



So The World Will Know: Cultural Diversity & Missions

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In this presentation Jay Matenga focuses on Christian unity and proposes a way to reframe the challenges of difference within world-Christianity, and where Christ-followers from around the world converge in missions groups and culturally diverse congregations. He suggests a vision for intercultural growth as a desirable outcome of unity in Christ, which James the Just says is born of trial but is cause for great rejoicing.

Kia tau te aroha noa ki a koutou me te rangimarie, he mea na te Atua na to mātou Matua, na te Ariki hoki, na Ihu Karaiti. (Grace and peace to you [all] from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ). *Tihei mauri ora!* E kore au e ngaro; he kākano i ruia mai i Rangiatea. (I will not be lost; I am a seed planted in the open heavens).

1. Introduction

My central thesis for this exploration is that Christian unity in cultural diversity requires a compelling vision of positive transformation that mutually benefits the person and the group.

I articulate this vision as “intercultural growth”; made possible through Christ, by the power of the Spirit, in covenantal community.

Here I am attempting to connect with Sebastian and Kirsteen Kim’s thesis (in *Christianity As A World Religion*) and look at some implications for global missions faced with the stressors of undertaking missions-in-community alongside believers from different world-Christianities.

I contend that more than 240 years of missions strategy needs to reorient to understand *missio Dei* in alignment with John 17:21-23 and covenantal unity. Placing it ahead of William Carey’s “Use of Means” (Carey, 1792), which has produced an unintended instrumentalism, or overemphasis on mechanisms to help the world know, when Jesus identified the one thing that will do it: our unity.

So, with this paper I would like to lead us from the macro to the micro. From the global reality of world-Christianities as a complex culturally diverse community, to the place where that complex culturally diverse community most commonly intersects — in global missions. As I do, I encourage the reader to look

out for the application to culturally diverse congregational life. It is immediately transferable.

We will move from the ‘what’, through the ‘why’, to the ‘how’ — or at least point the way towards a desirable destination. I will first discuss SEEDS. This will provide some context to my thesis, describing what has led me to this point. I will then present some elements toward a SOLUTION. For this I will draw on research I collected in my doctoral work. By the time I conclude I hope you’ll perceive a *wero* (a challenge or prod), toward a fresh vision for the people of God from and within Aotearoa New Zealand.

2. A Seed

2.1 My Roots

E kore au e ngaro; he kākano i ruia mai i Rangiatea. (I will not be lost; I am a seed planted in the open heavens). *Tihei mauri ora!* (This is the breath of life!).

I am Māori by my father’s line, whose father, my paternal grandfather, had no Pākehā heritage. But I was raised in the Pākehā home of my mother and stepfather and educated as a Pākehā under my stepfather’s surname, which I held for the first part of my life. That I was Pākehā went without question due to my skin tone and faux surname. That I am instinctively Māori has long been a source of confusion for me, and those who have suffered to work with me!

But I’ve come to embrace my hybridity, a liminal space between worlds, which Homi Bhaba says, “entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy”



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(Bhaba, 2004). A rich understanding of hybridity can be found in the ecotone, which environmental biologists identify as the convergence of two distinct ecosystems that become habitats for unique species (Krall, 1994). This is the essence of the Māori concept of *whakapapa* (Royal, 1997), two entities coming together to create something unique. Every one of us is, in some sense, a hybrid—but we also have the capacity to hybridize, to transform beyond our genetics.

2.2 My Shoots

Something latent within me unlocked as I sat in conversations with Africans, Arabs, Latinos and Asians of many kinds in ad hoc adjunct meetings, while the dominant cultures in global missions leadership gravitated to their own social circles. Something about the different perspectives on the world from the minority groups attracted me. Their encouragement for me to occasionally speak to the whole group on their behalf humbled and confused me. But they showed me the path to my authentic self, something I did not discover and may not have discovered participating in local churches here in Aotearoa.

If it were not for culturally diverse faith-community experiences, locally and globally, I might actually be lost. I would not be the hybrid Pākehā/Māori I am today. I may be a wild oat seed illegitimately sown, but I am thankful that I have been planted in an open heaven, and that makes all the difference.

Brothers and sisters from the Majority World — who I prefer to identify as Indigenous — were the influencers who observed that the seed that is me, and my planting, had produced something different to the Western leaders they usually dealt with. One of my West African mentors summed it up, “Jay, my brother, you may have a Western face, but you have an African heart”.

2.3 My Fruit

That set me on a protracted journey, over almost a decade, to figure out why they thought that, and it led me to discover my Māori heritage. It connected me with the biological father I never knew. It is a journey of sense-making about my genetic heritage, values and attitudes as I learn more and get more comfortable in the *korowai* (cloak) of culture that is *te ao Māori* (the Māori world). It is a long walk home and I have got a long way to go.

