

Living in community – whether you like it or not!



**Bible studies for mission teams
living and working at close quarters**

Tony Horsfall

Introduction

In all my experience of working with people involved in mission, the most common problem that arises is that of inter-personal relationships. This is often of course with national colleagues, but equally as often it is within the mission team itself - often multi-cultural in background, diverse in personality, separated by generation and theologically poles apart! Such a team probably uses English as their common language although it may not be the heart language of a significant number of them. No wonder they encounter strains and tensions!

Additionally, they may be called upon to live and work in demanding and challenging environments, with difficult climates, and at close quarters with each other. Work, daily life, social interaction, leisure time, and church involvement may all overlap substantially, causing some to scream inwardly, 'Get me out of here, I'm suffocating!'

These studies are by no means the answer to all your problems, but they may provide a starting point. They are written for the context of a team meeting where you might begin your time together with a devotional of 20-30 minutes. They are simple and easy to use, and almost anyone could lead a study based on this material. They will help you to talk openly about some of the issues you face, but also point you to Biblical principles by which you can live. The right attitude of mind is vitally important in coping well with situations, and we need to have our thoughts shaped by the Scripture and our wills empowered by the Holy Spirit. Then at least we have a chance to enjoy each other, not just endure our time together.

If you choose to use these studies, prepare them prayerfully with a personal openness to anything God might want to say to you, or to do in your life, and with an expectation that God will meet with you as you share, and then as you seek to live out what you are learning. Why not ask your prayer partners to invest special prayer in you as you work your way through this material? God has a special way of doing more than we expect when we are serious about following him.

Please adapt the studies as you wish. They are not written in stone, and the material is there to serve you.

Be blessed as you read!

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1. Living in community – whether you like it or not!

In cross-cultural ministry we often find ourselves ‘thrown together’ with others whom we might not have chosen to be with! Not only are we working in a different culture, and probably in a taxing climate and challenging environment, but we may also be of different nationalities ourselves, with our own languages and cultural perspectives. Added to this we may come from different generations, a variety of church backgrounds, have conflicting personalities, and our own lifestyle preferences. What a challenge this presents to even the most mature people and godly believers!

Think about your own situation. What are the differences between you? What are the unique challenges that you face where you are?

Fortunately, the God who calls us into mission knows the challenges we face, and whilst he does not promise that it will be easy (the challenges we face are part of his strategy to help us grow), he does promise that his grace will be sufficient for us. Remind yourself of this great promise, and the principle that Paul draws out from it:

⁹But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. *2Corinthians 12: 9-10*

In reading these verses, what do you understand about the concept of ‘grace’?

How do you currently experience ‘weakness’ in your own life?

What encouragement can you take personally from the principle that ‘when I am weak, then I am strong’?

Take time to worship and to pray, drawing into your inner being the strength which God supplies. Allow a moment or two of silence when you can be still, and know again that God is with you.

2. What we have in common

¹²Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. *Colossians 3:12*

Whilst there are many things that can pull us apart, there are of course many factors which draw us together in cross-cultural ministry, and some of the closest friendships are forged in the most stressful of situations.

In your context, what are some of the things that draw you together as a team? What do you have in common? What do you enjoy about your situation?

One of the ways in which we can resource and strengthen ourselves for living and working closely with others is to have a strong sense of our spiritual identity, and what we share in common in Christ. This is the essence of *fellowship* – sharing together in Christ. From v12 we can remind ourselves of 3 important aspects of our identity in Christ.

1. We have been chosen by God

The reason you find yourself in this particular country, and working with this organization, has something to do with your sense of call. At some point God broke into your life, and not only saved you from your sin, but called you to serve him. So here you are! *Read John 15:16 and 1Thessalonians 5:24. Briefly share something about how you came to faith, or how God led you to your present work.*

2. We have been made holy, and are becoming holy

At the moment of our conversion, all our sins are forgiven, and we are considered to be holy in God's sight. See, for example, 1Corinthians 6:11. This gives us our confidence before God. At the same time, we are becoming holy in our everyday lives, and we are still changing and growing. See for example, Colossians 3:8. We need to be patient with ourselves, and others. *Share, if you wish, one area in your life where you are still growing.*

3. We are unconditionally and unchangeably loved by God

Our identity is not found in what we do, but in who we are – God's beloved children. See 1 John 3:1. As Philip Yancey has said, there is nothing we need to do to make God love us more, and nothing we could do that would make him love us less. We are the object of the Father's love and delight, whether we feel it or not. And if we know ourselves to be loved, we will be able to love others in turn. *What difference does it make in ministry and relationships when we know (1) that we ourselves to loved by God, and (2) those we work with are equally loved by him?*

3. Dressed for the part

¹²Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Colossians 3:12

Almost certainly dress will be an issue for you in your work and ministry, either in dressing in culturally acceptable ways, or wearing clothing that is right for the job you do. How we dress has a lot to do with how we feel about ourselves, and wearing the right spiritual 'clothing' can impact significantly how well we relate to one another.

