

Lutheran efforts towards improving cross-cultural communication in rural Australia

Robert Borgas

All of us feel most comfortable when communicating with others who belong to the same culture and speak the same language. Conversely, we feel rather timid or reserved when mixing with people from another culture, especially when we are the ones in a minority situation. This can happen when we travel overseas to a country where English is not the first language, or work in an outback Indigenous community, where the rules of social behaviour are quite different from what we are normally used to. The more time we spend in such a situation, especially if we struggle to understand and appreciate the local culture and language, and even more so if we feel that we are being discriminated against just because we come from another culture, the experience can become increasingly alienating. The above situation is precisely what many migrants and almost all First Nations people in Australia have had to deal with their entire lives.

Since 1990 I've lived mainly in Australian rural towns of between four and thirty thousand people. Most people living in these towns are Australians from a Western cultural background and about 25% are Australians from an Indigenous Australian cultural background. Since the 1960s there has also been an increasing arrival of migrants from other cultural backgrounds from many parts of the world who have also made rural Australia their home. One of the biggest issues facing many Australian rural towns with significant Indigenous populations, in my opinion, is that while many Indigenous Australians know a reasonable amount about Western culture, most other Australians still understand very little about the many and various Indigenous cultures still alive and well in their community. As Western culture is the culture of those with most power in modern Australia, Indigenous people need to have at least a basic understanding of this culture in order to survive and avoid alienation. Conversely, most other Australians don't need to understand anything about Indigenous cultures or speak an Indigenous language in order to get a job, join a sporting club, or even watch TV. While some Indigenous Australians have learned to cope with the ignorance that most other Australians have of their culture, it frustrates and even angers others. This rather unbalanced knowledge and respect of each other's culture tends to exacerbate already conflicted community relations because of past treatment of Indigenous Australians since the arrival of non-Indigenous people to their shores many years ago.

Some Lutheran schools and congregations located in areas of high Indigenous populations have responded to the problem of cultural alienation in a number of ways in order to foster an environment where people from all cultural backgrounds feel understood and valued by emphasising four basic biblical principles. First, all people were created by

a loving God who still cares for His good creation (Genesis 1–2). Second, God has created many different cultures so that people spread out over and care for God’s creation in many different ways, rather than living a mono-cultural existence in one place (Genesis 11). Third, Christians of all cultures have a common bond through our baptism into Christ (Galatians 3:28). Fourth, the Holy Spirit empowered the first Christians to speak many different languages on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) so that people from many different cultural backgrounds might know the good news about Jesus Christ.

The above basic biblical principles have been implemented in at least seven ways in some schools:

1. By ensuring that people of all the different cultural groups represented at that school feel comfortable expressing their culture and language, particularly if they are in a minority situation in the wider community.
2. Wherever possible, students have been placed in classes with a reasonable number of students of the same culture as themselves for peer-support, as well as being encouraged to mix with students of other cultures.
3. Students of all cultures have a fair representation of adult role models working as staff or volunteers at the school. This often means employing more Indigenous teachers, teacher aides, and other administrative and auxiliary staff.
4. Local Indigenous issues and language features in the school curriculum.
5. School board/council members are trained to understand and appreciate Indigenous issues, and actively encourage appropriate Indigenous parents to become school board/council members. The school board/council/principal also consults local Indigenous families and leaders when revising school policy.
6. All staff have been provided with cross-cultural training on Indigenous issues to help them understand how to make Indigenous students and parents feel welcome in the school grounds and classrooms.
7. Teacher visits to Indigenous parent’s homes (initially accompanied by an Indigenous home/school liaison officer) have been encouraged.
8. Cross-cultural training has been led by Indigenous people on their country (where possible) and on their terms.

By creating an environment where Indigenous staff, students and their families feel welcomed and valued because of their culture and language, and by involving and consulting Indigenous people in the process of school planning and policy, Lutheran schools empower Indigenous staff, students and their families to be full and equal participants in the life of their local school.

The above basic biblical principles have also been implemented in at least eight ways in some congregations:

1. Indigenous languages are used in the regular worship and funeral services conducted by the congregation, including in the liturgy, songs, bible readings and announcements.
2. Sermons are preached in simple English for those whom English is not a first or second or even a third language.

3. Indigenous languages are read by lay readers who come from that particular language group unless permission from the relevant leaders has been granted otherwise.
4. Visiting Indigenous pastors from outlying communities are encouraged (and paid appropriately) to lead or assist with services where possible.
5. Indigenous members are positively encouraged to be more active in local congregation leadership and responsibilities (attending church council, welcoming people for worship, catering, cleaning, making the announcements after service, bus driving, etc.)
6. Church communications (such as the weekly newsletter or bulletin) make regular reference to local Indigenous involvement in the foundation and history of the congregation as well as current Indigenous involvement.
7. Bible studies are offered not just in English but also in local Indigenous languages.
8. Worship environment is made welcoming for visiting Indigenous people from outlying communities.

By leading church worship and teaching in different languages other than just English, by involving Indigenous people more in the life of the local congregation, and consulting Indigenous people in the process of implementing these changes, Lutheran congregations empower First Nations members to be full and equal participants in the life of the local church, and welcome Indigenous visitors from outlying communities.

In 2015 I helped a thirty-three person Indigenous choir from seven different communities in central Australia perform nine concerts and fifteen other appearances in Germany over four weeks. The German public were amazed how these Indigenous people were both interested and able to sing hymns that the German missionaries originally brought with them from Germany and translated into the language of their ancestors in the late 1800s. This positive feedback received from the German audiences when they sang German songs in their Indigenous languages impressed the choir members so much that they personally felt more appreciated in Germany than they often did in Australia when they sang English songs in their own language. This led me to reflect that Australian society still has a long way to go to fully value and appreciate Indigenous language and culture.

I believe the reason why these Indigenous people bothered to keep singing the German hymns after 138 years was because they were the songs through which the early missionaries first brought the gospel to their ancestors. But, perhaps of equal importance, the early missionaries valued their ancestor's language enough that they bothered to use it to communicate the gospel. When different languages and cultures are appreciated and shared among different ethnic groups in society, community relationships flourish.

Currently serving as Pastor of Angaston Parish and School Pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran School, Angaston, SA, Rev Robert Borgas has worked closely with Pitjantjatjara and other First Nations Australians in Central Australia and on the far west coast of South Australia for almost thirty years.