Along the way though, a major question has dominated my thinking. That is, why is unity not our primary strategy for local and global witness, when Jesus clearly gave his *modus operandi* for mission in John 17, summarised in verse 23 that says: “I am in them and you are in me, May they experience such perfect unity so

that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me”?

I’ll tell you why — because, with the diversity we’re facing today, it’s humanly impossible. Political commentator and Massey University lecturer, Grant Duncan confirmed as much in an interview with Rob Mitchell for Stuff news published June 29 2019. Referring specifically to Christians in New Zealand politics he said, “It’s just a minefield... You are never going to unite those (differing moral perspectives), it’s impossible” (Mitchell, 2019). There are so many opinions about what should constitute the ‘common good’ and Christians cannot agree. We are “all over the spectrum”, as Dr Stuart Lange noted in the same article.

In contrast, homogeneity is easy. We gravitate to the like-minded, like-coloured, like social status-ed. But post-World War II migration has smashed the fantasy of homogeneity. Right-wing nationalism might be trying to raise it from the dead, but whatever is raised will be a little more than a zombie.

In global Christian circles, with the accelerated movement of people around the world, in the face of increasing cultural diversity and decentring power, we make do with polite tolerances or objective-oriented agreements. Should cultural diversity exist in congregations, it is usually tenuously held together by a dominant organisational ideology and prescribed group values—having the appearance of unity but often denying its power (to paraphrase 2 Timothy 3:5).

Unity is humanly impossible. But that’s precisely why unity manifest is such a powerful witness to the world of the love of the Father for the Son and those who follow Him. Nothing is impossible for God.

Encouraging deep unity and mutuality in the faith, is the fruit I hope I will be able to bear from this maturing seed standing before you, planted in an open heaven.

Let me show you where my journey has led me to thus far...

3. A Setting

3.1 Exploring Environments

I have already alluded to the migrancy that has been accelerating since World War Two. This is unusual only for its volume and pace. Peoples have always travelled—for commerce, conquest or concern for their own survival.

In similar regard, the esteemed Drs S & K Kim note in *Christianity As A World Religion*, that world-Christianity has never been the religion of a homogeneous group. They write, “Christianity has always been geographically widespread and practised

locally in different communities across the world” and furthermore, “Christianity does not have one single strand of development, one centre or a single history, but Christian history is diffuse, complex and polycentric” (Kim & Kim, 2016).

That word, “polycentric” is a bit of a buzzword in global missions circles at the moment as missions leaders experience the colonial hegemony of the West slipping away. Polycentricity refers to multiple centres of power manifesting in a common context. For missions, this represents the increasing confidence in missionaries from new sending nations realising that they have something unique to contribute to missions groups that need not be constrained by Western theological or missiological assumptions.

As one of my West African mentors, Dr Solomon Aryeetey wrote for *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, “If we were to try to identify the one main thing that stands in our way when it comes to the missionary enterprise... it would be this: the overwhelming attitude and complex of superiority with which the vast majority of the Western Church is afflicted, and its twin evil, namely, the complex of inferiority that is so deeply rooted in the Church found in the so-called ‘Majority World’” (Aryeetey, 2013).

That is changing, because that sense of superiority is being shown to have no real substance. In *Whose Religion Is Christianity* (Sanneh, 2003), the late Lamén Sanneh amply illustrates via the discipline of Bible translation, that the Church’s spread around the globe has more to do with the gospel’s indigenous reception and acculturation than missionary intention. 174 years ago, the rapid spread of the gospel amongst Māori by Māori for Māori is a local testament to this fact. Davidson & Lineham quote George Clarke who claimed that by 1845 almost 60% of all Māori regularly attended church services (Lineham & Davidson, 1995). Māori believers not attending church would add to that percentage. This is quite remarkable, since by the mid-1820’s the gospel had hardly made a dent here. And is it devastating to realise it was unnecessarily short-lived (Reese, 2007).

I note all this to establish a context of complexity, but also of power. We are speaking of a multitude of environments that provide unique soil for the gospel seed. The gospel is not, as some seem to assume, a tree to transplant. When discussing Christian unity in contexts of cultural diversity we must first understand that the gospel is not a static commodity that is traded. It is an evolving narrative that is experienced and retold. A seed that transforms and is transformed according to contextual dynamics (Anderson & Stransky 1976).

