

WHAT DENOMINATIONAL LEADERS SHOULD KNOW BUT HAVE NEVER BEEN TOLD REGARDING INTERCULTURAL MINISTRIES

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Introduction

Personal Information

The presenters of this workshop have been involved in ethnic ministries in Asia and North America. Being of Chinese and Indian/Malaysian descents, we have worked with Caucasians in denominational and trans-denominational contexts at local and national levels. The content of this workshop is based on personal experience and co-operative research.

Purposes/Objectives of the Workshop

This workshop is conducted for the purpose of providing “North American Caucasian” (NAC) denominational leaders with information and insights into what they need to hear from their ethnic (i.e. non-Caucasian) co-workers but have never been told.

A questionnaire (see Appendix) with fifteen open-ended questions was designed and distributed to dozens of ethnic workers for their input. The presenters then incorporated the result of the survey into this ethnographic³ study presented here from an “emic”⁴ perspective.

Personnel

An ethnic worker is trained in his own cultural context to conform and comply with the “group” which is the core of decision and judgement for its members (see Table 1). When coming into contact with the Caucasian “self” at the beginning stage of intercultural interaction, he may find it enviable to have the freedom and be **fascinated** by the type of self-determination and self-confidence a Caucasian “self” can enjoy. However, upon closer examination and longer interaction, he may be **frustrated** and later find it offensive. Unless he is allowed and wants to assimilate into the Caucasian way, he will **flee** from the “egoistic Caucasian” and isolate himself from further interaction or run the “risk” of being assimilated to the “undesirable” trait (according to his own cultural heritage). He may want to **fight** against Caucasian influence and **find** ethnic identity and psychological security by retreating to interact with members of similar ethnic background only (some would call this “ghetto” mentality). His own cultural upbringing

will prohibit him from being **frank** to the Caucasian about his own negative feeling and **forthright** of his criticism of the Caucasian way. Consequently, there are things that denominational leaders should know but have never been told from an “emic” perspective regarding intercultural ministry.

An ethnic worker (including most of those from European cultures) is generally required to use the formal way to address his colleagues, especially his superior and members of the opposite sex. He feels very uncomfortable when a NAG calls him by his first name. When NACs insisted on him to conform to the first-name basis of address, he feels uneasy and awkward. It would be worse if his NAC superior is the one insisting it. According to his own cultural norm, he should follow the instruction of his superior. Yet he finds it habitually hard to change to the NAC way and personally he is afraid that his peers will accuse him of being disrespectful to his superior, a terrible misconduct of a “spiritual servant” in the ministry.

Occasionally, when the first lady of the denomination happens to be dressing casually, laughing out heartily and loudly, cracking jokes informally, the ethnic worker will find that to be very unbecoming and embarrassing.

An ethnic worker is most grateful to the many kind deeds of NAC colleagues toward him and his family, as in the case of a newly arrived Vietnamese pastor from a refugee camp. He surely can use the financial and material assistance provided by NAC. However, at the same time he feels being trapped to become a “bond servant” with a life time obligation to pay back his indebtedness to the NAG. Later when he sees the blatant cultural misconduct of NAC within the context of Vietnamese community, he would not dare to tell the NAC the truth to help prevent future major blunder the NAC may later commit. When the NAC had done something grossly wrong in the Vietnamese context, the NAC would blame the Vietnamese pastor for not telling the truth. (See Table 1)

Policy

Several illustrations from **Table 2** will be selectively presented in terms of policy.

The policy of leadership selection differs among NAC is very different from that of other ethnic groups. NACs usually operate on objective criteria in the selection and promotion of leaders, such as academic qualification, success in membership growth and budgetary increase. Ethnic ways are less scientific: personal and spiritual character, relational skill, personal integrity and reputation. Similarly, ethnic workers tend to place more focus on the intangible way of reward such as honor and shame.

Ethnic workers cannot understand and will not readily conform to the NAC’s insistence / practice of the use of structured meeting, scheduled appointment, specific job description, detailed programming and budgeting, setting short- and long-term goals, etc. They see that as the way of the world thus “unspiritual.” They think **pastoring** (or any other form of Christian ministry) is like **parenting**: spontaneous, intensive, personal, informal and unstructured. They despise the NAC’s way as merely “professional” and not spiritual.

