

# THE IMPACT OF TRANSITION

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PASTORAL MINISTRY TODAY IS OFTEN, and increasingly, cross-cultural. The days when it was only missionaries who had to learn about adapting to different customs are long gone. Any serious programme of pastoral formation needs to be preparing people who can communicate across cultural barriers. But there will be a cost. This kind of ministry and mission require people to pass through a barren desert, a 'no-self land'.

The call to continue the mission of Jesus in the world today is a call to transmit meaning—the meaning of life at its deepest level. There is a strange paradox in this call to mission. The very person who is called to transmit meaning must themselves go through a searing process, a deep crisis invading their own world of personal meaning. To be effective in mission and ministry at the deepest level, I must be willing to pass through a period of crisis, a time of meaninglessness.

## ***Passing Over***

Crossing the cultural barrier usually begins for pastoral ministers when they, like Abraham, set out at the call of God to a place that will be shown them. There is a barren desert to pass through at the frontier of mission. The initial period of orientation, the first moment of contact with people in a new setting, with new customs and a new culture, is an invitation to a deep conversion. It invites the minister to go into a desert place, a place of barren wastes. Here, the lack of familiar supports and the sense of disempowerment provide—paradoxically—the possibility of opening out to a new world and a broadened horizon. Here a real conversion can begin, a *metanoia*, in which pastoral ministers begin to perceive more clearly and more deeply not only what God's creative power is doing in the world, but also what God is doing within their own selves.

In his book, *The Way of All the Earth*, the theologian John S. Dunne describes a phenomenon which he calls 'passing over'. What he says is close to my concern here. Dunne writes:

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Is religion coming to birth in our time? It could be. What seems to be occurring is a phenomenon we might call 'passing over'—passing over from one culture to another, from one way of life to another. Passing over to the standpoint of another culture, another way of life, another religion. It is followed by an equal and opposite process we might call 'coming back', coming back with new insight to one's own culture, one's own way of life, one's own religion.<sup>1</sup>

'Passing over' is essentially a matter of sympathetic understanding: people must have somehow within themselves what they find in another. At the same time, we can gain insight into our own standpoint only if we are willing to pass over into the lives of others. For it is only in the moment of passing over into other lives that one has a glimpse of what full enlightenment would be. In that particular moment, according to Dunne, one's own self and its habitual standpoint disappear, and one sees what it is like to care for others in their own right, as opposed to caring for them only in so far as they have a role in one's own life.

In passing over to the standpoint of the other, one becomes conscious of oneness with other people and with God. Ultimately, it becomes clear that every person is really an incarnation of God. Eventually, we recover a sense of our own identity, of our own uniqueness and distinctness; but our former horizons have receded and broadened. The boundaries dissolve, change. As we move from one horizon to another, there is a conversion experience—indeed the passing over to the standpoint of another is comparable to the experience of passing over to God.

Dunne thus describes how insight is gained and shared in a lifetime of passing over into the lives of other people. What he says is intensely and directly applicable to the vocation of any pastoral minister working cross-culturally. To cross the boundaries between one culture and another, between one way of life and another, requires a willingness and commitment to pass beyond the security of the familiar, of the homeland. At the frontier of the new culture, the voyager will find a new world of meaning and values. This often poses a threat because it seems so impenetrable, and yet it offers the possibility not only of broadening one's horizon, but also of self-transcendence.

<sup>1</sup> John S. Dunne, *The Way of All the Earth* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), collated from pp. ix, 223-224, 85-86, 91.

'Passing over' involves making new discoveries about the human person and the human community, about the creative power universally at work in human life. Cross-cultural pastoral ministers are Christians who choose and commit themselves to a process of passing over sympathetically into other lives, cultures and religions. They try to reach the point at which they understand others' interests, their attractions, their ways, and indeed resonate with them. At this point the minister can begin to feel an at-homeness in the 'foreign land'. Dunne calls this sympathetic understanding an 'experience of universal compassion'. When one passes over to other lives, other cultures, and other religions, one comes back again with new insights into one's own life, one's own culture, and one's own religion. In the moment of passing over, one sees one's solidarity with other people and with God; and in the moment of coming back, one sees one's own concreteness and individuality. Perhaps this growth in universal compassion is the greatest fruit of a missionary vocation.



***Transitional Experience***

What actually happens to the pastoral minister in the course of this 'passing over' to another culture? Behavioural scientists speak about the *transitional experience*. They describe the human psyche's passage from one culture to another in very concrete terms. Every person experiences the world through their own culturally influenced values, assumptions, and beliefs. When the person encounters another culture these are called into question. The encounter with a new culture often poses a threat to one's way of life. It usually involves what has been called 'culture shock'.