Stuart Lange is right when he says, “we’re all over the spectrum” and that need not be a bad thing. It is our default starting point. That the gospel manifests differently in different people and places, while carrying the same spiritual DNA, must be accepted as the grace of God—not as a problem to be resolved. As the late Eugene Peterson noted, Christ plays in 10,000 places (Peterson, 2008).

Increasingly, Christ-followers from those myriad places, carrying a gospel-story perspective unique to those places, end up fellowshiping with people from different places. If not in your church, then certainly on the mission fields of the world. And, usually, that’s where the problems emerge.

3.2 Differential Diagnostics

We have no shortage of diagnostic tools to help frame the problem of conflict where cultural diversity is at play. And thanks to all these tools, it is not difficult to define the problem of difference.

You could draw on the anthropology of Paul Hiebert, Lloyd Kwast, Sherwood Lingenfelter, Charles Kraft, Victor Turner or—Mary Douglas, who informed Sheryl Takagi Silzer’s recent work on multi-cultural teams (Silzer, 2011).

Or, you could look to organisational psychology and the international values surveys of Geert Hofstede, Shalom Schwartz, Fons Trompenaars, the Culture Detective, or the GLOBE study best articulated by Christian Welzel. I even have an app on my phone (*Culture GPS*) that compares and contrasts cultures and their values. These values models have informed Christian writers such as Richard and Evelyn Hibbert and David Livermore, although Livermore was also particularly influenced by the cultural intelligence work of Earley and Ang.

Alongside Lingenfelter, Silzer, the Hibberts, and Livermore, you could add James Plueddemann, Duane Elmer, Mary Lederleitner, Darla K. Deardoff, Taylor Cox, Lee Gardenswartz, Erin Meyer, Elidh Milnes, Richard D. Lewis, and... well, there is enough to kick start any bibliography for diagnosing cultural difference.

They all dissect the issues of difference in their own ways. They propose rationale for differences and, if you are fortunate, give some recommendations and develop some exercises to help the reader/participant empathise more sensitively with difference. It is a start, but it does not develop community on its own. Cultural agility is one thing, but intercultural growth adds a whole other dimension. An underlying assumption for most of this diagnostic material is project-goal oriented. The Hibberts argue that “the most important feature of a team is that it forms for a specific purpose... and should



disband once that purpose is achieved". They go on to insist that multi-cultural teams add further complexity in that "values need to be negotiated, explicitly articulated and agreed on" (Hibbert & Hibbert, 2014).

3.3 Why Works

But the covenant community, wherever it manifests, is not a team. There is no disbanding. There is no 'taste and see' if there is resonance before we commit. You are either in Christ or you are not. We are not working towards a functional or productive goal, at least not primarily. We should first be concerned about inter-relationships. Our common vision should be to see reciprocated blessing and mutual growth in Christ. A harmonic unity.

While this may sound like an idealistic la-la-land. This is the eschaton the Biblical and historical Christian narrative is leading to: a shalom reality. Jesus did not ask for unity in the sweet by and by, he asked the Father to make us and keep us one now. But, in fact, we do pick and choose and disconnect and move and get as close as we can to homogeneous comfort—because it's the easier option. It's just not God's best for us and I do not believe it is Biblical intention. As the Drs Kim have proven, World Christianity has never been a monocultural religion (Kim & Kim, 2016).

Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl quotes Nietzsche when he writes, "Those who have a 'why' to live for, can bear with almost any how." (Frankl, 2006). I am under no illusion that Christian unity is a tough row to hoe. Add cultural diversity to that and developing a Christian community can be excruciating. But you can endure that, says Frankl, if you know why you're doing it.

We need to recapture a vision for deep, committed, covenantal, reciprocal and mutual unity-in-diversity as God's primary witness to the world. It was never meant to be easy. James 1:2-4 tells us as much. Unity is formed in trial, testing and temptations to break faith. James is not primarily referring to external pressures here, he is speaking of struggle within a fellowship of difference. But, James says, if we persevere in our relationships and hold fast to our faith in God for our relationships, we mature. This is my vision for the Church and her witness: that we mature inter-relationally and grow interculturally so the world will know. But witness is a by-product, it is not our primary 'why'.

James reveals our primary 'why': it is maturity. In today's culturally diverse reality, I see maturity as intercultural growth. Our 'why' ought to be growth, in ourselves as participants in Christian community and in the Christian community as a whole, both locally and globally and in parts where it has yet to emerge.

To influence widely, we need to promote a fresh desire for unity. Make it attractive and compelling. We need to recapture the eschatological power of the covenantal community (Lingenfelter, 2008). Therein lies a subjective benefit, a collective benefit and a projective benefit. Not mutual happiness, but mutual growth. We could argue about who determines what growth looks like, but we have the Biblical narrative to guide us, the Holy Spirit with us, and we work it out in community. We may have to let go of some of our propositions and release a few axioms, but dogma never build dynamic community. The Christian ethic, rooted and revealed in the character of God, is a relational wellbeing ethic that supports the dignity of all.

