

The St. Mary-Mead Model of Intercultural Relations

Any study of the cultural life of missionaries would need to examine in detail the contents of the bookshelves in Mission Guest houses. Whenever you stay in one of these worthy institutions there is no need to be at a loss for something to read, there is always a small library or book shelf with a selection of various literature to help you while away your time. The interesting feature is that these libraries, large or small, always seem to come equipped with the same books and magazines. There are always a few Christian Books, some of them by authors you may have heard of (the unknown authors being referred to as world famous on the book jacket), and you can usually find a few old copies of the appropriate denominational magazine. On the secular side, Reader's Digest is a constant as are seven year-old copies of National Geographic along with a few Western Novels, and then just as you are despairing of finding anything to read, there are a couple of Agatha Christies, stuffed under fourteen copies of Woman's Day.

Most of Agatha Christie's books revolve around one of two central characters, Hercule Poirot, and my favourite, the little old English Lady, Miss Marple.

For those of you who have never been to a Mission Guest house (or for those who read the Westerns - somebody must), I'll explain how Miss Marple operates. Sometime in the first few chapters of the book, someone is killed, and despite the scepticism of the police, Miss Marple will discover the killer. Even though she has only rarely left the little village of St Mary-Mead, Miss Marple is able to solve murders involving Film Stars, Politicians, Millionaires and the rest and despite not moving in such circles herself she shows a remarkable insight into people's characters. Now, her secret is this, she may only leave St Mary-Mead on rare occasions, but she is an acute observer of human character, and as she says, "You can see a lot of life in a village." Her observations of people in St Mary-Mead, especially their wrongdoing ("*there is a lot of wickedness in a village*") allow her to understand how people outside of her normal circles act. So, when a millionaire is found dead, and the only clue is a missing golf club, or whatever, this will remind her of Mrs. Jenkins in the fish shop, whose umbrella went missing on a sunny day. Knowing what little foible of human nature pushed someone to steal the umbrella, Miss Marple is able to understand why the golf club went missing and so by comparing people she knows with the people involved in the murder she is able to work out the name of the criminal. All of Miss Marple's deductions are based on the fact that people are basically similar, be they people in High Society or in a little English village and if you know what makes one group tick, you can understand the others. And this (finally) brings me to my point.

Coming to Africa from the West we expect things and people to be different and generally we are not disappointed. People talk differently, they carry their babies differently, they think differently; you name it, it seems to be different. Our training too, helps us to look for differences, we are trained to examine the things people believe and the way they act, which in practice often means what do they believe that we don't believe etc... Anthropology papers and write ups need to look at belief systems and ways of life and we need to understand these things in order to do our jobs properly, but nonetheless, I wonder if looking at things which separate us from the people whom we live amongst, doesn't do us and them a disservice.

Just think of dear, old Miss Marple, she understands the Hollywood Starlet, not because she knows anything about her lifestyle, but because she remembers someone in her village who acts in a similar way. Couldn't we try and understand people in our villages, not by looking at what separates us from them, but at the similarities.

This idea first came to me as I got to know a man, I'll call him Alain, who was the leader of the church in our first village. To look at he reminded me of Pete, one of the youth group leaders in the church where I grew up, the funny thing was that as time went on, I realised that his character was similar to Pete's as well. Yes, on the surface there were lots of differences between Pete and Alain, but their reactions to situations were surprisingly similar. Both have the same amazing generosity, and the same way of becoming gruff and authoritative when they feel threatened. When I found it hard to understand Alain, I

would think back to Pete and ask myself how we would react in a given situation, it took a lot of imagination sometimes, but it helped me an awful lot. Over time I started to compare a lot of village folks to people at home, it became a bit of a game (a good one for Mission guest houses, when you've finished the National Geographic) but a game with a serious side -- helping me to get to know people.

In a sense it shouldn't be a surprise that people act in similar ways, both in Africa and at home. The counseling people tell us that all human beings have the same basic needs, shelter, food significance etc... and then there is the Myers-Briggs type test that points out basic similarities. Not that I'm recommending that you go out and do Myers-Briggs on all of your village, - just compare people here with those at home and look for similarities.

Of course this system doesn't always work and it involves making huge generalisations about people - but I recommend that you give it a go. The St. Mary-Mead Model for intercultural relations.