

## An Exploration of Effective Strategies for Teaching Adults Cross-Culturally Through Small Groups

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*This article reviews an example of a non-Western individual learning in a non-Western context followed by his teaching in Western churches. In the past, most adult education in a non-Western context was usually done by Westerners. This is changing, and now some non-Westerners are teaching in a Western context. It examines the experience of the author teaching in Western churches, though he was reared and educated in a non-Western context (Korea). As an adult, he moved to New Zealand (where the Western education system is used) and experienced first-hand how different the educational system was from that of his home country. This article deals with the author's teaching experiences while living in New Zealand. In addition, he suggests that small group ministry is an effective means of adult education. Many newcomers start attending church through initial involvement in a small group ministry. An understanding of the other cultures is greatly needed in a multi-ethnic context. Prayer is crucial throughout the process.*

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### Introduction

**T**his article is written to present and review an example of learning in a non-Western context and then teaching in a Western context when the teacher comes from a non-Western context. This is not a common theme in adult education. As is well known, the history

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of mission reveals that Christian mission has been done primarily by Western countries such as Europe, Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Of course, by their unfailing endeavors, many countries all over the world were evangelized. Consequently, mission has been regarded as an enterprise of the West. More recently, South Korea, being a non-Western country, has actively participated in Christian mission. The country is currently the second largest mission sending country in the world. Today, we see many non-Western people working as missionaries and pastors in Third World countries and even in Western countries.

When I worked as a pastor in New Zealand, I observed non-Western pastors and missionaries working for churches. As a non-Westerner I ministered to people from a variety of cultures within a range of areas, including preaching, teaching, evangelism, and other activities. In particular, I focused on teaching adults through small groups. While I was working, I realized that there were a wide variety of books, journals and materials written on this topic by Western theologians and missionaries from their perspectives. However, there were few resources written on this topic by non-Westerners based on their experiences. For this reason, I would like to describe my experience of learning in a non-Western context and of teaching in a Western context. While I am discussing this, I would like to deal with effective cross-cultural teaching strategies for teaching adults through small group ministry in church. Small group ministry has helped churches to grow qualitatively and quantitatively, so I will describe its importance and functions in relation to church growth.

### **Western or Non-Western?**

Many people have discussed how to define the concepts of Western and non-Western. Thus, we need to clarify these expressions. Missiologists Judith and Sherwood Lingenfelter write:

We use the term Western and expatriate interchangeably, since “Western-trained” may encompass North Americans, Europeans, Koreans, Japanese, and others educated to teach but who lack understanding of the cultural context of the students

with whom they interact (Lingenfelter and Lingenfelter 2003: 9).

For the first 30 years of my life I lived in South Korea, which is a non-Western country. South Korea was influenced by the power of China, which transmitted its culture and civilization to most oriental countries a long time ago. The Chinese practice a variety of religions. Among them are Confucianism and Buddhism, the two major religions which have shaped their country (Osgood 1951). Buddhism formed the activities of daily living, and Confucianism played an important role in their philosophy and education. Due to China's proximity to Korea, those religions have also impacted Korean people in various areas. In particular, they were instructed by educators having a Confucian mindset and view of knowledge. However, Korea's educational traditions were challenged by the influence of Western education. For example, I was educated by programs created by Koreans who were taught in Western countries, including elementary school, middle school, high school and university. Even though Korea followed Western forms of education, it still preserved traditional elements that were formed by Confucianism. In contrast to Western countries, educators are given more authority in Korea. Teachers usually instruct their learners in a hierarchial way (Lingenfelter and Lingenfelter, 71-73). In the Confucian tradition learners should be obedient to their educators at all times. Although learners may have different ideas and opinions, it is considered impolite to express them.

After moving to New Zealand, I saw that education operated there in a different way. There was no hierarchial way of teaching, so educators interacted freely with students, not authoritatively, because the country adopted a Western educational system. I had the opportunity to pursue further study in New Zealand at a theological seminary. I also had the privilege of teaching cross-culturally in a church. I found myself constantly questioning: Western or non-Western? I recognized that I am still a non-Westerner. Although I was educated in Western countries for more than eight years, my way of thinking was still shaped by a non-Western perspective.

