
Crisis meets Culture, Culture meets Scripture: a Workshop Report

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Excited voices filled the room as the 79 workshop participants from 15 language groups gathered to attend the *Crisis meets Culture, Culture meets Scripture* workshop (now referred to as *Culture meets Scripture*) in northern Philippines. They had returned for this follow-up workshop after having begun implementing their Action plans from the previous workshop. Now they looked to share the results with the larger group and to join together again in further dialogue regarding analyzing and transforming their culture's responses to death in light of Scripture.

Purpose of the Workshop

Every culture experiences crisis events that tend to unravel life, and they have prescribed traditional practices in response to those events. They also have relational structures firmly in place to support and encourage those traditional practices. Tensions naturally are high in a crisis, but when a person becomes a follower of Christ, some of those practices clash with Scripture, creating new and sometimes intense tensions. This workshop focused on equipping believers to resist those pressures toward practices that conflict with their allegiance to God, and to overcome the internal tensions created so they might respond in ways that are scripturally grounded while still being culturally meaningful.

The purpose of this workshop was to equip believers to evaluate the social and spiritual pressures they encounter in a crisis or a culturally important event, to encourage advanced planning-in-community toward courses of action to take, to build strong communities of support for their planned new actions, and to evaluate their practices—which ones can be maintained, which ones clash with Scripture and need to be forsaken and which ones can be transformed.

Brief Description

The workshop focused on three areas:

1. Developing *Communities of Scripture Dialogue* where a community of believers, across denominational boundaries, gathers to analyze their traditional practices and dialogue about ways to bring them into alignment with Scripture. This dialogue can be intense and create strong emotional responses. One very happy outcome in the workshop was to see a new unity develop among the community's spiritual leaders.

2. Encouraging the development and commitment of the wider “community of believers” (*koinonia* fellowship) to become an effective support network for members of the family of God when they seek to implement a scripturally aligned response to a crisis or culturally important event. The participants overtly outlined culturally effective support that could withstand pressures.
3. Beginning a dialogue to transform the rituals highlighted by the *Community of Scripture Dialogue*. Two specific workshop events toward this transformation were a session on writing songs based on Scripture to use during death rituals which produced new songs for each group, and a session to write prayers based on Scripture, praying for the grieving family and against feared consequences.

Two other critical issues which participants requested sessions on were how to evaluate dreams and how to deal with faith healers. These sessions were not planned in advance but were a response to issues that arose and we made space in the schedule to address.

How did we do this?

We used presentations, small group discussions, worksheets, drama and role playing to analyze the underlying reasons for their traditional responses to the death of a family member and the consequences of not responding properly. Participants first uncovered their traditional assumptions about those reasons and consequences, then they verbalized the pressures relationships put on them. They began to comprehend the power of the emotions generated by those things, noting how these strongly influenced their decisions. Participants then took the critical issues they uncovered to Scripture, evaluating their traditional responses in light of what is written in Scripture. We also introduced the concept of transforming rituals to reflect their allegiance to God. We then began discussions on the need to develop a strong bond of support among fellow believers—an element critical for transformation. This culminated in the participants forming their Action Plans to introduce what they had learned to believers in their places so that together they could transform their practices to reflect their allegiance to God.

The follow-up workshop looked more in depth at forming *Communities for Scripture Dialogue*, building support groups, and ritual transformation. It also brought the teams together again for the significant work of synergy, networking and mutual stimulation through sharing their Action Plans. This in itself proved remarkably valuable.

Results of the Workshop

The language groups all refined their Action Plans, delineating how they would introduce the things they'd learned and the activities they would use to initiate transformation in their language area. The implementation of their Action Plans included doing re-echoes of the workshop in multiple venues; writing new songs based on Scripture; transforming certain rituals; planning to draft Scripture studies to address the critical issues uncovered; and the creating of committees among the churches to help grieving families with needs associated with the event. They also determined to organize the members of their churches to sit with grieving

families in shifts, equipping them with explanations based on Scripture to give to those attending the event. It would then be these church members who would be the ones to explain WHY the family is choosing not to follow certain traditional rituals and they would lead in introducing the transformed rituals explaining as the event progressed. They included plans to visit the family in the weeks and months following the death, specifically for prayer and encouragement. All this is designed to take the pressure off the grieving family and provide the solid support they need.

