

# **THE SMALL GROUP AS A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR TEACHING MELANESIAN CHRISTIANS: ISSUES FOR THE CROSS-CULTURAL FACILITATOR**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

People, the world over, gather in small groups. The same can be said of Christians. In whatever place they are found, believers seek opportunity to gather together in small groups to worship God, to study the Bible, and to be encouraged and equipped to live the life of faith. The small group is the place where Christians grow, and lives are changed.

Teaching Christians in small groups is not a recent phenomenon of the 20th century, much less merely a passing fad of the church in the West.<sup>1</sup> Many cultures, worldwide, have small groups in their very cultural makeup, and meeting together in this way, for the purpose of learning the Christian life, is an extension of what comes naturally.

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of the many cultures in which Christians gather in small groups, see J. Mallison, *Growing Christians in Small Groups*, Melbourne Vic: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1989, pp. 1-2.

Looking at the specific, yet diverse, cultural grouping of Melanesia, the broad aim of this essay is to explore the central issues impacting the learning of adult Melanesian people within the setting of the small group. The specific aim of this study is to clarify some of the key issues, to which an effective learning facilitator must be alert, in their important task, especially if they are faced with the added challenge of coming from a culture other than Melanesian.

To achieve this end, an overview of the main features of traditional Melanesian learning patterns will be presented, together with helpful insights, gained from studies in the specific links between culture and learning. This will be followed by particular relevant insights, gleaned from contemporary adult education theory, and then the biblical and theological perspective of the role of small groups in the intentional task of teaching Christians for life-change. Lastly, a summary of specific issues for the cross-cultural small group facilitator in Melanesia will be given.

## **TRADITIONAL MELANESIAN LEARNING PATTERNS**

Melanesia, meaning “black islands”, is the term used to describe those parts of the south-west Pacific, which are inhabited by people with dark skin.<sup>2</sup> Today, there are several million Melanesian people scattered over hundreds of islands, living in the countries of West Papua, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Fiji. Melanesia is one of the most-culturally and linguistically-diverse areas in the world,<sup>3</sup> yet, in terms of the Pacific, is quite distinct from the more homogeneous regions of Polynesia to the east, and the relatively homogeneous Micronesia to the north.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This term was coined by the French navigator, Dumont d’Urville, in 1832. See D. L. Whiteman, “Melanesia: Its People and Cultures”, in *An Introduction to Melanesian Cultures*, D. L. Whiteman, ed., Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, 1984, p. 86.

<sup>3</sup> Illustrated by the fact that 1,200 of the approx. 6,000 languages of the world are spoken in Melanesia. See D. Whiteman, *Introduction*, p. 89.

<sup>4</sup> D. Whiteman, “Oceania”, in *Towards the Twenty-first Century in Christian Mission*, J. M. Phillips, and R. T. Coote, eds, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1993, p. 108.

Melanesian cultures do, however, demonstrate many cultural commonalities among themselves, which allows for a generalised study of traditional Melanesian cultures, values, and learning patterns to be possible, and, indeed, authentic.<sup>5</sup>

Melanesian societies are characteristically group oriented.<sup>6</sup> The “group” may be a family, an extended family, a clan, a peer group, or even a whole village, but whatever the size of the group – life is focused around the welfare of this group as a whole.<sup>7</sup> Individuals certainly do make personal decisions and choices, however, individualism, so familiar in the West, is foreign to this part of the world. This group-orientation (or community-orientation) is the context in which learning has traditionally occurred, down through the ages.

Studies of learning strategies in Melanesia (and, indeed, other non-industrialised societies around the world), show that the traditional strategies employed in these societies are particularly of an *informal* nature.<sup>8</sup> The informal educational process is sometimes described simply as the socialisation (or enculturation) process,<sup>9</sup> where learning emerges as an outcome of the many social interactions which occur

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<sup>5</sup> A. Twohig has compiled a helpful summary of common themes in Melanesian cultures, under the headings of conservatism, education, leadership, relationships, morals, land, and religion. See *Liklik Buk: A source book for Development Workers in Papua New Guinea*, Lae PNG: Liklik Buk Information Centre, 1986, pp. 332-333.

<sup>6</sup> For a helpful discussion on this characteristic, see “Melanesian Communities: Past and Present”, by Mary MacDonald, in *An Introduction to Melanesian Cultures*, pp. 213-230, esp. p. 217.

