HOW MIGHT SMBC’S NEW MASTER OF INTERCULTURAL STUDIES PLAY A PART IN GOD’S MISSION?

The task of mission

There are still thousands of people groups and billions of people across the world who are beyond the reach of the gospel. Every follower of Jesus has been called to play a part in taking the gospel to them. This big task includes reaching people with very little access to the gospel in our own neighbourhoods as well as taking the gospel to places and people groups who are far away and have never heard the good news about Christ.

At the heart of mission is God’s love for the whole world. Every single nation and people group is on God’s heart. None is forgotten or ignored by him. When Jesus sent out his disciples, he sent them to make disciples of all nations. But not all nations—meaning all the ethnic groups in the world—have yet heard about God’s love, let alone responded to it. There are many people living in ethnolinguistic groups with virtually no active believers who could reach them in their own language and culture. A follower of Jesus wanting to bring the gospel to these people would have to cross significant ethnolinguistic and religious barriers to do so. This is why cross-cultural mission exists: to send out Christians to make disciples among those people groups where there are very few or no believers, groups who have yet to encounter the gospel.

The need for on-the-job training for missionaries

Missionaries need specialised training. Like their brothers and sisters in pastoral and teaching ministries, they need to keep growing in knowing and loving God. But they also need to grapple with the challenges of a very different culture and religion to their own. They need to learn how to relate well to people who are culturally enormously different, how to adapt their ways of communicating and practising Christianity in order to make sense to the local people, and how to deal with unpredictability.
Missionaries need to keep on learning. They need to keep testing the assumptions of their existing frameworks of meaning, developing resilience, and learning how to deal with complex situations. Only then will they be able to nurture culturally authentic expressions of Christlikeness in disciples from other cultures.

After one, two, or three years of learning the language and culture of their host people, missionaries typically focus on the work of sharing the gospel, making disciples, planting churches, and training Christian leaders. They face a multitude of challenges as they become involved in these ministries. After several years in their place of service, most have accumulated a list of unresolved ministry dilemmas and a sizeable list of unanswered questions about how best to make disciples in their new context. Many missionaries long to be more fruitful and effective in the tasks God has given them, but they are not sure where to find resources to help them.

SMBC’s new fully online Master of Intercultural Studies (MICS) has been designed to meet this need.

We recognise that most missionaries are not able to take big blocks of time out to study in Sydney or at their original training college or seminary. By developing this course fully online, we have made it accessible to people serving overseas or in remote locations across Australia. All the lecturers are experienced missionaries who are experts in the subjects they teach and, because teaching is online, several of them live and work overseas.

Online learning (and indeed all learning) at SMBC is not just a ‘knowledge dump’. We use the online space, which we call The Oasis, as a meeting place to interact together as we relate missions theory to everyday practice. There is a variety of online, interactive activities and plenty of practical assessments based on each missionary’s personal ministry context. Just as SMBC is well known for its face-to-face community on campus, we will be using The Oasis to create a learning community for missionaries who are scattered across the globe.

Our story as an illustration

Before we became missionaries, my wife and I were medical practitioners. Our experiences as trainee doctors has undoubtedly influenced our views on missionary training. Doctors are trained to be reflective practitioners. Although they have a huge body of knowledge to learn, it is critically important that they also master a range of practical skills and learn how to relate well to people. Doctors have to think about what they are doing and continually consider whether there might be ways of doing things better. They also belong to learning communities of peers. They are trained from very early on that they have a responsibility to pass on to more junior colleagues everything that they have learned, and to keep on learning themselves. We long to see this same commitment to ongoing learning and this devotion to discovering good practice and passing it on to others among missionaries. We see this as a biblical principle stressed by the model missionary, the apostle Paul, who wrote to his missionary apprentice, Timothy: ‘You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others’ (2 Tim 2:2).

Evelyn and I set out for Turkey in 1989, learned language and a little about culture and, after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, moved to Bulgaria as pioneering missionaries to Turkish-speakers. We had the privilege of planting a church and establishing nationwide leadership training for the thousands of Turkish-speaking Roma believers who were flooding into the church at that time.

Our felt need for help drove me to seek further learning wherever
I could—from training seminars provided by our mission agency, from reading books, and from further formal study. At that time, distance education for missions was little developed, so I spent quite a lot of time away from family and ministry in order to study. Whatever I learnt, I passed on to others. The MICS is an expression of our desire to both pass on learning as well as making it as accessible to others as possible.

Our vision for the MICS

The Master of Intercultural Studies is designed to intentionally develop a community of reflective missionary practitioners without requiring them to leave their place of ministry. It builds on prior learning and their current experience to encourage collaborative, in-context reflection on cross-cultural ministry practice. The course provides a forum for students to interact with their peers who are also serving in intercultural ministry in various other countries and time zones across the globe. The lecturers are all missionary academics who have expertise in the particular areas they are teaching in and who continue to play an active role in the missions community around the world.

The content of the degree

The MICS comprises four core units (subjects), some intercultural studies electives and either a ‘capstone’ (which helps students to integrate what they have learnt through the whole course) or a research project. The list of the units is provided below. More details can be found on the SMBC website: smbc.edu.au/study/master-of-intercultural-studies.

Summary list of units in the MICS

1. Core Units:
   - Contextualisation of Theology and Ministry Practice
   - The Gospel, Anthropology, and Ethnographic Research Methods
   - Making Disciples across Cultures
   - Developing Resilience and Spiritual Maturity in Cross-Cultural Ministry

2. Intercultural Studies Electives
   - Developing Leaders Across Cultures
   - Ministry in Culturally Diverse Teams
   - Church Planting Across Cultures
   - Effective Christian Education Across Cultures
   - Christian Ministry in Islamic Contexts
   - Transformational Development

3. A Project or Capstone

Importantly, you don’t need to be a full-time overseas missionary in order to benefit from this degree. You can sign up for single units that interest you without having to do the whole degree. It is also possible to audit units, which means doing the learning without having to do the assessments for credit.

Several people who are involved in cross-cultural ministry in Australia have also signed up for this course. The main thing to be aware of is that to successfully complete the assessments, you will need to have sustained engagement with, and ministry among, people from a culture other than your own.

Please pray for SMBC as we finalise setting up the processes and infrastructure for this new degree over the next few months.

Especially pray:
- That the MICS will result in lasting fruit as participants put into practice what they learn and are used by God to effectively communicate and live out the gospel, make disciples, and start and nurture churches that honour Christ.
- For the College IT department who are expertly setting up the online learning environment, as well as providing support for new students and lecturers.
- For the MICS lecturers who are learning how to set up their courses and teach in the online environment.

Richard and Evelyn Hibbert

Our hope is that the benefit of the MICS will not be limited to the students. Our intention is to nurture learning communities of cross-cultural ministry practitioners who, through reflection on Scripture and missions insights as well as interaction with one another, work to become more fruitful and effective in their ministries. The ethos of the course is therefore to actively promote collaboration and to pass on learning to the wider missions community. We expect that students will pass on what they learning through face-to-face interactions with fellow missionaries and local leaders, through sharing at teaching seminars and conferences, and through publications.

Editor’s note: For other details visit: smbc.edu.au/study/master-of-intercultural-studies