



**freshexpressions**  
changing church for  
a changing world



**MEMBER'S HANDOUT**  
gospel and culture





## LEARNING OUTCOMES



### At the end of this module you will understand:

- The elements and characteristics of culture
- Some definitions of culture and how it works in society
- The structure of culture and the relationship of worldview, values, forms and meanings, and behaviour.
- The relationship between Gospel and culture and the lessons of mission in relation to culture.
- The Homogenous Unit Principle, its associated controversies and potential resolutions.

### You will be helped to apply these insights to:

- Developing a cultural profile of your focus community
- Exploring appropriate connection of Gospel to your context
- Assessing any homogenous aspect of your church, mission or fresh expression and how a heterogeneous dimension can be increased.

## Recommended reading



### For course members:

*Mission-shaped Church*, CHP, 2004, chapter 1.  
Sally Gaze, *Mission Shaped and Rural*, CHP, 2006, chapters 1 and 3.

### For more in-depth follow-up:

Kate Fox, *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*, Hodder and Stoughton, 2005.  
Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, 25<sup>th</sup> Anv Edition, Orbis, 2003.  
Lausanne Occasional Paper 1, *The Homogenous Unit Principle*, (access [www.acpi.org.uk](http://www.acpi.org.uk)).  
Stuart Murray-Williams, *Church Planting*, Stuart Murray, Paternoster Press, 1998, pp144-148.  
Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*, Eerdmans, 1986.  
Margaret Wardell and Robin Thompson, *Entering Another's World*, St. John's College, Nottingham Extension Studies, 1996.



## INTRODUCING CULTURE

Sometimes the word culture is used in a narrow and specialised sense to refer to 'cultural activities' like theatre, ballet, art and music. We are exploring the wide and general meaning of culture that is 'the whole life-way of a people group'.

We begin again from the foundational principle that God is a God of mission who continually crosses all barriers - including cultural boundaries.

### 1 - Bible readings

#### *Matthew 28.18-20 ... Commissioned to disciple in every sub-culture*

***And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'***

This is one account of when Jesus commissioned his disciples. It is often called 'The Great Commission'. The word translated nations is in fact '*ethne*' from which we derive our word ethnic and so we see Jesus had in mind every ethnic people group and every culture.

#### *Acts 15.5-11... Wrestling with the distinction between Gospel and culture*

***'But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses."***

***The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."***

This passage records one of the situations when the early church had to struggle to discern how the Gospel engages with different cultures. Acts 8-15 demonstrates how the Gospel was being transmitted into different non-Jewish cultures and how the early church in Jerusalem sought to embrace both Jews and Gentiles as the new people of God. Acts 15.28-29 indicates that the early church leadership was keen not to burden the Gentile believers with unnecessary cultural impositions.



## 2 - DVD case studies



What aspects of culture did you observe in the stories?

How did the fresh expression of church try to communicate the Gospel to that culture:

Through what was left out (in contrast to traditional church)?

Through what was added?

Through what was changed?

## 3 - Some initial observations

*Culture is complex*

*Culture has a wide range of elements*

*There are many differences within our own 'ethnos'*

Cultural change is happening so fast that there are not only distinct cultures among various economic and social groups but now generational groups also represent unique sub-cultures. Pluralism describes today's UK context which means there are multiple cultures with which to engage.



***Mission in the UK has to have a strong cross-cultural element***

***We may be culturally blind within white-anglo population***

***Christians can be particularly blind!***



## HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND A CULTURE?

The study of cultures involves a number of different disciplines and is a vast subject by itself. Here are some initial definitions:

### 1 - Definitions

**1) 'Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'**

Sir E B Tylor (Introducing Cultural Studies p4 - Ziauddin Sardar and Borin Van Loon (Icon Books)

**2) 'Culture includes the organisation of production, the structure of the family, the structure of institutions which express or govern social relationships, the characteristic forms through which members of the society communicate.'** Raymond Williams (taken from Introducing Cultural Studies p5)

**3) 'Culture is the learned behaviour of a society or subgroup'**

Margaret Mead (taken from Introducing Cultural Studies p5)

**4) 'Culture is the 'total life way of a people' the social legacy the individual acquires from his group. A people's 'design for living.''** Kluckholm, Mirror for Man, p17

