Immigrant Pastor

There are moments in life we are all familiar with when we hear that piece of advice, that moment when wisdom is shared, profound discourse articulated by our significant other that for some reason just keep lingering in our minds for years, decades—even lifetimes. One such deeply insightful moment in my own life happened during a sociology of religion class some twenty-two years ago. The professor shared this simple generalized (probably overgeneralized) hypothesis that goes something like this:

The way a pastor thinks worldview/church/theologically wise today is how church members are likely to think in five to ten years’ time.
The way the university scholar thinks today is how pastors will think in five to ten years’ time.
The way the Missionary thinks these days is how university scholars will think in five to ten years’ time.

Three details left an impression on me. First, I remember thinking how arrogant this statement was because it was corralling people into such generalized groups. Only later did I come to understand that the lecturer was talking about trends and tendencies not inevitabilities.

Second, I was surprised to learn that the intellectuals and university professors are not on the top of the pyramid. It was only logically to conclude, I thought, that they would be far ahead from the rest of the crowd. But certainly not the missionaries; the “blue collar manual workers with rolled up sleeves” laboring deep in the forsaken jungle providing essential services like teaching, nurturing, feeding, building schools, and often working with the most disadvantaged and deprived people in the world. How on earth could they be on the top of the pile?

And third, when we asked our lecturer why—he acknowledged that he did not know why this was the case. And here I am, twenty-two years later
far from my college and native country working in my adopted country as a pastor—still reflecting and pondering about these words.

I am not a missionary, not a regular church member, and neither am I a university lecturer, yet I feel that the words of my professor have some bearing and significance in my life and work as an immigrant pastor.

Still, I think it would be arrogant on my part even to compare—not mentioning to place myself in some of these subgroups within the church—or even worse, claim some sort of intellectual superiority. But I do feel that I reap some immense and wonderful benefits and blessings for just being an immigrant pastor in a foreign country.

As I was about to start my ministry a decade ago I worried how I would, with my Croatian cultural background, fit into the United Kingdom’s multicultural church setting. How on earth would I cope, not only with the indigenous culture, but also with Filipino, Caribbean, Russian, and many shades of African cultures? It turned out that my worries were not only unfounded, but on the contrary, I felt that God created many blessings out of my “culture exchange” experience. He has turned to advantage one of my humanly perceived disadvantages and made it to be something beautiful and poignant just by default of my being an immigrant.

I guess being an immigrant pastor in a different culture from my own is similar to an experience of a child to whom things often have a slightly different hue from that of the adults. Ancient Jewish Rabbis used to say that in order to become a prophet one has to, in adulthood, retain an ability to see the world as a child does. I believe, I can understand, somewhat, what the sages meant when they said this. Because my experiences in various church communities in the South England Conference always seem delightfully novel and unusual; the customs and rituals from the various people groups arouse my curiosity. People and their culture continuously keep me fascinated and intrigued.

I used the term by default because this is something that I cannot credit to my intellect, education, or my genes. God indeed does work in mysterious ways and he always surprises us in the most unexpected of ways. He places us in situations in which blessings are being poured out before we became aware of them, or even while we still perceive this placement as threatening and confusing.

We often like to think and emphasize how homogenous Adventism is both in structures and doctrines. And indeed it is wonderful to know that on the Sabbath day we all study the very same Sabbath School lesson, we all sing familiar tunes, and that we all abide by our doctrines. But the beauty to me is not so much in the big picture but in the detail. And in that aspect I would argue that God is indeed in the detail.

For how is it possible that in this violent world in which populist lead-
ers claim that people cannot live together and that people are better off if they live separate lives, there are these little scattered Adventist communities where an Englishman and a Filipino are sitting together at a potluck table or where a Jamaican sings with Romanians while a Ghanaian brother follows them on the guitar and all this being overseen by an Italian elder and Croatian pastor. Is this not a miracle that only God can make happen? Had I stayed in my own country I would have never seen miracles of relationships on such a scale, but as prophesied in the Bible.

Working in a multicultural church environment also brings many other practical benefits in ministry. I have learned that a multicultural church is often easier to work in than in purely ethnic churches. Adventists are known to have strong opinions on certain topics, to the extent that they can often create tensions. The beauty of a multicultural church is that it incubates a more gentle and tolerant spirit among its members who have to (and desire to) accommodate their cultural differences. Likewise, in my case, living and working outside of my own culture did help me in my ministry as well. I would like to think that exposure to other cultures in my adopted country has made me a better person and that this was one of the ways the Holy Spirit molds people into the shape he desires.

I guess this is a journey similar to the one when God sent Peter outside of his rigid cultural Jewish context in order to prepare him to be a truly embracing person who would only then be able to feed God’s sheep. Some of us, it seems, just have to be taken out for a walk by God in order to see the bigger picture. Doing ministry as an immigrant in another culture blessed me with a few more gifts.

After two decades of spending time, mingling and working in the rich cultural context of Britain I have become somewhat culture blind, in the positive sense of this term. I remember going back home on holiday after the first year of my ministry. The folks back in my home church were amazed at the fact that I worked in a Caribbean church so they wanted to know what they do differently from us and how on earth do I fit in with such a different culture. I used to talk for hours over the finer points of worship, singing, and practicing what I thought were differences. However, later as the years progressed, while the questions were still the same my answers tended to be shorter and shorter. I either just did not see the differences any more or they simply appeared so insignificant that they were not even worth mentioning.

Probably there is a lesson in this illustration for our wider church community. We often segregate ourselves into various ethnic churches on the basis of our different (some would say incompatible) cultures and consequently some Adventist churches tend to become exclusive, rigid, and insular as time goes by. The Church has devised seminars to deal with this
issue but perhaps the easiest and simplest remedy is just to give it a go and spend some time with each other and let the Holy Spirit do the rest.

Finally, I would like to say again that I feel fortunate, blessed, and enriched as an immigrant worker. I believe that Jesus has changed me and shaped me through the encounter with people from my adopted country. And while I can never be fully a cultural Jamaican or an Englishman no matter how long I will be working as an immigrant worker, I have received some unique gifts. Working in other cultures helped me to see myself in relationship to my own culture.

Once I left home and was removed from what was familiar I was able to have a better look at my culture that made me what I am. Even more importantly, this experience helped me to better distinguish what is in my Adventism that is truly a matter of religion and what is cultural. Believers often struggle to separate these two and consequently, this may entrap them in the blind alley on their journey to the heavenly Kingdom and keep them away from things that really matter in life.

So now, after some twenty-two years I know something about the secret of the missionaries who have been snatched out of their own culture only to be transplanted in an alien one. They are the people who are blessed with insight into the faith that really matters to Jesus, a faith free from their cultural biases and exclusiveness. This is something that, without cross-cultural experience, is quite difficult to learn in a class of sociology of religion.

The Apostle Paul is one of my great biblical heroes. He mingled and moved as an immigrant in foreign lands. He even managed to share some common sense with his stubborn Jewish friends. No wonder then that he was able to say these words with such ease: “Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (Col 3:11).

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