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insight

A Journal for International Student Ministry in the UK

Connecting with Collectivist Cultures

friends INTERNATIONAL

a word from the editor

"Belief in the sovereignty of God is no excuse for lazy thinking." This has become something of a watchword with us as we put this journal together. The thought behind it was drawn from two conversations. Firstly, an African visitor to our church told me that, when the gospel first arrived in Africa, the Africans responded to the grace of God *despite* the non-contextualised approach of the first wave of missionaries. Secondly, an Oxford church leader said that to ignore the need to sensitively contextualise our message was "lazy thinking". We do believe in the sovereignty of God to reach people through our stumbling, flawed and often sinful ways. Yet, we also know He calls us to "be all things to all men that we might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22).

Faced with the highly complex and often underestimated challenges presented to us in international student ministry, the problem is often not so much 'lazy thinking' but 'overwhelmed thinking'. Dealing as we do with not just one culture but often several at any given time, we need all the help we can get.

What excites me about the articles in this issue is that together they make contextualisation accessible. Fritz Deininger gives us 'on the field' missionary insight into Thai Folk Buddhism, and his observations relate directly to our international student context – a reminder brought home to us by Lynette Teagle's article that the students we see in this country have a home context which we overlook because we don't see it. Catherine Weston brings the same issues closer still, reminding us that students are stepping not just out of their own world, but into ours. The world may be on our doorstep, but their journey is not complete until we open the door and welcome them in.

Our writers show us that we have already some of the tools we need to reach many cultures all at once. We have something that may have lain dormant in our thinking, but has never gone away: community. Many cultures think and operate far more collectively than the individualistic West. Yet we in the Church, despite the prevailing climate of individualism around us, can offer just that: community, family, a real and tangible experience of the Living God. In His sovereignty He has given the tools; it is now up to us to learn how to use them.

Peter Teagle
Guest Editor

Insight welcomes your comments and responses to the articles featured.
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Virtually Going Home:
An Unseen Dimension of International Students' Lives

by Lynette Teagle

Every Sunday afternoon in 1991, the public telephone in the Derby & Rathbone halls of residence in Liverpool would ring. It was fairly common knowledge that the call would be from Singapore, for the Chinese girl on the 3rd floor.

That student was, of course, myself, and the call was my weekly opportunity to check in with my parents back home, to catch up on the latest news and for them to make sure I was doing my work and taking my vitamins.

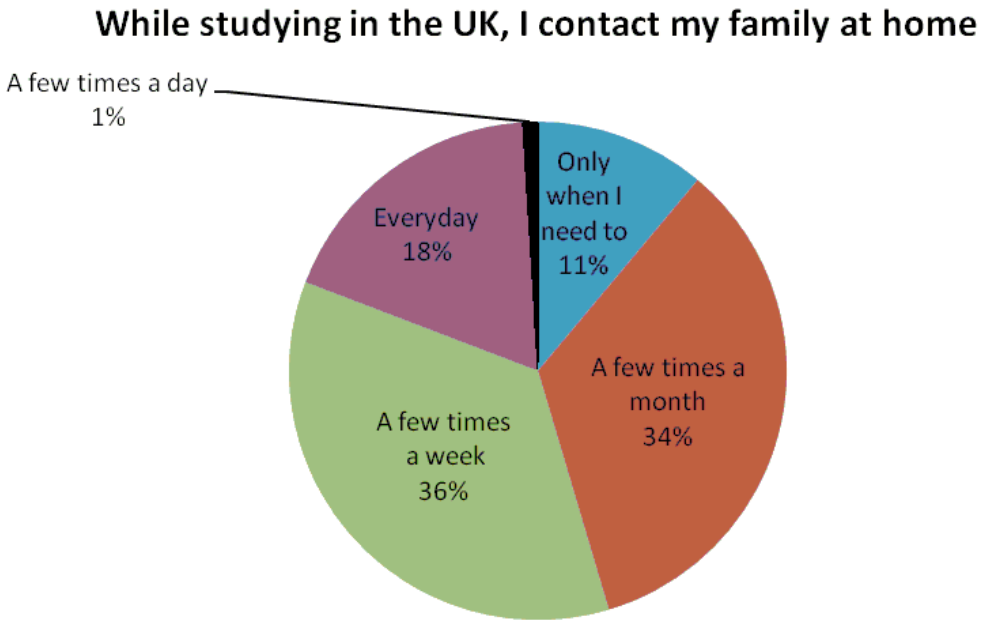
These days the situation for international students is very different as modern technology and advancements in cyber-communications make it far easier and cheaper to communicate across the miles. Students come from overseas laden with a slew of technology: the latest mobile phone, laptop, iPad/ iPod, webcam. Often their first questions are: "How do I get broadband?" or "How can I get an international SIM card for my phone?"

While many of us know intuitively that students keep in close contact with family back home, we are largely unaware of how technology is changing the shape of the international student experience. Nor perhaps are we actively engaging with the opportunities and challenges created by students' continuing connection with their families.

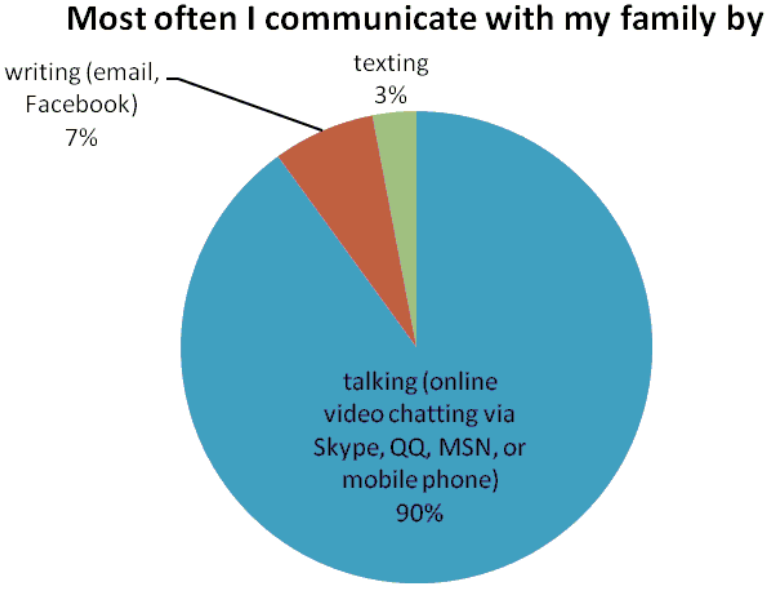
A Survey on Communication and Community

In June 2011, I devised an online survey[1] which was sent to international student contacts of Friends International staff and associates. The purpose of the survey was two-fold: first, to gain an idea of the frequency with which international students communicate with their families and the main methods they use, and second, to find out if distance from home affects the value which international students place on the advice they receive from parents and elders back home.

