

# Evangelical Review of Theology

## A Global Forum

**Volume 44 • Number 2 • April 2020**

**Published by**



WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

*Department of Theological Concerns*

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# On Becoming a Fellow Traveller in Mission

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## I. Moving from Outsiders to Fellow Travellers

New missionaries may have preconceived ideas of how they want to be viewed by people in the target culture. They may even have strategies to achieve the roles they would like to play: development worker, nurse or doctor, teacher at a Bible seminary, English teacher, student worker, pioneer, church planter, disciple maker, trainer of pastors and leaders, or manager of a missional business. They may have many years of training, but when they land in a foreign country and another culture, how they introduce themselves to that culture is crucial.

'When a newcomer arrives on a tribal scene he must somehow be related to the existing social structure so that people will know how to act toward him and how to expect him to act toward them.'<sup>1</sup> This may seem obvious, but as Judith and Sherwood Lingenfelter point out, 'Most American Christians have three significant

spheres of relationship: family, workplace, and church. After many years of consulting mission field settings, we have found that missionaries tend to turn their mission community into all three. This is disastrous for those who envision a ministry that touches the lives of people in the local community and culture.'<sup>2</sup>

Nowadays, the availability of social media aggravates this problem by making it harder to leave home. Missionaries may remain so connected to their home country that they do not connect deeply with locals. But to enter something new, you have to leave the old.

As we live among a new people group, we may have an idea as to what roles we would like to play, and the people may have their own expectations and ideas. The two can be very different. We may just want to be encouragers and fellow travellers, but the people amongst whom we live may want us to be patrons and a source of financial resources. Such conflicts can put us at risk of failing

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob A. Loewen, *Culture and Human Values. Christian Intervention in Anthropological Perspective* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1975), 435.

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<sup>2</sup> Judith E. and Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Teaching Cross-Culturally. An Incarnational Model for Learning and Teaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 117.

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from the start, despite our best intentions.

Or we may think we could help with money to improve our host people's living conditions. In their sight, this makes us a patron. But do we know what that means? The role may soon turn into expectations which we cannot fulfil, and then what?

The most important thing in becoming a fellow traveller is to learn the people's language and culture so that we can communicate and interact sensibly with each other. Shortcuts are available, of course. For example, we could use translators or interact only with people who speak our language. But if we want to show interest and respect towards a people group, we show it best if we learn their way of life and use their language.

Language learning gives us the opportunity to ask for help. *We* are the ones who need *their* help. We are not the ones who know everything; rather, we depend on other people from the start. Only through interaction with them can we learn their language and culture and come near to them. Jesus similarly taught the seventy-two whom he sent out to depend on the people to whom they went. They should not go with money but with the gospel (Lk 10:4, 7).

In my personal experience, language learning time had its ups and downs. After having learned Thai for nearly two years, my wife and I were sent into a remote Karen village where only a few people could speak Thai and nobody understood English. It was a tedious task to learn a language in a village where there was no running water nor electricity available, besides looking after three small children. Tom and Elizabeth Brew-

ster's LAMP method<sup>3</sup> was a help. Still, I found it hard as I did not progress as quickly as I would have liked. I said to my wife, 'What are we doing here? Is this all?' I had my ambitions. I saw things which needed change (in my opinion). I had prepared myself for missionary service for many years. I thought I knew how a church should function. But here I was sitting on the porch as an old lady from another village came to our house and talked to us louder and louder but we did not understand. She pointed to her ears. We knew she thought we were deaf.

Those years in the village, just being a learner and starting in baby shoes, frustrated me at times, but they taught me many invaluable lessons too. Looking back, I think, it was good that I could not speak up much during my first years. During this time we became friends with people in the village. We started to host a Bible study group during the week. Once a month I joined Karen Christians in walking to other villages on weekends to spread the gospel, so I got to know more and more villages around us. In Sop Lahn village, we participated in selling a few essentials at the same price as in the city, which was much cheaper than the nearby merchants' prices. My wife, a nurse, could help many people by selling basic medicines. That opened doors for us to visit the sick and we could pray for them together with Karen Christians.

This was the time when we grew into the role of fellow travellers. Ivan Illich expressed it accurately: 'Lan-

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3 Tom and Elizabeth Brewster, *Language Acquisition Made Practical* (Colorado Springs, CO: Lingua House, 1976).

guage learning is one of the few opportunities an adult can have to know the deep experience of poverty, weakness and being dependent on the benevolence of other people. It needs adequate patience, good observation, the courage to make mistakes and the ability to laugh at yourself.<sup>4</sup>

Fred Lewis writes, 'To learn the worldview of another people, *and* live according to their foreign-to-you worldview, leads to living uncomfortably just about all the time. ... The practice of vulnerable mission just about requires a missionary to live in weakness.'<sup>5</sup> While this is true, we have to ask how many missionaries are able to do this without breaking or leaving.

