

The Place of Cultural Sensitivity in Cross-culture Ministries in Busan, Korea

Benson K. Kamary, Ph.D.
Professor, Tongmyong University

Abstract

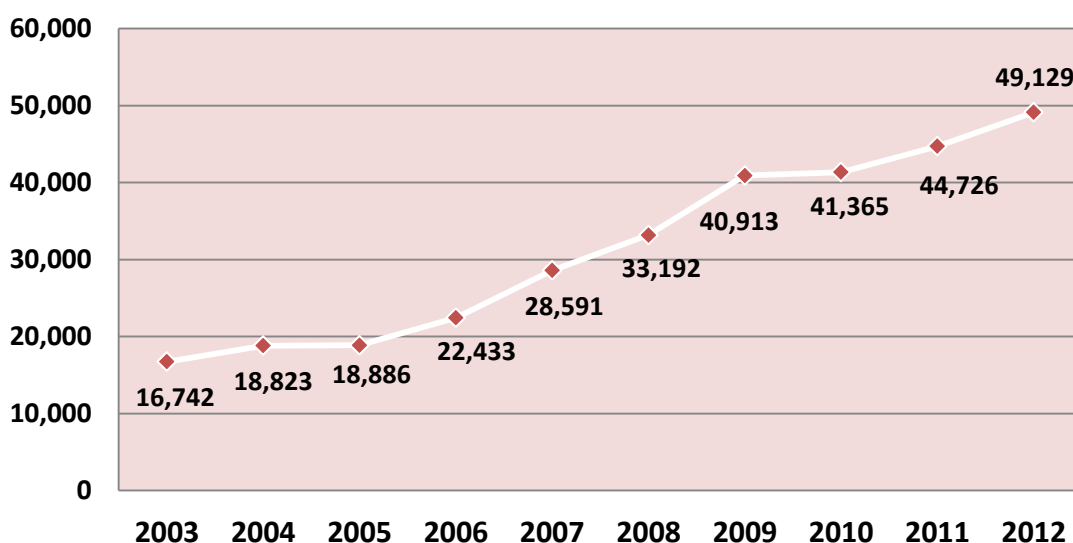
In the age of globalization, Korea has continued to open its door to people from diverse cultures. For the Korean church, the opportunities for cross-culture ministries continue to emerge and the necessity to evangelize and edify such congregations into faith maturity has become an agenda. Even though Korea has been culturally homogeneous, small to middle size cross-cultural ministries are cropping up particularly in large cities where cultural diversity is in the increase. With the growing number of foreigners studying, working or married in Korea, the potential for more cross-culture ministries remains huge. Consequently, due to cultural differences, cross-culture ministries or otherwise referred to as international ministries experience culture related challenges. This paper surveys the nature of cross-cultural ministries in Busan (Korea's second biggest city) and the necessity of cultural competence as a significant element in effective cross-culture ministries in the Korean church.

Introduction

The number of foreigners in Busan has increased steadily over the recent years. According to the Ministry of Public Administration and Security (2012) there were 49,129 foreigners in Busan. Today, three years later, the number could be well above 50,000 people from different cultures and backgrounds. In this context, Churches in Busan and particularly in the area where the population of foreigners is relatively high such as Sasang, Haeundae, Namgu and Hadan have opened up cross-culture ministries or incorporated translation facilities in their main church services for the benefit of the foreign congregants. While specific churches have focused on, and created special services for some larger communities of foreigners such Indonesians, Chinese, Cambodians, Filipinos, Srilankans, and Vietnamese,

others have established English programs to accommodate English speakers from around the globe. Some of the well-known Cross-culture ministries in Busan include: Antioch International Ministry (AIM), International Community Church (ICC), Hosanna International Ministry (HIM), Shinpyungro Church, Ellev Church, Samil International Family (SIF), and Catholic Centre*.

Number of foreigners in Busan from 2003-2012



Source: Ministry of Public Administration and Security (2012)

With the opportunity to evangelize and serve cross-cultural communities, Churches in Busan continue to put much effort to create a suitable environment for growth both in numbers and in faith maturity. In collaboration with Christian Universities, like in the case of Kosin University, some churches sponsor international students taking Masters in Divinity (M.Div.) or Masters in Theology (Th.M) and also offer them experience in church leadership.