The summer months of the year were chosen to capture students' behaviour. This is close to the end of the academic year, and since the assumption might otherwise be made that students would contact family more frequently during the early days of orientation and 'more lonely' winter months of October to December.



1. http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/3CSF9GX



After two months 121 responses were received from students ranging from undergraduate to post-doctoral studies[2], and representing some 40 nationalities[3]. Although one person alone cannot accurately represent the views of their cultural background, the survey captures a snapshot of experiences across the range of international students we work with.

The results of the survey indicate that almost regardless of nationality or cultural background[4] many students remain in close communication with their families back home. Of the 121 respondents 55% had online video conversations with their families at least a few times a week, and almost 20% were in contact with home at least once daily.

This should shape our perspective as we interact with international students and seek to care for them. Rather than treating each one purely as an autonomous individual, we should be acutely aware of the family back home as a significant but unseen influence on each student. We should also learn to regard each student as continuing to be a representative of their home community, of which they remain an integral part.

THE IMPLICATIONS

1. International students seek to remain rooted in their home life.

In individualistic societies great emphasis is placed on the choices and decisions of the individual, and for a long time we have applied a similar emphasis to our work with international students. Traditionally, it has been felt that being overseas and away from home means that students are cut off from family bonds and obligations, and thus have to fend for themselves, since physical distance often means a necessary cutting of family ties. The distance has also led us to think that each international student focuses only on his or her own wishes and preferences, although a growing understanding of collectivist cultures has meant that cross-cultural workers are more aware of the continued influence of the home community on those overseas.

The advent of Skype and similar online video chatting methods, and cheap international calls on mobile phones, means that students are no longer as isolated as they used to be. Interestingly, many survey respondents reported that they spoke to their families at least as often as before, if not more. Even for those who felt they were speaking to their families less than before, the reduction was due to the fact that they were no longer living under the same roof as their family members, and hence were missing the daily interaction of home life, but that does not mean that the overall influence of the family had reduced significantly.

In fact, the survey results suggest that the influence of the family is even stronger than we had previously thought. There is a great difference between the student who is out of contact with family, but carries a subconscious awareness of his background and family values, and the student who

2. Age range breakdown as follows: 18-20 (15%), 21-30 (72%), 31-40 (11%), over 40 (2%).
3. Nationality breakdown of respondents as follows: China, including Hong Kong (36), Japan(6), Malaysia(5), France(4), USA (4), India(4), Turkey(3), Thailand(3), Taiwan(3), South Korea(3), Nigeria(3), Nepal(2), Romania(2), Bulgaria(2), Finland(2), Spain(2), Vietnam(2), Latvia(2), Germany(2), with one each from Tanzania, Colombia, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, Singapore, Greece, Kazakhstan, Malta, Poland, Iran, Ghana, Chile, Mauritius, Saudi Arabia, Macau, Bangladesh, Kenya, Uganda, Syria, Jordan.
4. While the majority of respondents came from 'collectivist' cultures, responses did not correlate with stereotypes. For example, those who only communicate "when they need to" came mainly from collectivist cultures such as Taiwan(2), Thailand(2), Malaysia, South Korea, and Bangladesh, traditionally individualistic Germany, as well as those ranked in between: Japan, Mexico, Bulgaria and Turkey (based on ranking devised by Geert Hofstede (2010), in *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind,* New York: McGraw-Hill Books).

is speaking to his family every other day and making decisions and choices in the light of those continuing conversations.

As one Oxford DPhil student commented:

> *I'm in the UK, but this is just for my education, but I still belong… So it's that whole question again of negotiating and navigating, because they are two different places and two different sorts of cultures… There's a network of relatives who, you know, call for holidays, the holiday periods and everything – those are key, and obviously my family.* ***I'm on Google Chat with my brother almost every day. I phone my parents… The need to be grounded, for me, is the most important thing.***[5]

In addition, lest we think that the responses are a reflection of age and maturity, the majority of respondents (75 out of 121) were studying at postgraduate level, including some at PhD level and above, with 85% aged 21 or older.

2. The opinions and advice of parents and elders matter greatly to those overseas.

The survey also asked key questions to gauge students' attitudes to the advice and opinions expressed by their families, specifically parents and elders. Again, responses bore little relation to students' cultural background.

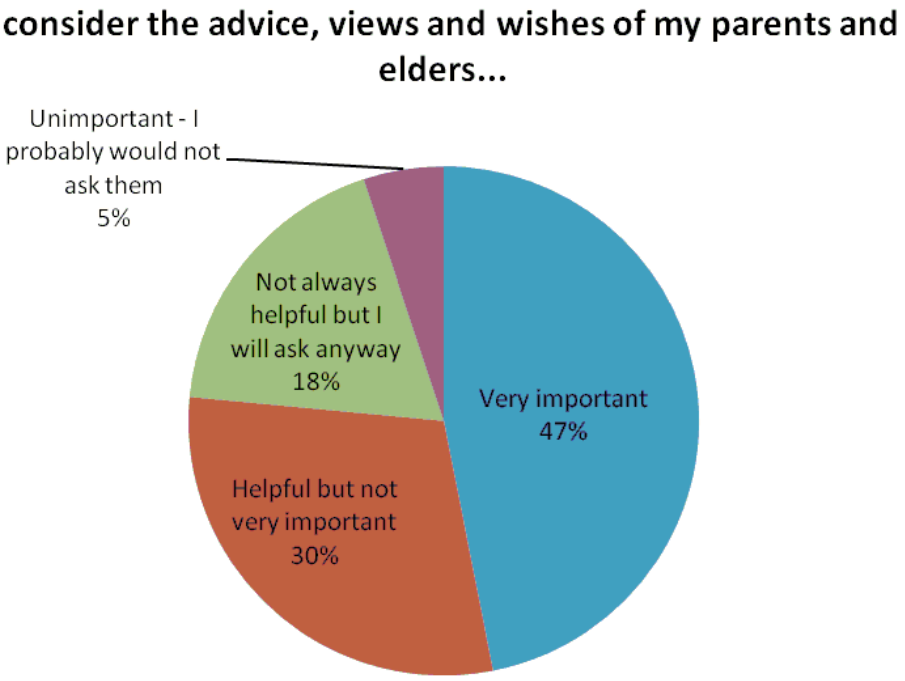
This would suggest that the international student experience increases the influence of family bonds across many nationalities. Living in an unfamiliar context and lacking the normal resources afforded by a network of friends and advisors, students, and even students that are mature adults, look to their parents or other elders for guidance and direction. It is striking that not many listed 'friends' as a primary source of advice while overseas.

