



GLOBAL | INTERACTION

DISTINCTIVE WAYS OF FOLLOWING JESUS

By Grace Munro, Editor, in the *Vision* magazine, May 2006

Our goal in Global Interaction is to empower communities to develop their own distinctive ways of following Jesus

A key goal for Global Interaction staff who work with 'unreached' groups is to see people living in total allegiance to Jesus. The second aspect is encouraging such people to find ways of expressing their allegiance to Jesus "their way".

Have you ever visited an established church in Malawi or Zambia? Perhaps rural Thailand? Bangladesh or India? This scenario might describe your experience: even without understanding a word, you knew when to stand, sit, open the hymn book or close your eyes for prayer. A few aspects of the service felt unfamiliar but, on the whole, it all seemed "just like home". The people even used "our" hymns, albeit translated.

We thank God for the missionaries who preceded us. As a result of God's work through them, thousands, even millions, of people now experience a daily walk with Jesus and have eternal hope. In what follows, our awareness of our own capacity to get things wrong restrains us from criticising others who did what they believed to be best in their passion for telling others of Jesus.



In our communities and churches in Australia we are now more aware of the value of different cultures. We have begun to grasp that westerners have no greater claim on "rightness" than do people of other cultures. We are learning not to impose our ways on others. We are finding riches in other cultures that enhance our view of the Gospel.

At Global Interaction, with our passion to see people following Jesus, we want communities to develop their own distinctive ways of following him.





SIMILARITIES

In fifty years' time, what might be the similarities between groups just starting now, and our Australian churches or those already established through previous Australian Baptist work?

1. The groups, we believe, will be moving toward the Father, in company with Jesus, led by the Holy Spirit. As in our own churches, participants will be at various stages of the journey. Some will have lived as active servants of Jesus for 50 years, just like Pastor Sai in PNG. Others will have begun well, fallen, been picked up, and fallen again. Some will be just starting to explore what faith in Jesus might mean for them. Some will attend gatherings out of habit or curiosity, others out of a deep love for God. In terms of their spiritual journeys, these new groups will be very similar to our churches.
2. These "churches" will, like ours, be totally dependent on God's grace and empowerment. They will fail at times, and experience God's grace and forgiveness, just as we do.
3. Many of the participants, we trust, will be enthusiastically telling others about Jesus.
4. These churches, like ours, will reflect an amazing mix of human abilities and frailties and divine enabling and empowerment.

A key goal for Global Interaction work with "unreached" groups is to see people living in total allegiance to Jesus. That allegiance to Jesus, dependence on God, constant experience of God's forgiveness, and passion for introducing others to Jesus are key areas in which groups that are starting now are likely to be similar to our Australian churches in another 50 years.

DIFFERENCES



In almost every other way, we hope and pray that groups starting now will be very, very different from Australian churches. 50 years on, visitors will be inspired by the faith, worship and witness of such groups. But they will see that their life and ministry are quite





different from that of churches established through earlier mission work. The emerging communities of believers will be very much at home in their own cultures.

1. They are unlikely to use terms like “church” or “Christian”. These words carry Western cultural baggage. “Church” conjures up images of buildings and of forms of worship foreign to the cultures of the people we serve. “Christian” is a term that is misunderstood and even hated by some people whom we serve. For many, it speaks of western lifestyles, morals and attitudes rather than of a life-changing relationship with God. New believers will be encouraged to find relevant local words to describe their relationship with Jesus and their corporate life.

2. Each group, we trust, will have its own distinctive style of expressing its allegiance to Jesus. Each group will live, serve, worship and be Jesus’ witnesses in ways appropriate to their background and situation. They will not be clones of Aussie churches.

Just as our patterns of church life reflect our early religious and cultural roots, so the new groups are likely to reflect their background. For example, our Christmas is a “Christianisation” of an event originally associated with sun worship. Some churches established through Australian Baptist work have already adapted and transformed aspects of local culture. Australian Indigenous communities use, very effectively, cultural painting and dance to tell the gospel story. Leadership forms based on kin networks, so vitally important in indigenous culture, have brought new meaning for attendees at infant dedication and baptismal services.

Several people from previously “unreached” groups have come to faith recently (p.9). How will believer groups that grow around these people express their worship in the future? Will they sit, kneel, bow, stand or lie down when they pray? Will they close their eyes for prayer? Will they lift their hands heavenward, hold them together in the way Buddhists do, or use the variety of movements normally associated with Muslim prayer? The simple answer is that we have no idea. The groups need to find their own appropriate expressions for prayer.

Just as our values and church processes are closely linked with our cultural values and community processes, so these new groups will reflect their cultures. Our styles often reflect western individualism, materialism and age-based groupings. In other cultures, inter-generational and communal relationships are expressed very differently. These differences will be reflected in the corporate life of Jesus-followers.

