

The global church lived out in a local congregation

The Chinese Mennonite Church in Toronto

Brian Quan

I've heard of borscht, but I can't say I've eaten it. And only recently did I come across the word *Zwieback*. If I were to ask the people in my congregation whether they could identify these two items common in the diet of Canadian Mennonites of Dutch-Prussian-Russian heritage, they would probably look perplexed. But if I were to ask them whether they know what congee, tong-sui, and xiaolongbao are, they would say yes. And

what's more, most of them would have eaten these foods in the past week.

The foods we eat are unique expressions of our culture. Also distinctive, but perhaps less readily discernible, are the ways faith is expressed among people of a particular culture.

I have been a part of the Chinese Mennonite Church in Toronto since it was planted in the late 1970s. If you were to visit our church, you would be greeted with warm smiles. Your first impression might be that the congregation is homogeneous: everyone looks Chinese. But as our worship began, the fact of difference would become more apparent. You

might even feel that you had just stepped into a United Nations assembly. The sermon, preached in English, would be translated into Cantonese by an interpreter, and the words would be projected in Mandarin on a screen. You would discover that our small community church is made up of people not just of three generations but also of three distinct cultural and language groups.



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Being part of this faith community is a global experience, as members bring their distinctives to a church located in yet another cultural context, that of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. In what follows, through several brief illustrations, we will explore some of the complexities and opportunities that are part of congregational life of the kind that we embody.

Challenges of language and patterns of thought

Toronto is the most linguistically diverse city in Canada and among the most diverse in the world. Approximately two hundred languages are spoken here. In a small way, our congregation participates in the diversity of this city. A common mission unites us, but moving forward together as people with three languages and three cultural heritages presents challenges—and opportunities for learning and growth and deepening faith.

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Because of differences in context, the meaning of the words we speak cannot be fully transmitted between our cultures. The same is true of the meaning of scriptural words. Take Jesus's inquiry in Matthew 7:9-11: "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?" We don't eat stones, but if given a choice between a fish and a snake, members of my church might well say, "I'll have both, please." Chinese people enjoy fish and seafood of every shape, size, and color, and we consider snakes quite a delicacy. For this reason, a Chinese believer may find puzzling Jesus's suggestion that even a not-so-good parent would never offer a child a snake for dinner. The words of the text can be translated easily enough, but their meaning remains elusive. And Jesus's point—"If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts [fish, decidedly not snakes] to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"—may be lost in confusion around the folksy illustration he uses.

The larger context of this text in Matthew 7 is teaching about prayer. Jesus instructs his disciples to do three things: *ask*, *seek*, and *knock*. Almost instinctively, I notice how this passage lends itself to the structure of a standard three-point sermon. It offers three precise points and closes with this illustration about food parents offer to children. I also notice that the

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three verbs are in the active voice. I sense the Spirit leading me to exhort my congregation to pray *courageously*, *assertively*, and *persistently*.

This is my default way of approaching the biblical text, and my inclination is to believe that my reading is logical, practical, and exegetically faithful. But I need to recognize that this approach is not universal; it reflects Western ways of thinking. It may well suit a congregation of Canadians whose mother tongue is English. I need to be mindful that those who come from countries other than Canada may experience scripture quite differently and may find my three-point distillation an alien approach to interpretation.

Complications associated with making a request

In this text, Jesus teaches us to come to God with our requests. The instruction to bring our petitions before God is rooted in the reminder that God's intentions toward us are those of a loving parent. Jesus invites us to trust in and depend on our loving and compassionate Father in heaven.

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But here again, interpreting this text for a Chinese-Canadian congregation is not a straightforward matter.

In Chinese culture, the act of asking is complex and involves much more than words. Before making a request, the petitioner must weigh many relational considerations. A proverb ascribed to a Chinese author is translated thus: "He who asks a question remains a fool for five minutes. He who does not ask remains a fool forever." For English speakers, the word *fool*

doesn't capture the extent of the injury the proverb points to. What is at stake is not merely embarrassment or shame or a sense of inadequacy. Here, being a fool means losing face. Losing face is a serious social problem in Chinese culture. It means loss of honor, loss of respect, loss of communal prestige. Losing face is to be avoided at all costs, because it disrupts harmony in relationships. It contravenes important standards of social etiquette.

