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From the Margins to the Centre

The Diaspora Effect

A Collection of Essays to Celebrate
the 20th Anniversary of the Tyndale Intercultural Ministry
Centre

*Edited by Michael Krause
with
Narry Santos and Robert Cousins*

From the Margins to the Centre: The Diaspora Effect

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CHAPTER 8

Mission To, Through And Beyond The Diaspora

Rev. Dr. Timothy Li-Hui Tang

The Monkey and the Fish

A typhoon had temporarily stranded a monkey on an island. In a secure, protected place on the shore, while waiting for the raging waters to recede, he spotted a fish swimming against the current. It seemed obvious to the monkey that the fish was struggling and in need of assistance. Being of kind heart, the monkey resolved to help the fish.

A tree precariously dangled over the spot where the fish seemed to be struggling. At considerable risk to himself, the monkey moved far out on a limb, reached down and snatched the fish from the threatening waters. Immediately scurrying back to the safety of his shelter, he carefully laid the fish on dry ground. For a few moments the fish showed excitement, but soon settled into a peaceful rest. Joy and satisfaction swelled inside the monkey. He had successfully helped another creature. (Gibbons 2009)

In this ancient parable, the monkey believed he helped and saved the fish. Yet for anyone who possesses even a rudimentary understanding of water creatures, they will know that he did exactly the opposite: he killed the fish. The monkey was not in his own home and was dealing with a different animal. However, he continued to work within his own framework of life and his ignorance persisted even after the fish died. It was “obvious” that the fish was struggling and needed help. It was his “kind heart” which prompted the monkey to act out and even put himself in harm’s way to rescue the fish. It was, however, his lack of knowledge and uninformed assumptions that ultimately led to the fish’s demise.

For those in the Christian mission field, the lesson is not new. The golden rule of “treat others as you would have them treat you” has been replaced by what is often known as, the platinum rule: “treat others as

they *want* to be treated.” This presumes that one cannot take for granted what may seem “obvious” and that “kind hearts” and generosity are not enough. In fact, knowing local symbols and traditions are required to effectively minister according to the perspective of the other instead of oneself.

For the ethnic church in North America this is also not entirely new. Operating ministries that not only speak the heart language of new immigrants, but also utilize practices that are representative of their own values, are indispensable. Indeed, the recent rise of ethnic evangelical churches, as vibrant communities of faith, are a testimony to this (Rah 2009, 14). In many cases, they represent the largest churches in some denominations and are in direct contrast to the many local evangelical churches that seem to be moving in an opposite direction (Rah 2009, 11). These churches have preserved, not only the language, but also the cultural practices of their homeland. In many cases, they have also become significant contributors in their local communities.

As these ministries have grown, the same principles continue to be attempted. In the Chinese church in North America, ministering to the second generation has meant in many cases, designing ministries and recruiting leaders that are able to resonate with an English-speaking group. Many churches have therefore employed staff and leaders who are fluent in English, and well versed in relevant trends, in order to effectively minister to the next generation (Fong 1999, 8). Sadly, ensuring that young people stay in the church and embrace a Christian faith has shown to be much more complicated than simply employing people who speak English (Lee 1996, 51). Ethnic churches are also baffled at times why these ministries fail to attract other English-speaking individuals in their neighbourhoods, even though they seemingly share the same language. Perhaps lessons from the *Monkey and the Fish* have not been fully understood.

Upon closer examination, the problems go beyond simply “outreach” endeavours and next-generation ministries. Inside the church, the leadership of the different language congregations shows only a superficial continuity; attempting to remain as one church has not been without its complications. Working across the generations, languages, and ultimately between cultures has developed considerable strain, both explicitly and implicitly. Isolation and conflict between ministries is extremely common. Even senior pastors and leaders, who

have studied in North America and are fluent in English, seem to miss the mark, when attempting to work in sync with their English counterparts and are confusingly disappointed over and over again.