**5) 'Culture is simply the ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.'**

Clifford Geertz (taken from Introducing Cultural Studies p5)

**6) 'The patterned way of doing things within a particular society which binds people together and gives them a sense of identity and continuity.'** Kwast

**7) 'The way we do things around here.'**

**8) Culture when compared to a large and intricate tapestry is made up of numerous threads, larger and smaller, and of various colours, all of which go to make up the overall pattern which in turn serves to interpret any part of it. We are prisoners, consciously or unconsciously of our culture.'**

**9) Culture is 'the more or less integrated systems of beliefs, feelings and values and their associated symbols, patterns of behaviours and products shared by a group of people'**

Paul Hiebert (Perspectives on the World Christian Movement, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, p374, Paternoster)

**10) 'Culture is a peoples' way of life, their design for living, their way of coping, with their biological, physical and social environment. It consists of learned patterned assumptions (worldview), concepts and behaviour, plus the resulting artefacts (material culture).** Charles Kraft (Perspectives on the World Christian Movement, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, p385, Paternoster)



## **Culture is:**

*Inescapable... every society has a culture*

*Levels of culture and subcultures*

*It is a 'Total Design' ... all pervasive*

*A lens through which we see reality*

Culture is like the lens we look through to understand and interpret reality. The problem is that anyone's cultural perception of reality is regarded as more real than reality. It appears absolute, totally logical and without a competing interpretation.



***Culture is self-authenticating - so we are all 'ethno-centric'***

Each of us grows up in the centre of our own world. We are 'egocentric by nature and only as we mature do we begin to break down the circle that separates the 'I' from 'You' and to see things from another viewpoint.' (Wardell & Thompson)



So the nature of anyone's grip on perception (or lens) is fully convincing to them... and ours is no less so to us! It is of the nature of culture to be self-authenticating. 'It's how we do it and it's clearly the only right way to do it.' So we all tend to be 'ethno-centric' and naturally are likely to be cultural 'imperialists'.



## KWAST'S LAYERS OF AN ONION MODEL

### *Outside in or inside out.*

Most sociologists and anthropologists agree that culture is more or less integrated so that all aspects connect in some way to each other. Hence if you change one aspect of culture it will affect other parts.

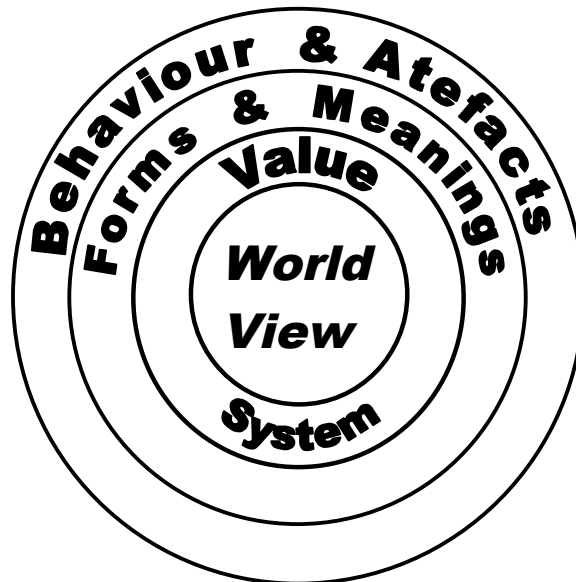
There is also a general acceptance that there are more superficial or surface, observable aspects of culture (such as explained in our early table exercises), and also underlying roots, foundations or core elements, all of which shape a culture.

In this sense it is normal to explain and explore culture from the outside in; from the observable behaviour to deeper intentions and motivations.

However, many think that a culture is better understood and explored from the inside out.

The deepest level of culture is a person's worldview which affects their values and then behaviour.

### *Kwast's 'layers of an onion' model*



### *Worldview*

Although hard to define, it relates to how people perceive truth, time, God and ultimate reality. It embodies the unifying concepts within culture. Some describe it as the 'meta-narrative', a big story or meta-grid that makes sense of everything.