A complex set of rules governs how face is lost and how face is given. For example, you could lose face if you made a request at an inopportune time or if you were overly assertive or if you approached the wrong individual with the request. On the other hand, face is saved or given when

you preface your request with a compliment or accompany it with a gift. Face can also be saved when you avoid a conflict or suppress a sensitive issue. The importance of face management is captured in this Chinese proverb: “Men can’t live without face; trees can’t live without bark.”

To use the terminology introduced by anthropologist Edward Hall, Western cultures tend to be “low context”; they rely on explicit verbal communication. Chinese culture, like Asian cultures generally, is “high context”; much is unstated, and the speaker relies on context to impart meaning. In a high context culture, the act of asking isn’t as simple as one would imagine, and a number of nonverbal factors enter into the process. For a Chinese-Canadian congregation, making sense of Jesus’s instructions to bring our requests to God needs to take account of these contextual considerations.

Complexities of conflict management

A reality in every congregation is conflict, but patterns for dealing with conflict are culture specific. In the dominant—low-context—society in Canada, egalitarian processes tend to prevail. Canadians generally get right to the root of a problem, in order to find a resolution while maximizing efficiency. With emphasis on achieving this goal, Canadians and people from the United States think and behave in a linear fashion. They are direct and at times confrontational. They show respect by seeking each person’s views or opinions before they make a decision. When a difficult decision needs to be made, it’s normal to take a vote.

Anthropological linguist Richard Lewis has studied the intricacies of communicating across cultures.¹ He would classify North Americans as linear-active. Linear-active people are task-oriented; they are highly organized planners, operating with a linear agenda. They prefer direct discussion, sticking to facts and figures drawn from reliable written sources. Speech is for exchanging information. They are truthful rather than diplomatic, relying on logic, not emotion.

In Eastern cultures, conflict is often internalized, unspoken, or overlooked. This response to conflict is one that attempts to save face. Lewis has categorized Eastern cultures as listening cultures, as reactive. People in reactive cultures rarely initiate action or discussion, preferring first to listen and establish the other’s position. Only then will they react and

1 Richard D. Lewis, *When Cultures Collide: Leading across Cultures* (Boston: Nicholas Brealey, 2005).

formulate their own position. They rarely interrupt a speaker. And when the speaker is finished, they do not reply immediately. Giving face to the speaker and showing respect for what has been said require observing a decent period of silence after the speaking has stopped.

Underlying these behaviors is an intricate interplay of power and authority. In a high context culture, relationships are much more structured,



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and from the family outward, structures are hierarchical. In a traditional Chinese family, for example, the patriarch makes all decisions on behalf of the family, and his word is final. Typically, he rules the clan, and there is no challenge to his authority. Children who have grown up in such a family remember hearing phrases such as “Children have ears, not mouths.” Here, authority is positional; it is not earned but is simply recognized.

“High power distance” is the terminology cultural anthropologist Geert Hofstede coined for this pattern of relationship.² In high power distance cultures, higher and lower level people accept the authority structure as part of

life, part of the natural order of things, and lower level people almost without fail defer to higher level people, to elders and those of higher standing. In such a system, lower level people rarely question authority, typically accept decisions made by higher level people, and internalize their own personal opinions without expressing them. These observations help explain why dominant culture people in Canada sometimes perceive Chinese neighbors as quiet, reticent, and passive.

Of course, these cultural factors have profound effects on how pastors and parishioners deal with conflict in the congregation. Awareness

2 Geert Hofstede analysed a wide range of cultures and developed his cultural dimensions theory, articulated in *Cross-Cultural Analysis: The Science and Art of Comparing the World's Modern Societies and Their Cultures* ([Thousand Oaks, CA]: SAGE Publications, 2012). His power distance index (PDI) identifies the extent to which less powerful members expect and accept unequal power distribution. High power distance cultures usually have centralized, top-down control. Low power distance is associated with societies characterized by greater social equality and empowerment.

of power distance dynamics is crucial for understanding responses of people involved in a congregational conflict and for exploring possibilities for resolving it. If power distance is perceived as high, a parishioner may well internalize the conflict and avoid confrontation. Avoidance may not be the best way to move on, but it is an accepted way in a congregation characterized by high power distance. In any event, conflict resolution in an intercultural setting requires patience, understanding, and adaptive changes.