Writing on the need for evangelism to reach whole families, Alex G. Smith observes:

> *All over the world the family generally provides emotional support, expects loyalty with elders, and often exercises control over younger and sometimes older members. This solidarity affects the receptivity of family dynamics to outside or unusual influences. Family bonds and filial unity generally resist or oppose changes coming from without through fear of the effects on existing kin ties, traditional loyalty and financial stability.*[6]

Three inferences can be drawn from this comment:

- First, the influence of the family remains a strong factor which contributes to international students' feelings of stability and identity when they are here in the UK.
- Second, family influence may affect on the receptivity of students to the gospel, depending on whether the elders of the family react to their new spiritual interest positively or negatively.



5. http://www.learning.ox.ac.uk/supervision/dphil/international/

6. Smith, Alex G. "Evangelizing Whole Families: The Value of Family in the 21st Century" in *Family and Faith in Asia: The Missional Impact of Social Networks*, Paul H. de Neui (Ed.) (2010), Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, pp 18-19.

- Third, a family's negative response to the gospel may have less to do with religious ties and behaviour, and more to do with the perceived threat to family harmony and unity brought by a student's growing interest in a religion, even if it is a move from nominalism to whole-hearted commitment.

Even so, I believe that on-going family communication creates valuable opportunities for ministry.

THE OPPORTUNITIES

1. The chance to build relationships with the immediate family.

One real advantage to students' close communication with their parents is that we can begin to connect with their families very early in our friendships with students. Concern and care for students' families is often welcome (unless they are extremely individualistic) and can be shown by:

- communicating our greetings to their parents;
- regularly asking after the family's health and welfare;
- offering to pray for needs and concerns, and keeping up-to-date with events;
- where appropriate, sending small gifts for family members on special occasions.

Apart from having pastoral importance, this has implications for returnee ministry. Our growing relationship with students' families can ease the way for those who go home with 'a new faith'. When 'Marcus' returned home having recently been baptised, his newfound faith was quashed by his girlfriend and her Buddhist family. This was not helped when they married and moved into her home, where he was told not to read the Bible or have it visible in their living area. When we visited Marcus and had the opportunity to spend time with his wife and in-laws, things improved tremendously. They no longer saw his Christian faith as a strange Western aberration, but something which he had learnt from caring friends. Had we had the opportunity to connect with his girlfriend while he was still in Britain, perhaps she might not have been as antagonistic on his initial return.

Relationships, however, require time and creativity. It is no easy task to connect with families when we are already struggling to relate with the students we meet face-to-face. But I believe that by seeking ways to interact with families, albeit indirectly, we are more likely to see students who come to faith in the UK continue their walk with God, especially if their families have been won over even to a small degree.

2. The need to pray meaningfully for families.

We have seen that the opinion of parents and elders remains significant, even when the family is separated by thousands of miles. While many might not actively consult their parents on issues such as friendship and religion, students continue to be attuned to the degree of positivity (or negativity) in their parents' (or spouse's) response to their involvement with Christian activities, and this can have a major influence on their decision for Christ, even if they themselves are convinced of the truth of the gospel. We need therefore to proactively think and pray about the hurdles which seekers might face in their journey towards Christ, in terms of family influence.

Sumi was a Japanese Masters student who would contribute enthusiastically and thoughtfully in Bible studies. She would often mention the conversations she was having with her husband in Japan about all she was doing in Britain. An older man, he seemed to be singularly disinterested in the Christian faith, and in time, Sumi's spiritual interest seemed to cool as well, discouraged by her husband's negative feedback.

It takes vision and imagination to pray consistently for people we have never met, but unless we are interceding for the families of students we work with, any spiritual growth may be impeded by the opinions of their loved ones. Conversely, the Holy Spirit's action could mean that our contact with one student results in entire families coming into a genuine relationship with Jesus Christ.

3. The potential to reach communities for Christ.

Cyber-technology means we can no longer simply pay lip-service to the idea of reaching nations through international students. The family has always had a high place in the Bible and nations have been reached for God's Kingdom family by family. Although familiar with Jesus' teaching on the impact of following Him on family relationships (for example,

Mt 8:18-22; Mt 10:21, 37-39), we easily overlook the fact that Jesus did not just relate to individuals but often included their households, whether directly or indirectly.

He called two pairs of brothers to be amongst His first disciples: Simon and Andrew, and James and John (Matthew 4:18-22). He was well known to family members of his disciples, including Simon Peter's mother-in-law (Mt 8:14) and the mother of James and John (Mt 20:20-23). His healings often had a dramatic impact not just on the ones healed, but on their family members (Mt 9:23-26, Mt 15:21-28, Mt 17:14-18).

Smith notes from the historical evidence that for more than a thousand years the early church focused their evangelism on whole families, clans, tribes and peoples. This changed only after the Reformation of the 1500s, within the nominal churched communities of Europe, when "the call for renewal of personal faith and individual salvation was rightly warranted. In that context a change of emphasis (from family movements) to the individual was correct."[7] Considering our own context of evangelism and discipleship with non-Christianised internationals, we need to balance our practice of working solely with the individual, seeking the individual's personal profession of faith, with looking at the bigger picture and prayerfully seeking ways to reach their wider community as well.

Ann was a student who started attending Bible studies almost as soon as she arrived in Britain. When her mother found out about this her first response was to remove the household idols as she felt that "there should be no conflict between my gods and the Christian God". Ann found this response very encouraging, seeing it as a sign that God was at work in her mother's life. She began to share more openly with her mother, sending her YouTube and website links to Christian songs and sermons in Mandarin. Before long she began to talk about making a commitment to Christ, while at home, her parents sought out Christians in their neighbourhood and began to attend church.

4. The need for transitional communities.

There are clear pros and cons to students staying connected with home. Cyber-communication has been found to play a big role in helping overseas sojourners through phases of adjustment by maintaining a sense of identity and connection with the family back home.[8] This has allowed them to ease into their new life, supported by a ready source of help and advice on the other side of the webcam.

The disadvantage of constant contact with home is that students can end up even more isolated in the 'real world', since they are less motivated to interact with people around them. This can lead to the sudden realization that they have few friends apart from the ones they might have met during orientation.

