

Mission Round Table

The OMF Journal for Reflective Practitioners



Popular Culture and the Good News

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Editorial

Neel F. Roberts

In picturing popular culture and the good news, I imagine the entry of Christian and Faithful of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* into Vanity Fair. It is unavoidable for those on their way to the Celestial City to pass through that town and that fair. The question for Bunyan was not on how to avoid it, but how to pass through in a Christ-honoring way. In his first part, he records a tragedy with heavenly results. In his second part, when Christiana and her company arrive there, he reveals how the town of Vanity, while no less vain than before, becomes a scene of rich harvest.

Our writers in this edition of *Mission Round Table* are those who are passing through their various popular cultures with their eyes and ears wide open and with every intention of revealing their vital faith in Jesus Christ on their way. Those who wish to present the gospel clearly and relevantly must take the time to get to know the popular culture of not only the country where they are residing, but also the segment of society that they are seeking to interact with. The first three writers show us how this is done. Joel C introduces us to C. S. Lewis—one of the twentieth century's great Christian communicators, who mastered his art in part through the study of medieval literature and the comments of enlisted men in the Royal Air Force during World War II. Through a rich discussion built upon various sources about Lewis' life, the paper traces how Lewis explores different forms of popular media of his day in order to communicate salvific truth to the masses. As shown in the paper, Lewis learned to effectively reach young and old and both to those who were wholly ignorant of the gospel as well as those who had the facts and needed to act upon them.

Seeking to help cross-cultural workers engage with cultures where they serve, Les Taylor reflects on his efforts to turn screens into tools and use films that present how people from other cultures see their own culture. He shows how

a person can begin to discover the thoughts of those in other cultures long before physically stepping into their communities. Taylor does not allow for passive imbibing of mass media, however. His goal is to form disciples and that requires personal and group interaction with the media and between teachers and disciples.

Through a focus group discussion, Cherlyn Oh lets Thai Christian students in Bangkok teach her about what they perceive to be the key forces at work in the popular culture that they are a part of. The fact that the discussion occurred online and that the students were the instructors is itself evidence of a changing culture that Christians need to understand in order to engage young people effectively. Her participants reveal the importance of the forms of media used by young people and the ways these are being used.

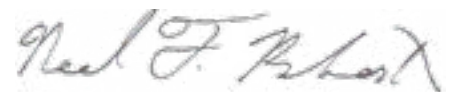
The next two articles look at how culture may impact people's receptivity to the gospel. Wilson McMahon provides a historical review of the growth of the Manobo church in the Philippines and their intentional steps to define their Christian and cultural identity. We see missionaries as contributors to, but not the creators of, that identity. McMahon was able to write as he has because he had built relationships and conducted interviews in which Manobo believers could express their faith in their terms.

Winnie Leung introduces us to two Japanese believers who inform us how they came to faith and now must wrestle with the relationship between their faith and some Japanese cultural practices. While this article gives us a powerful glimpse into what it is like to be a Japanese Christian, it also challenges us to take the time and make the effort to hear from those around us regarding how their own evolving Christian culture is either succeeding or failing to equip them to effectively engage with the popular culture in which they are placed.

It is hard to put the words "poor" and "popular" together and yet millions of East Asians experience cultures that are defined by poverty. The last five articles discuss efforts to serve the poor and needy. David and Ruth Ullstrom share their journey in promoting foster care in Taiwan. As we see from their article, the concept of caring for needy children goes back to Bible times. They describe current efforts to get whole churches to support foster families so that more children can discover God's love and the wider society will be able to observe pure and faultless religion being practiced in its midst.

Looking at the Filipino context, Iljo de Keijzer discusses the challenges frequently faced in one aspect of twenty-first century Christian culture—partnerships between foreign mission organizations and the local church. The popularity of the term may hide the reality that partnerships often fail to meet either party's expectations. De Keijzer provides a range of examples to highlight complexities that must be addressed for partnerships to flourish. The challenges, complexities, and questions raised are so important that we invited three experienced practitioners—Dr. Melba Maggay, Dr. Peter Q, and Jaap den Butter—to respond to her article and also to take the discussion beyond the Philippines. We are grateful for their contributions.

May the papers in this edition challenge us to renew our efforts to understand popular forms of culture around us, to discern the ways in which culture may impact people's receptivity to the gospel, and to seriously search our own hearts with regard to our motivation in partnerships with the local church as we seek to engage those cultures together.



Guest Editor, *Mission Round Table*

Surprised by Culture:

C. S. Lewis and the Redeeming of Popular Culture

Joel C

Joel holds a doctorate in English from a major American university and has taught courses on Western literature, language, film, and culture at universities in the US and Asia since the late 1980s. Along the way, he has had the privilege of introducing *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to dozens of university students.

One of my lingering regrets as a lover of great literature is that I did not first discover the remarkable writings of C. S. Lewis until I was already in college. As a college freshman, I had signed up for an elective course on “Mythology” taught by Mr. Warren Olsen, an English instructor who also happened to be an evangelical Christian. One day, Mr. Olsen wrote the name “Clive Staples Lewis” on the blackboard and briefly remarked that Lewis had written a popular series of fantasy novels for children called the Chronicles of Narnia. I had never heard of C. S. Lewis before, but I had by then developed a taste for fantasy novels and decided to give the Chronicles of Narnia a try. I bought a boxed set containing mass-market paperbacks of all seven of the Narnia novels and, one snowy weekend in the heart of a long Minnesota winter, settled down to read Book One: *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

Even as an adult reader, I was quickly captivated by the magical world of talking beasts and mythological creatures that I found waiting for me on the other side of the wardrobe door. Perhaps it helped that Minnesota winters, by the time February and March come rolling along, invariably begin to look and feel very much like “always winter and never Christmas.” At any rate, over the next few weeks, I read through all seven of the Narnia novels in rapid succession, with one foot seemingly in Narnia and the other in the real world for days on end. But I was left mournfully wondering in the end how Narnia *might* have looked and felt to me if, like Lucy Pevensie, I had only been eight years old when I first pressed my way through the wardrobe and into the snowy woods of Lantern Waste on the other side.

Accordingly, after I had become a father with young children of my own, I was determined not to let my boys suffer the same misfortune (as it were) that I had suffered in missing out on the world of Narnia as a child. Perhaps I was somewhat *too* anxious on that score, for when our oldest son turned three, I decided that the time must be right to try out *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* on young Christopher. Christopher was both highly active and highly verbal at that stage, and the only time that he ever really sat still for any length of time was when we were reading books together on the sofa. *The Lion* was to be his first full-length “chapter book,” and I was not entirely certain that he had either the attention span or the patience at that point to sit through the entire novel. We would take it in smaller, bite-sized chunks, one or two chapters at a time.

As it turned out, Christopher was more than capable of attending to the details of the story as it unfolded. He was all

eyes and ears, soaking up the delightful Pauline Baynes illustrations that perfectly complemented Lewis’ simple, folksy, down-to-earth narrative style. As the four Pevensie children—Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy—increasingly found themselves drawn into the very real dangers and delights of an enemy-occupied Narnia, little Christopher was right there with them every step of the way.

And then, something utterly astonishing happened. We were approaching the nadir of the story in Chapter Fourteen, where Aslan—the great, good, and powerful lion, the rightful ruler of Narnia—willingly gives himself up to the White Witch, the evil usurper, in exchange for the life of one of the Pevensie children. As Aslan, in a quick sequence of events, was captured, bound, shorn of his great mane, muzzled, and laid out on a cold Stone Table by the White Witch and her evil horde of minions, the full implications of what was about to happen began to manifest themselves in Christopher’s very body language. He first began to wiggle and squirm uncomfortably beside me on the sofa. Then, he was off the sofa altogether, weaving back and forth angrily across the living room floor. Finally, as the White Witch began to whet a stone knife in preparation for her final moment of supposed triumph over the great lion, Christopher could contain himself no longer. Through his clenched teeth, cries of “No! No!” began to well up from deep within him. “No! This can’t happen!” he finally shouted out to no one in particular. I was stunned! Little three-year-old Christopher, with every fiber of his being, was viscerally reacting against the utter horror and injustice of what was essentially a re-envisioning of the crucifixion of Jesus—and he was positively livid with the wrongness of it!



The only way that I could convince Christopher to let me continue on with the story was by assuring him that the story was not yet over—that there were, in fact, still several more chapters to go in the book, and that anything might happen in those remaining chapters to turn a sad story into a happy one.

When Christopher had calmed down enough to join me on the sofa once again, I quickly finished off Chapter Fourteen and launched into Chapter Fifteen: “Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time.” Around three pages (!) into Chapter Fifteen, after Susan and Lucy Pevensie had had sufficient time to grieve over the lifeless body of Aslan (thereby establishing for us as readers the incontrovertible fact that the great lion was indeed dead), the most magical moment in the entire Narnia series transpires:

The rising of the sun had made everything look so different—all colours and shadows were changed—that for a moment they didn’t see the important thing. Then they did. The Stone Table was broken into two pieces by a great crack that ran down it from end to end; and there was no Aslan.

“Oh, oh, oh!” cried the two girls, rushing back to the Table.

“Oh, it’s too bad,” sobbed Lucy; “they might have left the body alone.”

“Who’s done it?” cried Susan. “What does it mean? Is it more magic?”

“Yes!” said a great voice behind their backs. “It is more magic.”

They looked round. There, shining in the sunrise, larger than they had seen him before, shaking his mane (for it had apparently grown again) stood Aslan himself.¹

As the shock of Aslan’s sudden, glorious reappearance began to sink in, Christopher was once again off the sofa. This time, however, it was not convulsive anger but uncontrollable joy that animated his entire body. With radiant face, uplifted arms, and exultant cries of “Yes! Yes! Yes!” he danced across the living room in sheer delight. Then, with unmistakable hints of laughter in his voice, he triumphantly exclaimed, “I knew it! I knew it!”

In his simple, three-year-old mind and spirit, little Christopher had grasped the essential truth of the

Despite a distaste for most forms of popular culture that bordered at times on outright distain, C. S. Lewis had an almost otherworldly knack for knowing how and when to harness the various forms of popular culture that were at his disposal to communicate “mere Christianity” to vast numbers of people of all ages, faith traditions, and walks of life.

resurrection of Jesus as thoroughly as any theologian ever had—and all by means of a popular fantasy story.

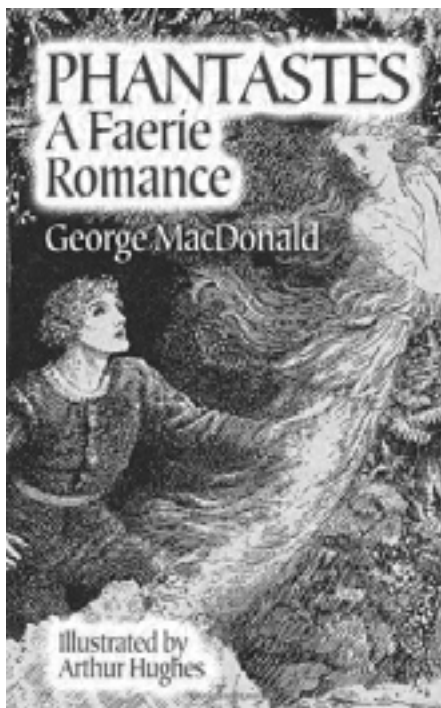
This unforgettable experience of reading *The Lion* to my three-year-old son, coupled with my own prior experience of first encountering the writings of C. S. Lewis as an adult, merely served to heighten and underscore in bold ink the immense regard that I already had for C. S. Lewis as a prophetic Christian voice speaking into the wastelands of modern Western culture. Little Christopher’s intuitive, whole-bodied response to the Christian gospel as re-imagined within a fictional Narnian universe was proof yet again of the astonishing influence and enduring popularity of C. S. Lewis as a Christian writer and thinker, both during his lifetime and in the decades since his death. But how was it that this semi-reclusive Oxford don—who had never had children, nieces, or nephews of his own, who had an instinctive dislike of almost everything associated with modernity and popular culture, and who was an avowed atheist right up to the mid-point of his life—should somehow, seemingly against all odds, have become one of Christianity’s most recognizable, marketable, and revered voices within popular Western culture today?

A deeper look into C. S. Lewis’ own life and legacy offers numerous clues as to how and why this apparently came about.² Despite a distaste for most forms of popular culture that bordered at times on outright distain, C. S. Lewis had an almost otherworldly knack for knowing how and when to harness the various forms of popular culture that were at his disposal—satire, science fiction, radio broadcasts, public lectures, children’s fairy stories, even romance novels—to communicate “mere Christianity” to vast numbers of people of all ages, faith traditions, and walks of life. There is a remarkable dose of irony in all of this. Those familiar with his private life and preferences report that Lewis never read *The Times* and considered the habit of “following the news” to be “pernicious and time-wasting.”³ Yet, that

did not prevent *Time* magazine, the most popular twentieth-century news weekly in the United States with an annual circulation in the millions, from featuring a full-color image of “Oxford’s C. S. Lewis” across the cover of its 8 September 1947 issue, with the cryptic tagline, “His heresy: Christianity.”⁴ Similarly, Lewis apparently had “no interest whatsoever” in the radio, which he regarded as a “harsh contraption” to be avoided at all costs—particularly when it was blaring forth popular music and programming (as it invariably was) from the nearby bungalow of his faithful gardener and universal handyman, Mr. Paxford.⁵ And yet, during the height of World War II, C. S. Lewis’ calm, reassuring voice was being broadcast by BBC Radio to millions of listeners across the British Isles, making Lewis perhaps the most trusted and recognizable radio personality—especially with regard to the Christian faith—in all of England by the end of the war.⁶ Nor did the cinema hold any special charms for Lewis. “There is death in the cinema,” warned Lewis in a 1947 essay, insisting that “nothing can be more disastrous than the view that the cinema can and should replace popular written fiction.”⁷ And yet, in a curious twist of fate, three of Lewis’ most popular novels in the Narnia series have, in recent years, been made into major blockbuster movies, with combined domestic and international box office revenues in excess of 1.5 billion US dollars.⁸ To top it all off, even the more intimate details of Lewis’ private life—his gradual, reluctant conversion to Christianity in the 1920s and 30s and his highly unusual marriage to an American divorcee named Joy Davidman in the late 1950s—have, since Lewis’ death in 1963, been packaged and repackaged for popular consumption in the form of numerous theatrical productions, two made-for-television movies,⁹ and one major motion picture.¹⁰ This perhaps helps to explain why the pop-cultural image and impact of C. S. Lewis and his writings is, by most accounts, even more pronounced and pervasive today than it was during his lifetime.

C. S. Lewis' protracted, often torturous, twenty-year journey (c. 1912–1931) from atheism to theism and then to full-blown Christian orthodoxy actually served as a surprisingly fertile training ground for equipping him to become one of the most influential Christian apologists of the twentieth century. For one thing, it convinced Lewis of the profound influence that popular fiction and “mythology” could have on one’s spiritual outlook and predilections—whether for good or for evil. Though Lewis, as a general rule, had little interest in popular culture per se, he was, nevertheless, a voracious reader, devouring virtually anything in print that he could lay his hands on, including popular fiction.¹¹ At the age of seventeen, Lewis purchased “almost unwillingly” a copy of George MacDonald’s fantasy novel, *Phantastes*, which was to play a significant role in setting him on the pathway towards professing faith in Christ many years later.¹² In *Surprised by Joy*, his 1955 spiritual autobiography, Lewis reflects on the subconscious impact that this delightful encounter with what he called “goodness” in MacDonald had upon him: “It is as if I were carried sleeping across the frontier, or as if I had died in the old country and could never remember how I came alive in the new.”¹³ In a separate account of the novel’s profound impact on him, Lewis wrote:

The whole book had about it a sort of cool, morning innocence, and also, quite unmistakably, a certain quality of Death, *good* Death. What it actually did to me was to convert, even to baptize [...] my imagination.



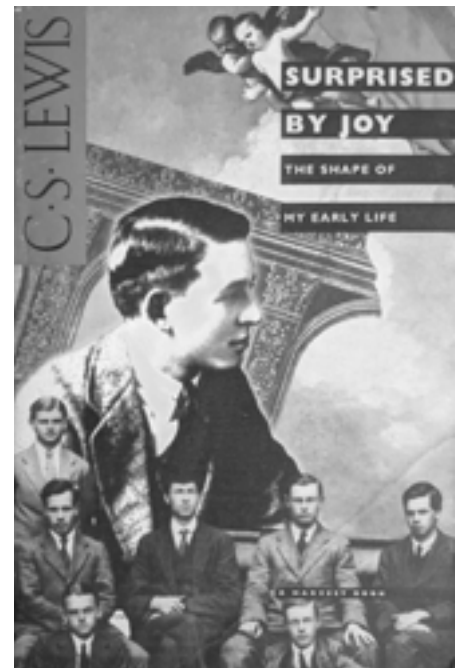
It did nothing to my intellect nor (at that time) to my conscience.¹⁴

There can be little doubt that Lewis, in writing his seven fantasy novels for children between 1950 and 1956, was both desiring and anticipating that his Narnia stories might have the same sort of spiritual impact on a new generation of readers that George MacDonald’s “fairy stories” had once had upon him. A few months after *The Last Battle* was released in 1956 as the final book in the Narnia series, Lewis admitted as much in an article for the *New York Times Book Review*:

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralyzed much of my own religion in childhood [...] [What if] by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.¹⁵

This is not to say that Lewis was deliberately seeking to evangelize his young readers in a strictly religious sense. But he was clearly hoping that those children who had come to fall in love with Aslan in the Narnian world might somehow become predisposed to recognize and fall in love with Christ in our own world. Once, when commenting on the popularity of his Narnia books in conversation with a close personal friend, Lewis candidly remarked: “I am aiming at a sort of pre-baptism of the child’s imagination.”¹⁶ What George MacDonald, through his “fairy stories,” had done for a youthful C. S. Lewis, C. S. Lewis, through his Narnia stories, was seeking to do for his own young readers.

Lewis’ two-decade journey from atheism to faith, however, involved far more than just the baptism of his imagination. His formidable intellect, guarded over by a brood of “watchful dragons” of his own, was in need of an even deeper cleansing than his imagination. I won’t take the time here to trace out all the finer particulars of that lengthy intellectual conversion process. They have, in fact, already been set forth quite splendidly by Lewis himself in *Surprised by Joy*. As might be expected of a literary scholar of Lewis’ stature, the reading of various classical and contemporary literary texts—including



Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) and Chesterton’s *Everlasting Man* (1925)—played a significant role in opening up his mind to the moral foundations of all human experience and the existence of a supreme, good God operating in the universe.¹⁷ Equally important, however, were the many personal conversations that he had along the way with various Christian—and even non-Christian—scholars and friends. There were to be many, many intermediate intellectual steps and stages, in other words, before Lewis was finally prepared, by late September 1931, to bow before Christ as Lord. One of those important intermediate steps, according to Lewis, occurred one night at Oxford during Trinity Term 1929. It was then that Lewis, after a season of vainly attempting to ignore the “unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet,” finally knelt down and admitted “that God was God”—famously becoming “perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.”¹⁸

The final tipping point that carried him across the frontier from belief in the Christian God to belief in the salvific work of Jesus as God was actually a lengthy, late-night conversation that he had in his rooms at Magdalen College on 19 September 1931 with two Christian friends who would later join Lewis as regular members of The Inklings club: Hugo Dyson and J. R. R. Tolkien.¹⁹ By the time Lewis had finally seen Dyson off around four in the morning, Lewis had come to accept that the “story of Christ” was not just one among many god myths but was “a true myth [...] with this tremendous difference that it really happened.”²⁰

In retrospect, we should all be genuinely grateful that a gifted thinker, writer, and scholar such as C. S. Lewis did *not* profess faith in Christ sooner than he did. As someone who had already wrestled deeply and often with the various claims of morality, paganism, atheism, scientific materialism, theism, and the uniqueness of the Christian revelation in human history *before* crossing over into the Christian fold at the mid-point of his life, Lewis was uniquely positioned in later years to speak both sympathetically and convincingly on those same cultural, intellectual, and spiritual matters as a Christian speaker, author, and apologist. And just as personal conversations and popular literature had both played significant roles in his own conversion process, Lewis would find himself turning (almost reluctantly at times) to popular modes of spoken and written communication—public lectures, radio talks, apologetic literature, science fiction, fantasy stories, and personal letters—to help others around him find their way forward through the many pitfalls and dead-ends of modern Western culture in their own intellectual and spiritual journeys.

Lewis' first, largely unsuccessful attempt at this was *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933), a fictional representation of his own long journey towards Christianity that was packaged in the form of an allegory. When sending the manuscript to his publisher, Lewis described the book as “a kind of Bunyan up to date.”²¹ While some readers and reviewers found the novel to be engaging and helpful, most simply found it to be too difficult, complex, and opaque to gain much from it, and sales of the book were decidedly poor.²² Lewis apparently took note of all this and learned from the experience.

His second attempt at employing popular fiction for redemptive purposes came in the late 1930s. As a boy growing up in Belfast, Lewis had loved the science fiction stories of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells,²³ and his passion for reading science fiction continued on into his adult years. It was not until after his conversion in 1931, however, that he first began to entertain “the idea that the ‘scientification’ appeal could be combined with the ‘supernatural’ appeal.”²⁴ Lewis, on reading a science fiction novel by David Lindsay called *Voyage to Arcturus* (1935) that had been recommended to him by a friend, had been impressed by the imaginative depth and scope of Lindsay's story, but appalled by an embedded ideology within the novel

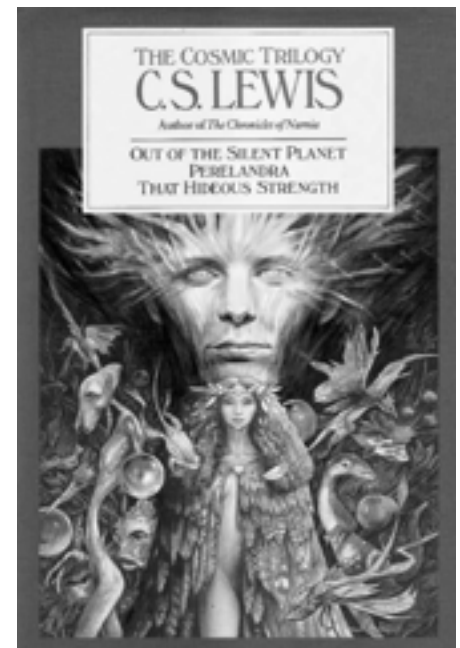
that was “so Manichaeian as to be almost satanic.”²⁵ In response, Lewis decided to try his hand at writing a spiritual thriller along the lines of those written by G. K. Chesterton and Charles Williams, only in the form of “a space-journey.”²⁶

When Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet* came out in late 1938, almost all of the nearly sixty reviews of the novel failed to pick up on, or in any way comment upon, the latent Christian ideology that Lewis had intentionally embedded within his space adventure.²⁷ This both fascinated and delighted Lewis! In a 1939 letter to a more spiritually perceptive reader who had written to Lewis after reading *Out of the Silent Planet*, Lewis wrote: “I think that this great ignorance might be a help to the evangelization of England; any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people's minds under cover of romance without their knowing it.”²⁸ The important thing for Lewis in this was that the theological impact of the novel should be received by his readers at a subliminal level, just as had happened to him when reading the fantasy stories of George Macdonald.

This eventually led Lewis to write two additional science fiction novels—*Perelandra* (1943) and *That Hideous Strength* (1945)—in what is now generally referred to as his “space trilogy.” In the writing of *Perelandra*, Lewis said that he had begun from a certain theological “supposition”: “Suppose, even now, in some other planet there were a first couple undergoing the same that Adam and Eve underwent here, but successfully.”²⁹ This was revolutionary in many respects, I would argue, in C. S. Lewis' development as a Christian writer of popular fiction. While Lewis' brief foray into the genre of science fiction had not been particularly successful from the vantage point of book sales or critical acclaim, it apparently helped Lewis to settle upon a unique *suppositional* approach to the writing of popular fiction that he would later employ to much greater effect in the Chronicles of Narnia. A few years after the last novel in the Narnia series had been published, Lewis would privately acknowledge that Aslan had been “an invention giving an imaginary answer to the question, ‘What might Christ become like if there really were a world like Narnia?’”³⁰

Though C. S. Lewis' “space trilogy” did not experience very much popular success as it was coming out in the 1940s, the same could certainly *not* be said of

its author. When World War II began on 1 September 1939, C. S. Lewis was hardly known by anyone outside of the somewhat insular academic worlds of Oxford, Cambridge, and the British university system. By the time the war was over, C. S. Lewis had somehow achieved (and, certainly, without any personal intention of doing so) near-celebrity status as a lay Christian apologist on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.



