

# A Whole New World

Missions veteran Don McGregor shares how good cross-cultural training can revolutionize your missions experience

**By Jason Chatraw**

*When Don McGregor attended a Wednesday night service as a high school student, he had no idea how his life journey would be transformed. Instead of joining the rest of his brothers on the family farm after studying agriculture at one of the state colleges in Kansas, McGregor realized after listening to the first missionary he had ever seen in person that he was headed for a life in missions.*

*“When this missionary woman said she could only go to the Congo for one more term and wanted us to all pray for someone to take her place, it was like something grabbed a hold of my britches and threw me to the front of the room,” McGregor said. “I told them, ‘I’ll go.’” It was with that simple obedience to answer the call that McGregor eventually found himself involved in world missions that has lasted 48 years and counting.*

*McGregor has pastored in the states and served in the Philippines for 15 years with his wife Sally before returning to direct Foursquare Missions International for four years. He later served as the president of Life Bible College in southern California and has since devoted his life to training pastors and teachers how to communicate Gospel truths in other cultures.*

*He took some time out to share with Cutting Edge some secrets to effective cross-cultural ministry.*

**CE: Cross-cultural training is somewhat of a new development within the area of organized missions training. How did you begin the process of learning about other cultures?**

DM: When I was in college, I took theology and missions courses. But some of the other courses I took in were anthropology, history, and linguistics. And as I took those courses with the idea in mind that I was going to be a missionary, those courses told me that something had to be a little bit different where I was going. I had a feel and an understanding for culture as a result of studying so many different cultures.

We traveled to the Philippines by ship—22 days at sea—and when we got there, we had a hunger to learn from the people. We were so intrigued by the people that we never really thought that we were going to be bringing them something other than the truth of the Gospel. With my agricultural background, I wanted to know how they farmed. We wanted to know how they cooked and what they ate. And because of our desire to learn about their culture once we arrived, I never got a whiff of culture shock.

I heard a missionary once say, “Blessed are the flexible, for they are not easily broken.” And I think that’s so important to immersing yourself in the culture you’re going to share the Gospel with. While we were in the Philippines, I once saw a missionary travel all the way by ship, got off the boat, and went to the house and stayed there the entire time until the next ship came to pick him up. I asked him why he never left and he told me he was just petrified. I think there were a number of things he never had in his training, if he had any at all. The curiosity of wanting to know how people live drove me to learn more about their culture instead of be afraid of it or not have anything to do with it. The missionaries who didn’t embrace the culture always seemed to be in conflict with the people or left before their term was up. My wife and I fell so in love with the culture and the people that we had 20 to 25 Filipinos living around us. Their culture wasn’t strange; it was interesting to me.

The other part that helped me was I understood the principle of Philippians 2 that talks about Christ being incarnate and giving us a model of what it means to go from one culture to another and the changes you have to make in order to communicate certain truths. Both those things helped hold us steady while we were in the field. And 40 years later, we’re helping Filipinos start churches here in the U.S. Every day was a learning day for us. We got into their lives.

**CE: What do you see as essentials in cross-cultural ministry training in getting teams ready to go overseas, whether it be on short-term trips or long-term stays?**

DM: I learned that preparation was the key thing. Inadequate preparation is a major reason why many missionaries end up not staying long on the field or at odds with the field. They may endure, but they struggle. Going to the first Urbana missions conference was the best thing we did—it was an absolute romance with culture. I was just a green horn kid, just a farm boy from Kansas. But I began to realize that Gospel had to be communicated in a way that was understood by others in a different culture.

When I arrived on the field, I would open my Bible and they would open their language Bible, but even with an interpreter (we had 78 dialects in the Philippines) we had problems communicating. I would listen to them and I would struggle with the words. I would ask them what the word meant to them using different synonyms. Their meaning of the word was a real education to me. Being a teacher and running a college as well as directing church planting, this principle became an integral part of my teaching and preparing others. If I wanted to be effective in my ministry, I had to eliminate all of the Western church thinking in the way I ministered. Filipinos would question why we did certain things—instead of being offended by it, they would ask us why.

Understanding the culture and who you’re going to be ministering to is a large part of preparation. Catholicism was very prevalent in the Philippines, and the people there thought protestants and Catholics were from two different worlds. But I knew how many tenets of the faith we shared in common. I once had a governor tell me, “You’re a protestant, right? Because I’m Catholic and we just don’t have much to talk about when it comes to religion.” I challenged him on that and listed 22 things that we did have in

common just off the top of my head. When I finished he said, “We do have a lot in common—but you’re different. Why?” And then I got to share about how to have a personal relationship with Christ. It was always easy to share the Gospel then.

