

Intercultural Ministry Journal

From Germany to the USA: A 21st Century Intercultural Ministry Reformation

Introduction

The church is in an interesting phase of missions history right now - one that has just started to shift within the last 10-20 years. For most of modern history, Western Europe and the United States have been the epicenter of missions activities, sending most of the world's missionaries to the farthest corners of the globe. But now, the philosophical Christendom of the west is quickly collapsing, and as churches here shrink, they are growing rapidly and vibrantly in Asia, Africa and South America. The harvest is plentiful in these parts of the world, and more and more leaders from the West and indigenous leaders from these communities are arising to care for the needs to this growing church movement. But in the west, many people are abandoning the dwindling churches of their hometowns to find riper harvests throughout the world, and are leaving these struggling churches in the dust.

After spending some time in short-term missions, the farther we travelled, the more my heart broke for these churches that are being forgotten in the rise of majority world Christianity. Of course, the Christian growth in these parts of the world is an incredible display of the love and grace of God for the whole world. But His love is for the WHOLE world, and all people deserve His love and grace in their lives, from Botswana to our backyard.

The "West" often encompasses a wide geographical area, from the US and Canada to Europe, and although the cultures of the countries within this range vary greatly, they share many common threads within their cultures. After spending some time with a young volunteer from Berlin, Germany, who is spending a year of service at my workplace – Camp Mardela - I have noticed the things we have in common, and the ways our cultures differ. I have also observed the similarities and differences between our church traditions and how the Bible is taught in church and Sunday school. This journal will be a reflection on these very things, identifying that although Christian tradition is still present in the West, it is undoubtably becoming a new mission field for teaching basic Biblical truths in light of the modernist/progressive trends in these cultures.

Prayer

I have been working at Camp Mardela since January of 2021. After a year of travelling and seeing ministry opportunities around the world in 2019, I felt compelled to serve faithfully in the states, particularly at church camp. This was a deeply impactful force in my life, and after seeing how it has transferred around the world as a powerful tool to teach young people the foundations of faith, I wanted to be a part of this ministry vocationally. To say that it has been a difficult tenure here would be an understatement. While it has been rewarding, it has come with its fair share of challenges that have caused me to question if God is still calling me to stay here. After a series of challenges this summer, I felt ready to throw in the towel, but at the advice of my father, he told me not to quit until God has given me the next assignment.

So I began praying “God, what’s the next assignment, because I don’t know how much longer I can take this”. Then a week later in mid-July, I get a call from the Brethren Volunteer Service that they have a volunteer interested in serving at Camp Mardela starting in August. I knew this was the answer to my prayer. God was clearly telling me that my work here was not done, and working with this volunteer in service and discipleship was my next assignment. This was not the answer I was wanting or expecting, but I was so excited to see how God would use this season, and I would faithfully commit to this God-given assignment.

This volunteer’s name is Jonas, and he is an 18-year-old high school graduate from Berlin, Germany. We have already had many conversations, casually and in intentional discipleship. Before he arrived, I prayed that he would grow in his faith during his time here, and that I could be a faithful steward of God’s truth in word and deed. Since he’s been here, I’ve been praying for our conversations – that Jonas would feel comfortable talking about deeper topics, areas he is struggling – in faith and in the practicalities of ministry - so that he can trust me as a mentor and leader while he is here. As of now, I have seen God be faithful in answering all of these prayers. I am excited to use this opportunity that has been presented to me to think deeper about the global church, the role of discipleship in the creation of faithful believers, and the dynamics of this new western mission field. The fact that this all arose in time for this assignment for this class is nothing short of providence as well. God’s timing and ultimate plan truly is perfect, and I have already learned so much through this experience that I hope to share.