Everyone has a worldview, religious or not. In much of the West today the core is based around individual fulfilment and materialism - and consumerism and the market economy. The Enlightenment brought rationalism to the centre of our culture of how we interpret the world. See Appendix B to contrast some global worldviews, but here are some typical elements within a worldview:

- Universe and its origin or nature
- Spiritual realities and their relationship with the visible material world
- Understandings of the nature of death and after/beyond
- Person's purpose and identity in family or communal relationships
- Person's relationship with earthly and spiritual realm
- Heaven/hell/sin/salvation/illusion/ultimate realities

***Someone has described worldview as 'What you are thinking about the world when you are not thinking!'***

### ***Values***

These flow from worldview. Our convictions about ultimate realities will influence what we value. Our beliefs about origins, purpose, identity and relationship will affect and shape our choices, motivations and what we hold important. Individualism puts a high value on developing ourselves and education. Identity based on materialism leads us to put value on what we can acquire rather than cultures with values flowing from a more communal worldview.

### ***Forms and meanings***

These are the common conventions and understandings that a culture puts on patterns, traditions and behaviours. In fact they connect values to behaviour.

Language is another key carrier of culture and made up of diverse sounds - forms - to which we give meanings. And even these change in different cultures, so 'wicked' and 'cool' may be the same forms but have different meanings to different generations!

### ***Behaviour***

The outer layer of the onion, the one we see first, is actually shaped and given meaning by what is hidden. To understand and influence a culture we have to look below the surface.



## APPLICATION: EXPLORING A CULTURE TOGETHER



In your tables choose a particular culture that someone in your group is concerned to reach into, either as part of a mission from a traditional church, or by planting a fresh expression of church in that culture.

You might want to choose a new housing area, or young adults across a town, or young families in the community.

Identify the situation you will explore together.

Draw Kwast's layers of an onion on a large sheet of paper in one colour.

Then think together about the culture you have chosen and try to map the different aspects you identify onto the layers of the onion (as behaviour, form and meaning, values, and behaviour).

The main point of the exercise is for people to get the hang of making this distinction. Clearly this will involve judgements about a particular group of culture which will need to be researched more thoroughly at a later date.



## GOSPEL AND CULTURE

### 1 - How does the Gospel speak to a particular culture?

#### *Listen and learn*

#### *Look for Gospel connections within the culture (doorways)*

All cultures are the product of human social interactions and have been shaped by common core aspects of human need like security, identity and belonging. Therefore, we can confidently expect to find connecting points for the universal Gospel story of the grace and love of God in Christ, which truly meets these needs.

#### *We need to address Gospel to the cultural core*

The hard-learned lessons of mission are that the secret of best practice is to first find Gospel connections and then to address the Gospel to as near as possible the centre or core of culture (using the onion-ring analogy). If the Gospel of grace is integrated into a worldview then the way culture works will mean that it will permeate through values to behaviour and produce an authentic Gospel community.

This was exactly the approach of Jesus in preaching the message of the kingdom of God in his own context.



Culture evolves over time. Its development is shaped, among other things, by the fundamental challenges that are common to the human condition. These include human insecurity, fear, uncertainty, alienation and isolation. So culture gets moulded to meet the universal needs which are implicit in these challenges. Many aspects of a culture serve to give a sense of group solidarity, and a conviction that we are right, doing things the right way, and are better than others who have different cultural norms.

The biblical theology underlying these truths are those of humanity seeking 'justification', 'righteousness' through patterns of observance of 'law' within their cultural imperatives.

It is for these reasons also, that we can be confident that within every culture there will be a doorway for the Gospel of grace to replace these foundations of cultural security. A Gospel of grace is all about a God who himself provides our righteousness, identity, security, belonging – all as a gift. This Good News of the kingdom is able to transform the core of any worldview, based on a new inalienable identity as children of God. This identity means that we do not need to strive to find our place in the universe through cultural conformity; but to receive that identity through the dynamic of a trusting (faith) relationship with God himself.

Therefore we need the right attitudes when considering a culture other than our own. These are:

#### *Humility, confidence and caution*



## 2 - HOW DOES THE GOSPEL SHAPE THE CHURCH IN A PARTICULAR CULTURE?



### *Don't impose your culture (Imperialism)*

Most mission mistakes arise from addressing the surface or visible culture... the behaviours. We are concerned about things like their dress, loud music, smoking, drinking, swearing, touching. We make things worse by assuming our forms and meanings rather than discovering theirs. This way we end up imposing our culture and the Gospel gets distorted.