### Learning in a Non-Western context

Due to the rapid development of science, technology and transportation we can go anywhere on the globe within a day. With the spread of mass communication, including television, radio and the internet, we cannot only communicate with others who live in different places at any time, but we can find information easily. We are living in the world that has become globalized. We are able to easily meet people from all over the world and a variety of cultures. When I lived in South Korea, I did not encounter people from other countries until I was 20 years old. However, today, it is common to meet with people who come from overseas. The world is getting smaller.

Since the 1900s, most non-Western countries, especially those in Asia and Africa, have been influenced by Western cultures and their civilizations. Due to these Western influences, systems of education were naturally affected, including curricula, textbooks and teaching materials. However, there are still differences between Western and non-Western learning. Sharan B. Merriam and Young Sek Kim point out that a non-Western perspective emphasizes “community, lifelong learning, and holistic conceptions of learning in adult learning” (Merriam and Associates 2007:71-79).

They showed that for non-Western people, their experiences play a more important role than formal education, while Western people emphasize formal education. Looking at adult learning within a Korean context, there are dissimilarities with Western learning, and there are both Western and non-Western aspects. Before the nineteenth century China was the strongest influence on Korea. In particular, through Confucianism Korea adopted and developed proud Confucian traditions in education.

In the 1900s Korea suffered through the invasion and colonization of Japan and later the Korean War. Both brought misery to the Korean people in many areas, including its economy, its political and educational systems, and more. During that time, Koreans made great effort to overcome these disasters. One of the plans for development of the country was to send Korean students to Western countries such as the United States, England, Germany, and France, in order to learn about other cultures and civilizations, so that they could possibly apply insights in Korea. With respect to education, most were sent to North

America for education and returned home. The result is that most of the educational systems, methods and materials used in Korea come out of the Western country of America. Thus, in many ways, the educational system in Korea is similar to that of America. Methods of adult learning and related systems were also brought to the country. However, in spite of the Western influence, there are differences because of the continuing influence of Confucianism. For this reason, it is misleading to say simply that Korean education is Western or non-Western.

In many institutions, the educational system is very similar to that of Western countries. Learners learn within this educational system (Service 1990:441-57). On the other hand, Korea had been influenced by Chinese Confucianism in adult education. Although the educational system is affected by Western education, there are still indigenous cultural elements. Many Korean learners stick with the Confucian concept that is dominated by hierarchical structures of human relationships (Kee 2007: 153-72). In this sphere, students are seldom allowed to make any critique in class. Instead, they simply write down what their teacher writes on the board and memorize it. Most courses follow Western programs with English, Math, Art, Music, Social Science and Science, as subjects. However, students must follow what their teachers command in class. If learners refuse to keep these rules, they would be in trouble. Consequently, it is difficult to get creative results.

It has already been noted that in the Confucian system learners must be obedient to their educators at all times. This can be a positive characteristic and work works well if educators lead learners in better ways. For example, when teachers are able to educate learners not in a one-sided way, but in a two-sided, interactive way as is common in Western education, it works well. Generally, under the hierarchical system, educators instruct with their own way of teaching unilaterally. However, this has been changing. Many who were educated by Western countries have attempted to change traditional patterns of teaching, so they want their learners to have the ability to discuss with each other rather than being only submissive. These kinds of efforts have brought more positive elements to education in Korea.

For this reason, it is misleading to say that the education in Korea is either Western or non-Western. Although Merriam points out that

“non-Westerners believe that knowledge is embedded in everyday life, they do not value what is learned in formal school settings more than what is learned in daily life” (Merriam and Associates, 78), Koreans do regard formal education as something which is important because of the influence of Western education.