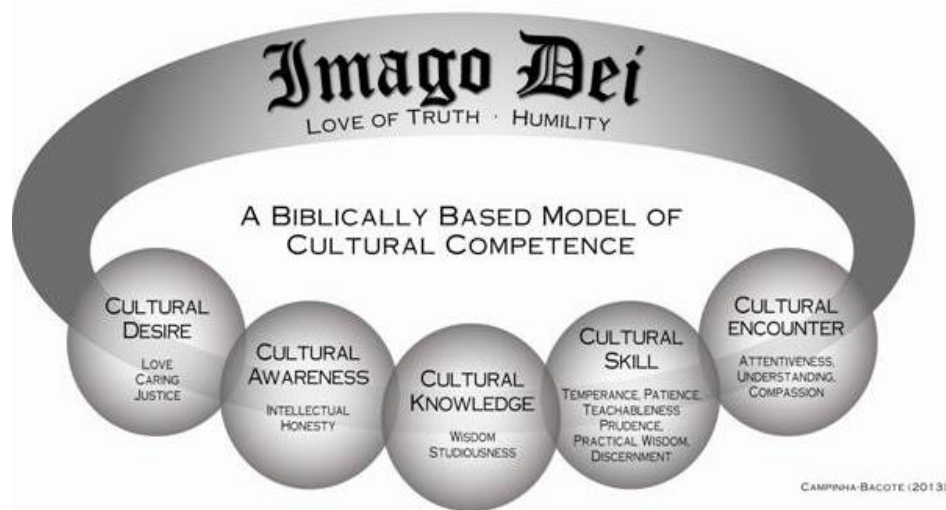
More often than not, intercultural challenges also arise because faith is practiced in the context of culture. Furthermore, Korean Churches with international ministries are faced with the challenge of how to create an enriching environment where people from cross-cultural background, notwithstanding their cultural and linguistic upbringings, are welcomed and supported, and provided with the most effective means to worship God. In other words, church leaders should be reflecting on how to develop a culturally responsive ministry which minimizes the members' alienation. Cultural competence is therefore significant especially

for culturally diverse Christian congregations because it facilitates and advances shared vision of the ministry, that is, it progresses a biblical way of seeing, interpreting and living in the world. Addressing these challenges is thus important for the effectiveness of any cross-culture ministry.

What is Cultural Sensitivity?

Cultural sensitivity or cultural competence can be described as having the consciousness of one's own cultural identity and the capacity to understand, appreciate, and interact with a person from a different cultural background. It also entails the ability to learn varying cultural and community customs. According to Cross et al. (1989) the term "culture" means the integrated patterns of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of racial, ethnic, religious, or social groups while "competence" is a term used to suggest having the capacity to function within the context of culturally integrated patterns of human behavior defined by a group. Cultural competence comprises of awareness, knowledge, skills, and advocacy. People who are culturally competent are also aware of their own cultural heritage and the values associated with it (Sue and Sue, 2003). This helps to develop acceptance, respect and celebration of diversity.

The ability to affirm beauty in diversity takes a deliberate effort so that people are actively in the process of becoming aware of their own assumptions, biases, and preconceived notions about others. Individuals who are culturally competent are comfortable with differences that exist in terms of race, gender, and other socio-demographic variables. Cultural differences are not to be viewed in a negative light. Campinha-Bacote (2013) utilizes a graphical representation (see below) to show how key cultural constructs are interdependent. The foundational construct of "imago Dei" (image of God) is continuously being permeated throughout each of the other five constructs: cultural desire, cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural skill and cultural encounter.



Campinha-Bacote’s biblical based model of cultural competence is significant for comprehending cultural context in any field particularly in cross-culture ministry. When all human beings are first viewed as God’s image bearers, it becomes easier to inculcate a shared vision as a community of faith. Effective cross-cultural ministry leads to a common worldview. For such an international ministry, the core of shared vision is the biblical worldview devoted toward culturally competent and responsive way of faith living and engaging God’s world.

Biblical Framework for Cultural Competence

It appears that the Scriptures are cross-cultural in nature. As stated in Matthew 28:18-20, Hebrews 13:5-6, Christians are called to go to every ethnic group (ethnyn). God is intentionally involved in cross-cultural ministry and accompanies believers in their journey of faith. In the book of Isaiah, the mission of Jesus Christ includes being a “light for the Gentiles” (Isaiah 42:6-7). Also, at the Pentecost different languages were heard when “Jews from every nation under heaven . . . heard them speaking in his own language” (Acts 2:5-6). This incident highlights the critical barrier that language is to cross-culture ministry. At the heart of the gospel is the need to be able to communicate the Word that brings faith multi-culturally and transculturally. The events at the Pentecost where 3,000 received salvation shows that the church has been a cosmopolitan gathering from its inception (Acts 2:41). The church in its final structure will include those saved by Christ's blood “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9).