Ethnic workers as conforming to the world, and degrading to impersonal deem professionalism in ministry enterprising. They decry NAC’s emphasis on “doing” as no more like ‘Martha’s busy **doing for the Lord**’ and they desire ‘Mary’s service of **being with the Lord.**’
 Compartmentalizing life to “**profession** in ministry” and ‘privatize **personal** life’ is regarded as hypocritical and Pharisaic. There is the priority of a person’s character over career, personhood over performance/productivity, relation over function, godliness/ graciousness over giftedness, etc; yet they insist on the **unity** of these qualities

Table 1 - THINGS RELATED TO PERSONNEL

AREA	CAUCASIAN: <i>PERCEPTION/ CONCEPTION/ OPERATION</i>	NON-CAUCASIAN: <i>FASCINATION / FRUSTRATION</i>
PERSONAL	‘self’: the core of decision & judgement	‘Caucasian ‘self’ provides freedom but is childish & narcissist”
	individualism	Fascinated by the option to be free from pressure to conform & comply in the old
	‘group’’: perceived as a collection of individuals	Individuality & strength found in group
INTERPERSONAL	informality & friendliness	Friendship helpful in coping with loneliness in a strange land yet feel uncomfortable with too much informality
	egalitarian	Hierarchy & status should be kept
	expressive & direct	Seemed too childish & rude
	benevolent kind & caring	Appreciated but fearful to be indebted and later can’t reciprocate
	‘west is the best”	feels inferior when encountering ethnocentrism or laments ‘racism”
PROFESSIONAL	professional & not to be personal	cold & impersonal; disregard personal ties/feeling
	emphasizes giftedness & specialization	too “worldly” and secular

The focus of this discussion is not on which orientation or mentality is more scriptural/spiritual. It only describes the differences between the two systems and reports the opinion and sentiment from the ethnic worker’s perspective.

Table 2- THINGS RELATED TO POLICY

AREA	CAUCASIAN: CONCEPTION/ PERCEPTION/ OPERATION	NON-CAUCASIAN: FASCINATION / FRUSTRATION
LEADERSHIP	Defined by objective criteria	defined by non-quantifiable criteria
	earn by productivity; promotion according to performance	ascribed regardless of performance or productivity
	"He who foots the bill has the most say"	"He who is older/wiser has the most say"
RULES	good & desirable, e.g. "conflict of interest" guideline	too restrictive; flexibility accorded to privileged individuals & circumstances
	ruled by majority democratically with open debate	ruled by consensus in hierarchical system; prefer dialogue and discussion
REWARD	to success: based on productivity & performance	to those who are good at SIR "smooth inter-personal relationship"
	in tangible way	intangible ways: positive - honor, negative - shame
ADMINISTRATION & OPERATION	Departmentalize Congregation & denomination.	Nurturing solidarity of group (e.g. family & kin) by group activity
	Compartmentalize life into public & private, professional & personal	Fusing of public & private, personal & professional, aspects of life
	Prefer pragmatic ("how to"): doing & program	Prefer politics ("with Whom"): being & people
	Encourage competition leading to improvement & progress	Competition strains relationship, causes conflict & loss of face; should be replaced by cooperation
	Time-orientation for punctuality & program	Event-orientation when the right people are all there; no event should be ruled by the clock
	Planning & programming with measurable goal, quantifiable results, structured activity, job description, budget, etc.	"planning & programming are unspiritual & worldly, play by ear and just let things be"
	"loyalty to my organization supersedes personal ties"	"loyalty to my family & friend rules & regulations are too restrictive"
	"if I can make the most impact & contribute to change, believe me, I will do it"	"if a denomination can get you for cheap, believe me, they will do it"
	Progressive reduction scale in subsidy will lead to desirable self-reliance"	"it should not be imposed uniformly, pending on the individuals involved and the circumstances"
	"ethnics (Asians & Haitians, etc.) are all alike and all rules are applicable to all of them"	"can't they see that North Vietnamese are different from South Vietnamese?" "I am not Japanese; I am Chinese"
"he who foots the bill has the most say"	"he who is male/old/leader has the most say"	

Process

In the process of intercultural ministry, ethnic workers with non-Christian background tend to treasure the shared Christian identity with ethnic co-workers, even those of a different denomination. In the process of interacting with ethnic co-workers of other denominations, they

find the old cultural identity and the newfound Christian identity (“the new self”) to be stronger and more important than that of the denomination’s (NAC’s “us” in terms of voluntary/contractual denominational ties). Thus they feel the denominational leader/administrator to be parochially too denominational.

Their attitude/sentiment is similar to that of the overseas missionaries who are happy to work closely with fellow missionaries of other mission boards or denominations, especially with those who come from the same country/culture or speak the same language. They also see the insistence of mission administrator on denominational demarcation or division to be arbitrary and unspiritual.

In the process of intercultural ministry, ethnic workers have much hesitation in conforming to the NAC’s orientation towards task, time, efforts, efficiency and change (see Table 3 below). These cultural traits are not shared by ethnic workers who do not have the background in the cultural history of technological revolution, Protestant/puritan ethic, frontier development, etc. They may not feel comfortable to be expressively critical of the NAC’s way of operating, the NAC denominational leaders should know the difference and appreciate their apprehension to change and the apathy to the NAC’s challenge to be “fruitful” (re: “productive”, “efficient”) for the Lord.