Confusions of identity

I've been part of the Chinese Mennonite Church in Toronto for more the half of my life, but growing up in a Mennonite church has been confusing and mysterious for me. People I meet are curious when they find out that I am Chinese and Mennonite. They ask, "How did that happen?" Without too much effort, I could explain the Chinese part of it. I could give some



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context about my cultural roots and my upbringing. But where I got stuck was on the word *Mennonite*. I have had a hard time clearly articulating an Anabaptist identity. I doubt that I am alone in this. Many members of our church would likely have the same difficulty. What exactly does it mean to be Mennonite in an intercultural Chinese-Canadian congregation?

In our beliefs as Mennonites in Canada, we follow the teachings of Jesus as recorded in the Bible. Theologically, we articulate our convictions in Mennonite confessions of faith. We seek to live out our faith with authenticity and simplicity; community, peace, and nonviolence are important to us. The heroic tales of early Anabaptists inspire us and reinforce our faith. These early pioneers were champions of faith. Yet we have little in common with their experiences of persecution in sixteenth-century Europe.

The question remains, What does it mean for a church made up of Chinese Canadians to identify itself as Mennonite? It is impossible to be a follower of Jesus in isolation and in the absence of context. Historical, cultural, and biblical sources inevitably shape the faith of an individual

or group. The cultural context of our congregation offers us these hints: In Chinese culture, the idea of harmony resonates deeply. Since ancient times, the beauty of harmony has been at the core of Chinese philosophy. Harmony is not uniformity but “proper and balanced coordination between elements, and it encompasses rationale, propriety, and compatibility. Rationale refers to acting according to objective laws and truths. Propriety indicates suitability and appropriateness.”³

According to Confucius, harmony is the most important value for an individual, a family, and a society. “Confucian harmony presupposes the coexistence of different things and implies a certain favorable relationship among them.”⁴ This philosophical outlook has affinities with the life and peace teachings of Jesus. A Chinese longing for harmony and human flourishing creates an opening for exploring the meaning of peace as we see it lived out fully in Christ. The gospel of Jesus Christ is fundamentally about harmony with God and others. The good news is that God has sent his Son to restore the shalom harmony that has been disrupted by sin. While some may see Confucian teachings about harmony as sufficient, in our view the shalom envisioned in scripture incorporates not just peace but universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight—the way things ought to be.⁵

When viewed this way, Confucius’s ideal of harmonious human relationships reflects the shalom that Jesus came to restore. Maintaining goodwill in existing relationships and seeking reconciliation where it is needed move us toward a harmonious society and an inner harmony, all of which is part of human flourishing. If that’s the case, we can connect biblical shalom and the Chinese idea of human flourishing.⁶ In the midst of complexities around language, conflict, and identity in our intercultural congregation, convergences between Confucian philosophy and the peace we see and know in Jesus Christ enrich our faith and practice.

3 Zhang Lihua, “China’s Traditional Cultural Values,” Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, November 21, 2013; accessed July 3, 2018, <https://carnegietsinghua.org/2013/11/21/china-s-traditional-cultural-values-and-national-identity-pub-53613>.

4 Xiaohong WEI and Qingyuan LI, “The Confucian Value of Harmony and Its Influence on Chinese Social Interaction,” *Cross-Cultural Communication* 9, no. 1 (2013): 60–66, accessed July 3, 2018, <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/cc/article/view/j.ccc.1923670020130901.12018/3618>.

5 Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not The Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 10.

6 I’Ching Thomas, *Jesus: The Path to Human Flourishing: The Gospel for the Cultural Chinese* (Singapore: Graceworks, 2018).

About the author

Brian Quan is a native of Toronto, Ontario, and was born to parents who had immigrated to Canada from China. He serves as lead pastor of the three congregations meeting at the Toronto Chinese Mennonite Church. He also gives his time to Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, serving as the assistant moderator. He is a husband, dad, friend, woodworker, hiker, and rock climber—a big sinner enjoying an even bigger grace, and an unlikely pastor.