Research has shown that international students socialize most easily with co-nationals (people from their own country), followed by other internationals, and finally, though rarely, with local students.[9] Despite concerns that this leads to a 'ghetto pattern' of students forming disparate mono-ethnic friendship groups, many researchers acknowledge the fact that co-national friendships are important to help students feel that they have the support necessary for mental and emotional wellbeing.

However, it is also true that in terms of wider networks of friendship, universities are limited in the help they can provide, and many international students – even those from individualistic cultures – struggle to find 'community places' where they can get to know others and be known outside their usual milieu.

Sometimes you want to go
where everybody knows your name,
and they're always glad you came.
You want to be where you can see,
our troubles are all the same
You want to be where everybody knows your name.
— **'Where Everybody Knows Your Name'**
by Gary Portnoy & Judy Hart Angelo

In many university towns today, local Christians run at least one weekly social event for international students in the form of cafés, conversation sessions or Bible discussions and dinner. Many of us tend to view social events purely as 'holding activities', intended to draw out students who have an interest

7. Ibid, p 16.
8. Meier, C. (2005). *Cyberspace & 'Keeping In Touch': Staying Connected Long Distance*, an unpublished paper submitted as part of PhD requirements, Regent University, Canada.
9. For example, in Brown, L. (2009). "An ethnographic study of the friendship patterns of international students in England: An attempt to recreate home through conational interaction", *International Journal of Educational Research*, Volume 48, Issue 3, pp 184-193.

in spiritual matters. The ultimate aim is to move students into Bible studies, without which the social activities are meaningless.

By contrast, deeper reflection on our social gatherings should help us see that they actually serve a vital and holistic purpose as ***transitional communities.*** This is where students, as people in transition, have the opportunity to discover both their changed identity as well as a community of caring people within their new British life. There are precious few venues, on and off campus, which are as welcoming and unthreatening as international student events. As one Persian student recently commented at the Oxford Brookes International English Club, "I love this place. It's as fun as the pub quiz night, but without the alcohol." Yet it is in this "fun and safe" environment that many see the realities of Christian life and community first-hand. Often our actions speak of Christ before our words do.

The survey results suggest that international students, regardless of culture, view 'virtual' family ties as key to their time overseas. Therefore, international cafés and similar events are perhaps far more valuable even than we first thought. Much more than being a means to an end or a convenient bridge into more 'activities', transitional communities give students the chance to form new bonds of friendship and support, and thus serve a vital need which can lead many to a deeper, more long lasting encounter with the living God.

DISCUSSION GUIDE:

1. To what extent have you noticed students contacting their parents? Does our experience match the statistics found in the article?

2. If our experience is that students seldom talk about their parents in our hearing, why do you think that is? What might we do to improve pastoral care and ministry to international students, in light of the impact their families at home have on their lives in the UK?

3. In what ways might we be able to factor in the influence of family back home in our evangelism and discipleship?

4. What did you learn from this article about international cafés, and similar activities, being *transitional communities*? How might seeing these activities as transitional communities rather than holding activities alter our perspective and the ultimate outcome of such events?

Understanding My Own Culture and Why it Matters

by Catherine Weston

Years ago, when we were very new to international student ministry, my husband Richard and I invited an Iranian student for a meal at our home and he accepted. As it happened our diaries were so booked up with evening engagements – a necessity of church life it seemed – that the date we offered him was about three weeks ahead. When the day came I spent a long time going to considerably more trouble than usual to cook an unfamiliar vegetarian recipe. Unfortunately, given all this effort, our guest failed to show up.

We learned two lessons from this episode…

Time Keeping and Planned Appointments

The first was that the Iranian student had not intended to be rude; rather that our own expectations were unrealistic.

When it comes to social interaction, most non-Western cultures are very spontaneous. They wouldn't dream of fixing an engagement more than a week in advance. The mere act of writing down an appointment to meet a friend for dinner can seem totally alien. An Argentine friend who had adopted this practice while in Britain told me her friends at home would be positively insulted if she did it there!

If we were living in Iran, we would, I hope, have soon observed the different rules governing social interactions and adapted accordingly. But we live in Britain and need to follow the norms of our own culture to a large extent, if we are not to frustrate and offend most people with whom we have contact. Yet at the same time, to fulfil our calling to welcome the stranger from another culture, we need to adapt our practice to avoid the above scenario repeating itself. Perhaps if we had rung our new friend up a couple of days beforehand to say "you have remembered you are coming to supper on Friday, haven't you?" then all would have been well. On the other hand, we might have discovered he had so completely forgotten our invitation that he had already fixed to go to London that weekend instead.

These days we have adapted the way in which we offer hospitality to take into account both our need to plan ahead and the spontaneity of other cultures. We deliberately designate mealtime space in our diaries for inviting international guests – otherwise we know it may not happen. We might block out several dates over a two or three month period. Then the week in which the date is fixed we contact our international friends and find out who is free. Simple really.

Biblical Values, or Western?

There was, however, a second, deeper, lesson from this episode – and indeed other similar misunderstandings – which has taken time and reflection to clarify. We, who are seeking to befriend international students, will rightly jump at the opportunity to learn more about, say, Japanese or Chinese culture; but even more important is the need to first understand our own culture. Where did this obsession with time management, diaries, appointments and forward planning come from in Western culture? Africans often joke, "You have the watches, but we have the time!" to reflect their more relational, laid-back approach to life.

Is our approach more biblical? When we give (or hear) talks to busy Christians about 'making the most of your time' (Eph 5:16, NASB) are we faithful to the context of this biblical saying, or merely baptising a Western cultural value?

In 1758, American polymath Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of the USA, penned an essay entitled 'The Way to Wealth'. In it a wise 'Father Abraham' sets out many pithy sayings to encourage readers in the ways of diligence and frugality. This was published in 'Poor Richard's Almanac', which at the time was hugely popular and influential. Such sayings as 'Time is money' or 'There are no gains without pains' and 'Early to bed, early to rise, makes a

man healthy, wealthy and wise' have passed into common usage.

