

Mission and Unity from an Asian migrant perspective

One foot in the East and the other in the West

Cheen Khaw

Lu Ho Boh? Cheah Pa Ah Boey? That's for "How are you? Have you eaten? That's the way I greet my own people in my dialect Hokkien back in Penang, Malaysia. Most Kiwis will immediately assume that being a Chinese, I would be able to converse and write in Mandarin, and that I come from China. I often have to explain that Mandarin is the unifying language of China, that there are many dialects there and that I am a fifth generation overseas Chinese – about 200 years removed from China. I also speak and write in Malay but feel most at ease and relate best with people using the English language. Because I am most at ease with English, I find myself choosing to worship in churches that conduct their services in English. In my case it has been mostly Anglican churches ever since I came to faith in Christ more than twenty years ago when I was a university student here in New Zealand.

Since the nineteen eighties, there has been an influx of migrants to New Zealand. According to the 2006 census, Chinese New Zealanders made up 3.4% of the population of New Zealand. The demographic make-up of the population of especially the major cities like Auckland has changed dramatically. Today, Auckland is very multiracial, multicultural and has a diversity of religions. The Chinese people who migrated from Malaysia and Singapore are scattered throughout Auckland, while Chinese from Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China tend to congregate in certain suburbs of Auckland. Many are Buddhists and Taoists and there are quite a number of Chinese temples and monasteries that have emerged in Auckland in the recent years. But many of the Chinese are also open to Christianity as they settle here and make a fresh start in life. Many too would choose to worship in an English-speaking churches instead of attending churches that conducts services in their own ethnic language.

Coming from Malaysia, a multicultural, multi-racial and multi-religious country I feel most at home and alive when I am mixing with people of other ethnicities and cultures. Because I am a migrant and a non-European, I find people from other non-European ethnicity gravitate towards me. So in a way these people are my "cultural" community. Consequently, I find myself walking alongside and reaching out to these people on a one on one basis. My time of involvement especially in tertiary chaplaincy, hospital chaplaincy, and with Anglican Franciscan brothers, has taught me the importance of presence and the practice of hospitality. It is about making time for the other. It is about listening to their stories. It is about wanting to know them as a person. It is about the willingness to learn about, to learn from and to learn with the other. In that process of learning I too have to open up myself to the other and be willing to make myself vulnerable.

A recent example would be my wife befriending a young Chinese couple from China at the local library playgroup. They were invited to bring their little boy to the Mainly Music at our church. We went for outings together. They were invited to our home for a meal. A friendship begins. Trust develops enough for us to share our Christian faith and for them to dare ask questions about it.

We are now a religiously diverse nation. I come from a background of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. When, I first converted to Christianity I made a complete cut-off from my previous religious roots – and with it to a certain extent my cultural heritage. Life's journeying has taught me the importance of being sensitive and accepting of the faith of others. I have learned to appreciate my previous religious roots. They were part of my formation as a person as I journey through life.

The painting of Jesus standing behind the captain of a ship holding onto the eight-spoke ship's steering wheel describes my own spiritual journey well. The steering wheel reminds me of the Dharma Wheel with its eight spokes representing the noble eightfold paths of Buddhism. These truths guided me as a person and are present in Scripture, but life only had meaning when Jesus came into my life. Since that encounter with the painting, I feel now at ease in having conversations with others of a different faith. For example some years back, at a back-packers hostel I found myself listening to the faith journeys of a Maori seeker, a Romanian who had embraced Tibetan Buddhism, an Irish Buddhist, a Fijian Indian Muslim, an Indonesian Malay Muslim and a South African Hindu. That time at the hostel has taught me that we are all pilgrims on Earth.

I have now lived in Aotearoa New Zealand for more than twenty years – nearly half a lifetime. I tell people I have one foot in the East and the other in the West. New Zealand is home and yet not home at the same time. I call myself an in-between person. I stand in a liminal space. It is a place where I embraced the richness of both the East and West and at the same time coming up with something new that is beyond both the East and the West. Mission flows from this in-between place. This space is further complicated or rather enriched by the fact that my wife Yukiko sitting on this panel is Japanese – it is a cross-cultural marriage for both of us. Increasingly, there are many cross-cultural marriages in New Zealand. They are a group that needs reaching out to. They are a group that often feels more at home in a multicultural church.

