

Urgently needed in church relationships: intercultural intelligence

Gustav Gous



Why is it that some churches find each other and unite, and some just can't get it right? Amongst other things, it has to do with intercultural intelligence. Intelligence is the ability to handle whatever you encounter in life in a creative, innovative and meaningful way. Intercultural intelligence, specifically in this article, refers to the ability to deal with all the differences we encounter in life: personality, gender, culture, cultural, denominational and many more.

For Christians, with a Father God who loves the whole world and all the people in it, using a vehicle called the church which must be the church for all nations, it is important to acquire that skill to be able to live and work with one another.

Quite frankly, my dear

The natural tendency, when people encounter differences, is to say: "This is what I think – this is what you think, and quite frankly, my dear ... I think you are wrong." This is the typical attitude of a cultural critic.

Intercultural intelligence has to do with three A's: Attitude, Ability and Action.

Let's look at it in the following sequence:

1. Attitude change.
2. Possible actions in any inter-action.
3. What are the abilities of intercultural intelligence?

Attitude is the starting point

You can either be a cultural *critic* or a cultural *learner*.

A teachable spirit is the starting point for intercultural intelligence. Even the philosophers said that curiosity was the beginning of all wisdom. You must be willing to open your mind for a few questions and not claim that you have all the answers.

Some people live and die as eternal critics, others are natural learners, and some get St Paul-like revelations along their Damascus roads to open their eyes. Call it conversion or Copernican revolution (where Copernicus first thought the sun orbited the earth, and later realised the earth orbited the sun), intercultural intelligence cannot kick in without an important mindshift: Change from a cultural critic to a cultural learner.

Cardinal Willibrands gave me my eye-opening experience and brought about a Copernican revolution in my mind with one question.

It was in 1987. He was heading up the Secretariat for Unity of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) in the Vatican. In a layman's terms, he was second in charge of the RCC, just below the Pope. As a curious student from the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), doing preliminary research for my doctorate in ecumenical studies, I travelled Europe and asked for interviews with a variety of church leaders in different countries. Great was my joy to get an audience with Cardinal Willibrands.

When I walked in, I had a deep spiritual experience that I was walking into the presence of a man of God. With the latest formulated ecumenical policy of the DRC in my hand, published in *Church and Society* ("Kerk en Samelewing 1986"), I asked with some pride: "What do you think of our Church's latest ecumenical policy?" It was the concentric-circle policy stating that, starting with the DRC in the centre, the closeness of ecumenical ties was regulated firstly with reformed churches, then other churches, and then, on the fringes, with the Roman Catholic Church and sects (!!).

Cardinal Willibrands gave it one look and asked a short, but for me a paradigm-changing question: "Who is in the middle there, Gustav?" The light went on for me

After a long silence, giving me time to work through my own experience of a Copernican revolution, he continued. "Shouldn't Christ be in the middle of the circle? I would even position the whole Catholic Church in a circle next to Christ, with half of the people and theologians closer to the mind of Christ, and some even far away I presume if this is the case with the RCC, isn't the same perhaps true of the DRC?"

A cultural critic takes his position as the starting point; a cultural learner puts the truth in the middle, realising that his or her truth is a *chosen* truth. Character is the ability to hold on to your truth; teachability is the willingness to let go of your truth.

War or snore? Six possible actions

There are six ways to interrelate to people of different opinions and to deal with the incumbent tension.

(i) *War*. Solve the problem through eliminating the other party – then the tension is also eliminated.

(ii) *Ignore*. I do not want to murder you; I just do not want to see you. You stay there, I stay here. The best way to handle the tension is to keep people apart. Another word for this is “apartheid”.

(iii) *Snore*. Circumstances, outside pressure, even legislation, force people together. Unwillingly they sit together – but some choose to close their eyes to the reality – they just snore. They act as if they are asleep and passively resist.