Here's how it came about. At the start of the war, Lewis had been asked by the London publishing firm of Geoffrey Bles to contribute something on the subject of pain and suffering to their Christian Challenge Series of popular theological books. Lewis obliged, and the appearance of his well-reasoned, eminently readable *The Problem of Pain* in bookstalls across Britain in October 1940 could not have been more perfectly timed.³¹ England had just endured four brutal months of almost-nightly German bombing at the height of the Battle of Britain, and people across the British Isles were desperate for spiritual hope and theological answers in response to their all-too-raw experiences with the horrors of war. Sales of *The Problem of Pain* were brisk and Geoffrey Bles responded by reprinting Lewis' popular apologetic work nearly ten times during the war years.³²

Lewis' obvious gift in *The Problem of Pain* for explaining difficult theological matters in language that a lay person could easily grasp caught the attention of the BBC. The national broadcasting company had been searching for someone in Britain who could speak to the nation on matters of faith, preferring a lay Christian in that

role rather than a prominent member of the clergy.³³ A BBC radio editor who had read *The Problem of Pain* wrote to Lewis in early 1941 with an invitation to “help us in our work of religious broadcasting.”³⁴ Despite Lewis’ general dislike of nearly everything associated with public broadcasting, he was, nevertheless, intrigued by the invitation. As his own small contribution to the war effort, he had already begun giving talks on faith (usually on weekends) to small groups of servicemen at airbases across the UK at the invitation of the Royal Air Force. What had struck Lewis quite forcefully in connection with his RAF speaking engagements was “the almost total absence from the minds of my audience of any sense of sin.”³⁵ This had led him to the conclusion that he would first need to convince his listeners of “the unwelcome diagnosis” that they were both morally and spiritually sick before he could “expect them to welcome the news of the remedy.”³⁶ The BBC invitation might give him just such an opportunity “to convince people that there is a moral law, that we disobey it, and that the existence of a Lawgiver is at least very probable.”³⁷

Lewis had been learning another important lesson on communication from his RAF speaking engagements as well—the crucial importance (as he would later summarize at a gathering of Welsh clergyman and youth directors) of “learn[ing] the language of our audience”:

You must translate every bit of your Theology into the vernacular. This is very troublesome, and it means you can say very little in half an hour, but it is essential. It is also of the greatest service to your own thought. I have come to the conviction that if you cannot translate your thoughts into uneducated language, then your thoughts were confused. Power to translate is the test of having really understood one’s own meaning.³⁸

In this respect, Lewis’ wartime RAF talks before small, live, predominantly uneducated audiences at air bases across the British Isles had already given him the very clues that he would need to successfully take advantage of the BBC’s surprising invitation to speak to the entire nation on matters of faith. He now knew what his audience members would likely look like, where he would likely need to start in terms of their own awareness of sin and need for the gospel, and what

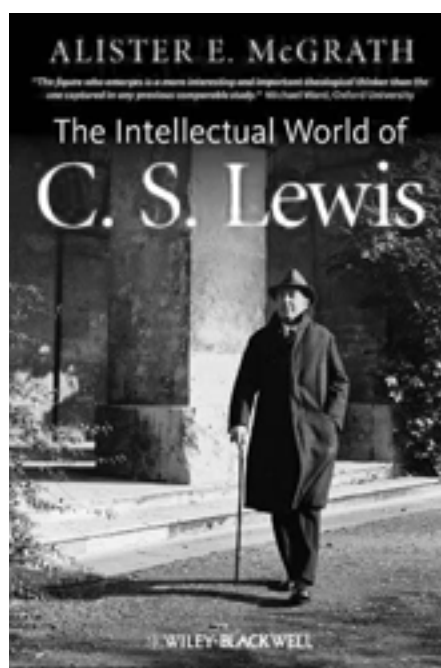
Lewis arrived at deep convictions about the vital importance of baptizing the imagination as well as the intellect, of doing pre-evangelism before evangelism, of carefully translating theological truth into the dialect of one’s audience, and of following up mass evangelism opportunities with intimate, one-on-one communication.

type of language he would likely need to employ in order to move them forward in their own spiritual journeys towards Christ. After some additional back and forth correspondence between Lewis and the BBC’s assistant director of religious programming, it was agreed that Lewis would give a series of weekly live radio talks from the BBC’s London studios in August of 1941 on the moral law.³⁹

There can be little doubt that Lewis approached this opportunity to address a “fairly intelligent audience of more than a million”⁴⁰ with deliberate missionary intent and zeal. As his imagined nationwide audience was not yet ready to receive “the remedy” of the gospel, he would tailor his talks toward “*praeparatio evangelica* rather than *evangelium*.”⁴¹ He apparently tailored them remarkably well. An enthusiastic audience response to Lewis’ first series of live BBC radio talks in August 1941 led to requests—first from his radio audience and then from the BBC—for more, and Lewis was more than willing to oblige.⁴² In his second series of live radio talks, which were broadcast to the nation on Sunday afternoons in January and February of 1942, Lewis decided the time was right to move on from pre-evangelism to the core tenets of the Christian faith: “What Christians

Believe.”⁴³ Two additional series of talks on the Christian faith followed in late 1942 and early 1944. By the time allied troops were landing on the beaches of Normandy in June of 1944, Lewis had delivered twenty-five BBC radio talks to listeners across the UK, with a peak weekly audience of 1.5 million listeners at one point along the way.⁴⁴ By VE Day on 8 May 1945, C. S. Lewis had become the most popular and trusted Christian celebrity in all of Great Britain.⁴⁵

Mass popularity certainly has its advantages. In keeping with the rapid rise to fame of C. S. Lewis as a well-known and well-loved radio personality in the early years of World War II, sales of most of his subsequent apologetic works (*The Abolition of Man*, *Miracles*, *Mere Christianity*) and much of his subsequent popular fiction (*The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Divorce*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Till We Have Faces*) were uniformly strong and, in some cases, downright phenomenal. First edition copies of *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), which is perhaps best characterized as a satiric epistolary novel about common types of moral and spiritual temptation that we all face, are reported to have disappeared almost overnight when they first hit the market in early 1942, leading to eight reprintings in the UK alone that year.⁴⁶ When the “devilish” novel was first published in the United States the following year, *The Screwtape Letters* became an instant spiritual classic and cemented Lewis’ status as a Christian celebrity on both sides of the Atlantic.⁴⁷ Similarly, there can be little doubt that the commercial success of the seven Narnia novels, which were published one at a time between 1950 and 1956 to uneven critical reviews,⁴⁸ was helped along substantially by the fact that they had been written by a celebrity Christian author. But regardless of what the professional reviewers were saying about the Narnia stories at that time, children of all ages seemed to universally love them. The Narnia novels have been in continuous print ever since they first began to appear on the market in the 1950s, have been translated into at least forty-seven different languages, and have reached combined global sales well in excess of 100 million copies.⁴⁹

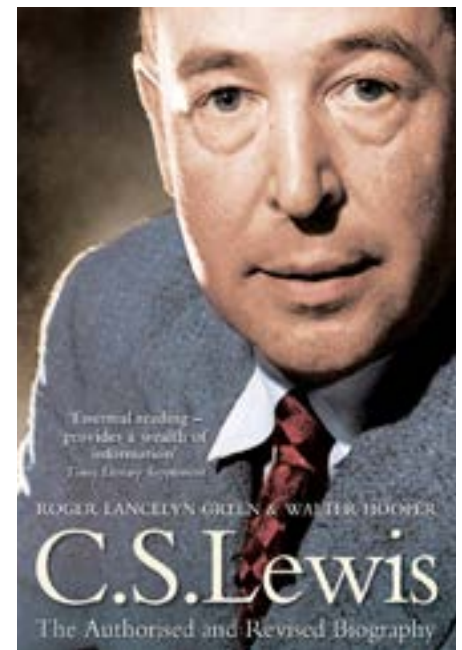


But there is invariably a downside to celebrity status as well—even celebrity Christian status. Lewis’ calm, winsome, colloquial way of communicating with his listeners in his wartime BBC radio broadcasts generated an almost instantaneous and (to Lewis, at any rate) unanticipated response. Mounds of letters from listeners of all types and persuasions began to arrive at the BBC’s London offices addressed to “Mr. Lewis,” which the BBC dutifully forwarded on to C. S. Lewis at his home in Oxford. For the rest of his life, Lewis felt that it was his duty to respond (often with the indispensable administrative assistance of his older brother, Warnie Lewis) to all of his correspondents—and particularly to those that had turned to him with genuine and serious questions.⁵⁰ While this opened a new avenue for Lewis, as a Christian, to speak directly into the lives of hundreds of new correspondents from around the world,⁵¹ it also placed an immense, time-consuming burden on Lewis’ shoulders, and he would struggle to keep up with his never-ending task of writing letters to complete strangers for the rest of his life.

Lewis appears to have paid a steep professional price as well for his unlooked-for national and international fame as the face and voice of “mere Christianity.” His growing popularity as a Christian apologist and speaker within Britain generated a bewildering degree of reactionary hostility towards Lewis among many of his academic colleagues at Oxford University.⁵² Even though Lewis was, by the end of the war, well-deserving of promotion to a full professorship based on his highly acclaimed scholarly work in the academic field of English literature, he was noticeably passed over first for a vacant Merton Chair of English position in 1947, then for a vacant Goldsmith

Chair of English Literature position in 1948, and finally for a new Professor of Poetry position in 1951.⁵³ In the end, Lewis had to make a late-career move to Cambridge University in 1955 in order to finally secure—as Cambridge’s first Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature—the full professorship and lighter tutorial load that he so richly deserved and desperately needed.⁵⁴

In the end, what I find most compelling about C. S. Lewis’ engagement with popular culture following his mid-life conversion to Christianity is the surprising extent to which he was even open to engaging with popular culture in the first place. Lewis never really outgrew his deep-seated provincialism and traditionalism. He apparently never learned to type, never learned to drive, never listened to the radio, hated going to the cinema, disliked having to travel up to London for any but the most pressing of reasons, was convinced that the literature of the past one hundred years should not be formally taught or examined at a British university,⁵⁵ and made only two trips beyond his beloved British Isles during his entire lifetime (once to the trenches of France as a foot soldier during WWI and once to Greece with his wife Joy shortly before her death in 1960). As mentioned above, Lewis once professed to being perhaps “the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.” The same thing could almost be said with respect to his surprising and, at times, phenomenally effective forays into various uncomfortable realms of popular culture following his reluctant conversion to Christ in 1931. It is as if Lewis, like the Apostle Paul long ago, found himself *compelled*, almost against his will and better judgment, to say and do things *for the love of Christ* that might just possibly have a chance of touching—



and somehow changing for the better—the lives of the largest possible number of persons around him. Along the way, Lewis arrived at deep convictions about the vital importance of baptizing the imagination as well as the intellect, of doing pre-evangelism before evangelism, of carefully translating theological truth into the dialect of one’s audience, and of following up mass evangelism opportunities with intimate, one-on-one communication.

I am almost tempted to think that C. S. Lewis, with his deep, intuitive grasp of an impressive array of sound missiological principles, might have become a remarkable missionary if he had been so led and inclined. But then again, wasn’t that precisely what he, in fact, did become? I see in C. S. Lewis a “mere Christian” who, in faithful obedience to his Lord and Savior, was willing to cross over again and again into unredeemed pop cultural spaces that bore all the marks of sin and of death, engaging head on

Clive Staples Lewis was born on 29 November 1898 in Belfast, Ireland (Northern Ireland today). In August 1908, he lost his mother to cancer. While studying in prep school in Malvern, England, he abandoned his childhood Christian faith.

Lewis read George MacDonald’s *Phantastes* in February 1916. He studied at University College, Oxford from April to September 1917. After enlisting in the British army, he reached the front line in Somme Valley, France in November 1917 on his nineteenth birthday. In January 1919, he resumed his studies at University College, Oxford. He received a First in Honour Moderations (Greek and Latin Literature) in 1920, a First in Greats (Philosophy and Ancient History) in 1922, and a First in English in 1923.

From October 1924 to May 1925, Lewis served as philosophy tutor at University College. In May 1925, Lewis was elected a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, where he served as tutor in English Language and Literature for twenty-nine years.

Lewis became a Christian in September 1931.

He received the Gollancz Memorial Prize for Literature in 1937. His four series of “Broadcast Talks” on religion were delivered over BBC Radio in 1941, 1942, and 1944. He was awarded honorary Doctor of Divinity in 1946 by the University of St. Andrews.

Lewis appears on the cover of Time magazine on 8 September 1947. In 1948, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and accepted, in June 1954, the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge.

The Chronicles of Narnia were published in 1950 to 1956. Lewis married Joy Davidman on 23 April 1956. Joy died of cancer in July 1960, soon after her trip with Lewis to Greece. Lewis died on 22 November 1963.



Plaque on a park-bench in Bangor, County Down, by Martin Robinson, CC BY-SA 3.0 < <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons.

the darkness that he found there—and always, always with the intention of redeeming whatever could be redeemed in those dark spaces, and redeeming whoever might be redeemed by means of them. It was a heroic, often exhausting personal mission for C. S. Lewis and it very likely sent him to an early grave. But he doubtless wouldn't have had it any other way—and God's kingdom on earth is all the greater because of it. **MRT**

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, illus. Pauline Baynes (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 184.

² Three excellent biographies on the life of C. S. Lewis form the basis for many of my incidental observations about his life in this article: Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2002); George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1988); Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2013).

³ Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 155, 236.

⁴ See *Time* magazine cover image by Boris

Artzybasheff, *Time* L, no. 10, 8 Sep 1947, U.S. ed., <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19470908,00.html> (accessed 17 November 2021).

⁵ Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 241.

⁶ McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, 241; Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis*, 278.

⁷ C. S. Lewis, "On Stories," in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), 16–17.

⁸ Statistics retrieved from Box Office Mojo, boxofficemojo.com (accessed 8 Nov 2021).

⁹ *Shadowlands*, directed by Norman Stone (BBC, 1986) and *The Most Reluctant Convert*, directed by Norman Stone (1A Productions, 2021).

¹⁰ *Shadowlands*, directed by Richard Attenborough (Spelling Films, 1993).

¹¹ Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 159.

¹² C. S. Lewis, "Preface," in *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, ed. C. S. Lewis (London: Collins, 1946), xxxiii.

¹³ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1984), 207.

¹⁴ C. S. Lewis, "Preface," xxxiii.

¹⁵ C. S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to be Said," in *Of Other Worlds*, 37.

¹⁶ Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis*, 318.

¹⁷ McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, 169; Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 100.

¹⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London:

HarperCollins, 2002), 271.

¹⁹ Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 114–15.

²⁰ Letter to Arthur Greeves, 18 Oct 1931, quoted in Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 116.

²¹ Quoted in McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, 169.

²² Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 131–32; McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, 170–71.

²³ McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, 233.

²⁴ Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 187.

²⁵ Quoted in Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis*, 254.

²⁶ Quoted in Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis*, 254.

²⁷ Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis*, 255.

²⁸ Quoted in Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis*, 255.

²⁹ Quoted in Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 199.

³⁰ Quoted in Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 199.

³¹ Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis*, 270.

³² Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis*, 270.

³³ McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, 205–206.

³⁴ Quoted in Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 240.

³⁵ Quoted in Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 244.

³⁶ Quoted in Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 244.

³⁷ Quoted in Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 244.

³⁸ Quoted in McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, 207–208.

³⁹ McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, 206–210.

⁴⁰ Letter from James Welch to C. S. Lewis, 7 Feb 1941, quoted in McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, 206.

⁴¹ Quoted in Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 244.

⁴² McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, 210.

⁴³ McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, 210–11.

⁴⁴ Justin Taylor, "75 Years Ago: C. S. Lewis Speaks to Britain about Christianity on the BBC—A Chronology," TGC (blog), 5 August 2016, U.S. ed., <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/evangelical-history/75-years-ago-c-s-lewis-on-the-bbc-a-chronology> (accessed 13 Nov 2021).

⁴⁵ McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, 241; Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis*, 278.

⁴⁶ Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 237.

⁴⁷ Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 237; Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis*, 274.

⁴⁸ Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 326–27; Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis*, 315–16.

⁴⁹ "The Chronicles of Narnia," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Chronicles_of_Narnia#Publication_history (accessed 13 Nov 2021).

⁵⁰ Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis*, 278.

⁵¹ See C. S. Lewis, *Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, 3 vols., ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009).

⁵² McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, 218.

⁵³ McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, 243–44.

⁵⁴ McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, 314.

⁵⁵ Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 156–157.



Reading Evangelicals: How Christian Fiction Shaped a Culture and a Faith

Daniel Silliman. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2021. ISBN 978-0-8028-7935-6. 286 pp.

Reading Evangelicals presents an insightful historical account of best-selling Christian fiction and a thought-provoking analysis of how American evangelical pop culture has been shaped by the changing book markets that it helped to build. Silliman looks in turn at five best-selling novels—*Love Comes Softly*, *This Present Darkness*, *Left Behind*, *The Shunning*, and *The Shack*—and analyses the imaginative worlds each novel conjures, its appeal to readers, and how it connects people into community. He examines the major forces at work in these fictional worlds, how they operate, and how they manifest God. Through his well-researched discussion of these novels, Silliman assesses the meaning of American evangelicalism and perceptively draws out what these novels reveal about their authors, publishers, the bookstores that sold them, and the masses who read them. He further guides readers through the broader contexts and trends surrounding the changes in evangelical publishing in the past few decades as well as the impact of marketing best-selling Christian fiction by Walmart, Barnes and Noble, and Amazon. More than an engaging documentary history, *Reading Evangelicals* raises important questions about evangelical identity and will benefit readers who wish to understand the past and future of one form of Christian pop culture.

From Toys to Tools: Reflections on Redeeming Our Screens

Les Taylor

Before joining many other COVID-19 refugees in March 2020, Les Taylor had lived and worked in Southeast Asia for twenty years with his long-suffering (and saintly) wife and two (remarkably well-balanced) children. Since completing his doctorate at a university in Southeast Asia, he has held a series of research fellowships in local universities and taught intensive courses in local seminaries.

Introduction

In this article, I reflect on my experience of helping a mix of East and Southeast Asian Christians and a range of cross-cultural workers engage in the cultural and religious contexts God has called them to serve in. In addition to serving as informal mentor to many, I have taught intensive residential postgraduate courses in a range of seminaries. Although my specific area of academic expertise and experience as a practitioner is primarily in one Southeast Asian culture, I am confident that the lessons I have learnt will be relevant to those committed to engaging with other cultures where they live. Those interested in my journey of putting scholarship to work in the service of mission should read my articles in earlier issues of the *Mission Round Table*.¹ I greatly admire the Apostle Paul—his biographer in the book of Acts presents his presence, comfort, and credibility in a variety of contexts. Like paintings, seminal films, albums and songs of musical genius, and literature, Scripture must be more than read. It must be reread for the simple reason that, as our experience of how God works in the world grows, we see new things as we reread. In Acts 17, Luke relates Paul accepting an invitation to present, in the local university, arguments he had been making in Athens' local marketplaces and synagogues. Remarkably, in his guest lecture, Paul quoted Greek philosophy and poetry. Had Paul not led the life of an itinerant preacher, healer, religious provocateur, and organiser, the bookshelves (or, more likely, scroll shelves) in his study might have included more than the Torah. There would also have been Greek works that were widely read and often quoted when he sought to share the good news of the kingdom of God.

Who are today's philosophers? Who are today's poets?

Philosophical treatises and poetic anthologies might be spotted on the bookshelves and coffee tables of bespectacled, over-educated bookworms. But most now encounter new ideas through films and today's best-known poets are songwriters. Furthermore, we watch films on our laptops and listen to songs on our mobile phones. Conventional publishing continues to thrive and I have no plans to rein in my advocacy for reading. Reading needs to be embodied, encouraged, and funded. The best leaders are readers, as this is one of the ways organisations avoid re-inventing multiple wheels. My argument is that we need to *redeem* the screens that so easily distract people from being fully present in the corners of East and Southeast Asia where we live, work, and witness. There are many ways that the screens we view can be redeemed and toys become tools. But this requires curated collections of media and recommended reading to be prepared and made available to those whose formation we are responsible for. Before proceeding, let's remind ourselves of snapshots slipped in by Mark that reveal challenges experienced by Jesus as he formed his disciples.

Episodes of low-level exasperation in the Gospel of Mark

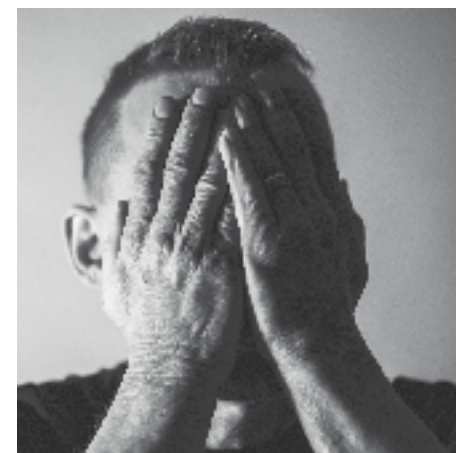
As the Gospels are the authorised biographies of the life and teachings of Jesus, the episodes of low-level exasperation included by Mark are there for a reason. I am confident that I am not the only one involved in either forming practitioners or discipling people

with no biblical knowledge or personal experience of the risen Saviour who is encouraged by the following snapshots.

Let's begin with Mark 8:14–18.

¹⁴ Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. ¹⁵ And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out—beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod." ¹⁶ They said to one another, "It is because we have no bread." ¹⁷ And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? ¹⁸ Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? (NRSV)

In this phase of his ministry, Jesus was travelling with his twelve disciples, who were followed by the crowds he had taught and healed. As this was before the advent of AirAsia (and before disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic), he travelled by foot and boat. This meant that he was tired. Like any effective leader, he had delegated specific



logistics to his disciples. A throwaway comment about the dangers of the local legalists was monstrously misinterpreted by the twelve. His first reaction could be paraphrased as “You still don’t get it, do you! Where are your eyes? What have you been doing with your ears when I open my mouth?” Attention deficit disorder (ADD) might not be as new as some say! In Mark 9:30–32, we are informed that Jesus travelled to Jerusalem after his transfiguration. He “passed through Galilee,” but did not want anyone to know this. This was because he was focused on “teaching his disciples.” He reminded them that “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” Mark adds that the twelve “did not understand what he was saying.” Furthermore, they were “afraid to ask him.” Be encouraged! Things that are important need to be said more than once. I often find myself saying, “I am saying this more than once *not* because you are dumb! It’s because it’s important!”

Another episode of what I have referred to as low-level exasperation occurs earlier in Mark 4:1–20, while Jesus was teaching the crowds about the kingdom of God.

¹ Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.

² He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: ³ “Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. ⁶ And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away.

⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸ Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.

In verses 9 and 10, Jesus urges any of those with ears to “listen” and “hear.” Once he was alone with both the twelve and “those who were around him,” he was asked about the parables. He explained that they had been “given the secret of the kingdom of God,”

Stories worth listening to, reading, or watching must be chewed over, retold, reread, or re-watched.

but, to outsiders, “everything comes in parables.” The reason was that, for the time being, these outsiders may “look, but not perceive” and “listen, but not understand.” He asked, “Do you not understand this parable?” Should this be the case, “How will you understand all the parables?”

He explains:

¹⁴ The sower sows the word. ¹⁵ These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. ¹⁶ And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy.

¹⁷ But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.

¹⁸ And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, ¹⁹ but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²⁰ And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.

As a professional coach, mentor, and educator keen to redeem our screens, a number of points struck me. Stories are things that are interacted with. It is nothing short of delusional for us to expect everyone to immediately “get it.” Disciple makers must be in it for the long haul. This snapshot in Mark has nothing to do with calling out legalists or Jesus’ multiple reminders to the twelve about his—and their—call to service and suffering. Mark relates details about what Jesus did after his public telling of a cryptic parable. For all sorts of reasons that cannot be dealt with here, most of us are more familiar with—and, therefore, more enthusiastic about—systematic theology than narrative theology. The Holy Scriptures contain the story of God that begins with his creation of the cosmos and ends with the sending of Jesus and the Holy Spirit (which leads on to the continuation of the story with the Spirit-directed ministry of his disciples even to the present). Big ideas and timeless truths

contained in Scripture are not presented as abstractions. They are contained in stories. Stories are to doctrine what cups are to coffee or tea. Stories worth listening to, reading, or watching must be chewed over, retold, reread, or re-watched. Moreover, it is almost always the case that some sort of explanation or facilitated discussion is required before those we are forming will “get it.”

Beyond the bookworm bottom line

Inspired as he was by the Holy Spirit, I should not be surprised at how Mark’s inclusion of these details has encouraged me. I do not interpret these episodes of low-level exasperation as examples of failure. I am able to celebrate my successes, but I have learnt more from my failures. Indeed, more of us should document our (often faltering) first steps. Is it possible to objectively assess one’s personal success? I ceased attempting this many years ago, after concluding that most either grossly overestimate or underestimate how well they have done. After resolving to make decisions based on who I *am* (rather than who I wish I was) and to develop the gifts God has given *me* (rather than be jealous of those given to my many mentors), I incrementally tweaked how I sought to serve Asian and Western co-workers in our fellowship and also anyone committed to wider kingdom causes. What have I learned from the practitioners—along with others—whom I journeyed with, who have successfully dispensed with their training wheels? In other words, is there anything in common with how cultural and/or religious outsiders overcame their cultural blind spots and religious prejudices?

Those now confident in the corner of East or Southeast Asia that God had led them to understood that learning is much more than an intellectual journey. As anyone who has mastered a sport or musical instrument—but, most importantly, a new language—will testify, learning is an *emotional* journey. As such, a deeply people-centred and pastoral approach to forming practitioners is required. Secondly, in our increasingly multicultural fellowship, accommodations must be made for practitioners who

are non-native English speakers. I also add that more of us must be committed to working with anyone limping with a range of learning difficulties.

I continue to not only read what anthropologists and historians are writing about Southeast Asia, but also advocate that others begin to do so. More is caught than taught and few will ever grow to be someone they have not seen. Despite being a dyslexic disaster zone until my late twenties, with the help—and, I would add, the Christ-like patience—of many mentors, I learnt to compensate by viewing my laptop as a tool, not just a toy. I eventually experienced for myself the transformative power of reading the books my lecturers and mentors curated for me. That said, rightly or wrongly, I do not profile myself as having successfully convinced many others that reading omnivorously could increase their levels of comfort and animate engagement. This is despite ceasing, years ago, to recommend 100–200 page books that are accessible to most with an undergraduate education. Could they afford these? Was this realistic for non-native English speakers? My new default was to email electronic versions of short articles.