<sup>7</sup> Whiteman, “Oceania”, p. 110.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Ninnes takes note of similarities between the traditional learning patterns of the Aboriginal Australians, tropical Africans, Native Americans, Polynesians, and Melanesians. See “Culture and Learning in Western Province Solomon Islands”, unpublished Masters thesis, Bedford Park SA: School of Education Flinders University of South Australia, 1991, no pages, <http://fehps.une.edu.au/f/s/edu/pNinnes/ma/ch2>, accessed February 28, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Ted Ward, “Putting Non-formal Education to Work”, in *Together* (July-September, 1987), Melbourne Vic: World Vision, p. 7.

through the course of life.<sup>10</sup> Wherever people live, work, play, or simply gather, becomes the locus for learning, ranging from the acquisition of necessary practical life skills, to the passing-on of important knowledge, deemed necessary for the welfare and prosperity of the group. Significant locations include the house, the garden, the place of hunting or fishing, the village meeting place, the place at the river, where the women gather to wash clothes, to the special places set aside for gatherings of selective groups, such as for the boys' initiation ceremonies,<sup>11</sup> or the exclusive men's meeting places under the leadership of the chief.<sup>12</sup>

A comparison of the anthropological research data on traditional learning strategies, from a variety of areas in Melanesia, reveals a remarkable similarity.<sup>13</sup> From childhood, but not limited only to childhood, the major informal learning patterns tend to have the following features: observation, imitation, listening, participation, and questioning.<sup>14</sup>

- *Observation* – Watching other people performing a task. The key people observed being older generations, family, kin, or someone recognised by the group as a leader or an “expert”.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Edgar J. Elliston, “Options for Training”, in *Christian Relief and Development*, E. J. Elliston, ed., Dallas TX: Word Publishing, 1989, p. 238. See also T. H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, San Francisco CA: Harper & Row, 1980, p. 109.

<sup>11</sup> J. G. Miller, *Live I*, Sydney NSW: Presbyterian Church of Australia, 1978, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the *nakamal* in Vanuatu, or the *haus man* in PNG. See Johnny Naul in “The Church is a Nakamal”, in *Gospel and Culture in Vanuatu 2: Contemporary Local Perspectives*, Randall Prior, ed., Wattle Park: Gospel Vanuatu Books, 2001, pp. 51-59. Also M. MacDonald, “Melanesian Communities”, p. 213.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Ninnes has provided a very helpful synthesis in his thesis, “Culture and Learning”, chapter 3, no pages.

<sup>14</sup> P. Ninnes, *Informal Learning Strategies in the Solomon Islands*, no pages, <http://wings.buffalo.edu/academic/departments/anthropology/JWA/V1N3/ninnes.art>, accessed 28 Feb. 2002.

<sup>15</sup> An “expert” is someone regarded by the group as having some information or skill of value to their welfare and prosperity.

- *Imitation* – After observing something, the action is copied.
- *Listening* – Knowledge, information, and instruction is received through talking, stories, songs, etc. Usually linked to observation.
- *Participation* – Initially, partial participation, leading to full participation. Full participation is often experienced in the context of a group.<sup>16</sup> Repetition and memorisation seem to be key components.
- *Questioning* – Particularly in regard to requesting information, or seeking help and advice.

The extent to which each of these strategies is used is dependant upon the context in which the learning occurs.<sup>17</sup> Further, the major cultural value, which influences these strategies, is the desire to maintain good relationships between people, with a strong emphasis on maintaining respect, and avoiding conflict. Again, the centrality of the group, and community relationships, are seen as very important values.

Learning comes through a variety of group contexts. Although not ascribed the formal title of “teacher”, significant people, in whose presence learning occurs, are the older generations, especially parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles.<sup>18</sup> Others are the community leaders, especially the “big men” or chiefs, who have responsibilities for the welfare of the group. A great proportion of learning occurs in the peer group, whether it is of children, young boys, young girls, mothers, men, local chiefs, etc. Notably, these informal groups often constitute people of the same sex.

Much of what is described, above, stands in stark contrast to the institutionalised school systems, and processes, prevalent in much of

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<sup>16</sup> An important learning strategy for activities, such as dancing, singing, fishing, building, gardening, etc.

<sup>17</sup> P. Ninnes, *Informal Learning*, no pages.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, no pages.

Melanesia today. Originating in the Western world, the *formal* schooling system came as a legacy of European contact, dating back over 200 years. Christian missionaries, too, were instrumental in the introduction of formal teaching patterns, as they tackled the education process, using the educational philosophy and training methods they knew so well from “back home” (i.e., Europe).<sup>19</sup> Melanesian people are among the first to reflect on the benefits of such a purposeful educational system, introduced into their rapidly-changing lives, yet, in this context, the formal educational system is also often criticised for the way it perpetuates the inherent cultural gap between the formal school processes and the traditional learning milieu of the Melanesian student.<sup>20</sup>

