

AGNES WOO

Leading a Polytheistic Faith to the Monotheistic God: A Study in Identifying Barriers to the Gospel in a Chinese Buddhist Community and Ways to Overcome those Barriers

Abstract

This article is written for the purpose of exploring a way to lead a polytheistic faith, prevalent in the local Chinese Buddhist community (LCBC) in Brunei, to the reality of a monotheistic God as revealed in the Bible (1 Corinthians 8:6). It serves as a guide for the local Chinese church (CC) to lead the LCBC to see that God as a Creator is sufficient to be their God.

This article identifies the need of a missiological package in order to lead the LCBC to Christ. The CC needs to assist the LCBC to become receptive before the core of the gospel message is proclaimed to the community. This article thus presents a missiological package which consists of ministries of witnessing Christ with good conduct, building good relations, taking dialogic action, establishing a well-organized team, contextualizing the gospel critically, directing the community to the Father of all, and applying consensus and pluralism in mission.

Keywords: Chinese Buddhism, Chinese culture, worldview, Christian mission, evangelism, critical contextualization, and consensus and pluralism.

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The Yellow River is a place where the Chinese can trace their origin, a place where all the Chinese ancestors lived, and a place which the Chinese should call home...

The Chinese identify themselves as the descendants of the Yellow River. It was from the Yellow River that the Chinese spread out to other parts of the world. The Chinese live almost everywhere on earth. Wherever they are, they cannot eliminate the fact that they are the descendants of the Yellow River – bearing the identity of their ancestors and they inherited the rich and sophisticated culture and religion from their ancestors. Many of them have lived overseas and established their home from generation to generation. Their inherited faith and worldview are subject to the challenge of other faiths. A small portion of them have converted to Christianity. But, many still hold firm to their religious identity. The local Chinese Buddhist community (LCBC) in Brunei¹ is one of these examples. Under such a condition, it is unavoidable that a family with two different faiths, the Chinese traditional faith and the Christian faith, occurs in the LCBC. Conflicts and problems start arising. The tension arising from such a family gradually expands to become the tension between the LCBC and the local Chinese church (CC). The relationship is damaging. Chinese Buddhists (LCB) started to blame the CC for causing the breaking of family peace and solidarity. Because of that, they have a bad impression of Christianity. The unfavorable relationship discourages the LCBC from coming to Christ. Under such a situation, it is necessary to identify what are the main barriers to the gospel in the LCBC and how the LCBC can be reached with the gospel.

The Chinese in Brunei

The Chinese are the second largest population group in Brunei.² Among the Chinese population, Chinese Buddhists are predominant whereas Chinese Christians and Chinese Muslims are the minorities.³ The Chinese community in Brunei is composed of various dialect groups such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Hainanese, Teachew, and Foochow. Most of them came from the provinces of Guangdong and Fujian in China (Niew 1995:82-83).

Commerce is the major living activity of the Chinese in Brunei. Almost all the commercial enterprises in Brunei are run by the Chinese. The Chinese widened their economic activities into various forms such as import and export trade, distribution and retail trade, various shops and department stores, restaurant and hotel services, vehicle and repair industry, banking and finance, insurance and real estate.

The Chinese have always played an important role in the country's economic development and made a definite contribution to the country's progress and prosperity...The

economic status of the Chinese in Brunei has long been firmly established (Niew 1995:90).

Significance of Religion

From ancient to present time, religion plays a significant role in the life and culture of the Chinese. In Brunei, the local Chinese Buddhists (LCB) are no exception. They are religious people and believe in the existence of God. They are aware that they can neither control their lives nor prevent any calamity by human effort. They thus look for divine help. They worship many gods in order to deal with their many needs in life. Each god serves them in one or more particular area/s. The faith of the LCBC is polytheistic. They pray to different gods for different purposes in their polytheistic tradition. They worship whatever gods there be in order to hope for protection and blessing. To them, religion functions as a protector, a provider, a helper, and an adviser in their life. The price for the service is to worship various deities with sacrifices.