I have lost count of the number of times I've been told, "I don't read" or "I don't *learn* by reading." I have no interest in being profiled by anyone as a grumpy, pale, stale male. One of my personal development goals is to grow old, grey, and gracious. Below, I relate ways that I have experimented with to move beyond the bookworm bottom line by using media when serving fellow followers as both an (informal) mentor and a (more formal) lecturer. To reiterate, most of these were explored in the postgraduate courses I have taught in a range of seminaries in East and Southeast Asia.

Throughout our increasingly connected world, authors continue to write. To

reiterate, conventional book publishing is thriving. Asian novelists write in both Asian languages and English. Works of the former are increasingly translated into English. Rightly or wrongly, most young practitioners who cross cultural and religious lines in order to serve others spend much more time in front of the screen. Few are bookworms. Most millennials choose to acquire skills by watching videos rather than reading recipe books or user manuals. Being called a bookworm is often a compliment, but referring to people as "screen addicts" is derogatory. I prefer my "redeeming our screens" bumper sticker to saying (with a deep, pale, stale, male sigh), "If you can't beat them, join them!"

My experience is that people a lot younger than I would much prefer participating in a fun evening of food, film, and facilitated discussion than at a book club. I celebrate that our organisation takes our calling seriously, but I also think that we all need to have a bit more fun. Spending an evening around food and film might be fun, but—more importantly—most millennials I have sought to serve are introduced to and critically engage with ideas. Most modern day (fellow) iconoclasts have been inspired by watching *Fight Club* or the first of the *Matrix* trilogy. The medium is as important as the message. Indeed, some say that the medium is the message.

I confess that the three-letter F-word "fun" was the last thing on my mind when I first required my postgraduate students to interact with a mix of articles and films.

I had been invited to teach a one-week block course. In previous courses I taught, almost no one had completed their pre-course reading. This meant that students arrived feeling very much on the back foot. Remember: successful students have climbed an *emotional* Everest before they begin ascending this intellectual one. How

could I help students arrive having already "got into the zone?" How could I help more arrive with some assessment balls already in the back of their net? Instead of assigning compulsory pre-course *reading*, I prepared a mix of carefully chosen films exploring themes of interreligious contact, comfort, and conflict between Christians and their non-Christian neighbours. I assigned these to groups of students, who were introduced to each other on the first day of the course. Should inadequate internet connections have prevented them from downloading these and/or they needed help accessing the non-English subtitles, these logistical pickups were dealt with on the first morning of the course. This meant that students could make sure to view their assigned film by the first evening of the course. In the days that followed, students were required to give a series of group presentations that summarised the main themes in the film, as well as some highlights (via the data projector). I facilitated discussion of these films that others had not viewed. This did not prevent students from offering their thoughts and reactions. Not only did this approach introduce students to some of the issues that this course explored, but this work was done by fellow students—not the scary foreign lecturer they had only just met. The themes explored through these films were developed in my lectures and compulsory readings. I provided electronic articles of all these, which, I note, few printed off. Interacting with media made it easier for students to read from their screens. This required some short tutorials about how students could move beyond profiling their laptops as toys by introducing them to online dictionaries and text-to-speech functions of their operating systems.

Around the same time, I sought to redeem the screens of a cohort of Serve Asia Workers (SAW) and interns that our team was hosting. We lived together in community for a number of weeks. In



addition to Bible study, prayer, sharing of our journeys of faith and call to cross-cultural service in Southeast Asia, and spending time in local communities, we watched a film every evening after we had eaten together. The following day, we discussed what we had watched. If I had been more organised, I would have taken the time to download and make available versions of the films with Mandarin, Cantonese, and Portuguese subtitles. Thankfully, everyone involved not only had adequate levels of English, but soon worked out how they could slow the speed of the movie to make it easier for them to follow the dialogue. Some also chose to download preferred subtitles. These are small-scale initiatives in resisting what political philosophers refer to as neocolonialism.

A third case study that I would like to reflect on is the most moving. I put together a course exploring issues of interreligious intelligence in Southeast Asia that aimed to specifically address issues of victimisation and oppression experienced by Christian minorities. The materials I prepared—Bible

The works of storytellers worth reading or watching the most are those that contribute critical commentaries about their imperfect societies. As cultural and religious insiders, their works often open windows into aspects of these societies that most outsiders would take years to see.

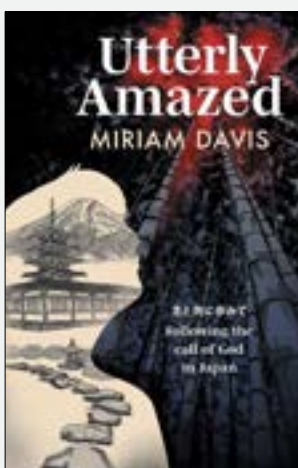
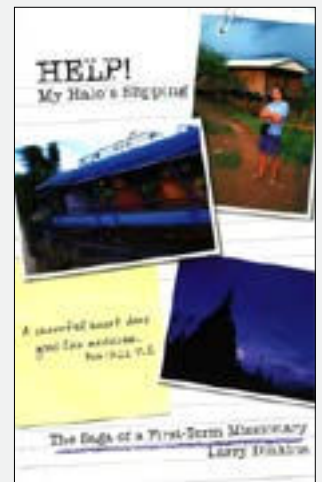
studies, lectures, and interaction with media—sought to encourage students to engage, on an *emotional* level, how Jesus' interactions with Samaritan (heretics) and (violent) Roman oppressors have contemporary relevance in Southeast Asia. I argued that Jesus' parables and accounts of his interactions in multi-religious Galilee are primarily prophetic in ways that resemble what Walter Brueggemann has referred to as the prophetic imagination. Bureaucratic attempts at bringing about social and religious change cannot compete with prophetic approaches. At the end of the course that brought together depictions of ordinary people in films with ordinary Samaritans and Romans, I felt the nudge to engage some theatrical Jesus jester

act of service or self-ridicule. Dressed in a T-shirt and *sarong*, and carrying a bucket of warm water and rag, I asked the students to arrange the chairs in a circle. Moving slowly around the group, I individually washed the feet of all my students, praying for them as I did so. I also encouraged the person on the left to pray for the person on their right, after I had done so. By the end of this final session, there weren't many dry eyes in the room—including mine. I consistently prayed prayers that asked God to give them love for the local Samaritans and Romans they knew. Afterwards, a number of students who were leaders of their denominations related that this was the first time anyone had washed their feet as Jesus

Help! My Halo is Slipping: The Saga of a First-Term Missionary

Larry Dinkins. Littleton, CO: OMF, 2021. ISBN 9971-972-06-4. 194 pp.
Second edition available on Kindle.

This biography is not about glamour and adventure or haloed saints sacrificing life and limb on some far-off heathen shore. Rather, it is written for readers who want to know what it is really like to become a missionary. You will laugh and cry with Larry and his wife, Paula, as you follow their story through language study, adjustment to an international mission organization, finding identity, and raising children in a new culture. Through sickness after sickness, floods, robberies, and the pressures of living in a very different culture, readers will discover what it takes to bring Thai people to know Christ and to see a church begin to grow. Larry and Paula's first term didn't produce even the hint of a halo, but it did produce in them a greater determination to be more like their master, Jesus.



Utterly Amazed: Following the Call of God in Japan

Miriam Davis. Gloucester: Fabulahula, 2021. ISBN 978-19160519-5-9. 308 pp

Following God's call to Japan soon after her graduation in 1975, Mariam Davis' initial two-year cross-cultural assignment turned into forty-two years of service until her retirement in 2017. She tells her story with candid honesty, sharing both her struggles and joys through the twists and turns of culture shock, constant transition, heartbreak, burnout, and depression. With a keen eye on God's hand in her life, Davis testifies to his faithfulness in sustaining, molding, and using her for his glory amidst the challenges and pitfalls of missionary life. This is a heart-warming and inspiring story of God's continued guidance in her life, one step at a time, that shows not only his great power but his sufficiency and unfailing love. Readers will find encouragement, comfort, challenge, and spiritual food and discussion questions at the end of the book will be helpful for personal study and small group discussion.

had done. A deposit in the emotional memory bank had been achieved. Only God knows whether—and in what way—this impacted their leadership.

In lieu of a conclusion: Some closing recommendations

I wish to conclude with some brief recommendations. The first relates to content. There are very few Hollywood movies that I would recommend. I personally prefer films written, directed, and produced by Muslims. Like novels and short stories, films do much more than simply tell stories. The works of storytellers worth reading or watching the most are those that contribute critical commentaries about their imperfect societies. As cultural and religious insiders, their works often open windows into aspects of these societies that most outsiders would take years to see.

These are some of the films I personally used. *Arranged* centres on the friendship between two women—an Orthodox Jew and a Muslim—who meet as first-year teachers at a public school, where they learn what they have in common.² It explores important cultural values of modesty and the importance of family for Muslims. In *Kinyarwanda*, a young Tutsi woman and a young Hutu man fall in love amidst chaos, a female soldier struggles to foster a greater good while absent from her family, and a Catholic priest and his parishioners grapple with his suspicion of the Muslims who offer shelter from the 1994 genocide.³ *Mogul Moguli* centres around a British Pakistani rapper on the cusp of his first world tour who is struck down by an illness that threatens to derail his big break.⁴ Viewers are introduced to many aspects of ordinary “lived” Islam, including drug use and concerns about spirit possession. *My Son the Fanatic* portrays a clash of generations and culture as the protagonist—a whiskey-drinking Pakistani taxi driver—is caught between his son and a prostitute when his son joins conservative Muslim friends to decide to clean up their local town.⁵ The documentary *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* chronicles the activism of Christian and Muslim women working together to bring peace to Liberia that led to the country’s first female leader coming to power.⁶ The title of *Taqwacore: The Birth of*

Punk Islam is a combination of hardcore (a form of punk music) and the Arabic term *taqwa*, which can be translated as “piety” or “god-fearing.”⁷ Like the other films I recommend, these introduce religious outsiders to young Muslims as they live out their faith today. Another documentary that I highly recommend is *The Imam and the Pastor*.⁸ Both the *Imam* and (Pentecostal) pastor are conservative, confessional religious leaders working to quell violence between Muslims and Christians in northern Nigeria. It tells the story of their reconciliation and how they lead peace-making initiatives. It explores what faith-based grass-roots activism can look like and calls into question assumptions that this is what “liberals” do. The premise of *The Infidel* is the identity crisis that follows in the wake of a young man discovering his birth father was Jewish.⁹ He sets about learning about “Jews” from an irreverent (secular) Jewish neighbour, who introduces him to everyday Jewish food, mannerisms, and literature. Another comedy that I recommend is *Where Do We Go Now*.¹⁰ A group of Lebanese women try to ease religious tensions between Christians and Muslims in their village led by their (clueless) husbands and sons.

Over and above content, my second recommendation reiterates arguments about us all needing to have a bit more fun. I am now based in my country of birth, and I write while completing preparations for a series of mini film festivals that I will host at local seminaries and churches. “Film Festivalettes” is the name we have given to an exciting inter-organisational pilot project with two other mission agencies. My first experiments in moving beyond the bookworm bottom line were unleashed on unsuspecting students preparing for service, but our hope is that these mini film festivals will help our efforts to increase local engagement with the last, least, and lost for the sake of the

gospel. In addition to helping local Christ followers serve locally, our hope is that, through these events, God might call new workers to join our organisations. There are a number of reasons for local enthusiasm about this project. The first is that these will begin with the cooking and sharing of Asian food. This is important as, in many countries, the combination of food and film—especially over the weekend—is something that is familiar. These will, therefore, draw greater crowds of young people than conventional events, the highlight of which is listening to a speaker. To be sure, once food has been eaten and the film has been watched, these evenings will conclude with facilitated discussion and stories from East and Southeast Asia. To summarise, adding films to our toolboxes is another way that we can redeem our screens by transforming toys into tools.

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¹ See “John Sung’s Identity and Ministry amongst the Chinese Diaspora Community in South East Asia—Learning Lessons from a Unique Missional Biography,” *Mission Round Table* 6, no. 2 (January 2011): 16–18, <https://omf.org/en/post/-/news-and-stories/2021/10/19/mrt-john-sungs-identity-and-ministry-amongst-the-chinese-diaspora-community-in-south-east-asia>; “Bivocationalism in Southeast Asia: Stories from the Past and Thoughts about the Future,” *Mission Round Table* 13, no. 1 (January–April 2018): 12–18, <https://omf.org/en/post/-/news-and-stories/2019/3/18/bivocationalism-in-southeast-asia> (accessed 19 October 2021).

² *Arranged*, directed by Diane Crespo and Stefan Schaefer (Cicala Filmworks, 2007), <https://cinemaworld.asia/movie/arranged/> (accessed 16 October 2021).

³ *Kinyarwanda*, directed by Alrick Brown (African-American Film Festival Releasing Movement, 2011), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1572154/> (accessed 16 October 2021).

⁴ *Mogul Moguli*, directed by Bassam Tariq (Pulse Films, 2020), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9892094/> (accessed 16 October 2021).

⁵ *My Son the Fanatic*, directed by Udayan Prasad (Feature Film, 1997), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119743/> (accessed 16 October 2021).

⁶ *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, directed by Gini Reticker (Fork Films, 2008), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1202203/> (accessed 16 October 2021).

⁷ *Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam*, directed by Omar Majeed (EyeSteelFilm, 2009), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1519402/> (accessed 16 October 2021).

⁸ *The Imam and the Pastor*, directed by Alan Channer (FLT Films, 2009), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFh85K4NFv0> (accessed 16 October 2021).

⁹ *The Infidel*, directed by Cyrus Nowrasteh (D’Souza Media, 2010), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1424003/>.

¹⁰ *Where Do We Go Now*, directed by Nadine Labaki (Les Films des Tournelles, 2011), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1772424/> (accessed 16 October 2021).



Popular Culture and the Gospel amongst University Students in Bangkok

Cherlyn Oh



Cherlyn is a Singaporean missionary serving with the Bangkok team in the OMF Thailand Field. For the last five years, she has been partnering with Thai Christian Students (TCS), a local organization under the umbrella of International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), to serve university students in Bangkok. One aspect of student ministry she enjoys is exchanging stories with students over food and snacks. She recently found out that her personal optimum spice level for papaya salad is having exactly six chillies in one serving.

Introduction

If you were asked to guess what Generation Z (born 1997–2012)¹ university students in Bangkok would consider as popular culture, what would you say? Would you think that Korean drama or idol groups like Blackpink and BTS would be top on the list? How about Netflix or Disney+ movies and series?

Those would probably make it into the top twenty, but imagine my surprise to find out that they were not listed as the top five according to my recent focus group discussion with five Thai university students.

Gordon Lynch, in his book *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, defines popular culture simply as “the shared environment, practices and resources of everyday life in a given society.”² Common categories for pop culture would include entertainment, sports, news, politics, fashion, and technology, amongst others.³

In this write-up, the “given society” that we will be looking at is that of the university students studying in the bustling city of Bangkok, Thailand.

Understanding what young people see as common and shared in their environment, the practices that go along with it, and the resources that they perceive as available to them is very important in our ministry to bring the gospel to this generation. This is because understanding how they think and what they view as important issues will help ministry workers know the questions that they are asking. This will help us craft biblical answers and address issues that they are concerned about. Not understanding the needs and worldviews of our target group before we come up with outreach and discipleship strategies is akin to embarking on a trip without knowing where the destination is.

The method

To satisfy my curiosity, I gathered a group of five university students who were active in the Christian groups from four universities in Bangkok. One student is majoring in English language, two in economics, one in journalism, and one in education. In August 2021, we had a focus group discussion via Zoom for about one and a half hours to talk about what they perceived to be the popular culture amongst their peers and their views on whether the gospel is related to it. The interview was conducted by me asking questions and the students taking turns to share their views. At various points in the interview, I asked the students if they agreed with what another student was saying. I was the learner, there to listen and observe the interaction of the students. The students shared in the Thai language and what they shared was consolidated and translated into English for this piece.

Four of the five students knew each other and their videos were turned on during the interview. The fifth student was less familiar with the others and his video was turned off. He shared a lot and even expressed disagreement cordially at certain points; he told me later that he could have shared even more, but sometimes held back because he didn't know the others that well. There is a possibility of confirmation bias for the other four students, but it was probably not significant based on my observations. While they generally agreed, disagreement was expressed at times and the student who disagreed shared why briefly. Most of the time, they did not elaborate or get into a discussion as to why they did or did not agree with another, possibly because of time constraints.

I acknowledge that a focus group discussion with only five university students is very limited, but one conversation can still bring insights that can help us understand this generation

a little more so that we can consider what else we need to find out and begin to generate ideas about how we can adapt our methods to reach the young people in a new era.

Findings

The following five points are summaries drawn from the opinions of the student participants of the focus group discussion.

1. Politics

Politics was the first thing that came up in the focus group discussion. This is not surprising considering that, since the year 2020 till the time of writing, this new generation of young people in Thailand, especially in Bangkok, have been protesting against the government, demanding for the parliament to be dissolved, for the constitution to be rewritten, and for authorities to stop clamping down on critics.⁴ The people sought creative ways to protest, such as the widely used three-finger salute from *The Hunger Games* movie series as a protest gesture to represent the three demands that the students were making. During a phase of the protests, a phrase adapted from the video game “Bioshock” was used to express the discontent of the protesters towards local institutions. It was used as a hashtag and trended on Twitter and Instagram for a period of time.

One student in the focus group explained that, in the days before Thailand was an official country, three pillars were set up to be the foundation of the people—the king, religion, and the nation. It was taught for hundreds of years that if any one of these pillars were destroyed, then Thailand as a country would disappear from the world. He added that this belief has been deeply entrenched in Thai education and upbringing, but is now being threatened by a new generation



of young people who are not simply conforming to what they are being told by institutions and old media. The student also said that young people are asking critical questions and are interested in finding out more on their own. He pointed out that they are able to both read up to find information—such as foreign philosophies and worldviews—as they have access to it on the internet, as well as easily share them and exchange opinions on social media.

Students in the focus group all agreed that politics was a hot topic amongst young people. Although they do not actively participate in student protests, they agreed with the movement in general and shared posts on their social media about what’s happening in Thai politics. They added that they were also personally interested to find out more about politics and read up about the history and background on their own, and they checked the credibility of news sources and influencers before following them on social media or sharing their posts.

2. Social media

Another big area seen as popular culture that was shared by all students is the use of social media, namely, Instagram and Twitter. It has a significant part

to play in many aspects of their lives as students consume and engage with the content on these platforms.

One student elaborated on what draws them to use social media: (1) It has helped to create spaces for people according to their different needs, interests, and perspectives. (2) They can group together on social media to find their “tribe.” (3) It can have a very large reach and encourages users to engage because they can express their opinions easily and boldly, since they have the choice to post from anonymity. (4) They are exposed to content that is diverse and may be different from so-called “mainstream” thinking. The student felt that, in some way, this promotes critical thinking because people need to take a stand amidst a vast array of opinions and perspectives that they have access to. She added that these platforms may, at the same time, hinder critical thinking because users may end up following individuals or groups that agree with their existing beliefs due to algorithms on social media set to show users content that is related to what they search for. In her opinion, this can cause users to think that their belief or attitude is the only right one to subscribe to.

The student who is in the faculty of journalism and mass media explained how the spaces in social media have allowed people on the ground to decide what the news of the time should be. In the past, “old media” like newspapers, radio, and television were run by instituted news stations. The backers of these institutions were the ones who decided the headlines and the direction of the content. Journalists and newscasters could not be a hundred percent upfront with their reporting and had to adhere to preferences or directions of the powers and businesses behind them. However, with “new” media today, people on the ground can immediately upload





on Twitter the videos and photos that they took with their phone cameras and update the masses on what is happening in real time before their very eyes. When people decide that uploaded media is important news, they share it on their Twitter or Instagram accounts and, thus, headlines are made on the social media space and can go viral within an hour. The other students in the group agreed that Thai young people get their news and updates mostly from Twitter as they feel that it is “reliable, real, and fast.”

One student shared that there is pressure to use these spaces to advocate for issues that the majority of their generation have deemed to be important. She gave the following example in the area of politics. Many university students agree that there is a lot of corruption happening in the government and are calling for change. As a result, whenever there are students protesting, those present at the scene would take photos and videos, share these on Twitter and Instagram, and urge other students to pass the message on, especially if there had been violence. If someone does not pass the message on for whatever reason, there is fear that others may view him as being pro-government or apathetic, which is viewed negatively. She observed that people may sometimes share political posts out of obligation or pressure from society and not because they truly want to.

3. Everything “online”

With the onset of the pandemic, online activities that were already rampant were further pushed to invade almost all areas of life. Celebrations like *Loi Krathong*—which usually saw people meeting by the river in the moonlight and releasing lanterns, made from segments of a banana trunk, onto the water—were even taken online. Almost every activity that students used to do before the pandemic could now be done “online.” They are

at home a lot and have had to study online and this means that they have the choice and freedom to learn on their own even more, as many things they are interested in are accessible online as well.

One student shared that there has been increasing interest, among young people, in learning about crypto currency, online trading, and e-commerce on their own because they wanted to learn how to make money on the side. She added that she has observed several changes. The financial literacy of the students is higher than before and they take more initiative to invest. Students realize that they can learn and find out how to earn more money rather than depend on luck and buying lottery tickets, a thing that the older generation may have been more likely to do. A lot of them are also less likely to want to be government officials, an occupation that used to be seen as stable and desirable. With their access to learning online and finding resources on their own, they are able to discover and learn in depth the areas that they want to develop in.

4. Gender issues and equality

One student raised the point that LGBTQ+³ issues have been “booming” in the last couple of years. He said that people are more accepting and space is given for people who identify with this community to speak and express their views. I was surprised to hear this as I had thought that it was generally acceptable, in Thailand, for people to identify themselves as LGBTQ+. The student responded that although it may be normal to see people from the LGBTQ+ community in the media and in Thai society, they have often been the brunt of jokes, have been bullied, and have not been truly accepted by people in the community. The student, who is in his second year, shared that since entering university, he

has had the opportunity to know a few people from the LGBTQ+ community and have become good friends with them. He also observed that more and more young people are speaking up and sharing on social media that people from the LGBTQ+ community are human beings, too, and deserve to be treated with respect. He added that many people who are LGBTQ+ are very talented and produce very good content on social media and are popular in the entertainment industry as well. They are thus able to speak up for the LGBTQ+ community to gain respect and be seen as fellow human beings.

Another student shared that there are more conversations taking place regarding gender equality and the need to show respect to women. She felt that this could be due to the influence of the #MeToo movement from the United States. This student said that sexual harassment used to be a normal thing in Thailand and sexual jokes were prevalent. She observed that people are now more careful about this and many orientation programs in universities have reduced or cut out games that have sexual connotations.

5. How does the gospel relate to popular culture in Bangkok?

All the students agreed that the gospel is very much related to the aspects of popular culture they had discussed.

Regarding politics, one student expressed strongly that the gospel is very much related to politics. He lamented that many Thai Christians are content with being saved by believing in Jesus, but do not continue to study the whole Bible to understand God’s message fully. He said that the Bible is very clear that God is not pleased with corruption and injustice and that Christians have a role in fighting for justice in the country. To him, one way to do that is to speak up about the corruption and injustice happening in society. He added that although God gave leaders power and authority to lead and run a country, he is not pleased when they do evil. He mentioned that in the past, a few Thai preachers used to talk about politics and social justice in their sermons, but they are now silent. He questioned why this is so and expressed disappointment that Thai Christians are not doing enough. Another student added that if we can respond biblically to the various issues surrounding politics, it would be a great chance to share Christian values and perspectives with non-believers, because

politics is a very big thing amongst young people in Thailand right now. He said that it is a great opportunity to let people see how Christians view things in the light of biblical teaching and to share the gospel of Jesus with them. When asked how this could be done, the students in the focus group said it is difficult and very challenging.

Regarding LGBTQ+ gaining more acceptance, students agreed that the gospel is very much related to it. One student commented that Christians need to share the gospel and tell people in the LGBTQ+ community about Jesus. He acknowledged that it is a sensitive issue and the Bible says some things about it, too. To him, it is clear that homosexuality is a sin, but at the same time, Christians have often not been understanding or accepting of the person when talking about this area. He added that homosexuality is not more wrong than other sins because everyone is sinful, but homosexuality is sometimes seen as an extra big sin when pastors preach about it on the pulpit. The student continued saying that as LGBTQ+ is gaining more acceptance in the society, the church also needs to be more understanding of the community. He said he believes strongly that Christians need to hold on to the truth, but also need to try to understand LGBTQ+ people more—to find out who they really are, what they think, and how they feel—instead of giving them the impression that Christians are always condemning them. The student acknowledged that it may be difficult to share the gospel with the LGBTQ+ community without causing them to feel judged or put down, but he sees that there is a need to think more about it and try.

As for social media, students saw it more as a tool and felt that it is very useful, especially in sharing the gospel. One student said that there is probably Christian material somewhere in every form of social media right now. He observed that there may not be a lot of content and it may not be very popular

or trending, yet it does exist. Another student shared that tools like these are very helpful for Christian students who may not have the time or confidence to slowly explain the gospel to their friends. But, with these tools available on social media, they could simply show a gospel video clip to their friends or share a Christian post directly with them.

