



Cultural Difference and the Spread of the Gospel

Further Reflections by **GREG H. PARSONS** Frontier Ventures staff since 1982, and currently serving as Global Connections Strategist.

We finished the 2022 Ralph D. Winter Lectureship—held in person at Biola University and virtually. In the July–August 2021 issue of *MF*, I mentioned the topic of this was going to be **Homogenous Unit Principle** (HUP). Simply stated, it is that *people like to become Christians with others who are like them without crossing linguistic, class or race barriers.*

Since HUP was introduced some 60 years ago, some embraced and used it as an effective strategy to see the gospel flow into and through a population segment. Others felt it could become an unintended excuse to keep churches segregated or create disunity in the church. Some were trying the best they could to look through the eyes of a non-believing, non-church-goer. Others were looking from a “down-the-road perspective” of what should a local church look like as it matures and seeks to present a unified witness to a diverse world?

We must use *both*: to “see” from the perspective of the not-yet-believer, as well as try to understand what a fellowship might look like over time. As we seek to spread our faith, we all adjust our methods to fit *other* contexts. We call this: **contextual-ization**. The question here is: how should we adjust when we share our faith and gather as a church and seek to draw in others?

The presenters at the original consultation in 1977 shared through the lenses of anthropology, history and ethics in addition to the biblical and theological interpretations and perspectives. Some of the material is quite engaging and stretching to our thinking—even though it is 45 years old! This is why I worked to put all the papers together in book form. At times, I found myself agreeing with points from all sides of the debate.

As I reflected on all of this, something stood out to me which is quite different today—at least in the West. That is the **huge increase in the ethnic and racially diverse make-up** in so much of our experience today. In the

1970s, while we had well-documented tensions and struggles with race, when you talked about diversity most people would think about broad categories such as Blacks, Hispanics, Asians and perhaps Native Americans. But there was little nuance *within* each of them.

This was reflected in the discussion at the Consultation itself, where illustrations were used about sub-cultures in the U.S. Early in the discussion, John R.W. Stott asked, in essence, or another way to say it; *nothing is really meaningful without a context*. If you are church planting in LA or New York today, multi-ethnic people within different multi-economic situations must be factored in.¹

Naturally though, it is a challenge when you shift from a Western urban “churched” context to a very different, often less culturally diverse culture somewhere in the world. People there may have *very* limited—or even negative—exposure to the church. Some have estimated that 86%+ of the Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists of the world have not personally met *any* kind of Christian. In those kinds of situations, perhaps more than others, believers must pray, observe and learn in order to understand what might open them to Jesus and the truth. That does not mean we change the message. It does mean that we seek to be as sure as we can that what we understand from our faith is understood and *heard* as “good news” that they might want to embrace.

More will be published in the near year from this event by www.ijfm.org and a book of original papers by William Carey Publishing (www.missionbooks.org). Contact me if you want more information. ☒

¹ Alan Tippett’s archives, held at the St Marks Theological Centre, Canberra Australia, includes fifteen hours of discussion between twenty-eight participants, which was recorded during the 1977 Consultation. You can find more information, at: <https://stmarks.edu.au/library/special-collections/the-tippett-collection/>. We have those audio files digitized and transcribed at the Ralph D. Winter Research Center and Archives in Pasadena, California.