(iv) *Explore*. People start saying: “Lord, it cannot continue like this” (Moses 6:6)?! There must be a way to find one another. Curiosity or good theology drive people to say: “If these people are children of the same Father (God), then they are my brothers and sisters. So, let’s talk to them and get to know them. Exploration brings heightened awareness.

But being aware of differences and similarities does not guarantee a sustainable relationship. It sometimes just makes you more aware why it is difficult to live or work with this person. Only with new ability training and newfound intelligence, people can learn how to handle differences.

(v) *Score*. People start to move together. If you have a dream, you need a team. They discover the proverbial rainbow nation of Bishop Tutu. They know how to enjoy and employ diversity, by synergising different energies. Combined effort and focus make a great impact and help the team or church to score great goals in pursuit of the vision of “thy Kingdom come”.

(vi) *Adore*. There is an even deeper union – where people do not only win together, but where they really respect and adore one another. It is like husband and wife relationships: You realise men and women differ vastly – but sometimes I look at my wife while she is asleep, and I realise: I adore her. She is uniquely different, but she is beautiful, and I love her

And this almost gives away what the secret abilities of intercultural intelligence entails ...

The abilities of intercultural intelligence

The three abilities or meta-skills of *intercultural intelligence* can be broadly described as (a) *stepping out*, (b) *stepping into* and (c) *stepping up*.

(a) **Stepping out**: Fundamentalism does not allow you to step out, because there is no need to step out if you already have the truth. There is no interpretation – so why bother to go for conversation?

In essence, fundamentalism is arrogance: My belief is the whole truth and nothing but the truth – my mind encapsulates the whole truth of the Mind of God! And such people revel in the steadfastness of their faith. Stepping out is overcoming a fundamentalist faith with a leap of faith. It entails courage. Stepping out makes me realise my truth is a *chosen* truth. If there are other children of the same Father, then they are my brothers and sisters. Then I must hear what they want to say. Stepping out has to do with FAITH – but then the courage of real faith, not fixated, fundamentalist faith.

(b) **Stepping into**: Stepping into another person’s world is to encounter its togetherness and differences, enjoying the otherness, getting close enough to be irritated by the habits, rituals and beliefs of other people – but it is doing so in the hope to find a greater unity, a greater truth, a clearer picture. Let’s call this step HOPE – hope to grow and deepen the relations with God and people, creatures and creation.

But hope without the last ability, *stepping up*, is going to be a frustrated hope. Step three can change the latent destructive tension resulting from encounter into creative tension.

(c) **Stepping up**: Stepping up is to create a new cultural space where people can live and work in creative tension. It is to realise that tensions are not necessarily always problems to be solved, but rather polarities to be managed.

Stepping up is to realise that many problems of cultural and Christian diversity have to do with the inability to deal with polarities such as truth and grace, faith and works, individualism and collectivism, immanence

and transcendence. Overemphasis or under-emphasis of one pole of the polarity could cause destructive tension, but could also be responsible for creative tension.

Stepping up is not only for like-minded people with a few differences. It is more radical than that.

What is the great commandment? Love God and love your ... neighbour? No, God said: love your enemies! This is radical stuff. Love is not the warm feeling of like-mindedness. Love is, as my colleague Fritz Holsher always says, the ability to deal with incompatibility. The inherent ability of *stepping up* is to LOVE.

Explore, score and adore

The three meta-competencies of inter-cultural intelligence can help churches explore, score and even adore.

Intercultural intelligence can help churches find one another through new attitudes, new abilities and new actions.

Read more on Intercultural Intelligence at <http://www.knowledgeworkx.com>

● **Gustav Gous** het, *benevens sy studies in filosofie en sielkunde, ’n doktorsgraad in ekumeniese studies en internasionale verhoudinge. Ná sy akademiese loopbaan by Unisa en UP, spesialiseer hy in die skep van interkulturele intelligensie in maatskappye. Op die oomblik is hy besturende direkteur van KnowledgeWorkx Suidelike Afrika.*

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