

Further Reflections

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Many times over the last ten years, I've been in gatherings where English was not the primary language. That is a shift from when I started to go to global events around 1990. Now, I often feel out of place—just how some of our sisters and brothers feel when they come to our English centric meetings.

A few years ago, I was in China to help with training. Thankfully, I was with a good friend who spoke Mandarin (and Cantonese.) We were staying at a hotel in the middle of the country, waiting to be picked up for the day's activities. As you often see in hotels, there was a little shop near the front and while we were waiting for our ride, a little old man came out sweeping up, getting ready to open the shop. Another man came over to him and began talking to him. I didn't think much about it. The sound of the language they spoke didn't seem different from Mandarin speakers I'd heard many times before.

The point is that we all need to be learners, working to understand how to best do what God has called us to do.

When they finished talking my friend turned to me and calmly said “I did not understand one word of what they said.” They were speaking one of the regional languages and he felt like I did all the time there—similar to what you feel when you realize you don't know what is going on in some situation. You wonder if you are missing out on important information? You *know* you are missing something.



If you travel to places that are different from your own, you've probably felt it. We try and act like we understand and fit in—in part as a helpful protection from those who would take advantage.

Naturally, this also happens to those global servants who go to serve in different cultures. Even when they learn the language there are still things they don't understand.

This issue of *Mission Frontiers* has practical illustrations of this for those doing medical work in mission settings. A central idea, almost always pointed out as “standard practice” is: medical personnel—even doctors—must *not* come in acting like experts. To do effective medical or development work, you must *listen* to the perspectives of the locals. I'm not talking about basic surgery—which is cut and dried (no pun intended). In some parts of the world, it is assumed that the doctor knows everything. The average person does not expect the doctor to ask any questions. They chime in with the right answer and everyone follows their orders! Thankfully, often they can be right. In the West however, doctors ask all kinds of questions to narrow down the possibilities (and so look ignorant when they go elsewhere where they are just supposed “to know.”).

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Let me give a real illustration I heard years ago. Global workers were sent out and “on the ground” among the people they had prepared long and hard to serve. Their churches were behind them. They had clear vision and calling to translate and share Scripture to see the gospel take root. They were ready and had begun that process, but didn’t see much fruit yet. In the process, they found out from the local people that what would help them the most was to put up a fence around their burial place! The workers were a bit taken back. “That isn’t what we came to do” was their first thought. They knew that the people were so poor, they couldn’t afford a fence, but wondered at supplying the funds for that kind of work.

Thankfully, they listened and learned that when burying their family members, they couldn’t dig deep enough because of the soil and water level issues. As a result, dogs or other animals would come at night and dig up the graves which was deeply disturbing to the people.

The workers built a fence, and the locals felt heard and loved. But what would the folks back home think of these efforts? These kinds of cultural complexities and unknowns can bring critiques from those who are removed from the local situation. We always want to be learning and growing—both those sent out and those sending them.

I heard a quote attributed to Einstein that curiosity is the most important characteristic of the scientist. It is true for the global worker and their friends back home as well. We need to be the kind of believers who work hard to *really* understand both the Word and the people’s culture we are called to, so we can more clearly communicate the Word to them.

I call it “cultural empathy.” Let’s get good at that no matter where we live and serve. ☑