Religious values are deeply embedded in the Chinese worldview. Although many descendants of the Chinese have established their home and life in foreign countries and are subject to the influence of foreign culture, the belief of supernatural power which governs the world still exists in their worldview. It is not something that can be easily removed or erased from their worldview, especially the beliefs of the worship of heaven and ancestors which were strongly rooted in the heart of the Chinese people. In fact, the more they struggle for happiness and prosperity, the more they pay their attention to the divine worship and the practice of divination.

The Local Chinese Buddhism

The local Chinese Buddhism is a syncretistic religion made up of the teachings and beliefs of Chinese folklore, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. The LCB, however, could neither differentiate the contradictions between all these faiths nor question them. They embrace and practice all of them. After all, Chinese Buddhism is an inherited religion, a religion belonging to their ancestors and practiced by them. The nature of Chinese Buddhism is dual characteristics: sophisticated and naive, superstitious and rational, and native and foreign.

Although many LCB neither know much about Chinese Buddhism, they naturally accept Chinese Buddhism as both their religion and identity. Chinese Buddhism makes the LCB feel that they are Chinese. It is commonly understood that a Chinese should live by the Buddhist faith. The LCB identify themselves as Buddhists. In this way, they manage to retain their religious culture in Brunei. The life pattern of the LCBC is influenced by Chinese Buddhism.

Reasons for Rejecting the Christian faith

The LCB reject Christianity because they dislike hearing about the claim of the CC: 'truth is found only in Christianity' and takes such a claim as discriminative to their Buddhist faith. They also dislike the CC claiming its Christian culture as superior to the Chinese culture and attempting to change the Chinese culture. The LCB are unwilling to forsake their traditional culture by becoming Christians. They are unfamiliar with and lack of understanding of Christianity. The LCBC regards Christianity as a religion in conflict with their cultural value such as filial piety, economic advancement, and divine and ancestral worship. Tension is formed between the LCBC and the CC as both parties hold firmly their beliefs and practices, which affects the efficiency of communicating the gospel. It is essential to reduce the tension in order to share the gospel efficiently among the LCBC.

Essentiality of a Missiological Package

The result of mission to the LCBC is unfavorable despite of all the effort the CC put in mission to the LCBC. The main obstacles in mission to the LCBC are identified as Christian expression of superiority, demand of forsaking the LCBC traditional culture, unfamiliarity and lack of understanding of Christianity, and contradiction between Christian teaching and the LCBC cultural value. Those obstacles lead to unfavorable relationship between the CC and the LCBC, which inhibit the LCBC from coming to Christ. The inappropriate way of presenting the gospel makes the gospel unattractive to the LCBC. The CC needs to remove those obstacles in order to lead the LCBC to Christ.

In a mission field, it is essential to make the repulsive into receptive before inviting them to accept Christian faith. The preparation of good soil for planting the gospel seed is essential in a mission field. It is thus important for the LCBC to become receptive in order to enable them to respond to the gospel. The CC thus requires a missiological package as an evangelistic method in mission to the LCBC. The missiological package should include elements such as witnessing Christ with good conduct, building good relations, having Christian-Buddhist dialogue, establishing a well-organized team, contextualizing the gospel critically,⁴ and directing the LCBC to the Father of all, the Source of life, our Lord, our Creator, and our God.

Witnessing Christ with good conduct, building good relationship with the LCBC, and having Christian-Buddhist dialogue are possible ways to overcome the conflict and tension between the CC and the LCBC. Without the tension, the LCBC would give the CC the opportunity to share the gospel⁵ to them and they would be more attentive to the gospel message. A well-organized team is essential to take the full responsibility of the ministry

and study how the gospel can be contextualized critically in a way that enables the LCBC to understand that God who reveals Himself in the Bible is the God of humanity and salvation can only be attained by accepting Jesus Christ as their Savior. Besides, the CC has to lead the LCBC to “move from where they are to where God wants them to be” (Hiebert 1999:28). For examples, the LCB believe that “salvation through faith in Buddha, who alone could deliver mankind from its eternal suffering” (Yang 1991:123). The CC can utilize the same principle to lead them to understand that salvation in Christ is attained by having faith in him. This is a way to help the LCBC to receive salvation by shifting the object of faith from Buddha to Christ. The same principle can apply to assist the LCB to shift their faith in their ancestors and deities to God. God alone is sufficient to be their God. They do not need many gods to serve them but to have faith in just one God, the only God they need to worship. “God is the object of our faith: not only what we believe but also the person in whom we believe, the person we put our faith in” (Aquinas 1999:121).