For a helpful history and overview of Western civilisation's attitudes to work and use of time, Tim Chester's short and eminently readable book '*The Busy Christian's Guide to Busyness*' is well worth reading – particularly, for the purposes of this article, the first three chapters. In his chapter entitled 'Using your time efficiently' he poses a warning:

> *The problem with schedules is they easily become ends in themselves. They should be the means that enable us efficiently to use time and so serve others…but our schedule can become a greater priority than people. This seems a particular problem for Anglo-Saxons. Other cultures value people over schedules.*[1]

And again

> *It's possible to run an efficient meeting that keeps to time, sticks to the point and cuts out chat and banter. But chat and banter are the heart and soul of relationships. And relationships are the oil that makes organisations run smoothly. You can't work together as a team without good relationships. Don't confuse efficiency and effectiveness.*[2]

And one final quotation:

> *Busyness can also be away of avoiding time for people. 'I'm busy' is sometimes a euphemism for 'back off'. Our schedules can be an excuse for not serving others. 'I'd love to help,' we say, 'but I'm tied up this week.' It's very easy to set yourself tasks for the day and for these to become more important than the person we meet in need.*[3]

I began with a personal story about a culture clash, which provided us with a lesson in how to better handle engagements with international students. However the incident also threw into relief an underlying value in Western society, which needs to be held up to the scriptures and challenged. When, all those years ago, we were wondering about the no show of our guest, my husband's comment at the time is instructive: "I am sure I saw him write it down in his diary." With the benefit of hindsight we can see that this was merely wishful thinking, based on his own perception that everyone was meant to do it like that. Today I hope we know better.

Forward planning and efficient time management are tools which, when placed in God's hands, enable us to get things done in His service. They have their place and we can give thanks that God has put us in a culture shaped in part by such values. But at the same time, as culturally self-aware Christians, we can recognise where they come from and live light to them as we relate to people from different backgrounds. We might run a programme of events for internationals, but recognise that the relationships are more important than sticking to the schedule.

In the light of the discussion above, my thesis in this article is that it really matters that we take the trouble to think about and analyse our own cultural filters as we engage in the ministry of befriending, witnessing to and discipling international students. We need to check what we consider as 'norms' and recognise they may stem more from our culture than from the gospel.

Individualism and Compartmentalisation

To illustrate further the ways in which our own cultural norms shape the way we do things, here is another area of application worth exploring, as exemplified in the following story: A Ghanaian friend – long established in the UK now – once confided in me her early experiences of a British dinner party. When she and her husband arrived at their hosts' house with their little daughter, she discovered to her distress that no provision had been made for her little girl – no food or place setting. 'Is my daughter not a valued person too?' she asked.

By the time she told me this story she had long since adjusted to the British habit of separate adult time and the need to get a babysitter. However, her experience highlights the differences between her culture, which is inclusive and group oriented, and ours, which is highly individualistic and compartmentalised. Perhaps our individualism has its roots in the philosophy of the European Enlightenment. "I think, therefore I am" said

1. Chester, Tim (2006). *The Busy Christian's Guide to Busyness*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, p 41.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

Descartes. Contrast this with the African philosophy of 'ubuntu', meaning 'I am what I am because of who we all are'.

Whatever individualism's origins are in Western culture, it is all pervasive. We train our children to be self-sufficient individuals by putting them to bed in a separate cot, even separate room, from the earliest age. One Japanese mother once explained to the author that she thought this was quite cruel. In her words.

> *Though I often complained to my husband that I had no time to do for myself [sic], I did not think at all of this idea [i.e. British method] of putting children to sleep because I felt too sorry for children to leave them awake alone in their bed.*[4]

Her concluding observation is noteworthy:

> *Looking at old people's lives here, I've seen much more independent old people in England than in Japan. It seems to me that they are strong against loneliness because they are alone in bed since they are born.*[5]

If we encourage independence from the cradle, then we celebrate it at the graveside too. A survey of funeral music conducted by Co-operative Funeralcare in 2005 showed that Frank Sinatra's rendition of 'I did it My Way' was the most popular contemporary song played at British funerals.[6]

Our education system teaches us to think for ourselves, form our own opinions and ask questions. Plagiarism is punished and initiative is rewarded. The 'gap year' experience is positively encouraged to help school leavers learn responsibility and independence. In society at large eccentrics are tolerated – even celebrated.

Popular sayings often illuminate a society's values. 'Learn to stand on your own two feet' (positive) and 'being tied to his mother's apron strings' (negative) speak eloquently of the value we place on independence. Coupled with this self-autonomy is the high value our society places on privacy. We may be concerned that friends or relatives are pursuing a potentially disastrous course of action but we hold back from offering direct advice, lest we be accused of unwarranted interference or meddling.

In short, if I am raised in a Western society like Britain, I regard myself as a self-autonomous individual able to make choices with reference to my own perceived desires and needs. My behaviour reflects on me, rather than my family or group.

A common feature of individualistic culture is the tendency to fragment our lives into different compartments, which have little apparent overlap – work, home, church or sports club. Christian living becomes associated with church activities rather than the whole of life. Those who come from a group oriented, holistic culture are much less likely to fall into this trap.

I found this particular trait in me challenged one day by the same Ghanaian friend I mentioned earlier. A group of us were meeting to pray in her house for the international wives group we ran in a local university residence. When I arrived, I discovered one of the Taiwanese ladies from the wives group had come for lunch and our hostess had invited her to stay on while the rest of us arrived to pray. I found myself getting twitchy. To my way of compartmentalised thinking at the time, unbelievers and prayer meetings don't mix! I would have sent strong signals that we were about to have a meeting to which she wasn't invited! I learned an important lesson that day from my inclusive, group-orientated friend. We had the prayer meeting of course, with the Buddhist lady listening in as we prayed. Later I discovered that this was one of the things that drew her to eventual faith in Jesus.

Attuned to the End Result

I have tried to show by way of two examples that it really matters that we understand our own cultural values as we engage in our ministry among international students. For those engaged in international student ministry, it may be an even more important aspect of personal development than learning about the other cultures with whom we come into contact. Even when we are seeking to be utterly faithful to biblical truth, we do our international friends a disservice by subtly implying that our way is the normative way, instead of the way the gospel finds its expression in our Western society. Let us have the humility to recognise that, blessed though our society has been by centuries of gospel witness, we do not have the monopoly on biblical values and need to learn from others.

This is important because our culture not only comes into play in the superficial encounters of hospitality

4. Hino, Yoko. Unpublished English language exercise donated to the author (1993).
5. Ibid
6. Ward, David & Ward, Lucy. '*My Way* tops funeral charts'. The Guardian. 17 November 2005: main section p 4.

illustrated by my two examples. We need also to realise that it has far-reaching implications for our effectiveness in sharing the Gospel and discipling new believers. For example when it comes to evangelism we need to work hard to counteract our default tendencies to treat international students as self-autonomous individuals. One worker explains[7] that in her experience South East Asian wives, that showed great interest in Christianity, would not make a commitment unless their husbands also did so because in their context it is a family decision to change one's religion.