### Teaching in a Western Context

This article is based on experiences of teaching adults while I was ministering as an associate pastor in a Baptist church in New Zealand. When I was first appointed the church had about a hundred and fifty members. Although there were two pastors, they could not deal with all the ministries of the church. The church appointed several leaders who were in charge of worship, administration, prayer, Sunday school, and small groups. They had no special adult educational programs. Although there were some Bible study groups in the church, I realized that they were not effective for these adults. Since there were no leaders who could look after the small groups I volunteered to care for them. It was not easy for me to organize and teach those adults so that they might lead the church to the next stage. In order to teach them effectively, I had to establish a vision, philosophy, organization, and effective strategies for adult teaching in a cross-cultural setting. While in pastoral ministry I recognized that teaching adults through small groups was an important approach seen in the Scriptures. So when I taught those adults I encouraged them to recognize the importance of the Bible. Since it is the Word of God, we learn much by reading the Scriptures and, from what we learn, we derive lessons to teach them. 2 Timothy 3:16 says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”

Furthermore, I realized that effective small group ministry contributes to church growth. After conducting small groups in the church, the congregation grew to 250 members before I resigned from the church to pursue doctoral studies. On account of the establishment of effective strategies for teaching adults through small groups, the church had grown. Through that ministry experience, I discovered that small groups encouraged the church to grow. When people would come to church, they would meet with others through small groups.

Community was built with other members of church resulting in church growth.

Yonggi Cho, the former senior pastor at one of the largest churches in the world named Yoido Full Gospel Church, recognized that small group ministry was one of the important elements for church growth (Cho 2004:107-50). In addition, Joel Comiskey observed that small group ministry was a positive factor for church growth in Latin America. When he was ministering in those areas, he concluded that a contextualized application of small groups which was adopted from Korea was effective in South America (Comiskey 1997). To conclude, in contemporary churches, adult teaching through small groups is needed.

### **Biblical Foundations**

The Bible shows us the history of the relationship between man and God. Ever since the first man and woman were created by him, human beings have been in relationships. Although there is no specific theology for small groups in the Old Testament (Icenogle 1994: 21), we can know for certain that humanity from the beginning has formed groups. In his creation, God did not create only one person: man or woman. Rather, he made both of them together. It shows us that humanity starts with groups. Later, through the Scripture, he let his children know the importance of education. Icenogle also points out the importance of the Bible:

Admittedly, little biblical material specifically addresses the modern behavioral concept and practice of small groups. However, the Bible is full of comment, observation, reflection and admonition about the need for good human relationships where God is an integral presence. Scripture was written out of, to and for human community. Humanity naturally gravitates to grouping, and Scripture naturally points to the need for healthy human groups, large and small. The small group is the rudimentary and simple version of the more complex human community called forth by God (Icenogle 1994:12).

Regarding adult teaching through small groups, a well-known section of the Bible is Exodus 18. This is the story about Moses when Jethro visited him. Jethro observed that the ministry of Moses was not very good (Exod 18:17). He suggested:

Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens (Exod 18:20-21).

This shows the importance of teaching adults by the appointment of wise leaders serving small groups. Yonggi Cho organized his church based on these verses, and he came to realize that effective organization for teaching adults contributed to the church growth. When we look at the New Testament, we can see that Jesus started his ministry teaching disciples after organizing them as small groups. Icenogle has said that “He (Jesus) trained the Twelve so that the Twelve could lead the church into Christian discipleship and change the world forever” (Icenogle 199). This demonstrates that the small group organized by Jesus started with only twelve people, but had the foundation to spread the Gospel to people all over the world.

### **Effective Strategies for Teaching Adults Cross-Culturally Through Small Groups**

When we educate adults, we need to consider that adults are different from children in many ways. Thus, we are required to have distinct teaching methods for adults. When I was in charge of small groups, I looked after one group that was comprised of different age groups (children and adults) because these adults had to bring children due to inadequate child-care alternatives. There was no one who could look after the children, so we had to gather everyone together, reading the Bible and sharing with stories. As time went on, I recognized the differences between the children and the adults were so significant that, finally, we had to divide the group into two age groups: children and adult. By doing so, I observed that the children felt comfortable sharing with their peers instead of with their parents who belonged to a different age group. Malcolm S. Knowles claims:



The pedagogical model, designed for teaching children, assigns to the teacher full responsibility for all decision making about the learning content, method, timing, and evaluation. Learners play a submissive role in the educational dynamics. In contrast, the andragogical model focuses on the education of adults and is based on the following precepts: adults need to know why they need to learn something; adults maintain the concept of responsibility for their own decisions, their own lives; adults enter the educational activity with a greater volume and more varied experiences than do children; adults have a readiness to learn those things that they need to know in order to cope effectively with real-life situations; adults are life-centered to internal motivators than external motivators (Knowles, Holton III and Swanson 2005: 71-72).

