

Facilitator Notes

The Johnstone Migration: Then and Now

Echoes of Eden in Western North Carolina: The Johnstone Settlement, 1852–1864

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About This Guide

This guide uses the Johnstone Settlement as a window into migration history — the forces that drive people to move, the costs they carry, and the echoes we hear today. It's designed for two main audiences: faith communities and educational institutions. Book clubs will find it equally useful, especially for personal and group reflection.

At its heart, the guide explores who gets to move, who is forced to move, and who gets left behind — questions that feel just as urgent now as they did in 1852.

The discussion questions here aren't a script. Pick the ones that fit your group. Rearrange them, combine them, skip some, rewrite others. The goal is honest, meaningful conversation — not covering every item on a list.

The Readings at a Glance

Participants should arrive having read the materials listed in the Overview. Here's a quick orientation to what each source brings to the conversation:

- **Gralley, *Echoes of Eden*** — The main case study. Traces the push-and-pull factors that brought the Johnstone settlers to the Appalachian highlands: disease caused by ecological destruction, fear of urban life, and the promise of a better life.
- **Censer, “Southwestern Migration Among North Carolina Planter Families,”**— Pushes back on romantic notions of planter migration. These were older, married, kin-connected families responding to inheritance pressure — not adventurous young people striking out on their own.
- **Rogers, “The Great Population Migration from South Carolina,”**— Tells the story of South Carolina's 1850s outmigration as an ecological crisis. Soil exhaustion and the collapse of cotton drove people out — and left behind a political culture hardened by loss.
- **Lustgarten, “How Climate Migration Will Reshape America”** — Brings the pattern into the present. Introduces “bluelining,” the northward demographic shift, and the emotional weight of leaving a place you love.

Supplemental Readings:

- **Lustgarten, “The Great Climate Migration”**— Zooms out to Guatemala and El Salvador to show climate as a “threat multiplier.” Connects forced international migration to what’s happening at the U.S. border.
 - **ICMC, “Cultural Assimilation vs. Cultural Preservation”** — Frames the dilemma migrants face: adopt the host culture or hold onto your own? Worth reading alongside the Johnstone story, because the settlers did neither — they tried to impose their culture on the mountain community they entered.
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Tailoring the Discussion to Your Setting

For Churches and Faith Communities

This material will likely land with both historical weight and personal resonance — especially when discussion turns to the enslaved people the Johnstone settlers brought into the mountains, and to climate migrants today.

A sequence that tends to work:

- Start with Historical Context to build a shared foundation, then move to The Enslaved Community and the Environmental and Ethical sections.
- Look for questions that bridge past and present. Environmental and Ethical Questions 3, 4, and 5 connect naturally to faith traditions’ teachings on hospitality, justice, and care for the vulnerable.
- Use the Personal Reflection questions as closing prompts or take-home journaling starters. Question 1 — about your own family’s migration story — consistently opens up conversation no one expected.
- Consider connecting this to your congregation’s own local history. Many communities have direct ties to the kind of planter and agrarian families Gralley describes.

Pacing options:

- **Single session (60–90 min):** Two questions from Historical Context, one from The Enslaved Community, one from Environmental and Ethical, one from Personal Reflection.
- **Multi-week study:** Dedicate a full session to each section.

For Advanced Secondary Schools, Colleges, and Seminaries

Academic groups tend to engage through analysis and comparison across disciplines — and this guide rewards that approach. The combination of scholarly summaries,

contemporary journalism, and a specific local case study is a natural model for interdisciplinary inquiry.

A few practical suggestions:

- Assign the readings before class so you can use session time for discussion, not recap.
- Many of the questions are compound. Consider breaking them into smaller pieces and assigning sub-questions to small groups before reconvening.
- Push the “then and now” comparisons. Ask students to be specific about where the analogy between planter migration and climate displacement holds — and where it breaks down. The friction is where the thinking happens.
- Pair the ICMC piece with Environmental and Ethical Question 6 (cultural imposition vs. assimilation). Pair Lustgarten’s domestic article with Historical Context Question 5 (Rogers’s ecological framing).

A possible three-session arc:

- **Session 1** — Historical context and what drove migration (Censer, Rogers, Gralley Ch. 2)
- **Session 2** — The enslaved community and the ethics of forced relocation
- **Session 3** — Environmental dimensions and contemporary parallels, closing with Personal Reflection.

Connecting the Readings: Themes to Track

These thematic threads run across all the sources. Keep them in mind as you move between sections — they’ll help the conversation feel like one continuous inquiry rather than separate questions about separate texts.

Ecological Crisis, Then and Now

Rogers’s soil exhaustion and Lustgarten’s climate modeling are structural mirrors: in both cases, unsustainable human activity degrades the land until leaving becomes the rational choice. Gralley adds disease to the picture — infectious illness linked to agricultural practices as its own kind of environmental crisis. Examine the historic arc of environmental degradation as a motivation for migration. Another question worth raising: does the cause of ecological failure change how we judge the people who leave?

The Agency Gap

Censer shows planters as careful, deliberate decision-makers. Gralley shows the enslaved people they brought along as individuals for whom every variable — location, family, labor, future — was controlled by someone else. This contrast is the moral core

of the guide. Return to it across sections rather than treating it as a topic confined to The Enslaved Community block.

