

# Simply ministry

**Melanie Endacott**

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When I first received an invitation to write an article on ‘developing a multicultural mindset for the LCANZ’, I have to admit my mind went blank. What could I possibly contribute to such a topic?

This is not because our school is primarily of an Anglo-Australian background. In fact, it is quite the opposite. People are often surprised to hear that only 3% of our students come from a typical white Australian background, with the majority coming instead from first or second generation refugees and immigrants. However, it is precisely due to this context that I have never considered our ministry to be multicultural. It is so normal to be multicultural that it is simply...ministry.

Of course, our work is not without its challenges. Language and culture present many barriers; from trying to explain safe student drop-off practices to parents accustomed to the rules of traffic engagement in Southeast Asia, to sharing important concerns about a student’s behaviour at the risk of their head being shaved because of the shame they’ve brought on their family. Everyday interactions and banter with parents, taken for granted in other contexts, can be missed. Though nods and smiles abound, many parents lack the confidence to attempt a lengthy conversation with a native English speaker; no doubt there are countless stories and important family events missed which would otherwise have shaped how we understand and care for their child.

Over time, one learns to slow down when speaking, to simplify one’s language and to check carefully for understanding. It is not always easy to communicate in this way. However, learning to simplify language can also present opportunities. How often do we slow down to truly ponder what is captured in the ‘theological’ words we casually throw around in chapel talks and Christian Studies classes? How many English-speakers hear words such as ‘salvation’, ‘atonement’, or even ‘grace’ without ever slowing down to fully understand such rich concepts? Consider one of my recent chapel talk conundrums; if you were giving a talk on Pentecost and could only deliver one take-home point, what would it be? The need to simplify my language became an opportunity for me to deeply reflect on the meaning of Pentecost and bring clarity to my message.

During the 2020 Covid-19 outbreak in Victoria, several school families tested positive or were in isolation as close contacts. Concerned for their welfare, the school put together and delivered care packs to ensure they had enough food during periods of lost income. After staff donated fruit, vegetables, long-life food, soap, toilet paper, sanitary products etc., the principal took the delivery risk upon himself and dropped off bags of supplies to families in need. Proud of ourselves, we were later astonished to hear of the hilarity that had resulted from our actions. Little did we know that sanitary products were a taboo in their culture, and that even someone as close as a husband would be loath to publicly

purchase them for his wife. They thought it was wildly funny, imagining someone as important as the male principal buying and packing such items...in public!

I tell this story because too often we focus solely on what we can impart and give, rather than taking the time to listen and learn. When we spend too long focused on the challenge of communicating the knowledge of our culture, we often forget to look for opportunities to learn from other cultures. Yet the more I speak with students and parents about life outside school, the more I am impressed by what I learn. Students may live in small, older houses by Western standards; yet they open up their homes freely to refugees and immigrants, sharing their little house with newly arrived 'cousins', 'uncles' and 'aunties'. A strong sense of community means that students are often picked up from school by friends or relatives, with everyone chipping in to share the daily tasks of life. Parents value Christian education so greatly that they are willing to work multiple factory jobs to ensure their children can receive a Christian education. Having received sometimes no formal education, or only up to mid-primary school, parents trust their child's education entirely to us and express such deep gratitude that it can make you uncomfortable. These cultures display an incredible generosity, community spirit, gratitude, and value of Christian education to a degree I have rarely observed in Anglo-Australian communities.

So as Lutheran schools and churches look to the future, considering how to develop a multicultural mindset and embrace the ever-changing cultural makeup of Australia, let me offer the little wisdom I have learned. Don't spend too long focused on the barriers and the challenges. Don't spend months trying to prepare for potential problems, waiting until you feel 'ready' to engage and to teach. Don't try to discover a method or strategy which can be universally applied to solve the mysteries of cross-cultural ministry. Instead, let me encourage you to engage.

Start by meeting with the cultural community; talk with them, ask questions, listen carefully. Celebrate the uniqueness of their culture and the insight they can offer into your own. Rejoice that God is at work, and ask how you can play a part in serving believers from every nation, tribe, and language. Be prepared to be humbled, and learn to laugh at your own mistakes. Never assume that your faith or knowledge is superior, but rather be open to learning from the many gifts Christ has given to others.

Most importantly, always remember that no matter our culture or language, we are all children of God through faith. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither English-speaking nor non-English speaking, neither Australian nor recent arrival; for we are all one in Christ Jesus. And so, if the barriers and challenges of multicultural ministry seem overwhelming... remember it is simply ministry.

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