A biblical framework of cultural competence therefore begins with God's Word as the standard in regards to compassion, grace, standards, and wisdom. As Mvududu (2010) contends, Christians are to be to be culturally competent considering Jesus' command to believers "to love one another" (John 13:34). In loving the "other," cultural competence requires knowing that "other" person and listening to him or her. To know a person from a different culture is more than just listening to their story. "It must also mean understanding and appreciating the differences between her/his story and our own. We need to have cultural competence to love across boundaries" (Mvududu, 2010, para. 3). Churches with international ministries are to be culturally competent not because it is a good idea but a mandate for them.

Since cultural competence goes beyond awareness cross culture ministry workers require specific knowledge and information about the foreigners if they are to fellowship in their exploration learning and growing in faith. To understand well the life perspectives of culturally diverse communities, cross-cultural knowledge is significant. A culturally responsive ministry encompasses perspectives, understanding, and the nature of interactions the congregation have.

From a biblical perspective, culturally responsive ministry takes a holistic approach to its congregation. Since most people groups bear intertwining of culture and religion, "when we become followers of Christ all cultures are suspect...and we must examine them in light of God's Word" (Woodley, 1956, p.53).

Our cultural perspectives are inescapable. Nevertheless, as Christians, our cultural perspectives must be refined only through the scriptures. To liberate ourselves from cultural our strong cultural blindness encountering the "other" is significant because it allows us to see our biases against others (Lingenfelter, 2008, Mvududu, 2010). Vanier (2005) asserts that "when we encounter, we come to know. When we come to know, we are able to understand. When we understand, healing and peace can really grow" (p.7). In such a cross-culture encounter, cross culture ministries in need to shift their thinking from "taking God to a godless world to the view that we are following God into a world in which God is already redemptively present" (Brueggemann & Stroup, 1998, p.8).

Reflecting on Default Cultures and Shared Vision

What does cultural competence have to do with shared vision in the ministry? To see the relationship between culture, and shared vision, one has to begin with the acknowledgement that culture is not neutral. Cultures reflect certain worldview assumptions about reality—including the view of man, view of church and indeed reality. Culture instrumentally shapes how we see, interpret and live in the world including how we worship. We are all cultural beings because every person has cultural lenses through which he or she views the world (Mvududu, 2010).

Secondly, it critical to recognize that culture is God's gift to humanity but man's rebellion against God has corrupted it and thus cross-culture ministry in Korean church ought to seek epistemological humility—a term used in this paper to refer to an understanding of the limits of philosophical and cultural perspectives. Epistemological humility may encompass four cardinal virtues: prudence, courage, patience, and justice (Andrews, 2013). Exercising epistemological humility in a cross-culture ministry means that ministers and other workers, for instance, allow opportunity for learning from people from culturally diverse background or to seek their feedback on the Korean own default culture. This aspect of “collaborative fellowship” also enhances the idea of church as community. Lingenfelter (2008) defines default culture as “the culture people learn from their parents and peers from birth, with all the inherent strengths and weaknesses of their society (p. 71).” Understanding the vulnerability of default culture in a ministry setting can help to increase cultural competence, allow for the development of mutual respect, freedom and effective critique on things that matter for the learning community.

C.S. Lewis, a profound thinker and writer argued that every culture has its own blind spots, its own viewpoint. And from that stance, it superficially perceives certain truths especially predisposed to make certain blunders (in Mangalwadi, 2009). Vishal Magawaldi (2009) contends that unless we see the world through others' eyes, we may inhabit a tiny universe, one in which we will suffocate. Magawaldi's sentiments echoes a Chinese saying that if one wants to know about water, they must not ask the fish because the fish is so accustomed to its water that it may never know when and to what extend the water is polluted. Thus examining one's own cultural milieu is vital for developing cultural competency.

