

Long-term cross-cultural worker Jonno digs into the black, white and grey of contextual mission and shares how he is witnessing it play out among the Yawo of Malawi and Mozambique.

At its most basic, contextual mission is about taking seriously the context we are in and adapting the way we communicate the message of Jesus so that it is understandable in that cultural context.

Contextualisation is not about changing the Gospel... it is about communicating the Gospel and ONLY the Gospel. It's about communicating the core of what it means to follow Jesus and not all the cultural rituals and traditions that make up our expression of faith. Those rituals, traditions and expressions are *our* distinctive ways of following Jesus, but sometimes we can think they are *the* way to follow Jesus.

Although Jesus preached the most radical teaching in the history of the world, he did it using language the community He was speaking to already knew, with stories they could easily relate to and in clothes they were also wearing. But, he wasn't like a chameleon. He didn't fit in so perfectly with his environment that nobody noticed He was different. He chose to be the same in things that didn't matter, but different on the things that did. We shouldn't underestimate the challenge that being different poses to those in power... it got Jesus killed!

So our challenge, as we try and imitate Jesus' ministry, is telling the difference between what does and doesn't matter, and how to engage with the things that do matter in a way that enables the indigenous faith community to survive and grow.

Since 2002, Heather and my context has been among the Yawo tribe in Malawi and Mozambique. They're predominantly Muslim and also practice African Traditional Religion so the culture is quite (very!) different from our own. Sometimes it's fairly easy to put issues into 'does matter' or 'doesn't matter' categories, but that's not always the case.

Let's start with an easy one. Most men here have more than one wife. However, Heather my wonderful wife of 25 years, is my only wife... and I plan on keeping it that way! In this context, having just one wife is pretty unusual, so Heather and I are just going to look different on this one. ☺

On the other end of the spectrum is how to pray. People here pray with their eyes open, holding their hands open and upward. Although this is different to how we have traditionally prayed, we don't think it matters to pray in the posture of our friends. God loves to hear our prayers whether our eyes are open or closed.

There are lots of other things in the middle though which are harder to figure out. Should we attend or involve ourselves in cultural events like funerals, memorial services or initiation ceremonies? A girl in Mozambique who was a new believer and had been healed of seizures began having them again after attending a memorial service. That points to there being a negative spiritual dimension going on, so should we go or not go? If we do go, should we take precautions like praying for protection beforehand or fasting?

In a village in Malawi recently, the chief told the faith community that they were no longer allowed to attend funerals. The believers felt strongly that they should continue to attend but how could they go against the directive of the chief!? They were stuck. One of the Yawo believers was reading in Genesis and came across the story of Abraham's death.

Genesis 25:9 says, "His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah near Mamre, ..."

This faithful Yawo believer was so excited when he read this passage because he could see something that the average Aussie reader would not see. He saw that Isaac, the ancestor of the family of Jesus, and Ishmael, the ancestor of the family of Muhammad, buried their father together!

If it was acceptable for their ancestors to be at funerals together, surely it would be acceptable for them!? A village meeting was arranged with the chief and sheik in attendance. Upon hearing this story from the word of God, and application humbly presented, the chief reversed his decision and allowed the believers to attend funerals. **This is a beautiful example of Yawo believers, interpreting Scripture contextually and applying it to their own cultural situation.**

These examples might sound foreign to most Australian believers however from our visit back to Australia last year, it looks to me like the church needs to be re-asking itself some of the same questions. What should we be participating in and what should we be challenging in our own culture? Actually, I reckon the church in Australia may have got some of the answers to these questions wrong. Most of us in the church embrace our culture's hyper individualism and materialism which has led to severe social isolation and rampant anxiety and depression.

Maybe it's time for the church in Australia to re-discover its own authentic and distinctive way of following Jesus?