Cultural Context

The subject of this journal is Camp Mardela’s volunteer, Jonas. He represents a couple intercultural realms across generations and geography. Jonas is the textbook definition of Gen Z, which is defined as youth/young adults born between 1997 and 2010, and they are generally socially conscious, politically progressive, digital natives, and very individualistic¹. But the bigger intercultural context here is the fact that he is from Berlin, Germany. Simultaneously, he represents an urban culture, as well as German culture as a whole. With these cultural differences, Jonas tends to bring a more progressive perspective to world-view issues, religiously, socially, and politically. He is very sensitive to issues of justice, freedom of expression and thought, and challenging traditional structures of authority. All of these world-view issues fall in line with the intercultural areas Jonas occupies.

Perhaps the place where he does not follow the trend of his culture is the fact that he grew up in a church, and remains active within a church context. Gen Z, urbanites, and Germans all tend to have an aversion to religious institutions, particularly Christianity. Gen Z, along with Millennials, are tied for the least religious generations in modern history, with about 33% of each of these generations claiming no religious affiliation². Cities in general hold a wide range of religious groups, with Christian churches holding a smaller and smaller stake in the cultural majority of cities. Because of this extreme ethnic and religious diversity in the US and Europe, these cities tend to be more progressive – a trend that often

¹“What Is Gen Z?,” *McKinsey & Company*, March 20, 2023, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/mckinsey-explainers/what-is-gen-z>.

² Samuel J. Abrams, “Perspective: Why Even Secular People Should Worry about Gen Z’s Lack of Faith,” *NewsBreak*, March 5, 2023, <https://www.newsbreak.com/news/2946672978087-perspective-why-even-secular-people-should-worry-about-gen-z-s-lack-of-faith>.

translates into religious beliefs as well³. Germany, and Berlin in particular, has been called “the atheist capital of Europe”⁴. The fact that Jonas is a hungry Christian urban, German youth makes him a bit of an outlier in light of these statistics. From talking with Jonas, a big reason he has a strong commitment to the church is his home church’s strong youth program. He grew up in their Sunday schools, youth program, and until he came here, was volunteering as a helper with youth going through confirmation classes. His church’s ability to teach and empower young people to get involved and take leadership roles has helped Jonas remain faithful. This speaks to the value of teaching our youth well in our churches and our ministries.

It has been interesting to hear what Jonas’s biggest culture shocks have been. So far, he has been surprised about buttered popcorn, the amount of fast food restaurants, the lack of sidewalks and public transportation, and the “laziness” of Americans (they aren’t willing to walk long distances – they have to drive). He has also been getting used to living in a small town versus a city. He has had time to get pretty settled in here, but after he took a trip to DC, he said he didn’t realize how much he missed being in the city until he was there, but even so, coming back to camp still felt like home, and he didn’t think he would feel that way so quickly. It has taught him that he is more adaptable than he thought he was, and can find safe places anywhere he goes.

Evangelism

As a part of Jonas’s volunteer placement at Camp Mardela, we are required to have weekly check-in meetings. These are supposed to comprise of time to discuss the holistic well-being of these volunteers, open the door for positive and constructive feedback, and offer space to discuss expectations for the week, month, and the year. After the first few weeks Jonas was at camp, I asked him if as a part of this check-in, he would be open to having a Bible study together, and he agreed. We talked about reading several different parts of the Bible, and he decided he would be most interested in reading about King David, so each week, we have been reading 5-6 chapters of 1 Samuel and discussing them in our meetings.

Our first Bible study meeting, however, he had accidentally ready Genesis 1-5! I had not prepared a discussion on these chapters, but we had an open discussion about them nonetheless. He brought up some major questions – many of them were the typical existential questions that arise from Genesis. Some of his questions made me wonder what kind of Bible exegesis he was taught in church:

- “Why did God lie about Adam and Eve surely dying when they ate of the tree?”
- “Why were Adam and Eve punished for seeking knowledge?”
- “Why did God not love Cain?”

