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Missional Lessons on *Philoxenia* from Missionaries

Rodney D. Otto

Abstract: The author points out the many lessons to be learned from mission work abroad with its emphasis on sharing the Gospel through friendship that can be applied in mission work in the United States, the world's third largest mission field.

Rubbing shoulders with missionary giants has been life changing. Ernest Hahn and Herbert Hoefler served in south India during the latter part of the twentieth century. Their missional hospitality overcame Muslim and Hindu cultural barriers not only in India, but also in America, where they used the bridge of hospitality to introduce immigrants to Jesus, the Christ. They served in a time of mission awakening. Methodology shifted from a mission compound mentality to spontaneous, indigenous church planting and people movements. Returning from India, they taught contextualization of the Gospel for America's growing populations of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. This article began as a thank-you for their ministries but soon expanded to be a thank-you for other missionaries, pastors, and teachers.

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In 1943, my baptism at St. John Lutheran Church, Hanover, Iowa, sowed seeds of compassion for all. The chancel figure of Jesus with outstretched hands set my life's theme: "Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). My childhood pastor, Rev. Elmer Wehrspann, framed the larger picture of church as the Kingdom of God. The teachers and pastors of my wife, Phyllis, in her



Rev. Dr. Rodney Otto is retired in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He earned a Doctor of Ministry in missiology at Western Seminary in Holland, Michigan. Short-term mission trips in Guatemala and India formed his stateside ministry. For a decade in retirement, he served a diverse small urban struggling congregation in Grand Rapids where hospitality learned from missionaries resulted in fourteen cultures reflecting the colorful saints of heaven. rod.phyl@gmail.com

Michigan childhood nurtured her worldwide mission passion. Mission festival speakers ignited our callings to reach neighbors near and far. Junior college deaf ministry pushed us out of our cultural box. Professor Walter Boss at Concordia Senior College shared how much patience is needed for Muslim work in the Middle East. Working for seminary nurse, Virginia Reinecke, introduced me to medical missionaries on furlough.

In 1965, missionary Roland Miller's Sem I Intro to Mission course deepened my interest in cross-cultural hospitality. His book, *Muslims and the Gospel: Reflections on Christian Sharing*,¹ is a clear presentation of Islam through the lens of friendship. The book is "an effort to personalize the data . . . it results from the writer's experience of 24 years of living in a Muslim town in India. . . . It is the Mappila Muslims of Kerala who have deepened for me the meaning of friendship."² In an age of pluralism, building relationships diminishes cultural walls and barriers, sharpening the focus of twenty-first century Gospel witness.

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Also during Sem I, my dormmate at the Seminary, B. H. Jackayya, president of Concordia Seminary in Nagercoil, India, became a lifelong friend. When I visited his home in Kollegal, Karnataka, via a Mission India³ trip, his hospitable welcome left an indelible imprint on my heart. My roommate, Terry Borchard, and I wanted to volunteer for India during Sem II, but India changed its visa policy, and we did not receive visas. My wife, Phyllis, and I met Herb and Carol Hoefer before they left for India. These seminary contacts laid a foundation for our cross-cultural ministries to immigrants and minorities in America.

In 1989, a long-time India missionary, Mary Esther Otten, recovering from hand surgery with a family from our parish in Kentwood, Michigan, provided first-hand stories of her husband, Henry, who served along with Hahn and Hoefer's team ministry in the India Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELC). Later in the 1990s, we learned from Douglas Rutt, Ed Auger, and Mayan garbage dump workers in Guatemala the difficulty of crossing linguistic and cultural boundaries. In 2004, a week-long seminar in India with Eugene Bunkowske and Indian lay leaders deepened my respect for IELC's contextualization of the Gospel. Extending that visit by four days with Pastor Daniel in Desuya, Punjab, we shared his ministry to Sikhs through dynamic church planting.

My seminary roommate, Terry Borchard, modeled missional hospitality for five decades in New Guinea. His South Dakota rural toughness translated to a deep love for the Ippili people of New Guinea. He felt more at home in those remote highlands than anywhere stateside. His life's work created a written language for the Ippili New

Testament. His translation was recognized by Fuller Seminary for its cultural sensitivity and contextualization.

