



# Listening and connecting across borders and cultures

**Intercultural listening is at the heart of how the mission world is changing.**  
By **Matty Fearon**

**W**hen asked to contribute an article on what 'listening and connecting across borders and cultures' means in the context of BMS World Mission's work, a line sprang readily to mind. It was not mine, but David McMillan's, who was until recently the Interim Director of Intercultural Learning at BMS. In a piece which will soon appear in the relaunch edition of *Mission Catalyst* magazine, David writes, 'Mission should strive to be intercultural, not merely cross-cultural'. From BMS' vantage point, the words 'listening' and

'connecting' actively move mission in the direction from being cross-cultural to becoming intercultural.

In particular, the word 'listen', was given an entirely new meaning for me following a conversation at the Heart of England Ministers' Conference earlier this year. Over lunch, through her sign language interpreter, Susan Myatt talked to me about the inaccessibility and one-dimensionality of the English word 'listen'. She explained what a poor substitute it was for the Hebrew word 'Shema', which resounds throughout the Old Testament. 'Shema' is the word that begins the foundational prayer recited by Jews at the beginning and conclusion of

each day, 'Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad / Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one'. Rabbi Adina Allen says of the imperative opening to the prayer, "just that word alone is a powerful call". Susan said that the Hebrew connotation bore a much closer relationship to the English action 'to receive' or 'to be receptive'. Ever since our intercultural conversation while breaking bread at the lunch table, I've read the Bible in a new transformed way.

For those of us with ears that hear, listening appears to be the most natural of things, so incidental to being awake as to feel not even an action. However, when understood in the context of the word 'Shema' we realise

that listening requires effort and humility. To be receptive and to receive requires us to open ourselves up to another's experience so that heart touches heart and we are changed. Such an approach was given a framework by the philosopher Martin Buber through his notion of developing an I-thou rather than an I-it relationship. Buber describes listening as 'something we do with our full selves by sensing and feeling what another is trying to convey so that together we can remove the barrier between us'.

While cross-cultural approaches climb over the barrier, and that is no bad thing in and of itself, intercultural approaches to mission act to 'remove the barrier between us'. BMS, like many other Western mission agencies, continues to equip mission workers with the skills to cope and thrive in a different culture. Such preparation remains essential. The challenge being given more attention recently, is how mission is done in context and how mission agencies perceive their role in the future as the church in the majority world becomes the majority of the church.

In practical terms this presents significant challenges to ways of working for Western mission agencies as we come to terms with the fact that the church in the Global South is the majority church, and the future of world evangelisation will depend on mission workers from the majority world. This future is very much the present for BMS and is embodied by people like Pastor J, a missionary from the Baptist Church in Mizoram, India, who has travelled to Cambodia to build communities of faith in Phnom Penh and beyond.



As Peter Oyugi, BMS' new Director of Intercultural Learning and Collaboration, said recently, "God is re-organising the mission world".

Intercultural mission asks a number of questions of BMS, both strategic - such as, 'how do we divest ourselves of power and control, in particular around strategy, governance and control of the gospel?' and also theological - such as 'how much have we still to learn about the meaning of the good news that Jesus preached as the Spirit of God moves powerfully across the Global South?' David McMillan, who sparked this article into life, is clear: "The answers to these questions will not be found in talking to ourselves. They will only be found as we dialogue

with brothers and sisters in the majority world who are finding their voices and casting their own theology."

It is our turn now to be receptive.



**Matty Fearon is the Head of Communications at BMS World Mission**