I appreciated his honesty in asking these questions, but the way they were asked, to me, revealed some deeper uncertainty about the character of God. To assume in these questions that God lied, God does not value knowledge, and that God does not love, to me revealed some flawed theology. I used this opportunity to share God’s character with Jonas. Since then, it seems that Jonas has been able to better

³ Rahsaan Maxwell, “Analysis | Why Are Urban and Rural Areas so Politically Divided?,” The Washington Post, Last modified March 5, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/03/05/why-are-urban-rural-areas-so-politically-divided/>.

⁴ John Keenan, “Where Is the World’s Most ‘godless’ City?,” The Guardian, December 7, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/dec/07/where-world-godless-city-religion-atheist>.

grasp the theology of God even in difficult passages. I gave him a tool to use when he encounters a hard passage to force himself to see all 3 of the primary characteristics of God in those passages – holiness, justice, and love, and see that even though some stories are hard to reconcile, that the character of God is always consistent.

We're about halfway through a harmony of the gospels reading plan. Before we began, I asked him to explain the gospel to me in his own words. He gave me a very generic answer – that the gospel is the story of the life, works, and teachings of Jesus. I pressed further and asked what the gospel meant to him personally, and he wasn't sure how to answer that question. I tried to clarify, saying we often refer to "the gospels" and "the Gospel" as 2 different things. "The gospels" are the literary distinction of the 4 books of the compiled eye-witness accounts of Jesus's life and ministry. And "the Gospel" is the big picture story of the Bible, how it was fulfilled in Jesus, and how it applies to our lives personally. Once I clarified this, Jonas was unsure of how to respond. I can understand his hesitancy to give a response. When I was his age, I would have given the same answer. Growing up in a United Methodist Church, the word "gospel" was mostly thrown around in the context of the first definition. It wasn't until I went on my mission trip that I realized I didn't know what "the Gospel" was. I was never given the tools to give a good definition for that. It wasn't until I read through the whole Bible that year that I fully understood what the Gospel was, and why it was good news to all people.

As Jonas and I have been reading through the gospels, I've been encouraging him to keep thinking about this question – "What is the Gospel, and why is it good news to you?" His answers are more beginning to resemble "Jesus loves me" and "I am saved by grace" with not a whole lot more depth, but I can see he is putting the pieces together and beginning to understand the theological depths of his faith through the gospels and the entire testimony of scripture to the power of God in our lives and hearts.

Gospel vs. Culture

Right now, there are very few gospel barriers. Jonas is very open to discussing the Bible, faith, and the gospel. However, I can see how he may struggle to speak so candidly in his home context. The primary cultural barriers for the gospel for youth in Berlin is a general disillusionment with the historic church in light of the atrocities it has committed in the name of Christ, and the growing materialistic/critical/post-modern philosophy.

One conversation we had was after a sermon at a church where the pastor was talking about the importance of preaching to non-believers and evangelism. He struggled with this idea that non-believers are bad people and sinners in need of rescue. He knew many good people who were atheists, Muslim, and other religions, and it felt inappropriate to view them as "lesser than" because they did not hold his religious beliefs. This religious pluralism is a symptom of the post-modern urbanization of the world. We are much more aware of varying religious traditions, and they live much closer to us than they ever have in history. Christianity's exclusivity claims are a turn-off to many young, modern thinkers, because they cannot reconcile that the loving God we preach of could send someone to hell simply for not believing in our version of God. It is evident that Jonas is having this philosophical struggle as well.

I helped bring some clarity to this difficult question as best as I could. I told him that all people are made in the image of God, and He loves them all. Because of this, his instinct to respect all people is a good one. We should not treat people badly because they do not hold our same values by calling them names or excluding them from our lives. However, we must recognize that their views are inherently different, and incompatible with the gospel we preach. Universalism is a flawed world-view, because