India's mission field was different. Two millennia of Gospel proclamation had built up barriers between the church and Hindu/Muslim culture. Contextualization faced deep misunderstandings,⁴ but the practice of hospitality helped missionaries cross age-old barriers.

The creativity of Hahn and Hoefer is worth exploring. Friendships outside the mission compounds grew through the use of reading rooms. Dialogue uncovered the cultural nuances that paved the way for their effective Gospel proclamation. Muslims and Hindus trusted them as friends. On our side of the world, we imitated their intentional hospitality in our stateside ministry. My lifelong friendship with missionaries serving in India made a difference in the Midwest parishes I served: rural, small town, suburban, new mission, and urban. Hahn's booklets and tracts, along with Hoefer's church-shaking work with NBBC in India, spawned my own version of stateside hospitality. In our own experience, the sending church was reshaped by missionaries to distant lands. Cross-cultural hospitality that Hoefer and Hahn modeled from the 1950s to the 1980s still bears fruit. Their style was the road less traveled, a difficult task.

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Hahn's tract ministry burst through the mission compound wall. His passion and intense work overcame many difficulties in writing, publishing, and distributing tracts. Hahn peppered the Hindu/Muslim countryside "white for harvest" with his Gospel tracts. Hospitality led the way to neighbors. Christ's compassion overcame barriers. Hahn built a bridge of unconditional friendship with Muslims. Besides the many workers in India who helped with the tracts, he could always depend on women stateside through the LWML.⁵ After his service in India from 1953–1978, Hahn continued publishing and distributing tracts through his Philoxenia organization.

Hahn's sense of humor and twinkle in the eye softened his intense sharing of bundles and boxes of booklets and tracts. His Canadian garage was filled to the brim, with little room for a car. He sent us postal packets and once even a carload of boxes. As I write this article, Hahn is in a nursing home. We continue to talk. His daughter Ingrid hands him the phone. With each call, he suggests new Muslim contacts.

Missional hospitality blossomed in western Michigan. Hahn's Sikh tract⁶ led to intentional and spontaneous witnessing. As I visited neighbors, gas station attendants, party store owners, and students, they were eager to dialogue about faith. Regular visits to a Grand Haven gas station paved the way for me to share the Gospel at a Punjabi funeral of a murdered Sikh attendant. Friendships grew Sikh Christians. When a

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Myanmar pastor joined Redeemer, an urban church I served in Grand Rapids during retirement, he needed an internship for his master's program. Redeemer commissioned him to Sikh ministry, since he knew Punjabi. He had Sikh friends but knew little of their faith. Hahn's tract on Sikhism and his booklet, "Your Muslim Guest," molded his Gospel witness. The Holy Spirit created curiosity in several Sikh hearts. Over a two-year period, three confessed Christ and attended Punjabi Bible study. Witness in their native tongue matured their faith. Hahn's tracts still help us today as we visit our friends at the Grand Rapids area *gurdwara*.⁷

The following is from Hahn's brochure, *The Sikhs and Their Religion*, published by his Philoxenia ministry in Canada. It gives the biblical background for missional hospitality:

Philoxenia means "caring for the stranger." It serves as an antidote to xenophobia, literally "fear of a stranger"—a familiar disease that permeates the human heart. Words related to Philoxenia are hospital, hostess, hospice and host (the word for the bread of the Eucharist). Biblically it is the remembrance of Jesus Christ in our Lord's Last Supper as the ultimate Host, the Supreme Sacrifice. Can we settle for the following Scriptures as encouragement? ". . . the stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you. . ." (Lev. 9:33, 34) "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers. . ." (Heb. 13:2)

Decades after meeting Herb and Carol Hoefler at the seminary, we connected with them at a Muslim/Hindu mission conference. Phyllis and I experienced their sensitivity to Hindu culture, demonstrating Christ's compassion. Hoefler's creative and sensitive research uncovered the Spirit's work in the hearts of Jesu Bhaktas (NBBC). His amazing interviews and subsequent publications have influenced mission leaders from India to Fuller Seminary in California. A *Mission Frontiers* article called Hoefler's work "striking research undertaken in the mid-eighties."⁸

Imposing mores beyond what Scripture prescribes stifles indigenous church growth and disrupts Kingdom work. Hoefler states that God redeemed people of all cultures. Therefore, orthodox Christians may retain their own unique cultural practices. Cross-cultural compassion demands humility and hospitality.