One way that Korean culture may constrict cultural competency is by its heavy reliance on Confucian worldview which, in many aspects of life including church ministry. Due to Confucian influence Korean society is radically hierarchical and the elderly or the clergy is often perceived as the main custodian of knowledge and wisdom. The opinion or feedback of the ‘followers’ are not sought after. This is also reflected in educational setting as Yook and Albert (1998) note: Instructors in Korea are highly respected and are never contradicted. Students often expect the professor to initiate communication, and they speak only when asked to by the instructor. Even if the instructor says something the student does not understand, learners view it as relatively inappropriate to ‘interrupt’ the instructor. While this model of teaching is accepted in Korea, foreigners accustomed to Socratic way of learning i.e. question-answer-discussion model may find it difficult to study or interact from the Korean approach. Foreigners may easily be interpreted as rude or disrespectful if they kept asking questions or challenge the position of the professor in a given subject. Correspondingly, non-Korean instructors and learners may use their cultural assumptions (at times based on ignorance) leading to adverse judgment of Korean way of life and ministry. Such a situation is likely to distract the vision of the cross-culture ministry.

Understanding the place of cultural competence in cross-culture ministry is thus paramount in shaping the vision of the congregation. Christ-centered view of culturally responsive fellowship is a critical necessity. Lingenfelter (2008) points out that Biblical principle “transcend both our human sinfulness and the prison of our culture” (p. 9). To achieve competency, international ministry must approach cross-culture community from a Christ-centered approach where all church activities lead hearts to Christ and where believers’ experiences, background, gifts, and talents are holistically accommodated and celebrated as a community of faith.

Building Cultural Competence in Cross-Culture Ministry

International ministries bear the desire to build community of faith through mission undertaken from a Biblical foundation. If this is the case, then a holistic biblical approach of the nature of diversity in the fellowship is to be considered. Developing cultural competence is instrumental in building trust within a relational community since the church is profoundly a relational group. The vision of any church group requires proper comprehension so that it

may remain rekindled. In other words, the ministry's vision must be culturally relevant and compelling for service and leadership to the glory of God.

In a setting where a biblical vision is shaped and developed, cultural competence can be understood “operationally” as the integration and transformation of knowledge and experiences into a specific view of life—a Christian worldview. Such integration effectively leads a cross-culture ministry to live up to its shared vision. Diversity can be celebrated genuinely when cultural backgrounds are explored, accepted, and respected from a biblical viewpoint. We must be aware that diversity also exists between ‘shared cultures’. For example it would be incorrect to assume that all Africans (Africa is a continent of 55 countries) have shared cultural backgrounds and similar experiences. It cannot be assumed, likewise, that South Asians are culturally similar. A group may share common historical and geographical familiarities yet individuals may share nothing beyond similar physical appearance, language, or spiritual beliefs (Cross et al., 1989).

Establishing cultural competency entails deliberate integration of cultural awareness programs which bear opportunities to develop cultural competency. Samil International Family (SIF) for example, established a program in which each people group share their cultural aspects and how these aspects are similar or different from Korean cultures. Other cross-culture ministries like Hosanna International Ministry (HIM) celebrate ‘international festivals’ where they celebrate diversity. These programs are to equip leaders and congregants and help them understand that leading is inspiring people to participate as a community (diversity notwithstanding) and to be empowered to achieve a compelling vision of faith. Cross-culturally, leading means inspiring people from different backgrounds to participate in the empowerment as a community, to achieve a captivating Christ-centered vision (Lingenfelter, 2008).

Cultural Engagement in Cross-Cultural Ministry

In this paper, the term cultural engagement is used to mean a process of active interaction with individuals in one's own culture or a new culture. Cultural engagement involves a deliberate, thought-out, philosophically-consistent actions aimed at reflecting a biblical perspective on cultural issues people encounter (Edlin, 2011). Christians are called to engage cultures by acting as agents of redemption seeking to subject everything under the

Lordship of Christ. Cultural engagement is a crucial process of life-long learning and enables one to love God by knowing and loving God's work (Platinga, 2000). It can also be said to be an involvement in a local culture in order to reach out to the community to share the truth of the Gospel. Though cultural engagement may improve relationships between individuals and groups of people, Christians must reject and abandon any evil cultural practice that contradicts the Gospel (Edlin, 2011).