As Christ-followers we have a distinct advantage. What is humanly impossible is made possible by the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit. You all know this: Christ tore down the wall of hostility that separates us from each other (Ephesians 2:14-16). There is now no power differential in Christ. He is our peace, our equaliser, our point of belonging together as siblings by the unity of the Spirit (Galatians 3:26-29). This is our holy pursuit.

4. A Solution

So, let us now move from the 'what' and the 'why' to the 'how'. As James so wonderfully plays out, maturity (i.e. growth) is born out of trial. In fact, he is so convinced by the positive results of trial and testing that he thinks we should rejoice when faced with it! How perverted, in this day and age where avoiding suffering is perceived to be the highest moral imperative.

Here, I introduce, 'the lesson of the instrument string'. As a guitar player I know that the only way to produce a harmonic is if a string is under tension and tuned correctly. I apply this principle to relationships, especially with regard Christian unity in cultural diversity. The only way we can produce harmony is under tension.

4.1 Assume Connectivity

Our first step toward harmony is to assume connectivity. Our unity is rooted in our common human dignity as made in God's image. But this is more than a mere concept. Following indigenous epistemologies and pantheist (Barfield, 1988) and Eastern Orthodox theologies, I hold that we are spiritually connected to each other and all of creation by a common vital life force, which Māori know as mauri ora (Marsden 2003). This spiritual flow, affected by the fall, is refined for Christ-followers by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, whose purifying work neutralises the hostility referred to in Ephesians 2. This 'animosity cleanser' is something the world apart from Christ does not have.

Theologically, we know the corruption of mauri ora as Sin, the relationship destroyer. The antidote of which is the reconciliation afforded by Christ. This is my lived reality, and a reality immediately recognisable by those who live in an Indigenous epistemé (Foucault, 2004)—that is, Indigenous ways of knowing.

If this sounds foreign or even heretical to your ears, the modern-industrial pogrom of disenchantment, to use Charles Taylor’s term (Taylor, 2007), has done its work. Not so for the indigenous, and almost all traditional ways of knowing outside of the Industrial epistemé. One of the reasons I believe the individualistic Industrial world struggles with communal belonging is the illusion of disconnect. Owen Barfield argues this is the highest form of idolatry (Barfield, 1988). In Charles Taylor’s terms, we have buffered ourselves, individually and as groups, against outside influence—whether interpersonally or spiritually.

Taylor argues for a re-enchantment of society, opening ourselves to more possibilities, feeling connection and the relational responsibilities that accompany it—to become more porous. It brings a greater sense of commitment to the collective, and a heightened sense of purpose from the unique contribution we each bring to the group. Herein lies an understanding of *mana* (honour/authority) as social currency, but that is another subject! A growing desire for re-enchantment, supernatural power and contribution to collective contexts is why popular media is so heavily influenced by supernatural and belonging-oriented themes. The world is yearning for it even as our churches continue to empty.

But spiritual connectivity is not the stuff of fantasy. It is the lived reality of Collectivist/ Indigenous peoples. In order to persist in unity, we need to assume connectivity, not similarity, as our starting point for unity and view growth as the beneficial outcome that ought to fuel a desire for unity. Furthermore, as we move forward and grow, we must work to maintain a harmonic counterpoint of differences, where each voice is participating and synchronous in the tension.

4.2 Accept Trials

In other words, to bring culturally diverse people together means a constant tension of power and push-back in relationships to create harmony, as with the instrument string.

Creative tension is well-known among innovation and change specialists, but I am applying it a little differently

here. I am speaking of constant relational tension, that ‘sandpaper ministry’ we often joke about in Christian circles. As a friend once noted about culturally diverse group meetings, ‘if you’re feeling comfortable something is wrong’. Meaning, if you’re at ease, it’s probably because you are part of the dominant culture, which suggests power is not being shared.

Intercultural growth speaks of transformation, in both the subject and the group. It requires prolonged engagement and exposure to others with an open, porous, vulnerability. I draw on the work of educationalist Dr James Loder in understanding the process leading to intercultural growth (Loder, 1989), together with the emerging science of interpersonal neurobiology founded by Dr Dan Siegel (Siegel, 2012) and developed for the Christian community by Dr Curt Thompson (Thompson, 2010). These theories, among others, create a paradigm for the way our being is changed through interpersonal and intercultural interactions.

