

Embrace the mess—celebrate the joy!

Matt Anker

Many people have said that mission is messy. And while that's true across the board, nowhere is it more true than in the area of cross-cultural mission. As people with vastly different cultural assumptions informing their thoughts and behaviours come together, you have a recipe for disaster were it not for the work of the Holy Spirit. Misunderstanding, offence and frustration are all too common when people from different cultures interact without offering grace to one another, and without realising that many of the values we assume are universally held, are in fact unique to their particular culture. What has the potential to bind us together in a joy-filled, cultural smorgasbord of believers is the fact that we share two things in common—the problem of sin, and our need for a Saviour. And herein lies the key to all mission, including cross-cultural mission. When we are truly aware of our own need for mercy, along with the incredible beauty of the underserved grace which we have received through faith in Jesus, it becomes so much easier to embrace all the challenges of cross-cultural ministry with enthusiasm because your gaze is lifted from differences that might otherwise offend, to the Christ who has saved us all. But it can be a bumpy journey!

For twelve years I had the joy of serving St Paul's Lutheran Church in Shepparton during which time the Holy Spirit transformed a largely mono-cultural congregation of around thirty members, into a thriving multi-ethnic congregation with people from seven different African nationalities joining the Australian, German and North American few who were the original members. While I learnt much about the cultures of our new family members and the challenges of mission and ministry in such a context, I learnt just as much about our own culture and the way in which it can potentially build barriers to deep and lasting pastoral engagement with people of other cultures. Time and again the challenges we faced as a congregation were a result of the assumptions we all made about the universality of behaviours we considered vital for 'polite' life together as a community. Added to this was the dissonance created when you have some members coming from the individualistic cultures of the West, and others coming from the communal cultures of Africa and beyond.

While there would be great value in offering a theological reflection on such things, this reflection will endeavour to consider these matters from a practical and relational point of view, especially within the context of our unique LCANZ culture.

To some extent, each of us is influenced by the underlying assumptions implicit in both our language¹ and culture. And while Jesus calls us to be in the world, but not of the world (Jn 17:14), it is important for us to recognise that these underlying assumptions certainly influence the way we operate within our congregational and synodical life as well. The way 'we' do things as congregations, districts and synod is not the only way to do them,

¹ For an insightful discussion on the influence of language on the way we think (and act), see https://www.ted.com/talks/lera_boroditsky_how_language_shapes_the_way_we_think?language=en.

nor is there anything that makes 'our' way the best way. It is simply how we have agreed to work together for the sake of God's mission in our context. If the context changes, as it has for all of us, we may need to consider if 'our' way remains the best way.

I would like to offer but two very practical and perhaps mundane examples of what I am talking about here. Most of you will naturally find your lives are structured around schedules and appointments. Our culture is governed by the clock and that is also true for our life together in our congregations—perhaps even more so with our Germanic heritage! For people from almost every non-Western culture—and that makes up over 90% of the world's population—this is not how they operate. At Shepparton we joked about the differences between African time and *Mzungu*² time, but it's the same the world over. So while the *mzungus* would get anxious about starting worship on time, our African members would scratch their head about people's desire to be finished in an hour. After all if spending time in the presence of our merciful God is such an important thing, why wouldn't we want to stay there all day? And if the people we are gathered with are our true family, why would we rush home to close them out?

Similarly, we in the West are concerned to ensure that all groups within a community have representation, and that every person has the right to be engaged in decision making and to have their opinions heard. But for a communal culture such as those found in Africa, such things are nonsense. In his book *Christianity Rediscovered*, Roman Catholic missionary Vincent Donovan tells of how his efforts to evangelise individual members of the Masai fell flat, but when he sought to engage the entire community, he held their rapt attention for a full year of instruction. As he evangelised the community some unexpected individual would emerge as the leader and lone spokesman, but in the days between their meetings it became obvious the entire community had discussed and debated everything he had taught them.³ To Western eyes it appeared as though the people were excluded from the process, and yet the Masai culture provided a very different, but no less engaging way for all members to have their say and to be part of the journey.

Time and again I have witnessed good intentioned people in our church seek to involve people from other cultures in ways that appeases our cultural ideals, and yet is antithetical to the culture of our new friends. I made a similar mistake again just recently in a Zoom meeting with Indonesian translators who wanted to meet with the Australian author of the commentary they were working on. Out of my own desire to honour them and show my trust in them, I advised that it was not necessary to involve me in future meetings. This offer was met with polite outrage as the leader pointed out that I represented the partner church and must be present! In Australian culture it would be appropriate for me to excuse myself, but in Indonesian culture it is vital that our relationship is honoured by my inclusion (even when I have nothing to say!).

To some of you reading this, these things will seem incredibly trivial, and you might think they have no place in a journal of this nature. However, in many cases, I have seen just these two examples put unnecessary stumbling blocks before people seeking God's mercy in our congregations, and rob us '*mzungus*' of the joy of seeing St John's vision of the heavenly assembly in Revelation 7 start to find its multi-ethnic fulfilment in our very midst. So often we have sabotaged incredible opportunities for renewal through cross-

² *Mzungu* is a Kiswahili word which has come to mean 'European' or 'white fella'.

³ Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

cultural mission as a result of ‘doing the right thing’ from a Western point of view, instead of entering into a journey with people of other cultures and living with the messiness this brings. I pray that our Heavenly Father would grant us the willingness to embrace the risks, to celebrate the messiness of mission, and to be abundantly blessed by what he does as we engage people from other cultures in an open, welcoming and loving way.

What I am not saying is that we should throw the baby out with the bathwater! There are practical and pastoral things that can strengthen the unity of multi-ethnic communities which are at the core of who we are as Christians. I have written elsewhere⁴ that some of the things that unified us as a congregation in Shepparton, and that I have seen as essential elements in mission elsewhere, are nothing more than the very things we have long held as central to the life of the church. These include:

- i. the judicious use of liturgically structured worship which fosters familiarity, belonging and engages all people in the divine enactment of law and gospel;
- ii. careful and thorough catechesis which honours the person and doesn’t use cultural differences as an excuse to short cut instruction, thereby robbing people of the gift of a deep foundation in the word;
- iii. works of mercy accompanied by a ministry of prayer;
- iv. and eating together—a dear African brother once said to me that when we put our hands in the same pot to eat, we become one family⁵.

In these last few years as I have served in the area of International Mission, I have become even more convinced of the things I have shared above. In congregations from Papua New Guinea to Myanmar, from Indonesia to Malaysia, these same things ring true. While many of our partner churches are deliberately mono-ethnic due to local pressures, those that thrive and advance God’s mission across all cultures typically embrace the mess and celebrate the joy of being forgiven sinners together in the presence of the Lord.

When we live with an awareness of our desperate need for God’s mercy, and in the comfort of his forgiving love in Christ, cultural differences cease to be the challenge sociologists would have us believe, and the body of Christ grows in an ever more beautiful array of people from every tribe and peoples and languages.

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⁴ Matthew Anker, ‘Lutheran treasures crossing the cultural divide,’ *Lutheran Theological Journal* 48, No. 1 (May 2014): 12–20.

⁵ I have recently been studying Tok Pisin at Australian National University and was delighted to learn the word ‘wansospen’, which literally means ‘one saucepan’ but is understood to refer to the people who eat from one saucepan, that is, a family. This is the exact understanding conveyed to me by the Congolese brother above.