

Contending with Culture Series

ESSENTIALS UNVEILED

Foundational realities for ministry across cultures

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Foreword

This booklet introduces four essential realities with which we must wrestle if there is to be effective ministry across cultures: motivation, models, maxims and method.

THE MATTER OF MOTIVATION

The first reality we must face is that motivation for ministry across cultures is often conspicuous for its absence. Consider churches that now find themselves in suburbs in which the ethnic composition has changed radically. Some of these churches are in decline. Give the leaders of such a church an hour to confer and state their top five priorities. Time and again you will find that many of these churches will not include ministry across cultures. The church may not be opposed to such ministry, but there is little vision or motivation for it.

As the devil's advocate, let me tell you why ministry across cultures might seem irrelevant to you and your church:

1. Ministry to people of other cultures is not a realistic option for you because you already have far too much to do and you simply do not have the time and energy to take this ministry seriously.
2. If your church is an English-speaking church then you may think such ministry is irrelevant because there are far less non English-speakers living in your area than in other ethnically diverse places.
3. You think ministry across cultures is irrelevant because, in your area, there are lots of people who share your own culture. These are the people who largely compose your church and you feel that ministering to such people is your strength.
4. You don't think ministry across cultures is a realistic option for you since you have had no training or substantial cross-cultural experience, at least ministry-wise.
5. You assume that you can leave it all to the Chinese to reach the Chinese, Spanish-speakers to reach



Spanish-speakers, Samoans to reach Samoans, Indonesians to reach Indonesians and so on.

6. Ministry across cultures also seems irrelevant to you because you believe that your church is ready to welcome anybody whoever they are. But, you reason, you can't force people to come in and since you are already a friendly church you are doing all that can reasonably be expected of you.

In short, you don't concern yourself with ministry across cultures because you've already got enough on your plate, your church is already open to people from all cultures, it's not really a major priority for you, and you can depend upon other people to focus on this ministry.

But are you facing reality if you dismiss ministry across cultures as irrelevant or of marginal importance?

The reality is that the demographic complexion of Australia is changing rapidly. This is clearly so in major metropolitan centres. But now there are significant numbers of refugees, international students and migrant workers in many regional areas.

Further, for those who take the Bible seriously it is impossible to trivialise ministry across cultures. The God of the Bible is the God of creation and the Bible begins and ends with an all humanity, all nations, all peoples perspective. God poured out his Spirit at Pentecost, setting in motion the process by which he would fulfil his promise to spread the apostolic witness to Jesus as the risen Lord throughout

Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to "the ends of the Earth" (Acts 1:8). Today people from almost every people group have acknowledged Christ as Lord in response to the apostolic gospel. God remains intent on gathering a people for himself from "every nation, tribe, people and language" (Revelation 7:9). Do we have on our heart what God has on his heart?



THE MATTER OF MODELS

There is another foundational reality that churches must take into account when approaching ministry across cultures. They must decide what model of church they will seek to develop.

At the broadest level there are three types of models: *dominant host*, *bridging models* and *multiethnic models*.

CHURCH MODELS FOR MINISTRY ACROSS CULTURES

- A. Dominant Host Models
- B. Bridging Models
- C. Multi-ethnic Models

A. DOMINANT HOST MODELS

1. Assimilationist Model
2. Landlord-Tenant Model
3. Benefactor-Beneficiary Model

The first possibility is that of a church playing host to either people who become congregational members or to a church or churches that share its facilities. In each case the people or churches do not represent the culture shared by most in the host church. This may or may not be an Anglo-Celtic church into which non-Anglos have come. For example, inter-marriage may introduce non-Indonesians into an Indonesian church.

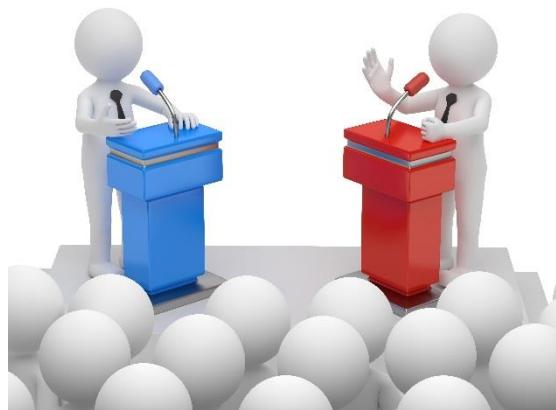
When people who don't share the majority culture become congregational members they are expected to fit in with the way the church operates. We might describe this expression of dominant host as an *Assimilationist Model*.

