

## MAKING CONNECTIONS



# Supervised Theological Field Education (STFE) as Inter-cultural Conversation

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# Snapshot

- 27% of the population were born overseas, and a further 20% of the population are children of people born overseas
- UK = 20% of our migrant population.
- 25% of our immigrants come from Asian countries, China and India mostly, but Vietnam, Burma, Cambodia and Malaysia are also significant.
- 41% come from elsewhere...NZ, other parts of Europe,
  - Many of these are Iranian, Syrian and Egyptian refugees.
- 30% of those who identify as Baptist were born overseas





# Transformation Program begun 2003

\* 10 full Saturdays per  
year, for 3 years

\* over 400 completed

\* currently 92 students

\* Dip Theology







- Denominational questions
  - Intercultural conversations
  - Ordination processes
  - Supervised Theological Field Education (STFE)



- What issues have you encountered in a peer group includes mixed ethnicities, that indicate cultural factors may or may not be involved?

An environment was created where participants will not only identify “the various cultural components that make up identity”, but rather dig deep “to understand how those components influence our way of experiencing the world. As we continue to journey into self-awareness, honouring the complexity of our own lives, we become better able to honour the complexities of another’s life, appreciating differences as opportunities rather than problems” (Floding, 2011, 159).

- Supervised Theological Field Education.
  - It is a reflective practice unit, accompanied by ministry placements or positions of 16 hours per week.
  - It is a double-point unit, taken over an entire year.
  - supervision and input at a number of levels.
    - each candidate has a personal ministry supervisor
    - a congregational feedback and reflection group
    - engages in personal reflection and evaluation
    - a weekly 2 hour peer supervision group, where a process of engagement with Case studies, goals and theological reflection are undertaken.
    - This is facilitated by myself as director of STFE.

- Complex power in my role
- Shohet outlines that *“when all three different sources of power(role, cultural, personal) are brought together in the same person, then the effect can be overwhelming”!* (Shohet, 95)
- *“interculturality, which speaks of living in the intersection of the three spheres – being centred in the intersection of the universal, the cultural and the individual within living, colourful persons.”*(Lartey, 1997, 13)







I value the concept that Hawkins (1994) developed of culture unfolding between us, rather than as a fixed, impermeable barrier. It shapes our interaction, as it shapes me, and so between us the possibility of learning occurs.



Welcome to Rev Jun Tan  
Co-facilitator

- Jun & I each track the experience in a personal journal.
  - It was a way of us comparing notes
  - asking questions about what parts of our interpretations were shared and what were distinct,
  - what might offer insight into the other in terms of their reflective process,
  - how the cultural understandings may be enriched.
- Within the group a process of reflective praxis, outlined by many including Lartey (1997), which begins with concrete experience, considers social and contextual analysis, develops hermeneutical dialogue, and continues in praxis.



# Learning and Resistance

- *“We also discussed resistance and trust. In STFE a case study can give the impression of being judged. They have to create a posture of learning, which means vulnerability vs guarding of themselves. They need to entrust themselves to the space. Resistance itself comes to look like either deflecting or drawing attention to self, where as trust tends to relax the body into the space. (Anne, 25/10)*
- *one Chin Burmese man said he thought it was more about personality. In fact, if there is trust in the group, good learning can take place, and open conversation (Jun, 26/7/2016)*
- **Resistance is countered by relationship**
- *One participant responds to almost every question with the phrase ‘my situation is very different from..’ which seeks to protect him from examination or critique or further question. This was challenged today. The protective layer of difference or ‘specialness’ that silences others was addressed, allowing him to see how this inhibits learning and growth. (Anne, 18/10)*

## Discovering commonality

- *Our Iranian pastor, whose experience of ministry among Iranian refugees is sobering indeed, and quite unique even across Melbourne, concluded the semester by declaring that he found encouragement in the shared stories of other participants, their struggles and triumphs, their pastoral responses and their limitations. For him, the common experience reminded him of what is true for all people, so that he did not experience the isolation of his difference. Whilst his situation was unique, as one could argue are all situations, he is not isolated in the questions raised by the human condition. (Anne, 30/5/17)*
- There emerged a comradeship where their experience of aloneness was overcome in the shared experience.
- Reflecting on experience was at first suspect, until they began to trust that the intent was to discover resonances between the narrative of experience and the theological narrative through which their lives discover meaning.
- Bringing their tradition into dialogue with their culture and experience, as an authoritative hermeneutic took time... and trust.