Involvement in culture is inescapable regardless of one's theological or doctrinal locus. However, for a Christian ministry, cultural engagement is not confronting other cultures but attempting to answer 'Francis Schaeffer's Question' of "how should we then live?" Cultural engagement is therefore "the activities of people that both respond to and influence the shape and direction of the world in which we live including work, education, behavior, activities, economy, politics, schooling, entertainment, community, social networking, meeting friends and so on. Cross-culture ministries are called to inform, shape and explore culture through communication, community, and sharing of new life in Christ.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has reflected on the issue of cultural competence and its place in cross-culture ministry in Korea. The study has theoretically explored the necessity for churches with cross-culture ministries to embrace efforts that promote capabilities to understand and interact with diverse cultures. The study specifically affirms the need to develop cultural competence in order to carry out culturally responsive ministries through which shared Godly vision can be realized and cross-culture conflicts minimized. There is no culture that is superior to another. All cultures are to be redemptively respected and approached from a biblical point of view. The more cultural competence is developed in a ministry the more it becomes easier to minister and serve. Ultimately, all cultures, cultural aspects, and ministry activities must be submitted under the Lordship of Christ for them to be biblical.

To contribute towards culturally competent cross-culture ministry which inspires shared vision, the author through his experience as the coordinator of Samil International Ministry (SIF) for five years recommends the following strategies.

- i. **Administrative Feature:** The church with cross-culture programs should consider creating awareness among its administrators who handle diverse groups.

Administrative structure should specifically emphasize culturally sensitive communication, service and other interactions in order to create a culturally responsive environment. Training workshops or festivals on cultural competence would be useful.

- ii. Instructional Feature: The leaders of cross-culture congregation can begin by exploring their own personal histories, customs, and experiences and reflect on how that relate to their service. This aspect may involve reflective thinking and interactions where feedback is sought and improvement encouraged.
- iii. Learning Cross-Cultural Perspectives: Since “our cultural assumptions are credibly useful in one context and misleading in another (Lingenfelter, 2008, p. 59),” it is important for foreign community to learn basic constructs of Korean culture as a way of promoting cultural competence. Learning various cultural perspectives involves building awareness of basic history, dominant worldview structure (i.e. Confucianism) and cultural expectations is key of effective international congregation.

As Cross and et al. (1989) notes, it is also important for any institution (in this case the church) to be culturally competent by embracing (1) value diversity, (2) have the capacity for cultural self–assessment, (3) be conscious of the “dynamics” inherent when cultures interact, (4) institutionalize cultural knowledge, and (5) develop practical adaptations to reflect an understanding of diversity between and within cultures.

List of References

- Andrews, M. (2013, May). Practicing epistemic humility. *Sententias*. Retrieved from <http://sententias.org/tag/epistemic-humility/>
- Brueggemann, W. & Stroup, G. W. (Eds.). (1998). *Many voices one God: Being faithful in a pluralistic world*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Campinha-Bacote, J. (2013). A biblically based model of cultural competence. Retrieved from <http://www.transculturalcare.net/BibleModel.htm>

- Cross, T., Bazron, B., Dennis, K., & Isaacs, M., (1989). Towards a culturally competent system of care. Retrieved from <http://www.culturediversity.org/cultcomp.htm>
- Edlin, R. J. (2011, March). Is cultural engagement biblical? Retrieved from <http://www.iapche.org/Insert223.pdf>
- Lingenfelter, S. G. (2008). *Leading cross-culturally: Covenant relationships for effective Christian leadership*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Mangalwadi, V. (2009). *Truth and transformation: A manifesto for ailing nations*. Seattle, WA: YWAM.
- Ministry of Public Administration and Security. (2014). Foreign students. Retrieved from <http://www.mospa.go.kr/eng/a01/engMain.do>
- Mvududu, N. (2010). Culturally responsive teaching: The bible tells me so. Retrieved from <http://icctejournal.org/issues/v5i1/v5i1-mvududu/>
- Plantinga C. Jr. (2002). *Engaging God's world: A Christian vision of faith, learning, and living*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- Sue, D. W, & Sue, D. (2003). *Counseling the culturally diverse: Theory and practice* (4th ed.). New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.
- Vanier, J. (2005). *Encountering the other*. New York, NY: Paulist Press.
- Woodley, R. (1956). *Living in color: Embracing God's passion for diversity*. Grand Rapids: MI Chosen Books.
- Yook, E. L., & Albert, R. D. (1998). Perceptions or the appropriateness or negotiation in educational settings: A cross-cultural comparison among Koreans and Americans. *Communication Education*, 47, 18–29.