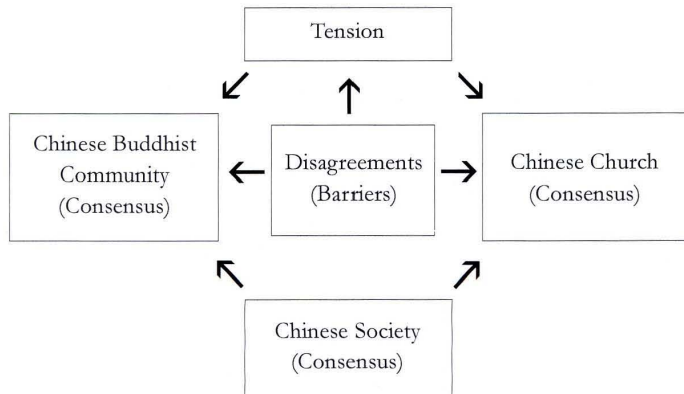
Applying Consensus and Pluralism

The CC needs to apply Rescher’s concept of consensus and pluralism appropriately in mission to the LCBC.

1. Problem of consensus

Consensus is one of the characteristics of the Chinese people. Both the Christian and non-Christian Chinese communities function as consensus. Consensus provides the Chinese with “the reassurance of being on the right track” (Rescher 1996:43). But, it creates disagreements between the CC and the LCBC as both parties hold strongly their beliefs and practices without giving place to each other (Figure 1).

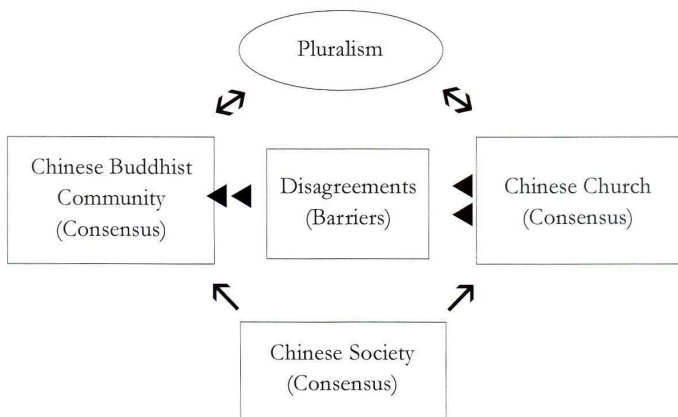
Figure 1: Illustration of the problem of consensus



2. Need of applying pluralism

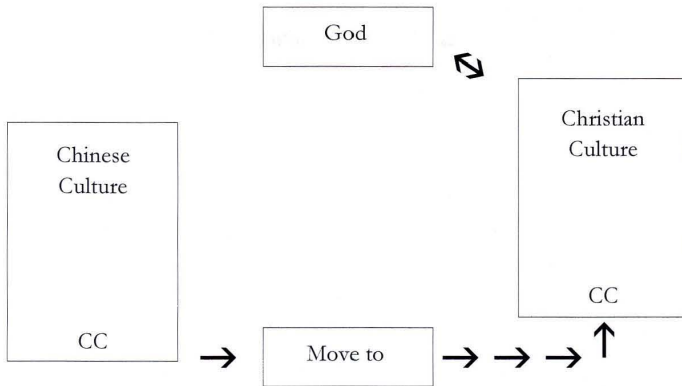
The CC has to realize that the gospel needs to pervade the LCBC through diversification. The CC should not expect all people to exercise the Christian faith according to the CC consensus, such as church tradition and policy, because there are other ways of experiencing God's grace and truth. Therefore, as Christian witnesses, the CC believers should learn to see other worldviews which are different from theirs and lead the LCBC to understand that communication and friendship are possible even when there are different positions and views. Indeed, the CC should encourage the LCBC to express their worldviews so that the CC can understand them and know how to communicate the gospel to them. The CC needs to guide the LCBC to see Christ through pluralism such as other views, beliefs, and experiences (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Illustration of the application of pluralism in Christian mission