- *“A conversation unfolded as to what is different and what is shared – and the affirmation of transcendental values emerged in both. Different cultures whilst they may appear to simply offer fixed doctrinal teaching actually do allow space for reflection. At times, though, this is a challenge – not simply relying on ethnic culture so much as context. One said their experience was that ‘reflection is close to doubt’. (25/10)*
- safe enough space for permission to be granted to doubt, through honest reflection, meant that at times we knew we were prompting genuine movement.
- we found that the space to name these doubts ran counter to the otherwise fixed evangelical certitude of their cultural tradition.



## Specialness/difference/cultural insight

- *“It was curious that a couple of presentations talked about ‘Asian culture’, as though that is all the same. Already it is quite evident that there isn’t a broad-brushstroke Asian, but rather a multiplicity of cultural mores, with distinctives that are significant. That said, there are similarities, but to generalise is to simplify what is far more nuanced. Naming this was interesting – and what we came to was an insight that we refer to “Western” thought, as though it is entirely shared, rather than nuanced in a variety of ways. (sept, 2016)*

- *He seems to me to be disconnected from the rest of the group, lost in his own world, drawing others attention towards him coercively. (2/8) PKorean was again blaming others in his church for the difficulties he's in. Anne handled well. I don't see culture made much difference in her handling here. (9/8) I personally started to become agitated with him. I find a real resistance rising within me when the Korean man speaks, as I long to find an authentic connection. He is very absorbed in his own experience, to the extent whereby it is almost a pathological obsession. (9/8)*
- *I left class today with that awful challenge of wondering if someone is 'playing the culture card'. The interaction that took place with one student feeds my concern that culture can be used as an excuse for evasion and avoidance, and affirms my concern that I don't have the capacity to read avoidance and resistance behaviours in another cultural context. It was reassuring to know that Jun felt the same! That is, he too understands that people can hide behind their culture and avoid transparency. Jun was even able to see resonances with another situation of a Chinese national who used culture to confuse and avoid. When pressed, it appears that this particular student resorts to the excuse of poor English, which is not an excuse as people are eager to listen and hear what is being said. These are indicators something else is going on. Jun is comfortable to note the tendency toward narcissism in this student, and to note the confusion that becomes a cloak around the student that appears to then blame, triangulate and avoid accountability. (30/8)*
- *Even Jun, who was much more reserved, reflected on the same interactions : I was more unkind to him than her. Very unChinese. But I was very frustrated by my inability to penetrate his armours and shell. Something going on inside him? What is the effective way to communicate with him? (30/8)*

“Supervision sessions that accept that prejudiced feelings are inevitable given our cultural heritage, may open up genuine explorations in which such feelings can be challenged and changed. This open supervision does not put into question the basic worth of the supervisee who reveals prejudiced or culturally insensitive attitudes. They could indeed be praised for their courage in being prepared to own to difficult thoughts, feelings and beliefs. Having been voiced and explored, a genuine change of attitude is the most likely outcome, particularly if there is a genuine meeting across difference.” (Shohet, 2006, 208)



*“I needed to make a claim for respectful listening between the cultures, and the need to avoid using culture or colluding with other cultural groups to exclude others. I was grateful for Peter’s clear head, and I felt as though we responded from the same page. I then checked up on myself, to ensure that I wasn’t colluding with him! The risk of marginalizing is real... as is the risk of dividing down cultural lines, and reminding them of the goodwill and hospitality of listening was really critical to name.” (Anne, 14.9)*

# Privacy/secretcy/vulnerability

- *“In my understanding vulnerability is transcultural. It is an ability to bare it all, to be "naked". This ability can be obtained and increased through faith in Christ who forgives our sins. One task of STFE is to provide a safe and encouraging environment for its students to become fully aware of such an ability and to intentionally increase their ability of being vulnerable... **Vulnerability** = the ability to suspend one's own judgement while revealing one's true thoughts and feelings that are perceived as shameful, guilty or fearful. “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed or embarrassed.” GENESIS 2:25 (Jun, 11/10)*
- *In our culture people keep secrets, people lie, people can't tell the truth (Iranian man)*

