



# Barriers and contexts in missionary work

## *The need for contexts*

From creation, the human being has been a *social* being. We were created to relate to others and to live in *community*. Therefore, by our very nature, we seek out people with whom we can associate. And we find that it is easier to associate with people with whom we share certain fundamental affinities or characteristics, such as language (linguistic affinity), where we live (geographical affinity), spiritual needs and spiritual journey (religious affinity), and behavioral traits and thought processes (cultural affinity). Due to these shared characteristics, we *understand* these individuals, and they also *understand* us. Because of this, we naturally form social groups with them, and these groupings form socio-cultural contexts where the common characteristics within the context *unite* us, and the lack of common characteristics outside of the context creates *barriers* between ourselves and those who live outside our particular context.

In fulfilling its ministries, the local church must

work *within* socio-cultural contexts. It is inevitable. It is also very healthy. Why? Because we work with human beings, beings that are grouped into these socio-cultural contexts and that express their deepest *needs* and *searching* in terms that belong to these contexts. *If our churches did not work within these contexts, they would have no message to share that would be pertinent to the lives of these human beings. They would have no answer for the needs felt by these people or for their spiritual searching. The new life that Jesus brings needs to be incarnated within the people's socio-cultural context.*

## *The problem with contexts*

Although it is good and necessary that the local church work within socio-cultural contexts, it also complicates matters when this church begins to reach out to the lost world. Why? Because when we reach out, our churches encounter the *barriers* created by the lack of common characteristics with those who live outside our context. The “height” and “thickness” of

these barriers will vary, depending on how many affinities or characteristics we have in common with this other group, but the barrier will always be there when there are sufficient differences between contexts. Therefore, a wise church carefully takes these barriers into account when they reach out to others, at least if they wish to present a gospel message that is *pertinent* to this other context. And how does this church do this? *By adapting the presentation and initial focus of its message to the realities of this other context.* This enables the church to cross these barriers.

But there are literally *thousands* and *thousands* of different contexts around the world. How can a church understand and work within such a diverse reality? Fortunately, this multitude of diverse contexts can be grouped into just four categories, based upon the general size of the barrier separating this church from this context. To a certain degree, these four categories form concentric circles around this church, each circle increasing the distance between this church and the population that lives within this category of context.

### *Category one contexts*

**The context of the local church itself.** Category one contexts are those that have a very close affinity with the general context of this local church. In our set of concentric circles, category one contexts are located *inside* the first concentric circle drawn around this church. In other words, this is the context *of this church*, formed by all the members of its congregation.

Thus, the members of this church feel a very large degree of affinity with this context. They feel a *religious affinity* because everyone in this context practices the same basic religion, shares the same basic beliefs, and shares similar elements in their spiritual journey. They feel a *linguistic affinity* because everyone in this context speaks the same language. They feel a *geographical affinity* because they all basically live in the same general geographical area. And they feel a *cultural affinity* because they all share the same basic lifestyle, behavior traits, and thought processes.

Therefore, with category one contexts, this church does not detect or feel any significant barriers. The group is, to a large degree, *homogeneous*, and this church can move and minister within this context with great ease. It knows the context well, since this is its own context, and it can correctly read the actions and reactions of this population. Furthermore, it can anticipate problems and questions. In short, it can present its message in a pertinent and persuasive way, and it knows how to effectively make disciples in this context.

### *Category two contexts*

**The near context.** Category two contexts have many things in common with the context of this church, but they also have *some* differences (mostly in the religious area). With regard to our concentric circles, category two contexts fall in the area between the first and second circles (counting from the center,

with category one being the area inside the first circle). These are contexts that are close or near to the church, but separated by a relatively small barrier. And why a *small* barrier? Because the members of this congregation have many things in common with those who live in a category two context. They probably feel a *linguistic affinity* because they all speak the same language. They probably feel a *geographical affinity* because they all live in the same basic area. And they probably feel a *cultural affinity* because they all share the same basic lifestyle, behavioral traits, and thought processes (they use similar clothing, eat similar food, live in similar houses, think along similar lines, share a similar worldview, etc.).

Therefore, within category two contexts, the only principal barrier between this church and an effective ministry among this category two population is a *religious* barrier. The members of this church are believers, and the common everyday member of this category two context is not a believer. But even so, due to the geographical, linguistic, and cultural affinities, the members of this church can pretty accurately understand this category two population and their life. They can even understand a fair amount of the religious needs and journey of this category two population, since many of these members once belonged to this group before they were saved. This means that this church can do a fairly good job of presenting its message in a way that will be persuasive and pertinent to this context.