The wise cross-cultural educator always seeks to adapt his philosophical and methodological teaching approach to that which has greatest affinity to the context in which he is operating. Clearly, small groups are a key to learning, within Melanesian cultures. It follows, then, that, using the small group context as a strategy in teaching Christians, demonstrates a good Melanesian “cultural fit”, and should be encouraged as a culturally-relevant setting, in which to facilitate Christian learning.<sup>21</sup>

### **INSIGHTS GAINED FROM STUDIES OF THE LINK BETWEEN CULTURE AND LEARNING**

Substantial evidence exists, suggesting that it is unlikely that there are any significant differences in cognitive ability and processes of people

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<sup>19</sup> See D. Whiteman, *Melanesians and Missionaries: An Ethnohistorical Study of Social and Religious Change in the Southwest Pacific*, Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 1983, pp. 122-124. Also Graham Miller, *Live I*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>20</sup> Critiques are well documented. For example, see M. J. Christie (1984), as cited by Nannes, “Culture and Learning”, chapter 2.

<sup>21</sup> An African church leader Elie Buconyori, calls this “coopting cultural modes for formation”. See “Educating for Spiritual Formation” in *Perspectives on Leadership Training*, V. B. Cole, et al, eds, Nairobi Kenya: NEGST, 1993, pp. 62-65.

around the world.<sup>22</sup> People from all cultural groups have the ability to think logically and rationally. The differences perceived, when comparing the learning behaviours noted across different cultural groupings, have to do with the socio-cultural context to which those people belong.<sup>23</sup> Different cultures have differing views on reality, where differing conclusions are drawn from, differing cultural values, beliefs (assumptions), and worldview.<sup>24</sup> How important it is for the cross-cultural small group facilitator to have an understanding of the cultural preferences and assumptions of the people with whom they are working.<sup>25</sup>

Research and analysis of preferred learning styles of people, from differing cultures around the world, seems to confirm a continuum of learning-style preferences, with the two poles relating to the degree of people's sensitivity to their context. As noted by Edward T. Hall, "high context" people have a high sensitivity to the concrete context around them, whilst "low context" people tend to be more interested in ideas and issues that are broader than the immediate context.<sup>26</sup> People are characteristically, more or less, at one end or the other of the continuum. Another way of describing these two characteristic learning styles is with the terms "field-sensitive" and "field-independence". Earle and Dorothy Bowen have popularised these terms, through their research of learning style preferences among African students. The Bowens have noted that East and West African students typically demonstrate "field-sensitive" characteristics,

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<sup>22</sup> Refer Ninnes, "Culture and Learning", chapter 2, who cites a literature review made by Scribner and Cole, 1973.

<sup>23</sup> Refer Ninnes, "Culture and Learning", chapter 2.

<sup>24</sup> Refer D. L. Whiteman, "What is Culture?", in *Introduction*, pp. 21-22. Also Whiteman, "Communicating across Cultures", in *Introduction*, pp. 56-84.

<sup>25</sup> For helpful discussions on the practicalities of this task, see D. J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-culturally*, Grand Rapids MI: Academie Books, 1978. Also K. G. Hovey, *Before All Else Fails . . . Read the Instructions*, Brisbane Qld: Harvest Publications, 1995.

<sup>26</sup> As cited by J. Plueddemann in "Culture, Learning, and Missionary Training", in *Internationalising Missionary Training: A Global Perspective*, W. Taylor, ed., Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1991, p. 219.

remarkably similar to observations of students from other non-Western countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania.<sup>27</sup> These broad characteristics, which identify the *field-sensitive* person, include:

- Very sensitive to the judgment of others.
- Responsive to social reinforcement.
- Good with interpersonal relations, which are very important.
- Likes being with people; groups are very important.
- Obedience to authority important.
- Culturally-determined gender roles important.
- Not analytical at problem solving.
- Extrinsic motivation very important.
- Autonomy not as important as social acceptance.<sup>28</sup>

For the Bowens, the goal of their research outcomes was to propose teaching strategies to fit the learning preferences of the field-sensitive person.<sup>29</sup> It is significant to note that most of the teaching strategies they suggest are firmly rooted in the context of the small-group learning environment. Again, the evidence strongly affirms the priority of the small group as a learning environment for the characteristically “field-sensitive” Melanesian people.

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<sup>27</sup> E. Bowen, and D. Bowen, “What Does it Mean to Think, Learn, Teach?”, in *Internationalising Missionary Training: A Global Perspective*, W. Taylor, ed., Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1991, p. 206.

<sup>28</sup> K. P. Cross, cited by E. Bowen, and D. Bowen, “What Does it Mean to Think, Learn, Teach?”, p. 207.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 211-213.