One student said it is likely that most of the viewers of such Christian content are Christians and there are probably very few non-Christians who view them unless these are being shared directly with them by a Christian friend.

Another student raised the point that while there is truth shared in a lot of the Christian content on social media, there are also cults that use social media widely and these groups are increasingly present in local universities. He shared the concern that these appear very legitimate and so, false teaching can spread quickly and widely as well.

Making sense of the findings

The students shared many insightful observations and allowed me to take a peek into their world and their views on popular culture. But what do the findings tell us about engaging young people? The following are some thoughts drawn from the discussion.

1. Short, raw, and in real-time

The students' responses clearly show that social media usage is something that pervades all areas of life for young people. It is worth noting that Facebook was not mentioned as one of the popular platforms for the younger generation. It could be because their parents and guardians are on Facebook and young people want to be able to express themselves without the scrutiny of the older generation. Facebook may have also become too congested with people they did not know and information they did not want. We can see, from

the findings, that the students use social media for entertainment, to learn, to get news, to spread messages of social justice, and to participate in politics, amongst others. However, it is interesting that they do not use all available platforms. As highlighted in the findings, the students observed that Thai young people get their news from Twitter because it is perceived to be “reliable, real, and fast.” Social media platforms like Twitter are popular because users can get information they are interested in within seconds. It is seen as reliable because “people on the ground” are the ones filming these videos and posting it in real-time. This is information that is raw—not redacted, refined, edited, censored, or sophisticated. It is now more common to see live videos on Instagram, too, where young people video themselves walking and talking on the spot, or even turning on the video to study together and share their lives with the online world. This shows that young people opt to watch what is raw, authentic, and not rehearsed. Then, there are also updates that are short and concise. They come in a bite-sized, summarized, and easy-to-consume format. For example, Twitter currently has a character limit of 280.⁶ Instagram is mainly used to share videos and images. The findings suggest that content that is short, raw, and in real-time are more likely to engage the new generation and get them hooked. Perhaps we can incorporate these characteristics as we think further about how to engage young people for the gospel, too.

2. Independent and discussion-based learning

As highlighted by the students, young people are able to find information on anything they want to learn, whether it is regarding cryptocurrency, trading and stocks, gardening, yoga, or other areas. The young generation have all kinds of information at their fingertips. They are IT savvy and are in touch with the latest apps and gadgets. It's a matter of being guided to where the best, most accurate, and reliable content can be found, since there is so much available on the internet. They can also pick and choose the topics that most interest them or are most relevant for them at any one time. This means that students are more able to study independently and are likely to have access to content that a teacher may use to prepare his or her lessons. Thus, the usual method of one-way lecturing and preaching is probably not so helpful for students anymore. They would get bored



if they already know part of the content or feel that what is being presented does not relate to their lives. Students don't come to the table with a blank slate that calls for pastors, preachers, or ministry workers to teach from scratch. What have they already read beforehand? Do they have opinions on the topic being taught? Where did these opinions come from? What do they want to know and what is most relevant to their lives now? If leaders in discipleship and Christian education can address these questions, they can work with the students' existing ideas and perspectives and engage students from where they are at. They can offer direction as to where students can look further, guide them in evaluating the reliability of the sources they are looking at, and facilitate sharing of different perspectives of other students on the issue. Students have much to offer and everyone would benefit when they are learning together and are engaged in discussion.

3. Engage in what's relevant (no matter how sensitive!)

From the topics raised by the focus group, it can be seen that the students are most concerned about politics and social issues like gender equality and showing respect to minority groups. They are more outspoken about what used to be sensitive topics in Thai society, including the church, and they are keen to address difficult and important questions. It is surprising to see how Thai people latched on to a phrase from a video game and how that, as explained by one student, revealed the cracks and fragility of a set of beliefs firmly built over so many generations of Thai people. The findings also suggest that the relative anonymity of social media makes it possible for students to be outspoken in a country where communication is largely dictated by social hierarchy. Students can speak their mind behind a pseudo username and share their opinions and perspectives with the masses. From their social media posts, we can gain insight into what students are really thinking and we need to recognize that it is difficult to convince this generation based on traditions alone or expect them to subscribe to things just because "it's been done like this all along." The findings indicate that Thai young people are asking questions that matter to them. Must everything be black and white? Aren't human beings and the issues surrounding society more complex than the way things are presented? If the church leaders and Christian

mentors of university students are afraid to address such topics and are unwilling to look at the Bible together for a response to these issues, then we will risk losing the young people. It is clear that they are seeking answers and that they do want to discuss this with people they look up to in the church. They see that the gospel is relevant and is related to all these issues, but are not sure how to connect them.

Looking ahead

So how can we bring these thoughts in as we consider how to adapt the way we do ministry amongst the new generation? I believe such conversations have started and are going on right now. Each ministry team probably has to adapt according to their context and the people they serve. But the thoughts gleaned from the focus group session provide some ideas to contribute to the ongoing discussions.

Firstly, can we rethink the way Christian education, such as Bible studies, sermons, and Bible school curriculum, is being done? How can we increase the impact of these sessions by incorporating their preferences for content that is short, raw, and in real-time? Is it possible for a church service to replace the one-way communication of typical sermons with short snippets of teaching, say fifteen minutes at a time, followed by a discussion of the presented content in small groups? Examples from current issues could help bring the content to life and let young people see that God's word is still relevant in this day and age. How about a question and answer time so that there can be "raw" moments of sharing on the spot, whether by fellow learners or the facilitator, to get real with heartfelt sharing of thoughts and experiences. The idea that young people are attracted to what is "raw" could be a sign that they desire authenticity—real conversations without all the rehearsed speech, sermons, smoke machines, and lights. Conversations and dialogues don't feel rehearsed. There is space for asking questions directly and for deeper relationships to be formed through authentic conversations. Tools could also be used in church to engage a big group of learners in real-time by allowing them to ask questions or express their opinions via platforms like Slido⁷ and Kahoot!⁸ These questions can then be addressed by the speaker or the teacher, or raised for discussion in small groups. During the pandemic, groups that work with young people in Thailand, such as Thai Christian Students (TCS)⁹ and

the youth committee for the Seventh District of the Churches of Christ in Thailand, conducted online camps that made effective use of various tools in their teaching sessions, workshops, and fellowship time.¹⁰ These tools have also been used for on-site camps and events for greater interaction in a big group.

In addition, considering that young people are more exposed to independent learning and have access to a wide range of information on the internet, it will be helpful to give them time for individual research and study, when possible, before coming together to present and discuss what they have found. It cannot be assumed that the pastor, teacher, or Bible study leader knows it all. Learning goes deeper when everyone has the opportunity to share and respond to each other's findings and perspectives, sources of information are evaluated, and learners are given the platform to express their ideas, defend their stand, and even change their mind. The teacher then becomes more of a facilitator and moderator to make sure things do not stray from the purpose. This approach may be challenging right now for a society like Thailand that is strongly hierarchical. When a pastor or older leader sits down to join a group, people tend not to share or the leader is likely to dominate the discussion. However, the fact that the interview that provided the basis for this article could be conducted in a way that young people could share their views openly with a missionary like me, who is older than they by at least ten years, shows that change is possible and is starting to happen.

Another important thing to think about is how to address sensitive topics when we interact with young people. If we believe that our Lord is "one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all,"¹¹ we exemplify that truth when we respond to all issues in society with God's word and show that his word has the authority to speak to and transform all areas of life. It is true that discussing sensitive topics can be a very scary thing. In my work with students, I do tremble in fear at times when they bring up sensitive issues that I know have no clear, direct answer. Sometimes, there is a clear answer! The issue is that it can be very difficult to say. But, just like how God called the prophets in the Old Testament to speak his truth faithfully, we, as his servants, also need to seek wisdom and courage from God to speak his word into the issues of the day. For example, I am encouraged and glad

that the students see that their friends from the LGBTQ+ community need to know Jesus, too. So the next question would be: how can they be equipped to share Jesus with them? I understand the “heat” that comes with bringing up Jesus to our LGBTQ+ friends. I myself have experienced that, too. But I realize that we need to be willing to step into the fire and begin engaging our friends from the LGBTQ+ community. Many of them are willing to discuss more when they see that we sincerely want to be friends with them. Perhaps God wants to address some other area of their lives first. Perhaps we can encourage them to approach God and ask him directly the questions that are upon their hearts. The thing is, we will never know until we engage them and it is not only in proclaiming Jesus, but also in demonstrating his love and living out our faith amongst them. As I encourage students to share Jesus with their LGBTQ+ friends and to love them, I, too, need to do it and we can embark on this journey together and cling to God for guidance!

Many times, we don’t have the answers, but we can invite students to journey alongside us to discover God’s truths in his word. It will also be helpful to show young people the reality that there can be many Christian responses and perspectives to one issue. For example, in our recent Christian student camp conducted online, one of the local staff conducted a workshop on politics. Many students attended it and had heated conversations about the topic. The staff then shared with students his tabulated summary on how different churches in history had taken a stand regarding politics in their own country. There was a spectrum from submitting to authorities,¹² and thus being obedient to the leaders of the country, to acting justly¹³ and fighting for the oppressed by standing up against corrupt rulers. They each

held on to God’s word and responded in a way they believed was obedient to God. The question was then posed to the students: “Where, in the spectrum, are you? Would you be able to sit and listen to a fellow brother or sister who thinks differently from you?” The students were challenged as they were faced with different perspectives of people who also loved God wholeheartedly. They had to think more critically about where they stood, what God had called them to do in response to this issue in this season of their lives, and the possibility that God may have called others to respond differently.

This is relevant not only in discipleship, but also in evangelism. As the students have shared, non-believers can be engaged and become interested when we show them that perspectives and values from the Bible are relevant to real issues in the society and in their lives. When we listen to the young people and find out that they are concerned about gender equality and justice for the minority groups, we can point them to God’s word and show them God’s heart for the oppressed¹⁴ and God’s command for his people to take care of them and love them.¹⁵ His heart for the oppressed is the same loving heart that desires each person to know him and give their lives to him.¹⁶

Conclusion

Before the interview, I assumed that popular culture, to the students, would be related to entertainment and gadget fads, but when I sat down to listen to their voices and try to understand their world a little more, I realized that they were passionate and concerned about other things. I learnt that we must never assume we know the needs of the people we serve. We need to seek to listen to and understand them. We need to know the questions they are asking before we think about how we can

respond to their needs and show them how the gospel is relevant to their lives.

There are probably many more questions that will be raised after reading this article. For example, how can we balance online and offline activities? Can church really be fully online? Can sermons from the pulpit really be done in a discussion style? How can we differentiate between real and fake news based on the summarized short tweets on Twitter? Don’t young people need to learn how to sit through long sermons and read books more than 100 pages long?

Like I said earlier, the discussion in this article is based on the observations of a very small group of university students and the study is limited in scope. Perhaps you can do a focus group discussion with the young people in the area you serve to understand what they are interested in and what questions they have. Perhaps answering those questions would be more pertinent! Nonetheless, I hope that this paper can kick-start some brainstorming for you as your team serves the new generation. May God empower us to be authentic servant leaders to point more young people to Jesus Christ. **MRT**

¹ Michael Dimock, “Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins,” Pew Research Centre, 17 January 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/> (accessed 6 November 2021).

² Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 19.

³ “What is Pop Culture?,” Mr. Pop Culture, <https://mrpopculture.com/what-is-pop-culture/> (accessed 8 November 2021).

⁴ Yvette Tan, “Why a new generation of Thais are protesting against the government,” BBC News, 1 August 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53589899> (accessed 8 November 2021).

⁵ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and other sexual orientations or gender identities.

⁶ Ann Wylie, “What’s the Ideal Length of a Tweet?,” PR News, 14 January 2020, <https://www.prnewsonline.com/whats-the-ideal-length-of-a-tweet/> (accessed 8 November 2021).

⁷ See the Slido website, <https://www.sli.do/> (accessed 8 November 2021).

⁸ See the Kahoot! website, <https://kahoot.com/schools-u/> (accessed 8 November 2021).

⁹ See Thai Christian Students website, <https://www.tcs.or.th/> (accessed 8 November 2021).

¹⁰ Some other tools to explore further include Gather, Discord, Miro, and Jamboard.

¹¹ Ephesians 4:6 (ESV)

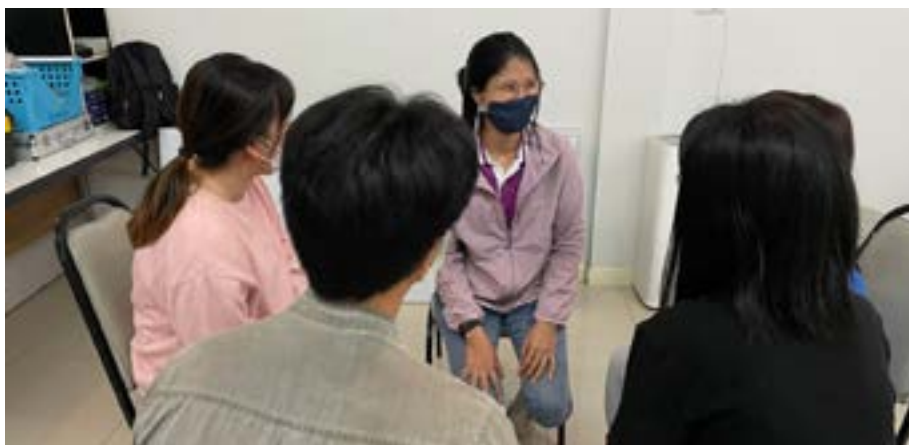
¹² Romans 13

¹³ Micah 6:8

¹⁴ Psalm 14:6; Psalm 72:12–14; Luke 4:16–19; Job 5:15; 1 Samuel 2:8

¹⁵ Leviticus 19:9–10; Leviticus 25:1–5; Isaiah 1:17; Proverbs 31:8–9; Proverbs 22:22–23; Jeremiah 22:3; Zechariah 7:10; Luke 12:32–34; Deuteronomy 15:11; 1 John 3:17

¹⁶ John 3:16



Ready for the New:

How Social Upheaval Shaped a People's Response to the Gospel

A Case Study from Mindanao, Philippines

Wilson McMahon



Wilson and his wife Irene are from Northern Ireland and have served with OMF as church planters among the Manobo of southern Philippines and as regional directors for OMF in Ireland. Wilson and Irene returned to the Philippines in 2019. Wilson now serves as dean of academic affairs in Koinonia Theological Seminary in Davao City and Irene serves as OMF Philippines field director.

As missionaries who belong to an evangelical agency, we are comfortable talking about church planting using missiological terms. We have developed competency at drawing from key themes of this discipline to explain what we see happening in the midst of the people with whom we have become deeply connected, particularly as we see them respond positively to the gospel, begin to gather as communities of faith, and then, in turn, reach out to evangelize and plant churches among their own kith and kin. As church planters, many of us have also imbibed a good measure of pragmatism. We have learned that certain ways of doing things work well, in terms of promoting interest in our message or helping young churches grow, multiply, and remain true to their calling. The latter we have learned from the senior workers who mentored us in our craft or from our time spent reading material that draws from thinkers within the Church Growth Movement.

Undoubtedly, well-honed methods and good missiological thinking impact the shape and depth of our mission. We also have a large measure of control over both. We fastidiously learn our methods and implement them with care. We may owe a lot of our missiological thinking to our teachers, but we alone are responsible for weaving what we have learned into the warp and weft of our daily work.

The reality is, however, that Christianity does not take root in new places solely in response to the missionary's message, crucial though this is to the process. Everyone who hears the Christian gospel for the first time does so within a cultural matrix of socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-historical forces

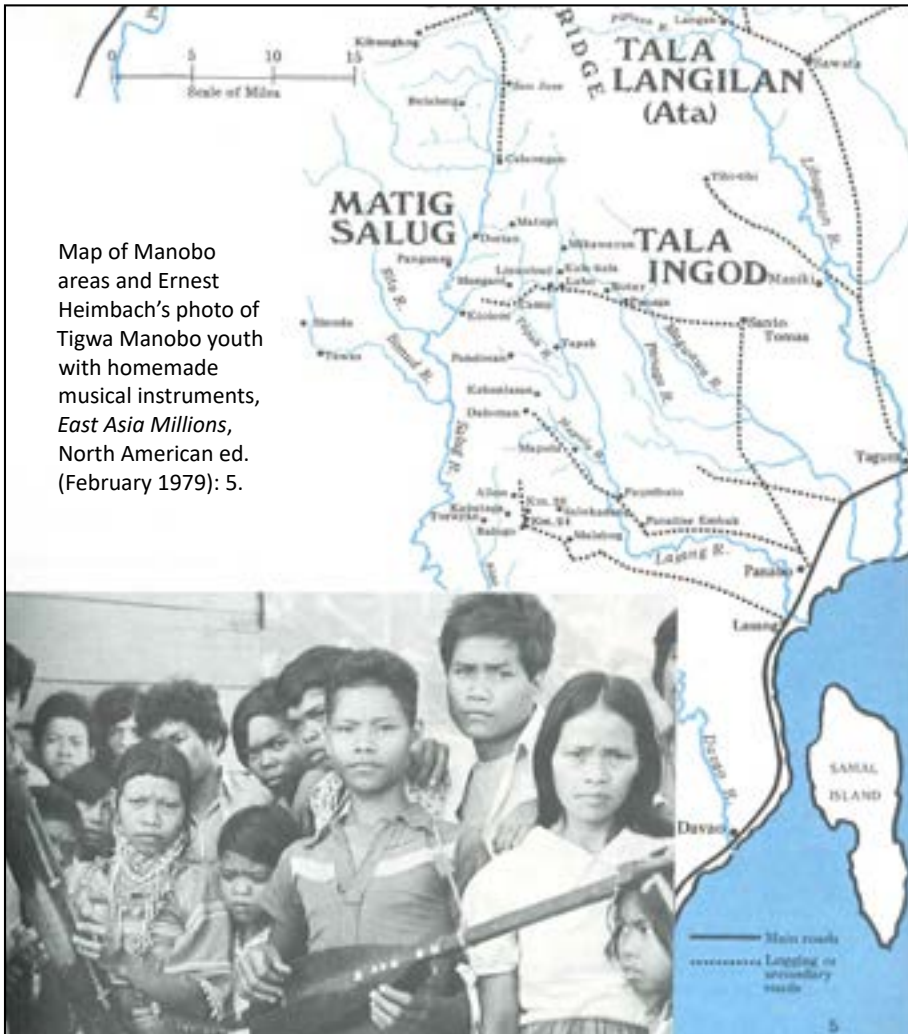
that can make it either more likely or unlikely that people respond positively to the new message. In this article, we will examine some of these forces. Using the growth of Christianity among the Manobo of Central Mindanao, Philippines as a case study, I would like us to consider how certain socio-historical influences have been vital in affecting the positive reception and ongoing growth of Christianity in this part of the Philippines. We shall begin with a brief introduction to the history of Christian mission among this segment of the Manobo population of Mindanao.

The workers and their methods

OMF Philippines leadership first began making trips to visit the Manobo groups of Central Mindanao in 1975–76. When reporting on those trips, it was clear that, in accepting the challenge to begin mission work amongst the Manobo, OMF's intention was to see an indigenous Manobo church established. To quote from a report presented by Dave Fuller at an OMF Philippines conference in 1976, "... if the church is to succeed in reaching more than peripheral Manobo, it also must be Manobo."¹ Today there is a large thriving Manobo church association that owes its origins to OMF workers who began and continued their efforts with this intention firmly fixed in their minds.²

The OMF missionaries who pioneered evangelism amongst the Manobo began by learning Cebuano, the *lingua franca* of Mindanao,³ after which they moved into Manobo villages and began acquiring fluency in the language of the Manobo people group they had committed themselves to reaching. In general, their

Everyone who hears the Christian gospel for the first time does so within a cultural matrix of socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-historical forces that can make it either more likely or unlikely that people respond positively to the new message.



Map of Manobo areas and Ernest Heimbach's photo of Tigwa Manobo youth with homemade musical instruments, *East Asia Millions*, North American ed. (February 1979): 5.

school students and to approve the concept of a central Bible school.

With the passage of time, the dormitory project eventually morphed into a full-blown scholarship program that provided accommodation for high school students across MABCAM and tuition grants and accommodation for those who made it to college. This scholarship program and the Central Manobo Bible School of Mindanao (CMBSM) proved to be institutions that made inestimable contributions to the education of young people and the training of church leaders respectively. Nevertheless, they were always dependent on mission funding for their operational costs. CMBSM was eventually closed down in the late 1990s as the necessary funding dried up. Financing for the scholarship program was maintained until 2019.

In the years following MABCAM's creation, its leadership increasingly took on more and more of the oversight of church life and mission. Matters of discipline were dealt with by MABCAM leadership and they gradually became more and more proactive in the running of the association and its administrative shape. In 1988, delegates took the decision to organize MABCAM into four regional zones to facilitate easier supervision of churches through regional business meetings.⁷

evangelistic methods were preaching, group and/or individual Bible studies, and conversations in Manobo homes.

and customs. MABCAM's leaders were elected by delegates appointed from each church to attend meetings.

Missionaries began discussing what the new emerging Manobo church would be named as early as 1979. Initially, there was widespread enthusiasm for the Manobo churches to be organizationally connected to the Association of Bible Churches of the Philippines (ABCOP).⁴ This was eventually abandoned in favor of the creation of a purely Manobo church grouping, which was formed in 1985 and named the Manobo Bible Church Association of Mindanao (MABCAM).

The major early initiatives that helped to develop the capacity of MABCAM and its members were decided on by OMF missionaries and then brought forward for discussion and approval by the MABCAM delegates in their meetings. In what was only their second delegates' meeting in December 1985, it was recorded that delegates decided to proceed with providing dormitory accommodation for Manobo high

Evangelism and church planting in new villages was another ministry that MABCAM leaders gradually began to take organizational responsibility for. This was made possible through the training gained at CMBSM. One report details how, one year after classes had begun at the school, there were four new villages being consistently visited by Manobo preachers. In each case, the initiative had been taken by the respective

The number of MABCAM believers in October 1985 was 550⁵ and, by November 1987, there were 734 members belonging to thirteen congregations.⁶ At this early stage of MABCAM's life, OMF missionaries remained committed to making MABCAM a church association led by Manobo Christian leaders and in a manner that was appropriate to Manobo culture



Albert Catua, current MABCAM president





Celebrating MABCAM's thirtieth anniversary, April 2015

preachers.⁸ Despite these encouraging signs in the early years of MABCAM, there was little growth numerically throughout the 1990s. In December 1994, MABCAM was recorded as still having only seventeen churches.⁹

In the early years of the twenty-first century, new growth and vitality began to flow into MABCAM, principally through the work and influence of younger leaders who had graduated from college via the scholarship program. Well educated and spiritually vibrant, many of these young adults gave themselves to helping in their home congregations, with the most gifted of these getting elected to positions of overall leadership. They brought new administrative skills to leadership and were proactive about organizing Manobo Christians to do church planting in unreached areas.

Today, MABCAM has more than seventy congregations, not to mention an indeterminate number of outreaches where Manobo preachers are teaching the gospel. The association now has ten zones, more than double the number it had in 1998, and has a presence amongst seven of Central Mindanao's indigenous people groups.¹⁰ MABCAM's relationship with OMF has also moved on—OMF no longer has missionaries doing frontline church planting or training within MABCAM. A celebratory event has been planned for August 2022, which will celebrate what God has done among the Manobo of Central Mindanao and also mark the end of a formal relationship between OMF and MABCAM.

Besides the strategic planning, skills, and efforts exerted by OMF workers, and working on the premise that the Spirit of God was active in bringing to birth faith and

new life in these Manobo communities, what were the socio-cultural factors that contributed to this enthusiastic reception of Christianity in Central Mindanao?

Trauma as catalyst for new identity

Susan Hawley, in her study on the Bible amongst the Miskitu in Nicaragua who were evangelised by the Moravians in the nineteenth century, remarks that the stress inherent in a period of change can lead to the search for a new identity and that, in the case of the Miskitu, led them to choose Christianity.¹¹ The late Andrew Walls made the claim that the appropriation of a new religion, or elements thereof, at a time of crisis, is frequently given momentum by the perceived inadequacy of the old gods in dealing with new conditions.¹² These existential crises of identity can come in the wake of various natural or man-made calamities. Examples of the latter are famine and/or conflict; alterations in the local demographics caused by the in-migration of new settlers; severe economic downturn, which can kickstart the out-migration of much of the indigenous populace; and environmental degradation through

desertification, constant flooding, or deforestation. From the 1960s onwards, the Manobo of Central Mindanao have lived through variations of most of these.