What is your favourite clothing? Could your team members guess? How has your wardrobe been influenced by your environment?

Paul identifies five essential qualities (all of them displayed in Christ) which we are to develop in our lives as we grow to maturity, positive qualities that will help us to live well together. *As you consider each quality in turn, share if you wish examples from your life together as a team where you have seen it displayed.*

1. **Compassion** Read Mark 1:41

Compassion is the ability to feel deeply for the needs of other people, to see beyond our own concerns and to be moved to help others in their suffering. It is one of the outstanding qualities of Christ, reflecting a heart that is 'open' rather than closed. This compassion needs to flow to our fellow team members as well as those we have come to serve.

2. **Kindness** Read 1Thessalonians 5:15

Kindness is love in action, and operates not out of obligation or duty, but simply to bless another person. Its focus is on helping in the ordinary things of life, not just the big crises, and often concerns things which need not be done, but which brighten someone else's day.

3. **Humility** Read Matthew 11:29

This quality is to do with 'lowliness' of mind. It is the opposite of pride and arrogance, of self-seeking and selfish ambition, and is an essential quality of good team players. It makes us co-operative and submissive, and able to accept help, advice and correction. Its presence eliminates rivalry, enabling us to admit our mistakes and to say sorry.

4. **Gentleness** Read Proverbs 15:1

This refers to how we deal with people, how we 'handle' them in delicate situations and times of need. It covers our responses and our words, and reflects our sensitivity towards them, and our respect for them.

5. **Patience** Read Proverbs 15:18

Often translated as 'longsuffering', this is the quality that helps us to give time to each other to change, and to persevere in trials.

4. The most important thing

¹³Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. *Colossians 3:13-14*

And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it. *Colossians 3:14 The Message*

There is no doubting the fact that the foundation stone of life together as God's people has to be love – whether in our working life, relationships in church, or living on a compound. But love is actually in short supply amongst fallen human beings. Being 'nice' is not enough, neither is having 'good intentions'. Love is a divine quality, and only as we acknowledge our bankruptcy can we receive the abundant supply that heaven waits to give.

For this study, we turn to Paul's 'Hymn to Love' in 1Corinthians 13. Read this passage section by section, and be challenged to live in the 'most excellent way'.

v1-3 **Without love I am nothing**

Love is more important than our words, whether in eloquent preaching or spiritual gift. It is actually more essential than prophetic gift or miraculous signs. It is even more foundational than sacrificial service. How easily we run out of love! *Let one or two members of the group pray for a fresh outpouring of love upon you all.*

v4-7 **Love described**

Love is neither sentimental nor theoretical, but extremely practical. William Barclay says that this passage demands much self-examination from the good man or woman, and he is right. *Take a moment for personal reflection, and then ask God for help with any one of the aspects of love described here. Share if you wish.*

v8-12 **Love that is eternal**

As Christians we should live in the light of eternity, and recognize that love is something that abides. We are to leave childish ways behind us, and grow to maturity. We are to grow in self-awareness and the knowledge that we are accepted by God who knows us through and through. *Ask God to give you greater self-awareness. Confess any childish responses you may have made in your interactions with others. Do this privately, or in the group, or later on to another person.*

v13 **Follow the way of love**

Paul highlights a trinity of essential Christian virtues. Faith is our response to God's word, and hope is our conviction that his promises will come true, but neither will be needed in heaven. Love alone remains. *Conclude this time again with prayer for the outpouring of God's love upon you.*

5. Love in action – bearing with one another

¹³Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. *Colossians 3:13-14*

Love is something we receive from God, but choose ourselves to express in our relationships. It is more of an attitude than a feeling, and shown through actions, not simply words. Two tangible aspects of love are highlighted: bearing with one another, and forgiving one another.

In living and working closely together, this expression of love is a must. Essentially, bearing with one another has to do with patience, and being committed to each other in the inevitable ups and downs we experience in our relationships. This does not mean, however, that we do not speak openly and honestly about how the behaviour of others affects us.

Proverbs 19:11 *When is it right to overlook an offence?*
Proverbs 27:5 *When is it right to raise an issue?*
Ephesians 4:25-27 *What does it mean to speak the truth, and to do so in love?*

Remember that, just as you have to ‘put up’ with your colleagues, they have to ‘put up’ with you!

Comparing James 3:13-18

It is easy to compare ourselves with others – who has the best language, the most national friends, the best behaved children, the newest vehicle, the most holidays, and so on. Feelings of jealousy are destructive of friendship, and feelings of inferiority spoil intimacy.

Judging Romans 14:13

Inevitably we have different standards and values, even though we are all believers. It is easy to criticize others for their differences, often without fully understanding their position.

Gossip Proverbs 16:28

There is a thin line between sharing news and talking about another person unhelpfully. It is important not to criticize others behind their backs, to betray confidences, or to seek to influence others to take our point of view against a colleague.

Take time for personal reflection about your own individual responsibility towards the harmony of your team. Confess any sin that the Holy Spirit makes you aware of, and then ask for the fruit of the Spirit to be formed in each of your lives.