Culture shock is primarily a set of emotional reactions to the loss of perceptual reinforcements from one's own culture, to new cultural stimuli which have little or no meaning, and to the misunderstanding of new and diverse experiences.<sup>2</sup>

The experience of culture shock often involves feelings of helplessness and irritability; one can fear being cheated, contaminated, injured or disregarded. Culture shock can be recognised as a form of alienation. But it also represents an attempt to comprehend, survive in, and grow through immersion in a second culture. This is the view of Peter S. Adler, who points out that culture shock is very significant in the understanding of change, including the changes that come when people move from one place to another. What he calls 'transitional experiences' hold a great potential for growth and development.

In such situations of psychological, social or cultural tension each person is forced to redefine some level of their existence. Many people are relatively unaware of their own values, beliefs, and attitudes. The transitional experience, in which the person moves from one environment into another, tends to make them aware of cultural predispositions and hence gives rise to conflict. These new environments of experience tend to produce psychic disintegration. But this disintegration can be positive. It can be the beginning of a reorientation of the personality to a higher level of consciousness and to a new psychic integration.

<sup>2</sup> Peter S. Adler, 'The Transitional Experience: An Alternative View of Culture Shock', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 15/4 (Fall 1975), pp. 13-23, here p. 23.

The transitional experience, according to Adler, is a movement from a state of low awareness of one's self and one's culture to a high awareness. The person can be seen to pass through five stages of adjustment to the new culture:

- Contact
- Disintegration
- Reintegration
- Autonomy
- Independence

#### *Contact*

The first stage is marked by excitement and euphoria. The person is usually captivated by the new culture and by its seeming contrast with previous experiences. The person remains functionally integrated with their own culture. In the contact stage the person is more in touch with the similarities, less so with the differences.

#### *Disintegration*

The second stage is marked by a period of confusion and disorientation. Differences become increasingly noticeable as different behaviours, values, and attitudes intrude into the perception of the newcomer. Tension and frustration increase. There is a growing sense of being different, isolated, inadequate to the situation's demands. Confusion over personal identity mounts. There can be experiences of alienation, depression, and withdrawal, leading to disintegration of the personality.

#### *Reintegration*

The third stage is characterized by strong rejection of the second culture. The person becomes hostile to that which is experienced but not understood. Personal problems may be projected onto the second culture as the person withdraws into the security of the familiar. The expression of negative feelings at this stage can be a significant sign of healthy reconstruction. They may represent a growing cultural awareness and an increasing ability to act on feelings. The person now makes a choice: either a) to regress to the superficial behaviour of the contact stage; or b) to move closer to a resolution of the difficulties and frustration; or c) to return to the home culture. The choice that the person makes will depend on the intensity of the experiences, the

resilience of the person, and the interpretation and guidance provided by significant others.

#### *Autonomy*

The fourth stage is marked by an increasing sensitivity, and by ever greater skill in understanding and living with the second culture. The person relates to people from the other culture, and becomes able to understand them. They acquire autonomy: they can survive without cultural cues and props from the home culture, and can let themselves experience fully new situations. The person functions completely in their role, both comfortable with their status as an insider-outsider in two different cultures, and secure in it.

#### *Independence*

In the fifth stage of the transitional experience, that of independence, the person comes to relish cultural differences and similarities and to enjoy their significance. The new-comer is able both to give and to elicit a high degree of trust and sensitivity. They can view both themselves and others as *human beings* who are influenced by culture and upbringing. They are capable of putting meaning into situations. The person exercises choice and responsibility even as they still experience the other emotional, behavioural, and attitudinal states characteristic of earlier stages.

The transitional experience begins with the encounter of another culture and evolves into the encounter with self. The sequence of changes which take place between contact and independence are indicative of a progressive unfolding of the self.<sup>3</sup>

In Adler's model this independent stage is not a culmination. Rather, it is a state of dynamic tension, in which discoveries of one's own self and of cultural difference have opened up the possibility of a deeper level of experience in general. In a set of intensive and evocative situations, the person moves through the transitional experience by perceiving and experiencing other people in a distinctly new manner. They then experience new dimensions of existence.

<sup>3</sup> Adler, 'The Transitional Experience', p. 18.

### ***Outward and Inward***

Adler's model of the 'transitional experience' can be correlated with Dunne's model of 'passing over' into other religions and other ways of life. The two models together can give invaluable help in orientating pastoral ministers for cross-cultural mission today. Both Adler and Dunne confirm that *the process of acculturation is always a journey into the self*.

The more one is capable of experiencing new and different dimensions of human diversity, the more one learns about oneself. The process of entering into another culture demands the willingness to set out on an inner journey as well as an outer journey. Passing over into other people's lives by understanding them is an experience of sympathy and resonance. One must find within oneself something corresponding to what one sees in another. It leads to the discovery that one has within oneself all that exists in every other human being. Each of us is a human person, but we must discover within ourselves the realm of feeling, imagination, thought, and action which corresponds to the humanity in the lives of others. In the process of acculturation, of going through the period of culture shock, of passing from stage to stage, what at first seemed alien, uninteresting or repulsive can evoke resonance. To pass over into other lives through sympathetic understanding requires a letting go of security, of certainty and of familiar relationships, but it leads the willing traveller to a new horizon, beyond their own narrow standpoint. When one begins to perceive a broader horizon, the original standpoint begins to change. It too becomes broader and deeper. Through sympathy and resonance, one begins to move toward a life of *universal compassion*.