Following World War II, from 1948 to 1960, Mindanao's population increased by 87 percent, more than twice that of the national rate of 41 percent. More than one half of this increase was due to in-migration (an actual increase

of 1,250,000 people) and issued in a population for Mindanao of around 5 million people by 1960.¹³ The huge influx of migrants eventually began taking its toll on the social fabric of Mindanao. By the 1960s, many of the new settlers, unable to pay back their government loans, had become landless. The Muslims of Cotabato province also began reacting to what they saw as the increasing emasculation of their way of life by "Christian" immigrants, with the result that new armed groups began to emerge in response to the social dislocation that Muslims were facing.¹⁴

When Ferdinand Marcos became president of the Philippines in 1964, the situation in Mindanao was becoming more volatile. Keen to exploit the island's abundance of natural resources and in order to avoid any disruption to major extractive industries, Marcos deployed the military to key trouble spots in Mindanao.¹⁵ More than any of the other major extractive industries, it was commercial logging that expanded and flourished under the Marcos presidency. From 1950 to 1987, 36,000 km² of land was deforested in Mindanao, accounting for 45 percent of all deforestation in the Philippines in this period.¹⁶ All of these developments



MABCAM church at Kibungkog, July 2019

brought massive social and environmental upheaval to the Manobo and other indigenous peoples of Mindanao. The colossal deforestation of so much of Mindanao irreversibly disrupted their way of life, and the network of national highways and logging roads opened up their homelands to Cebuano-speaking settlers, who would acquire land and be the catalyst for additional social dislocation.¹⁷

The Manobo of Central Mindanao first encountered OMF missionaries and their message in the mid-1970s when the monumental changes listed above were in full swing. Looking at circumstances from a socio-cultural standpoint, the

we have the Christian way and the way of the government... now we follow new technology, because in the past we had Manobo ways that were not easy.... (Interview 21)

I would say that, in years past, we just did not know about the Bible. We just lived by our culture, but now our education is much greater... there are Manobo who have been to school... we have teachers who are Manobo, we have a doctor, nurses ... your children can be educated, we can be educated. Like me, if I continue to serve the Lord, my children can be educated. (Interview 62)

importance of local knowledge was a result of young Akha becoming ever more preoccupied with gaining an education in the Thai school system with the understanding that this, in turn, could lead to new economic opportunities.¹⁸

What this helps us to see is that the arrival of OMF missionaries teaching the gospel coincided with a *kairos* moment in Manobo history—a moment that owed its actuality in real life to the corporate greed and scheming of power-hungry politicians and businessmen. Nevertheless, it was a moment within the providence of God that prepared Manobo people for a new message and identity.

Evangelical Christianity and group formation

From the previous section, a question that begs an answer is: if the Manobo of Central Mindanao were ready for a transition to a new identity and a new way of life, why did they not just assimilate themselves to the “new” and “modern” way of life of the Visayan settlers who were moving in as their new neighbors?

An answer to this can be arrived at by considering why the Manobo and other indigenous people groups of Mindanao chose to live in the highland areas of the island in the first place. The anthropologist and political scientist, James C. Scott, has studied the highland communities of the Southeast Asian massif and their relationship with neighboring nation states.¹⁹ Scott’s analysis of the upland communities of Southeast Asia, whose domain stretches from central Vietnam to north-east India, leads him to assert that upland communities make a political choice to live at the perimeter of state control. Non-state space, therefore, be it hill or forest, became a zone of refuge from state agents where people could avoid being captured as slaves, pressed into labor, or have their produce assessed and



Early missionaries Bob Moye, Wendell Krossa, and David Ginther with Manobo leaders

Manobo of Central Mindanao found themselves in a new place—the old way of life was gone. Christianity and, in particular, the Bible provided a new identity and a new text that would allow some Manobo to navigate a way through their new circumstances. This comes through in many of the interviews I made during my own research in 2014–15:

That is what we all as Manobo followed before. Then the Bible arrived and we were enlightened. The old has gone; the new has come. We now need to do what he wants. He tells us what is good to keep and what we should abandon. (Interview 19)

In a previous time, we gentiles did not have the Bible. We were ignorant about his word. He made people; he used people so we would know his word. (Interview 8)

It was correct to use Manobo wisdom in the past; we did not have anything else and there was no one to explain to us the meaning. But now

The Bible in these interviews is not referenced as an ancient text that pre-dates Manobo culture but as something new, something that signified their transition to a new identity as a people. The Bible and Christianity are bundled together in the people’s consciousness with other more familiar elements of modernity, such as education, technology, upward social mobility, and submitting to the government. Academics who research in the field of World Christianity regularly encounter this relationship between modernity and Christianity. To quote another example from Southeast Asia, Cornelia Kammerer has described how conversion to Christianity among the Akha highlanders of Burma and Thailand gained intensity at the same time as traditional religious knowledge among these people began to wane. The diminishing





Manobo in native dress at MABCAM thirtieth anniversary celebration in 2015.

taxed. Life in the hills and forest, therefore, according to Scott, does not display “archaic traits of a people left behind, but devices to avoid incorporation and to stop concentrations of power in their midst.”²⁰ Living in small communities of four to five households and practicing swidden agriculture made them notoriously difficult to subdue and their crops almost impossible to assess for taxation purposes. Even their kinship patterns were designed so as to “divide and not be conquered.”²¹

Though Scott focuses on a territory within mainland Southeast Asia, his conclusions can be applied to the Philippine context. The elements of a culture that signify avoidance of state control in Scott’s thesis can be found within Manobo communities, namely, a strong tradition of household autonomy, self-reliance, an anti-hierarchical ethos, and shifting agriculture.²² The desire for autonomy and independence were very probably the confluence of factors that drove the ancestors of present-day Manobo communities into the central highlands of Mindanao in the first place. This can help enlarge our understanding about the Manobo’s willingness to adopt evangelical Christianity.

Religion, according to Scott, can be a device that assists in maintaining the distance from state-forming societies that hill peoples are anxious to preserve, in addition to providing them with a modern

identity. This happens when hill societies adopt a “religious identity that is at variance with that of core state populations who have stigmatized them.”²³ By becoming evangelical Christians, the Manobo have been able to negotiate a place for themselves within a global Christian community while, at the same time, preserving their differences and

distance from the local, lowland, state-forming power, which is dominated by lowland Visayan settlers, is religiously Catholic, and would prefer that Manobo allow themselves to be assimilated within their structures of power.

In short, and in answer to the question with which I began this section, assimilation into the mainstream has always been something that independent-minded, freedom-loving Manobo have wanted to avoid at all costs. Embracing evangelical Christianity has enabled the Manobo of Central Mindanao to do just that. It has helped them to maintain a sense of being a distinct people group in the face of all the social upheaval that we examined above.

This option for Protestant or evangelical Christianity, over against the majority religious affiliation of a nation, has been made on the part of minority indigenous people from other regions of Southeast Asia, and for the same reasons. This is certainly the case in Myanmar, where Baptist Christianity has flourished among minority groups like the Karen, Chin, and Kachin, who never embraced the Buddhism of the majority Bamar people. The situation is similar in Malaysia, where more than 70 percent of the nation’s Christians are located in East Malaysia, in the provinces of Sabah and Sarawak, among the non-Malay, non-Muslim indigenous peoples. Protestantism makes

up more than half of the 33 million Christians of Indonesia and these are also found scattered across a multitude of ethnic groups. Perhaps the best-known ethnic group in Indonesia to have embraced Christianity is the Batak. There are around 8.5 million Batak in Indonesia, and around 50 percent of these are Protestant Christians today. And the same is true in Vietnam, where Catholicism constitutes a large 8 percent minority of the country’s population. Large numbers of Vietnam’s minority highland peoples have become evangelical Christians, with most of this growth taking place since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. In fact, though the ethnic minority peoples of Vietnam constitute only 13 percent of the nation’s population, they account for more than half of the country’s Protestants.²⁴

Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to present how certain socio-historical realities generated a degree of readiness on the part of the Manobo for appropriating the evangelical Christianity brought by OMF missionaries. Christianity—this new religion with its new text—helped the Manobo to transition to a new identity and a new future, characterised by the material benefits of modern life, such as education, technology, and upward mobility. Embracing evangelical Christianity also allowed for renewed group formation around a new set of values, which would facilitate their remaining distinct as a people and avoid assimilation into the mainstream culture of lowland society.

Lest some of us lament that these are less than worthy reasons for converting, it is worthwhile to note that certain elements within the OMF mission strategy reinforced these expectations on the part of Manobo. It can hardly surprise us that the Manobo expected opportunities for education as a corollary of conversion if we consider that a scholarship program was a core element to OMF mission strategy right from the beginning.

Assimilation into the mainstream has always been something that independent-minded, freedom-loving Manobo have wanted to avoid at all costs. Embracing evangelical Christianity has enabled the Manobo of Central Mindanao to do just that. It has helped them to maintain a sense of being a distinct people group in the face of all the social upheaval.

As for the expectation that embracing evangelical Christianity would facilitate a renewed sense of being a distinct and separate people, we should note the quotation above from the early leader and pioneer of OMF mission among the Manobo, Dave Fuller. He was committed to planting a church that “must be Manobo.” Commitment to this value by OMF workers—reflected also in the decision not to connect MABCAM with ABCOP and to ensure that MABCAM was always governed by Manobo leaders—has indeed facilitated MABCAM becoming not just a Christian denomination, but an important cultural marker for many Manobo. In a separate piece of research that I conducted in 2013, I asked thirty MABCAM members a simple question: “Who is MABCAM”? The overwhelming majority of respondents (86 percent) answered that MABCAM was an organisation that existed “for the Manobo.” This take on MABCAM’s identity reveals, perhaps more than anything else, what MABCAM contributes to the sense of its members’ identity as Manobo. For many Manobo, who have witnessed the loss of so much self-esteem through the eradication and dilution of their traditional way of life, MABCAM cuts against the prevailing tendencies of other organizations, businesses, or political parties they have encountered in the past. In their eyes, MABCAM is probably the only institution they know that is “for them.”

All Christianity is cultural. The socio-cultural values of a local culture and the needs of its people will always shape how Christianity is practiced and what it signifies for its members. And the reverse is also true. The practice of Christianity will also result in the creation of a new cultural space. Today, MABCAM bears the marks of the socio-historic,

socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural forces that dominated the lives of Manobo people at its birth. But, MABCAM is more than a mere social construct—more than a cultural Christian entity formed to provide a sense of unity and meaning for a socially dislocated people. MABCAM members view themselves as truly Christian, having left behind the old gods of their forebears to serve the one true and living God. Within MABCAM, members also feel they have a safe place where, without fear of ridicule and derision, they can celebrate the way of life of their forebears and all within it that was, and still is, enriching and life-affirming. **MRT**

¹ OMF Philippines, “Introducing Central Mindanao: Report Presented at the OMF Philippines Area Conference,” 1976, unpublished paper.

² This church association is officially called the Manobo Bible Church Association of Mindanao and will be referred to hereafter as MABCAM.

³ Cebuano is the main language of communication within the western Visayan islands and eastern Mindanao. For this reason, it is more often referred to as *Bisaya* or *Binisaya* within Mindanao.

⁴ ABCOP was co-founded by OMF and the Far Eastern Gospel Crusade in 1972 to provide fellowship for newly planted churches in southern Luzon, Philippines. At the ABCOP General Assembly in 1988, ABCOP’s name was changed to the Alliance of Bible Christian Communities of the Philippines and is currently known by the acronym ABCCOP.

⁵ OMF Philippines, “Formal Communications,” October 1985, unpublished paper.

⁶ OMF Philippines, “Mindanao Monthly Report,” November 1987, unpublished paper.

⁷ OMF Philippines, “Mindanao Monthly Report,” October 1988, unpublished paper.

⁸ OMF Philippines, “Prayer Focus Philippines,” November 1988, unpublished paper.

⁹ OMF Philippines, “Manobo Team Minutes: Annual Planning Meeting,” December 1994, unpublished paper. Actual figures are unavailable for the number of churches and total membership in the late 1990s.

¹⁰ Zones 1 and 2 represent MABCAM churches amongst the Ata Manobo, zone 3 the Tala Ingod Manobo, zones 4 and 6 the Tigwa Manobo, zone 5

the Umayamnon Manobo, zone 7 the Dibabawon, zone 8 the Pulanguihon Manobo, and zone 10 the Agusan Manobo. The Manobo of the Arakan valley are closely related linguistically to the Matig Salug and their churches are located within MABCAM’s zone 9. The Dibabawon of zone 7 do not consider themselves Manobo even though their culture and worldview are similar to that of their Manobo neighbours.

¹¹ Susan Hawley, “Does God Speak Miskitu? The Bible and Ethnic Identity among the Miskitu of Nicaragua,” in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark G. Brett (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2002), 327–28.

¹² Cf. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (New York: Orbis, 1996), 131. Walls makes the point that the universal faiths can provide the means for maintaining the identity of tribal people under the threat of absorption or domination from a majority culture.

¹³ Frederick L. Wernstedt and Paul D. Simkins, “Migrations and the Settlement of Mindanao,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 25, no. 1 (1965): 91–95.

¹⁴ From 1903 to 1960, the Muslim proportion of the Mindanao population dropped from 31 to 20 percent, Wernstedt and Simkins, “Migrations,” 101.

¹⁵ Patricio N. Abinales, *Making Mindanao: Cotabato and Davao in the Formation of the Philippine Nation State* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000), 166.

¹⁶ David M. Kummer, *Deforestation in the Postwar Philippines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 58.

¹⁷ Some logging concessions constructed as much as 70 km of road in order to extract lumber. Cf. Robert Hackenberg and Beverly H. Hackenberg, “Secondary Development and Anticipatory Urbanization in Davao, Mindanao,” *Pacific Viewpoint* 12 (1971): 8.

¹⁸ Cornelia Ann Kammerer, “Conversion among the Akha Highlanders of Burma and Thailand,” *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 2 (1990): 284.

¹⁹ James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).

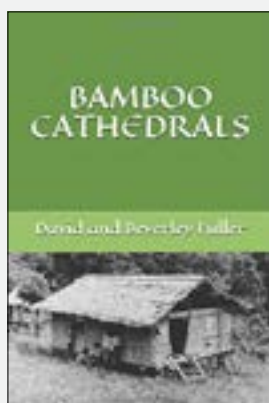
²⁰ Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 8.

²¹ Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 32.

²² Shifting agriculture is still practiced by some Manobo communities, but is much less common nowadays. Settled agriculture and the cultivation of land for growing maize, wetland rice, and bananas are rapidly becoming the norm for Manobo farmers.

²³ Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 319.

²⁴ Peter Phan, “Vietnam,” in Kenneth R. Ross, Francis D. Alvarez, and Todd M. Johnson, eds., *Christianity in East and Southeast Asia*, Edinburgh Companion to Global Christianity (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 193.



Bamboo Cathedrals: The Story of How God is Building His Church amongst Indigenous Peoples of the Philippines

By David and Beverley Fuller. Independently published, 2020. ISBN 978-1709980022. 261 pp.

This book is the story of one family, the Fullers, who were part of the team of pioneer missionaries among the Mangyan in Mindoro and the Manobo in Mindanao. The story helps readers to see how God prepared and equipped his workers to build his cathedral as they lived as messengers bearing the good news of the Creator God. The book also seeks to answer some questions that others have asked the Fullers in the last forty years, including the question: what is the message that is changing timid Mangyan and bold, aggressive Manobo into faithful leaders, teachers, and pastors of hundreds of churches?

Seeking God and Growing in Him in My Way:

The Stories of Two Japanese Christians

Winnie Leung



Winnie and her husband, Ricky, joined OMF in 2014. They serve as church planters in a rural city in Hokkaido, Japan. They are applying for the OCMS MPhil Research Programme and hope to research topics that can help the Japanese churches in the long run.

“Christian terrorist”— the story of Satoru

Even though only one percent of the religious population of Japan is Christian,¹ Satoru was not unfamiliar with the name “Jesus Christ.” In fact, he had far too close a relationship with Jesus in his childhood, so he decided to set him at a distance, not expecting that he would later be led to reestablish his relationship with the Savior.

Satoru was born into a Christian family. From childhood, he was brought to the church by his parents. Sadly, he did not enjoy church life at all. Because Satoru was the eldest among his brothers, his parents expected him to set a good Christian example and they had been very strict with him, particularly about attending Sunday services and reading the Bible. Under the harsh religious supervision from his parents, Satoru’s hatred towards Christianity had come to a flash point! He hated church life. He hated reading the Bible and praying. He hated everything about Christianity! To show his anger and discontent, he used whatever ways possible to disturb the Sunday service. Once, he even sprayed water on the church with a hose! The bad relationship with his parents was a thick wall that blocked the relationship between Satoru and Jesus.

If I relate to Jesus, why are “parents” and “church,” which are the stumbling blocks, included in this relationship? If “parents” and “church” are not taken out from this relationship, it is hard for me to build a relationship with Jesus. Besides, I have to unlearn what I have been told by my parents and children’s Sunday School about Christianity and rethink my relationship with Jesus.

The turning point—an intellectual process

The turning point was when Satoru was a junior high student. He believed that to accept Jesus as his true Savior, there were two things he had to figure out. Firstly, he



needed to think through what Christianity meant to him. Secondly, he needed to figure out his relationship with Jesus. What was the true meaning of “Heavenly Father” to him? Did nature and the universe come into being by accident or by intelligent design, or were they created? Satoru desperately did all kinds of studies to find the answers. Finally, he was convinced that it is impossible for such an orderly universe to come into being by accident, so also with humans and animals. He was assured that there must be an “unknown God” who created this world and this God must be the one spoken of in the Old Testament. He was also convinced that since God created humans, they have a relationship with him and also a responsibility to follow him. “Because the Heavenly Father said ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him,’ humans have to follow this order, so will I,” said Satoru.

After undergoing this intellectual process, Satoru confessed his faith. And six months later, he was baptized without any hesitation or facing any objection.

“Even now, just opening the Bible is painful to me.” The experience of being forced by his parents to read the Bible and pray has been a trauma to Satoru. Therefore, he has decided not to pretend to be a good Christian anymore, but rather to be true to himself.

If I pretend to be a good Christian, I feel that I am lying. In those days, God gave me a lot of teachings, one of them was “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.” Since then, I have decided to read the Bible

when I can read, to pray when I can. I feel much freer when doing these.

Unique opinion, common struggle

Satoru is very active in serving the church. He serves as deacon in addition to being the guitarist and overseeing the sound board. He used to serve as a cell group leader. When asked what led him to quit, he replied,

The Japanese churches love fellowship (交わり). But we spend too much time on fellowship, but [Bible] study is also important. It is better to have a good balance. Besides, we should have more studies on discipleship training, theology, worship, and tithing, etc. It is better to study those kinds of basic knowledge.... Our knowledge on tithing is too superficial. We always say, “This sacrifice is the amount that we return to you” in the Sunday service prayer.² Yet, this sacrifice represents “our sacrifice to the Lord.” Thus, it is not “return” (お返し) but “to sacrifice ourselves” (自分を捧げる). Therefore, cell group leaders should be those who are well trained.

When asked about cultural struggles that he has encountered so far, Satoru’s answer was not unexpected.

The thing that I struggled with the most was at a funeral. My wife was the only Christian in her family. When I attended the funeral of her grandmother, I was the only person who was suitable to do *hashiwatashi*.³ I struggled a lot at that time, but in the end I did it. If I refused, I would give trouble to my wife’s family, and I did not think it’s a good testimony. I believed that if Jesus was there, he would have chosen to comfort the family in sorrow. So, I decided to trust in Jesus and leave this struggle to him. Regarding filial piety and faith in the Japanese culture, I think believing in God is important, but caring about our neighbor is also important.

Satoru continued,

Well, I could only trust the Lord. The request was so sudden that I could not even prepare or ask for advice from our pastor. But even if I can ask, I believe that there will be many different answers. For those strict pastors, they will say “No” for sure. Some may say

“it depends on the situation” or “God will know our struggles. So, it is OK.” There may be no correct answer in the world. Maybe when I die and go to heaven and ask our Father, there I will know the correct answer.

Satoru’s resigned response spoke to my heart, and I felt for him.

“Seeking for unchanging love”—the story of Motome

Raised in a Christian family, Motome was baptized when he was nine by his own decision. Christianity was so natural to him, just like part of his normal life. He had been blessed by the biblical teaching and prayer from his parents. He thought these things were normal, part of common family life. It was not until he moved to Tokyo for university and started living by himself that he started recognizing the difference. “Of course, I knew God and I believed in him. But it was when I moved to Tokyo, I started feeling that God is essential in my life and I felt it from the bottom of my heart.” This was also the moment when his faith grew rapidly, like “a flower in blossom.”

While his faith grew in Tokyo, those were also the days when he suffered a lot. While he was in university, he started dating a non-Christian girl. She used to study in a Christian school and knew a lot about the Bible. Yet, she only knew it with her head, not her heart. In fact, she hated Jesus. What’s more, this girl had another boyfriend while she was dating Motome. Motome was extremely shocked and hurt when he found out. He felt the limitations of humans. He sought for love that would never change. He was reminded that only Jesus’ love, as demonstrated on the cross, will never change. He was longing for such unchanging love, but he also wanted a human’s love. Unfortunately, that girl was not the one who could give him such love. In the end, they separated. Motome struggled and suffered for nearly two years. In those difficult days, Motome was comforted when he worshipped God during the Sunday services.

You are not alone!

Another challenge that struck Motome happened when he was twenty-five—he lost both his health and career. He had been taking medication for two years and suffering from insomnia. To his disappointment, he did not feel any better after taking the medication. Motome

started communing with a men’s cell group. It was a group of three members, all about the same age as Motome. After they learnt about Motome’s situation, they earnestly prayed for him. And it was such a miracle—Motome started recovering gradually and he could sleep without taking any medicine! Finally, he could even stop going to the hospital. This experience of miraculous healing has strengthened Motome’s faith and he learnt to accept his own weaknesses. He believes that even if he breaks down, God will give him strength to rise up again.

The same cultural struggle

Motome faced a similar struggle as Satoru, which is the religious practice related to Buddhist or Shinto ceremonies. Since Motome works as a legislator, he is frequently invited to attend Buddhist or Shinto ceremonies.

Sometimes I am told that I must attend [a Shinto ceremony], but I don’t really want to. Even now, I still feel very pressured and scared. If I do not attend, there will be lots of pressure. That is really difficult. But I think if I keep taking this standpoint, the others will eventually understand.

The obstacles: community building and ancestor worship

From the stories of Satoru and Motome, a couple of things can be observed. Although both grew up in Christian families, their perceptions of Christianity and church life were very different. Of course, the role model and teaching of parents is a crucial factor, but the quality of fellowship and life seem to also be key factors. Besides, both of them share the same cultural struggles. From their stories,



two potential factors that affect the church growth in Japan can be suggested—community building and ancestor worship.

1. Community building

From my personal observation, one of the true reasons behind weak growth in Japanese churches is the failure to build up a supportive community for seekers and believers so they can thrive. It is said that the Buddhist or Eastern view of the self is much more community-oriented.⁴ Unfortunately, we missionaries unconsciously bring in our own culture of sharing the gospel and ways in Christian growth, without taking into account how new believers can stay in their own community with their new religious identity or enter a new Christian community with love and care.

The blame, however, should not be put only on missionaries. Churches also fail to build cultural bridges into the larger society due to fear of contamination by pagan elements, causing Christians to build walls of self-protection.⁵ Churches themselves fail to engage with or respond to the society. Biblical teaching is mainly intellectual and weak in application. Christians may see the importance of doing outreach, but they cannot find suitable examples to follow.⁶ As a result, churches are neither able to build supportive community nor engage the “secular” community.

2. Ancestor worship

Fear of the spirit world and of the future is not uncommon in Buddhist Asia.⁷ Divination often becomes crucial when a family is dealing with the death of a loved one. To ignore this need is to dismiss the primary conditions and strategic means for reaching the target people. In fact, Francis Xavier, the first missionary to Japan, recognized that ancestor worship was the root of the faith and strength of blood ties in Japan. He understood deeply how Japanese people desire the salvation of blood relations.⁸ Western Pure Land Buddhism in Japan had a doctrine of rebirth through the invocation of Amitabha. Because this doctrine was appreciated by the people, this form of Buddhism spread throughout the country and is still popular in Japan today. Early Christian missionaries were not able to reconcile ancestor worship and the Christian tradition. To this day, the problem has not been resolved and it obstructs the spread of Christianity in

contemporary Japan.⁹ Samuel Lee states that one of the reasons why Christianity is not widely believed in Japan is the strong pressure from the larger community or society, where personal decisions are not allowed to disturb the harmony of these groups even when such decisions are logically beneficial to the individual decision maker. Christians can be perceived as being antisocial and selfish for disrupting the harmony of the family unit by refusing to observe many traditional Shinto and Buddhist rituals, especially those of praying to spirits and reverencing the dead.¹⁰ For most Japanese, gods are not to be worshipped, but have to be treated correctly. Correct treatment entails rituals of respect, veneration, propitiation, and offerings that are performed by the living on behalf of the dead to gain access to the life-giving powers of gods.¹¹ In traditional Japanese thinking, if ancestors' spirits are worshipped properly through religious rituals, funeral ceremonies, and offerings, they can transform into gods (仏) and protect the family for generations.¹² Though Mariana Nesbitt argued that for the urban dweller, this overwhelming obligation to help the ancestors gain nirvana (涅槃 nehan) is not uppermost in their minds anymore, it is obvious that there is still a sense of dependence on the dead, but mainly for psychological comfort. The comfort seems to be found in knowing that the customs have been observed satisfactorily.¹³ It is said that in order for the dead to remain fresh in the memory, it is necessary that some object of reminiscence, such as a house, a legacy, or a grave, remain within the daily reach of the descendants.¹⁴ To deny this aspect of ancestor worship is to deny one of the deepest means to self-identity among Japanese people.¹⁵

Their stories tell something

Each Japanese Christian has his own story and each story tells how one grows in faith in his unique way. There are tears, smiles, and struggles in the stories, but—most importantly—they are not alone! God's mercy and grace are always with them. And their stories communicate to us missionaries important messages. I pray that through listening and studying more stories of the local believers, we can rethink and derive more effective mission strategies that better help the Japanese churches.

