

Can West and South work together in mission?

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Anybody who has tried it will know that working together in multi-cultural teams is one of the biggest challenges that we have to face in mission. This article looks at the most common areas of tension and then tries to make some suggestions about causes and remedies.

I begin with three disclaimers:

1. In trying to describe people's cultural behaviour, I am aware that I am making generalisations. There are plenty of exceptions that could be cited for each of the generalisations I make, but they are not therefore untrue. It is almost certainly true, for example, that Africans on the whole are more conscious of the spirit world than British people. This does not mean that there are no British people who are sensitive to the spirit world, or that you might not come across an African who is indifferent to it. And if you did meet such people it would not disprove the generalisation, only prove that there were exceptions.
2. I am not trying to make value judgements but to describe. I am unmistakably a 'Westerner' myself, but also lived for more than twenty years in India. If it came to a debate about values, I would be sometimes on one side and sometimes on the other.
3. I use the terms West and South for convenience. They are not strictly geographical terms. 'West' means predominantly the countries that are the products of the European Enlightenment (including the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand). South means what we used to call the 'Third World', sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and of course some other parts of the world.

Clash of cultures

History

It is difficult to forget our history even when we know that it is a hindrance to us. Western missionaries tend to forget very quickly that they come out of a history of imperialism, but this has not been forgotten by Southerners. Likewise, Koreans have not forgotten what the Japanese did to them during the Japanese occupation. The Turks and the Greeks have been enemies for centuries. Australians get on well with most people because they have no history of (external) imperialism, but what do the Aborigines feel about their situation? I leave the reader to fill in further examples or to question the ones that I have given. What is certain is that history matters.

Ethnicity

Considerations to do with 'background' are of crucial importance to Southerners. In such areas as marriage and even eating together, caste and tribal differences can suddenly take a very high profile. Distinctions of this sort are of less importance to Westerners, though of course not entirely absent. The European class system, for example, can turn up in most unexpected places.

Community

Southerners feel that Westerners are too individualistic and universalist (one rule applies to all) while Westerners feel that Southerners are too influenced by the group and too particularist (rules are meant to be interpreted differently in particular situations). Thus Westerners feel that Southerners will unfairly give priority to family and friends, while Southerners feel that Westerners will not even help their family and friends when they have a clear duty to do so – witness the fate of elderly relatives.

Family

As often noted, the concept of family is a much wider one for Southerners than Westerners and includes the idea of the living dead (ancestors).

Spirit world

Southerners live much more closely to the spirit world. They feel that Westerners do not understand spiritual realities. Westerners feel that Southerners are over influenced by 'the spirits'. This stems from and leads to differences in theology, but equally to different praxis. Thus, if you are a team leader who has discovered serious sin in the team do you (1) send for the exorcist (2) engage a Christian counsellor – if you can find one (3) consign the team member to Satan after reading the appropriate Biblical passages? This is a simplistic scenario, of course, but it serves to highlight possible different cultural approaches.

Spirituality

In the Western world spirituality is very much a matter of intimate communion with God; Southerners feel that spirituality is best demonstrated by miraculous power, especially healing. In a multi-cultural team everyone may be eager to choose a 'spiritual' team leader but on the basis of the above everyone may not agree about who that is.

Remedy of first resort

In times of crisis Southerners (especially the women) have a greater existential reliance on God. Westerners seek 'means' before they turn to God for help. Southerners are mindful that God rewards our faith; Westerners tend to think that God has given us the means to remedy our troubles and expects us to use them.

Worship

Southern worship, as we know, is much more expressive. Southerners often feel that Westerners are not worshipping at all. Westerners would like some silence.

Evangelism

The place of evangelism in the Christian life is given much greater importance by Southerners. Westerners think that Southern evangelistic methods are naïve. Southerners believe Westerners lack zeal.

Abstract doctrine

Debates about doctrine and objective Truth are of great interest to Westerners (especially men) but debating such matters as inerrancy, the doctrine of the atonement or the Trinity, is of little interest to Southerners.

Sermons

Southern sermons are inclined to be emotional and exhortatory, while Western sermons are more rational and explanatory.

Debates about ethical issues

Southerners may feel that Westerners are hopelessly lax (for example, in not taking a clear stance on the homosexuality issue) while Westerners may feel that Southerners are too harsh (for example, in granting too much power and privilege to males and turning a blind eye to oppressive family structures).

Work ethic

Westerners stand in the middle (and criticise everybody) with regard to issues of work and leisure. They feel that Africans and Latins are too laid back, while Asians are too intense, turning their work ethic into a legalism. Questions naturally arise about team practice. Has the leader the right to insist that everybody gets up at four o'clock in the morning to pray, or, conversely, does it matter if certain team members never turn up at the prayer meeting at all?