most religions have exclusivity claims, and without such claims, their views would be invalidated. It's contradictory to say all religions are valid when this very notion invalidates most of them. It is also important to recognize what makes Christianity different in light of other worldviews. All other religions require an element of works-based worship to achieve their ultimate goals. If the sole purpose of all religions was to just "be a good person", then the universalists would be correct in saying that whatever way you choose to do that is fine. But that is not the goal of Christianity (and may it be noted, not the goal of several other religions). Christianity is based on faith and grace. It preaches that you do not have to work for your salvation. In fact, that venture is vanity, because it is impossible for imperfect human beings to achieve. Instead, we are called to trust fully in God, considering our flaws, and trust Him to work in our hearts, and from that, we do good works for others. This is fundamentally different from most religions that are trying to build a ladder to God. Even Christians who do this have the wrong idea. It's about faith, not works. That's why the gospel is good news. Some people are bending over backwards to be good people to earn salvation, and we get to tell them that they do not have to worry about being perfect for their eternal destiny, but that they can put down the ladders they have constructed and trust Jesus, and take His hand, and He will lead them up the ladder that leads to salvation and eternal life. This does not mean that people of other religions are bad people. Often, it's the opposite. It is because they are good people who want to seek the betterment of themselves and the world that we owe it to them to tell them there is a better way to do that out there.

Biblical & Theological Foundations

Biblical Examples of Intercultural Ministry

The current intercultural context of Western Europe, Berlin, and Eastern Germany in particular, seem to resemble the debate Paul had with the philosophers in Athens in Acts 17:16-34. Paul preaches first in the synagogue at Mars Hill, but then is approached by Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, whose core beliefs were a form of pantheism – god is everything, and man's chief purpose is to live a virtuous life through good moral works⁵ This philosophy is experiencing a renaissance, with many progressive, new age, and secular schools of thought adopting similar values – particularly in the west. A church planter in Germany noted that many of his interactions with Germans seemed similar to the way Paul interacted with these philosophers – not particularly hostile, but genuinely curious about the new ideas presented by Christianity as a different school of thought⁶. We see the same sort of response by the philosophers on Mars Hill. Most of them scoff at Paul's claims and don't accept it, but a few do. Even though the growth (or regrowth, in Germany's case) of Christianity is slow, it is worth entering into these difficult philosophical sparring grounds to win even just 1 soul at a time. But it takes more than a youthful rigor, contemporary worship songs, a seeker-sensitive sermons to achieve this. It takes intentional conversation, and at times – debates - with individuals to address their questions and concerns. In this mission field, the focus must be on intellectual foundations of Christian faith, and personal relationships & discipleship.

⁵ "Living Passages," Living Passages, May 5, 2020, <https://livingpassages.com/preaching-gospel-mars-hill/#:~:text=Mars%20Hill%20is%20the%20location,17%3A16%2D34>).

⁶ Ken Chitwood, "Church Planting after the Fall (of the Berlin Wall)," ChristianityToday.Com, February 13, 2023, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/march/church-planting-east-germany-ddr-christians-atheists.html>.

Theological Support

The hope of the gospel in a western context is summarized with one word – freedom. Freedom from sins, freedom from legalistic obligations, freedom from death, freedom to be your truest self in Christ. The gospel is not contextualized in this same way around the world, but this is a theological position that most westerners understand and can relate to. Galatians 5:1 beautifully illustrates this theological point – “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” The philosophers on Mars Hill believed that good works were the key to righteousness and self-actualization, but the gospel preaches that Jesus is the key. We are justified through faith in Christ out of His abundant love for us, not through our good works, although this love should compel us to do good works. In modern secular philosophical trends, a similar belief to the stoics can be found, and the gospel should bring hope that we don’t have to chisel ourselves bit by bit from the unformed marble of our souls to become the best version of ourselves, but we can hand the chisel over to God, and allow us to form us into His image not by our works, but by His love.

Challenges to Theological Positions

So far, the only major challenge I have encountered to core Christian theological positions was that of identity, and only briefly. In a discussion with Jonas after a church service, he said that he appreciated how his church never used a pronoun for God, or used pronouns interchangeably for God. I asked him why he liked that, and he said because God is outside of gender, and we have arbitrarily applied a male pronoun to him that does not fully encapsulate his character.

