Effective Intercultural Communication:
A Christian Perspective.

A. Scott Moreau, Evvy Hay Campbell, and Susan Greener.
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For many people, intercultural communication equates to language learning. This is far too narrow. Effective Intercultural Communication will help anyone who communicates in the twenty first century, where every community includes people of diverse ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. The book's emphasis is on communicative effectiveness for the sake of Christian ministry. While in the secular world there are many books that aim to help business people negotiate deals and make profits, there are fewer Christian books that delve into the multiple facets that constitute effective communication.

The structure of the book is clear: the first part is introductory, the second part builds theoretical foundations, the third part explores practical patterns of intercultural communication, and the fourth part is about developing intercultural expertise.

For many students at seminaries and for pastors in church ministry, the greatest learning will come from the third and fourth parts. The chapter headings of part three are as follows: Nonverbal Intercultural Communication; Contexting; Polychronic and Monochronic Time; Individualism and Collectivism; Social Power in Intercultural Communication; Gender Roles; and Honor and Justice.

Attention to each of these elements will reward any individual who deals with people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The book explains a range of nonverbal communication patterns, such as eye contact, silence, stillness or movement, physical proximity, physical contact, and gestures. Non-verbal communication is estimated to convey more than 70% of the message, as it indicates attitudes, emotions and personality. Non-verbal communication patterns vary widely depending on cultural context – in some cultures making direct eye contact is indicative of sincerity and truth-telling, while in other cultures it can demonstrate the speaker is being threatening or domineering.

The chapter on 'context' explains Edward Hall's theory of low-context versus high-context cultures. In low-context cultures, meaning lies in the explicit words used (eg. USA, Germany), while in high-context cultures, meaning resides in stored knowledge of behaviors, attitudes and values, such that explicit words are less important than non-verbal communication and clues. The proverb, "A wise person is one who hears one word and understands two" conveys a high context worldview. Some Indonesian ethnic groups are renowned for their direct "straight-talking" speech, while others pride themselves on being "halus" and polite (in other words, indirect). These differences reflect the spectrum of low-context and high-context communication patterns.

Attitudes to time reflect cultural norms. In some settings punctuality, "clock-time", schedules, appointments, and avoiding being late are valued. In Edward Hall's research, these are labelled monochronic approaches to time. Hall contrasted monochronic time with "polychronic" approaches to time. In polychronic settings, relationships are more important that appointments, interruptions are welcomed, and people may hold multiple simultaneous conversations. In monochronic cultures time is commodified ("time is money"), while in polychronic cultures relationships and flexibility to respond to changes are more important.

Individualism and collectivism are a particularly helpful framework to inform evangelism. Most evangelism strategies imported from western countries to Indonesia assume an individualistic culture where each person is autonomous and can make their personal decision to believe the gospel and follow Jesus. However, Indonesian culture is predominantly collectivist, in which lifelong loyalty to one's in-group (particularly the extended family) is expected. For members of collectivist cultures, obligations and duties to parents and ancestors are treated with greater weight than self-actualization and self-fulfillment. Therefore, evangelism and discipleship should emphasize how following Christ is good for the needs and interests of the group, promoting harmony, mutual love and service, and the opportunity for a shared future reconciled to God and each other.

Another useful lens for understanding the dynamics of intercultural communication is the concept of power distance, introduced by Geert Hofstede. Power distance is "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a community expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede Cultures and Organizations, 46). Broadly speaking, high power distance cultures are hierarchical (political, religious, business leaders exert authority over subordinates, who must show respect and obedience); while low power distance cultures are more egalitarian. Most Indonesian young adults (including theological students) have a preference for low power distance (because of the influence of media and globalization). Misunderstanding power distance is a common cause of conflict in ministry settings. Young evangelists or junior pastors may fail to recognize who holds power in the church community, and how they must respectfully conduct themselves so as not to dishonor established power-holders. The book also analyses how the phenomenon of patronage influences the flow of communication.

Effective Intercultural Communication next highlights the important of gender roles in communication patterns. Traditional cultures tend to have a large gender role separation, whereby masculine values such as achievement, performance and competition permeate society, and female roles are defined with reference to

harmony and tenderness. Being aware of the predominant gender roles in a particular setting assists Christian leaders to adapt their style to the patterns of their setting and avoid causing offence.

The last chapter in part three of the book concerns honor and justice. Anthropologists have observed that while western cultures are marked by justice as a basic cultural value, Asian cultures are oriented more towards honor (or face). Loss of honor creates shame, while injustice creates guilt. Honor-shame cultural frameworks are currently a hot topic in missiology, with writings by authors such as Jayson Georges and Jackson Wu aiming to introduce western readers to the dynamics of non-western cultures. Sin terminology and gospel presentations that are narrowly western (presenting individual guilt as the primary consequence of sin), can fail to elicit a response from non-westerners who don't feel "guilty," but may feel they have a problem with shame.

The final part of the book concerns developing intercultural competence, and includes material on adaptation and culture shock, intercultural friendship, evangelism, discipleship and church planting. Each of these chapters seeks to apply the paradigms developed in part three to specific ministry scenarios. While the book is primarily written for a western audience, it is extremely useful for those from other cultural backgrounds who wish to improve their communication with people from diverse cultures. One particular strength of the book is that it draws on important secular scholarship in the field of intercultural communication, to underpin and strengthen Christian intercultural ministry.