Causes

One reason why these differences can become so destructive is that our own culture is generally thought to be normative, that is to say the 'natural' standard by which we judge other people's behaviour. (We all think this, even when we have been warned against it.) In the College where I teach we have more than twenty different nationalities and managing the College is akin to running a large multi-cultural team. We certainly attempt to honour cultural diversity, and to affirm each other's culture. Too often, however, this is simply interpreted as meaning that I, as a member of the community, have the right to live according to my culture and that other people are prejudiced or insensitive if they do not give me the space to do so. Also, other people who do not live as I do are 'weird' or abnormal. 'At home we always...' 'Where I come from, we do not...' 'In my church we....' are typical starting points. This may be fine: there is nothing wrong with affirming my own cultural identity and even bragging about it a bit! However, the danger comes when my culture becomes the unexamined standard by which we judge other people's culture. Much of what we think are theological or ethical differences among Christians amount to little more than this sort of behaviour. This can shade all too quickly into cultural superiority which goes beyond treating my culture as normative, and treats it as better than everybody else's.

We must certainly stop referring to culture as an absolute. You often hear people speaking in this way. 'But it is my culture...' they say, as if that ended the argument. But all cultures (including Western culture!) is under the judgement of God in the sense that God is a reference point beyond the culture. Culture is a human product and as such is fallible. It contains elements that are clearly good (divine) and bad (demonic) and much in between.

We think that cultural differences should be easy to resolve, but that is not necessarily the case. As the saying goes, we are all wearing cultural spectacles, we are all unable to take them off, and usually we are all unaware that we are wearing them.

We may also feel that we Christians are ideally suited to handle problems of cultural difference. 'All one in Christ Jesus', something which we gladly subscribe to, seems to give us the basis for effective cross-cultural fellowship. I think this often does work, and I certainly do not want to ignore the work of the Holy Spirit in uniting us. Nevertheless, my observation is that multi-cultural mission teams working cross-culturally, often find it difficult to remain united. Partly, this reflects a simple psychology. The people among whom we are working are expected to be different and perhaps even hostile. We knew this might be the case when we first signed up to be in cross-cultural mission. Indeed opposition is sometimes seen as a validation of what we are doing. However, the people with whom we are working (our team) are expected to support us and understand us. They are fellow Christians who share the same call and objectives. Yet they often seem to fail in this duty. Their support is limited and they certainly do not understand us! Secretly we put this down, very often, to lack of Christian grace. Meanwhile, they are coming to the same conclusions about our Christian profession.

In some ways I believe that the genuinely South-West, cross-cultural team is a new situation. Mission in the past was so dominated by the West that we can hardly speak of 'teams' at all. It is one thing to work with people who are different when the situation is unequal. We can boss them around and make them do things our way, or we can feel good about condescending to their way even when we feel that our way is best. In any case we are usually happy to accept people who are different from us as long as they are making strenuous efforts to be like us! When they are equal to us in power – as presumably they ought to be in a team situation – then we have to work much harder at it. We Westerners are not used to it, and I wonder whether we are up to it.

Sadly, one response is to withdraw. If we can't be in a team on our own terms, then we won't be in it at all. This is a very post-modern approach to working with others. 'You are welcome to your truth, as long as you accept that my truth is different.' It works in today's world because we have mobility and the choice that goes with it. In the New Testament, Paul, in particular, makes strenuous attempts to maintain fellowship among believers. He knew that the Corinthian Christians, for example, who fell out with their fellow believers, might 'fall out' of Christian fellowship altogether. If they left the church in Corinth there was probably no other church to go to. Today it is different. If I do not want to have fellowship with a particular group of Christians, I can usually find another. If I don't like the way you work, I can join another team, or go off and work on my own.

Remedies

- One remedy for this whole situation is better cross cultural training. We simply need to understand each other better. So often when we realise why people behave as they do then we cope better with our own feelings.
- We need to see that there are choices to be made. If somebody is late on the job because they have been unexpectedly visited by a relative who needs hospitality, then we have to realise that 'task orientation' and 'people orientation' can sometimes be in tension. We approve with one part of our minds the way that some cultures affirm people and community but with another part feel that people should turn up to their jobs on time whatever happens. But perhaps we cannot have it both ways.

- We also need to break out of our own monocultural upbringing if that is what it has been. Short term mission may be a helpful preparation here. However, venturing into another culture will not necessarily of itself do the trick. It depends on the company we keep. I sympathise with students when they first come to College if they seek out others of their own nation to sit with at meals and to spend their leisure time with. But I always hope it will not go on too long. One of the great dangers for a multi-cultural team is the team within the team. If there are a number of people from one nation and they form a distinct group within the wider team and they are depending on each other as a primary resource for support and fellowship, then nine times out of ten there will be trouble.
- A team is not something like a family which always contains a number of unchangeable constraints. (Having chosen your wife, you do not have any choice about your mother-in-law.) Better selection of team members may be part of the answer in avoiding culture clash. The business world has done a great deal of careful work on the selection of effective, well-balanced teams. We Christians could take notice.
- Better leadership is always going to help. Many of the issues we are dealing with in cross-cultural teams have to do with the exercise of power. A leader who is perceived to be unfair, or inexperienced or authoritarian will act as a magnifier of cultural differences.

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is unity...but also liberty. We need to allow each other to be different and to enjoy the diversity but also to work for unity. Creating multi-cultural teams is a tough task. However, it is also the only possible future. If we do not learn to work together, then mission will fail. It is also, however, an opportunity. Society at large is not making much of creating harmonious and lasting multi-cultural communities. We have an opportunity to demonstrate that the gospel works, that we Christians really do love each other.

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