As we seek better results, we must consider that children can get learn more from their teachers, while adults learn better through sharing with others through dialogue. After I recognized that difference, I had to find someone who could be in charge of the children.

While I was teaching adults, I also discovered that those adults had differences. Knowles states:

In any group of adults there will be a wider range of individual differences than is the case with a group of youths. Any group of adults will be more heterogeneous in terms of background, learning style, motivation, needs, interests, and goals than is true of a group of youths. Hence, greater emphasis in adult education is placed on individualization of teaching and learning strategies (Knowles, Holton III and Swanson, 66).

On account of these individual differences, small groups had to be reorganized into a variety of groups, and teaching materials adjusted to members' interests. Some were concerned about topics like marriage, relationships, and church, while others were more interested in biblical and theological knowledge, such as the study of the books of Romans, Ephesians, Genesis, and the meaning of salvation.

Another difference is that adults like to share their experiences. Bergevin affirms that “the adult educator, like the learners, must eventually put adult experiences in proper perspective in the educational program” (Bergevin 1967:121-22). Adults have had a variety of experiences; so in teaching adults, we need consider their experiences. When I taught adults through small groups, I focused on attracting their interest by having them share about their previous experiences. They became more interested and involved.

### **The Significance of Prayer**

When we look at the Bible, we see that many of the heroes of faith prayed regularly to God. Jesus also used to pray to God in any situation. When he started his ministry, he prayed to God. While he was ministering, he spent much time in prayer with all his heart and mind. Prayer still must be regarded as one of the most important factors in teaching adults, so that we can see them coming closer to God. Bruce considers prayer as “a necessity of spiritual life, and all who earnestly try to pray soon feel the need of teaching how to do it” (Bruce 1988: 52). Before we start teaching adults, we should prepare with prayer, so that we may have more confidence in teaching them effectively.

When we gathered together in small groups, we usually started with prayer. At the end of the meeting, we would also pray about their needs. When we prayed, we felt that we were being guided by the Holy Spirit. Mikel Neumann suggests that God breaks down barriers in his prayer (Neumann 1999:123). Small groups are one of the best places in which to teach adults through prayer. After praying fervently, we recognized that members were encouraged by the fact that they were eager to pray for each other. Through prayer, we discovered that many were healed physically and spiritually by the work of the Spirit. Yonggi Cho claimed that he could have more confidence after praying through his ministry. He also pointed out that prayer is one of the most important things in our Christian lives, so he made prayer one of his priorities before teaching adults in the church (Cho 2005:165-98). Furthermore, he organized his church using a variety of lay leaders and taught them clearly regarding the importance of prayer in teaching adults (Cho 1979:24). He has discovered that the church active in prayer was being transformed. Hence, in teaching adults through small groups,

prayer is one of the most important elements so that members can encourage each other in order to grow spiritually (Neumann, 132-133). Prayer also encourages spiritual growth in church leaders. Through the power of prayer, unity with each other will surely be one of the outcomes (Donahue and Robinson 2001, 139).

