

GO

Lives and
communities
transformed
through
encounter with
Jesus Christ

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 **Interserve**



BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

The Gospel of
reconciliation



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Good news

for multicultural communities

**A CALLING TO BE CO-
LABOURERS IN THE GOSPEL**

CHRIS BINDER
NATIONAL DIRECTOR

When my wife Rachel and I lived in Central Asia, we had a friend, "Spring", who came from a village where there were no known Christians and no church. One day Spring had a dream. She saw a foreign man who she had never seen before. Some time later this very man came to her village. He had come with a short-term mission team and they were handing out leaflets. She took one. It was signed at the end "Jesus Christ". Spring thought this must be the name of the man who had handed her the leaflet. Long after the man left, a Dutch Christian lady came to live in the village.





Spring went to her and asked about the man and the leaflet, and she started learning about who Jesus really was. She was one of many first generation believers whose journey to following Jesus started with dreams and visions. The power of the Gospel: Jesus revealing Himself to those who are far from Him, overcoming the barrier of sin and opening the way for a relationship with the living God!

◆ Our changing society makes many ask, “What is the relevance of the Gospel in multiethnic, multicultural, multireligious Britain”?

Now we find ourselves living in the UK, a world away from the mountains and plateaus of Central Asia. Britain is an increasingly multicultural place. Birmingham and Leicester are the first “super diverse” cities in Britain, where people from ethnic minorities make up more than half of the population. One in four people in Birmingham were born

outside of the UK. While other parts of the UK are less ethnically diverse, the ethnic minority population in the UK has grown tremendously from around 6 million to 15 million in the last 20 years. Our changing society makes many ask, “What is the relevance of the Gospel in multiethnic, multicultural, multireligious Britain”?

As we have sought to live out our calling to be co-labourers in the Gospel, perhaps some of us have tended to focus on the vertical relationship between the individual and God. The Gospel enables us to come into a right relationship with God, to know Him personally as our loving heavenly Father. Sometimes it happens in a dramatic way, such as what happened with our friend Spring. Sometimes it is less dramatic but no less revolutionary. However, the Apostle Paul teaches us that the Gospel also enables barriers to be broken down between people: our horizontal relationships one with another. One very real barrier of the time was that between Jews and Gentiles. Writing about the radical idea of Jews and Gentiles being brought into one family, he tells the Ephesians:

Ephesians 2:14-16: For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

It is not one or the other: a reconciled relationship with God or a reconciled relationship with others. Both are outcomes of the Gospel at work. We should be bold in sharing this Gospel that brings such reconciliation. It is good news!

Socioeconomic barriers are another example of barriers that need to be broken down by the Gospel. The work of a young team of Central Asian Christians who care for the homeless is inspiring. They reach out and offer the love of Christ, practically and through prayer, to those who society largely despises or ignores. They have understood that, “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and

female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” God’s desire is for the homeless to become brothers and sisters with them in Christ. Interserve Partner “Mary” was instrumental in establishing the work with the homeless but from the start she was resolute that this must be a locally-led initiative. This is a great example of wholistic ministry, an approach that continues to be a conducive context for Gospel-powered vertical and horizontal reconciliation of relationships in areas such as healthcare, education, business and community development.

One of the things that I deeply appreciate about Interserve is that we are an international fellowship. Every Interserve team that I have been a part of has included members from around the world. It creates such an enriching environment and provides opportunities to learn from those who see the world differently to me. It has been wonderful to welcome people from around the world to be a part of our team here in Great Britain. Pray that we can go much further and faster in fostering this diversity. As the Church grows around the world, we remember Paul’s teaching about the Body of Christ



in 1 Corinthians 12. We cannot say to anyone who is different from us, whether they come from a different country, ethnic group, speak a different language, have different values... we cannot say to anyone in the Body of Christ "I don't need you" any more than any one part of our physical body can say to another part, "I don't need you".

This benefits us as communities of Jesus-followers and helps us in our journey of discipleship, both in our relationship with God and with one another. As we learn to live and work together, as we love one another despite our differences, it is also a powerful counter-cultural witness to the watching world. Jesus said in John 13:35 "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

If our mission teams and church families are made up of people who are similar to one another, we don't demonstrate the barrier-breaking power of the Gospel: this counter-cultural idea that in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free. This becomes even more of an issue

if our surrounding communities are multicultural while our community is largely monocultural. It is encouraging to see the growth of the intercultural church movement in this country as we explore how to celebrate the different cultures that make up the Body of Christ even in our local neighbourhoods. We pray for more!