Participants Evaluation of the Workshop

The most accurate evaluation comes as we continue to hear further results of their Action Plans. Based on comments given by participants during the workshop debrief session and on their evaluation sheets, the workshop content was very well received and much appreciated. The following comments, summarized from the workshop evaluation sheets, help to evaluate the content:

- *Prayer: this is one thing that our language group needs to learn to pray publicly. It was very helpful to have a model to follow in writing a prayer. Also, listening to the reports was encouraging. It gave our group ideas to try.*
- *This workshop encouraged us to love in action rather than just saying it and to reach out for the need of others in times of crisis. It is “other centered” not “self centered.”*
- *I like most the topic on [structuring specific] prayers and the topic of community for Scripture dialogue. That gave me an insight on how we would be communicating to our own people about the gospel.*
- *I am thankful that God used this workshop to light again the fire in my heart to serve God. The truth is I am in the middle of my decision to quit in serving God because of some problems occurring in my ministry but thanks God for those words that encouraged me to go on. May God bless you.*
- *This is an excellent tool to create or practice koinonia focusing our thoughts to work together for God’s glory and allowing ourselves to be an instrument of God.*
- *One of the most encouraging parts of this workshop for me is listening to the reports seeing that we have all the same problems. ‘Hard’ is one of the words that I have heard. But we have to realize that it is a spiritual warfare. But we saw possible results. That it is not impossible. I am impressed by the Mayoyao group. One thing I appreciate in their group is their unity. That’s the key. If we leaders don’t have unity we will not succeed. I hope it will start with us.*

On their evaluation sheets workshop participants suggested using this workshop material to address other cultural events such as weddings, marriage, birth of a child, sickness, dealing with enemies and tribal wars, parenting, house or business dedications, town fiestas, calamities, epidemics and agricultural rituals.

Some Workshop Outcomes

Workshop participants have begun implementing their Action Plans. Here are a few examples:

1. Many of the groups held re-echoes of the workshop in their home areas. In *Balangao* the participants, following the example of the *Mayoyao* participants, decided to form an interchurch group in which the church leaders would work together. This group would form a strong support group toward implementing their Action Plans and seeing transformation occur. As of this writing, the *Balangao* church leaders had held their third meeting.
2. *Mayoyao* church leaders spent five months in intense dialogue and produced a multi-page initial draft to present to their churches containing analysis of their traditional practices and some suggested modifications for those practices that clash with Scripture. They shared copies of this draft with the other groups at the follow-up workshop.
3. The *Butbut* people of the northern Philippines modified one of their rituals. Traditionally the family of the deceased does the *pogpog* ceremony wherein a spirit medium is called on the night of the burial and the medium cuts off the tail feathers of a chicken, telling the spirit of the deceased to not return. This action protects the family from the retaliation of the deceased. The believers decided to modify this practice; they would not do the traditional *pogpog* ceremony but rather they will request the believers to come together on the night of the burial and have a prayer ceremony, praying for God's protection.¹

Though we introduced this workshop in the Philippines using a two-part workshop plan, it can be done using a single workshop format. To introduce the process we chose the event of a family member's death as that is a very stressful time in the Philippines and believers undergo great pressure to fulfill cultural expectations during that event. The process can be applied to any culturally important event or crisis situation in a culture. In doing this workshop it's best to choose a topic that most people struggle with.

If you would like to learn more about this workshop contact Amy West (amy_west [at] sil [dot] org).

¹ Noted in letter received from Alfred and Racquel Mijares, October 16, 2009.