During the process of interacting with one and other, ethnic workers take the NAC’s every move personally and in the wrong way, e.g. public debate as personal attack, raising question as personal- challenge, voting openly as public pressure on individuals, eye-contact as showing personal anger/threat, etc. On the other hand, they convert/interpret everything into personal matters: e.g. gifts and favors are ways and means to cultivate and reinforce relations, decision is to be made by consensus of persons who are willing to give up personal interest/opinion for the sake of the solidarity of the group.

Appointment/promotion to desirable positions is not based on objective criteria or institutional rule but personal preference based on relationship. They see no wrong in “patronage” appointment and no need for “conflict of interest” guideline. The relational network is more important than personal performance/productivity or planned program (e.g. church planting). Of course, the ethnic worker will not tell this to the NAC’s face; after all there is no personal bond or relational base to enable him to do so. (see **Table 3** below).

Table 3

AREA	CAUCASIAN: PERCEPTION/ CONCEPTION/ OPERATION	NON-CAUCASIAN: FASCINATION / FRUSTRATION
SELF	independent & autonomous	“the Caucasian ‘self’ is fascinating from distance but fearful when near”
	“us” defined by association of personal choice based on interest & achievement	“us” defined by involuntary grouping, e.g. family, gender, etc.
OPERATION	Task-oriented	“too much concern for efficiency will turn you into an impersonal bureaucrat”
	Means-oriented	“that’s dehumanizing”
	effort-optimism: “if there is a will; there is a way	Relation-optimism: “if you have the right relationship/connection; there is a way.” There is an obsession for harmony & honor.
	prefer change (future = bright & progressive)	“avoid change if at all possible because it is risky” (future = uncertainty & fear)
	time-conscious for punctuality & program	People-conscious for the privileged to ensure the event is good regardless of the time
	analytical/critical understanding will bring improvement & progress	Relational approach with smooth handling is the way to ensure harmony & peace
INTERACTION	Eye-contact: = honesty & sincerity	Avoid eye-contact to show respect; especially when addressing members of the opposite sex
	objective social interaction	“how dare you attack my idea & oppose me
	church planting: budget, planning & program	“start nothing unless the right persons & the right network are in place”
	“gift -giving to leader in high position is bribery”	“gifts & favors are necessary to reinforce relationship”
	decision-making: counting votes of individuals	“a leader should be able to read the general sentiment of the group & nurture consensus”
	conflict resolution: by confrontation & direct settlement	avoid conflict at all cost; otherwise use subtle communication & mediator

Conclusion

There are many positive examples of successful cooperation between ethnic workers and NACs. There are more reasons for better cooperation among Christians of different ethnic backgrounds: “one body.. one hope, one Lord, one faith..’) and we are “to strive to maintain the unity...” (Eph 4:1-7). We just have to be ethnically better informed, culturally more sensitive, ministerially more cooperative to show the world the true color of our love for one another (John 13:34-35) regardless of the color of our skin or the label of our denominations.

Appendix - INTERCULTURAL MINISTRIES QUESTIONNAIRE

The following TOPICS and SUB-TOPICS are provided to trigger your thoughts on various aspects of church planting and pastoral ministries among ethnic groups. The list is not exhaustive. Feel free to express your experiences and views on whichever is applicable to you. Use extra paper if you need to. Your input on any or all of this is very important. THANK YOU!

AWARENESS (cultural, denominational, personal struggles, etc.)

EXPECTATIONS (denominational, family, personal, energy level, ministry time, productivity, success, etc.)

FINANCES (ministry expenses, rental, personal salary, etc.)

DENOMINATION (attitudes, communication, collegial feedback, fairness, freedom, supervision, leadership style, polity support, time line for growth, etc.)

LEADERSHIP (clergy, layperson, maturity, personal, style, etc.)

PREPARATION (community research, ministerial training, etc.)

STRATEGY/METHODS (creativity, denominational, personal, etc.)

SUPPORT (colleagues in ministry, family, financial, moral, personnel, struggles or crises, etc.)

SUPERVISION (degree of, frequency, quality, written report, etc.)

RESOURCES (advertising, evangelistic tracts, finances, stationery media, nurturing materials, personnel, business cards, etc.)

Before I started this ministry I wish somebody had told me the following:

The challenges/barriers/problems in intercultural ministries are:

The discouragements in intercultural ministries are:

The joys/rewards of intercultural ministries are:

Other comments (if any):

END NOTES:

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³ Ethnography is a descriptive study of a particular culture.

⁴ Social scientist such as Kenneth Pike and James Spradley use the "emic" (insider' s perspective) as compared to the "etic" (outsider' s perspective) in research strategy. The presenters are both of

non-Caucasian background with first-hand experience personally and have gathered inputs from ethnic co-workers in the survey

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