Receiving cultures must be given the option to judge how Gospel/kingdom worldviews affect their values and then work them out through their forms and meanings. The Gospel will only be authentic to them if it is lived and expressed through their forms and meanings (symbols).



**Table application:** What would imposing your culture mean for the group you were thinking about in the main application exercise? Give some concrete examples.

Remember, Christian culture does not exist.

### ***The culture must be challenged by the Gospel (Syncretism)***

Syncretism happens when the pioneers so accommodate to the new culture that the Gospel is compromised, and that culture isn't challenged by a church living out the counter-culture dimensions of the kingdom.

**Table application:** What would this kind of syncretism mean for the group you were thinking about in the main application exercise? Where will the Gospel challenge the culture? Again, give some concrete examples.

### ***The better way: Inculturation***

Midway between these two errors of imposing our own culture or accommodating completely to the new culture is the better way which Christians describe as inculturation (the Gospel being born within the culture) or contextualisation (the church being shaped by its new context).

This engagement of Gospel with culture is therefore a two-way transformation. On the one hand, the Gospel takes on aspects of the culture as it is earthed in the fresh expression of the body of Christ/church (incarnation); whilst on the other hand the Gospel lived out, based on a Gospel-infused worldview will bring about challenge and change to anything in that culture that dehumanises and hinders God's kingdom.

Inculturation happens when the pioneers listen, discern and engage the culture to enable an authentic indigenous church to emerge, which is able to express the Gospel in that culture but also challenge its dehumanising aspects by living a shared Gospel lifestyle and proclaiming the kingdom.

**Table application:** How do you imagine this process of inculturation will look in the particular culture you have been thinking about throughout this session?

### ***Conclusions***

Remember that this process of inculturation commits a new community to a process of ongoing continual reflection about how to reflect the Christian faith and worldview in such a way as to reshape the culture.

See the notes for Session 5 on Values (right at the end) which represent this change diagrammatically.



### **Examples**

For two very powerful examples of this in practice see:

1 Corinthians where Paul wrestled with the impact the Christian faith should have, in the very different environment of Corinth, regarding the everyday questions of eating, drinking and family relationships. Paul neither imposes Jewish culture nor accommodates to the pagan culture of the Corinthians.

*Christianity Rediscovered* (Vincent Donovan). In this book, the missionary first has to discover how the Gospel connects with the culture of the Masai (which he can only do by leaving every cultural aspect of church behind). Once the Masai come to faith, the missionary then has to discover with them culturally appropriate ways of being church which do not impose the Western way but are able to challenge the Masai culture from within.



## EXPLORING HOMOGENOUS UNITS

We have also identified that the rate of cultural change today has led to pluralism and a multitude of sub-cultures even within majority white Anglo culture in the UK. In fact it has even resulted in different generations becoming distinct sub-cultures and fresh expressions of church including youth congregations, children's church and 'third-age' church.

But many ask if this is acceptable, is it biblical, is it good ecclesiology? It can seem like 'niche-church' to fit consumerism rather than a kingdom worldview. The technical term for this is the 'Homogenous Unit' church. That is, churches made up of all the same kind of people.

The H.U.P or Homogenous Unit Principle, as originally identified and described by Donald MacGavran (*Understanding Church Growth*, Revised Edition Eardmans, 1980, p223) suggests that for most effective mission and evangelism, people need to hear the Gospel in their language and see it lived within their culture.

## An exercise to explore this issue

Village B is 7 miles from a large town. It has grown over recent years to about 3,800 people. Half are village folk who go back many generations and half are 'incomers' who have moved into the 'halo' of new owner-occupied houses gathered around the historic village, with the picturesque green and its parish church.

The long-standing villagers look on the new folk as 'foreigners'. Few, if any, of the latter have attended the parish church services, which regularly have some 40 - 50 worshippers. The long-standing villagers like more traditional services and certainly don't think children should distract from worship.

The vicar has tried an experiment to reach the 'incomers' and held a one-off more modern family service in the village hall in the High Street which was advertised to all the new private estate homes. To his surprise 50 people came. With this encouragement he now proposes starting a weekly congregation in the village hall.

One of the church wardens has responded by suggesting that 'in that case the vicar might as well start a church in the barn at the other end of the village where the farm labourers' cottages and council houses are'. These particular village residents have never come to the parish church - still regarding themselves as 'chapel-folk', even though the Methodist chapel closed 20 years ago.

