

Listen, learn and be blessed

Barbara Mattiske

What do you like about travel? The vistas, the architecture, or food? I love different cultures and language. I love to learn about others: sometimes it makes me feel vulnerable, but, it is learning and listening that makes you grow.

What must it feel like for people new to Australia? Every community is different. Every church community is different. What links people together? Is it sport, or is it faith? Is it the need to feel wanted and valued? No matter the culture we grow up in or the colour of our skin, we want that love.

The past six years I was blessed to be the cross-cultural coordinator in my church. We weren't and still are not a huge church but we are prepared to try. We looked around us and contacted our local Council to see who our community was made up of. We discovered our area was Asian, with some from Iraq and Iran and Africa.

To engage our community, we started with a children's program, a simple God based program of singing and dancing with its main focus to make everyone feel special. We started with two children, but we grew, and two years later there were forty children per week with their families.

Why did it grow? I believe God used a community willing to listen and learn. We valued remembering someone's name and provided a home where you felt loved and valued with a coffee and a home-made cake. Where you are amazed how much you understand when language is difficult.

The more I listened, the more I discovered what people wanted. People want to fit in, they want their children to fit in, just like you and me. What could we do to help that? People want to share their culture...how could we help that happen? People want to learn about how to live here. Many questions, but what do you do as a small church community?

Pray and trust and remember. God is not going to tell you off for trying! He may change your direction and lead you differently, but just trust and try.

Our mid-week church grew into playgroup, cooking classes, Mainly Music, learning classes, coffee and chat, English classes and eventually simplified Alpha courses.

Why did this work? I believe that remembering someone's name is important. Listening to someone not only with your ears. To smile. I believe we shouldn't judge, but be family to someone. Just because someone does something different to you doesn't mean it is wrong. It is just different.

Remember, most people who come to live here are just like you. Most come alone, just their family, no extended family. During a marriage course I asked when the last time was they had been out for a meal together. The answers were all 'years ago' as they did not

know anyone to leave their children with. What could we do? We babysat twenty children while their parents went out for a meal. It wasn't hard...and we started just by listening.

Remember too, to honour belief. It takes a lot of courage for someone to enter your church buildings. They often feel they will be judged and that we will push Christianity onto them. People tell me they feel accepted here for who they are. Our courses are all based upon Christian principles so we just trust that God would use these courses and the simple language for people to ask more...and over time that has happened, leading us to run Alpha, and people being baptised.

How blessed are we to sit together, sharing thoughts and discovering we are all the same. To see hearts open to sharing and laughing and crying. This is what our mid-week church looks like.

Yet on Sundays we are now also blessed with opening our doors to a Korean church and a Sudanese community and a Chinese Mandarin church. So now, not only is mid-week church reaching out to our local community, but we have these different Christian cultural groups which provides wider opportunities to worship and invite people from similar language backgrounds to engage together. We have joined together for Alpha Go Slow courses, eating together and heading into our language groups to learn about God. What a blessing!

All this happens from prayer, listening and acting upon what you learn to build relationships that trust and honour each other.

What happens when the world is hit by the global pandemic? We went online; many of our community were caught overseas visiting family and couldn't get back. One mum ended up staying in her home country for the birth of her baby and returned after Christmas. Others were distressed for their families, and others felt that they were being judged by Australia. We spent many frantic hours setting up online and encouraging people to join us.

The protocols of online chatting were soon learnt and yes, it isn't the same as in person, but, how blessed that we could still meet. The heartache and loneliness people were feeling made these groups lifelines for many. God used our small groups to grow His love. We grew from one simple bible study group to two online groups meeting each week and more wanted! Everyone still needed to feel loved and wanted. People still needed family. People's hearts were aching and were open to hearing about God who loves and values them.

What now? We are back. We started by meeting in open parks and now are nearly back to normal and yes, it is wonderful to be together. Many though, are still scared and have not returned, so we try to keep in contact.

What have we learnt? It's that same simple message. Listen with your ears and heart. Love as God loves you. Honour each other.

The blessings received are amazing. The love returned to you will burst your heart. The knowledge you gain will blow your mind. The gifts people will share with your church community will bless all who come through your doors.

Outreach has changed. We still support our Sudanese families in Africa which is what we have been used to...but, even that has changed with communication so immediate and needs changing so quickly.

Outreach is so different. It's your local community. It's building relationships and caring. It's being that link of friendship to God. We can each do that.

Barbara Mattiske has worked at Glynde Lutheran Church for over twenty years and witnessed the change to a diverse cultural local community and adapted church activities to welcome those new to the area, growing the role of cross-cultural coordinator and then mentor before retiring.