

Herzlich Willkommen to our mob, nǐ hǎo and salam

Alison Short

We all experience challenging circumstances and need to find a way to solve the presenting problems. Sometimes it's a matter of changing one's job, having a deep relational discussion, extending an educational skill set, or moving house. Rarely, the solution is the complete upending of our lives to travel to another country, either by choice or necessity. When this happens, we wonder what it will be like in the new place. We plan for expected needs and then make the agonising decision to leave everything we know as we hope for a new future, in line with God's promises (Jer 29:11). This is as true for the early Lutherans in Australia as for many other migrations since, as multiple diasporas of many cultures have spread around the world within our increasingly globalised world culture.

My roots are in intercultural care and service. The new Lebanese student stuck out like a sore thumb in my small rural primary school in the 1960s, yet I helped her. Similarly, I sat through innumerable cups of tea and unknown conversation while my mum supported recent German migrants in our Victorian wine growing area, using excellent German skills learned at Immanuel College. She had also worked for the Good Neighbour Council in Adelaide, meeting the post-war boats and helping people settle into their new life. My great-uncle was instrumental in the Queensland church and then the New Guinea mission, bridging between Neuendettelsau and our local and regional needs, with another uncle undertaking church work near Lae.

My home is now set in one of the most multicultural cities in the world and my work takes me to the most diversely multicultural region in Australia. My engagement with my international and first-generation Australian students enriches my life and has shown to me the wonderful diversity of God's creation—through my students, I have acquired a wonderful Taiwanese tea, eaten moon cake for the Chinese festival, attended an amazing family banquet in Taipei, and experienced the rare beauty of hearing a well-played Guzheng¹ in Australia. Our exchange student from Norway has taught us soulful songs of longing, and through conference opportunities I have been blessed to return to the birthplace of my relatives in former East Germany, consequently learning German for improved communication.

However, I know that many of my students face personal and cultural issues connected to their differing levels of acculturation within the context of strong family and relational commitments. For example, one student had to regularly miss class to take his visually impaired Korean grandfather to medical appointments, another left class altogether to

¹ A complex Chinese table harp, as frequently heard in Chinese documentaries and movies.

return to China after the death of an elderly relative, whilst another travelled home to Iran for treatment of a back injury.

These issues have only been exacerbated in the context of the recent pandemic. I have students who have not seen their partner in Hong Kong for almost two years, or worry about a father working in frontline medical treatment in Malaysia. My work colleague's mother died alone of Covid-19 in India, and my close friend travelled to the UK with her young family, negotiating closed borders and the panic of international travel to engage in a new work benefitting international health initiatives.

It is clear that in our everyday lives, cultural sensitivity and cultural competency are paramount, and I have taught, researched and written in this area. We need to acknowledge our weaknesses and at the same time expand our level of understanding to embrace all people as we are called to live out our vocation in our world of two kingdoms as conceptualised by Luther. We can't forget that the secular world around us has changed from early Australian Lutheran times, therefore so must we. Despite caution due to the remembered travails of wartime (and yes, my great-uncle was interned in Australia too, for no good reason), we are a church called to spread God's love to all people. One of my favourite hymns talks of the worldwide 'Mexican Wave' of prayer and praise, as people sleep and wake around the world.² Likewise, we need to find our way as a river of love incorporating the whole of our community, not just the people we know, or we like, or who look like us.

The history of both the Old and New Testaments shows us that God mandates migration, whether to avoid oppressive regimes (Matt 2:13–23) or the well-known Exodus (Pentateuch). Amidst all this, welcoming strangers has been a very clear social code, with hospitality transforming strangers from potential threat to ally. Abraham's welcoming of three strangers led to parenthood for Sarah and fulfilling of God's promises (Gen 18:1–15), and heaven is often depicted as a generous and glorious banquet (Isa 25:6–9; Matt 22:2–4). Incredible diversity existed in the Greco-Roman empire: Corinth was in many ways similar to Sydney as a multicultural and economic hub, and northern Galatia contained multiple ethnicities including Celts from France. The early church struggled with not only religious but cultural differences in working together, responsible for many of Paul's writings relating to everyday practices. Nevertheless, the early church continually welcomed strangers into their midst as valued gifts and potential angels (Heb 13:2). We also hear that Philip was guided to help a travelling Ethiopian, telling him the good news about Jesus leading to baptism and great rejoicing (Acts 8:26–40). Similarly, as Lutherans in our Australian contemporary context, we need to be authentic in our every relationship with others, regardless of culture. This means understanding that they may have different viewpoints and expectations to us, and we need to work to find connections and shared experiences as a bridge between us within a Christ-centred culture.

