

“Who Is My Neighbor?” Showing Hospitality to Fellow Workers Who Are “Strangers” Among Us

by J. Wu

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A few years ago, when my husband and I were seconded to a different organization, we were invited to their organizational conference. The weather was lovely, and dozens of workers were mingling on the green lawn, enjoying the sunshine, coffee, and good conversation. A Western worker, probably in his late fifties, was standing with help of crutches outside of the crowds—alone. Most of the workers chatting on the lawn were young adults in their twenties and thirties, both singles and marrieds. A grey-haired single man with crutches seemed to be so out of place there. No one noticed him, and no one asked him if he needed help to get a cup of coffee or tea. He was standing far from the crowds by himself. But this scene was familiar to me and caught my attention—I knew how he might feel at that moment. Thus, I asked him if he needed anything, and urged my husband to talk to him.

It is human nature that we prefer to talk and make friends with people who look like us, think like us, or speak like us. It is safer and easier. We do not need to take the risk of feeling uncomfortable, being offended,

or causing offense. Sometimes we are stretched when we mix with people from a different ethnicity or nationality. And on other occasions, like the conference I mentioned earlier, we might encounter people of a different age group and life stage (almost all the workers in that conference were Westerners, including the older man with crutches).

A colleague of mine, who is a widow from a Western country and in her sixties, has often expressed a sense of isolation and loneliness on the field. Though there are many Western workers in the place where she serves, many of them are significantly younger than she is. One time she commented to me, "I am not sure if they are good with older people."

I can understand her concern. Single young workers often only like to hang out with cool young singles like themselves, and workers who are married and have children usually connect with other families who have children of a similar age. But interestingly, this older female worker connects well with Asian workers on the field, including me. Almost all her close worker friends are Asians from different countries. Perhaps it is because Asians tend to respect and value elderly people much more than Westerners do. Asians are more willing to spend time with older people and listen to them.

My Own Journey

Some of my Western colleagues feel bad for me or other Asian workers because we are stereotyped and discriminated against in some Arab countries. However, this sentiment of my Western colleagues gives me mixed feelings. It is not only in Arab countries that we are treated differently because of our cultural background and appearance. The reality is that in almost all countries I have been to, including the United States, everyone is treated differently based on their appearance or ethnicity—some are treated more nicely and others worse. Perhaps in some countries it is more subtle than others.

I was born and raised in Taiwan, and I had cross-cultural experiences in Germany and China before moving to the States in 2005 for seminary. As an international student, I probably experienced most of the hardships that new cross-cultural workers might experience on the field. After I married my American husband and became an immigrant in the States, I constantly sensed the difference in how people treated me as opposed to how they treated my husband. Many people whom we encountered—mostly American Christians, both men and women—would often only look at and talk to my husband and ignore me, as if I were invisible or could not understand what they were talking about. When we joined an international Christian organization, which sent thousands of workers around the world, I thought the experience would be different. Unfortunately, things were not as I expected.

About five years ago, when my husband and I were relatively new in our organization, we attended a large regional conference. We did not know many colleagues at that time. One day at the conference they had separate events for men and women. Women had a ladies' gathering in one of the banquet halls in the resort hotel where the conference was held, while men went on an outing to do other activities. At that conference, I was one of the few Asians since most of the workers in our organization are Westerners.

When the gathering started, I found myself sitting in a seat surrounded by ladies I did not know, all of whom were Westerners. After the lady speaker finished her short talk, it was the mingling time. I sat in my seat on my own for several minutes. Every lady already had their chatting partners, so no one came to greet me or talk to me. No one even noticed me. I felt like a complete *outsider*. I do not remember how long I stayed in that banquet hall, maybe five minutes or longer. Since I remained invisible in that hall, I decided to go back to my hotel room on my own. When my husband came back to the hotel room from his men's outing, I told him what happened at the ladies' night, and tears started to fall.

A couple of years later, I shared my experiences with several of my colleagues from my organization. They all felt sorry for what happened to me. I appreciated their empathy and desire to improve the culture of our organization. I also started to think what kind of culture and Biblical teaching was missing or lacking in our large international organization with a majority of Westerners.

And Who is My Neighbor?

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" *he* replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:25-29, NIV)

I think most Christians know this passage well, and we may be even more familiar with the illustration that Jesus gives to answer the law expert's infamous question. Sometimes we are so familiar with the Good Samaritan story that we forget the original reason Jesus is telling it. After narrating the whole story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus asks the expert of the law again, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replies, "*The one who had mercy on him.*" Then Jesus tells him, "*Go and do likewise*" (Luke 10:36-37), which is another way of saying, "Go show

mercy and love your neighbors who are not your people, just as the Good Samaritan did.”