By understanding my own culture better I can recognise that what is normal for me may be neither biblical nor helpful. I can recognise that international students are part of families and societies where there are group decisions and expectations. I can discover that the best form of discipleship is the inclusive, relational approach, which encompasses all of life, rather than an activity which takes place during a formally structured course.

What happens if we overlook the need for this self-awareness? I want to suggest that we risk producing Western clones when we come to disciple international students because we have failed to see how much our own culture shapes the way we run our churches and activities, and live our lives as Christians. Worse, we risk producing ill prepared 'converts', who never thrive, or indeed fall away on their return home because the Christianity they have learned did not 'fit' their experience.

Consider the case of Mod, a Thai PhD student who 'prayed a prayer' at an evangelistic meeting. Her Christian friend expressed joy that she was now a Christian, but Mod still saw herself as Buddhist. In the words of the local Friends International staff worker:

> *Many months of discussion with open Bibles followed when we tried to understand the various cultural and religious issues. It seemed that Mod really did "believe" but she said very clearly that she just wasn't sure this would all work back home. All we could do during this time was to build up the tentative faith that she had. There was no attempt to push her to "make a clear declaration of faith" and certainly not to be baptised. We knew that such things would be premature. On her first Sunday back in her country she went to the church we'd told her about, taking family members with her. She liked it, and so did they! Within a few weeks she was baptised. Today several members of her family now believe. When I last saw her she was doing a part-time MA in Christian studies at a local Bible college, and was reading the Bible one-to-one with three people every week.*[8]

Let us ensure that, by God's grace, we make disciples, like Mod, who will make a difference when they return home.

DISCUSSION GUIDE:

1. Describe a culture clash you have experienced with regard to time keeping and appointments. How might you handle it differently now?

2. How does understanding this aspect of Western culture inform the way you engage with international students?

3. In what ways does biblical teaching challenge individualism?

4. How might things have been different if Mod's friends had pressed her for a clear commitment and baptism before she returned home?

5. Part of our care for international students is enabling them to adapt and thrive in *our* culture. How far should we go in adapting to *theirs* to enable effective discipleship?

7. Ruth Archer, Friends International Guildford, in email correspondence with the author.
8. Bartow Wylie, Friends International Cambridge, in email correspondence with the author.

Attracted by a Religion that Works

by Fritz Deininger

The Christian gospel has not yet penetrated Buddhist societies on a large scale. Every missionary serving in a Buddhist country in Asia needs to grapple with the fact that there has been little response to the gospel among the adherents of Buddhism, despite the presence of Christians in their societies. Since the arrival of the first Protestant missionaries in Thailand in 1828, the Thai Christian community has not grown beyond a minority of less than one percent of the country's population. The same is true in countries like Myanmar or Japan where the number of Christians from Buddhist backgrounds has not increased significantly even though much effort has been made to reach these people with the gospel.

Many factors contribute to the slow growth of the church in predominantly Buddhist countries. While each region in Asia differs in history, culture, and religious background and needs to be studied individually in order to identify the specific causes that prevent people from responding to the gospel, there are a few common factors that should be taken into account. For instance, society and family exert significant pressure on individuals to conform to traditional ways of life and belief systems. Upbringing and religious education also contribute to a person's worldview and attitude towards Christianity, which is often regarded as a Western religion. We need to study the life of a Buddhist person holistically in order to understand his or her cultural, religious and personal obstacles to following Christ.

What holds Buddhists back from believing in Christ, and why are they not attracted to Christianity? This article seeks to draw attention to some beliefs underlying the Folk Buddhist worldview, which play a major part in the life of the Buddhist. The Christian message encounters beliefs and practices that are deeply rooted in the hearts of the followers of Buddhism. This is not intended as a comprehensive study[1], but as a means to stimulate discussion that focuses on the spiritual dimension of the problem, and to discover approaches to helping Buddhists respond to the gospel.

The Question of Appropriate Methodology

James Gustafson, a missionary in Thailand for many years, concluded that the reasons for the non-growth of the Thai Christian community are basically problems of methodology, and that Folk Buddhists *"should be largely receptive to the gospel if approached right."*[2] If his assessment is correct, then what Christians need to do is to find the right approach to communicating the message of the gospel to Buddhists. These recipients of the gospel are often receptive, but the methods used prevent them from believing.

Many times, the insensitivity of the one presenting the gospel to Buddhists creates barriers instead of bridges to believing in Christ. Missionaries unwittingly make mistakes when they fail to understand the cultural and religious background of the people. They often do not know the language well enough to be able to communicate well and on a deeper level. Some have pointed out that the gospel must be presented and communicated in ways acceptable to the Buddhist community.[3] But is the failure to do so the main reason for the slow growth of the church among Buddhists?

Over the past few years, missionaries have employed many methods in approaching Buddhists with the gospel, paving the way for evangelism through English teaching, football teams, social help, drug rehabilitation, and caring for street children. These methods have produced some results, but they have not brought about a major breakthrough. While much effort has been made to reach Buddhists with the gospel, they have not responded as expected. The underlying beliefs and practices of Folk Buddhism, which shape the people's worldview, seem to

1. My unpublished M.A. Thesis titled *Folk Buddhism as a Challenge in Preaching the Gospel in Thailand* (1991), Columbia Biblical Seminary and Graduate School of Missions, Columbia, South Carolina, supplies many details concerning influences on the worldview of Folk Buddhists.

2. Gustafson, J. (1970). *Syncretistic Rural Thai Buddhism*. Unpublished M. A. Thesis, School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, p 238.

3. Williams, I. (1995). *The Receptive Ear: Communicating Biblical Truths in Thai World Views*. Unpublished Thesis, Columbia International University.

significantly inhibit their response to these efforts. I wish to highlight three aspects of this worldview.

1. A Religious Supermarket Mentality

Many Asian Buddhists do not adhere to the pure teaching of their religion, but practice a "Folk Buddhism" that includes animistic practices, Brahman ceremonies, Buddhist teaching, and other belief systems. This syncretistic religious system addresses all aspects of daily routine, provides answers to the mysteries of life, and helps its adherents deal with supernatural powers and forces. One of the main features of this religious worldview is that it is able to accommodate all kinds of beliefs and practices. It is a religious supermarket mentality for which *"all kinds of religious and superstitious elements can harmoniously integrate..., ...all religions are equally good and have the same goals and purposes... [and] the more religions you mix together, the more effective your salvation."*[4] Buddhist scholar and reform monk Buddhadasa Indapanno concurs: *"If we have the Bible in our minds and think in the Buddhist spirit of reasoning, we feel that Christianity, like Buddhism, is a religion of Wisdom and Karma, and that having realized the essence of both religions, we can be both Christians and Buddhists at the same time. And what is more we can be Muslims or Hindus at the same time."*[5] One of the reasons for this peaceful co-existence of religions is that each of them fulfils different needs. Many Buddhists want to integrate all of them as they are attracted to any religion that works and promises to take care of their earthly longings and the future. The religious supermarket mentality is born out of pragmatism.