MRT

Writer's note:

The stories are based on interviews that I carried out with two Christians living

in Hokkaido, Japan. Names have been changed in the stories.

¹ According to “Annual Statistics of Religion 2020” (「宗教年鑑 令和2年版」) issued by the Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan, in the religious population of 183,107,772 people, 1.0 percent (1,909,747) are Christians. See 文化庁, 「宗教統計調査」, 35, https://www.bunka.go.jp/tokei_hakusho_shuppan/tokeichosa/shumu/index.html (assessed 1 September 2021). Since it is normal for the Japanese to believe in more than one religion, the religious population is far larger than the figure for Japan's population (about 125 million people in 2020). Another figure, which was published by Tokyo Christian University in April 2019, shows the Christian population in 2017 (including Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant) was 0.83 percent (1.05 million people). See 日本宣教リサーチ, 「JMR 調査レポート(2018年度)」, 2019年4月, 東京基督教大学 国際宣教センター, 8, https://www.tci.ac.jp/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/JMR_report_2018.pdf (assessed 4 September 2021).

² 「今捧げた献金をお返ししました」

³ Hashiwatashi (箸渡し) is a Buddhist practice at funerals. After the dead body is cremated, two family members use wooden or bamboo chopsticks to pick bones up one by one (in order) simultaneously into a cinerary urn. By doing this, the dead person is believed to pass from this world (この世) to the other world (あの世) smoothly.

⁴ Sheryl Takagi Silzer, “How Buddhist Spirituality Influences and Shapes Asian Cultural Practices: Missiological Implications,” in *Seeking the Unseen: Spiritual Realities in the Buddhist World*, SEANET Book 12, ed. Paul H. de Neui (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2016), Kindle ed.

⁵ Gioia Michelotti, “The Search for the Best Way to Win Japan,” *Mission Nexus*, 1 July 1995, <https://missionexus.org/the-search-for-the-best-way-to-win-japan/> (assessed 13 July 2021).

⁶ Mitsuo Fukuda summarizes that there are three common ways of outreach that have been used by the Japanese churches: large outreach events, tract delivery, and interest classes (e.g., cooking class, English class, or sports). Once Christians have invited their non-believer friends to the church, they normally pass the job to pastors or missionaries. Fukuda points out that this is a reason for slow church growth. See 福田充男: 《野生のキリスト教》(日本: いのちのことば社, 2018), 38–39.

⁷ Alex G. Smith, “Buddhist Spiritual Realities: Divining and Discerning the Future,” in *Seeking the Unseen: Spiritual Realities in the Buddhist World*, SEANET Book 12, ed. Paul H. de Neui (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2016), Kindle ed.

⁸ Naoko Komura, “Christianity and Ancestor Worship in Japan,” *Studies in World Christianity* 9, no. 1 (April 2003): 60.

⁹ Komura, “Christianity and Ancestor Worship in Japan,” 65.

¹⁰ Samuel Lee, *Understanding Japan Through the Eyes of Christian Faith*, 4th and rev. ed. (Amsterdam: Foundation University Press, 2011), 89.

¹¹ Ian Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 27.

¹² 宮家 准著, 趙仲明譯: 《日本の民俗宗教》(南京: 南京大學出版社, 2005), 頁149.

¹³ Mariana Nesbitt, “Japanese Ancestral Practices: A Contextualized Teaching Tool on the Afterlife in the Local Church (Hibachi Theology)” (MTh thesis, South African Theological Seminary, 2007), 55–56.

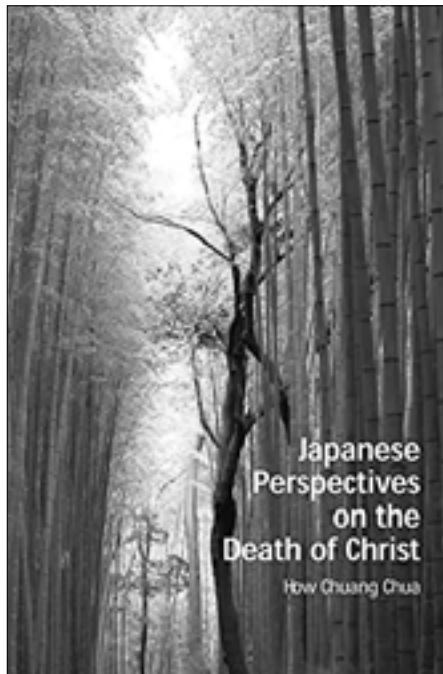
¹⁴ Komura, “Christianity and Ancestor Worship in Japan,” 64–65.

¹⁵ Komura, “Christianity and Ancestor Worship in Japan,” 67.

Japanese Perspectives on the Death of Christ

How Chuang Chua. Oxford: Regnum, 2021.
ISBN 978-1506483702. 308pp

**Reviewed by Michael Widmer,
OT Lecturer at Hokkaido Bible
Institute**



Writing with an international theological background and years of experience as a missionary in Japan, Chua offers a well-researched and insightful study in contextualized Christology. The book is based on Chua's PhD dissertation submitted to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Prof. Netland (doctoral supervisor) greatly endorses the book and provides a thoughtfully written short biography up to the untimely death of How Chuang Chua in 2015.

The book starts with an anecdotal story. A missionary was preaching the gospel in Japan and concluded with the following plea: "Jesus Christ died on the cross for your sins. If you accept him as your personal Lord and Savior, you will have everlasting life." After the meeting, so the story goes, an elderly lady approached the missionary saying: "Sensei, how can the death of Jesus cause me to go to heaven? Besides, I don't want to go to heaven, I just want to be where my ancestors are." Most missionaries to Japan can relate to the challenge of communicating the message of the cross in a way that is both intelligible and is perceived as truly good news. Chua acknowledges all the effort that missionaries have put into creative and culturally intelligible

ways of communicating the gospel. However, he takes contextualization a step further by looking at how influential Japanese Christian thinkers have appropriated the cross for themselves.

By providing an overview of the history of Christianity in Japan and a summary of the development of Christian theology in Japan, Chua sets the context for the heart of the book, which contains three in-depth expositions of three modern Japanese thinkers: Kitamori Kazō (1916–1998), a theologian; Endō Shūsaku (1923–1996), a novelist; and Koyama Kōsuke (1929–2009), a missionary and theological educator. All three agree that the cross demonstrates God's suffering love. For Kitamori, the cross is the site where the God of love embraces his enemies—the very ones who have betrayed that love and hence come under his wrath. The divine embrace is thus an act characterized by deep pain. In Endō's religious writings, the theme of the divine embrace is also prominent. It is an indiscriminate embrace of a maternal God—especially of the weak, the helpless, and the cowardly. Endō departs considerably from biblical teaching by focusing only on divine love and ignoring divine judgment. For Koyama, the cross reveals an impassioned God who continually moves toward the periphery in search of that one lost sheep. He develops a missiology of the cross using the motif of the *crucified mind*. Through the writings of these three Japanese scholars, Chua insightfully illuminates cultural themes, religiosity, and the nature of Japanese Christianity. Common to all three writers are the themes of suffering, self-negation, and universal embrace. Chua evaluates their writings both in the light of biblical teaching on the cross and classical Western theories of atonement, and shows how these themes have parallels in Japanese culture.

Suffering is an existential human reality in Buddhism. All three writers project the motif of patient suffering onto God. *Self-negation* finds concrete expression in Japanese cultural values,

such as harmony (*wa*) and modesty (*kenkyō*), and in the aesthetic qualities of simplicity. The cross provides the model for Christian life and service based on another-centered self-denial. *Universal Embrace* highlights parallels between the universal mercy of Amitabha Buddha and the grace of the Christian God. In a highly communitarian society like Japan, the exclusion from one's group is highly stressful and repugnant. It is probably for this reason that there is no mention of the subject of hell in the writings of any of these authors. Interestingly, the three are less interested in how the cross saves than they are in the divine demeanor displayed through it. Chua summarizes their views as "Christ suffered *because* of us; Christ suffered *like* us; Christ suffered *for* us."

The impassioned God who identifies with the suffering of the people seems to resonate more readily with Japanese than the sovereign God who judges them. For this reason, Chua suggests that gospel preaching should focus on the manner of God's suffering love and on what God has done through the painful death of Christ in order to redeem us from judgment of sin and death.

In the final chapter, Chua offers three suggestions for an evangelical approach to cross-cultural theologizing, suggesting that we appropriate: (1) the incarnation as a theological model; (2) epistemic humility as a theological virtue; and (3) canonicity and catholicity as theological principles. Missionaries must avoid what Koyama calls a "passive answer-theology," and should cultivate a "lively invitation-theology," meeting people on their own terms and inviting them to walk with Jesus so that they can taste and see that the Lord is good (Ps 34:8).

Overall, this book is an excellent model of how to do theology in conversation with the global church. It is a treasure trove of contextual insights into Japanese appropriations of the cross. Any reflective practitioner who is involved in cross-cultural communication of the gospel will greatly benefit from this work.

The impassioned God who identifies with the suffering of the people seems to resonate more readily with Japanese than the sovereign God who judges them.

Promoting Foster Care in Taiwan

David and Ruth Ullstrom



David and Ruth Ullstrom have been in Taiwan since 1988. They have three biological children and two adopted Taiwanese sons, one of whom died of cancer in 2010.

The purpose of this article is to tell the story of how God led us to become foster parents and to start a movement—*Taiwan127*—to challenge churches in Taiwan to get involved in foster care ministry.

In 2013, six months after moving to a new neighbourhood to start a church, we received a phone call asking if we could care for a ten-month old boy. The call came from a friend who had started a nursery for abandoned babies. “This boy is very active and just started walking,” she explained. “He disturbs the other babies and would benefit from more space to move around and more personal attention. Could you care for him until his new parents can come and get him?”

“Jimmy”—our first foster child—lived with us for eight months. We became very attached to him and he to us. When the time came to leave with his adoptive parents, he did not want to go and we cried unconsolably, too.

Not long after, we cared for a little girl from the same nursery for four months. Little “Dora” was eighteen months old when she came to stay with us. The children’s home felt she needed more one-on-one attention, so they asked us to care for her. She had spent her whole life in the nursery, most of her time spent in one small room. It was a good home, but they did not have the manpower to take the children out very often. When Dora came to our house, she was very quiet. She slept in a crib in our room and when we woke up in the morning, we assumed that she was still sleeping because we did not hear any sound from her crib. When we went to look in on her, however, we discovered that she was already awake. We had no idea how long she had been quietly sitting there. She did not call out.

We also discovered that she had many fears. When Ruth tried to give her a bath in the big bathtub, she screamed. When we took her outside in the stroller,



she was afraid of the sound of scooters and trucks driving by. Any loud sound would startle her. We liked to ride bicycles for exercise and to relax, but when we tried to put Dora in the child seat on the back of the bicycle, she screamed. If we left the room and she couldn’t see us, she screamed. Also, she was not used to being around men. When she first arrived, she would not let David hold her.

Fast forward two months.... The first sound we would hear each day was Dora calling out from her crib to get picked up. We would find her standing in the crib eagerly anticipating a morning hug. She also loved having her bath in the bathtub. This was now a fun time that she looked forward to. She was no longer afraid of going outside. To the contrary, Dora loved going outside in the stroller to the local wet market, where the sellers would greet her and she would wave back. She was no longer startled by the sound of traffic going by. Riding on the back of a bicycle was now a favourite activity. And rather than being afraid of David, she would climb up in his lap with a book, asking him to read to her.

Dora lived with us for four months, during which time we saw her come out of her shell and blossom. She was like a flower bud that opened to the sun to show its beauty. She is now with her adoptive family in Canada, where she continues to blossom. Photos from her adoptive parents show her smiling, joyful face.

We also found joy. There is great joy and satisfaction in seeing a child, like Dora, change for the better. Every child has their own issues and changes at their own pace, but love awakens the person that God created them to be. Trying to give a hysterical, screaming child a bath is not fun, but seeing them eventually overcome their fear and enjoy playing in the water is a source of great joy! In fact, often the greatest joys in life come from these “small” victories. They may seem small to us, but, for the children, it is a significant milestone in their development. Our joy comes from being able to have an impact on their development as God pours out his love for them through us.

It was Sunday morning and the children were in Sunday School on the first floor of the church. Suddenly, it started raining outside—a real downpour. One of the Sunday School teachers looked out through the glass doors and saw two young boys standing outside, wet and shivering. They had been cycling past the church just as the rain started and were taking shelter from the rain. The teacher invited them inside. They came and joined the Sunday School class. They were pretty wild and smelly. Their clothes looked dishevelled and dirty. Something did not seem right. They happily accepted an invitation to stay for lunch, which they ate ravenously. Where were their parents? Why were a six-year old and ten-year old riding around the neighbourhood by themselves?

It turned out that the boys were living by themselves in an apartment a three-minute walk from our church. Their father had died and their mother had found work in another county, leaving them behind in a rented apartment, with a friend stopping by to look in on them, give them a boxed supper every day, and try to make sure that they were doing their homework. Apart from that, they were unsupervised and spent a lot of time roaming around the neighbourhood on their bicycles.

The boys lapped up the attention they got at the church and started to show up regularly, ringing the doorbell whenever they needed something, particularly food. One day, we convinced them to let us walk home with them to see where they lived. Their apartment was a mess and the drain in the bathroom was plugged up with about five cm of dirty water on the bathroom floor. There was no hot water and it was winter. No wonder the boys



were so smelly! Who would want to bathe in conditions like that? We unplugged the drain, cleaned the bathroom, and took them home for a hot shower.

Meanwhile, one of our church members had called Social Services to tell them of the boys’ situation. It turned out that Social Services knew about the boys and agreed that it was not good for them to be “home alone,” but they didn’t want to disrupt their schooling by putting them in a children’s home and they didn’t have anyone else available to care for them. Our church member mentioned to the social worker that the boys often came over to the church and that we were giving them some meals and looking out for them.

We soon received a phone call from the social worker asking a lot of questions. At the end of this 45-minute “interview,” she asked if we would be willing to have the boys come and live with us until their mother got her life sorted out. We agreed and they ended up living with us for two months.

They had a lot of bad habits, including foul language, but we saw a huge change in them over those two months. They loved Sunday School and the older brother, who was in grade 4, loved reading Bible story comic books.

After they returned to their mom, we wondered how they were doing, but had no news for almost five years. Then, a few months ago, the younger brother, now eleven years old, messaged us on the internet. After chatting for a few minutes, he wrote, “I plan to visit you one day. I will remember you forever. The next time I see you [I] will definitely bring a gift. I love you.”

How many children do not go into foster care simply because there is no family available to care for them? At the time we cared for those two boys, we were not a registered foster family. Perhaps if we had been an official

foster family, we would have been asked much sooner to care for them.

After caring for the two brothers, the nursery called again, asking us to care for a handicapped baby for two weeks, followed shortly by a request to care for another handicapped baby for fourteen months.

Meanwhile, a family in our church saw us caring for these children and decided to apply to the local foster care agency to be foster parents. They took the training and were soon caring for a one-month old baby boy. They told us about the training, so we also applied and were trained to become officially registered foster parents.

As we went through the training, we learned more about foster care in Taiwan. We learned that there is a shortage of foster families, and so, many children have to stay in an institutional setting in children’s homes. In fact, according to statistics from the Ministry of Health and Welfare, in 2019, there were more than 4,300 children under government care.¹ Most of those children were in children’s homes, with only about 1,500 children living in foster families. This is a sad situation for the children, as many studies have shown that children develop much better in a family than in an institution.

In 2017, Taiwan was reviewed by the International Committee of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It concluded that Taiwan had too many children in institutions and urged the government to work to expand the foster care system so that more children could be placed with families.²

God intended us to grow up in families. Psalm 68:6 says that “God sets the lonely in families.” Where are these families?



This is the question that we started to ask ourselves and local social workers.

What we found out is that there are two organizations in Taiwan approved by the government to train foster parents and place children in foster homes. But, despite excellent training and a generous financial subsidy, the overall number of foster parents in Taiwan is declining.³ Why is this?

There are two reasons for the decline. The first is that it is difficult to recruit new families. Fewer families are coming forward to be trained. The second is that many families decide not to continue as foster families. In fact, within two years of becoming foster parents, it is not uncommon for three out of four families to stop.⁴ Obviously, it is not good enough to recruit more families without finding ways to encourage them to keep caring for children and to not give up. The “back door” in the foster care system needs to be closed.

As we learned these facts about foster care in Taiwan, we began to ask ourselves: Where is the church? Why are there not more Christians caring for vulnerable children? Surely these children are not invisible to God.

We looked online and discovered that, in the United States, there is a growing movement among churches to get involved in foster care ministry. This movement started when Christians became aware of the vulnerable children in their communities and began to pray. They also told their friends and other churches of the need for more foster families, leading to a movement.

As an example, in 2007, a group of Christians in one county of the state of Arkansas started a ministry called *The CALL*, working with the Department of Children and Family Services, to help provide more foster families to care for children in foster care in their county. Their website recounts the growth of their work:

What started with one group, in one county, quickly spread to other counties. In 2010, *The CALL* became a statewide organization and is now active in 44 counties around Arkansas.... Families recruited by *The CALL* make up over half of all foster families in the state. Since 2007, these families have cared for over 10,000 children, and

created forever families for over 800 children [through adoption].⁵

Christians in other American states have started similar organizations with similar results. God is answering their prayers with more and more Christians becoming foster parents, welcoming vulnerable children into their homes.

This can happen in Taiwan too! We believe that once Christians in Taiwan know of this need and are shown a clear plan of how to help care for vulnerable children, they too will respond. As we have talked with pastors about this, their first response is almost always, “I did not know.” They did not know that there may be children living just down the street from their church needing a family to care for them.

This is why we have started a movement called *Taiwan127*. The name was inspired by the verse, James 1:27.

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (NIV)

Taiwan127 exists to be a bridge between the church and foster care agencies in Taiwan. When we asked the foster care agency what their greatest challenge was, they answered that it was to recruit good foster parents. *Taiwan127* seeks to recruit and support Christians to be trained as foster parents in order to meet this need.

Taiwan needs more foster families, but those families also need people to help them so that they don’t give up. Remember that, typically, three quarters of all foster families quit within two years of starting. This is true in the USA, Canada, and Taiwan—there is no difference.

Why do foster parents quit? A study in the USA shows that many people quit because they don’t have enough support.⁶ They feel that they have

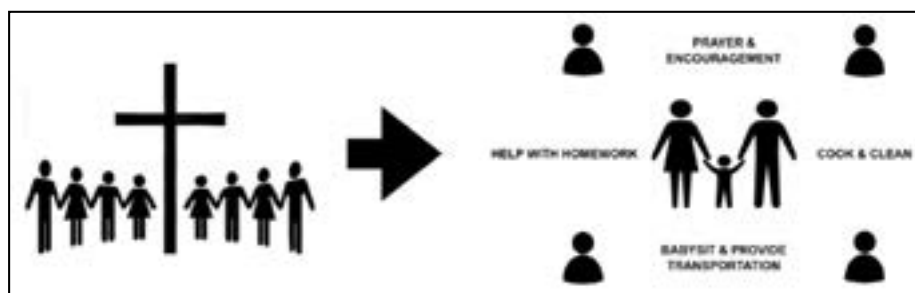
no one to help them when they need help. Informal conversations with foster parents in Taiwan confirm that this is also true in Taiwan.

From interview data, in current child welfare NGOs, a child protection frontline worker may manage and provide services to up [to] 45 children who were abused or neglected by their care-givers per month. Furthermore, a child welfare frontline worker may need to visit six to eight families, including fresh cases and follow-up cases, every day. The high number of children in the caseloads means that frontline workers face challenges in providing adequate services to needy children in a timely manner. A frontline worker has to make decisions with regard to the service intervention to needy children within a short time. In most situations, a frontline worker could only visit needy children and their family twice in a month.⁷

Our experience confirms this. The social workers are very busy. We could expect a short visit from the social worker once a month. They do their best, but it is not enough support. The solution is to surround every foster family with a group of support friends.

This is why the vision of *Taiwan127* is **a church for every child**. We want to see foster care become a ministry of the church. We want to see four support friends from the church supporting each foster family. When the church gets involved, the attrition rate for foster parents is dramatically reduced!⁸ Not everyone can welcome a child into their home, but everyone can do something to encourage and support foster families in their church.

We personally could not have hung in there for the long haul as foster parents without the support of our church. The church has prayed for us, and also gave clothes, diapers, baby formula, etc. One couple even stayed at our house for five days with the two boys so that we could take a holiday with our





daughter visiting from Canada. Another church member painted a bedroom and helped us move furniture to get ready for two children coming on short notice. Everyone can do something.

This is the message that we are seeking to share with our Taiwanese brothers and sisters through *Taiwan127*—the need for foster parents and support friends to support them with prayer and practical acts of kindness.

God has been opening doors. Last year, we had *The Foster Journey*, a book that was published by CAFO (Christian Alliance for Orphans), translated into Chinese and sent out with a letter and brochure to about 3,300 churches in Taiwan. It was written to introduce people to foster care from a Christian perspective.

A door also opened for us to speak at the largest church in Tainan City. As a result of speaking at that church, four families signed up to be foster families and six families signed up to take the same training to be respite families—to provide temporary care in order to give the foster families a break. These families have begun the training required to receive foster children. It is our hope and prayer that this church will become a model of church-based foster care ministry in Taiwan.

God also moved a Taiwanese businessman to offer funding for *Taiwan127*. We are already a local OMF ministry project; the next step is to register as a charitable organization with the government so that we can offer salaries to people who join in this ministry. Our dream is to have a Taiwanese pastoral couple who are also foster parents to head up *Taiwan127* and expand the ministry throughout Taiwan. This will take time, but God has brought the offer of funding and

we have heard of a couple who may be suitable for this role. Certainly, if God is providing the funding, he is also preparing people to join us in this ministry!

The last word

Caring for vulnerable children is nothing new for OMF Taiwan. Years ago, back in the 1970s, Dr. Pauline Hamilton worked with delinquent boys, teaching and counselling at a government-run school. Her story is recorded in the book, *To a Different Drum*.⁹ Also, in 1976, “Uncle” Wes Milne had delinquent boys, often referred to him from the courts, live with him. He continued this ministry until retiring for a second time in 2001. More recently, Linda McFerran was a dorm auntie at Bethany Children’s Home in Taipei for twenty-six years.¹⁰ In fact, this focus on caring for vulnerable children fits right in with the OMF Taiwan focus on reaching the working class. Margaret Zingg also visited detention centres and reformatories in Northern Taiwan from the 1990s, continuing to follow up with troubled youth contacts for nearly thirty years.

Each of these missionaries has left a legacy of changed lives. Children who were uncared for and vulnerable received their love and care and became, in some cases, mature Christians and valued members of society. This missionary service drew the attention and admiration of both Christian and non-Christian Taiwanese. Our hope is that this kind of ministry will not just be seen as an exceptional role for a spiritual elite but will come to be seen as a normal part of what the church does and thus, a valuable witness of God’s love to Taiwan society.

We have noticed that when we care for vulnerable children, people notice. People notice love. People notice sacrifice. We know a family who first

started asking us questions about God because they saw us caring for our first foster child. They were curious to know why we would do this. Their curiosity eventually led them to start coming to church, believe in Jesus, and be baptized.

Imagine a world where Christians are known for our love, for caring for vulnerable children. Imagine vulnerable children who have never heard about Jesus living with a Christian family where they experience the love of Jesus and hear about how much God loves them. This is the vision of *Taiwan127*. **MRT**

¹ Statistics provided by a social worker.

² Social and Family Affairs Administration, Ministry of Health and Welfare, “Concluding Observations on the Initial Report of the Republic of China/ Taiwan on the Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Draft),” 24 November 2017, 12–14, <https://www.mohw.gov.tw/cp-3425-38618-2.html> (accessed 22 Oct 2021).

³ Enru Lin, “Foster Families Wanted,” *Taipei Times* (10 May 2014), <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2014/05/10/2003589982> (accessed 22 Oct 2021).

⁴ Lin, “Foster Families Wanted.”

⁵ “Our History,” The CALL, <https://thecallinarkansas.org/about> (accessed 15 October 2021).

⁶ See Jason Weber and Katie Overstreet, *The Foster Journey: Often A Winding Road. Always a Trip*. (McLean, VA: Christian Alliance for Orphans, 2017), 56.

⁷ Chien-Chung Hsu, “A Study of Non-Government Child Welfare Services in Taiwan Focused on Children in Need of Child Welfare Service Intervention” (PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 2016), 214, <https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:410672> (accessed 15 October 2021).

⁸ See Genesis 18:23–32; Exodus 32–34; 1 Kings 8; Ezra 9; Daniel 9; etc.

⁹ Pauline G. Hamilton, *To a Different Drum: The Autobiography of Dr. Pauline Hamilton* (Singapore: OMF, 1998).

¹⁰ Linda McFerran’s loving ministry to the children is recounted in *Cosmic Light* magazine: 江佩君, “她是我媽媽: 愛爾蘭宣教士范華寧的二十六年 [She is My Mother: Twenty-six Years of Irish Missionary Fan Huaning],” 宇宙光 45, no. 531 (1 July 2018): 48–55, <https://www.cosmiccare.org/Magazine/Detail/8117180c-6fb7-4b58-8c98-a5e1bb82dc14> (accessed 27 October 2021).