In 1996, Christianity Today published an article by Helen Lee called the *Silent Exodus* (Lee 1996, 50-53). This brought to the forefront a situation that had been quietly occurring in many Asian churches. The revelation was that the majority of their second and third generation young adults were finding these very churches “irrelevant, culturally stifling, and ill equipped to develop them spiritually for life” (Lee 1996, 50). Sadly, Lee outlines that many of these young people are not simply leaving their culturally based churches for Anglo churches but leaving their faith all together. Lee does a good job of outlining not simply the disparity between the overseas-born and the American-born generations, but also the nuanced differences between the Japanese, Korean, and Chinese communities, respectively. This can be attributed to their unique immigration histories and some cultural variations that exist.

Contrary to most multicultural church paradigms, Asian churches have moved towards a parallel type approach, where the different language and ethnic groups have separate ministries under the same roof. More developed communities have separate worship services, small group, and fellowship times and – depending on the church – separate children and youth ministries. For many of these pastors and leaders, it is easy to see that the complication of being both responsible for an entire congregation, with its own unique cultural needs, and serving within – and at most times under – another cultural group, can be both challenging and filled with conflict. Hoover Wong describes these as issues of “housing,” and outlines some of the typical aggregate-type relationships that exist in Chinese churches. Although he focuses on the Chinese church, this is typical of most growing Asian churches, though there is little documentation of this. Wong’s attempt to categorize the general structure of various churches is nevertheless very useful (Wong 1998). Addressing the church as a house with multiple families and outlining key points of tension between the congregations is also constructive. How to allocate building resources, their management and maintenance, questions of development, and how things are valued, are all enormous parts of the disparity between cultures.

Some North-American-born leaders have sensed a calling to leave the ethnic bonds of the first generation immigrant church. Vibrant

examples, like Evergreen Baptist Church in Los Angeles and Newsong Church in Santa Ana are simply the tip of the iceberg. In fact, some of these leaders have made a strong case for branching out autonomously, using the same homogeneous principle that the original ethnic church based its motivations on (Fong 1999, 8). Others, however, have continued to strive for harmony and sought to share common resources in a bilingual and bicultural fashion. Indeed, the most common expression observed in the Chinese church – given the limited resources, a deep-seated desire to maintain unity, and strong theological convictions (Wong 1995) – is arguably the parallel church.

In 2001, Justin Der at Stanford University, researched a cross sampling of 64 pastors and leaders, who were either presently in the Chinese church, or who had previously served on the staff of a Chinese congregation. He inquired about the reasons why so many English-speaking leaders of Chinese churches were not only leaving the pastorate in these churches, but were also leaving their faith. He also sought to find input from first-generation ethnic leaders and pastors. A significant commonality was found among all of the American-born Chinese pastors and staff members, with regard to dropout and discouragement of leaders (Der 2001, 8).

Perhaps most significant was the inconsistency of responses between these American-born leaders and their first-generation immigrant counterparts. For all of the English-speaking leaders, conflict with the first-generation leadership team was always rated as a major cause of the dropout/discouragement; whereas, none of the first-generation leaders gave this factor a high rating. In contrast, these immigrant leaders attributed their dropout/discouragement to shortcomings within the American-born leaders. Der encourages a better awareness of this divergence and an increase in constructive communication, as essential for any type of resolution to come about (Der 2001, 9). In his brief concluding remarks, Der suggests that churches need a much “better understanding of the cultural differences involved” (Der 2001, 16).

Paul Wang produced a study from two churches in the greater Vancouver area in Canada, closely examining the conflict between the cultures (Wang 2003). His findings showed cultural avoidance tactics and strained family dynamics were major causes of discord. Similar to Der, his recommendations encouraged enhanced leadership development in the church overall.

Cecilia Yau briefly outlines the complexity of the issue. In a Chinese Christian Mission compilation called *A Winning Combination*, Yau brings together various leaders and writers from both American and overseas-born Chinese backgrounds (Yau 1986). The terms ABC and OBC are used to represent the two groups. A detailed reading of the various chapters and articles hints at the volatile tension that exists between these communities – a tension that circles around *identity, culture, language, orientation, and church-ministry*. Of particular interest are the concluding petitions by both Hoover Wong and Wally Yew that move beyond the rift between the cultures to refocus efforts outward on evangelism and outreach.