My wife and I may be Asians but we are poles apart in many ways. To understand each other, we communicate with each other in English. Most multicultural couples do and try to learn the other's ethnic language. The learning of another's language opens many doors. A further complication if one can call it that, is that I have been an Anglican all my Christian life (a charismatic evangelical, now much tempered by the contemplative tradition), while my wife comes from a Pentecostal background. We have learned to appreciate each other's denominational background. I am now an assistant curate in an Anglican parish. And as usually is the case, we as a family would be in the minority group. Once upon a time, I used to stand at the periphery. Unless I stepped forward and offer myself to serve I would remain in the shadow. In fact, I faced much inner turmoil and struggle when I heard God's call for ordination training in the Anglican priesthood – to the Tikanga Pakeha branch of the Anglican Church. People of other ethnicities need to be given the opportunity and much encouragement to take their rightful place in the Body of Christ.

Is there room for working together ecumenically? I think there is room for working together ecumenically. However, it may not be an easy task to bring about the unity amidst the diversity. I would like to use the metaphor of a pot-luck meal. Food brings people together. At a pot-luck dinner everyone brings a dish. There is an intention and a commitment in coming together and each placing a dish on the table. Imagine each ethnic group bringing their own ethnic dish and putting it on a table – and imagine this table as belonging to the Lord. What you would have on the table would be a mosaic of gourmet delight. It is the banquet promised by Jesus. A favourite verse (Rev 7:9) comes to mind : "...and there was a great multitude that no one could count,

from every nation, from all tribes, and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and the Lamb,” Each dish is unique. Each dish in a way represents the story of a person or a people or a denomination. Each dish is part of God’s story. Each story needs to be told, listen and affirm. As we do, we begin to understand each other, begin to realize that we are all connected to each other and begin to put into action together and work towards a common goal.

Recently, our parish sent a plea out to our community for donations of food. Manurewa, a suburb where many inhabitants are poor has been much affected by the recession. We run a foodbank and budgeting service. Donations poured in and continue to pour in and a major portion of it came from the churches of the various denominations in Manurewa itself.

Imagine what the meal would be like if you mixed them up altogether in a pot? I can’t begin to imagine what the taste of the meal would be like. The stories would be lost. The diversity would be lost and with that the unity also. Mission is not about assimilation.

A single dish does not make a pot-luck dinner. Each person’s dish helps make the pot-luck meal complete. Pot-luck dinners are a reminder that no person (no denomination) is an island. We become a person (or a denomination) through the other. We need each other to make us whole. Paul talks about one body and many parts. Each has a place and a role to play. The diversity of dishes is a reminder to appreciate, accept and celebrate our diversity and unity. We need to see each other as an equal. As we do, we begin to realize that we are inter-connected to each other. Further, one can never in a way say a pot-luck dinner has reached its limits. There is always space for one more dish. It is about having an enlarged heart. It is about being inclusive. It is about creating space for the other. To do that much emptying is involved. It is about helping to serve one another and the other. There is much we can learn when we bring our dish to the table.

Sharing the gospel in a non-threatening way

Yukiko Wakui Khaw

It has been reported that there are about 12,000 resident Japanese in New Zealand, and a lot of them are married to New Zealanders. Compared to Koreans and Chinese, the Japanese community is much smaller. However, there are many young Japanese who come and stay for one year on a ‘Working Holiday Visa’. Most of them go to English schools while staying with Kiwi families when they first come here and work or travel during their one year stay. Interestingly, they are very open to Christianity.

In this article I will focus on what God is doing amongst these young Japanese people in New Zealand and discuss what we may be able to do in a multi-cultural society. I start by stating how I became a Christian. Though I had attended Sunday schools while I was little, I didn’t seriously commit myself to be a Christian until I came to New Zealand to work as a Japanese teacher 16 years ago. At that time I felt quite lonely as I was away from my own family. One of my colleagues invited me to go to her church and I went there one Sunday. To be honest, I didn’t understand the messages fully and I was not particularly interested in Christianity itself, but I went back to her church. It was probably because some ladies invited me to join their lunch after the services. They also invited me to other social events and to their homes. My English was not so good, but they treated me as one of their friends, not as a foreigner. They didn’t preach to me, but, instead, shared God’s love with me in a non-threatening way. One of

the ladies offered me one on one bible study and I learned about Christianity. I was baptised four months later.