What began as an outward journey to other people and other cultures becomes an inner journey to a deeper and more authentic self. Values, assumptions, attitudes and beliefs are clarified, modified or discarded. New insights challenge old behavioural patterns. The more people learn about themselves, the more they discover that the barriers to universal solidarity are paper walls. As walls, they obstruct the building of the Reign of God; they cast shadows onto the world instead of intensifying light. But they are paper walls. We can pass over into another culture and break through them, entering the lives of other people at a deep level. As the walls crumble, light appears; as the

horizon recedes and broadens, understanding and compassion grow; as insight expands, one becomes more truly human. Understanding and becoming what is more truly human lead us to perceive and love what God is and what God through Jesus Christ is doing in our world.

### ***More Than Spoken Words***

In the light of what has been said so far, it is clear that cross-cultural ministry requires more than simply language study. A programme design for this first step into the new culture must include strong elements of orientation towards the host culture and its pastoral needs. It is necessary for the pastoral minister to have been exposed to the process of acculturation. They must also have done a critical reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of their own culture and nation: its values and counter-values, its sinful structures and its grace-filled ones.

The pastoral minister must have a good sense of who they are. The key to missionary activity today is relationships. Pastoral ministers need to know their own identity well enough to be able to enter into healthy and enduring relationships with others. The whole process of acculturation, of passing over, is impossible without the capacity for living and acting in communion and solidarity with others, without the capacity for coping creatively with conflicts and frustrations. This means that a minister must be in touch with their own interiority. They must also be in touch with their own gifts, and, at the same time, be aware of egocentric patterns of behaviour which stifle authentic speaking and listening, giving and receiving, loving and being loved. Cross-cultural mission demands radical re-adjustment. It is a moment when the pastoral minister is faced with an invitation to a deep conversion.

More is going on here than 'learning the language'. According to linguistic specialists, it is more accurate to speak of the development of communication skills. Implied in this latter phrase is a more holistic or contextualised approach to the language study period. In other words, the learning of a language is only one part of an overall process, a process of entering into a new culture.

The technical skills required to learn to speak a new language must be coupled with a thoughtful and intuitive leap into a completely new reality. Language provides a set of symbols which introduce one to a new culture; but much more than mere verbalisation is needed to enter

a culture. We also need other types of skills: listening, observing, questioning, clarifying, imaging, sorting-out, reflecting, intuiting, making a new reality our own and so on. The pastoral minister must be helped to practise such skills in an entirely new situation, consciously applying them to the task at hand. Moreover, in addition to the practising of skills, there is a deeper reality involved: spiritual and imaginative horizons must broaden, attitudes must be clarified, convictions must be sharpened, and a new energy must be released. This is the process of conversion taking place.

### ***In the Community***

During this initial period of acculturation there must be time and space for reflection and prayer, both individual and communal. The learning about language and culture is part of a process centred on the personal growth of the pastoral minister. And this must be nurtured by the community of ministers during the initial period. Furthermore, whatever styles of personal and communal reflection may be set up during the orientation period, these should be realised in the context of a community sent in mission. Pastoral and theological reflection, talks, readings, pastoral visits, part-time ministries, discussions, pastoral counselling sessions, and so on—all these should have as their main goal the personal growth of the pastoral minister and the building of a community of faith, hope and love.

***The need for support, insight and challenge*** The new pastoral minister has crucial need of the support and challenge of Christian community as they set out on a voyage of discovery. In fact, it is the community experience, at this critical moment, which will determine the way in which the minister integrates (or does not integrate) the personal and societal dimensions of a contemporary spirituality for mission. If the newly arrived minister is to pass through the various stages of the transitional experience and move toward adequate acculturation, they will certainly need loving support, theological insight, Christian challenge, careful listening and sensitive responses from significant others. There must be honest, trusting and faith-filled sharing between newly arrived ministers and those who have already been involved in the ministry, those who have taken the journey of discovery many times before. Mission is a voyage of discovery—discovery for the Church which is strengthened and

enriched by the multiplicity of cultures it embraces and informs, discovery for the pastoral minister who reaches new levels of consciousness and depths of faith, and discovery for those who open their hearts to the message, no matter how strangely it is spoken or how clumsily it is offered. The transition period of passing into a new culture is a critical time of journeying. It is both an outward journey and an inner one. Whether we describe it psychologically, sociologically or theologically, it involves life, death and resurrection. It demands personal choice and the willingness to endure patiently. It requires a community of faith, hope, and love—a community willing to give support and challenge.

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