Exploring the Challenges of Partnerships between Foreign Mission Agencies and the Filipino Church

Iljo de Keijzer



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Introduction

In this paper, I will explore the challenges of partnerships between foreign mission organizations and the Filipino church, especially with regard to finances. I will use the framework for critical contextualization created by Paul Hiebert. He recommended that we deal with the old (beliefs, rituals, stories, songs, customs, art, music, etc.) consciously in a process that neither rejects nor accepts it uncritically: (1) gather information about the old, (2) study biblical teachings about the event, (3) evaluate the old in the light of biblical teachings, and (4) create a new contextualized Christian practice.¹

This framework was originally created in a time (1980s) when missionaries often rejected almost everything foreign to them in the culture to which they were bringing the gospel. In time, a counter movement of accepting everything in the host culture uncritically emerged. Though Hiebert's framework was developed to evaluate traditional religious rituals for the sake of new believers in a certain cultural context, it could also be adapted as a framework for evaluating how we do partnerships in missions. The same steps can be applied for doing partnerships in a contextually appropriate way. I will go through the four steps adapted from Hiebert's framework and apply these to partnerships in the Filipino context:

1. Analyze what is happening at the moment (the old ways);
2. Study partnerships in light of the Bible;
3. Evaluate the old ways in the light of this biblical teaching; and
4. Suggest some possible steps towards a new contextualized form of partnership between the foreign mission agency and the Filipino church.

Poverty in the Philippines is a real challenge for all mission organizations serving there. Disasters take place almost every month and the economic system also keeps the country in poverty. In response, many projects are created to

help alleviate some of these. The verse "For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish" (Mark 14:7a NRSV) is true in the Philippines. Culturally, the Philippines is a country that is also very familiar with the patronage system (*ninong* and *ninang* or "godparents") and the concept of *utang na loob*—"indebtedness." While helping society run well in general, these can become very challenging as they give too much power to those with money.

Step 1: Analyze what is happening at the moment with regard to partnerships and projects in missions (the old ways)—stories about missionaries, partnerships, and money

In this section, I will look at some cases of failed projects/partnerships and attempt to identify where they went wrong. These are mentioned not to criticize (as most of these were undertaken by experienced missionaries with a heart for the Filipino people and who had at least a basic cultural understanding), but to aid our learning. The examples come from different mission organizations.

The first issue faced is that people usually see the missionary as the giver.² The more remote the location where the missionary serves, the farther away the donors are from the people he serves.

I was based in Sariaya, Quezon. In OMF, we usually do not talk about money, as we trust God to provide for our needs. My Filipino co-workers would send to me anyone who needed money. It upset me, since it is impossible for me to help them all. I discovered the reason for their behavior only after two years, during an informal fellowship time with the friends who had become my *kumare* and *kumpare* (what one would call the godmother and godfather of his/her child)—they asked me how I ended up being so rich. Then, I realized they thought I was so rich that I did not need to work anymore

and could just come to live and minister in the Philippines. I learned a lesson that day. I do need to talk about money at the right time! When responding to requests, saying things like “I will pray for it” or “I will check if the project still has money left for this” can be little ways of showing that we, personally as missionaries, are not the benefactors.

When an *Iman*—Islamic religious or community leader—asked a missionary for some materials to repair a *barangay* hall—local government center—the missionary said, “We will talk with the team to see if there is still money in the project.” At times, you need to give to maintain good relationships in the community. If there is money in the project, sometimes a small gift goes a long way. All went well, the relationship was strengthened, and goodwill in the community was created—at least until the mainly local team took a foreign missionary along. From then on, bigger sums of money were requested. The people thought they had identified the source of the team’s money. Tension between the leaders of the community and the team rose. The community felt the missionaries only gave a little from the abundance of foreign money that they must have access to. This problem grew even bigger when a family asked for help after their water supply was cut off. The foreigner felt so bad for them that he went to pay their bill immediately. He thought he was being a good neighbor. The team helped him see that he should bring those decisions to the team so that they could together determine whether there is dependency already or if a sudden, unexpected need had arisen where help is needed for that one time.

A project that provided livelihood to a remote village worked really well and brought the people income and many came to faith at the same time. When time came for the project to be closed due to the missionary’s departure, the local people that were helped felt betrayed. It served a good purpose, but caused problems when it had to be closed.

A mission group serving in the Philippines gave salaries, buildings, and equipment to each church and pastor of their denomination. The churches multiplied

and the denomination was growing significantly. After many years, the budget ran low. The mission group started preparing the church for a change (over a seven-year period!). Pastors were to be supported by or receive salaries from the churches they served. Only their local missionaries were to continue to receive salaries from the mission group. This created a lot of pain and misunderstanding. People felt that serving a church was considered less important than planting one or providing training. Some of the older pastors felt they were entitled to their salaries and did not even want to be accountable for their hours and ministry. They had always received a good salary and felt that they had a right to it and that nobody should question them. These are some of the challenges we face.

Similarly, a local NGO planted two hundred house churches. They did it through paid salaries for workers, sponsorship programs, and medical work. Money is needed to plant churches, but foreign money tends to create dependency. Partnership between the foreign mission and local church planters has been vital, but if the foreign mission completely withdraws their financial support, the churches will face a very difficult time. This happens when a local organization is built on regular foreign support that allows them to work well.

As these examples show, money is needed for planting churches through partnership, but how can we do this without creating dependency? The support from abroad really helped in the church planting efforts of these groups, but it also created a sense of entitlement that saw the rich West as being obliged to give money. Using money in church planting and partnerships is not a simple black-and-white or right-or-wrong case. It is complicated and many deep issues are involved in finding the best way of using money for furthering the kingdom of God.

The Alliance of Bible Christian Churches of the Philippines (ABCCOP) saw the need to revise their Theological



Pastors Lito Silang and Renz Punzalan were students in the first ABCCOP TEE teacher training and became teachers in the second one.

Education by Extension (TEE) program to equip their pastors.³ For the growth of church plants in the whole of Luzon, more equipped teachers were needed to provide local training for all these new churches. Outside funding from partners was used to revise the curriculum and train new teachers. Outside funding was not used for the TEE program itself so as to ensure its continuation. Until now, I feel that has been a wise decision.

In a positive way, many scholarship projects have created empowerment and scholars have given back to their tribal or urban poor communities. However, as very few scholarship projects have received funds from graduates, it is difficult to continue supporting incoming students without outside funding.

STEP 2: Look at partnerships in the light of the Bible

I will turn to examine the biblical and theological foundations regarding the problem of partnerships for helping the poor. Partnership is a word that is often used in mission and relief work, but is hard to truly achieve if initiated by full-time, highly-educated foreign missionaries. This is because the money needed for the partnership often comes from the same foreign party. Inequality quickly plays an unavoidable role.

In the OT, we find in Isaiah 65:17–25 a good picture of the ideal world to come, where prosperity, peace, and contentment will be shared equally by all God’s people. A similar message can

Partnership is a word that is often used in mission and relief work, but is hard to truly achieve if initiated by full-time, highly-educated foreign missionaries. This is because the money needed for the partnership often comes from the same foreign party. Inequality quickly plays an unavoidable role.

be found in Micah 4:4, where all will live in prosperity and peace, enjoying their own fruits. How then can we anchor our initiatives in this “not yet” era we are living in? How can partnership help us to move towards this ideal world to come?

Partnership is mutual

In 2 Kings 4:8–37, we find a special partnership between a rich woman in Shunem and Elisha the prophet. Elisha often passes by her house on his journeys and knows he is welcome. At some point, a special room is built for him. Elisha, in what seems a human response, would like to give something to this lady. At the advice of his servant, Gehazi, he promises she will have a child. She did not ask for this. A boy is born and, after some years, he died in her arms. She bitterly tells the prophet, “Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, Do not mislead me?” (2 Kings 4:28 NRSV). From the woman’s words, we can imagine what she must be thinking: “I did not ask for a son, but you thought you had to give me one and now he is dead.” Another important clue that helps in interpreting what is happening here is that God had not shown Elisha what had happened to the woman. As missionaries, we may not be comfortable about accepting things given by our local partners and feel we need to give in return. The above story suggests that such a human response may not be wise. Can we accept it graciously when local partners give something to us?

It is also astounding to see that Paul takes offerings from the Gentile churches planted during his missionary journeys—the “missionary churches”—instead of the other way around, to help the poor in the Jerusalem “mother church” (1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8; Gal 2:10; Rom 15:26–27). If the people among the Gentiles have shared in the spiritual blessings of the Jews, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. This is different from how we often do missions—missionaries tend to give both spiritual and material blessings. Paul is appealing to their *utang na loob* or “indebtedness” to those who helped to get the gospel to them.

Partnership gives empowerment

The story of the widow’s oil (2 Kings 4:1–7) is a good illustration

of empowerment being preferred to the “dole out” option. She was empowered by Elisha with a business plan to provide for her sons. Her dignity as a working mother was preserved. It can be a temptation for foreign and local missionaries alike—do we give what is needed based on what God asks from us or do we give what we think people need? We may even think that if we give them this or that, they will be obliged to come to church, thus resulting in a bigger church. Recently, a friend who leads an NGO in children’s ministry had to deal with a worker who stole a portion of the relief packs to give to contacts of their church in the attempt to get these people to join the church.

Patron-client relationships as a form of partnership

When Paul speaks, in 2 Corinthians 8:19, of a generous gift he is administering, he does so in the language of patronage, but his use of *haplotes* here indicates “generosity arising out of the purity of mind.”⁴ The NT might accept patronage as part of culture, but in Luke-Acts, we can note a bright ray of renewal, a form of radical patronage, where, according to Heen:

- (a) the cultural worth of a patron does not necessitate the diminution of clients,
- (b) the gift itself (*charis*) is accepted for the theological mission of the church and the social values it advances, and, therefore,
- (c) a patron’s wealth does

not buy inappropriate influence in the affairs of the *ekklesia* and/or the expectation of unconditional loyalty.⁵

In practice, the missionary is often seen as the patron, since he is the visible person who brings the good—the material and spiritual teachings. Therefore, there is a tendency for the local people to serve and please the missionary. Missionaries sometimes try to say, “No, it doesn’t come from us, but from people outside (or inside) the country.” Beneficiaries would then attempt to get to know these “unknown” and “unseen” benefactors. They will be curious to learn how to connect with and get on the good side of the patron. One task for the missionary is to point them to the real patron (God)—a beautiful way of evangelism. Pointing them to God as the ultimate Patron will usher a deeper curiosity and understanding of who God is. In short, patron-client relationships done biblically are modelled when the abovementioned three aspects of radical patronage are seen.

Within the church, a Christian patron is not to anticipate the social norm of loyalty he would receive outside the church.⁶ Luke-Acts as well as Paul seem to warn against the wrong use of patronage (1 Cor 9:12–15) and show its good uses when people give from the heart (Theophilus, Phoebe, and Lydia).

Importance of relationships in partnerships

One thing that does call for our attention is the relationships that can be observed in Scripture. Paul had a close relationship with Philemon. The women who supported Jesus, some of whom had been healed by him, travelled with him at times and cared for him. Phoebe was commended not just for the money she gave as a benefactor, but her involvement in ministry was much deeper and recognized as such (Romans 16:1–2). What is the relationship between local churches and the distant benefactors in another country? Partnerships require time and relational investment, not just accepting or giving a big check.

In Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, we find a view about giving that is also seen in the Philippines. People do not save money for their own future needs,



Elisa Helpt een Arme Weduwe [Elisha Helps a Poor Widow] by Caspar Luyken. Etching on paper, 25.2 x 20.3 cm. From Rijksmuseum, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.146492>.

but give from their plenty and others will supply them in their difficult times (2 Cor 8:13–15). Though this sounds beautiful and biblical, in practice, it is abused by many. Some people work extremely hard since their whole family seems to rely on them. How to apply this sharing from plenty and having others help them when they are in need is extremely challenging in the Filipino context.

The letter to the Philippians gives us perhaps the best example of partnership between Paul and the church in Philippi. Paul thanked them for their sharing or partnership (κοινωνία) in the gospel (Phil 1:5b). It seems, from the context, that they continued in both sharing the gospel as well as helping Paul and the poor church in Jerusalem financially. They had a long-standing relationship from the first day to now. In verse 7, Paul continues to explain why: (1) they hold Paul in their heart (as Paul holds them in his), and (2) they share with Paul in God's grace (3) both in the practicality of imprisonment as well as the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

Intended use of funds in partnerships

What Paul gathered from the “missionary churches” was for the poor in Jerusalem, the home church. It is important for us to realize that times have changed and ministry is done differently today compared to the times of the NT. Having richer people in the places we serve who can provide for snacks or Bibles might be better than receiving all funding from our mother churches in the West. Collections in the Bible seem to go to the poor and to the full-time missionary (Phil 1:5 cf. 4:16). This provision for the physical needs of the poor might be compared to the relief and development projects today. But when we take the principle to mean assisting others in their spiritual ministry (Sunday school materials, electric bills, etc.), we have no biblical command or precedent, except to support the person doing the work so that he can do this full time instead of part time.

The role of the heart in partnerships

In the NT, we find the example from Paul about offerings—that God loves the cheerful giver (2 Cor 9:7)—and, in the letter to the Philippians, he writes about



Talking with and listening to the local people to understand their needs

the example of Jesus, who emptied himself for us (Phil 3:7–8). The heart of the giver is important, not just the gift!

STEP 3: Evaluate the old ways in the light of biblical teaching

Partnership is mutual

In partnerships, each mission organization has its own goals for a project; it is important, however, to hear the other party's goals and motivation. A genuine partnership forms when both parties share a common vision. A partnership where parties hold different visions or objectives is a recipe for disaster. By listening, one can better understand the other party's goals and manage expectations. Trust can be built that way and there will be less room for misunderstandings and miscommunication.

As OMF Philippines, we experienced challenges in our partnerships despite the fact that we had mutually defined our relationship as partners. Usually, OMF provides the money and partners do the distribution and reporting, but there was a time when this was different. The group we were partnering with was given money; they did not have a ministry in the affected province, whereas OMF did. Our partner did not consider giving the money to OMF for us to do the work and reporting, but found another local partner to work with to distribute the money. Even when the relationship is longstanding and mature in many ways, building a truly mutual partnership remains challenging.

Can the church plants also contribute to new ministries? It is astounding that the offerings of the people in the church of Jerusalem were to aid

the poor (Acts 4:34–35) and the offerings Paul later gathered *from* the “missionary churches” were all for the poor in Jerusalem. Paul's missionary team was supported by the “younger church” at Philippi (Phil 4:10–19). But no precedent can be found in the Bible, let alone any command, to give toward the *ministry* of another church.

Partnership gives empowerment

Here are some questions to ask ourselves. Do our partnerships empower the local church? Or does

the mission organization dictate every step and control the management of the church? How do our projects empower the people we serve? A good project must empower people and communities and respect their dignity as human beings (as in the story of the widow's oil in 2 Kings 4:1–7). Dependency robs people of their dignity. Empowerment restores or reinforces a person's human dignity. Empowerment can lead someone to discover the joy of meaningful work and the joy of being able to help others and provide for their own families.

Patron-client relationships as a form of partnership

A major difference between our context now and the times of Paul should be noted—many missionaries now tend to serve the poor, whereas Paul seemed to go mainly to the cities and find those of influence. On the one hand, this might be a lesson for us in that we might do well to find people of influence in the communities we serve so that less money from our home countries will be involved. On the other hand, it is good to remember that Luke-Acts is not prescriptive, but descriptive, so one needs to be careful not to blindly copy Paul. In the Philippines, we need to redeem patronage once more, like Luke did in Luke-Acts, so that it becomes a good cultural as well as biblical value.

Importance of relationships in partnerships

As early as around 2000, a trend appeared—sending money instead of missionaries, since fifty locals can sometimes work for the cost of one missionary family. However, one thing occurs when the West subsidizes the work of churches and pastors on the mission field—potential growth is stalled because

of the mindset that it can't be done unless an overseas benefactor provides the funds. Jealousy often develops among the pastors and churches who don't receive assistance towards those who have developed a pipeline of support from the United States or other rich countries. In the long term, especially if the support is not sustained indefinitely, it creates a patronizing dependency and difficulties for those pastors to readjust once the salary stops.⁷ As sensible and appealing as this strategy may sound, more and more mission observers are pointing to the hazards inherent in "just supporting nationals."

It is not always easy to discern when sharing of resources is justified and when restraint for the purpose of promoting self-sufficiency is wiser and, in the long run, the more loving response.⁸ There is still a need for missionaries and it is important to alleviate poverty, but how can we find a way that does not create dependency on the West for continued church planting and instead encourages local ownership in the area of funding church multiplication and indigenous mission movements? This remains a difficult question to answer.

Intended use of funds in partnerships

In the New Testament, people were using collected offerings to provide for the physical needs of the impoverished—what might be called relief and development projects today. We see that churches sent out missionaries, like Paul and Barnabas, and local people in the planted churches were also supporting the missionaries in their ministry. So, a case can be made for local missionary support here.⁹



Devastation wrought by typhoon Haiyan

The role of the heart in partnerships

The greatest problems in partnerships seem to be caused by compromises in character. As Bishop Efraim Tendero shared:

Christianity is not so deep here. The Philippines is known as the only Christian nation in Asia, but it is also regarded as the most corrupt nation in this region of the world. How can Christianity and corruption go together?¹⁰

Or, in the words of Bishop Noel Pantoja of the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches (PCEC), in an interview with *Christianity Today*: "This oligarch-controlled, patronage political system plays an important part in slowing down, if not utterly neglecting, the rehabilitation and rebuilding of the [Typhoon] Haiyan-affected areas." He added that "Faith-based groups do not have a better track record in resisting corruption, especially those that are pork barrel fund-related. We have been advocating against the use of pork barrel funds by evangelical [and] Pentecostal Christians."¹¹

Rich local Christians can create the same problems as foreign missionaries.

Once, at a national gathering of a big denomination, a rich person came for an activity and demanded that the whole layout of the room be changed according to his preference. In view of the many gifts he had given to the denomination, the denominational head was not able to refuse this unreasonable request due to *utang na loob* or "indebtedness."

Does the giver feel a solidarity with and a responsibility for fellow believers in need, like what Jesus taught? Are gifts given from the stance of a benefactor or of a servant? "I am among you as one who serves," said Jesus. Does the giving win the lost? Or does it cultivate a culture of dependency? Paul was willing to become all things to all people in view of his single-minded objective—to win as many as possible and as widely as possible. So, today, one test of any mission agency's partnership should be its evangelistic effectiveness. Does the money free people to do evangelism and discipleship, or does the support cause them to look to the donor for ministry direction? Does money invested promote or retard long-term indigenous church growth and evangelism? These are not easily measured, but reporting and regular interviews can at least partially monitor effectiveness.

STEP 4: Suggest some possible steps towards a new contextualized form of partnerships between the foreign mission and the Filipino church

Partnership is mutual

Can we accept something in return from those we serve? Or do we need to write it off? As a mission organization,



People in Leyte learning how to sew and make dishwashing liquid and slippers as new livelihoods after typhoon Haiyan.

we need to work hard to find ways that will bring out the reciprocity of the partnerships because it will not suffice to just give money to partner organizations. Organizations like Habitat for Humanity and Gawad Kalinga (Give Care) provide land, housing, and other needs with the aim of giving people dignity by providing a place to live.¹² Beneficiaries may not have much to contribute financially towards the construction of their houses, but they help in rebuilding the whole community or cooking for the volunteers who are building the houses. People are also able to donate in kind: food for builders, furniture, paint, etc. This ensures dignity and ownership. An additional foundational principle that Gawad Kalinga has is working with partners in their own field of construction. As mission organizations, our donations usually come from churches and individuals. Partnering with construction companies brings competence, passion, and lower rates. This will also ensure longer standing relationships (think in terms of maintenance) due to their common interest.

Partnership gives empowerment

I would like to underscore the importance of “empowerment.” A well-run project should empower people to develop all the gifts God has given them to help themselves and others. For example, many of the scholarship projects empowered students to receive training for a career. Now, they earn their own salary and share their earnings with their family, similar to the story of the widow and the oil. It would be good in the long term to look for more local funding or look into advocating that graduates help future cohorts of students. Alternatively, they can work in a livelihood program to help them earn some money that can support other students.¹³ A clear warning against creating “dependency” through projects needs to be given. Regular evaluation of projects can also help. One thing that we have been trying to do with one of our partners, where we help with allowances for missionaries, is to reduce the support over a period of five years. It is hoped, in that time frame, that they can slowly find local partners. In practice, it is still a struggle. Most missionaries will be balancing a fine line between saying “yes” where help is really needed and saying “no” where the project would actually do fine without their help/intervention. Humble dependence on the Holy Spirit and on co-workers is vital here.

Another element to keep in mind is that if we stop supporting a project, which other group will they connect with after the next disaster and what is the group’s view of partnership? We may have created dependency, but the next organization they connect with may do even worse than we did. This is not a reason to keep supporting organizations that we are partnering with, but it is something to take into account in a country like the Philippines, where there is so much poverty and many natural and man-made disasters as well as numerous groups coming to support here and there for a couple of years before moving on to another place.

Patron-client relationships as a form of partnership

The dynamics of the patron-client relationship creates a good network and influence and so, it builds up social status and personal identity. Basically, the essence of this relationship is considerably top-down, but since a substantial element of the relationship is understood to be mutual, it does reciprocate in time at different levels. Filipino families would like to get *ninongs* and *ninangs* or “godparents” for their kids and they are usually chosen from close friends and relatives. *Ninongs* and *ninangs* take on the role as benefactors and they remember the children for birthdays, Christmas, etc. Subsequently, they are attached to families through their *inaanak* or “godchildren.” Connections are important. When *ninongs* and *ninangs* become old and need care, their acts of love and kindness are reciprocated. Patron-client relationships might not be ideal in missions, but are hard to avoid in Filipino culture. Clear communication and parameters will help to avoid some difficulties.

Specific rules also apply to the role of benefactors. This is where missionaries often go wrong. Missionaries only pick up parts of the role, but to those they serve, that role comes as a “package deal.” Oftentimes, things go wrong in relationships here. Many missionaries in the Philippines—as well as Africa and *other parts of Asia*—assumed the role of patrons in the giving of money and jobs, but became upset when asked to fulfil that role completely as it is understood within the culture. Clear communication from the very beginning on what you are willing and not willing to give as well as pointing towards the “real Giver” are very important.

Also, being discerning about what is happening is a must for missionaries.

As an example, a missionary bought school supplies for some kids in the neighbourhood. The next school year, those parents fully expected to get school supplies again and also asked for a uniform. When the child got sick, they also came to the missionary for medicines. This caused confusion, frustration, and even anger for the missionary. In another case, the son of the house helper of a missionary needed some special medicine that the family could not afford. A team member agreed to pay for that. This continued for several years and when the child was in high school, he wanted to join the school band, but needed a uniform for that. The missionary team talked about it, but decided they would not spend that amount if it were their own children, so they told the mother they would not be able to help. The mother and the whole family became very angry, since they fully expected the missionaries to meet that need also.

In another situation, a missionary prayed for a sick church member, but there was no improvement. He talked things through with the family and felt there was a joint decision that they needed to bring this member to the hospital. The team did assume they would help with the hospital costs. But once they reached the hospital, the family just went home and left it to the missionaries to make sure there was always somebody with the patient (a Philippine hospital requirement) and made no effort to pay or borrow some money. The team learned their lesson that day that clear communication is very important. God was gracious to them as, on that same day, they received an unexpected gift basically covering the hospital costs.

There is also fear on the side of the missionary about spoiling the local employees that will make it impossible for them to do their work well as pastors and evangelists.¹⁴ A good way to avoid this is to ensure missionaries have good relationships and cultural understanding before they start projects and local partnerships. Another form of protection could be requiring projects to be approved by the whole team beforehand.

Relationships can be abused to advance self-centered motives and satisfy personal greed. This aspect of moral

descent has affected the Philippine society extensively and even the way churches and ministries render their services to communities. Nevertheless, the patron-client relationship as part of the Filipino culture can be redeemed. Luke-Acts gives us a good example on how it can be redeemed. It is important to find biblical ways to use the patron-client relationship in the Filipino culture. Again, good cultural and relational wisdom is vital here.

Importance of relationships in partnerships

From the examples in the New Testament, we can see the importance of relationship. We organize and facilitate a project as a result of relationships established; we should not use it as a means to build relationships. Paul related well to the church of Philippi and they kept supporting him over a long time. It is great if we can have good relationships with our sending churches like this, but it is also essential for our local workers to create these relational structures and not depend on a salary from the organization.

When it comes to long-term sustainability of projects, the Center for Community Transformation (CCT) invests in continued discipleship and savings groups to ensure longer lasting relationships.¹⁵ Through these, they continue to have input in people's lives and help them apply the learned principles in their newly started livelihoods. These long-term

relationships help many more projects succeed, compared to one-day training and seed money for livelihood projects.

Intended use of funds in partnerships

Jesus was always generous and kind towards those who needed help, but was also empowering. Those healed from debilitating sicknesses were empowered to retake their places as people with dignity within their families and communities.

It will also help to teach the people we serve to appreciate the difference between people giving to the ministry and those giving to gain influence, and to respond accordingly. A retired pastor moved to a certain island after his retirement. He then offered financial assistance to the leaders of the group we work with there. The group refused. They understood that the pastor wanted to use the money to gain direct influence over their leaders. They would have accepted the money if it had been given for use "where needed" without strings attached.

Basics like consultative and smart planning, monitoring, evaluation, and learning (PMEL) in almost any area of stewardship are often not internalized. One good, even if imperfect, model to study is the company Human Nature, which demonstrates excellence in entrepreneurship with attention to Christian virtues.¹⁶ Mission organizations might consider getting business

consultants from agencies like Human Nature, Gawad Kalinga, CCT, or other viable alternatives. If we, as missionaries, want to do partnership well, let us not be ashamed to learn from others, even from businesses, and not pretend we can run projects well with our theology degrees.

