

Diversity Implications For Missions In A Covid Crisis

Originally posted to the World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission website, June 17, 2020.

The context of this article is the civil unrest in the United States of America in the wake of the death of George Floyd in police custody. The Mission Commission's Global Leadership Council (GLC) discussed the topic when they met on June 8, 2020. The GLC was deeply grieved by the ongoing racial disparities in the USA highlighted by the media, as well as similar injustice worldwide that goes relatively unreported. It prompted the MC to consider an appropriate response and one urgent and practical outcome was to produce a position statement on diversity and inclusion for our own community, to rectify systemic injustice within the sphere of our influence and responsibility. In this article MC Executive Director, Jay introduces that statement from his personal experience of racism and identity development in missions and cautions us to treat other's experience of injustice and exclusion very sensitively, seeking first a deep understanding before acting.

The COVID-19 event has raised to boiling point pre-existing strains on many societies, the United States of America being one of the most visible at the moment. There, a perfect storm of uncertainty, stress, and strong-arm reactions lifted the lid on barely-contained race-related disparities and we have all seen the consequences unfold online. For those of us who are globally focused, the scenes are all too familiar.

They have, and continue to be, played out in many parts of the world where minorities experience grave injustice and abuse of power. The additional strain brought on nations by COVID-19, amplifying injustice, has stirred up diversity implications for missions.

1. Conception

By genetic lottery (or I should say, Divine providence) I was born with a lot less melanin than my half-sister. My features are non-descript regarding my ethnic origins. I am no longer surprised to be greeted in Russian when I am in Thailand or told that I look like someone they know from Sweden or Poland. I am an ethnic hybrid.

A global missions mentor once commented that I seemed to him like something of a chameleon in international circles. Apparently, he watched as I interacted with others, adjusting my interaction as I adapted to who they were and how they preferred to communicate. My empathetic English-born wife feels embarrassed when she sees me "mimicking" like this. I can't help it. I am an indigenous child in a colonised world; adaptation is a survival mechanism. It has become a gift. The gift of hybridity. By the transforming power of the Holy Spirit of the living God, I have become a connector.

2. Created In Crisis

I grew up protected by my white mother, as best as she could, from my angry and abusive stepfather (a child of English migrants to New Zealand). She kept my mixed ethnicity hidden behind my pale skin. As I grew inside

this camouflage, I became a secret observer to the perspective of a racist. For as far back as I can remember I have borne the wounds of the derogative way he would speak about the "bloody useless Mowries" (Māoris — my biological father's heritage), "thieving bungas" or "lazy coconuts" (Pacific Islanders), "ching-chongs" (Asians), or "those black bastards" (all of the above); people he considered a drain on civil society. I lived by the mantra, 'stay hidden, or he'll turn on you next'. It was bad enough being on the receiving end of rage for the slightest infraction around the house, adding overt racial contempt to that would have made life unbearable.

Adapt or die. It sounds extreme, and it is, but the narrative a child constructs is hard to shake. One can never really dissociate from it. It needs to be healthily *metabolised* (thanks to Henry Cloud for that metaphor¹). In my experience, transforming trauma into healthy maturity requires supernatural intervention.

I was compelled to see the complete inadequacy of my own capacity to measure up. I couldn't do it and I knew it. I needed to throw myself at the foot of the cross of Christ seeking mercy. I was 16, singing along with Foreigner, "I wanna know what love is, and I want you to show me...", only to realise one day that it had become a prayer. The family that shared the love of Christ with me, God's answer to that prayer, pointed me to the cross and the



Jay Matenga

Dr Jay Matenga is the author of "Mutuality of Belonging: Towards Harmonizing Culturally Diverse Missions Groups" and co-author of "Mission in Motion: Speaking Frankly of Mobilization". Jay is the Executive Officer for Missions Interlink NZ and also serves as the Executive Director for the World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission.



hope that was on the other side of it—the redemption of my childhood trauma and a metanarrative that would help me make sense of it all and find my life’s purpose.

Yet I remained camouflaged even in the churches and missions I belonged to. Me and God, in the midst of God’s people, hidden behind a veil of pale, adapting. Growing up in a white lower-working-class environment didn’t award me many economic or educational advantages, but I readily acknowledge now that it did provide privilege. Until my early 40’s, I was known by my stepfather’s very English surname. In many ways this and my skin tone defined me, but it also constricted me. It was an identity placed on me when I started school. I was never formally adopted and when we went to apply for a marriage certificate, I discovered it wasn’t even official—my birth certificate’s surname was a hyphen. Undetermined.

But my individualised identity had been forming in-Christ, among God’s people. I grew spiritually and theologically. I took opportunities to know God and contribute my best to make God known. God’s work in the wider world was most clearly articulated for my wife and me through the Perspectives course and since the early ‘90s we have committed ourselves entirely to supporting God’s mission.