I say this because this penchant is already being displayed by ABC congregations with advanced degrees of autonomy. I fear the ABC church, at its full emergence, will be too much the provincial clone of its parent church. Looking inward in terms of survival and stability may well result in evangelism remaining a hostage in the ABC camp. (Wong 1986, 170.)

Though predating Der and Wang's work by a good 15 years, it is fascinating to find the desire to move beyond simple conflict resolution these authors all reflect. Though Yau's book focuses on the inward struggle of the Chinese church, his reminder to look outward hints at the complexity of doing so – especially given the cultural mosaic that also surrounds these churches.

For the Cantonese churches in Toronto, changes in immigration have also presented new challenges. Emerging Mandarin immigration now overshadows a once booming Cantonese population. New ministries, therefore, continue to surface with the same indigenous principles of adopting Mandarin language, practice, and leadership. Unfortunately, the challenge of these differing ministries working together and co-existing as one church has proven to be overwhelming. These churches are not simply single churches with multiple congregations, but “aggregate” communities made up of several unique, divergent parts making up a whole. Conflicts, church splits, ministries that are completely separate from each other, and congregants leaving the church altogether, are unfortunately all too common. Carlson writes:

Finding the basis for unity in a bilingual Chinese church is more complicated because there is not just one cultural center, but two or more. To some extent, the more “Chinese” the church is the more comfortable it is for recent immigrants. But if it is more “American” it is more comfortable for the second generation. This inevitably creates a certain tension. But the level of tension depends on how much the two congregations attempt to be integrated. For both congregations to be effective, they each need to have their own distinctives. But the more separate they become, the more concern there is about the unity of the church. (Carlson 2008, 102.)

From a superficial perspective, the underlying complexity is often overlooked, as the different groups usually look racially the same. Similar skin colour, hair, and perhaps even much of the language, is shared and overlaps. However, ethnic and cultural diversity needs clearer distinctions as, conversely, communities with differing races can actually end up with the same cultural ethos.

Some have examined the experiences of individual pastors (Der 2001, 12), while others have pointed to structural and governance questions for a resolution (Lee 2003). Even with translation and different leaders, who can speak multiple languages, emotions can run high and misunderstanding and miscommunication often continue to permeate. It would seem, that even with the best intentions and kind hearts, there remains something that is not so *obvious*. Indeed, one wonders if the story of the *Monkey and the Fish* is closer to reality than a simple fairy tale.

Aggregate Incubators

While Canada as a whole advertises its great “multiculturalism,” the reality is that ethnicities and cultural groups still continue to gather in somewhat isolated communities and neighbourhoods. Despite the greatest of urban planning strategies, cultural and language bonds are often too resilient. Even organizations that seem to have a multinational population with several diverse racial components, in actuality, often default to monocultural practice and values. This can be seen in many European Canadian churches, which have grown in diversity, by attracting people of different ethnic groups and skin colour. Yet, their celebration of diversity is precisely that – one that is only skin deep. Indeed, if distinctive cultural groups were actually coming together,

there would inevitably be conflict and friction, as values and perceptions collide through conflict and friction, like that in the aggregate, Chinese multicultural church.

Is this an argument *for* conflict and friction? Most definitely not. But, what if these places of disunity and conflict were not communities of anguish, but opportunities for growth and development? If harnessed correctly, could these seemingly incompatible aggregate communities – those we find so often in the Chinese church – actually be incubators for leadership development? Can we nurture incubators that allow for consistent cross-cultural and intercultural contact? For any real growth to occur in almost any field, cognitive learning needs to be coupled with experience and praxis. Could these colliding cultures of faith provide an opportunity for increased practical and experiential learning, growth, and development? For if leaders and members of these truly multicultural churches actually learn the skills and vocabulary of intercultural leadership, could they then not become effective witnesses to an ever diversifying global diaspora? For Chinese aggregate churches, because of the high expectations placed on church members and leaders to participate in church activities, there are often daily opportunities to test leadership values, collective versus individualistic perspectives in programming, and long-term versus short-term orientations towards accessing building resources.