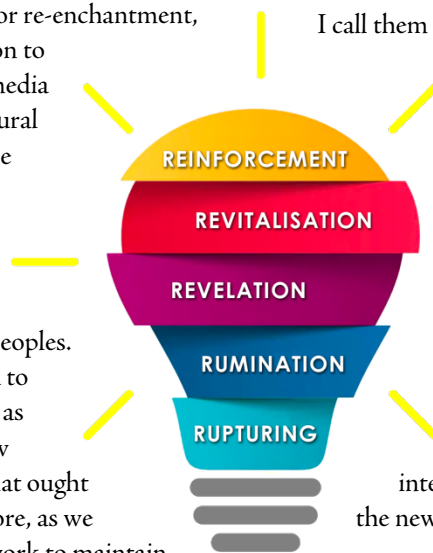
Loder speaks of epistemic rupturing, where what we know is challenged by some external crisis and as we work that challenge through to resolution we are transformed. Loder identified 5 phases of what he called, “therapeutic knowing” (Loder, 1989), a process of enlightenment if you will.

I call them **the 5 Illuminating R’s**:

1. **Rupturing** — the conflict in context, or the crisis moments.
2. **Rumination** — taking time to scan or think on the encounter.
3. **Revelation** — sudden understanding or insight felt with intuitive force or deep conviction. The a-ha moment.
4. **Revitalization** — a release of energy and repatterning of the mind that normalises the change.
5. **Reinforcement** — cementing the interpretation of the experience and promoting the new knowing to others.

4.3 Appreciate Outcomes

This process provides an epistemic roadmap for enduring any sort of life experience and embracing it as positive for transformative growth. I understand psychologists are also confirming this process in post-traumatic growth studies. Almost two millennia ago, James knew this. Staying in tension and allowing the process to work in concert with the Holy Spirit while holding fast to our belief in unity in Christ, develops maturity. We need to uphold and appreciate that outcome as highly desirable.





This is especially the case with intercultural relationships. As you might guess, living in community with a diversity of 'others' provides abundant crisis moments and opportunities for epistemic rupturing. Diagnosing difference helps, but if you enter into relationships with diverse cultures in a buffered way you do not allow yourself to be transformed in the encounter. Intercultural growth requires that mutual and reciprocal transformation is able to take place for covenantal community and maturity to form.

Intercultural specialist Dr Joseph Shaules explains it this way,

Foreign experiences make possible a process of deep cultural learning, one that can make us aware of the cultural configuration of our unconscious mind, and make us more effective interculturally... (it) can stimulate personal growth and provoke deep-seated changes in our perception, worldview, and identity. (Shaules, 2015)

5. Conclusion

We have come a long way in this paper, but it has been like a smooth stone skimming across a glassy lake. We really have only touched the surface. My central thesis was that Christian unity in cultural diversity requires a compelling vision of positive transformation that mutually benefits the person and the group. I hope I have done justice to that claim as we moved from seed to solution; from the what and why to the how; and from connection and tension to resolution.

My aim was to introduce you to some paradigmatic ideas—to create some small degree of epistemic rupturing to get you thinking beyond the functional to the transformational. I hope you can better appreciate the desirable benefits of cultural diversity in Christian community at a micro, interpersonal level. Understanding this lifts our ecclesiology and missiology to a new level for our lived experience in the midst of plurality.

Intercultural growth, shared in community by the people of God, can present a powerfully prophetic example to an increasingly diverse world that is struggling to develop agreement for the common good.

God can help us do the impossible if we have Christ's vision for it. But it will necessitate change in all of us. Not towards a bland cultural homogeneity but a glorious counterpointed harmony of cultural diversity, where our transformed selves are able to appreciate and value one another's differences as plantings of the same seed in different contexts.

If the world sees us like that, there will be no trite sociological explanation for it. For it can only happen supernaturally in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit — and the journalists will concede, "it's a miracle".

As the waiata by my *whanaunga* (relative), Canon Wiremu Te Tau Huata of Ngati Kahungunu, encourages us—let us make an effort to align ourselves together in unified fashion, all seeking mutual enlightenment and love.

Tūtira mai ngā iwi

Tātou tātou e

Tūtira mai ngā iwi

Tātou tātou e

Whaia te maramatanga

Me te aroha - e ngā iwi!

Kia tapatabi,

Kia kotahi rā.

Tātou tātou e

Tātou tātou e.

Look this way together, people

All of us, all of us.

Align together, people

All of us, all of us.

Seek after enlightenment

and love of others—everybody!

Think as one,

Act as one.

All of us

All of us.

The All Black supporters' version of this song can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxorRtINRTc>

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