3. Crafted For Connection

It was through participating in God’s mission that I became conscious of my camouflage. Brothers and sisters from the ‘Majority World’ Church recognised my cloak of adaptability and ever so lovingly drew my attention to it. They called me, the real me, forth. They identified the usefulness of my hybridity. They recognised that my indigenous, collectivist, perspectives and values resonated with theirs. They had me stand alongside them, in my pale skin, to speak with them in our attempts to expose a colonialism-infused Global North dominance in missions. To quote a dear Ghanaian mentor, “You may be white on the outside, but you have an African heart!” A greater compliment I could not have received.

Their encouragement prompted me to search out why I saw the world in many ways similar to my collectivist cousins. At 42, I finally commenced a wonderful relationship with my biological father. I received my lineage 27 generations back to our ancestor’s arrival from eastern Pacific islands. I located myself in the land of my forefathers (which is where I happened to grow up as part of a white family). I learned that I had been baptised by those who led me to Christ in my tribe’s river. My father blessed me with my indigenous birthright (we are of a priestly line) to aid my work for

Christ. The way I saw the world finally started to make sense. My identity in-Christ became all the richer and more meaningful as a Māori and Anglo/Germanic hybrid.

For every one of us, our unique genetic heritage is part of our God-given giftedness. Redeemed in-Christ, God draws grace from our respective ethnic heritage, cultural influences and life experiences to manifest and witness to Christ’s Kingdom in the world—a Kingdom made up of gloriously distinguishable nations, tribes, languages and people... all of us formed in that part of Christ’s good creation in which we grew: our *place*.

4. Converse With Caution

Having positioned myself thus, when the names of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd (among others) were held up in the USA as banners in the call for justice and the deconstruction of racist systems that contributed to their deaths, I wondered afresh how we ought to compassionately respond to incidents of injustice as a global community of God’s people? Global media has transmitted to all of us the violence in the USA, along with the long-standing trauma of, and injustice against, the African American people. But the complex social situation of the Black Lives Matter movement can too easily be separated into a simplistic binary: for, or against. To avoid undue entanglement in this historic moment, I think it best we grieve with them and let them speak of their pain and suffering as they will.

It is for the people of the United States of America to own this story and write its next chapter. It is for those of us outside of it to learn and look to our own. As Miroslav Volf has observed,

...in my attempt to be in solidarity with them, I can actually betray them because I am not in solidarity with them as they understand solidarity and themselves in the need of solidarity. For this reason, my posture should not be one of offering perspectives on how they should engage in the struggle against injustice, deception, and violence to which they are exposed.²

For those of us who live outside a location of injustice, we do well to let those who share our faith speak from within that context. Meanwhile, we support them, grieve with them and try to understand the anguish through the limited lens of our own experiences. In the case of the USA at the moment, the National Association of Evangelicals³ and Christianity Today⁴ provide local Evangelical perspectives that the World Evangelical Alliance affirms. The NAE invited my compatriot and friend Dr Brian Winslade, local church

pastor in New Zealand and member of the WEA's International Council, to provide an outsider's perspective⁵. I think he responded well, in sensitive theological fashion, as an invitee to the discussion.

As we try to empathise with the struggles of others, holocaust survivor, neurologist and psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl cautions us against a temptation to belittle the suffering of one against the suffering of others we might know about,

...a (hu)man's suffering is similar to the behaviour of gas. If a certain quantity of gas is pumped into an empty chamber, it will fill the chamber completely and evenly, no matter how big the chamber. Thus, suffering completely fills the human soul and conscious mind, no matter whether the suffering is great or little. Therefore the 'size' of human suffering is absolutely relative.⁶

As Frankl also counsels, we need to allow time between stimulus and response. We must allow sufferers in every context space to express their pain on their own terms. Like Elihu, the younger of Job's companions, who God did not condemn (Job 32:2ff), we silently listen and lament with them until we have greater comprehension of the ways we might be able to help. But it is not a passive listening and lament. Rather, as we enter their pain, it adds meaning to our own stories and motivation to our eventual response.

From my backstory you might appreciate why, as I see injustice exposed around the world, I can too quickly rush to the point where Elihu eventually exploded,

No, I will say my piece.

I will speak my mind.

For I am full of pent-up words,
and the spirit within me urges me on.

I am like a cask of wine without a vent,
like a new wineskin ready to burst! (Job 32:17-19)

Yet I know deep inside of me that words often have little affect on systemic change. Rectifying actions are required. In my indigenous reality, there is not an effective way to make something right with words. An apology is not something that is spoken. Wrongs are righted through actions. We call this "utu". It is a philosophy of practical reciprocity, a rebalancing or realignment and, thereby, the restoring of right relationships (utu can refer to the rebalancing of generosity as well as harm).

Wherever the Church encounters injustice, we are responsible for prophetically calling it out and living counter to it, demonstrating righteousness as a witness to the shalom promise of the Kingdom of God. No less so missions, who are more likely to encounter injustice

in places where the people of God have little influence in society.