Jesus’ illustration was very counter-cultural for his time. From various passages in the New Testament (e.g., John 4), we learn about the racial and religious tensions between Jews and Samaritans which caused them to discriminate against each other. If we contextualize this parable to the present day, the parable may be something like, “A white evangelical was robbed on a road trip, and a couple of white evangelical ministers passed by him and did not help him. In the end, it was a black Muslim who helped him and paid his hospital bill.”

Why did Jesus tell a lengthy and culturally offensive story to answer the expert in the law’s simple question: “*And who is my neighbor?*” Is he not trying to say, “Your neighbor is the one who has mercy on you, and it does not matter what ethnic, religious or political background they are from?” And the most important thing is that he told us to do likewise: show mercy to those who are from a different ethnic, religious, or political background.

In the same gospel, just a few chapters after the parable of Good Samaritan, Jesus also challenges us, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid” (Luke 14:12, NIV). In the New Testament, the Greek words for hospitality and hospitable are *philoxenia* and *philoxenos*, and the roots of these words literally mean “love for strangers/ foreigners.” These Greek words may remind us of a terminology we use more frequently nowadays: *xenophobia*, which means exactly the opposite of “love for strangers/ foreigners,” i.e., hospitality. I believe that the hospitality taught in the Bible is not the kind of hospitality we show to our friends and family members, or people who are “like us.” Being generous, kind, and hospitable to the people who are already “one of us” or from “our side” is not biblical hospitality; it is human nature.

Implications on the Field

When my husband and I were in our previous country of service, we partnered with many Brazilian workers in a refugee ministry. One time when we had a meal together, we asked a single female worker—the leader of the ministry—about her experience with American workers. This Brazilian sister shared with us that many years ago when she was still a language student in an Arabic school for workers, she observed that American workers only liked to hang out with other Americans.

Then she told us this story. One day, she saw her young American male classmate passing by her. She wanted to greet him, but he just ignored her. Later, when she asked him why he did not greet her, he replied that he did not consider her as a friend. She was shocked and offended. After hearing this story, I could not help wondering how this American worker was doing in his ministry on the field. His behavior was quite against the local culture—in our Arab context it is so important to greet everyone, or else local people will assume you have something against them. Perhaps he was very warm and friendly to the local people, but just not to the workers who were from cultures different from his own.

As cross-cultural workers, most of us have received trainings in culture to help us establish relationships with the locals to whom we would like to witness. We study their cultures and languages, we eat their food, and we try to practice hospitality in the local way—so the door of the Good News will be open. But when we face our other neighbors, our fellow workers who are from different cultures or life stages, we may ignore them or avoid making an effort to have a relationship with them. On the other hand, I understand every worker has limited time and energy and must prioritize their family and ministry and set boundaries. But showing hospitality to those who are different from us does not mean we have to be their “best friend forever.” It is simply being inclusive and kind to “outsiders”—showing philoxenia.

I have also talked to some fellow workers who are skeptical about the idea of culturally diverse organizations and teams. They believe it takes

too much effort and it is not worth the time and energy. A while ago, I had a conversation with a Christian leader in China who has been actively mobilizing cross-cultural workers there. He expressed his concerns about monocultural agencies since he has seen such organizations and teams in Chinese and Korean contexts. He believes the most ideal workers in his context are those Chinese believers who have lived or studied in Western countries for several years and have a broader worldview, who can think and do things outside the Chinese box, and who are able to work with global workers from a different cultural background.

I agree with his insight. We all have blind spots from our own cultures. Working with people from different backgrounds may not be as comfortable, but it helps us to learn and approach ministry in different ways. This not only applies to cultural differences, but also generational or denominational differences. For example, I have learned much from our fellow workers from Latino countries. I have observed them to be so warm, inclusive, and relational. One Latina worker I know is especially effective in drawing believers from a Muslim background to her because she is so loving.

In addition, an inclusive and hospitable team itself is a great testimony of the Good News. Sometimes I wonder, if we as Christian workers do not even know how to practice hospitality towards our fellow workers, how can we show real and genuine hospitality—the welcome of non-believers to the wedding banquet of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9)—to the locals to whom we desire to witness? As Jesus Himself said, *“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son”* (Matt. 22:2). And sadly, sometimes the non-believing local people do a better job than we Christian workers do in welcoming strangers. At least, this is the case in our Middle Eastern context.

More than five years ago, when we still served in a previous field, my husband’s local friend invited us to attend his brother’s wedding. This local friend is from a middle-class family, and his brother was an engineer, so the wedding banquet was quite grand and held in a nice hotel wedding hall. According to their conservative Sunni tradition, it was a

segregated wedding banquet, so my husband went with his guy friends to the men's hall, and I went alone to the ladies' side.