The Gospel is good news: from the steppe of Central Asia to the streets of urban Britain. Let us continue to pray for, and actively work towards, seeing the power of the Gospel at work, destroying dividing walls of hostility, reconciling us and those around us to God and to one-another. ♦

Are you feeling called to be a co-labourer in the gospel? We would love to explore this with you. Email start@interserve.org.uk to start your journey today.



A promise fulfilled

HE BRINGS THE NATIONS IN

On one of the darkest days of the first COVID lockdown I sat down and cried. 'The work in the community and church is finished,' I wailed dramatically.

And then into my deep despair shone the light of a beautiful heavenly whisper I could not resist, 'Just you see what I will do when the doors of the church reopen. I will be bringing you the nations!'

And so, they come! The people we did not search for or expect. Families from Nigeria, a lady from a Muslim

♦ The Gospel is good news: from the steppe of Central Asia to the streets of urban Britain.



background seeking baptism, Iranian men seeking sanctuary, an Afghan man with little English and children from many cultures... And still others arrive adding joyfully to our delightful, sometimes 'messy round the edges,' and yet so beautifully Christ unified fellowship!

'How do we move from 'multi-culturally jogging along side by side' to being an intercultural fellowship?' we asked... 'From being a church with people from many nations, yet with a predominantly white leadership and worship group?' We knew it had to be more than just throwing a few token songs from the nations into the mix.

This will continue to be a steep learning curve and we do sometimes get it wrong. During lockdown I became close to a lady in our fellowship and heard, on park benches and on the phone, her story of being a black Christian in the church in the UK. I am learning to be less defensive, to repent where that is needed, to be challenged in my biases. I am learning I might need to become less so that others can flourish and use their gifts. That hurts my pride at times, but so what!

We are learning as leaders in the church that we need to persist in empowering all to use their gifts and that we need to keep asking people personally to be involved. For example, we talked for some while to an African brother about using the gifts he clearly has in worship. Then came a beautiful moment one Sunday when he came forward, took the microphone, and started to sing a Swahili song. Since then, there has been no stopping him and his journey has emboldened others to use their gifts too.

This has not happened overnight, but slowly worshipping Jesus in the heart

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languages of others is becoming part of our DNA. We have been challenged to loosen our hold on our preferred songs and styles in order that others may be blessed. How enriched we are as we do so.

And so, our brothers and sisters, some of whom have lost so much, can worship in their own tongue. In our community people who do not yet worship Jesus are watching this group of diverse worshippers and wondering if they could possibly be part of it too? Sunday mornings bring us a sweet foretaste of heaven where people of every tribe and nation and tongue worship the Lamb in true intercultural harmony. ◆

By an Interserve partner in the North of England.

We would love to hear how your church is responding to the nations being on our doorstep. Share your story by emailing start@interserve.org.uk



Working side-by-side



LIVING, WORKING AND WORSHIPING IN AN INTERNATIONAL TEAM

When I first arrived in South Asia I was very motivated to learn about the local culture and love the people I would be serving. What I had not bargained for was joining a multinational team and learning to live, work and worship with a group of people from a large number of different countries (eight when I arrived).

I estimate that I have worked alongside people of over 20 nationalities in my time in South Asia. That brings richness to life and I miss being part of an international group when I am home in the UK. I have celebrated many different national days, eaten delicious food from around the globe, learnt new games, expanded my knowledge of world geography and traditions and I would find a welcome in homes on five continents.

Cross cultural teams bring joy, but there is also the potential for plenty of misunderstandings. What does it mean if someone invites you for tea? Is it

◆ It is a real joy worshipping with people from so many countries and traditions. This is a foretaste of heaven.

a huge meal, a beverage only, or tea and cake? Even among native English speakers we use different words for many things, which can cause confusion sometimes with hilarious results. I learned to use more international language. For example, "sweater" will be understood more readily than "jumper" which means something quite different to an American than to a Brit. We all have different ways of expressing humour too and I have made mistakes in this area when my British humour was taken literally and caused hurt. On one occasion a national colleague requested some spare spoons for a rehab home he was setting up.