Who Bears the Cost of Others' Leaving

Rogers shows that when planters and small farmers left South Carolina, the state's social fabric thinned and its politics hardened. Lustgarten's "bluelining" describes the same pattern today: when people with resources leave, those without options are left in communities that decline around them. The Johnstone story adds a third layer — the Appalachian residents who received the settlers and had to absorb the cultural and economic weight of their arrival.

The Illusion of the Safe Destination

Both Gralley and Lustgarten treat the destination as partly imagined. The Johnstone settlers idealized Dunn's Rock as an Eden; Lustgarten's climate refugees are moving toward cities — Buffalo, Detroit, Duluth — that carry their own vulnerabilities. A useful question to sit with: what does it mean to migrate toward a place that also contains risk?

Imposing vs. Adapting

The ICMC frames the migrant's dilemma as a binary: assimilate or preserve your identity. The Johnstone settlers did neither — they tried to impose their coastal Carolina culture on an existing mountain community. That third path is analytically distinct and historically significant. It's also visible in some contemporary in-migration patterns, where wealthy urban arrivals reshape rural communities in their own image. Use this as a bridge between the historical and present-day sections.

Preparing for Hard Conversations

Some Principles to Start With

- Set expectations before the first question: honest engagement with the evidence, willingness to examine how privilege shaped both past and present, and genuine respect for everyone in the room.
- Distinguish discomfort from harm. Discomfort is productive — hold space for it without rushing to resolve it.
- Expect some defensiveness, and meet it with curiosity rather than judgment. Participants with Appalachian roots, Southern family history, or anxiety about current in-migration may resist parts of this framing. Try: "What about this feels difficult?"
- Let the primary sources do the heavy lifting. When conversation gets abstract, return to specifics: Censer's inheritance data, Rogers's ecological portrait, the personal clarity in Lustgarten's closing paragraphs.
- Don't demand personal confession. Personal Reflection questions are invitations. Important reflection often happens after people leave the room.

- Be honest about contested ground. Whether the Johnstone settlers qualify as “environmental refugees” is genuinely open. You don’t need to resolve it — you need to help people think carefully about it.

When Participants Identify with the Settlers

Some participants — especially those with family ties to the planter South, or those who have recently relocated to western North Carolina themselves — may feel unexpected identification with the Johnstone settlers. This isn’t a problem. It’s a door.

- Acknowledge it openly: “Many of us might have made similar calculations. What does that tell us?”
- Then press on the asymmetry: “What did the settlers have that the people they enslaved did not? What did they have that the mountain residents did not?”
- Use Censer’s data to keep the discussion grounded in history rather than personal guilt. The settlers weren’t uniquely virtuous or uniquely villainous — they were operating within a structure. What was that structure, and who built it?

When the Contemporary Parallels Get Politically Charged

Lustgarten’s climate projections and the ICMC’s framing of migrant rights will likely surface disagreements about immigration, climate policy, and demographic change. Here’s what tends to help:

- Keep the historical anchor present. The question isn’t “What should U.S. border policy be?” but “What does the Johnstone story reveal about how communities respond to arrivals with more resources?”
- Be precise about types of migration. The settlers chose and planned. The enslaved were moved against their will. Contemporary climate migrants fall somewhere in between. That precision reduces heat.
- If the conversation stalls on policy, redirect to the personal: “If a trusted expert told you tomorrow that you should leave where you live, would you go?” (Personal Reflection Q. 7)

A Note on the Local Dimension

For participants in western North Carolina, this isn’t distant history. Flat Rock and Dunn’s Rock are close to communities where many of your participants may live, work, and worship. Questions about how wealthy in-migrants reshaped local culture and housing markets in the 1850s may resonate — sometimes uncomfortably — with what people are seeing happen around them right now.

That local resonance is an asset. It makes the history immediate. It can also make the conversation tender. Be ready for participants to bring strong feelings about the present into a discussion that's ostensibly about the past. That convergence isn't a distraction — it's evidence the material is doing its work.

A Note on the Dual Audience

While this guide is useful for book clubs it was designed with churches and classrooms in mind— and that's intentional. Migration has always been both a material phenomenon and a moral one. It's driven by ecology and economics, shaped by power and privilege, and experienced as loss, hope, displacement, and sometimes the destruction of the communities that receive the displaced.

The questions that matter most here — about who gets to choose where they go, who bears the cost of that choice, what responsibilities come with the freedom to move, and how communities respond to arrivals with more resources than those already there — belong in both the sanctuary and the seminar room.

Quick Reference: Pairing Questions Across Sources

For facilitators who want tight thematic control, these pairings work especially well:

- **Historical Context Q5 (Rogers's ecological framing)** → pair with Lustgarten's domestic article (climate as ecological crisis today)
- **Environmental & Ethical Q6 (cultural imposition)** → pair with ICMC supplemental (assimilation vs. preservation framework)
- **Enslaved Community Q1 (agency contrast)** → pair with Lustgarten global article (forced vs. chosen migration)
- **Environmental & Ethical Q5 (bluelining / who is left behind)** → pair with Rogers (departure hardens the political culture of those who remain)
- **Personal Reflection Q7 (would you leave?)** → use as a closing prompt in any setting; it bridges every section