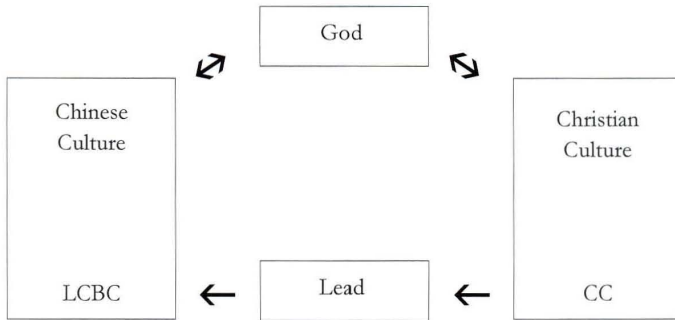
It is essential for the CC not to force the LCBC to believe what the CC holds but to guide them to see God's Truth through their culture and allow them to experience Christ in a way different from the church tradition. In other words, the CC should not try to pull the LCBC out from their culture and put them in what the CC views as Christian culture. The CC should not claim that God can only be found in Christian culture (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Illustration of directing the LCBC to see God through Christian culture



In fact, the CC should lead the LCBC to see God through their culture and help them realize that there are other views and beliefs they have not yet discovered and experienced (Figure 4). For example, the LCBC worship heaven because they believe that there is a divine being overseeing the earth, from whom they receive blessings and punishment. They do not know who the divine being is. Their ancestors called him Heaven because he lives in heaven. They also believe that rain is provided by Heaven. The CC can utilize the view of heaven as a connecting point to lead the LCBC to see what God has revealed about himself in the Bible. “Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy” (Acts 14:17). The Bible clearly states that God is the one who “...causes sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5: 45); he is the one who created heaven and earth (Genesis 1-2); and he is the righteous judge of mankind (Psalm 7:11; Isaiah 33: 22; Ecclesiastes 3:17; 1 Peter 1:17).

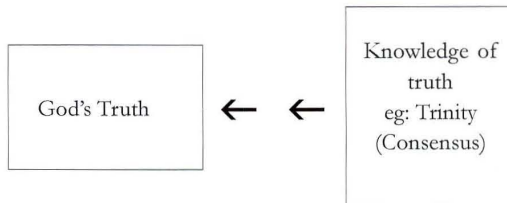
Figure 4: Illustration of leading the LCBC to see God through the Chinese culture



3. Proper use of consensus and pluralism

Consensus is helpful in understanding the core teaching of God’s truth, such as the Trinity which is uniform knowledge. Since “rational insight into the real is beyond us, it is consensus that provides us with the functional equivalent that is the best we can, in the circumstances, manage to achieve in the direction of truth and knowledge” (Rescher 1996:14-15). It is essential to lead the LCBC to see human limitation and the need of exercising faith in accepting God’s Truth. In fact, God’s Truth is consensus. Nothing can be added nor deleted from the Bible (Revelation 22:18-19). Christian witnesses need to be confident in holding the position of consensus when applying God’s Truth in the presentation of the gospel (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Illustration of applying consensus in understanding God’s Truth