Sometimes a different ethnic church or churches will pay a rental for use of church property. Hence the name *Landlord-Tenant Model*. Some host churches only ask for a minimal contribution to costs such as electricity and cleaning – the *Benefactor-Beneficiary Model*. The user church may be larger than the host church. But, as owner of the property, the host church is dominant, setting the terms and conditions. These models typically involve superficial relations between the churches.



B. BRIDGING MODELS

- 4. Translation Model
- 5. Overlap Model



Language and other factors, for instance the needs of first generation migrants, introduce complications for churches that seek a more organic relationship.

Two types of bridging models provide a way forward. It is possible for the members of both churches to meet as one church if translation is

provided – the *Translation Model*.

Alternatively, the two groups might gather for part of the service and then split to different locations for people to hear the sermon in their own heart language – the *Overlap Model*.

A mixing of models will often occur. The issue is one of emphasis. So in “dominant

host” models the stress falls on the fact that minorities have to fit in with the ways of the host. By contrast, in bridging models there is a new emphasis on forging substantial relationships between the participating entities.

With this in mind let’s carry the emphasis further. This brings us to the third type of church models: multi-ethnic models. Here we have churches in which not merely bridging but merging is experienced.

There are two forms this might take. In the first expression of this, people from different cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds meet together in the same church service. There is no translation. No splitting of language or ethnic groups during the service. The same language is used by all. We can call this the *Uni-Congregational Multi-Ethnic Model*.

Thinking of the domestic scene, many Australian minds will immediately conceive of English-speaking churches as being the primary exemplars of such multi-ethnic church services. But don’t be too hasty. Think of our Arabic-speaking churches, often composed of a vast range of national and ethnic backgrounds - people from

C. MULTI-ETHNIC MODELS

- 6. Uni-Congregational Multi-Ethnic Model
- 7. Multi-Congregational Multi-Ethnic Model

such nations as Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Syria. Small groups are typically reflective of this same rich diversity. Many Anglos naively suppose Chinese churches are mono-ethnic whereas often they too, on closer analysis, may have an ethnic range almost as extensive as that of Europe.



The multiethnic church that centres on a multiethnic church service or services may or may not extend this to the small group structures of the church. In some such churches all small groups are ethnically diverse English-speaking groups. But in other such services the multiethnic church service is complemented by language-specific small groups.

There is another expression of the attempt to merge people from different cultures, a second form that a multiethnic church can assume. This is the *Multi-Congregational Multiethnic Model* in which different ethnic or language congregations form one united church community.

It is one thing to identify the right model for your church. But you also need to learn how to make that model work. To understand the dynamics of each these models and their pros and cons, see the separate booklet in the *Contending with Culture* series entitled “Model Churches. Shaping the Church for Ministry Across Cultures.”

THE MATTER OF MAXIMS

There are a number of maxims or principles that are integral to effective ministry across cultures. For example, *develop leaders from the people for the people; recognize all culture is biased towards sin; practise identification without loss of identity.*

One of the single most important principles is this: *Cut down the cultural distance when you can.*

Cultural distance is a key concept used by missiologists. It's not hard to see why. There are missionaries who travelled thousands of miles to reach people in far-flung places, but travelled very little cultural distance once they got there.

Many unreached people are geographically so close to us. But cultural differences make them seem so far away. In Sydney, for example, the geographical distance between Bondi and Bankstown is not very great. However, there is an immense cultural distance between bikini clad girls sunning themselves on Bondi beach and Islamic women walking the streets of Bankstown fully covered by a *burqa*. In fact, one sometimes sees women in *burqa* at the beach itself.



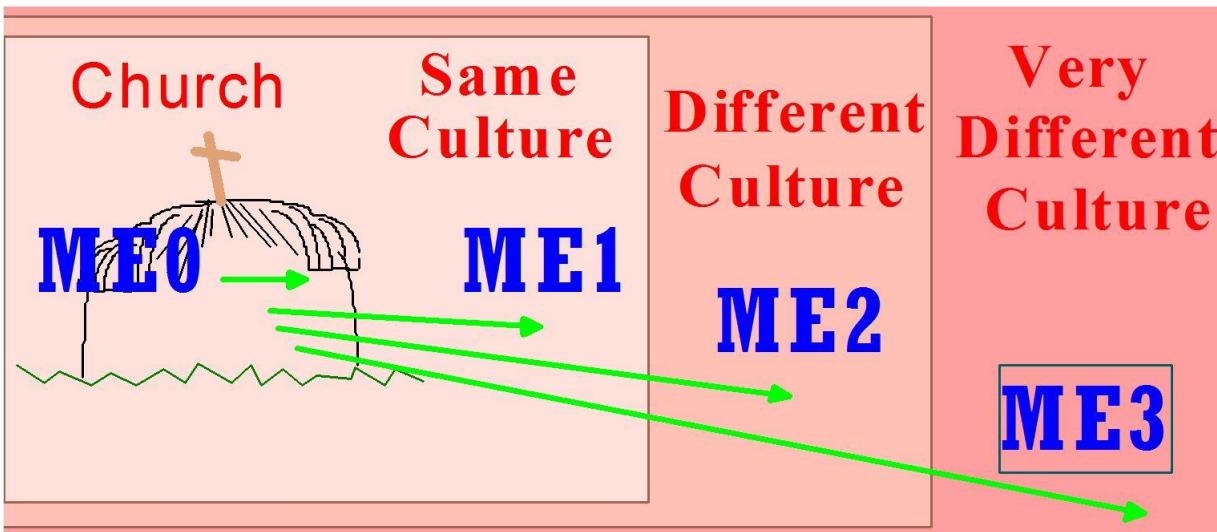
Since people have their own unique personal cultures, the principle of reducing cultural distance applies to all ministry. Our present focus is on those whose ethnic and cultural roots are divergent from yours. Cultural distance explains why many people, even when the language barrier is overcome, may not respond to our ministry and our communication of the gospel, no matter how friendly we may be.