Leadership & Culture

Perhaps, at the heart of the issue are leadership and one's understanding of culture. Geert Hofstede, in his book *Software of the Mind*, would argue that our fundamental core values – which are formed and programmed during our early years of childhood – produce drastic differences. Hofstede outlines the core differences as fundamental dimensions, which can be measured within each cultural group. These 6 dimensions involve *power distance*, *individualism*, *uncertainty avoidance*, *masculinity*, *long-term orientation*, and *indulgence indexes* (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov 2010). Of course, there are other various dimensions and constructs to identify the behaviours of different cultural groups, but the bottom line remains the same; at some fundamental level, depending on the cultural and people group, one's core values will vary.

When leading differing cultures as they come together, any one of these aspects can have a huge impact. If, for example, two leaders have

contrasting values in the area of *power distance*, verbal language is the least of their concerns, as they attempt to collaborate and cooperate. High power-distance individuals will tend to accept greater disparities in hierarchy, whereas those on the lower end of the continuum will do all they can to work towards an equality of authority and demand justification for anything less. For a leader that places a high value on *individualism*, a loose social network is expected. Working with leaders, who don't value individualism as greatly and hold more strongly to the value of *collectivism*, may cause major issues in programming and expectations. While these differences are not impossible to overcome, becoming aware of these cultural differences and the diverse dimensions yields immense impact.

These differing continuums explain why so many messages and communications are not only misunderstood, but are at times offensive and disrespectful to other cultural groups. Missionaries in a foreign country must focus on culturally *specific* study and research. But in the Canadian context of global mobility resulting in multicultural teams, congregations and neighborhoods, *specific* cultural research is far too limiting; instead, *general* cultural skills and ability become essential. For a person leading a group, this is invaluable; for leaders relating one to another, this is absolutely indispensable.

In a general sense, these skills and abilities between cultures are referred to as "intercultural competence." Fantini describes this as "a complex set of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (Fantini 2006, 12). Beyond the term intercultural competence, a wide variety of terms are also used in a quite similar manner. These include *intercultural communicative competence*, *transcultural communication*, *cross-cultural adaptation*, and *intercultural sensitivity*, among others. Over the last 10 to 20 years, several frameworks have been used in various ways, focusing on very different aspects of intercultural competency (Sinicrope, Norris, & Watanabe 2007, 8). One of the most prominent and widely used is the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), initially developed by Milton Bennett (Bennett 2004, 62).

Bennett writes about intercultural competence as a movement from *ethnocentrism* to *ethnorelativism*. Significant observation and study resulted in creating his DMIS, which describes a broad theoretical framework through which an individual can grow (Bennett 2004, 62).

Ethnocentrism can be loosely defined as one's own culture being "central to reality," while in broad terms those in *ethnorelativism* see the experience of one's own culture as simply one particular organization of reality among many options – each just as credible and viable as the other. Bennett describes this development as a change in orientation:

Each orientation of the DMIS is indicative of a particular worldview structure, with certain kinds of cognition, affect, and behavior vis-à-vis cultural difference typically associated with each configuration. It is important to note that the DMIS is not predominately a description of cognition, affect, or behavior. Rather, it is a model for how the assumed underlying worldview moves from an ethnocentric to a more ethnorelative condition, thus generating greater intercultural sensitivity and the potential for more intercultural competence. Changes in knowledge, attitudes, or skills are taken as manifestations of changes in the underlying worldview. (Bennett 2004, 75.)

Advancing along the continuum is primarily based on the supposition that continued contact with cultural differences creates strain on one's personal orientation. Therefore, greater experience with intentional and guided reflection aids an individual to move from one stage to the next. Bennett's original model consisted of six stages (three *ethnocentric* and three *ethnorelative*). A general outline of this model can be seen in Figure 1.

| ETHNOCENTRIC STAGES | ETHNORELATIVE STAGES |
|---------------------|----------------------|
| Denial | Acceptance |
| Defence | Adaptation |
| Minimization | Integration |

Figure 1: Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

It should be obvious that developing intercultural sensitivity or competency is more than a simple comprehension of stages and

models. Indeed, this whole field of intercultural development involves, in its simplest terms, a combination of cognitive, behavioural, and affective proficiencies that need to be nurtured and trained over time and with intentional guidance. Moving individuals from ethnocentric mindsets to those of the ethnorelative stages, involves self-awareness, breaking down inherent prejudices and stereotypes, and examining systemic influences that leaders are immersed in. Over the years, professional development outside of the church has necessitated this type of examination and many have benefited from tools like the Intercultural Development Inventory - based on the DMIS - to assess and inform student-based curriculum, to effectively foster cross-cultural dexterities and skills.