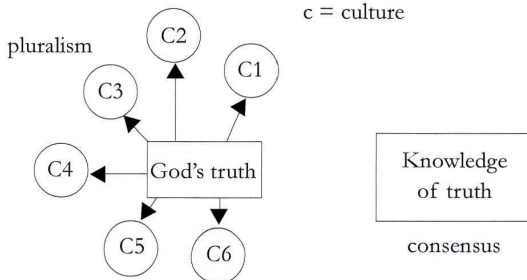
For examples, the LCB believe in many gods. They also believe that the worship of deities and ancestors can bring peace and blessings. The CC needs to direct them to understand the biblical truth: there is only one God who is the God of all, the Trinity. The trinitarian nature of God is understood as three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who belong to or

in one entity. The three persons are one divine being who exist at all time and same time. The Bible repeatedly emphasizes the oneness of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Together, they are one God not three gods. God reveals Himself as Trinity, which is beyond human rational mind to understand God as Trinity. As human beings, we can only respond to this Truth by faith. We cannot change nor modify the Truth according to what our mind can comprehend.

The Bible also tells us that “Worship the Lord your God and serve him only” (Luke 4:8). The God who reveals Himself to us in the Bible should be the one to worship (Revelation 14:7, Exodus 34:2). He is the one who provides every good thing to us (Psalm 16:2; James 1:17). Although God does not promise us that we would not suffer in this life, He promises that He would always be with us. He would protect us and give us peace if we are in suffering (John 14:27, 16:33; Psalm 91: 2-6, 9-12, 14-15). “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1).

When coming to the practical dimension of human life which will be influenced by human experiences application of pluralism is required (Rescher 1996:67). Since different cultures have different ways to understand and experience God’s Truth, God’s Truth should be expressed differently in each culture (Figure 6). The “Bible, may be one, but it is... a one that admits of many constructions and interpretations” (Rescher 1996:79). To understand and accept God’s Truth, the concept of consensus is significant, whereas, to apply God’s Truth to different cultures, different evangelistic methods are allowed to be used (Figure 6). In other words, the concept of consensus is essential in helping the LCBC to accept God’s Truth with faith. The CC, however, can direct them to understand God by utilizing their cultural elements such as religious teaching and belief system.

Figure 6: Illustration of applying pluralism in mission to different cultures



For examples, some Chinese Buddhist terminologies can be utilized in the presentation of the Christian gospel and some major themes of the Chinese Buddhist teaching can be utilized to assist the LCBC to understand the gospel.

The Chinese Buddhist terminologies such the Three Jewels (Zurcher 1962:17) can be utilized in the presentation of the gospel as follows:

<u>Chinese Buddhism: Three Jewels</u>	<u>Christianity</u>
Buddha: He could deliver mankind from its eternal suffering and is seen as the finder of the truth.	Jesus Christ: He is the Savior of the world (John 4:42) and the Truth (John 14:6).
Dharma: It is the teaching of the Buddha.	Bible: It is God's Word to humanity (2 Timothy 3:16-17).
Sangha: It is the Buddhist community who have attained enlightenment.	Church: It is the Christian community who believe in Jesus Christ and have eternal life (John 6:47).

The use of the major themes of Buddhist teaching such as the Four Noble Truths (Rahula 1974:16) is a way to lead the LCBC to see salvation through Christ as follows:

<u>Chinese Buddhism: Four Noble Truths</u>	<u>Christianity</u>
1. Recognition of suffering: The world is full of suffering and every thing is vanity.	Christianity provides the same teaching (Genesis 3:14-20 and Ecclesiastes 1:2).
2. Arising of suffering: Humanity suffers because of their own desires.	Humanity suffers because of the desire of leaning on themselves but not God (Jeremiah 17:5, 48:7; Ephesians 4:22; and Genesis 2:17, 3:6, 16-19; 11: 4,8).
3. Cessation of suffering: To cease suffering is to cease all desires.	To cease suffering is to stop leaning on own self (Proverbs 3:5).
4. Path for the cessation of suffering: Salvation can be attained through good work. It is essential to realize that we do not own anything.	Salvation can be attained through faith in Jesus Christ (John 3:16). It is essential to realize that God is the Lord of creation, and all creatures including humanity are created by him. He is the Lord of our life (Genesis 1-2).

By understanding the different uses of consensus and pluralism, Christian mission is able to identify the differences between the authority of the Bible and the various ways in mission. This helps the CC to realize the importance of developing a missiological approach according to the cultural need and allow the LCBC to come to Christ in their culture.