There are four levels of cultural distance: MEO, ME1, ME2 and ME3. "ME" stands for "Ministry and Evangelism." So MEO is Ministry and Evangelism at level zero. This is "in house" ministry and evangelism, ministering to those already familiar with our church. Any cultural distance traveled is trivial. All committed

Christians engage in this kind of ministry and there's nothing wrong with it, unless that's all we do.

The next level up is ME1. This is "near neighbour" ministry and evangelism. Some effort is made to reach people who are not familiar with our own Christian culture. We travel a greater cultural distance, but still not much.



At the ME2 level we need good walking boots because now there's serious cultural travelling to be done. The people you are trying to reach may not speak English that well. Then again many of them may speak English very well, like Indian subcontinent people, for example, but to reach such people groups you will have to take into account some major cultural issues.

ME3 involves radical cross-cultural ministry, where the cultural distance is immense because language and cultural factors are formidable. Ministry to

sharia-observing Muslims in Australia is moving nearer to the ME3 end of the continuum, though by no means at the extreme end.

Remember the key principle: *cut down cultural distance when you can*. Take an ME2 or ME3 level of cultural distance and cut it down to an ME1 level. An obvious way to do this is to find and empower *workers from the people for the people*, e.g. find a suitable Mandarin-speaking worker to minister to Mandarin speakers.



Another way to cut cultural distance is to plant, develop or form cooperative relationships with *churches from the people for the people*.

In many ethnically diverse metropolitan suburbs there is a great need to develop multiethnic churches. Some see the multiethnic church as *the biblical ideal*. By all means endeavour to develop such churches. But recognize that it is impossible to evangelise many first generation people, in any appreciable manner, except through ethno-specific churches or churches with a narrow ethnic range.

Some second and third generation non-English speaking background people will find their way into churches other than those attended by their parents. But many

ACTS 11:19-20

"Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus."

second and third generation non-English speaking background people will only be reached through churches composed of those with similar backgrounds.

The reality of cultural distance involves a crucial implication: *gospel ministry left to itself always travels from like to like*. Another way of saying this is that, barring special measures, gospel ministry will always operate at MEO and ME1 levels. Acts 11:19-20 illustrates that this is just as true of New Testament gospel ministry as it is of contemporary gospel ministry.

Theologically, these verses conform to the familiar pattern: "*To the Jew first, and also to the Greek.*" The communication of the gospel by these scattered Jewish Christians to only Jews shows that the offence taken by the Jews against Stephen was unwarranted. Jewish Christians

have not abandoned Judaism, notwithstanding Stephen's criticisms. Also, as the immediately preceding context has illustrated, the deep-seated residual influence of Jewish ritual laws concerning cleanliness and uncleanness made it additionally unnatural for Jewish Christians to reach out to Gentiles with the gospel.

These verses illustrate that left to itself, gospel ministry travels minimal cultural distances. The vast majority of Jewish Christians communicated the gospel only to fellow Jews.

The gospel itself knows no ethnic or cultural boundaries. But, left to itself, gospel ministry always travels from like to like. We can either swim with the current or against it. We swim with the current when we find, train and empower leaders from the people for the people. We swim with the current when we plant, develop or form cooperative relationships with churches from the people for the people.

THE MATTER OF METHOD



Another fundamental reality we must deal with in approaching ministry across cultures is that of the method of approach. In determining what method of approach is wise in developing such ministry we would recommend eight essential stepping stones. Think of someone crossing a stream in which there are many randomly placed stones raised above the surface of the water. There is not a prescribed order as to which stone one should stand on at any particular point in the crossing. Further, consider the person who stops midstream to take photos and who may move back and forth. It's rather like that with the stepping stones that follow. Feel free to vary the order and recognize that there will be some overlap and moving back and forth.