My British colleague agreed, but joked it would cost a ridiculously large sum; everyone laughed. My national colleague commented to me afterwards that these were very expensive. I had to explain that it was a joke and they would be given as a gift. His laughter had indicated embarrassment, not (as we assumed) that he was sharing in the joke.

It is a real joy worshipping with people from so many countries and traditions. This is a foretaste of heaven. We are truly united in Christ and it is a privilege to be part of such a big family. It is so encouraging to get a text from one of my local brothers and sisters to say they are praying when things are tough, and to be part of my home group which gives stability, as expat friends come and go. Goodbyes are always the hardest part of being part of an international team.

There is more than one way of practicing medicine and I learned quickly to be humble, and that we can all learn from each other. We need to find the best solutions for the situation where we work,

rather than importing systems that may not be a good fit. There are also different ways of running meetings. The Western practice of discussing an issue and then settling on the majority decision does not always work in other cultures. I now realise why it is important to carry on discussing an issue, which I thought was already decided. Consensus is so important - we cannot drop the subject until everyone is comfortable, which I have learned does happen eventually, when we don't rush.

I love that I now have a second language that I can speak fluently, and I admire friends and colleagues who are functioning in their second or third language most of the time. Most national friends speak several languages as well. I have learned when speaking English that I need to slow down my speech and avoid using figures of speech that might not be understood. I love the new words and the proverbs I have learnt which can express an idea so well.

I have also loved being immersed in another culture. Some things have

◆ I really value the national friends who point out my many cultural blind spots too.

become second nature. I always hand things to people using my right hand and eat with my right hand, although it took a couple of months of sitting on my left hand to acquire this habit. I also now automatically apologise or indicate if I have to step over someone's feet and keep mine tucked away. I have learned that relationships are more important than being on time, so if you need to be on time you must factor in time to greet people on the path. It is far more appropriate here to be openly concerned and interested in other people. I am much more nosey in my adopted language. I recently had my arm in plaster and this allowed everyone (not necessarily only people I knew) to ask how I had injured myself and what exactly was wrong, and


then a few weeks along why I was still in plaster. All journeys took a few minutes longer.

I have learned to appreciate many positive things in my host culture and I have learned from these. But as an outsider it can be helpful to ask lots of questions and politely challenge some negative things. When I was working in obstetrics, new mothers could be very disappointed after the birth of a girl (boys were more valued, especially in those days). I would say how lovely to have a daughter and explain that in my family my father felt very blessed to have 3 daughters as we looked after him so well. This is part of being salt and light where we are placed. I find that I now see my own culture with new eyes and I can question the things in my home culture that need challenging. I really value the national friends who point out my many cultural blind spots too.

God is more interested in who we are than what we do for him, and I often say that He has brought me to a different country as part of His plan to make me more like Him, to chip off some of my rougher corners - I must be a slow learner as I am still here! The beauty of working in an international team is that as we rub against each other, we help each other in this journey. ◆

Would you like to experience the richness of working in an international team? Email start@interserve.org.uk to start your journey today.





Responding
as a church
to the

challenges migrants face

**JOURNEYING WELL WITH THOSE
WHO HAVE SUFFERED
PREJUDICE**

It's just so obvious, isn't it? My accent is enough to make people think that I'm not very clever, but sometimes, they don't even hear what I'm saying. Sometimes, all they see is this."

After the last sentence, my Kurdish friend points upwards and then tugs slightly on the edge of her hijab, as if the initial statement wasn't obvious enough.

"When I first came here, I thought that I would try to make it a little more friendly looking. I bought scarves with prints of flowers, bright colours, sparkles... but it didn't seem to make much difference. I don't know how to say it. The scarf sometimes feels like a wall. My husband tells me not to wear it, but it's still important to me. It's part of my faith, it's part of who I am. Do people here really want me to hide something that's so important to me? Isn't that a little bit like lying?"

Sozan* has become animated and I'm not sure if she's asking me a rhetorical question, or if she wants my opinion.

It doesn't really matter, because before I can speak, she goes on to complain about how she "sticks out like a sore thumb," proudly using an idiom Sozan just learned in her advanced English class. She expresses anger about how every week some local kids verbally hurl a common racial slur in her direction as she walks to English class. "It's so awful," she says, "but what makes me most angry is that it's not even the right one, I'm not even from the country they're trying to shame!" This final story captures the essence of much of the prejudice that she has received – not only offensive, but the ignorance tells on itself.