I would suggest that becoming a fellow traveller is a long process. Besides the ideal of living 'according to their foreign-to-you worldview', we have to consider how much a single person, couple or family can handle of this. One of our co-worker families was able to adjust deeper and another less so. We had to find our own way to survive and then to grow into a fruitful ministry. Actually, a long-term mission perspective helps, because you have the time to adjust accordingly.

Jesus' coming into this world was a long-term mission, and very radical besides. He became a baby and entrusted himself to the hands of sinful humans. After adjusting to this earthly life for thirty years, becoming a fellow traveller to the Jewish people,

he started his ministry. Jesus knew his host culture so well that he frequently used stories (parables) to teach his fellow travellers very effectively. Then he gave himself over completely to fulfilling the plan of God the Father. Although his time of ministry seemed short, he accomplished it to the point that he could call out, 'It is finished' (Jn 19:38). 'He humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross' (Phil 2:8).

More important than anything else is an attitude of humility and the desire to adjust one's life to the new culture, which also means looking for the good traits in that culture.

If we want to become fellow travellers, we have to find common ground to talk and fellowship together. When Karen people from different villages meet each other, they usually talk about their common connections, their family, relatives and friends and what they do to earn their livelihood. I often felt like an outsider because I would have explained my family very quickly. A few years ago, I discovered a theme I had overlooked even though many Karen talk about it: their dreams, which influence many Karen quite strongly.<sup>6</sup> Here I can join in. I have discovered many new traits about their culture and this is a theme I can talk about to anyone, whether the listener is a devout Christian or a spirit priest. It opens up opportunities to share the gospel and it has challenged me to give more attention to my own dreams.

My wife, on the other hand, has

4 Ivan Illich, *In den Flüssen nördlich der Zukunft. Letzte Gespräche über Religion und Gesellschaft mit David Cayley* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2006), 24; my translation.

5 Fred Lewis, 'Worldview: A Vulnerable Mission Ingredient', *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, April 2018.

6 See Hans Christoph Baer, *Dreams in the Omkoi Karen Christian Context: An Anthropological Research Combined with a Theological Study on Dreams* (Nuremberg: VTR Publications, 2018).

learned a lot about natural medicine from the Karen, and she has also translated a booklet about natural medicines in the tropics into the Karen language. Again, this has given us opportunities to appreciate what the Karen already know and to learn from them as well as to pass on some practical knowledge, such as how the papaya in their garden can be used for medicine in different ways. My wife gave a seminar in a Karen village, which the ladies enjoyed very much. They produced medicine with plants that are locally available.

As already noted, Jesus knew his Jewish culture so well that he used stories from that culture in his teaching. The Karen culture is full of stories, some of which are very similar to those in the Bible. For example, they have a tale analogous to the biblical story of the Fall. Mr. Dipae, one of the early believers, was very gifted in comparing Karen stories and sayings with biblical truth. He always used these comparisons in a positive way, showing people the Bible was teaching things that the ancestors had been teaching already. I challenged Mr. Dipae once to tell a traditional saying or a story that contradicted the biblical truth. He stopped for a moment and then answered, 'I can't do that; you can.' This answers is not surprising if you know that one of the highest values among the Karen is harmony—a value that we can link to the wonderful Good News of reconciliation instead of taking revenge. 'Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you' (Eph 4:31–32).

What has also helped us to estab-

lish ourselves as fellow travellers has been the traditional view some Karen have of the white man. In their mythology, the white man is called their youngest brother. Many Karen Christians have started to call us their youngest brother (*pügöda*) instead of foreigners (*golawa*). This has been a great asset. We belong to their family. As such, we are allowed to share our thoughts but we are not telling people what to do. I always thought this was a very good position to be in as a missionary. It sounds good, but I have to admit that I often got my own fingers into things, desiring to tell them what a good solution should look like.

The Karen's traditional poems, called *hta*,<sup>7</sup> are another indigenous resource that can be used to tell the gospel. A friend and long-time missionary, Keith Hale, has produced an evangelistic booklet which explains the way to salvation through those *hta*. This tool is well-liked among the older people.

