

Intercultural Competency for the Chinese Church

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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.

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 The golden rule of “treat others as you would have them treat you” has been replaced by what is often known as, the platinum rule: “treat others as they *want* to be treated.”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 immigrant 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. 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. 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. 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. Immigrant churches are also baffled at times why these ministries fail to attract other English-speaking individuals in their neighborhoods, even though they seemingly share the same language. The problem is accentuated also by a revolving door of leaders and pastors who struggle with working across congregational and cultural lines both internally and externally. Perhaps lessons from the *Monkey and the Fish* have not been fully understood.

Inter-cultural Leadership

Is the solution then merely a better set of leaders? Do pastors simply need to learn more languages or just work harder? Does the immigrant church – and arguably the church at large as an increase in ethnocultural diversity into local North American neighbourhoods edge towards 50% and beyond – just need to endure these passing trends, as other new immigrant Christian experiences of old have had to work through?

Recent work in the business world – and other professions – have indicated distinct and measurable differences between ethnocultural groups that go well beyond language and colour of skin. Indeed, research and in-depth discussion around power and hierarchy, to high and low context cultures, to individual vs. collectivist mindsets, have exposed the need to work with these polarities and variations instead of working around – or in spite – of them. These professionals have made considerable strides to not only reveal these unique variations but also developmental competencies that are beneficial to the individual leaders and employees, but also to the organizations and companies as a whole. In recent years, Intercultural Competence has been highlighted not as a nice addition to a leader's toolbox, but an essential capability for transformation and organizational effectiveness. Training and development too, continue to be crafted based on scientific assessment instruments and measures. Cultural intelligence, intercultural sensitivity, cross-cultural competency, and global leadership, are all amongst the names and terms used in this ever growing and indispensable field.

One wonders if intercultural leadership development as an actual skill set could be adapted into the church. Especially within new immigrant churches – like the Chinese church – where the cultural divide is not simply at the intersection of its walls to the dominant culture, but also inter-generationally, inter-congregationally, and truly intercultural as new cultural communities emerge. The opportunity for this especially in the Chinese church in Canada – with at the very least Cantonese, Mandarin, and English congregations under the same roof – could serve as a perfect incubator for intercultural leadership development. What if the answer lay not in simple structures and new models to adopt, but a deeper understanding of culture and leadership? What if current training surrounding intercultural competency and ethnocultural intelligence became the basis of understanding each other and oneself? 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?

The Tyndale Intercultural Ministries Centre, has developed a biblically centered model of intercultural leadership development, redeeming the tools and resources from global and international experts for Kingdom work. Through intentional and accurate intercultural assessment, development and training, the hope is that the Chinese aggregate church – and other communities like it – can become centers for servant-leadership development and abundant 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.

Rev. Dr. Timothy Tang was born in Toronto where he now lives with his wife and three children. He has served in a Chinese church as a full-time pastor for over 20 years. His most recent community, has led the way for the church to have a dynamic influence in an ever changing multi-ethnic and multi-cultural neighbourhood, bridging the assembly, the agency, and academy into non-faith based social service and civic arenas. His concentration on lay-leadership reaching their full potential, was at the heart of his dissertation focusing on developing intercultural leadership within the Chinese church.

