

The Deeply Formed Life: Five Transformative Values to Root Us in the Way of Jesus

by Rich Villodas

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Reviewed by M. James & D. Lemke

M. James (pseudonym) and his family have been serving for more than 25 years among the Gulf Arabs. Together, they co-labor to follow-up media inquiries, minister to seekers, disciple believers, and train workers through involvement in Fruitful Practices for church planting.

Dale Lemke has served in disciple-making and leadership development ministries as a pastor, missionary, and educator in the United States and in Japan. He currently serves as chair of Christian Ministries at University of Northwestern, St. Paul. His research interests include leadership development, vocational awareness, and intercultural competence.



It has been said that a church-based ministry team tends to have lower relational stress, but plants a fellowship similar to their home church. Conversely, a multicultural ministry team tends to have higher relational stress but establishes a church more relevant to the target culture.¹

1 I heard this from a leader from another organization years back, though I cannot recall his name and context.

In the Arabian Gulf, diverse multinational ministry teams are the norm. At various times, we ministered alongside teammates from Canada, China, Germany, Korea, Lebanon, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and other nations. This experience aligned well with the 2016 Lausanne Global Analysis where a regional director stated, “Playing a healthy and contributing role on a multicultural team in cross-cultural Christian service is increasingly part and parcel of the normal requirements of serving Christ well” (Awuku 2016).

Though it is becoming the norm, a multicultural ministry team often struggles with the stress of miscommunication, misunderstanding, and feelings of partiality. The potentials and pitfalls of the multicultural ministry team have been studied for over 30 years, though it could be argued that the tradition goes back much further to the church planting team listed in Acts 20:1–6 (Mackin 1992; O’Donnell 2002; Webb 2019).

At the University of Northwestern (UNW) where I (Dale) teach, the strength of diversity in the context of ministry is highlighted in the course, “Leadership for Transformation”—a holistic exploration of the role of spiritual formation, intercultural awareness, and vocational clarity. An emphasis in the class is for students to articulate insights into their own cultural rules and biases, and to discuss diverse cultural perspectives. These skills are vital for members of a successful, multicultural church planting team.

The course textbook, *The Deeply Formed Life*, promotes practices for spiritual wholeness of the individual functioning in a multicultural, diverse world. Many spiritual formation books focus simply on spiritual disciplines that can help individual believers become more like Christ. This text’s overall strength is the presentation of a holistic model for both personal and relational formation in Christ as applied to spheres of life not typically associated with spiritual formation, such as racial reconciliation, healthy sexuality, and service. It is through transformation in these spheres of life that readers can become better equipped for functioning in multi-cultural church planting teams.

The author, Rich Villodas, is an ordained minister in the Christian & Missionary Alliance church. He is lead pastor of New Life Fellowship in Queens, New York, which describes itself, “as a *multiracial community deeply transforming lives through Jesus for the sake of the world.*”² *The Deeply Formed Life* is sourced from Villodas’s personal experiences and written to those in the evangelical Christian community who are yearning for deeper communion with Christ and frustrated by superficial and fragmented lives. Villodas’ personal experience is shaped by his Puerto Rican descent, his birthplace in Brooklyn, NY, and his role as a pastor of a large multi-ethnic church.

Villodas addresses a concern that Christians do not “take time to go deep down within because we have often been disciplined into superficiality” (13). He notes that social media and the value systems of the world contribute to this focus on the superficial, and he suggests that conservative, progressive, and charismatic traditions tend to dichotomize faith by emphasizing “the outward at the expense of the inward” (14). According to Villodas, Christ seeks to transform his followers from the inside out, and Christ’s inner work is both deep and broad.

As such, Villodas presents a holistic view of spiritual formation that focuses on five core values: contemplative rhythms, racial reconciliation, interior examination, sexual wholeness, and missional presence. The ten chapters of the book are grouped into pairs with the one chapter introducing the formational value and the other exploring spiritual formation practices related to that value.

There is a sense in which the spiritual practice of “listening” is a meta-theme that ties together the values in the book. Villodas explains, “The contemplative way is about listening deeply to God. The way of reconciliation entails listening deeply to each other. The way of interior examination is about deeply listening to ourselves” (98).

2 <http://newlife.nyc/>

The *Deeply Formed Life* presents a holistic model for both personal and relational elements of spiritual formation. Personal contemplation, prayer, and interior examination are typical features of spiritual formation. However, Villodas makes the case that spiritual growth is also connected to relational dynamics such as racial reconciliation, healthy sexuality, and vocation. As such, the text provides a framework for helping members of a multicultural ministry team benefit from life-long, deepening intimacy with God, sensitivity to God's calling, enhanced cross-cultural communication skills, intercultural competency, and integration of faith with profession.

Villodas' presentation of racism and illustration of deeper systemic issues of racism by an iceberg analogy is useful. When applied to the multicultural team, the text highlights the unequal treatment for teammates of different nationalities and cultures. This can be analogous to something we experienced in the Arab Gulf, when nationals sometimes treated our Filipino teammate as if she were a hired servant. Our team would intervene to curtail such unequal treatment of our Filipino sister.

At UNW, students often emphasize a believer's personal position "in Christ" at the expense of the relational dynamics between people in Christ. Yet Paul does not so clearly dichotomize the personal and relational elements of our "in-Christ" identity. Our personal relationship with Jesus is foundational, but Paul also indicates that this relationship will necessarily translate into certain ways of relating to other believers. The epistles to the Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians are filled with instruction related to this holistic perspective on what it means for the community of faith to live out their corporate identity in Christ.

The weakest section of Villodas' book are the two chapters on sexual wholeness. The reader may anticipate the chapters to specifically address sexuality, but instead the chapters are quite metaphorical and generally focus on intimate human relationships. While this is a worthwhile topic that fits with the holistic personal and relational emphasis in the book, the framing around notions of sexuality may not connect with all readers and cultural expectations.

Furthermore, though conversations of sex tend to be common in the Gulf, it is often difficult for people to comprehend the link between divine and human relations which Villodas makes in these chapters. For most Gulf Arabs, religious conversations about sexuality tend to focus on things like ritual purity. It is almost unthinkable for Gulf Arabs that a person's sexual life would have any connection with the larger context of an exclusive, caring, tender, and loving relationship with one's spouse.

Overall, we recommend the book if you serve on a multicultural church planting team and seek to deepen your individual and community life. In the Gulf, the default is for like cultures to congregate together. A multicultural church planting team has the strength of diversity, with each member highlighting an aspect of the Gospel.

For a time, an Australian teammate hosted a weekly *majlis* – a traditional Arabic evening gathering that involves food and conversation. As a medical doctor, he attracted many to the *majlis* because people wanted an opportunity to discuss a particular malady affecting themselves or a family member. Most found it surprising that the rest of our team, a mix of several nationalities, assisted in hosting by cutting up fruit and offering food. In local culture, these tasks were reserved for the family of the host and we were clearly not blood relatives. However, our familial connection and care for one another was readily apparent as we discussed passages in the Bible and prayed together at the *majlis*. The Arabian Gulf and other Muslim nations need to hear the truth of God's word from believers living deeply formed, holistic lives within a harmony of cultures and nations.

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