It is a joy to discover resources in the culture that can be talked and shared about, learning from each other. It is hard work, but it is also enriching to find out about the people's hopes and with what they can identify in their lives. It is a privilege when we start to belong to them in one capacity or another. But we also need humility when we feel misjudged, ignored or even scolded because we do not fulfil their expectations. We have been blessed that more than once we could reconcile with people after relationships had turned sour. I have appreciated it a lot that the Karen have given

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7 These poems are chanted at traditional funerals or weddings, or they may be used to put a baby to sleep. Some of the *hta* tell about God. New *hta* can also be made up.

us another chance after I had acted inappropriately in their eyes.

We have never established a mission station, but rather just lived in a Karen village or among the Thai and Karen in a marketplace. Over the years, usually just one foreign family has lived with the Karen in the Omkoi district of Chiang Mai province. Since the work grew so quickly, the Karen themselves had to take responsibility for the groups of Christians among them. With our presence we have been an encouragement to the Karen, but also a temptation to depend on us. The Karen appreciate that we have learned their language and culture, and that we eat what they eat and sleep where they sleep. We try to use tools for teaching the Bible that are reproducible for them. They have become aware that in Christ they have received the same power that we missionaries have.

One Sunday after church, we were called to a neighbour's house because a young man had suddenly fallen unconscious despite having no sign of illness. So we started to pray. I prayed and the lad started to swing at me. Then an elder prayed, and at that point the young man sat up and asked what has happened. God had made it very clear that he listens to the prayers of the new Karen believers. This was an encouragement to them.

## II. Handling Expectations of Money

The temptation for the Karen has been that some thought we would bring money with us to help them. At times, some of the Karen wanted us to move out because they felt that we were standing in the way of other groups who came in later and were

giving more financial help.

When we were new in the village, one cold morning a Karen mother with her almost-naked baby came to our house, begging for clothes. But we had to say that we were not distributing clothes, and to please go to the church elders. She was not very happy and we asked ourselves whether we had done the right thing. Later on, when we got to know people, we discovered that this mother belonged to one of the richest families in the village.

Another time, one of the educated church workers was unhappy with us because we did not pay salaries. He told me that we could afford to send our children to school in the city (which was a heartache to us) but we would not help the Karen. He said he would not work with Western missionaries anymore. So he moved out and went to work with another group that paid him a monthly salary. After six months, he was back in our village. He did not like how that group was directing him. The village church he came back to disciplined him for three months, not giving him any role in the church during that time.

Then the Karen leaders thought it would be a good idea to help evangelists who go out regularly with some reimbursement. They asked us whether we would help with half of that money. We agreed. But after one or two years, we realized that most of the evangelists got only what we paid, and not much if anything of what the churches had promised. A new start was necessary. Nowadays, we still help a little, but most of the support comes from the different village churches.

Then the pressure came to help with building churches. When I was

walking with Karen Christians to spread the gospel, one leader asked, 'Why is it that you do not help? Look at the other village where another mission has built a nice church and we have only a bamboo hut to meet in.' I responded, 'The church in the other village tells a lot about that mission and their faith, and your church tells a lot about your faith.' Even though similar questions have been raised at times, none of the churches we have worked with have joined hands with that group. One reason has been that we had been living with the people and had become friends with them.

At times, however, we did compromise under pressure. For example, we agreed with the churches that our organization would pay for tiles for the roofs of new churches. We have done this over many years and it has worked out well. We remain part of the work, helping in some measure as the Karen do as well.

Not too long ago I met a very dedicated missionary from the organization that helped to construct the nice church building, and he asked me why the Karen do not take up responsibility for their own work. I looked at him a bit puzzled, because I felt the Karen were taking responsibility quite well in the work in which we were involved. After a moment of silence, he said, 'We will start to work more in the way you do now. We will give out less money.'

We praise the Lord that we have had friends and relationships with Karen people who have appreciated our presence without expecting money. That has helped us navigate this minefield of finances. In emergency situations, we were willing to drive people to a hospital, but we declined to be the Landrover taxi to the dis-

trict town, thirty kilometres away or a three-hour drive when we first lived there. (Road improvements have cut the travel time roughly in half since then.)

Establishing personal relationships that are based on respect and equality is key. With those who see us only as givers of resources, this is a difficult goal to reach. Once a Karen called us stingy in an open meeting, because we would sell paracetamol tablets instead of giving them away free. It hurt. And yet we know that by selling things, we give the other person the feeling of partnership instead of dealing with him or her as a beggar.

We have also set an example that it is okay for Christians to sell things. Some of the second-generation Karen Christians have started businesses and we are friends with them. Nowadays, some of them even help us from time to time. The first time this happened, I did not find it easy to accept but now we praise the Lord for that! As Paul wrote to the Philippians, 'Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. ... They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God' (Phil 4:17-18).