## INSIGHTS GAINED FROM CONTEMPORARY ADULT EDUCATION THEORY

Over the last 40 years, the emphasis of adult education study and reflection has shifted from teaching to learning. The person, and needs, of the *learner* have come more clearly into focus, with the development of what is commonly known as *learner-centred education*, as contrasted with subject, or *content-centred*, education more often associated with formal education. A pioneer in this approach was Paulo Freire, who developed a learner-based education strategy while working among the illiterate peasants of Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>30</sup> Many consider the most important consequence of Freire's approach was his firm belief that language, and any educational content, must be firmly rooted in the world of the learner. The learner, living in his particular and unique context of community, is to be the one who sets the educational agenda for change. Through group discussion and dialogue, the priorities are set for action. Freire's methodology has had the roll-on effect of triggering increasing interest around the world in the value of sharing opinions and ideas in a group setting, especially in response to unique, and specific, learner contexts.<sup>31</sup>

The cross-cultural small group facilitator can benefit greatly in using principles from *learner-centred* reflection and discussion techniques. Cultural insights are gleaned when the facilitator intentionally allows the group members to talk, encouraging them to share thoughts together, articulating the needs, issues, problems, and challenges

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<sup>30</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York NY: Crossroads, 1970, and *Cultural Action for Freedom*, Harmondsworth UK: Penguin Books, 1972.

<sup>31</sup> For example, Lyra Srinivasan, in *Perspectives on Non-formal Adult Learning*, New York NY: World Education, 1977. Lyra gives case study examples of the "problem-centred approach" and "self-actualising education" as non-formal education techniques, used with success in Asia. For a summary, and balanced critique of Freire's contribution to the task of Christian education, see Robert Pazmino, *Foundational Issues in Christian Education*, 2nd edn, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1997, pp. 75-80.

facing them and their community.<sup>32</sup> Further, it is from this entry point that the Christian small group facilitator can help guide discussion, from felt needs and issues, towards finding practical help in the scriptures.

It should be noted that there is not necessarily a dichotomy between the ideals of *learning* and those of *teaching*. The focus on the learner ensures that dignity, value, and respect are always conferred on the learner, their needs, and context, while an appropriate emphasis upon teaching, not only includes a concern for learning, but further demonstrates a commitment to sharing “content” intended to enhance the life of both the learner and his community. Obviously, content considerations are foundational to a Christian small group facilitator desiring to share the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, with the associated challenges of practical Christian discipleship.<sup>33</sup>

Determining how the adult learns has become a central issue in seeking for effective adult education. Perhaps one of the most significant contributions is the simple acknowledgment that adults are not children, and that there must, therefore, be some particular distinctives, as to how they learn. Clearly, adults are different, in their developmental needs, in their accumulated life experiences, and also in their perceptions about God.<sup>34</sup> Malcolm Knowles’ study of *andragogy*<sup>35</sup> offers four crucial assumptions about learners, suggesting that, as a learner matures:

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<sup>32</sup> In “making easy the work of the group”, the facilitator’s role is clearly expressed. See B. J. Fleischer, *Facilitating for Growth*, Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1993, p. 21.

<sup>33</sup> See R. Pazmino, “Adult Education with Persons from Ethnic Minority Communities”, in *The Christian Educator’s Handbook on Adult Education*, J. O. Gangel, and J. C. Wilhoit, eds, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1993, p. 280.

<sup>34</sup> See Nancy T. Foltz, “Basic Principles of Adult Religious Education”, in *Handbook of Adult Religious Education*, N. T. Foltz, ed., AL: Religious Education Press, 1986, p. 25.

<sup>35</sup> Knowles initially defined “andragogy” as “the art and science of helping adults learn”. See *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*, Houston TX: Gulf Publishing, 2nd edn, 1978. More recently, he uses the term “andragogy” to simply describe

(1) Their self-concept moves from being a dependant personality towards being a self-directed human being; (2) they accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning; (3) their readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of their social roles; and (4) their time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and, accordingly, their orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centredness to one of performance-centredness.<sup>36</sup>

Knowles' perceptions have had a profound influence on how the task of adult education is considered, in both the secular and the Christian realms around the world. Valid cross-cultural application of these principles can be made, however it must be kept in mind that his theories of andragogy were developed in the Western environment of America, and care must be taken before the principles are wholly transferred to other cultural contexts, such as Melanesia, where many traditional cultural values are typically "un-Western". As an example, the welcome and helpful emphasis of recognising the learning needs of the individual (the development of the self-concept) could easily degenerate to the destructive excesses of individualism, observed in Western societies. In Melanesia, personal advancement is not set as a higher goal than familial and communal connection and loyalty.<sup>37</sup> Positively though, Knowles is clear in his affirmation that "Learning is a social activity; we learn better when we interact with

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another model of assumptions about learners, with distinctives from pedagogy, yet useful in describing the way many adults learn. See *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*, Chicago IL: Follett Publishing, 1980, p. 42.

