



WHAT IT MEANS TO ‘EMPOWER’

Someone said to me, “I’m not sure I like the word ‘empowering’, it seems to imply someone has the power and they are giving it away to others – isn’t that paternalistic and patronising?”

Global Interaction came into existence because pioneering Australian Baptists had a concern for the poorest, most marginalised, and least-reached overseas communities. This concern is still our focus today with our work in Asia, Africa and Outback Australia. Not only do these communities struggle with poverty, social issues and injustice, most important of all, they don’t know about Jesus and therefore are spiritually powerless and lost.

We believe our approach to mission should be incarnational and contextual. We are called to follow Jesus’ example to go and live within communities, to be His servants in those places. This requires intentionality, preparation and sacrifice, involving separation from family and friends, and financial hardship. We are called to present the good news in a way that is appropriate and understandable in that culture. Therefore we must first learn the language and study the customs, practices and beliefs of the community. **We must discern how God is moving in that place to reveal Himself in stories and practices that could be used to explain and illustrate the life of Jesus.**

Inevitably, as we immerse ourselves in the culture and make friends within the community, we become aware of physical as well as spiritual needs. We cannot ignore people who are hungry, unwell, persecuted, uneducated or unskilled. The needs of a community may be overwhelming, but we are called to live the Gospel in word and deed and seek ways to be the true friends of the community. These friendships must be based on respect, trust, compassion and honesty. **A very astute village elder once asked a cross-cultural worker, “Do you love me because you want me to be saved, or do you want me to be saved because you love me?”** We want our friends to know about Jesus because we love them.

We don’t believe in an extractionist model of mission. When someone comes to faith in Jesus, we believe we should encourage them to find ways to stay embedded in the community and culture. This enables them to continue to communicate with their family and friends and become evangelists in their own right and in their own way.

Equally, we don’t encourage dependency. We are aiming to help individuals and communities become self-reliant. We aim to localise our work as soon as possible and therefore avoid buildings, institutions and ministries that cannot operate without our ongoing involvement.

As time goes by, and a faith community develops, we must equip and encourage them to seek the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to discern their own unique identity as the body of Christ in that place. **We are not interested in creating a ‘franchise of Christendom’.** Instead, we trust God to reveal the appropriate way for believers to become leaders in their community in a sustainable and fruitful manner. After all, the faith communities that emerged in Israel, Rome, Greece and Turkey in the first century struggled with this same issue and each developed its own unique identity based on its culture. The faith communities that are emerging as a result of our work in Asia, Africa and Outback Australia aim to exist and multiply in their own environment in ways that we could never have imagined.

It’s only when this complete picture comes together – when our people have shared their faith, values and knowledge – that a powerless community begins to be transformed. This is God-given and not man-made and brings hope and maturity. **Therefore, ‘empowering’ is more than a word; to me it expresses the very essence of our approach to mission.**

IVAN JAMES AO, Chairperson of the Global Interaction Board, dispels the myths of what it means to empower others.

Pictures:

Papuan smiles

Ivan James AO
(photo: Meg Holt)

IVAN JAMES AO
Chairperson of the Board