It has been my joy and passion to reach out to Japanese people here in New Zealand. They usually have never been to church in Japan and therefore know little about Christianity. Less than 0.5 % of the entire Japanese population is thought to be Christians. However, if you ask Japanese, particularly those who are on a working holiday visa, to come to church you will be surprised that most of them show an interest because they are longing to interact with New Zealanders. It may also be that they think all Westerners go to church on Sunday, and attending church could be a good cultural experience for them.

There are three Japanese churches in New Zealand. However non-Christians prefer to go to English speaking churches because their motivation is to improve their English and to build up friendships with others. There are a few what we can call international or multicultural churches in Auckland. Many Asian students including young Japanese make these churches their home. Some of these churches offer easy English messages so that non-native English speakers may understand the messages. The services are held in either a different room in the same church building on Sunday or a different day of the week. They also offer bible study or other courses such as Alpha in easy English. Interestingly enough, when one church organised an Alpha course for all the church members, most of the attendants were Japanese. The alpha video had a Japanese translation subtitle.

There are also churches, which offer translation services with translators and translation equipment are available. But normally, unless they are Christians or seriously seeking Christianity, few people are keen to use translation services. I have been involved in leading both English and Japanese bible studies, but Japanese non-Christians normally go to English ones even if their English may not be so good initially. But if they start to be interested in Christianity, they will join the Japanese group and start to use the translation service.

Based on my own experience and observation, communicating the Gospel in English to Japanese may have limitations unless their English is very fluent. Misunderstandings may also occur because of cultural differences. For example, Japanese people generally find it very difficult to say “No” when Kiwi Christians are being kind to them. This is because they don’t want to lose the friendship or make others feel bad, so they may pretend to become Christians. Often, Kiwi Christians have excitedly told me their Japanese home-stay student has become a Christian and have asked me to talk to them. Then I find out they haven’t yet become a Christian.

However this is an important opportunity because the majority of them are here for a short time, a maximum of one year, and it is rather difficult for them to hear the gospel in Japan. It has been said that Japanese are thirty times more likely to become Christians when overseas. But it is also said that eighty percent of Japanese who became Christians abroad fall away from faith because of the lack of fellowship to support them when they return back to Japan. Linking returning Japanese new Christians with Christians in Japan who will be able to help them move forward spiritually is crucially important.

But how can those young Japanese people understand Christianity if their understanding of English is so limited? Most New Zealanders do not know any Japanese words apart from “sushi” and “Toyota” and most churches don’t have Japanese speakers. So, is it going to be impossible to get connected with them to share the gospel?

There is a network for Japanese Christians throughout New Zealand. Japanese churches and other international churches, which have Japanese members, work together for the Japanese

community despite coming from different denominations. There are also people who are involved in a ministry called 'Diaspora' who serve amongst Japanese living in New Zealand rather than going to Japan. As already mentioned, Japanese people are more open to the gospel while in New Zealand than when they are in Japan. I am one of those and am in a position to help my fellow Japanese simply by talking to them in Japanese, or by providing Japanese resources and so on. 'Diaspora' also organizes Japanese Christian camps each year. In 2010 more than two hundred people attended the camp and seven people were baptised there. Different types of outreach events have been organised regularly, for example inviting Christian singers from Japan. One of the main purposes of this kind of event is to encourage those Japanese people to be a part of the church fellowship. It is a long process but some of them will show their interest in seeking Christianity by mixing with Kiwis and other Christians or attending a Bible study. Each one of us has a different role to bring them to the kingdom of God.

Of course, there will be some challenges and issues, when working with people from different cultural background. For example, most churches in Japan don't encourage people to be baptised until they have done a lot of Bible study to make sure about their faith, usually at least one year, but some New Zealand churches encourage them to get baptised as soon as possible. The other big issue is their family and ancestor worship. The family might be accepting of their new faith, but when it comes to turning away from ancestor worship because of Christianity, a conflict might occur. If new Christians ask questions regarding the different denominational churches, they might get confusing answers. This may happen when working together with different churches and denominations.