<sup>36</sup> Knowles, *The Modern Practice*, pp. 44-45, 390.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Pazmino provides some helpful cautions in "Adult Education with Persons from Ethnic Minority Communities", pp. 278-288.

other people.”<sup>38</sup> He goes on to suggest that, “the small group format . . . offers the ideal”.<sup>39</sup>

Research has found that adults learn best when they are not under undue stress, they are given adequate time, and can work at their own pace.<sup>40</sup> In Melanesia, it is extremely important for adults to be given plenty of time to fully discuss and explore the issues of the topic at hand. Frustration comes when insufficient time is given. Further, frustration, followed by disinterest, comes when the learning objective is felt to be either too basic or too difficult.<sup>41</sup> A wise small group facilitator will fully collaborate, and negotiate, with the members of the group, in the process of setting the group’s learning objectives.<sup>42</sup>

In all cultures, as people move up in years, they begin to lose the physical agility of their youth. Visual and hearing acuity begin to decline in the adult years, sometimes limiting what can be easily seen and heard by members in a small group situation.<sup>43</sup> The small group facilitator needs to consider questions such as: *Have all members heard accurately the words spoken by me and other group members? Can all group members see the subtle hand and eye movements of other group members?*<sup>44</sup> *Are people sitting in the best possible configuration to see and hear all that is happening?* Research shows that, even though rate of learning may decrease with age, declining hearing and visual acuity do not necessarily mean a corresponding decline in the ability to learn, or the correctness of the

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<sup>38</sup> Taken from “Contributions of Malcolm Knowles”, in *The Christian Educator’s Handbook on Adult Education*, p. 100.

<sup>39</sup> Knowles, “Contributions of Malcolm Knowles”, p. 100.

<sup>40</sup> D. J. Brundage, and D. Mackeracher, *Adult Learning Principles and Their Application to Program Planning*, Ontario CAN: Ministry of Education, 1980, p. 108.

<sup>41</sup> J. R. Kidd, *How Adults Learn*, New York NY: Association Press, 1977, p. 275.

<sup>42</sup> Brundage and Mackeracher, *Adult Learning Principles*, p. 12. See also S. D. Brookfield, *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning*, San Francisco CA: Jossey-Bass, 1986, pp. 62-64.

<sup>43</sup> Kidd, *How Adults Learn*, p. 62.

<sup>44</sup> This is particularly pertinent in Melanesia, where non-verbal communication techniques are frequently used.

response.<sup>45</sup> Adult small group members need to be given every opportunity to maximise their full learning potential within the small group.

## **BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR TEACHING CHRISTIANS IN SMALL GROUPS**

God created people as social beings, with needs for interaction. Since people cannot survive in isolation, they must find ways to cooperate together. The family of Adam and Eve was the first small group.<sup>46</sup> Even a cursory look through the Old Testament reveals how the notion and practice of small and large groups was woven into the fabric of the very existence of God's people, the Israelites.<sup>47</sup> In the New Testament, we see that Jesus Christ devoted Himself to His own small group of 12 disciples, to informally teach and guide His followers (Mark 3:14, 15). Following the "Great Commission" (Matt 28:18-20), these same men went out again with the task of evangelising and nurturing new Christian believers. It is interesting to note that the disciples, and other members of the early church, followed the same model, which Jesus gave them, where they regularly gathered together in small groups for fellowship, worship, prayer, and teaching (e.g., Acts 2:46-47; 5:42; 12:12; 21:7). Evangelism and nurture happened, as a spontaneous outcome of these informal, yet intentional, gatherings of Christian believers.<sup>48</sup> Church history has shown this to be a continuing scenario down through the ages, particularly noting that, on many occasions, it is through the agency of small groups of committed Christians gathering together that God has brought spiritual renewal to His church.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Foltz, "Basic Principles of Adult Religious Education", p. 32.

<sup>46</sup> J. Plueddemann, and C. Plueddemann, *Pilgrims in Progress*, Wheaton IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1990, p. 115.

<sup>47</sup> For a helpful summary, see N. McBride, in *How to Lead Small Groups*, Colorado Springs CO: NavPress, 1990, pp. 14-15.

<sup>48</sup> John Mallison provides a useful summary in *Growing Christians in Small Groups*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>49</sup> J. Mallison, *Growing Christians in Small Groups*, pp. 5-7.