I am listening to these stories of prejudice by this articulate and smart Muslim woman in a church. We have just finished our English classes and we're sharing coffee during the break before the next class begins. Some of the other students are handing around plates of cloying but moreish maamoul cookies, that seem to be more powdered sugar than pastry. As I enjoy the hospitality of my refugee friends, others, overhearing our conversation, join in with their own stories of prejudice. Thankfully, none have experienced physical violence, but many comment that it's the piling up of little things that builds into a mountain of frustration. "You start second guessing yourself," chimes in one man, "I'm on the bus and I think, is that man looking at me strange because he doesn't trust me, or is he just grumpy and rude to everyone? You start questioning every reaction, feeling guarded when you don't want to be. But that's what happens!"

◆ "My husband tells me not to wear it, but it's still important to me. It's part of my faith, it's part of who I am."

Sitting and listening to all these stories, I know that there isn't much that I can do at this moment to "fix" things, as if that were possible. The incidents have already happened. What I can do is listen, try to understand their frustration and the "piling up of little things," being made aware of what those are, and remembering to challenge them when I see them happening in our community. With disappointment in myself, I can think



of situations where I have remained silent.

I am given some hope that I'm hearing these stories in the church; that our friends feel comfortable to voice their experiences so openly and honestly.

Sozan has just started attending the "Parents and Toddlers" group that happens at the church the next day and

◆ "None of the other mums question the hijab or look at me strange, they don't laugh at my accent."

is encouraging other young parents to come as well. I ask her what she likes about the group. She laughs and says, "My son will play with some of the other kids, so I have a chance to drink a cup of tea in peace!" She then continues, "Actually, the thing that I enjoy the most is that I go and I am a normal mother. None of the other mums question the hijab or look at me strange, they don't laugh at my accent. We just talk about normal stuff. How looking after a baby is so tiring and so great. At Christmas, they invited me to the carol service. It was lovely. They did ask first if I would be interested, because they know I am Muslim. It was nice to just be asked about that and

◆ Joy... can be understood in witness only if we can also hold the painful emotions felt in the contexts in which we serve.

they were interested in what I believe about Jesus."

This statement from Sozan, to my mind, captures one of the ways that the church can respond effectively to the prejudices that our refugee friends often face. There is a place for campaigns and protests, but there is also a place for a quiet, hospitable alternative: a place where they don't feel they are a threat because they wear a hijab and people respond with curiosity, rather than hostility.

I know that Sozan heard the gospel explained at the carol service. However, I imagine that she first experienced an embodied gospel message in the welcome of the other mums in the parents' group. The biblical scholar Joshua Jipp puts it so well in his book *Saved by Faith and Hospitality*, "This divine hospitality comes to us in the person of Jesus, the divine host who extends God's own hospitality to sinners, outcasts, and strangers and thereby draws them—and us—into friendship with God. God's embrace of humanity into friendship with him is the ultimate form of welcoming the stranger. But divine hospitality does not end with our experience of God's welcome; it also elicits human hospitality." A long way to say, that when the church welcomes those who are "others" in

our community, the church (albeit in a limited way) acts out and points to the hospitality God has first offered to us in Christ.

The other thing that strikes me during the coffee break between the English classes, is that there is so much laughter in the room. We hear some sad stories, but there is joy in our midst. This is not a superficial happiness that attempts to paint over the cracks left by the trauma of living as a stranger, but a genuine joy that can only spring from embracing our friends as whole people. As Evelynne Reisacher writes in her book *Joyful Witness in the Muslim World*, "joy... can be understood in witness only if we can also hold the painful emotions felt in the contexts in which we serve."

The witness of our church is far from perfect and no doubt, my colleagues and I have much to learn. However, a great source of hope for the witness of the church is a relatively simple, but most definitely not easy, thing: the offer of an unconditional welcome, being open to receive, and in doing so, pointing to our saviour. ◆

*A pseudonym has been used.



Please join us in **prayer and thanksgiving** for churches as they welcome, receive, support and point people to our saviour.

Impact report

We hope you will be inspired by what God has been doing in our midst in the last year. Please take the time to read the Impact Report that came with this GO magazine.