It is hard not to fulfil people's expectations. Who likes to disappoint others? Yet when we look at Jesus' ministry, we see that he did not fulfil all the people's expectations. On one occasion he went to another village even though many wanted to be healed by him (Mk 1:35-39). To the rich young man he gave the freedom to choose whether he would sell all and follow him (Mk 10:17-31). Jesus loved him and yet he let him go. Many left Jesus when he taught God's word in a straightforward manner. And then he asked his disciples, 'You

do not want to leave, do you?’ (Jn 6:66–67). As missionaries, we are not called to fulfil the wishes of the people but to do the will of the Father in heaven.

### III. Missionary Visions and Local Cultures

Going on mission with a broad vision is a good thing. Often people are motivated for mission by a vision of providing better healthcare or a burden for the victims of sex trafficking. But when the vision and strategy are spelled out in concrete forms and plans before one has had long-term exposure to the target people group, serious problems can arise. Here are a few vivid examples.

A foreign medical mission built a hospital near Omkoi, because the Karen told them that they would like to have one. But it has never functioned as a hospital, because foreign doctors need to take an examination in the Thai language first before they can be approved to practise, and no doctor who has passed this exam is available.

Two groups have recently arrived who work against human trafficking. One is supporting an orphanage (which actually is a hostel with only a few orphans) and the other is sponsoring children with the vision of helping them through their studies. In actual fact, we have not had a problem with human trafficking in the area because the Karen highly value marriage and family. And it is even less of a problem in the traditional setting of mountain villages, where extended family members care for each other. To me, it seems to be lacking in integrity to depict Karen kids as though they are in danger of human trafficking or being orphans when in

fact they are not. But it is easier to find sponsors for orphans and children in danger of human trafficking than just straightforward for studies.

Recently many foreign workers have been thrown out of China. How do the abandoned Chinese feel? Many feel left behind, alone, sad and angry. Another one expressed it in this way: ‘As I look back, I sometimes feel used. Maybe I was just the tool that made it possible for the foreigners to see their dream come true. I don’t want to feel that way, but sometimes I wonder. I realize now that I wasn’t really part of making decisions. I was the one who ran all the errands and did what I was told to. But maybe it isn’t so easy when you don’t understand the culture.’<sup>8</sup> No missionary would like to be the one this person describes, but it should cause us to reflect on how we undertake our work.

In contrast, consider how Paul taught the new Christians. He encouraged them to help the churches in Jerusalem and in Judea. He encouraged the use of local resources to help others. We never hear Paul asking the sending church in Antioch to help him or the newly established churches; instead, he gave the new Christians the opportunity to express their gratitude towards God and to the Christians in the place where the gospel originated.

Sometimes God gives us a vision to set us on our way, but the missionary must be open to adjusting, changing or even abandoning the vision to keep in step with God. Paul and his team were going to preach the gos-

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<sup>8</sup> ‘So, How Are They Now? A Follow-Up on Chinese Christians after Their Expat Colleagues Had to Leave’, 5 July 2019, <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/chinasource-blog-posts/so-how-are-they-now..>

pel in Bithynia, 'but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to' (Acts 16:7). Then he had a vision of a man of Macedonia begging him to come over to Macedonia (Acts 16:9). Paul and his team decided that this was God's call and went off to preach the gospel in Europe.

In the same way, we have to stay flexible to keep in step with God's calling. Only when we become fellow travellers with the people we want to serve we will start to see things as they see them, and that will help us to adjust our vision so as to be in step with them and with local circumstances. We need to think about how we can integrate our vision with their vision, or God may ask us to abandon our vision to become part of a greater vision with the people we want to serve.

One senior missionary advised me, 'If you really think you have a good idea how things should change or could be done better, you can talk

about it with the Karen—but then you have to wait. If the idea is good in the sight of the Karen, sometime later one of the leaders will air a similar or the same idea, and then the time has come to act and support his idea.' I have seen that happen several times. About two years ago, I aired the idea that they should research the land rights of the place where a hostel and Bible training centre are located. Just recently, they came up with suggestions of how to make sure that the unregistered land will not be taken over by someone. Had I done it all by myself, they would have thought it is my responsibility, but now they have taken it on as their responsibility.

It is good to have a vision or burden to go to the mission field. Without it, we would probably stay at home. But it is essential to go with a servant attitude and to spend the first years becoming fellow travellers who know the culture and language of the people group we are now part of.