When I walked into the hall, I saw that more than one hundred Muslim women were sitting there. I did not know anyone and might have been the only foreign guest there. However, as soon as I walked in, I saw a middle-aged lady, covered by a hijab (head scarf) of course, waving to me and saying I could sit at her table. The lady started to chat with me, and other ladies at that table also talked to me from time to time. Though I did not know any of them, I felt welcomed there, and they did not seem to be bothered by my funny Arabic accent.

When it was dancing time, the ladies there also tried to include me and encourage me to join them. I had fun spending the night at the wedding banquet, even though I did not know any of these local ladies at all! I especially appreciate the lady who waved to me when I came in, though it was the only time I spent time with her in my life. I do not even remember her name, but I will always remember her hospitality and inclusiveness.

The irony is that this wedding actually happened in the same year I attended the aforementioned large regional conference when I was a relatively new worker. It was also held in a grand banquet hall in a nice hotel with more than a hundred women who did not look like or speak like me, and most of whom did not know me. It was like a *deja vu* moment, but the outcome was the opposite. To me it almost felt like another Good Samaritan parable, but now the passersby were the female Christian field workers, and my Good Samaritan was a hijabi (covered) Muslim woman. It felt like Jesus was also asking me, "Which of these do you think was a neighbor to you?" And then he said, "*Go and do likewise.*"

Perhaps due to these experiences, I am sensitive to those who may feel left out, neglected, and excluded. Perhaps this is the reason I spotted the older gentleman on his crutches who was excluded by a group of younger workers in a more recent conference of a different organization.

Extend Grace and Empathy

After these things happened, my husband and I moved to another field—a war-torn country where some Western countries, especially the United Kingdom and United States, have historical baggage. Thus, it has been more challenging for Western citizens to live and serve there. One of the main reasons we felt we might be able to live and serve in this place was our heritage—I am Asian, and my husband is half Hispanic, so people do not assume that we are Americans. This has probably been the first time I have felt that being an Asian is an advantage.

My husband and I do not own a car in this country, and when we go out, we just take taxis. We rarely worry about the numerous checkpoints in our city because we almost never get stopped. When we have asked our fellow workers, who are Egyptian and Brazilian, about their experiences, they say they have felt similarly to us. They have rarely been stopped at checkpoints when they drive in the city, and the few times they have been stopped, the police were nice to them.

In contrast, a Caucasian American worker in our city and his family have had a completely different story to tell. They have been stopped often, and the police do not treat them nicely. It almost sounds like reverse racism to me. One day, when this American family gave us a ride, my husband and I were sitting in the back seat. When we were about to pass by a checkpoint, I could tell they started to feel anxious and stressed, and the wife scrambled to grab a scarf and cover her hair. As they expected, the soldier stopped them at that checkpoint and asked for their passports. Eventually, the husband found a way to pass without handing the soldiers their passports. Witnessing all this shocked me because this has never been our experience here. This scene somehow reminded me of my African American friends' story—their dread and anxiety whenever they were stopped by policemen in the States. But here in our host country, it is Caucasian Americans who suffer from more scrutiny.

Through this experience, I have realized that the way people treat those who are of other ethnicities or nationalities is mostly based on their personal experience. And we all have our own limitations and bias. If I was raised under the same circumstances having the same upbringing or national history as another person, I might think, feel, and behave the same way they do. No one is better than anyone else.

I have been able to forgive those who have neglected, excluded, or discriminated against me in the past because through these experiences I have been able to identify with and understand those who have had similar pains. I can give thanks to God for creating me as an Asian, and even for the negative experiences I have had.

Final Thoughts

Years ago, my husband and I had the privilege to be part of a multicultural congregation in our previous country of service. We were among Arabs, Africans, Europeans, North Americans, Latinos, and Asians worshipping together. When I sang worship songs with them, I felt an inner joy that I could not describe. Perhaps I experienced a small foretaste of Revelation 7:9—worshipping with *“a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”*

My hope and prayer for Christian organizations is that we would show philoxenia and would be inclusive of brothers and sisters who are different from us or the majority of our organization’s members. I believe diversity in unity is a strength and witness of the gospel. Diversity in God’s kingdom is also the result of God’s mission, which he revealed in Revelation 7. In other words, our mission work is, by definition, aiming to make heaven a more diverse place. Perhaps we as workers should start getting used to diversity and learn to enjoy being with our brothers and sisters from *“every nation, tribe, people, and language”* here now on the earth.

Questions for Conversation

- What stood out to you most in Dr. Wu's story?
- How should teams and organizations with a dominant culture relate to members of different cultures and life stages?
- Reflect on the concept of *philoxenia*. What keeps us from loving the "strangers" among us? What can we do to grow in *philoxenia*?