Being confronted with injustice, as we are at the moment, should cause us also to look at our own house to see if we are being blind to injustice there. After all, the Apostle Peter warned, "judgement begins with the family of God..." (1 Peter 4:17). As the Mission Commission's leaders heeded the suffering of others and considered the meaning for our own lives, a specific action-question emerged: how ought we to help right the wrongs of systemic injustice within the global missions community?

5. Committing To Community

If you are not aware of systemic injustice within the global missions community you have not sat long enough in the lament of our brothers and sisters from the Majority World and heard their stories of dismissal. You have not felt the frustration of your perspectives on God and missions being misunderstood or ignored. You have not had to recalibrate your values or frame your insights according to the terminology and implicit rules of the industrialised world. You have not been talked about instead of with. You have not experienced what it is like to be relegated to the soundproofed room of 'otherness', while a predetermined agenda is pursued as business as usual.

Conversely, while the Global North narrative may not tell the whole story, we should also be careful not to diminish the contribution of the West to the spread of global Christianity nor fail to realise that this is a tough moment for traditional sending nation missions. My pale privilege has allowed me to sit with white missions leaders and experience their perplexity and genuinely deep sadness when confronted with accusations of dominance and control by those from the Global South. Even in their own traditional sending nations, their commitment to spread the gospel and do good in the world is being undermined by a post-colonial critique. If you are from the dominant culture it is painfully difficult to perceive the negative influence it can have on minorities in your midst. Try as you might to accommodate, it can seem like nothing short of resigning will satiate demands for understanding and equality. Even then, inequities will still be perceived and experienced, because they are built into the very assumptions that shape our missions and ministries.

My understanding of the history of the Mission Commission is that our leaders have always attempted to create space for a wide representation of voices to be heard on missions issues. This has required a great deal of intentionality, but we are also aware that it inevitably



fell short of some people's expectations. In trying to hold conversations in tension, groups still polarised and spun off into separate networks. That is not a bad thing in itself, so long as those networks do not silo themselves.

In a multi-cultural reality (even a Christian one) it is unrealistic to think a perfect system for equal participation and profit is possible this side of eternity. We must accept that we need to co-exist in the creative-tension of difference and give time for innovative change to emerge from our uncomfortable conversations, again and again. As a transformation process, this needs to be seen as desirable. Membership does not distribute dividends, it bears fruit. Deep dialogue should positively affect and benefit all participants, leading us to maturity (see James 1:2-4). The Mission Commission is committed to providing a safe space for courageous constructive conversations, encouraging all participants to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the source and finisher of our common faith (Hebrews 12:2).

As a result of our reflections on this historic moment, where systemic disparities have been exposed afresh, the leaders of the Mission Commission agreed on a

Position Statement on Diversity and Inclusion⁷ to guide our community's inter-relational conduct. It not only speaks to our ethnic and cultural differences, but also to gender, demographic, linguistic and economic variances. It recognises our propensity to lean toward those like us and calls us all to a higher standard of mutual inclusion in-Christ. It serves as a mandate for our loving acceptance of one another, promoting respect for each other's viewpoints on God's mission, and marks our continued commitment to publish reflections about missions issues from multiple perspectives—all toward strengthening participation in God's mission.

According to this position statement, wherever, whenever or however the Mission Commission gathers, no one need hide behind cultural camouflage for fear of not belonging. No one need remain quiet for fear of being misunderstood or dishonoured in some way. We will also continue to work on lowering barriers that hinder participation (e.g. language and location) and we are thankful for the technological advancements we can leverage to do so. Pray for us in this.

Conclusion

Having set the bar with this position statement, we expect those within the global missions community, who participate in the Mission Commission, to self-regulate according to what we believe is nothing less than a Kingdom ethic of love. As Volf has recommended, may we be a people who take the time to truly listen and deeply understand each other, lest our "presumed understanding... become a form of closing (ourselves) off to them, even a form of exclusion"⁸.

For all the racial slurs and aggressive dominance of my late stepfather, in his own pain he failed to appreciate the one thing that could have opened a pathway to healing for him: understanding the pain of another. Christ-followers, may we go into our hurting worlds with empathy and vulnerability, our true selves unveiled (2 Corinthians 3:18), drawing from the rivers of living water within us, to outwardly produce good eating fruit (character) and leaves (actions) that can heal all ethnicities through a demonstration of the practical love of Christ (Ezekiel 47:12, Revelation 21:1-2).

References Cited

1. Cloud, H. 2011. *Necessary Endings*. London, UK: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
2. https://mailchi.mp/yale/the-quest-and-question-of-life-for-subscribers-only-miroslav-volf-matt-croasmun-1673357?e=f8fcb98704&fbclid=IwAR1vTZgxB9R1dMzWtYHpGJ4kyNhYYs3qV8q8Fn_kiP1AUR2Fxy4NNJ0uypA
3. <https://vimeo.com/428157902>
4. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/june-web-only/justice-too-long-delayed.html>
5. <https://www.nae.net/international-perspective-us-christians-politics/>
6. Frankl, V. E. 2017. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
7. <https://weamc.global/who-we-are/diversity-inclusion/>
8. See footnote 2.