1. Prepare the Ground

Comedian Mitch Hedberg recalls, “I saw this wino, he was eating grapes. I was like, ‘Dude, you have to wait.’” I’ve seen people who are impatient to start a new initiative to reach people across cultures. But you have to let the grapes mature and you have to process them properly if you want to enjoy the wine.

The preparation phase should not be rushed. Before commencing a ministry across cultures it is important to seek assurance that this ministry will be owned by the leaders of the church and that they will ensure it is well-supported and promoted.



There are occasions when leaders merely give permission for a ministry to proceed. This is less than ideal. This often results in lay members involved in this ministry becoming dispirited as they experience the implications of such a take-it-or-leave-it mentality. Ministry across cultures is demanding and those involved in it need to be encouraged. Only when leaders are committed to this ministry will they ensure that it is adequately resourced and that it is given a good profile in the church community.

Fundamental to sound preparation are such things as the development of the team that will be involved in this ministry; and prayer for the ministry not only by team members but by church members during church services and as they use the church's prayer notes.

2. Ask for Advice

Gavin Baskerville quips: "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a refusal to ask for directions." Don't waste a good deal of time and effort by trying to work out everything yourself. Tap the experience and expertise of others. Identify and consult with those who are able to provide specialized advice on how to develop the particular ministry your church has in mind.



"Remember, if anyone asks, you're getting your career advice from some guy in an office over on K Street."

3. Form a Task Force

Have your leadership body commission a team of respected representatives from among your church members. Give this task force a mandate to research the possibilities for ministry across cultures and to present a written report with recommendations to the leadership body at the end of a specified period of time, e.g. six months or a year. It is advised that this report in some form, that does not sacrifice its integrity, be communicated to the wider church.

4. Take a Look at What Others are Doing

Identify churches and ministries that are broadly in the range of what your own church might be embarking upon. Organise visits to these churches and ministries. For example, two persons might go with pre-prepared questions, observe what is being done, meet with the leaders of the ministry concerned to ask their questions and learn what they can and then report back to their own church. Identify things to avoid as well as things that might be adapted to your own church situation.

5. Organise Training

Identify what knowledge, skills and attitudes will be needed by those who will be directly involved in ministry across cultures. Develop a program of training to address these areas. Consult with cross-cultural trainers and seek their advice. You may need to invite such trainers to assist in providing such training.

6. Implement the Ministry

It has been said that the only thing that ever sat its way to success was a hen. It is important to have ownership by leadership and transparency with church membership because this underscores the fact that the church means business and will not be content with just talk and the spouting of good ideas.

7. Re-evaluate your Ideas

Schedule a review of the ministry for perhaps six months or a year after implementation. “If at first you don’t succeed, destroy all evidence that you tried.” Well, no! Don’t do that! But do be realistic. Don’t expect everything to go well. Expect that you will need to do some tweaking or maybe even make some radical changes.

8. Develop the Ministry

Make sure multicultural ministry initiatives and especially the people responsible for developing them are well-resourced and supported.

A famous Chinese proverb states, “*A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.*” There’s a lot of cultural distance to cover, yes. But take that first step. One comedian quipped that her grandmother started walking five kilometres a day at the age of 60. She’s 97 now and nobody knows where she is! If you take the steps outlined above who knows where your church will be in future days.



RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

“Free Online Resources for Intercultural Ministry.”

<http://www.facetofaceintercultural.com.au/resources-for-intercultural-ministry/>

Perspectives on the World Christian Movement. A Reader (eds. Ralph D. Winter & Steven C. Hawthorne; William Carey Library / Paternoster). Also available in Kindle.

QUESTIONS

1. Other than obedience to the Great Commission (Mt 28:16-20), what aspects of biblical truth motivate you to take the gospel across cultures?
2. What considerations do you need to keep in mind as you seek to develop an appropriate church model for ministry across cultures?
3. In what ways can you cut down on cultural distance?
4. In your church which persons will be responsible for developing your own approach to doing ministry across cultures?

For more titles in the “Contending with Culture” and “Whoever” series of booklets see the listings at: www.facetofaceintercultural.com.au



The ever-increasing ethnic and cultural diversification of Australia presents particular challenges for churches intent on reaching people across cultures. We think here of all churches, not merely dominant culture churches that may be predominately Anglo-Celtic in composition. As your church ‘contends with culture’ may you know God’s guidance and enabling.

NEED ADVICE?

Contact Mike Wilson, facetofaceintercultural@gmail.com

More resources: www.facetofaceintercultural.com.au

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