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Hoefler reiterated "the real move toward an indigenous Christian faith can never come from the Christian community. It must grow out of 'Churchless Christianity,' with the help and encouragement of the church."⁹ God values people of all cultures; He created them.

All these missional influencers affected our years in Grand Rapids, where God gifted us with a diverse congregation and a nonprofit organization to help immigrants.

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Both ministries were based on Matthew 9:36: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Fourteen different cultures worshiped in a small, struggling urban congregation with the joy of heaven’s colorful saints. It was a beautiful experience. For ten years, our nonprofit, “CALL: Christ’s Compassion for All” helped over four hundred families annually with immigration issues *pro bono* or affordable. Clients came from nineteen cultures. Recently, volunteering in a local high school English class for immigrants opened doors of a nearby LCMS congregation to a service in Swahili.¹⁰ Blessings flowed freely in western Michigan by welcoming immigrants as friends and neighbors.

Hahn, Hoefler, and Otten followed the footsteps of earlier missionaries who practiced hospitality. In 1706, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg initiated Lutheran work among Tamil-speaking Indians. Two hundred years later, Stanley Jones cultivated unconditional friendship with Ghandi and high caste Hindus. *The Christ of the India Road*¹¹ is his classic text on hospitality.

Today, Greg Finke leads the way in missionary hospitality in the United States. *Joining Jesus*, his textbook for hospitality to those outside the church, is simple.¹² Enjoy people, especially neighbors. Observe what Jesus has already done in the hearts of your friends outside the church. “Seek the kingdom of God,” as Jesus commands. Open your eyes and ears to hear and see what God is doing in secular American culture today. Greg’s questions to us are “What is God up to in your life?” and “How is He messing with you?”

I have learned to listen and show respect, rather than impose my ideas of how every person should follow Christ. I am still figuring out what creative approaches will develop friendships among immigrants, nones,¹³ and those of other faiths. What avenues would be more hospitable than the path through a church door? May the Spirit lead us with the passion of St. Paul on Mars hill and beyond.

Endnotes

¹ Roland Miller, *Muslims and the Gospel: Bridging the Gap: A reflection on Christian Sharing* (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press, 2006).

² Miller, *Muslims and the Gospel*, 11.

³ Mission India, a Grand Rapids, MI mission organization, trains indigenous workers in India and hosts short-term mission trips for clergy.

⁴ B. V. Subbamma describes caste and cultural barriers that India workers faced in her 1970 study at Fuller Seminary, “Christian Approach to Hindus.”

⁵ Ernest Hahn, “Missionary Ernest Hahn Writes,” *The Minaret* 18 (February 1964): 10.

⁶ Ernest Hahn, *The Sikhs and Their Religion* (Mississauga, Ontario: Hospitality, n.d.)

⁷ A gurdwara (gurdwārā; meaning “door to the guru”) is a place of assembly and worship for Sikhs. People from all faiths, and those who do not profess any faith, are welcomed in Sikh gurdwaras.

⁸ H. L. Richard, “Christ-Followers in India Flourishing—But Outside the Church: A review of *Churchless Christianity*,” *Mission Frontiers* (December 2001).

⁹ Richard, “Christ-Followers in India Flourishing,” 202.

¹⁰ Students in East Kentwood High School, a suburb south of Grand Rapids, speak 75 different languages. St. Mark Lutheran of Kentwood, Michigan, welcomed these immigrants for their Sunday afternoon worship time.

¹¹ E. Stanley Jones, *The Christ of the Indian Road* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1925).

¹² Greg Finke, *Joining Jesus on His Mission* (Elgin, IL: Tenth Power, 2014).

¹³ Those not willing to pass through church doors or identify with any particular religion.