### **Philosophy of Adult Teaching for Small Groups**

Since the 1960s, the importance of small groups especially for teaching adults has been recognized and utilized in most churches. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has supplied church members with a variety of biblical opportunities for small group ministry (Stokes 1970:353). We must prayerfully establish a specific philosophy for teaching adults. Donahue points out that "a mission statement and ministry philosophy are key to the success of your ministry" (Donahue 1996:21). When I began in small group ministry, I became aware of the need of a mission statement and a ministry philosophy for small groups. Our mission statement was "to connect people relationally in groups for the purpose of growing in Christlikeness, loving one another, encouraging each other to grow spiritually, in order to glorify our Lord Jesus and proclaim the message of Him as one of his disciples."<sup>1</sup> This statement was given to the leaders and it challenged them, serving as the mechanism for reminding them of the purpose of the ministry. According to Galbraith "becoming an effective teacher of adults depends on acquiring a balance between an appropriate philosophical vision of teaching and the understanding and implementation of that vision into a practical instructional process and its related elements" (Galbraith 1998:3-4). Once the mission statement is completed, we need to create possible strategies for how to develop a comprehensive revitalization ministry (Arnold 1997:42). More importantly, having a positive philosophy, we should do our best so apply those principles in our specific Christian ministries. One of the best strategies is to establish small groups where we can effectively teach adults through those ministries.

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<sup>1</sup>This is the mission statement of the church.

### Understanding Different Cultures

We have seen that effective organization of small groups has contributed to the church growth. A variety of skills is needed to organize small groups, especially in a cross-cultural context. When I started organizing small groups, I considered how to do so effectively. I recognized there were a variety of cultures in the church. Lingenfelter describes that we need to “clarify and value the cultural distinctives of the participants...The teacher’s role is to create the most appropriate context within which students can learn” (Lingenfelter and Lingenfelter, 17). The work of an educator is to discover a clear strategy of how to teach effectively, so that he/she can be ready “to balance understanding of oneself as a teacher and know how to develop learning encounters that are meaningful and useful in the promotion of personal and professional growth” (Galbraith 1998:4). Thus, the educator should not try to train students according to his or her own culture, but to bring them to a comprehension of other cultures, so that they can understand a variety of cultures. Pai emphasizes, “in order to live effectively and in an enriching way, one not only needs to know about other cultural patterns but also how to reconcile the diverse patterns, so that a new and unique approach to life may emerge” (Pai 1990). As educators coming from our own cultural context, we really need to learn how to teach something to others who have grown up in a different culture so that the students may not be confused on account of the different cultures.

Teaching in a different culture is not an easy task. While I was teaching a group of adults in a church<sup>2</sup>, I had no trouble teaching in my own culture, but teaching in another culture was a difficult challenge which I had to endure with perseverance. In this respect, we can ask why we should try to understand other cultures here in this world. As the Lingenfelters (2003) point out, we should learn from the example of Jesus. He is our model to follow as disciples. When we consider him, we see how he endured with perseverance in order to understand our human culture, which is so different from that of heaven.

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<sup>2</sup>I also taught a group of Korean people through the Korean small group. Syllabus and materials were different from those of other English speaking people. We communicated in the Korean language.

Notwithstanding, he committed himself to be like one of us. He was "committed to mastering the knowledge and habits of his culture and that by doing so he grew in favor with people and with God" (Lingenfelter and Lingenfelter, 21). He spent much time learning our cultures and understanding us. This can be applied to us. Even though we are born and grow up in a different culture, we need to learn other cultures as our Lord Jesus did.

Why do we need to try to comprehend another culture in this century? We could stay in our own culture without communicating with other cultures. But this would not help us to be effective in multi-cultural societies. We need exchange with other cultures. Pai claims:

If a person operates rigidly in terms of a single culture, he/she will be less effective in accomplishing desired purposes. This suggests that the greater one's breadth of cultural awareness, and the more flexible a person is in shifting from one appropriate cultural context to another, the more successful that person will be in achieving desired outcomes. Frequent inter-ethnic contact is important, for it tends to increase the number of other cultural orientations within the private culture of an individual (Pai 1990).