During our time as missionaries in south Thailand, we attended the funeral of a local Christian. His children, who had not become Christians, wanted to conduct a Buddhist funeral. They allowed the Christians to have one evening for a funeral service, but while the service was still going on at the family home, Buddhist monks arrived to perform their funeral rites. Several funeral guests remarked that the deceased would surely go to heaven since both Christians and Buddhists helped his soul through their respective funeral rites. They had no trouble accepting the Christian songs, prayers, and sermon, but were primarily concerned that the deceased was well taken care of by the ceremonies, and that whatever was done in the name of either religion worked.

2. A Worldview Without a Permanent Centre

Another aspect of the Folk Buddhist's worldview is that it is not centred on a supreme deity as the ultimate cause of everything. When Buddhists use the term "God", its meaning cannot be compared with the God of the Bible. In contrast to Bible-believing Christians who *"define religion as an ultimate concern with a seeking and self-revealing God, which normally and ethically qualifies all other concerns, which motivates God-centred patterns of life, worship, and mission, and answers the question of the meaning of life."*[6] Buddhists do not have God as their stable and permanent centre to rely on.

The world of the Folk Buddhist is surrounded by the powers of the spirit realm. This spirit realm is the power source for the fulfilment of a Folk Buddhist's needs and wishes in daily life. He must find ways to deal with the spirits, and seek their favour and protection (sometimes even against their harmful schemes). Animistic beliefs and practices are prevalent in the daily consciousness and lifestyle of Folk Buddhists because they meet a need for protection, prosperity, and practical aid. It is a religious system that promises to work if everything is done according to the prescribed rules.

3. The Absence of a Redeemer

The essential difference between Christianity and Buddhism lies in this: *"Christianity is a religion which relies on external help, whereas Buddhism teaches the way of self-help."*[7] Christians depend on God, without whose help they can do nothing. Buddhists help themselves and receive the fruit of their actions. They work out their own salvation. Life is improved and perfected by their efforts. Self redemption is one of the cardinal principles in the life of a Buddhist. Atonement for sin depends on one's following the way that Buddha has shown to reach the highest goal. This belief contributes very much to the self-reliance of the Folk Buddhist. Becoming a Christian would mean depending on somebody else for salvation. Only those who can not help themselves

4. Kim, S. I. (1980). *The Unfinished Mission in Thailand.* Seoul, Korea: East-West Center for Missions Research and Development, p 16.
5. Indapanno, Buddhadasa (1967). *Christianity and Buddhism.* Sinclaire Thompson Memorial Lecture. Bangkok: Samakisan, p 7.
6. Steyne, Philip M. (1990). *Gods of Power.* Houston, TX: Touch Publications, p 28.
7. Indapanno, ibid, p 38.

need external help. These three dominant aspects - and many other religious beliefs are integral to the Folk Buddhist worldview. They surface and exert varying degrees of influence when the gospel is being preached. In some countries, Buddhism is more traditionally oriented; in others, globalization has produced changes in the belief system of the adherents. In many instances materialism has replaced Buddhist teaching so that the religious system must fulfil believers' materialistic needs.

The Challenge of the Gospel

As we have seen, the Asian Buddhist religious environment is ready to absorb the Christian message and its teaching as long as it can be interpreted from the Buddhist point of view. Since Buddhists "*... can accept all the passages of Christianity as in agreement with the Buddha's teaching, if they are allowed to interpret the language of Dhamma in the Bible in their own terms*"[8], it is unsurprising when a Buddhist responds that all religions teach the same, namely, to be good and to eventually reach the same goal in life. The Folk Buddhist has been taught to think in these categories. Such a response does not necessarily mean that the communicator has failed to make the message clear and understandable, but it points to a need to communicate in such a way that differentiates the gospel message from Buddhist teaching.

Christ's claim that He alone is "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6) challenges Folk Buddhists who want to shop around for suitable religious experiences. Jesus cannot be integrated into the religious supermarket because He makes an exclusive claim on the life of the follower. Furthermore, there is the question of whether the gospel message actually works. Has the gospel something to do with life in this world, or does it just teach us about eternal life? Christians often emphasize the importance of eternal life. In reaching Buddhists, perhaps there should be a focus on how to cope with life in this world and the stress of daily living. Do Christians have an answer? Certainly there are limits to what the gospel promises when it comes to earthly prosperity, well-being or fortune. Christians often overemphasize the intellectual side of the Christian message. Those who want to believe must understand the right doctrines: God created the world, we are sinners, Jesus came to save the world, Jesus is the Son of God, and many other doctrinal points. While it is important to know the fundamentals of the gospel, Christians presenting the gospel to Folk Buddhists need to demonstrate that the Christian message works out practically in their daily life, and that it is applicable to their struggles and meets their personal needs.

8. Indapanno, ibid, p 30.
9. Steyne, ibid, p 211.

Christians often emphasise that faith in Christ precedes obedience, but the two should not be separated. Why not invite someone to do what Jesus tells us and by doing find faith in him? (John 7:17). Alan Tippet says, "*The Christian way is not a legal code, or a 'statement of faith,' but a journeying with Christ. Christian ethics cannot be set down in a code book; they spring from a relationship between Master and disciple...Effective mission is more 'bringing men to Christ' than teaching the Christian way, for the way cannot be taught to unbelievers; it has to be experienced as men tread it with Christ.*"[9] An effective approach might be to say "come and see", "come and practice", or "come and encounter the truth". When introducing people to the experience first, the messenger of the gospel might fear that the hearer may not really come to faith in Christ. Perhaps our approach to Buddhists needs to undergo a paradigm shift. Folk Buddhists need to be invited to a journey.

Jesus has prepared the way for us to follow. In all that has been discussed, it is important to depend on God and the work of the Holy Spirit that will illumine the minds of Folk Buddhists to understand what God has prepared for them (1 Cor. 2:6-16).

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DISCUSSION GUIDE:

1. What experience have you had in communicating the gospel to Buddhist international students? Do we face the same or different challenges as those of missionaries in Thailand?