6. Love in action – forgiving one another

¹³Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. *Colossians 3:13-14*

The second outworking of love is that we are able to forgive one another. The motivation to do this inevitably springs from the fact that we have ourselves been forgiven by God.

God has forgiven you

Receiving the forgiveness of God is one of the most ‘healing’ aspects of salvation. All of us have sinned, and God has forgiven us for all our transgressions. Moreover, we continue to sin, but his grace is constant towards us, so that whenever we confess our sins he is willing to forgive us. This includes even our shortcomings in living and working together – we need not constantly berate ourselves for our mistakes and failings.

Psalm 103:11-14 *What do you learn about forgiveness and the character of God?*

1John 1:8-10 *What is the answer to sin and failure?*

Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you

The moral responsibility to forgive others, and the motivation to do so, stems from our own experience of forgiveness. Sometimes you will be hurt, disappointed or let down by our colleagues. And sometimes you will be the one causing pain to others. How shall we respond?

1. Reflect – be honest with yourself; acknowledge any wrong on your part.
2. Pray – be honest before God, asking for his forgiveness, and wisdom.
3. Go – approach the other person in a spirit of reconciliation, taking responsibility for your own actions and being open to listen as well as speak.
4. Guard against gossip; avoid sharing inappropriately.
5. Use a mediator or third party if necessary.
6. Forgive – release the other person. Receive forgiveness if necessary.
7. Pray together to seal your reconciliation.
8. Share the victory with the team when the time is right.

What has often appeared to be a defeat has often been turned to great victory by the Lord when people are humble and open to confess their sins. Revival has often come as a result of God’s people being reconciled together.

Some helpful scriptures for you to discuss: Ephesians 4:32 Philippians 4:2-3 Matthew 18:15-17

7. When Christ rules

¹⁵Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. *Colossians 3:15*

As we have explored the theme of living and working together, we considered firstly the positive qualities that make it possible, and then looked at the inevitable challenges to our enjoyment of life together. This final study reflects what happens when we have learned to live by the scriptural principles we have considered - when Christ rules in the heart of each individual.

Submitting to Christ Romans 12:1-2

It is easy to sing 'Jesus is Lord' but in reality we are all rebels and we chafe sometimes beneath his yoke. If we are to enjoy life together in a team context we must first be rightly related to the Lord of the team - to Jesus Christ, our Head. *Finish the sentence: What I most love about Jesus is...*

Members of the same body 1Corinthians 12:14-20

In reality none of us can do the job by ourselves. We need others, and are dependent upon them. This is why God has placed us in a 'body' or team. None of us alone is as effective as all of us together. Our achievements are multiplied when we pull in the same direction and combine our gifts, talents and resources. *Finish the sentence: What I most appreciate about this team is...*

Called to peace Acts 9:31

The normal condition of the body of Christ is that of peace – a settled calmness where each member can function at their best and there is a sense of wholeness and contentment. Remember that this is God's will for your team, and that you have a part to play in establishing such a favorable condition. Choose peace over strife; choose harmony over division; choose to work together rather than to pull apart. *Finish the sentence: What I most pray for this team is...*

Being thankful Philippians 4:4-7

Such a positive faith-filled attitude breeds hope in everyone else. Find the good in your situation, and see the grace in your colleagues. Speak words of encouragement, take every opportunity to appreciate others. *Finish the sentence: I am thankful for...*

As you complete these studies, what has been the thing that has most helped you? What lesson would you like to underline as a key truth to take with you into your work together?

Ten principles of Community

Ask team members to read these through before you meet, and then have a time reflecting on each of them in term as you read through them.

- 1) **Belonging** – knowing that you have a place where you fit in, are accepted and are appreciated; not feeling left out or rejected.
- 2) **Openness** – able to be honest, candid, and to genuinely share who you are; welcoming to new people.
- 3) **Caring** – kind, thoughtful, gentle, concerned for and considerate of those who have needs.
- 4) **Cooperation** – helping each other by bringing the skills and resources you have together towards a common goal; teamwork.
- 5) **Healing and growth** – when you are sad or distressed there are people who will comfort you; when you are struggling, there are people who will help you to get stronger; a place where you develop more strengths and abilities.
- 6) **Relationships with friends and enemies** – You are willing to be friends with people who are different from you; when people mistreat you, you work towards reconciliation.
- 7) **Forgiveness** – you ask for forgiveness when you have hurt someone, you forgive when you have been wronged.
- 8) **Patience** – when others bother you, or you don't get your own way, you endure and persevere without complaining or speaking badly of others or the situation.
- 9) **Mutual Trust** – you have faith and belief in others and you rely on them just as they can rely on you to do your best – you understand that you are capable of letting others down and so give grace when others let you down.
- 10) **Using Your Gifts** – you contribute your gifts and talents towards the good of the community and you encourage others in the gifts they have.

Jean Vanier, Community and Growth, Paulist Press, 1989