The role of the heart in partnerships

We need to discipline ourselves in the administration of partnership projects. Important in partnerships is the idea of *kenosis*—"self-emptying"—the verb used by Paul in Philippians 2:7 when he describes how Christ Jesus "made himself nothing." Jesus, in his incarnation, humbled himself and assumed the form of a slave in order that he might serve us unreservedly. In delivering a project, temptation is always present to use it for self-promotion or to feel good about ourselves. Self creeps in and corrupts our project and local people see this more clearly than the project itself. We must make sure the project and partnership serve the community and not our egos. We must empty ourselves of all self-serving attitudes.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have explored the challenges of partnerships between foreign mission organizations and the Filipino church, especially with regard to finances involved. I used Hiebert's framework to contextualize actions in partnerships between the foreign mission and the Filipino church. I went through the four steps adapted from his framework: (1) Analyze what is happening at the moment (the old ways); (2) Study partnerships in the light of the Bible; (3) Evaluate the old ways in the light of this biblical teaching; (4) Suggest some possible steps towards a new contextualized form of partnership between the foreign mission and Filipino church. In each of these steps, I focused on six important areas with regard to partnerships and projects for them to run better and more contextually. The following outcomes were discussed.

Partnership has to be mutual: Can we accept something in return from those we serve? As a mission organization, we need to work hard to find ways that will bring out meaningful, multi-tiered, multi-faceted participation in our partnerships because it does not suffice to just give money to partner organizations.



Small boats are not suitable for trips in open seas. Due to a broken pier, we had to go from a small boat into a smaller boat to reach the shore.

Partnership gives empowerment: A well-run project that observes good practice empowers people to develop as those who can use all the gifts God has given them to help themselves and others. Many of the scholarship projects empowered students to learn and train for a career. Regular monitoring of projects can help to guard against dependency.

Patron-client relationships can be used as a form of partnership: A good way to avoid issues related to the patron relationship of the missionary to the community is to ensure that missionaries have good relationships and cultural understanding before they start projects and local partnerships. The patron-client relationship as part of the Filipino culture can be redeemed, like what was done in Luke-Acts. May we point the Filipino people to the ultimate Benefactor. Again, good cultural and relational wisdom is vital here.

Relationships in partnerships are of vital importance: A good model is Paul, who related well to the church of Philippi and they kept supporting him over a long time. It is great if we can have good relationships with our sending churches, but it is also important for our local workers to create these relational structures and not depend on a salary from the foreign organization.

Money needs to be used well: Jesus was always generous and kind towards those who needed help, but his help was also empowering. Receiving input from businesses and NGOs that run well according to Christian values can help us develop healthier partnerships.

And, lastly, the heart is very important for both partners: We must make sure the project serves community needs and not our egos. We must empty ourselves of all self-serving attitudes.

It is my desire that these initial steps will help us to do partnerships and projects well and that these may lead to indigenous mission movements in the Philippines. **MRT**

Writer's note:

I wish to thank all the people who shared with me their stories of struggle in the



A former recipient of a scholarship from Bukang Liwayway (Dawn for the Poor), which works among urban poor, now has a good career in banking.

area of partnerships and projects. I am grateful for your openness. This paper is, in part, the result of all our struggles in doing partnerships and projects to serve the church in Asia in its efforts to encourage indigenous mission movements. May this paper help to challenge us to do this to our best ability.

¹ See Figure 1 in Paul G. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *Missiology* 12, no. 3 (1984): 290.

² This paper is not denying in any way the biblical mandate to help the poor, but challenges us to consider the best way to do so. The Bible is very clear about the mandate to help the poor. Both the Old and New Testaments show God cares for the poor. They will always be among us (Mark 14:7) and are our responsibility. In Deuteronomy 15:1–11 and Leviticus 25:8–17, God gave clear rules and regulations for dealing with the poor. God also made it clear that the "end goal" was equality that will be reached only in the age to come (Isaiah 65:17–25; Micah 4:4). There is a clear biblical mandate to help the poor, but there is also the question as to whether the feeding of the five thousand by Jesus justifies our feeding projects. Does the healing ministry of Jesus justify medical missions? See Jim Harries, "'Material Provision' or Preaching the Gospel: Reconsidering 'Holistic' (Integral) Mission," *Evangelical Quarterly* 80, no. 3 (2008): 260. Are these descriptive of Jesus' ministry on earth or are they prescriptive for us to follow? These are just a few of the theological questions surrounding money, partnerships, and mission.

³ Alliance of Bible Christian Churches of the Philippines is an association that was started by five interdenominational mission organizations and currently has about 900 churches and an additional 250 house churches.

⁴ David Arthur DeSilva, "Exchanging Favor for Wrath: Apostasy in Hebrews and Patron-Client Relationships," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115, no. 1 (1996): 101; D. K. Jayakumar, "A System of Equality and Nonacquisitiveness as a Subversion of the Greed-Based Capitalism and the Patronage System," *Africa Theological Journal* 30, no. 2 (2007): 248.

⁵ Erik M. Heen, "Radical Patronage in Luke-Acts," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 33, no. 6 (2006): 447. David Lull makes a similar argument and refers to patrons in Luke as "servant-benefactors." See David J. Lull, "The Servant-Benefactor as a Model of Greatness (Luke 22:24–30)," *Novum Testamentum* 28, no. 4 (1986): 289–304.

⁶ Heen, "Radical Patronage in Luke-Acts," 455.

⁷ Robertson McQuilkin, "Stop Spending Money! Breaking the cycle of missions dependency," *Christianity Today* (March 1999): 57–59, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1999/march1/9t3057.html?share=dLzUWawv1R2BQ4ONFo4WRMUDry9hVjE> (accessed 12 October 2021).

⁸ Craig Ott, "Missions and Money: Revisiting Pauline Practice and Principles," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 42, no. 1 (2018): 11.

⁹ See also Galatians 6:6–7.

¹⁰ Bishop Tendero, the former secretary general and CEO of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), in a meeting with him at ABCCOP.

¹¹ Timothy C. Morgan, "Show Us the

Relief Money!" *Christianity Today* (18 February 2014), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/february-web-only/philippines-haiyan-show-us-relief-money.html?share=dLzUWawv1RRAgJqYms0iM6BkDxfHyZ> (accessed 5 November 2021). Pork barrel funds refer to discretionary funds allocated to legislators to spend on localized projects as they see fit. Historically, cases of misuse and corruption have plagued such funds. See Kristel Limpot, "EXPLAINER: What you need to know about the PDAF scam," *CNN Philippines*, 14 February 2021, <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/2/14/PDAF-scam-what-you-need-to-know.html> (accessed 4 December 2021).

¹² See Habitat for Humanity Philippines, <https://www.habitat.org.ph>; Gawad Kalinga, <https://www.gklworld.com/home> (accessed 5 November 2021).

¹³ The Philippine Department of Social Welfare and Development led in providing opportunities for income-generating activities and livelihood development through the Sustainable Livelihood Program implemented in 2011. The objective of the program is to reduce poverty and inequality by generating employment among poor households and by moving highly vulnerable households into sustainable livelihoods and toward economic stability. See "Sustainable Livelihood Program," Philippine Department of Social Welfare and Development, <https://car.dswd.gov.ph/programs-services/core-programs/sustainable-livelihood-program/> (accessed 5 November 2021).

¹⁴ Jonathan J. Bonk, "Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem . . . Revisited," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 31, no. 4 (2007): 171, <http://www.internationalbulletin.org/issues/2007-04/2007-04-171-bonk.pdf> (accessed 5 November 2021).

¹⁵ See CCT Group of Ministries, <http://www.cct.org.ph> (accessed 5 November 2021). In savings groups, people come together weekly and put aside some amount of money. They usually also get taught some basic business principles. Only after they have been able to save a certain amount can they apply for a loan. It ensures relationship and commitment from the person wanting to start a business, leading generally to higher success rates.

¹⁶ "About us," Human Nature, <https://humanheartnature.com/buy/mission-vision-values> (accessed 5 November 2021).

Three Responses to “Challenges of Partnerships between Foreign Mission Agencies and the Filipino Church” Towards Genuine Partnership

Melba Padilla Maggay



Dr. Melba Padilla Maggay is a sought-after international speaker and consultant on culture and social development issues. A specialist in intercultural communication, she was research fellow on the subject at the University of Cambridge, applying it to the question of culture and theology. As part of her lifelong concern for the poor, she has accompanied many development organizations in their journey towards social transformation. She is president of the Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture, which engages in development, missiology, and cross-cultural studies aimed at social transformation.

Part of the problem of the Western missionary movement is that it has come to the shores of recipient cultures from a position of power. Missions had been a handmaiden to colonization and, in recent times, conduits of theological and cultural influence from the countries where they came from, facilitated by having in their possession money and other resources.

Whether they are aware of it or not, Western missionaries come with a paradigm like that of the multinational—selling a pre-packaged gospel by promising resources and technology transfer.

There is much talk these days about contextualization, but I wonder if we have fully grasped what this means in the way we do “mission.”

The incarnation tells us that we cannot McDonaldize the gospel: same ingredients, same size, same way of cooking anywhere in the world. The God of the universe came to a particular culture and a particular time. Unlike the Indian avatars whose fleeting appearances are lost in the mist of legends, Jesus can be pinned down on a calendar; he had a history and lived in a small-town community and a particular geography.

Have we ever thought what the gospel could look like in the places where we have been sent? Have we ever asked the locals what the good news means to them? Has our interaction with them brought us to what Latin Americans call a “hermeneutical suspicion”—

making us aware that our reading of the culture and even of the Bible may not be all that accurate nor universal?

Also, the incarnation means we come as servants, emptying ourselves of what power or privilege might look like in those places. It is not an accident that Jesus was born and lived among the lower classes; he was not seen as being loaded with resources. The entry of a foreign missionary in a community, by the mere artifacts he brings in—a car or motorcycle, appliances, camera, computer, and other gadgets—signals to the people that there is plenty more where he comes from and so raises undue expectations.

Jesus, as a human being, had to grow in his own self-understanding; his temptations in the wilderness was a testing of his self-identity, what he truly was, and how he understood his mission to be. He spent thirty years of his brief life just becoming a Jew; he was not over-eager to get out there and preach.

Similarly, the paper’s suggestion of not starting a project until after we have understood the people’s context of needs is sound. To know what will truly transform, we are to, first of all, be deeply embedded in where people are.

My impression of the way Jesus went about doing good was that he simply responded to whatever need there was in front of him. He was not programmatic, that is, he did not come to a village with a pre-set intervention, whether a feeding or a health program, not even an unduly universalized, one-size-fits-all kind of

Even when Jesus knew what people needed, he would ask, “What do you want me to do for you?” Poor people need to be made aware of what they have, that they do have a contribution to make towards their own well-being.

message. Apart from the Sermon on the Mount, his teachings were specific responses to people and events he encountered. He refused to be cornered into either/or propositions, like whether to pay taxes or not, or, in our day, the debate over whether evangelism or social action is priority. He simply responded where it hurt and raised people's questions and concerns to a new level of awareness as to what truly matters, opening a window to new arrangements of reality that the kingdom brings.

It is interesting that when faced with scarcity, Jesus asked, "What do you have?" And often, even when he knew what people needed, he would ask, "What do you want me to do for you?" Poor people need to be made aware of what they have, that they do have a contribution to make towards their own well-being. Those needing help will have to define for

themselves and articulate what they really want, and not simply follow the agenda of those who happen to have the funds.

What all this means is that partnerships must begin with local people who have a vision of what their church or community can be. Outsiders can only serve as an enabling environment and accompany them towards their dreams. This way, the relationship is founded on a shared concern and there are local champions to sustain the initiative long after the missionary is gone.

Work that belongs to the kingdom usually begins with a relationship, with some bond or connection with local people that soon develops into a shared vision and collaboration on what needs doing.

But often, what people call "partnership" is simply transactional. A mission agency

offers a local church funds to do its works of mercy. The church, in turn, does the work prescribed, but soon a patron-client relationship develops. As a disillusioned pastor told me, "The mission hires us as their employees and we do the work for them; all they do is to send in our reports to the funders and take pictures." As a result, the work is done only for as long as the funds last.

Exit strategies often fail when projects do not begin and end with the local people. The reality is that whether it is an NGO or a mission agency, it will always, at some point, terminate its presence. It is the people who will remain, and it is an index of the work of the Spirit in their lives that whatever work of the kingdom has begun will continue as the Spirit enables them.

MRT

Challenges of Partnerships and Some Guiding Principles

Peter Q

Peter and Mary have served in Asia since 1980. In addition to extensive involvement in the Nepali church, they trained farmers, designed curriculum, taught, and wrote books. They have overseen work in eleven Asian countries and continue to live and serve in Southeast Asia. In their current location, they have helped develop an international school, and continue to mentor and provide member care to local pastors and expatriate fieldworkers.

I want to thank Iljo de Keijzer for her excellent article regarding the "Challenges of Partnerships between Foreign Mission Agencies and the Filipino Church." After studying the article, I reached the conclusion that this paper is much more than a work regarding the "challenges of partnership." It also includes some important "guiding principles" that can be useful to many of us involved in partnerships. This is especially so for those of us who work cross-culturally in the South and Southeast Asia context.

My wife and I moved from the United States to Nepal in 1980. At that time, we found ourselves serving in a small, poor rural village. We worked as a veterinarian and teacher/educator, and thus obtained our visas from the Nepal government. We worked long hours and were also leading Bible

studies and prayer meetings, building relationships, and helping others to establish a small church (which today is flourishing and has planted a number of daughter churches). Not long after we arrived, we found ourselves dealing with many of the same challenges that Iljo de Keijzer faced, as discussed in her article. Perhaps you can also relate to some of these challenges:

- In spite of living what most westerners would describe as a very simple lifestyle, we realized that we were perceived as being wealthy, with unlimited access to finances. In fact, we really were "rich" compared to our neighbors and friends, and we really did have access to many resources that could help further the kingdom of God.

- We desired to help build the church and serve the poor, but we were new and inexperienced. How, and from whom, could we learn to help and serve—without causing problems and creating dependency, and without setting ourselves up like local "patrons" whom others would almost worship mechanically?
- How could we understand our local partners and their real needs and help them to understand us? How could we develop close personal relationships and learn from each other?
- How could we work together with local believers to make decisions regarding the use of available funds; for example, who really needs help and who doesn't?

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Building Relationships for Fruitful Partnerships

Jaap den Butter



Jaap and his wife Marieke are from the Netherlands and have served with OMF Mekong Minorities since 2002. For almost sixteen years, they lived in one of the CAN countries in the Mekong Region, where they worked with an NGO, while they focused on one of the UPGs in the area. Since 2018, they have been living in Chiang Mai, Thailand where they are now the Sector Leader of Mekong.

Many years ago, a colleague and mentor said to me: “If you keep working with the existing church, you will never see a biblical church movement among your target people group!”

I was upset about it. Is that not what we are all about? Partnering with the local church in order to further the kingdom? Has God not planted this local church in this place to use it for his glory? Why would I put this aside and just do my own thing?

Over the years, I have come to see what this colleague meant. It is not easy to fruitfully partner with local churches while pursuing the vision God has given us. During our years serving among one of the unreached peoples in the Mekong Region, we have seen relationships with local churches quickly go into meetings where the main topic is financial support for buildings. Hopes we had for the local church to fully come on board the vision of a Church Planting Movement among the unreached peoples of the area never really came to fulfilment in the way we had envisioned. On the other hand, we have seen personal relationships built on trust and mutual understanding become very fruitful in ministry among a people group.

I am thankful for Iljo de Keijzer’s clear analysis in her article about the different aspects of partnerships in the local context. It challenges us to learn from our mistakes and look for ways to partner well.

Without repeating everything de Keijzer has said in her article already, I would like to highlight a few things that caught my attention.

Partnership is mutual and relationships in partnership are important.

These two separate headings in her article stood out to me most. They seem to be open doors, but are so important.

We can say it easily that partnerships are mutual, but how often have we been in partnerships that are driven by our own agenda or by the agenda of (one of) the other partners? I think these two statements, the mutuality of partnership and the importance of relationships in partnerships are very much related to one another. I had to think of a phrase we use in the Leadership Matters Course: Meaningful relationships are built when we reveal ourselves to others and others reveal themselves to us.¹

A relationship leading to a fruitful partnership needs to be mutual. We, as foreign missionaries, need to reveal ourselves to our potential partners and I wonder sometimes if we are really good at it. We need to know our own distinctives and what we have to offer, but—maybe more importantly—we need to know what our needs are that could be met by our local partners.

In working towards a partnership, we need to spend more time listening to what the distinctives and needs of our potential local partner are. So, besides the importance of relationship in partnership and mutuality of the partnership, I would like to emphasize that we work towards equality in partnership, recognizing our own needs and the needs of our local partners and working together on equal ground towards meeting each other’s needs and, through that, meeting the needs of the communities we are serving.

Are we willing to be open and vulnerable towards our potential partners? That brings me to another highlight in de Keijzer’s article: the heart behind relationships. Let’s keep checking our motives in starting relationships. How often have we started a relationship with the idea that this story might look good in our newsletters? Or how this relationship may fit our goals and objectives? We may even think we know already what our potential partner or target group needs and have preset ideas on what a partnership should look like.

In what ways can we hold to our own insights and beliefs while being open and adapting to the vision and mission of a potential partner, empowering them to implement their ideas and plans in their own culturally sensitive way?

Are we initiating a relationship and a partnership focusing on our own needs and agenda or are we intentionally focusing on listening to the challenges, needs, dreams, visions, and goals of our potential partner? This can be a challenge when we have a strong vision and mission and a masterplan for our ministry. In what ways can we hold to our own insights and beliefs while

being open and adapting to the vision and mission of a potential partner, empowering them to implement their ideas and plans in their own culturally sensitive way? I would like to see more discussion in our organization on how we can do this well in our day-to-day mission practice. In what ways can we apply the guiding principles in Iljo de Keijzer's article and Pete Q's response?

I am looking forward to seeing more discussion on this topic. Let's strive towards meaningful relationships that lead to fruitful partnerships. **MRT**

¹ Leadership Matters Course, International Training Alliance, <https://wetrainleaders.org> (accessed 6 November 2021).

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- How could we help other expat workers respond appropriately to sudden, unexpected needs—without creating dependency? And, with respect to ongoing needs, how could we use our resources effectively—again without creating dependency?
- How could we examine our own hearts and willingly receive gifts as well as give freely to others?

We still work with local pastors who serve in rural areas and, these days, most of our pastor friends understand the outside world much more than they did forty years ago. In fact, some of them understand it better than we do! Most of them also understand our limitations with respect to finding funding for ministry and work. Even our local pastor friends are now often perceived by their rural brothers and sisters as being wealthy and having access to unlimited resources. In spite of the increased understanding of both expat missionaries and national pastors, together, we still see dependency developing; we are still learning to serve and work together more effectively; we still need to be able to regularly examine our hearts; and we still need to be able to both give and receive gifts from each other.

Even back in the early 1980s, a number of us younger missionaries were also beginning to see for ourselves the crucial role of

partnership in church planting and disciple-making. We saw partnership as a way of working together more effectively, and as an expression of the parts of the body of Christ working together. And we believed that strategic partnerships with the right people would make our work more effective and sustainable. The lessons we were learning were consistent with the points that Iljo de Keijzer makes in her article. If I may be so bold, I would call these “Guiding Principles for Partnership” and would summarize and build upon them as follows:

- Partnership is mutual. Both partners need to give and take. I, as an expat, need to be ready, willing, and happy to learn from my national partners. This includes engaging in dialogue that allows me to learn what their real needs are and what things they consider important.
- Partnership leads to empowerment. Local partners can become confident to make decisions and become leaders in their communities and I believe that this leads to sustainability.
- The importance of personal relationships, especially within the context of partnerships, cannot be overemphasized. As we look over our years of working within the national church, it seems that long-lasting change takes place in the context of relationships.

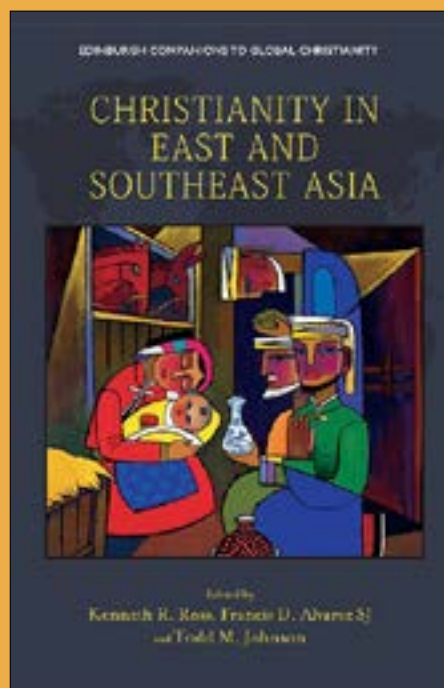
- Character is important, and as de Keijzer states, “the greatest problems in partnerships seem to be caused by character compromises.” But how do we teach character? Now, after forty years of dealing with this challenge, it seems to me that the best way to teach character is to model it. And when we do talk about it, it is often within the context of personal relationships that we are able to most effectively communicate.
- Regular evaluations were mentioned as a way to prevent dependency. I would add that regular evaluation is also important in the context of building strong partnerships. Even in situations where evaluations are feared and avoided by our partners, taking the time for personal reflection of our own roles, responsibilities, and actions can help us demonstrate accountability and the desire to work well with others.

In summary, I agree with de Keijzer that there are challenges involved in working with local partners. At the same time, I agree that there are steps (Guiding Principles) which, if followed, “will help us to do partnerships and projects well and that these may lead to indigenous mission movements in the Philippines” (and elsewhere). **MRT**

Christianity in East and Southeast Asia

Kenneth R. Ross, Francis D. Alvarez, and Todd M. Johnson, eds.
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1474451604.
568pp.

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Another version of this review was published in *Studies in World Christianity* 27, no. 2 (2021): 194–96.

This volume is the latest publication in the Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity series, which builds upon the success of the *Atlas of Global Christianity, 1910–2010*. It focuses on a region of the world in which Christianity, in the past fifty years, has been the fastest growing religion—increasing from five to twelve percent of the total population—while remaining a small segment of the population in the majority of countries.

Following an introductory section that provides a demographic profile of Christianity in the region and a preparatory essay, the book is divided into three major sections. The first is an analysis of Christianity within each country in the region. The second examines the origins and current strength of the major Christian traditions within East and South East Asia. And the third is a collection of ten essays on vital twenty-first century themes pertaining to Christianity in this part of the world.

The “Countries” and “Christian Traditions” sections are well researched, and the combination of text with data from the World Christian Database (WCD) makes each chapter a valuable resource for any student. The inclusion of three chapters on China is particularly helpful, given the size and diversity of Christianity within this nation, and given the new *modus vivendi* that all forms of Chinese Christianity are currently trying to negotiate with the Chinese state.

For this reviewer, “Key Themes” is the strongest section of the book. Each of these chapters provide the reader with genuinely compelling insights on how these themes are currently defining Christianity in this region in the twenty-first century. The chapter by Sebastian Kim entitled “Social and Political Context” is particularly good and reminds the reader that in every East or Southeast Asian nation, Christians have had to work out some kind of arrangement with state actors, sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully, in order to create public space for their presence and their message. No government in this part of the world has ever been indifferent to the place that religion plays in the life of its people.

There are some features of the book that niggle with this reviewer, particularly when it comes to the presentation of data. The data concerning Christianity in each country is presented in terms of the percentage each Christian

tradition contributes to the national population. This works well for nations that are largely mono-cultural, but a more nuanced presentation of the data would benefit our understanding of how Christianity is doing in more multi-cultural contexts. For instance, we are repeatedly told in the chapter on Myanmar that Christianity has grown virulently among the ethnic minority groups of that nation. Yet, because of the one-dimensional way in which the data is presented, we do not know what percentage of which of Myanmar’s ethnic minorities are Christian. All we know is that Christianity accounts for eight percent of the national population (146).

In addition, the established practice of dividing all non-Catholic and non-Orthodox Christians into Anglicans, Independents, Protestants, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals feels decidedly unsatisfactory in numerous places and are categories clearly ignored by some authors. For instance, Kang San Tan’s chapter on “Evangelicals” states that “Evangelicalism finds expression in the region through such denominations as Anglicans, Assemblies of God, Baptists, Methodist” (323), despite the fact that all of these groups are separated from Evangelicals within the WCD statistics. Tan also refers to the scandals that rocked the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul in 2014, as an example of “Evangelicals” behaving badly (324), while Julie Ma refers to the same church as a well-known “Pentecostal mega-church” in her chapter on Pentecostals and Charismatics (340).

Nevertheless, these are minor issues in what is an otherwise excellent publication in every department, and a text that will well serve the student of World Christianity at every level. This reviewer’s highlight from the book is the opening chapter by Francis D. Alvarez. Written in easy, uncomplicated prose, this first-rate introductory essay manages to distil the diversity, breadth, and faith commitment of Christianity within the region. Alvarez succeeds where many have tried and failed in the past by refusing to be an advocate for either the traditional or postcolonial ideology. He simply reminds his readers that “Christianity is not foreign to Asian Christians anymore.... Though with Western features, Asian Christianity need not be ashamed of the faith we have fathered or mothered” (19).