What if the church, could utilize these tools and models to develop leaders - not simply to resolve conflict, but to further God's kingdom "to the ends of the earth"? What if pastors of different cultural backgrounds and language went beyond merely exchanging pleasantries and committed themselves to learning intercultural competencies? What if lay leaders and congregants saw their disagreements as opportunities for cultural exchange and awareness? What if outreach teams continued to embrace cross-cultural sensitivity training, in order to learn about their new neighbours and emerging neighbourhoods? What if the senior pastor or leader of a local church saw themselves not simply as protectors of their culturally perceived truth but as intercultural catalysts, inspired by Abraham, Moses or Paul - biblical mentors, who themselves spent their lives journeying to the cultural awareness of the "other" and of themselves?

To, Through and Beyond

In recent years, the term "diaspora" has been used to describe the global movement of people. This is an ever-increasing phenomenon due to both voluntary and involuntary migrations. Whether refugees, who have been forced out of their homeland, or international students, who are looking for foreign expertise and education, to families migrating for work, there is no doubt that more and more people groups are finding themselves permanently settled in foreign countries.

Another phrase used to describe the different facets of Christian ministry to the diaspora has been "to, through, and beyond." "To" describes ministry and outreach to people who are on the move;

“through”, denotes the capacity of the gospel to be transmitted through native speakers of diaspora people groups; and finally, “beyond” encompasses the Christian witness going full circle, where we find cultural groups reaching beyond their own likeness and ethnicity to impact others with the gospel.

In many ways, the Chinese aggregate church embodies all three of these dimensions. In Canada, many Cantonese believers came to know Christ through student ministries. They have obviously been successful in reaching out “to” others like themselves – diaspora peoples in a foreign land. The continued work of the Mandarin ministry at this point – especially given the continued immigration of Mandarin-speaking people to Canada – furthers the need for “through” ministry models. The English congregations and members – who themselves are arguable 1.5 generation or bicultural because of their close ties to the first-generation immigrants – represent the hunger and desire to reach “beyond” to new diaspora groups and ethnicities.

Through intentional intercultural assessment, development and training (which the TIM Centre has been committed to doing), the case has been presented that the Chinese aggregate church – and other communities like it – can become incubators for missional ministry. With the global movement of people not slowing down, this could be the time for us to truly learn the lessons of the Monkey and the Fish and be more than simply kind hearts.

Reflection Questions

1. Tang quotes Justin Der’s conclusion from the study of American-born leaders and their first-generation counterparts, “Churches need a much better understanding of the cultural differences involved.” In your opinion, how can such better understanding happen?
2. Tang also notes, “Differing ministries working together and co-existing as one church has proven to be overwhelming.” In what ways is this “overwhelming” ministry seen in some church contexts?

3. This chapter lists the six fundamental dimensions of core value differences (power distance; individualism; uncertainty avoidance; masculinity; long-term orientation; indulgence indexes). Which one of the six do you consider as a critical core difference? Why so?
4. How valuable is intercultural competence in navigating cultural differences among different ethnic groups in churches?

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Rev. Dr. Timothy Tang was born in Toronto where he now lives with his wife and three children. He has been the lead English pastor at the East Toronto Chinese Baptist Church since 2001. Although Tim planned a career in healthcare, God called him to full-time ministry during a short term mission trip to Asia in 1996. After completing his M.Div. in Youth and Family Ministry at Tyndale Seminary, he went on to complete the Arrow Leadership emerging leaders program. Tim has also recently completed a

Doctor of Ministry at Gordon-Conwell Seminary focusing on developing intercultural leaders. Since 2016, Tim has also served as the associate director of the Intercultural Ministries Centre at Tyndale and continues to serve both the church and community.