The only teenager who attends the parish church has said she could bring lots of her friends if only they could have their own event with music and DJ's from the club scene.



**Questions**

- Do you agree with the vicar's plans for a village hall congregation for the 'incomers'?
- What about another in the barn for the 'chapel-folk'?
- Or should unity of God's church be expressed by the parish church congregation at Sunday morning worship to which anyone is free to come?
- Should the youth a) have their own event or b) be given a special 'slot' at the family friendly service or c) be encouraged to go to the youth church in the town 7 miles away?
- What other ideas or comments do you have? How might the unifying power of the Gospel be expressed in this situation?



## **CONCLUSION**

**1 - We the missionaries must change**

**2 - The Gospel frees us from false security in culture**

**3 - Are we Gospel missionaries or a 'preference planters'?**



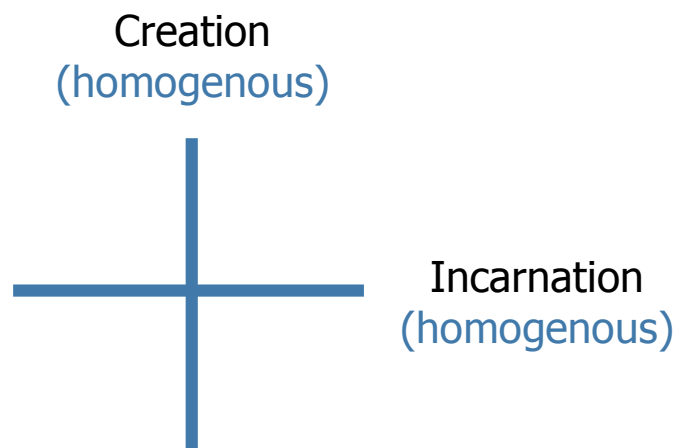
Level	Menu	Done
	<b>To study</b>	
◇	Read the material in Sally Gaze, <i>Mission Shaped and Rural</i> on inculturation.	
◇	Engage with the material in Appendix A on H.U.P if you didn't look at it during the session. Download and read the Lausanne Paper No1 on the Homogenous Unit Principle from <a href="http://www.acpi.org.uk">www.acpi.org.uk</a> .	
	<b>To do</b>	
◇	Write a cultural profile of your own church community or mission team so that you can compare it to the people group you are working with.	
◇◇	Write a cultural profile of your chosen social context including worldview, beliefs, values, forms & meanings, behaviour. Then write down your plans for engaging with that sub-culture and a description of the life of a fresh expression of that context.	
◇	Plan a visit to a fresh expression in a quite different culture from your experience. Spend time in prayer and reflection afterwards and note down the different aspects of culture that you became aware of and describe how the church engaged with that culture.	
◇◇◇	☺☺☺ Research, organise and carry out a short term overseas cross-cultural mission trip. CMS can organise these if you contact their Encounter team <a href="mailto:info@cms-uk.org">info@cms-uk.org</a> . Preferably go as a team.	
	<b>To reflect</b>	
◇	☺☺☺ As a team brainstorm your answers to this question from the session. If post-modern culture exalts individualism and values experiences, list a number of ways that you could engage. Then consider how these could lead into building community for a fresh expression.	
◇◇	☺☺☺ Together with others, review the place of the visual in your culture and imagine what symbols and images can connect to express people's response to God.	



## APPENDIX A: MORE ON THE HOMOGENOUS UNIT PRINCIPLE

We can only offer a short summary and overview here. The key is that there are essential theological principles on both sides of the apparent divide. So those who simply endorse one view (for heterogeneous - multi-cultural church) and rubbish the other view (homogenous expressions), or vice versa, end up denying some crucial truth. If we were to conclude that it is wrong to have a church in a specific cultural expression, we would be contradicting all that we have said in this session. So how do we resolve this apparent contradiction? We must find ways to express both truths... at the same time... or perhaps the key might be at different times and places!? Life is not static and single-dimensional and nor does church life need to be.

But first let's identify four foundational theologies that affect this debate.



