

# Some insights into the thinking of new arrivals from non-European backgrounds

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Early migration to Australia and New Zealand was overwhelmingly from Europe so it's not surprising that our church congregations took on a strongly European favour. Up until 1980, only one in twenty people in Australia/New Zealand were of non-European background, but it is now one in four, and this trend continues to grow. While the general demographic has changed around us, the composition of our churches has stayed the same.

This presents the LCA NZ with a challenge, but also a wonderful opportunity if we will develop a multicultural mindset. The mindset is really a missional attitude that recognises that these many new cultural groups are a ripe harvest field. I feel tremendously privileged for the personal experience of moving out into this harvest field for over thirty years and look back over countless hours spent with people from the Middle East, Asia and Africa. For quite some time I was employed to assist Ethnic leaders from about fifty different groups so observed people from a wide spectrum of ethnic and religious backgrounds.

I got to hear their heart cry and to love them (with the Lord's help).

I think it's possible that members of the LCA NZ stay anchored to their European mindset because they don't know what the others are like, so I will endeavour to summarise some of the things I observed among non-European people over the years. Obviously, some of these comments are generalisations but there are many similarities across the board. Perhaps these insights can generate a more open-hearted response to other cultural groups and help inform our missional response.

1. *People in transition are more open than those in settled populations:* Refugees and migrants expect to encounter change as they make a new life. Many have been abused in the name of religion and are evaluating what they believe. Others can freely ask questions for the first time. There is a significant window of opportunity to impact people with the gospel in the first years after they arrive. I frequently watched Muslim people (and others) respond to kindness shown by Christians.
2. *Newcomers thirst for connection:* There is a real thirst in the heart of the newcomer to connect with the host people. Most of us would agree that our Aussie neighbours don't particularly 'need' us, but when we move towards these newcomers, they are almost always glad that we initiate something. People would say 'now that I have finally made a friend in my new country, I feel that I belong'.
3. *People of non-European backgrounds generally respect us.* A feature of our modern world is that white skinned people are generally on top and the rest are striving to get there. In many ways this is not right, but it is a factor which means we have people's

attention. The challenge is to use this moment for the Lord and not for ourselves. If we show interest in these new arrivals, they feel honoured and they listen to us. In Christ we lift them up and serve them.

4. *People from Africa, the Middle East and Asia are innately hospitable* and community minded, which underpins their openness to building new relationships. For these people a chance to share a meal is an honour, not a burden. This means their door is open.
5. *There are soft hearted and hard-hearted people in every ethnic group* (in roughly the same proportions) and there are no 'bad' ethnicities that are intrinsically further away from God than others. The soft-hearted ones in any culture are the ones who are 'close to the Kingdom'. Some parts of the world make the news for all the wrong reasons, and we need to guard against a perception that 'nothing good can come out of Nazareth' (or Somalia, Iran, etc.). Jesus shocked his audience by choosing a Samaritan who best loved his neighbour.
6. *People from Africa, the Middle East and Asia are innately spiritually-minded* and care about pleasing God. They haven't been secularised like many Westerners and they still thirst for spiritual input. I often detected that a person of another religion was relieved to hear that I was a Christian because they struggle relating to an atheist and were glad to think we have common ground (a respect for God).
7. *A respect for age*: There is a deep respect for older people and a willingness to listen. Perhaps as Lutherans we bemoan the fact that we are an ageing group and as older people we are 'sort of invisible'. Age is probably advantageous in the multicultural sphere.
8. *Theology is less important*: While most non-European people care about God, they don't often have a deep idea about what their religion requires. We tend to view faith through Protestant eyes. Protestants expect to grow in theological knowledge so we can articulate the basics of our faith. My experience is that the average Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu does not have a clear theology, nor do they really want to 'argue' doctrine. In fact, debating theology could be counterproductive. They are more impressed by relationship and by experiencing God than by understanding doctrine. Apologetics might be necessary when relating to religious experts, but for most people their faith is cultural not theological. I found them open to Jesus and quite quick to change their view after a personal encounter with him. The best approach is love not religious argument.

## Conclusion

It is true that the LCA has European migrant roots, but we are now living in a time of great opportunity to touch the hearts of the people who have come to join us from the rest of the world. They are people wide open and primed, ready to respond to the message of our lives if we will live out the love of Christ.

Our Lord seeks to gather His sons and daughters from all the *ethnē*, and He is working within the multicultural mix that is now our Australian and New Zealand reality. In Eph 5:10 we are encouraged to find out 'what pleases the Lord'. If He wants something, we do well to join Him!

Our Lord deserves to be honoured among the peoples!

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