I told him I could go either way on the issue. I understand his sentiment that God is bigger than gender, and as He is not a human being, probably does not have a physical body that we could define what gender He is. But on the other hand, calling Him by other gender pronouns feels inappropriate, because in scripture God calls Himself by male pronouns, and shouldn’t we respect the pronouns God gives Himself? With a little bit of pushback he asked me where God gives Himself a pronoun, and I simply said that scripture is inspired by God, and God is exclusively referred to with male pronouns. The conversation stopped there.

It was a brief interaction, but revealed the prevalence of this worldview that even churches are applying this loose definition of gender to God Himself, which seems inherently contradictory to the view itself. If gender is defined by an individual, and they have the right to tell other people what gender to refer to them as, why would we not extend the same courtesy to God? Why are we trying to fit Him into our own gender ideology when they balk at people doing the exact same things to others by “propagating” a gender binary? In this conversation, I was only able to point out the irony of using pronouns for God that He did not give us permission to call Him by, and not the deeper incompatibilities of this ideology with Christian theology, but it was interesting that the issue of pronouns gave some insight into how this world view is affecting the church and how the gospel is preached.

Missions History

It feels appropriate that in talking about ministering interculturally to a German that this could be paralleled with the ministry of Martin Luther. A German native himself, Martin Luther sparked a movement in the church that created a landslide that redefined the entire faith by promising a person’s

ability to study and discern the scriptures on their own, and to provide the resources for people to get back to the simple gospel, apart from the traditions that were distorting it from the Catholic church at the time. Luther's radical view of the church's spiritual role in the lives of its congregants emerged from a culture in the Catholic church that was emerging where only clergy were able to read scriptures, and they had the power to enforce unbiblical practices on the churches by their own authority, and could not be held accountable by the congregation for these unnecessary and damaging acts. People were becoming bitter towards the Catholic church and the way it used its authority to abuse people.

In many ways, the west is facing a growing distrust in the church for similar reasons. They see the way the Bible is preached, but lived out inconsistently with those teachings, and therefore, damaging. Like Martin Luther, missionaries in the west need to be bold to call out the inconsistent and heretical teachings of the church, and call for it to come back to "sola scriptura"⁷. As Martin Luther urged, we need to encourage congregants to be Biblically literate, and teach the breadth and depth of scripture, and give people the tools to interpret and discern for themselves through a Biblical lens. The fact that Martin Luther made this stand within a German cultural context is quite ironic, considering that Germany appears to be the epicenter of an institutional religious collapse once again. Perhaps it is apt that we return to his methods, applying them to our modern cultural context, and teaching that Christianity is more than an institution, but a deeply spiritual movement that brings all believers together in unity that transcends religious structures.⁸

Practical Issues & Training

The most valuable things I have been able to do with Jonas are intentional discipleship, taking him to local churches and discussing them, and getting him actively involved in the community. For this specific intercultural context of a European ex-patriot in the states, these have been the most helpful tools in making him feel comfortable, safe, intellectually and spiritually enriched, and giving him a sense of belonging in the short year he will be here.

Jonas has made interesting observations about the nature of worship in the American church. In about half of the churches we went to, people in the congregation barely sing along with the worship songs. They may stand, and a few may sing the words, but it is mostly people watching the worship leaders, and not taking an active role in worship. This really bothered Jonas. Even though he grew up in a church with contemporary worship, he prefers the local Brethren church that sings traditional hymns, because everybody sings along, and is engaged in worship together. After we went to the Michael W. Smith concert, he observed the same thing. He loved that everybody sang along and "shared the music with each other". And this is not dependent on a genre of worship music – it has everything to do with the hearts of the people who are in the worship assembly.