In their particular contexts, believers will have challenging decisions to make under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to ensure that they are both honouring of God’s word and





sensitive to their cultures. Many believers live as part of communities where Jesus is barely known and where family and friends are committed to Buddhism, African traditional religions or Islam. At a family wedding or funeral service that incorporates religious aspects, where will they draw the line in the extent of their participation? We Aussies are unlikely to boycott the funeral or wedding of an atheist or agnostic family member, and they too will participate in community and family events. In those and other contexts, they will be light and salt for Jesus.

How will they dress? What will they eat? What terminology will they use to express their faith? What Biblical stories will they gravitate to? How will they celebrate the Lord's Supper? We do not know. The believers, right from the outset, are being encouraged to "develop their own distinctive ways of following Jesus" as they reflect on the Bible under the Spirit's guidance.

Global Interaction staff aim to resist the temptation to tell new believers how things should be done. They want to allow God to speak to the believers in the context of their culture. In a similar way, after initial reluctance, the early church encouraged Gentile believers to follow Jesus "their way", rather than imposing Jewish culture on them. That does not mean staff will lead people to faith and say no more. They will ask questions to stir believers to discover aspects of Biblical truth and their culture to enrich their walk with God. There will, of course, be some aspects of any culture that the gospel will challenge, just as aspects of our own culture are shown to be inappropriate or in need of change when the light of the gospel is applied.

3. Believers will remain "insiders" in their communities, both culturally and physically. We read gospel stories in which Jesus sent people he had helped or healed back home to tell their story. The woman at the well could be named the first evangelist, and a very effective one at that!

In past decades, missionaries sometimes encouraged new believers to move out of their home communities. At times the believers lived in enclaves where there was a strong missionary influence. Many were employed on mission compounds or became paid evangelists.

The aims for extracting believers from their communities are understandable. Missionaries wanted to put believers in a place that was conducive to moving toward holiness as Christ's followers. They wanted to keep believers safe from the opposition of family and community, as well as from "evil" influences. The mission compound was seen as a refuge in a potentially risky and antagonistic world.





What was intended to be beneficial had some less helpful side effects. Believers extracted from their homes became dislocated from community and culture. They, along with their new faith, were perceived to have become “foreign”, even though they made evangelistic forays back into home territory. In contrast, insiders who remain linked with existing networks can speak of Jesus and their faith in natural ways using culturally familiar terms. As others meet Jesus, the seed of the gospel can grow from roots that are firmly based in the local community and culture, just as it did among the early disciples.

Under the Spirit’s guidance, those who remain in their communities will discover for themselves which aspects of their culture are aligned with the gospel and will value these and discern other aspects of their culture where caution is required. Believers extracted from their communities, in contrast, tended to see their own culture as wholly suspect, and often gained an understanding of the gospel that merged western culture with Biblical truth.

A key to healthy spiritual growth is dependence on God rather than on people. Those extracted from their communities were often given strong advice about what was wrong and what was right, and told what to believe and what not to believe. In some cases, they were paid by missionaries, including for evangelistic work. When new believers remain firmly linked with their own communities and are not dependent on missionaries, financially or otherwise, they learn to grow and minister in dependence on God and to use the resources available to them rather than waiting on others to give them direction or funding.

SO, WHAT’S THE CATCH?

Yes, there are risks in encouraging believers to stay within their culture and community and to express their faith in ways that reflect aspects of their religious and cultural background. The big risk is syncretism, of believers straying away from exclusive worship of God. There is the potential for them to take aspects of their culture, their former beliefs and religious practices and merge them into their new faith. This is what the Israelites did when they moved into the promised land, for example, 2 Kings 17:33.

These new believers are as likely to fall into the trap of syncretism as we are. For us, it is usually subtle. We don’t physically bow before idols. We don’t call “gods” the cultural things that can threaten our exclusive allegiance to Christ – except maybe sport. The reality, however, is that we are just as syncretistic as any other group. We Aussies who are believers are only a little less materialistic than our neighbours. By default our western individualism and self-centredness flows into our church life. We accept with little question the gross injustice experienced in our world because, after all, we live in the





'lucky country' and that must have been what God intended for us. These things, as much as making offerings to idols, are syncretistic.

Yes, there is a risk of syncretism as new believers are encouraged to remain in their communities and cultures. Yet the solution to syncretism is not found in ourselves or any other group of believers stepping away from our culture or our community.

THE GREATER RISK

A far, far greater and more treacherous risk is that we could fail to plant the seed of the gospel deeply within a local community and culture. It is far more risky to impose our cultural ways on others, potentially leading them into an even healthier syncretism. It would be far more risky to dislocate people from their cultures, turning trust in Jesus into a foreign concept and reducing the possibility of others within their communities hearing the message of Jesus in meaningful ways.

Global Interaction is committed to empowering communities to develop their own distinctive ways of following Jesus. We want to see believers living within their own communities and cultures, and being part of faith movements that lead whole communities to live in total allegiance to Jesus.