Living in the Western culture of New Zealand, I wanted to be a good learner in understanding another culture in a godly way. It was a challenge. In teaching cross-culturally, we often ask ourselves how we can teach effectively within the new culture. The Lingenfelters say:

When teaching cross-culturally, the ideal is to become less American (75 percent) and more like those we teach (at best 75 percent) and therefore 150-percent persons....But to be effective in a new culture, we must learn a host of new behaviors that are not part of our way of life. For example, in Yap we had to learn new values about time and to think differently about obligations of relationships. We discovered that the Yapese way of dealing with crises was far different from our way, and we had to adjust to their way. (Lingenfelter and Lingenfelter, 23)

When we attempt to understand another culture, we should be careful learners of the country. Teaching within a different cultural context should follow how the learners of that culture learn. Without understanding these cultural ways of learning, we could fail in our attempts to teach effectively.

The best way is to be “flexible” to the culture. That means we should be open to learning about and valuing other cultures. In a Western context, we should be like a Westerner, while in a non-Western context, we should be a non-Westerner. The apostle Paul wrote, “to the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law” (1 Cor. 9:20-21). Although Paul was born a Jew, he wanted to be a Gentile because of the gospel. In addition, he made efforts to understand other cultures. Based on this concept, we should take lessons from our Lord Jesus Christ. Lingenfelter’s comment about him in relation to our work here on the earth is striking:

Acceptance of self and transformation in Christ are especially important...Teaching cross-culturally works best when we accept who we are and then embrace the necessity of change through the power and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ (Lingenfelter and Lingenfelter, 125).

Our work here on the earth is to learn from Jesus and to follow him with all our hearts. In this world, we are living to communicate with others who are coming from a variety of cultures. We should remember our culture and then learn about others as Christ did during his ministry. As our globe is coming closer together, so the work of knowing about other cultures is not a future job, but a present work. Along with this, the work of teaching in cross-cultural contexts, which is so dear to us, is also seen as being of the utmost importance.

In our church, most small groups had their own cultural flavors: European, Asian, Pacific Islander, and more. Of course, some groups were mixed cultures. We needed to skillfully organize the groups in our church. I organized the small groups into a variety of subgroups.

Bill Donahue categorizes a variety of small groups: disciple-making groups, community groups, service groups, seeker groups, and support groups (Donahue 1996, 28). He also formed groups based on marital status, age, ministry, task, personal need, life stage, etc. Although our church considered the variety of possible groups, we organized our groups into the following categories: Sunday school teachers, administration, worship, single men and women, young married couples, old married couples, families in need of caregivers, and international. Some groups were formed based on age, while others were formed based on a common interest.

### **Teaching Adults Through Small Groups**

In the contemporary church, small groups are one of the best places where adults can learn effectively. When they gather, they are free to talk about other things based on the Bible. Neumann considers small groups as "a modality for effective adult learning." (Neumann, 93) There are a variety of ways for teaching adults through small group ministry. Through small groups, we are able to fellowship with other people in prayer and singing songs. Moreover, we instruct them from the Scriptures and other books pertaining to the Bible. Most studies are connected with their lives and experiences, so they would be able to participate in their small groups.

As Bergevin (1967) points out, adult learners have had more experiences, so educators of adults need to take this into account, and they must recognize the uses to which individual experiences can be put (Bergevin, 122). If we use these kinds of techniques in small groups, the ministry will operate more effectively. Donahue and Robinson have affirmed that through experiential training, "their confidence grows and their friendships deepen." (Donahue and Robinson 2001, 139) As they note, we should encourage adults to be growing spiritually through small groups.

### **Conclusion**

We have considered learning in a non-Western context and teaching in a Western context by a non-Western teacher through the experiences of teaching adults in small groups. Learning in a non-Western context

is different from a Western context as evidenced by the situation in Korea. It has an educational system that is similar to that of Western countries, but has Asian elements.

My experience of teaching in a Western context as a teacher from a non-Western background is of special interest since it is becoming increasingly common. Understanding the culture and the educational style of a host culture are important. There are a variety of ways for effective ministry in teaching adults. In particular, establishing small groups is an effective strategy for teaching adults because it is based on the Bible. Small groups help the church to grow effectively. In contemporary Christian ministry, many are wrestling with how to teach adults effectively, especially in cross-cultural settings. In this regard, this article contends that teaching adults through small groups should be considered as an important method.

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