### Creation

This doctrine includes the fact that culture and cultural diversity is part of God's creation. Part of what God sees as good is the creativity that is displayed in the array of cultures that make up the human race. So to plant expressions of church that affirm a culture and cultural difference, honours the creator and respects human diversity. This affirms homogenous expressions.

### Incarnation

This is the model of God's mission as we have seen in earlier sessions. Jesus took on the form of those he was called to reach... even to the point of identifying his focus as 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matt 15.24). This mission model is affirmed for all who follow Jesus' pattern by Paul who said 'I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some (1 Cor 9.22). The 'dying to live' principle at the heart of *Mission-shaped Church* involves the missionary/pioneer leaving their church culture to discover what church culture grows up in a new sub-culture. This again seems to primarily affirm diverse homogenous expressions (although of course it challenges folk from one cultural expression to leave it and take the Gospel to another).



### Salvation: Reconciliation



Here we have the truth that Jesus' work through his life, death, resurrection and sending the Spirit was to break down every dividing wall, making separated mankind into one (Eph 2.11-22) with God and each other. Paul can now say that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (Gal 3.28). We are all now adopted into a new family (the basic cultural unit), God's family. So this truth is on the other side of the argument, it's what stirs passions for heterogeneous church. It is interesting that it was in Antioch, amongst Jew and Gentile, that

believers were first called Christians. Perhaps these people were labelled such not by their ethnicity, occupation or religious background but by their common allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 11.19-26).

### Shalom: Righteousness, Good News for the poor

The Gospel of Jesus not only breaks down dividing walls but also lifts up the poor and marginalised. Sociological study of culture confirms that if we mix two cultures (heterogeneous) we don't automatically get an equal mixture. One dominates the other. Other sub-cultures eventually emerge. And crucially for this theological truth, it's not the culture of the largest population in the mixture that dominates. No, it's the culture with the highest economic and educational index (power) that dominates. For there to be good news realised for the poor there must be expressions of church not just **for** the poor, but **of** the poor in their culture (and of the addicts, of the deaf, of the gypsies ...).



So far we have three out of four theologies affirming homogenous expressions.

### Resolution: Putting it together

We have already hinted that the way through may lie in liberating the church from a static view. We may solve the dilemma by exploring the flexibility and diversity opened up by being church in different ways at different times and places, and in different sized groupings. Making full use of these opportunities can enable all theologies to be expressed rather than rejecting some in favour of another. This can work with different sized expressions of church being homogenous (cells or clusters) and larger gatherings being heterogeneous. Or it can be achieved by working to explore expressions of unity (heterogeneous) between culture specific groups (homogenous) that may not be about worship services but all the other dimensions of social expressions of church, like fellowship (eating together) and mission (working together). This only touches on the host of ways to build unity across diversity in space and time.



## A fifth theology



This understanding of holding together both homogenous and heterogeneous expressions gives us a right perspective on a fifth key theology - the truth which tells us where it is all leading - the end times eschatology. Some have argued that at the end it is all heterogeneous as all barriers are removed and we are all fully one. Every tribe tongue and nation will be united around the throne (Rev 5.9-10 & 15.4 & 22.6). However, this again misses the point. Culture

doesn't exist unless it's socially expressed. So every tribe and tongue will be present and preserved in its cultural identity (homogenous) whilst also being perfectly at one with each other (heterogeneous). It's not replacing the other... it will be both together... we shall experience perfect heterogeneously homogenous communities!! See Ephesians 1.10.



## APPENDIX B: FURTHER APPLICATION

Use these questions as a guide to work through the lessons of this unit in your fresh expressions team.

- What are the main values of the de-churched and non-churched in your target communities? Do these point to the character of their worldview?
- What connections can you think of between the Christian Gospel and the hopes and priorities of your non-churched communities?
- How might you respond to these connections? And how could community be built around these values and responses?
- Which values in your context does the Gospel challenge and how would a transforming Christian community behave?
- Where you are, are there still signs of Christendom beyond the church? To what extent is the biblical story known and traditional church patterns, rites and symbols understood? How might any residual Christendom affect the sort of expression of church emerging in your context/sub-cultures?
- If postmodern culture exalts individualism and values experiences, list a number of ways that you could engage and how you could build towards a fresh expression.
- Write a cultural profile of one of your chosen target communities. Then write down your principles for engaging with that culture. Write a description of the likely culture of any new faith community that would arise.