



Seeing ^{But} *Not* Understanding

Greg H. Parsons



Travel (short-term travel, in particular) can stimulate our minds. Seeing different surroundings gives us fresh perspectives on our life and ministry.

But when we travel we also bring our backgrounds and experience with us. We bring our views on ministry and mission work, which are colored by our home church's philosophy. These approaches to ministry can be helpful, but they can also be harmful. We can assume that we need to do the same things "over there" that we do at home – be it discipleship, evangelism, even the way we greet people.

Does your favorite North American author really know what to say to suffering believers in Myanmar?

Such assumptions can lead us into methods that are inappropriate for other cultures. Let me illustrate.

When I first joined the USCWM about 20 years ago, I met a man from what is now called Myanmar. He was then finishing his Ph.D. studies in the U.S., and he has been serving in Myanmar ever since.

About two years ago, he returned to the U.S. and while here shared a ministry report with our staff. He referred to the books his team was publishing – mostly Burmese translations of books by well-known U.S. authors. He gets funding from the West to translate and publish North American Christian books. When I challenged him to write himself, he said he didn't have time or money. Nor do other writers in most other countries.

Think about that: does your favorite North American author really know what to say to suffering believers in Myanmar? Does he or she know how to share with those from a Sino-Tibetan Buddhist background, or how to get across Biblical truth to anyone else with a very different worldview?

Of course, many helpful things are found in many quality books in our culture. But even with

the homogenizing force of globalization, book illustrations and humor usually don't transcend cultures. Therefore, almost every book has parts with virtually no meaning in many other places.

Some might ask: While a book or worship song may not be as *helpful* to other cultures as it is to us, it doesn't seem like it would be *harmful* to get our stuff out there, does it? It could be. Simply stated: when we subsidize translation and printing of books in other countries, we chip away at the initiative of local leaders to write and publish local resources as well as the initiative of local believers to pay for it.

When a USCWM-sponsored team took our *Perspectives* course to South Asia, they were aware of these hazards and therefore sought to "contextualize" the course to the local scene. One of the biggest problems they encountered was getting South Asian mission leaders to write articles. It's not that they *can't* — they simply *don't*. Why? Because they can't afford to get their books printed as cheaply as those sponsored and subsidized in North America. There's little motivation to write if you can't get it published or if the price is too high.

The same dynamics apply beyond publishing—to worship, or drama, or other elements of mission and ministry. When Westerners send ministry teams—short-term and long-term—we need to help them realize that at first they may be like a dog in a museum, seeing everything but understanding nothing. By contrast, cross-cultural workers who serve for longer periods of time and who connect with local believers are far more likely to understand local language and culture and to discern what might really be helpful. 🌐



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