Following the teaching and example of Jesus, and His first disciples, the Bible clearly reflects the task of Christian education to be something intentionally prayed for and planned towards. “Life change” in believers is the goal. An important goal of Christian education is for believers “to become conformed to the likeness of Jesus”, that is, “more Christlike”, or “reflecting maturity in Christ” (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 4:11-13).<sup>50</sup> Not only are believers to be built up in their Christian knowledge and understanding, their whole lives are to be in the process of reflecting growth and change towards the maturity intended by our Creator. As stated by Lois LeBar, “Christian teaching operates at the level of life. Anything less is sub-Christian.”<sup>51</sup>

As signalled by Jesus’ words in Mark 12:29-31, effective and balanced Christian education must have a holistic outlook on life. Nancy Foltz describes Christian teaching as necessarily requiring a gentle blend of four content areas: cognitive (knowing), affective (feelings, emotions, attitudes), psychomotor (action), and lifestyle (the integration of the three).<sup>52</sup> Christian knowledge and understanding is intended to have a relationship with every area of life, without compartmentalisation. Fortunately for the Western Christian educator working in Melanesia, this understanding of reality fits naturally into the Melanesian way of viewing life as an integrated whole. Traditionally, there is no distinction between the sacred and the secular. It may serve the cross-cultural facilitator well to recognise that the Western neo-platonic worldview is traditionally foreign to Melanesia, and that practical application and expression would be expected to accompany any cognitive spiritual truth.

If Christianity is correctly described as “faith-as-whole-of-life”, then what is the most effective way of communicating this life-changing

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<sup>50</sup> Refer Lawrence Richards, *Christian Education*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1975, pp. 20-25. Also L. LeBar, and J. E. Plueddemann, *Education That is Christian*, Wheaton IL: Victor Books, 1989, p. 193.

<sup>51</sup> LeBar, *Education That is Christian*, p. 15.

<sup>52</sup> See Foltz, “Basic Principles of Adult Religious Education”, pp. 25-26.

faith to others? A closer look at the life of Jesus in the gospels reveals His teaching and leadership methodology. In the informal context of the small group, sharing life's rough-and-tumble experiences on a daily basis, Jesus led His disciples to discover spiritual realities, which were to profoundly impact their lives. Through His every *word and action*, Jesus' life example was on display for every disciple to observe and reflect upon. Through the transparency and intimacy of the small group, Jesus *modelled* the humble, God-centred life of faith (John 14:9). Jesus gave His life as an example to be copied (Luke 6:40; cf. John 13:15-17).<sup>53</sup> In a similar way, the Apostle Paul was able to say to the new believers in Corinth, "I urge you to imitate me" (1 Cor 4:16; cf. Phil 3:17).

The Bible shows us that the life of faith is passed on to others, young and old, through meaningful relationships. More specifically, faith is "caught", through the informal socialisation process at work in the community of faith. Lawrence Richards describes modelling as *the* method of Christian education.<sup>54</sup> The application of this simple, yet profound, theological insight to teaching Christians in Melanesia is obvious. Firstly, it affirms the traditional *informal* learning strategies at work in Melanesia (discussed earlier), as potentially effective ways of teaching and nurturing Christian faith-as-life. Secondly, it draws attention to the strategic role of the small group facilitator as someone called upon to *model* the Christian faith, by word, action, and lifestyle, in prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit.<sup>55</sup> The demonstration of the facilitator's commitment to group members, in Christlike humility, is of crucial importance.

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<sup>53</sup> Jesus' teaching methods are explored in C. Wilson, *Jesus the Teacher*, Mt Waverley Vic: Word of Truth, 1974, and J. S. Stewart, *The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ*, Edinburgh UK: Saint Andrew Press, 1957. See also C. H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1996, p. 273.

<sup>54</sup> Richards, *Christian Education*, p. 81.

<sup>55</sup> Compare the traditional Melanesian learning strategy of observation and imitation.

## **SPECIFIC ISSUES FOR THE CROSS-CULTURAL SMALL GROUP FACILITATOR IN MELANESIA**

In facilitating learning and discussion in any given small group in Melanesia, the leader needs to be keenly aware of the dynamics of the group. This is no easy task, but how much more so if the one facilitating discussion is from a culture other than Melanesian. Following is a summary of many of the more-pertinent issues of small group interactions, particularly in relation to the predominantly “high-context” or “field-sensitive” Melanesian cultural preferences and values. Where appropriate, comment is made, where the cultural preferences may contrast considerably with a typical Western value.<sup>56</sup>

*Group goals:* The group will be people-oriented, as contrasted to task-oriented. The purpose will be to build interpersonal relationships, and to meet the needs of members.

*Time:* People and relationships take priority over time spent. Event-orientation as contrasted to time-orientation. Precise starting and finishing times are not important.