New Zealand is becoming a multi-cultural society and any congregation may have to accommodate mixed races and nationalities. Maintaining unity within such diversity can be a challenging and surely difficult task. There is a view that foreigners who came into this country should adopt New Zealand ways. As the old proverb says, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" However I believe trying to fit in, or assimilate into a dominant culture or existing structure, does not work. There are many culturally distinct ways of reaching the same goal, or of living one's life. In fact, there are many equivalent ways to reach a final goal. By accepting people as they are and having attentive listening ears and heart, I am sure we can build a unity as Christ desires. New Zealanders alone may not be able to lead Japanese to faith, if communication is a barrier. But I cannot lead them either by myself, as they want to be mixing with non-Japanese. By working together side by side, I believe we can make a difference in their lives. It also offers the opportunity to experience in at least some small degree the wonderful vision of Revelation 7:9, where people from "every nation, tribe, people and language" stand before the throne in worship of God.

The challenge of being an ethnic church

James Lee

Around 30,000 Korean people are living in New Zealand with around 20,000 in Auckland. Most love living in New Zealand but we have some difficulties, such as finding a job, involving in

social activities and understanding many other different cultures. However, what makes us glad is the kind society, family relationships, clean beaches and the beautiful landscapes. My family chose to immigrate to NZ because of the better education opportunities, the good environment to live in, and to learn English. Also because we heard that New Zealand is a calm and peaceful country.

Most New Zealand people are quite friendly. When I get lost on the road and ask for directions, they explain how to get there and some even get out of their cars to give me information in more detail. Some even led me to somewhere I recognised so I could find my way back.

Many Koreans of the 1.5 generation are confused about whether they are Korean or a New Zealander. Not all, but many have problems with their parents. The problems are mainly because of the generation gap between the parents and the children. The term 1.5 generation refers to people who immigrate to a new country before or during their early teens. They earn the label the '1.5 generation' because they bring with them characteristics from their home country but continue their assimilation and socialisation in the new country. Their identity is thus a combination of new and old culture and tradition. Depending on the age of immigration, the community into which they settle, extent of education in their native country, and other factors, 1.5 generation individuals will identify with their countries of origin to varying degrees. However, this identification will be affected by their experience of growing up in the new country. 1.5 generation individuals are often bilingual and find it easier to be assimilated into the local culture and society than people who have immigrated as adults.

Although we start learning English from intermediate school in Korea, New Zealand has a high language barrier (IELTS 6.5) that makes us think again about immigrating to New Zealand. When I was a child, the ways we learnt English were very different. It was so that we could read persistently, not to use practically. (point is too high.)

Our church is located in the Mangere Bridge area which is well-known for many burglaries and other criminal incidents. My mission is to make our church more biblical and strong, after being devoted to God. Then we plan to influence the people in Mangere to reduce crimes and proclaim Jesus Christ our Saviour to make them his disciples.

Our mission is to influence the people living in this area so they can worship God and experience the greatest love of Jesus Christ. We have a garage sale for the locals once a month at our Church, supplying quality goods for a cheap price. Most are one or two dollars. An obstacle we face is the English speaking service for the community. Korean Christians have a very strong belief in God and we have our own special way to study the Bible and pray. We have begun an English language ministry. In this way we can associate better with the English speaking ministers and help each other.

As a church minister I generally look after our church members, through pastoral care, visiting our members and counselling with them. We evangelise at the Mangere market on Saturdays. We also go abroad for mission to another country once a year. So far, we have been to Fiji, Vanuatu, Pakistan and China. I have also started a Bible study program. All members have to be involved if they want to become a member of our church. It takes sixteen weeks to complete.

I am negative with the ecumenical ministry. Although many churches are united, there are difficulties in agreeing in some areas. For example, after many churches in Australia became one denomination in the Uniting church, the issue regarding homosexual ministers caused trouble. A Korean church in Melbourne had a conflict between the church members due to different opinions about that issue, so about fifty members left the church. The most important thing we have to do is pray. The ministry of revival is in the prayer. Our church members get together at

5.30 am to pray together Tuesday to Friday. Koreans are very strong in prayer. I suggest that we all have to pray for this country and the movement of Holy Spirit in the churches.