- *the concept of culture as a 'hindrance' was challenged, as we unpacked the concepts of privacy and secrecy, respect and hiddenness in terms of western and eastern concepts of individualistic/communal experience. Culture was seen without judgement, but rather in terms of the emphasis upon the human person. (Anne, 18/10)*

# Humour



*“Humour entered the room and allowed us to laugh with one another at shared experiences of human folly. We seemed to laugh at a number of things, particularly the morning group. Perhaps we were more relaxed. It was a shared laughter at the nature of shared struggle and shared limitations. It was lovely indeed. I hope we can foster that, as it is one of the means by which the cultural guards may be broken. Laughter transcends difference and shares connection. Humour, when it is about shared human folly and not culturally alienating, opens up and disinhibits. It’s lovely!” (Anne, 18/10)*



- Humour indicates the growth of a bond.
- “humour has always provided a cultural prop to adjust to difficult social changes” (Heddendorf, 2014, xiv). But as a *cultural prop*, there is the assumption of shared interpretations. Indeed, humour becomes a litmus test to the shifting of meaning interpretations that become all the more live in diverse cultural contexts. The capacity for humour to contain a multiplicity of meanings allows it to be effective in both binding together and identifying cultural nuances.
- Culture, whilst present, begins to sit behind rather than in front of our humanness.
- Humour creates the capacity for participants to hold experiences more lightly, thus gaining a broader perspective.
- Humour ‘transcends these immediate incongruities and shows us what Niebuhr calls *the ultimate incongruities of existence*’ (Heddendorf, 2014, 4).
- The need to make rational sense is suspended for a moment, liberated meaning from being contained or explained. “Rather than resolving the tension, humour stretches it to the fullest. On this level, the comic spirit accepts the struggles and suffering of life and mixes them with hope” (Heddendorf, 2014, 4).



# Mutuality

- *“humility is akin to gratitude – that is the recognition of need of the other. “*
- Hospitable space
- *“Jun and I discussed the communion table as reflecting the learning space – both imminent – present, transitory in time and space, and Transcendent – reaching across time and space, allowing imagination and wonder, and question and reflection. The Eucharist is a place of gratitude – a place of meeting, it relies upon acknowledgement our need of the other, and our participation in sharing. The eucharist also invites us into vulnerable space, inviting trust – ie, we entrust ourselves to the meal. In this way it confronts resistance. In our case, who is the host at the table (cf the host/elements). This role is shared, by Anne & Jun, both participating in creating a hospitable space, where trust and engagement may occur. “ (Oct 25)*

*A number of insights emerged.*

*One is that when considering the cultural context in the reflective practice process, we recognize that which is distinct and that which is shared. We then discover the means by which the situation is viewed through these lenses.*

*That is, there is a transcendent element here. Values are at play in this place, as expressed in our theological world view.*

*So too might play – sometimes as humour – become a tool for transcending the minutia, cutting through our limits and discovering a larger view. (Anne, 2017)*





At its best, the peer group provides a safe space to articulate shared beliefs, to explore the narrative around which our faith is experienced, and to find a way to invite insight into the cultural elements of experience. The attention paid to the experience of each other, allows growth in formative areas for leadership: awareness of oneself, capacity for empathy, development of cognition and understanding, awareness of power, the practices of generative community, and the growth of gratitude as both a posture toward God and an openness toward learning (Lau Branson & Martinez, 2011, 208).





*"Culture, whilst present, sat behind rather than in front of our humanness."*

*This image has beautifully captured the essence of this whole experience. It says to me that genuine theological reflections can happen the same way whether or not culture presents, that culture is secondary compared to our shared humanness, that culture does enrich the group learning experience when properly acknowledged and demystified, that the supervisor is to engage the person of a different culture, not the different culture of the person, that the inter-cultural conversation doesn't change the fact one way or the other that failure to learn can still happen in the group... Jun, 6/2017*





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