*Gender makeup of group:* Discussion may flow more freely in mono-gender groups or in peer groups.<sup>57</sup> Melanesian women may not feel as free to talk in the presence of men, however this does not rule out using mixed groups.

*Kinship relationships:* Many small groups are made up of relatives, some with complex relationship loyalties, protocols, and taboos. Kinship terms are often used when referring to someone else in preference to personal names.<sup>58</sup> Some members may not talk with, or

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<sup>56</sup> Some of these categories have been adapted from Jim Plueddemann, and Carol Plueddemann, in *Pilgrims in Progress*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>57</sup> Compare the traditional Melanesian learning strategy of participation. A fuller participation could be anticipated within peer groups.

<sup>58</sup> An important feature of Melanesian societies. Anthropologists refer to this as “teknonymy”. See K. McElhanon, and D. Whiteman, “Kinship: Who is Related to Whom?”, in *Introduction*, pp. 107-108.

make eye contact with, a particular member of the group. Grasping a basic understanding of how a local kinship system is organised, and functions, is important for the cross-cultural small group facilitator.

*Sitting configuration:* Face to face contact, with accompanying eye contact is not viewed as especially necessary (as compared to the West).<sup>59</sup> However, it is important that everyone can hear and see what is going on. Participants may feel more relaxed sitting on mats.

*Communication style/body language:* Communication will tend to be indirect, with an emphasis on non-verbal messages. Tone of voice, facial movements, and posture all have important meanings. It may be considered offensive to unduly raise the voice.

*Use of language:* Any given small group would tend to use the language understood most fluently by all group members, allowing for freer discussion and interaction. When people from several language groups are present, then the local lingua franca is chosen.<sup>60</sup> Language learning must be a priority for the cross-cultural facilitator.

*Respect for authority:* Respect is readily shown for prestigious group members (i.e., the “big-man”, or a senior experienced person, or someone with formal credentials [an “expert”]). Ideally, the group leader is qualified in one of these ways.<sup>61</sup> What these people say is respected, accordingly, members will be hesitant to counter or contradict what is said.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Eye and facial gestures are important features in communication, however, in some relationships, it is disrespectful to maintain direct eye contact.

<sup>60</sup> For example, *Tok Pisin* or *Motu* in Papua New Guinea, *Pijin* in the Solomon Islands, and *Bislama* in Vanuatu.

<sup>61</sup> The cross-cultural facilitator may be respected as an “expert” (rightly or wrongly), by virtue of his formal qualification (study, experience, or ordination), or even merely through his presence among them.

<sup>62</sup> Compare the traditional Melanesian learning strategy of partial participation in the presence of respected individuals.

*Interaction style:* Group harmony is important. There may be a tendency to conform to what other members have expressed, especially if spoken by someone with rank. Personal stories and “testimonies” are important. Members will carefully avoid causing a fellow group member to “lose face” and feel shame.

*Leadership style:* Members would tend to expect a strong, controlling leadership to maintain group harmony and conformity; however, the Christian leader will need to temper this expectation by demonstrating a “servant-leadership” style, as taught by Jesus.<sup>63</sup>

*Life example of leader:* Group members will look to the leader for knowledge, wisdom, direction, and example. The leader’s words, actions, attitudes, and lifestyle are all contributing factors in what group members learn. The leader needs to be conscious of his or her modelling role.<sup>64</sup>

*Conflict resolution style:* Indirect resolution is sought, through relatives or mutual friends, not through direct confrontation. Displeasure by group members is shown through non-verbal, subtle communication. Resolution may be avoided for as long as possible. Reconciliation is often sealed through the exchange of gifts, and through prayer.

*Literacy levels:* Group members may have vastly differing levels of reading skills and comprehension. Some participants may not be able to read at all. However, all members have a valuable resource of life experience and stories, and should be encouraged to contribute to discussion.

*Preferred discussion topics:* Issues, concerns, problems, challenges, and events, immediately impacting on the group members or

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<sup>63</sup> See S. Hoke, and S. Voorhies, “Training Relief and Development Workers in the Two-Thirds World”, in *Christian Relief and Development*, pp. 221f.

<sup>64</sup> Compare the traditional Melanesian learning strategies of observation and imitation.

community, are the topics of greatest interest for discussion, whereby help and direction can be sought from scripture.

*Preferred Bible passages:* Bible stories and parables are favourites, as well as history narratives, along with the Psalms, and other passages, which encourage the imagination.

*Preferred Bible-study method:* A holistic approach to Bible study is preferred. The distinctions between the consecutive questions of the inductive Bible study approach (observation/interpretation/application) are blurred.<sup>65</sup> Deductive, or topical, Bible study methods are popular.<sup>66</sup>

*Discussion questions:* The leader must allow plenty of time for discussion, as members will want to thoroughly explore the issue at hand.<sup>67</sup> Out of respect for other group members (or maybe due to a lack of confidence), some people may appear slow to begin. The facilitator must be careful not to overload the members with too many discussion questions, or Bible passages to be looked through.

