

This series of posts was written while reading and engaging with [Duane Elmer's book *Cross-Cultural Connections*](#). It's a book well worth reading!

[cross-cultural connections \(1\)](#)

June 5, 2009

The good folks at [CMS](#) have leant me Duane Elmer's book *Cross-Cultural Connections*. It's really easy to read and has lots of useful things to say. The very first challenge it poses is to ask how much grey area you, the reader, are happy with between what you define as 'right' and what you define as 'wrong'. How much behaviour (ways of worshipping, relating, conducting business, etc.) are you prepared to label 'different' rather than wrong?



It's a fascinating question. I think I find it easier to count things as difference rather than error when I'm clearly immersed in a different country. I find it harder to treat brothers and sisters who are close (geographically or culturally) with the same grace. When I perceive someone to be in the same culture — when I expect them to share my values, to have had a

similar upbringing, to enjoy the same things and to find the same things uncomfortable — then I make demands that I would never make of people I understand to be deeply embedded in another culture.

How often do we expect our 'close' brothers and sisters to think, act, sing, relate, dress and consume the same kinds of ways we do in order to be appropriately expressing their love of God. How much room do we allow one another to simply be different? I think I need some more practice at accommodating 'non-wrong' difference.

[cross-cultural connections \(2\)](#)

June 9, 2009

Culture...sneaks up on us, and we tend to make decisions based on our cultural background rather than trying to understand the cultural background of the other person first.

One of the best things my mother ever taught me was to, as she used to say, "put the best construction on everything". By that she meant that you should always choose to interpret someone's comments or actions in the best light possible. But the thing I've slowly been realising, and that Elmer's Cross-

Cultural Connections has reinforced, is just how easy it is to assume you know all possible interpretations of a situation. Even if you put (your) best construction on a situation, chances are you're going to misinterpret it!

Instead of making the best possible judgement from within our cultural frame of reference, Elmer suggests that what's necessary is the suspension of judgement "until we have made deliberate attempts to understand". Expect not to understand. Don't leap to conclusions, but pause, ask questions, listen to the answers you're given, be genuinely interested in someone else's story.

This is true not just in cross-cultural situations... it is so easy to feel like I understand exactly what my family means by every facial twitch, yet simultaneously believe that they don't understand me at all.

[cross-cultural connections \(3\)](#)

June 12, 2009

Openness, acceptance and trust. They sound a bit New Age maybe? Or perhaps they're the catch-cry of the naive multi-culturalist? They're actually the three personal characteristics that Elmer identifies in Cross-Cultural Connections that are fundamental to successful cross-cultural adjustment.

Elmer's really upfront about the fact that in cross-cultural situations you will face frustration, confusion, tension and embarrassment. You will. But he suggests that if you can enter into those situations with openness, acceptance and trust you are more likely to observe closely, listen intently and inquire genuinely about what happened.

In contrast, if you walk into a cross-cultural setting fearful, suspicious and stubbornly holding onto the way you like things done, then he pretty much guarantees that you will be full of criticism for the new culture and will tend to withdraw into yourself (or a community of similar people).



I like the framework. I like the fact that these characteristics don't necessarily mean having to give up your own culture. Although if you're acting this way I think you'll be prone to picking up new ways of doing things, I also think that openness, acceptance and trust are things you can really only do

when you have a pretty strong sense of self, of your value and purpose. So, these characteristics aren't about making you into something else in order to connect with others but help you transcend the barriers between yourself and others from where you already are.

[cross-cultural connections \(4\)](#)

June 19, 2009

How do you divide up the world? There's lots of debate about the political correctness of these big labels, but here are some options:

- First, Second and Third Worlds?
- 'East' and 'West'?
- 'North' and 'South'?
- Developed and Developing?

Duane Elmer refers a lot to Westerners and the Western world, but then refers to the rest of the world as the 'Two-Thirds World'. Linguistically it kind of bugs me, but I hope you get the gist of what he means...



The latter third of Elmer's Cross-Cultural Connections discusses a number of key cultural differences between the 'West' and the 'Two-Thirds World'. Like all generalisations, it's going to grate sometimes, but there was also quite a bit of wisdom. One of the things he said that really struck me was about goal- vs relationally-oriented people.

According to Elmer, Western society is dominated by a goal-focussed mentality. There's plenty that's good about this way of operating: goal-oriented people work hard, they are often trustworthy and dedicated. They get a lot done. The relationally-focussed person, on the other hand, dominates the Two-Thirds World. Relationships lay the foundation for activity; goals and schedules are only attended to after sharing in conversation and hospitality. When a friend drops in to visit, they become the relationally-oriented person's priority — the doctor's appointment will wait.

Now, there's no right way to do things — Elmer's clear this is just a case of [difference](#) — but here's the rub... Elmer's insight is that goal-oriented people will sacrifice relationships in order to reach the goal while relationally-oriented people will sacrifice the goal in order to maintain the relationship.

In light of this insight, I've been wondering what kind of impact discussions like [this one](#) will have? I think moving towards realistic goals is definitely a step forward, and generally I'm all for KPIs and SMART goals. But Elmer's planted a small seed of doubt. What will we be prepared to sacrifice (marriages, friendships, sanity...?) in order to demonstrate we've achieved our man-made goals?

[cross-cultural connections \(5\)](#)

July 29, 2009

So, it's been a while since I posted on Elmer's Cross-Cultural Connections but we were at a CMS event the other night that has spurred me to finish the series off with one last post. And the reason for the post is this: I struggle with the wisdom of many very experienced brothers and sisters that recommends conformity to the status expectations of another culture, making adjustments where possible to give honour as you can.

Elmer writes (p 168):

Keep in mind that if you insist on imposing your cultural values [e.g., gender equality] and even your biblical values on the rest of the world in a way that others perceive as crude or harsh, you will not get a hearing for the gospel... find a way if possible, where you can uphold the cultural values [of status/respect] while bringing your own biblical values to bear on the situation in a sensitive way.

I find this a hard word. I want to do away with gender inequality, I want to break down the caste system and I want to treat the cleaner with all the respect and dignity I would give to my colleagues. Yet the word from Elmer, and from others I respect with years on the mission field, is that certain concessions need to be made when working within the structures of power and authority in other countries.

I don't want to be 'crude and harsh'. I want to act 'in a sensitive way'. But I struggle to know what that will look like. This is just one of those things I don't think I'll figure out until I'm in a country where it matters. But it confounds me and it tears at my left-leaning, bleeding heart.