

# crossing cultures

Missionaries know all about leaving behind the culture that they are familiar with and living as foreigners somewhere else. But as John Thew writes, even if we never leave our birthplace, none of us are truly at home.

On a visit to Australia, a famous dignitary snatched the headlines when he signalled to a clutch of well-wishers through the window of his Commonwealth car. Unfortunately, he held his hand the wrong way, so victory turned into two fingers. An innocuous gaff. But not all cultural misunderstandings are as trivial.

Passing a certain village, where the elders had been seriously inquiring about Christian faith, missionary John decided to just drop in the gospel cassette they had ordered a few days earlier. Ignoring the advice of the local evangelist, he was sure the early delivery would win the grateful thanks of the elders and all the people. Instead, the evangelist and John were never invited to that village again.

Good intentions translating into bad outcomes is the fate awaiting everyone who doesn't do their 'cultural homework' properly.

## Understanding culture

Culture is what makes any group of people a recognisable group. It includes language and gestures, habits and forms, customs and practices, beliefs and attitudes – anything that is learned behaviour that has commonality in the group. So when someone from outside tries to break into a group – for any reason – there is a whole bunch of learning that needs to happen on both sides, so that the one can understand the other.

This is why CMS invests heavily in our Missionaries-in-Training program, and then insists on missionaries investing a long time in language acquisition. Language is not just words, but the main key that unlocks culture, to learn how people tick, what makes up their hopes and fears.

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So when Andrew went off to Sulawesi with the grand intention of teaching in the Bible school, he first had to learn Indonesian words, then understand the Indonesian mind, and feel the local heartbeat. Only then could he start to explain the unchanging gospel of God's grace in terms that could be received by his students.



Andrew Buchanan spent a year learning Indonesian before he started teaching. Here he is pictured with some of his students.

But the learning process never stops. Missionaries, like any others, need to keep learning, for there is never a point of 'know it all', because cultures are dynamic, always changing, fuelled by the constant cross-fertilisation of travel and communications.

## Slipping up

Culture-crossing gets fouled up easily and regularly. First, there are simple misunderstandings. We read the wrong signals; our intentions are misunderstood. It may be as simple as holding your hand the wrong way; or as complex as rushing too fast, so that the signal goes out: "We don't really care enough to spend time with you."

More sinister is passing judgment on others' cultures. Ethnocentrism says: "We do it this way; this is right; therefore other ways are wrong!" This attitude is all-pervasive, and comes from plain ignorance and sin. It was the colonial attitude that confused European culture with the gospel; and it is still the unchallenged assumption of many western Christians today. But we must be clear: every culture is sinful, and needs to be transformed by the prophetic word of God.

The equation of 'western' with 'Christian' in Islamic perception is very annoying and offensive to true Christians. We, like them, deplore the greed, the materialism, immoral sexuality and violence of our own culture, and so strangely we find common ground with many Muslims.

*"I've become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" 1 Corinthians 9:22 NSRV*



## Aliens and strangers

How then, can we operate as Christians in any culture, our own or another? "As aliens and strangers", says Peter (1 Peter 2:11). We are aliens, in that we are away from our real home and culture with God in heaven; and strangers, in that we don't fit comfortably into any earthly culture. The fact is, there is no 'Christian culture' except the culture of following Jesus, which allows us to live in any human culture, yet not be 'of it' – an uncomfortable coexistence that undoubtedly makes for more stress in living, but is God's true and living way.

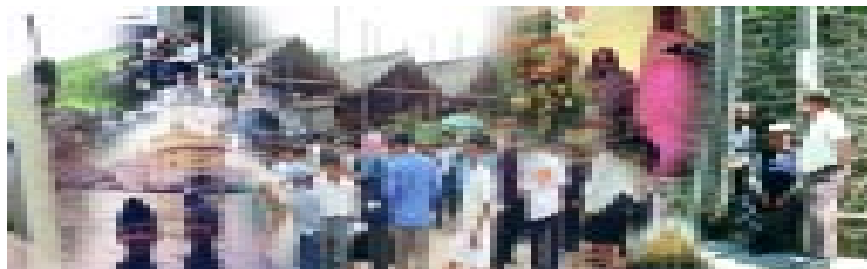
*The fact is, there is no 'Christian culture' except the culture of following Jesus, which allows us to live in any human culture, yet not be 'of it'*

When we look for models of culture crossing, there is none greater than Jesus. He left the perfection of the culture of heaven, and entered his parents' Palestinian Jewish culture at level one – as a baby. From there he grew up, learning the ways of his people, but also learning the ways of his Father in heaven. As Jesus grew in knowledge and wisdom, learning from his mistakes, he grew into the ministry that had been planned for him from eternity, as outlined in the Old Testament that he had come to know passionately. This huge investment led into the

comparatively short public ministry of the Jesus we recognise from the Bible as God Incarnate, the Son of God.

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It is a pattern that Jesus handed on to all his followers. To the 12 disciples, he said, "As the Father sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21). Then he sent us into all the world – so that wherever we go, or wherever we stay, we are part of God's global missionary movement. We



are agents of God himself, at home or abroad, but always in cultures that are estranged from God.

This involves living on the fringes of culture, so that we can communicate with the culture in which we live, but not be ruled by it, not totally absorbed in it, but able to speak to it as from God.

Expressing his passion for Jesus and the people Jesus so dearly loved, Paul said: "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). Paul, like Jesus, was willing to do

whatever was needed to identify with people who were lost.

The problem in our western culture, especially nice middle-class Australia, is that we easily confuse Christian values with our surrounding culture, which in fact is predicated on materialism and acquisition, self-fulfilment, and happiness as the greatest good. We may become so immersed in our culture – even our church culture – that we lose the cutting edge of being in the culture of discipleship of Jesus.

Between us, even the readers of this article, we have enough money, gifts and talent to fill and maintain all the

gospel needs and opportunities that CMS has all over the world. The only thing that stands between us and this goal is the will, yours and mine, to stand apart from our prevailing culture, and be such radical disciples of Christ that, though others may laugh or belittle us, they will still see in our lives, and hear from our lips, the message that Jesus can save them too.

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