*Use of handouts:* Together with the Bible, papers, with written information, outlines, instructions, or discussion questions, are appreciated.

*Visual aids:* Relevant objects, models, pictures, photographs, maps, diagrams, blackboards, etc., used by the leader to enhance learning, are greatly appreciated.

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<sup>65</sup> For insightful comment on the relationship of learning styles to Bible study method, see Peter S. C. Chang, "Steak, Potatoes, Peas, and Chop Suey: Linear and Non-Linear Thinking", in *Missions & Theological Education in World Perspective*, H. Conn, and S. Rowen, eds, Farmington IL: Associates of Urbanus, 1984, pp. 113-123.

<sup>66</sup> Issues of gospel, specifically related to culture (both traditional and modern), are considered important.

<sup>67</sup> Compare the traditional Melanesian learning strategies of listening and asking.

*Application:* Appropriate and practical application of the study to life situations would be an expected outcome.

*Group prayer:* Prayer is an expected and essential component of Christian small group interaction. The “*bung*” prayer, where individuals pray at the same time, has become popular throughout Melanesia.

*Singing and music:* Singing and music is enjoyed in much of Melanesia, especially singing which allows for harmonies to be developed. Allow plenty of opportunity for repetition in the learning of new songs and music.<sup>68</sup> As well as being used in worship, songs are important media of carrying information.

*Opportunities for learning and teaching:* The small group facilitator should be alert to the many *informal* learning opportunities which may present throughout the day, outside of the planned-for small group Bible study and discussion meeting. Opportunities to communicate Christian truth can arise at any time or place.

## CONCLUSION

The challenge of how best to teach and nurture Christians has been placed squarely before the church, ever since the Lord Jesus Christ first commissioned His disciples 2,000 years ago. What is the key to accomplishing this God-given task most effectively? For the Christian educator, ministering cross-culturally, this means giving serious consideration to the cultural milieu in which he is working. The prudent educator will not automatically default to the normative teaching and learning strategies of their own home culture. If coming from a Western culture, the typically “low context”, or “field-independent”, learning strategies, often expressed through *formal* education techniques, and deemed appropriate for Western learners, are found wanting in other cultural settings.

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<sup>68</sup> Compare the traditional Melanesian learning strategies of participation, together with memorisation and repetition.

A closer look at Melanesian cultural patterns reveals that learning has traditionally occurred *informally*, and within the context of a group. The dominant learning strategies being those of observation, imitation, listening, participation, and questioning. Clearly, then, the wise educator would seek to understand, and utilise, these indigenous patterns. The concept of teaching Melanesian Christians for “life change”, within the context of a small group setting, shows a striking “cultural fit” with the learning strategies traditionally employed.

How can the cross-cultural small group facilitator further maximise his or her effectiveness? The cross-cultural facilitator must consciously seek to understand the dominant cultural values at work within Melanesian society, particularly in relation to the high priority given to relationships, and to the maintenance of harmony within the group. For example, time considerations are secondary to quality relationships. To the cross-cultural facilitator, this heightened “group awareness” may contrast to the individualistic thinking and time-orientation, more common in his home culture. A wise cross-cultural facilitator will seek to minimise cultural dissonance for group members by careful observation and sensitivity. Further helpful insights on effective small group leadership can be gleaned from contemporary studies and observations by adult educationalists, particularly in the area of *learner-centred* reflection and discussion techniques, and also from studies revealing how adults learn most effectively. An understanding of the adult world – particularly intellectual, social, and biological distinctives, as contrasted with those of the children’s world – is of great benefit to the small group facilitator.

The biblical goal of Christian education is expressed in the holistic development of people’s identity, based solidly in the person of Jesus Christ. The New Testament reveals that Jesus taught His disciples by calling them “to be with Him”, as He demonstrated a godly life, for the disciples to witness, and to copy. Again, the traditional Melanesian educational role of *modelling* fits well with Jesus’ chosen teaching and leadership methodology, used to bring about life-change

in His disciples. Presenting a genuine Christian “life-example” is perhaps the greatest challenge faced by any Christian, ministering cross-culturally.

In the “high context” world of varied cultural values, and distinctive learning preferences, there are, indeed, many issues requiring careful consideration by the small group facilitator, seeking to effectively minister cross-culturally in Melanesia. However, armed with the insights of fellow travellers, who have sought the most appropriate way forward, and with the grace and wisdom of Almighty God, may God grant them the courage to give it a go.

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