My everyday role in working with students and staff has been as cultural broker, assisting with negotiating challenging systems, voicing issues and advocating where necessary. For example, four of our international students have now obtained visa exemptions, and their relief at arriving and completing quarantine has been palpable.

² The day Thou gavest, Lord, is ended (LH 549).

Although I can provide some support in a professional capacity, the question remains: How best can we all show God's love to our multicultural neighbours in our everyday vocational ministry? Paul faced the same problem as he ministered within the multicultural Greco-Roman empire to the people in Corinth, working as a tentmaker so that he could be with the people right there in the marketplace (Acts 18:1–4). Jesus walked with everyday people and was open to everyone, even the little children and the birds of the field, the rich man who couldn't let go and the poor man who argued that he should be allowed the food that the dogs were eating. He showed us how to value everyone and everything, be it a lost coin or a lost sheep, a sick child or bereaved sisters. Nothing was beneath his notice, and he often spent his time interacting with people he didn't know.

Given our current times, we also need to work harder at finding ways to understand and welcome all people into our regular Lutheran congregations. However well-meaning, churches and services for specific language and cultural groups (Indonesian, Chinese, African, Samoan, Swedish, Estonian, and so on) separate us rather than bringing us together around God's table. Pentecost reverses our communicative confusion of the tower of Babel, and values all languages and cultures to bring us all together at the same time. Luther foregrounded the importance of language, ensuring that direct communication through the Word could occur for each and every person in their own language. Our bible translators and missionaries have spread the good news far and wide, influencing the early church in Australia, and we can now build from that. In today's world, our small church in Sydney has welcomed regular members from Indonesia, Malaysia, Canada, USA, South Africa, Sweden, and various parts of Germany and Eastern Europe over a long period of time. In any given week, multiple accents and opinions merge as our whole community lives together as the body of Christ. Our children have grown up together and supported each other, and we have grieved together as events happened in other countries such as a tsunami or a pandemic.

We can't fathom the myriad of reasons that people have needed to come to Australia due to opportunities and challenges, but we can change the way that we respond to them by offering them love and hope. First, we need to get outside our comfort zone and make an effort to communicate, even if that means stumbling and misunderstandings in our words, just like Jesus at the well (John 4:5–26), and we note that nonverbal means such as a smile, a nod or a gentle touch are so helpful in conveying a desire to communicate and heal (Mark 5:27–34). Second, we need to be authentic in our listening so that we can understand their experiences and needs, and think how we can spread God's love into this situation, just as Jesus did with people needing healing or asking questions on the road to Emmaus (Mark 1:32–34; Luke 24:17–20). Third, we need to consider our communicative style as a person and as a church, to speak slowly and clearly, explain acronyms and in-house references to be certain that we are clear (John 16:29), and show genuine inclusion of all people within our committees, districts and synods. Jesus promises to draw all people to himself, not just his favourites, his best friends or the ones who look like him (John 12:32). Through our personal, vocational and corporate ministry, we have the potential to bring God's peace, hope and support to all people in our Australian context, living out our grace-filled lives into our community to make a difference.

Lord, we know that you love diversity! A simple walk in the Australian bush shows us shapes, colours, textures and growth habits that are so divergent that we marvel at your

imagination. The ancient peoples of our country have thrived on valuing the land and its diversity for abundant life and living, and later our new arrivals have sought homes here, coming from other parts of your creation. You don't corral one type of plant and then the next type of plant, like an ornate Renaissance-style garden, but intermingle us all like the Australian bush to adapt and grow together. Give us the strength and wisdom to find new ways to value all people and to put our faith into action working together as your body of Christ, so that we may spread your love and hope to all people in the world around us. Amen

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