So, in category two contexts, this church encoun-

ters *one* rather small barrier, which it can cross with relative ease and then move and minister fairly freely within this category two population. Of course, it will always have to recognize, keep in mind, and take into account the religious differences that separate it from this context. But this is a fairly simple task.

### *Category three contexts*

**The similar context.** Category three contexts are those that are not real near to this church, but they also are not real distant from this church, either. Thus they have limited similarities with this church's context. With regard to our concentric circles, category three contexts fall in the area between the second and third circles (counting from the center). These are *similar* contexts to the context of this church, but also separated by certain key differences. Thus, a category three population has *limited* characteristics in common with the congregation of this church, and it has certain important differences.

These differences create the barrier between a category three population and this church, and this barrier tends to be higher and thicker because of the greater number of differences. However, it is not a *huge* barrier, because there aren't *that* many differences. In fact, this barrier tends to be composed of religious differences plus one additional key difference (it might be geographical, linguistic, or cultural). For example, if this church plants another church in another portion of the country, it will normally cross a barrier composed

of *two* differences: a religious difference (it is working with the unsaved) and a geographical difference (it is working in a region that is far away from this church). Or, if this church begins a ministry among another ethnic group, like the Chinese, this could involve crossing a barrier composed of *two* differences: a religious difference (it is working with the unsaved) and a cultural difference (it is working with Chinese who have a different lifestyle, behavioral traits, and thought processes). *But, if there are more than two key differences involved in this barrier, it is probable that this ministry would more properly fall under the next category in our list.*

Therefore, when this church encounters the barrier between itself and this category three population, it cannot cross this barrier as easily as it did with a category two population. Since this barrier is higher and thicker, it requires that this church stop for a while and study this barrier so that this church can better determine how to minister effectively among this category three population. *This context will require greater adaptations, if this church is to achieve a healthy communication and application of its message. And, depending on the “distance” between this church and this context, it may very well require that this church send someone to this location (if it is geographically distant), or dedicate a special worker to this ministry (if it is culturally distant, such as with the Chinese group mentioned above).* Perhaps this person also will need to study and understand this category three population’s religion, so that Jesus Christ can be

presented as the true answer for this population’s spiritual searching (for example, if this church is working with Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Chinese Folk Religionists, etc.). *When this church is faced with the need to send or dedicate a special person to represent them in the fulfillment of this ministry (since the “distances” involved prevent this church from working more directly with this ministry), this person is a missionary of this church.*

### *Category four contexts*

**The different context.** Category four contexts have few religious, linguistic, geographical, and cultural similarities with the context of this church. In fact, category four contexts tend to be rather *foreign*. With regard to our concentric circles, category four contexts fall in the large area outside the third (and last) of the circles. These contexts are *different*, and many times very different, from the context of this church. Therefore, a category four population has *few* things in common with this congregation. They follow another religion, speak another language, live on another continent, and/or have a very different lifestyle, behavioral traits, and thought processes.

So working with category four populations means that this church has to cross an even higher and thicker barrier, composed of religious differences plus two or more additional key differences (such as geography, language, or culture). For example, if this church has a ministry among the Chinese that live in the same city

where this church is found, but that follow Chinese folk religions, speak Chinese, and have a Chinese culture, then this ministry would be with a category four population (a barrier with *three* elements: religious differences, linguistic differences, and cultural differences). Or if this church has a ministry among the Japanese that live in Japan, follow Shintoism or Buddhism, speak Japanese, and have a Japanese culture, then this ministry would also be with a category four population (but now with a barrier composed of *four* elements: religious differences, linguistic differences, geographical differences, and cultural differences).

And when this church encounters the barrier between itself and this category four population, it cannot cross this barrier nearly as easily as it did with a category two or category three population. So what does it do? Throw in the towel? Give up? **No!** If God is calling this church to minister in category four contexts (and aren't they included in the Great Commission?), then **God will make this ministry possible**. But this church needs to study and think about this barrier so that it can better determine how to minister effectively among this category four population. These are contexts that are going to require a high degree of

adaptation, if this church is to achieve a healthy communication and application of its message, one that is understandable, pertinent, and persuasive within this radically different context.

Therefore, this church studies and prepares to develop and implement these adaptations, and then it ministers within this context. *And as a key piece in this study, preparation, and ministry, this church chooses its missionaries and sends them to this distant context, so that through the representation given by these missionaries, this church can fulfill its responsibility to the Great Commission.*

## ***A non-optional activity***

Having seen all this, we need to remember one more thing. None of this is optional for the local church. The Great Commission requires that *every* believer work (in one way or another) in making disciples of *all* nations. This means that *every* church should be working in this activity. And this activity includes all four of these categories. There are no alternatives offered. **There is no plan B**. And there is no easy way to accomplish this task without wrestling with each one of these barriers and contexts.