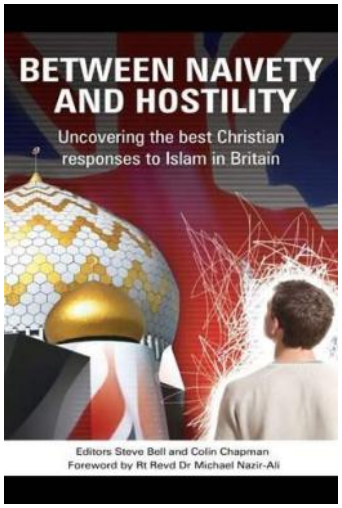
2. We might argue that it is not rational to believe in Buddhism and Christianity at the same time, and yet rationality does not seem to be a Folk Buddhist's primary concern when thinking of spiritual matters. How does this challenge our normal patterns of evangelism?

3. Deininger points out that it is crucial to show that the gospel works out practically in this life as well as holding promise for the next. How willing are we to give personal examples of how Christ's power has impacted our lives? How can we involve international students in our 'practice' of following Christ and, in so doing, show them our beliefs?

Book Reviews:

Between Naivety and Hostility

Steve Bell and Colin Chapman (Eds.)
Authentic Media, 2011
304 pp.



This unprecedented collection of 18 essays and additional supporting articles, subtitled '**Uncovering the best Christian responses to Islam in Britain**', is written on subjects close to the heart of everyone interested in Christian/ Muslim relations.

The book is not an introduction to Islam. It is a book for those who have a passion for the "grace and truth" approach to Christian/Muslim relationships and those who want to understand this school of thought in all its compassionate diversity. Paraphrasing Colin Chapman's words, it is a book about expressing approaches that give greater emphasis to either the Great Commandment or to the Great Commission.

The book is divided into three parts:
In Part 1: Assumptions and Starting Points, we have the starters: Ida Glaser's "Thinking Biblically About Islam" is for me the most original and stimulating reflection. She ends her contribution with: "*I believe that the most important question is not,* "*What does God think of Islam?" But,* "*What does He expect of us?*"

In Part 2: Crucial Issues in Britain Today, we move from the entrées to the main courses – and what dishes they are. Philip Lewis' magisterial overview of the British Muslim community today in which he underlines the issue of identity. Lewis writes well and to the point: "*For many young Muslim men living in the inner city there has been a process of multiple alienations from wider society, mosque and home.*" Tim Green explores conversion, apostasy and discipleship. Ziya Meral writes rivetingly on jihad with his incisive critique of our too-often simplistic analyses; themes taken up in another chapter. There are articles on education, women and the hot potato of Islamic courts, so contentious when Archbishop Rowan Williams raised it in 2008. Part 2 needs time to digest.

In Part 3: Models of Positive Relationships, the dessert trolley is rolled in. With gastric juices still working hard on the main course, Richard Sudworth introduces us to "*the difference that makes a difference*" approach to other faiths, previously presented to us in his 2007 publication "Distinctly Welcoming". I like his phrase, "*embedded relationships of understanding*". Andrew Smith tantalizingly describes the creative activities of a programme called Youth Encounter with which he is involved. This is followed by an accessible critique of "taqiyya" (dissimulation) and a call to mutual integrity by Toby Howarth, drawing on Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
But what would a dessert menu be without a crème brulée flambé? Yes, Jay Smith juxtaposed with Chawkat Moucarry — polemics versus dialogue — make for two succinct and compelling chapters. What we need is something to settle the stomach after such rich desserts and who better than Bishop Bill Musk, who exhorts us to further positive and creative relationships with Muslims at every level of society.

Between Naivety and Hostility is controversy between two covers in order to produce a faithful missional response to Islam in its multiplicity of expressions. When did you last go to a restaurant and have a four course feast served up to you with impeccable table service for the price of a paperback?

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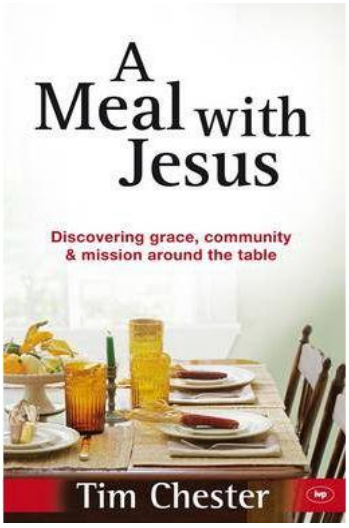
Book Reviews:

A Meal with Jesus

Discovering grace, community & mission around the table

Tim Chester
IVP, 2011
160 pp.



Have you ever felt that cross-cultural mission (or any mission) was a specialist activity for experts; that contextualisation, cultural hermeneutics and avoiding the dangers of syncretism push mission beyond the scope of "ordinary" Christians?

Tim Chester reassures us:

> *This is how Luke describes Jesus's mission strategy: "The Son of Man came eating and drinking."…*
> *It's not complicated. True, it is not always easy – it involves people invading your space or going to places where you don't feel comfortable. But it's not complicated.*

This book does what it says on the tin. Rich with relevant illustrations of real people today, we are invited to discover the outrageous hospitality of God seen in Luke's record of the meals of Jesus.

Have you ever felt under-resourced in international student ministry? Imagine what the disciples felt when asked to feed 5000 people! Chester writes: *'We need a theology of leftovers… to remind [us] that Jesus provides [in mission]'.*

Tim Chester shows us so winsomely that this is mission and community that every believer can do in response to grace without much changed to our daily schedule. Students we meet from many cultures know that food is so much more than fuel. Many of *us* need to relearn that. We eat three meals a day. Each is an opportunity to express our dependence on and gratitude to God and to imitate his generosity as a sign of the banquet to come.

Feasting on this book led me to feast on Jesus and to determine to take more eating opportunities. Taste and see.

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Lynette Teagle grew up in Singapore. A Friends International staff worker since 2001, she works in Oxford alongside her husband Peter and has just begun studying for a PhD at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies.

Fritz Deininger is the Academic Dean of Bangkok Bible College & Seminary (BBCS), and has been teaching at BBCS for about ten years. He has a Th. D. in New Testament from the University of South Africa. He has been in Thailand with OMF since 1981. He has done research in the area of reaching Folk Buddhists with the gospel and is interested in developing theology that meets the needs of the Asian context.

Catherine Weston and her husband Richard serve as senior consultants in international student ministry. When not abroad, Catherine is also involved with international outreach at their local church in East Oxford.

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