I think the most important thing about these particular activities is that these can be applied to new members of the community here in the states as well, not just with ex-pats. Whether you're from Georgia or Germany, when you find yourself in a new social context, you want to feel free to speak, worship, and live within that context. I've been very intentional about making space for Jonas to speak

⁷ Timothy C Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions : A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Kregel Publications, 2010), pp. 448.

⁸ --, *Invitation to World Missions : A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Kregel Publications, 2010), pp. 449.

freely, giving him opportunities to get involved and meet new people, and he has greatly appreciated this effort. He has never felt bored or left-out during his time here. Too often when new people come into a community, or more specifically a church community, they are not cared for with such attention. Maybe it's the perspective that people in the church don't want to seem "pushy" and want to give new people freedom to come and worship, without feeling obligated to get involved. Although at the core, people do this because they may understand how intimidating it is to be in a new place, and sometimes the last thing you want is strangers prying into your personal business and hounding you about all the things you should be doing, but I feel like this leaves people in the dust. When you enter into a new community, you don't know the dynamics of what they do, what the opportunities are, who you can talk to, and it's nice to at least have a couple people come alongside you and show you the ropes of a new place.

I think it may be helpful to approach new community and church members as an intercultural ministry. Especially because we cannot assume that everyone has a Christian background anymore, showing grace and love to everyone, regardless of where they come from, may show people the love of Christ through hospitality they may have never seen before. Western culture values freedom, independence, and individuality, but at the core of our humanity, no one wants to be alone, and this is what Jesus promises us. We can help show people that promise by assuring them that they are not alone, no matter where they go.

The Church & Intercultural Ministries

A very interesting part of discipling Jonas has been our church excursions. Even though he grew up in a large, contemporary, and seemingly progressive Christian church, he has preferred the worship in our traditional, hymn-singing Brethren church. In the contemporary church near us, he says he likes the music, but it drives him crazy that no one sings along. They just stand and watch the performers. He much prefers the Brethren church, because even though they are all older songs, everyone shares the music, and the worship feels more genuine.

Even though Jonas has a Christian background, I think this is a key observation. Many younger generations are leaving the church for the reason Jonas observed at the contemporary church – it was nice, but felt inauthentic. This is something that is rarely a problem in the rapidly growing churches in the majority world – worship is the centerpiece of their fellowship, and is expressed boldly and genuinely. As the west has become more disinterested in church - even those in the pews of the churches – a strange new creature of worship has emerged – one that is bland, disinterested, and luke-warm – a sorry excuse for what genuine worship of the creator should look like. We have settled for the comfort of traditions instead of daring to be authentic, and people are noticing. If we take a lesson from churches in the majority world, and learn how to be free and genuine in our worship, we can join the community of global believers in harmony, instead of being a damper on the church's instruments of praise.

Personal Development

Honestly, after travelling so many places, I was expecting to come into this class and get a stirring to travel to Africa and South America and do longer-term missions. But it seems that the opposite has happened. Even in my travels, I remembered my teammates' hearts would break every time we had to leave a place, wishing they could stay longer and support the ministries we were with that month, seeing

the deep needs of the people there. I never felt my heart break in that way until we were hiking El Camino in Portugal and Spain. After meeting many European atheists, pagans, new agers, etc, hiking to receive some kind philosophical or spiritual enlightenment, unaware or indifferent towards the Christian roots of this pilgrimage, my heart finally broke. I reflected on how many people at home I knew who were seeking similar revelation, completely writing-off or just unaware that the Christian God was even an option. Even with churches on every corner, people see God as a stranger, and are looking elsewhere. Where has the western church gone so tragically wrong that this is our cultural reality?

I am feeling more and more drawn to the churches in the western world that have become luke-warm – where so many people fall victim to false gospels and apostasy. And this is an area of the world that just a few hundred years ago was sparking revivals around the globe, now in desperate need of its own revival. The tides have turned quickly, and I am seeing the increasing value in solid theological teaching in our churches. If we want to encourage and continue to fuel the growing church in the majority world, we need to be able to do so from a solid foundation.

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