The other thing I think that’s important is that people going into other cultures need to be exposed to miracles and healings, the marvelous things that open people’s hearts to hearing the truth of the Gospel. If you haven’t been in an environment where you are exposed to that, you need to get around some people who believe in and experience this on a regular basis. It seems like the Western church is the only group of people who struggle with believing in miracles. Catholics believe in miracles. Hindus believe in miracles. Muslims believe in miracles, too. By the time I went on the field, I wasn’t a stranger to the power of God; I had seen some healings and experienced some personally. (I thought for a while I could never go on the mission field because I had to walk with a crutch due to the bones in the lower part of my back being shaped abnormally. The doctors said I had a 50-50 chance that I would ever walk without crutches. But God completely healed me!)

So, preparation is crucial as well as experiencing the supernatural. Chances are where you’re going believes in the supernatural, too.

**CE: What are some ways you recommend preparing for cross-cultural ministry, whether stateside or overseas?**

DM: The preparation stage begins way before you leave to go into another culture. Start by praying about the target country or group you’re going to visit. Learn about the people, the culture, the politics, the way of life. One way you can do this now is get online and read about the people and the country on the Internet. Read what their problems are, and that gives you a chance to make the Gospel message relevant to their particular need and connect immediately with their culture. That type of incarnation begins once you step into their world. You can build lasting loving relationships that way; that’s the key to bonding with the culture. Get to know the people.

I really encourage teams to really pray about the particular country or group. Burden comes as you wait on God and hear His heart. I think people have to have a biblical reason for going. It can’t be for adventure or excitement; otherwise, we just become tourists. Learn about the people and the countries. *Operation World* by Patrick Johnston is an absolute must. That book gives you history, background, language—everything you can imagine. That prepares the heart.

Another preparation is prayer with fasting, as well as making sure everybody on the team knows their giftings and how to function in those giftings. I would even suggest beginning with some basic language study, too. Even if it’s not the language of the country where you’re going, at least you’ll understand the thought pattern in most cultures.

If you're going overseas, get involved in a cross cultural ministry here at home. In Los Angeles, we have 295 languages and cultures in the public school system. I think a local church should prepare their people for that by getting people involved in cross cultural ministry before they go abroad. They shouldn't go cold turkey overseas. Today, you can go to a Latin congregation or Korean congregation or African congregation. See what they're like and experience the culture here first.

**CE: In sharing the Gospel in other cultures, what is some of the best wisdom you can share with those going on the field, whether they are pastors or lay leaders?**

A teacher's life is a supporting message to what you teach because what is taught is to be lived out. If you're supposed to love God and people, you better love people while you're there. That may not be true here in the U.S. People often see the preacher on the platform but never in his pajamas at home. He's kind of isolated. We can't hide when we're serving in another people group's culture. Ultimately, truth is more caught than taught.

We need to identify the felt needs of the people we're teaching by asking people about their families and villages and history of their people and personal journeys. People love to tell their story if you will take time to do that. The teacher will learn so much about the people. You should have three or four people tell you about their journey to Christ and their background. Immediately, you can adapt your teaching to fit into their culture and make it relevant to them.

We have to have tools like that that help us contextualize the Gospel for the people who are listening. As we listen to their stories, we not only know their felt needs but we also know their burdens.

Any time I teach something, I want to help people learn to apply the principles and truths from the Bible to their own personal lives. I always end daily workshops with asking the people how they intent to live these truths out tomorrow. Then, they take a moment and list ways they are going to apply it to the way they live. That way, there becomes an ownership of that truth. We have to make sure we have no hidden agenda when we are teaching in other cultures. We can't have any doctrines that we're dogmatic on – we need to put a lot of commas there instead of hard periods. **CE**

SIDEBAR:

**Church planting strategies  
in cross-cultural ministry**

When it comes to church planting in other cultures, Don McGregor says the value of understanding the culture is priceless, particularly when it comes to spreading the Gospel. One of the ways McGregor found that principle to be extremely effective was when it came to understanding the family structure in other countries and how different it is from the U.S.

“When you go overseas and you want to learn about culture, you immediately get involved in family settings,” McGregor says. “Indian, Muslim, Filipino, African—in almost every culture outside of the West, the family is an integral part of their culture.

“However, we do ourselves more harm than good when trying to apply Western church thinking to evangelism. Our method of evangelism in the U.S. seems to be to win the people to Christ and then extract them from their family and put them in a program. Instead of seeing the family as a whole unit, we want to divide up the kids from the teens from the adults from the senior adults.

“What we found in the Philippines was that this method was a huge mistake. Instead of trying to get them in a program, we taught everyone how to open their Bible and share the Gospel. So, in the Philippines where there was a big push to moving from the countryside to the city, the city dwellers always returned home on the weekends or for holidays at every chance they got—and then they shared their newfound faith with their families. They would open their Bibles, pray for the sick, and watch generations give their lives to Christ. After a while of seeing this happening and hearing the people return to us in the city and beg for people to go back and start churches in their old villages, we began training them so they could go and lead the people.

“Understanding how to lead in a small group setting is important in cross-cultural ministry because that’s how they do everything over there. There’s more value in learning how to share the Gospel in smaller settings than larger ones. And it can result in some real grassroots revivals in areas you never even planned on going all because the culture operates differently than in the West.”

—Jason Chatraw