Words of Encouragement

Leading the LCBC to God might not be an easy ministry. It is difficult to eliminate the religious worldview of the LCBC even though they are born and live in a foreign culture as a minority. The LCB have such a rich culture with a long history of religious tradition. They are born to be the heirs of their ancestors' religious culture with or without their realization. Religious idea is somehow deeply embedded in their worldview.

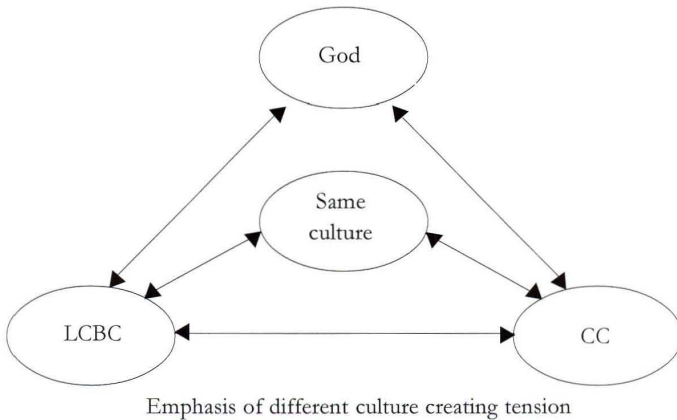
As Christian witness, the CC should not lose faith for "What is impossible with men is possible with God" (Luke 18:27). Furthermore, humanity has the natural instinct to look for God. This is because humanity is created in the image of God. Therefore, there is a tendency for the LCB to come to Christ. It is a matter of how Christian mission utilizes their existing belief system to lead them to Christ. If the LCB have interest to know about Christianity, they are one step closer to Christ. The Bible teaches that "For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened" (Matthew 7:8).

To mission the LCBC, the CC needs to have good conduct, good relationship, good understanding, good team work, good biblical foundation, good approach, good message, and consistent faith in Christ. The CC must serve as the spirit of Paul who says, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow..." (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Conclusion

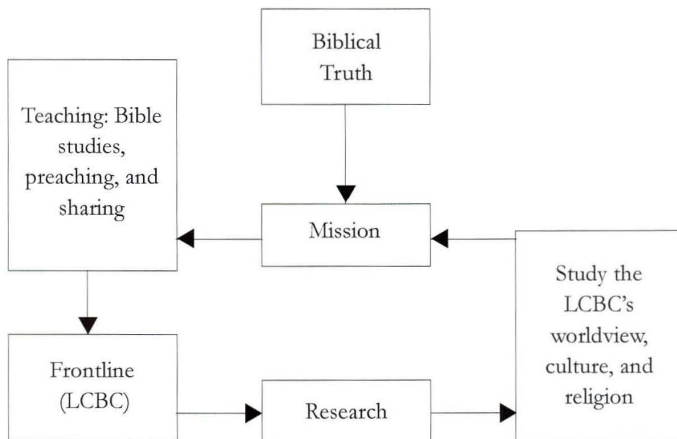
It is essential to bring the CC and the LCBC together in the Kingdom of God and lead the LCBC to enjoy the blessings of God. When cultural difference is emphasized, tension is formed, which lengthens the distance between the CC and the LCBC. If the focus is placed on the cultural commonality, it will bring the CC and the LCBC closer to each other. Both parties will be even closer if they seek the same God (Figure 7). The CC, however, must understand that culture is something that God allows humanity to have. It can be used in mission but it cannot be seen as the authentic standard because of its imperfection as a man-made product. To ensure a culture is on the right track, it is necessary to take the Bible as the authority to countercheck the culture because the Bible reveals the standard of God.

Figure 7: Illustration of the relationship between the CC and the LCBC



The LCBC is a community who seeks to know God and wishes to find the right God to serve. The CC must first lead them to have interest in the Christian faith and then explain to them what the gospel is. The CC can study the LCBC by conducting research among the LCBC, which helps the CC to gain insights for mission. The CC can then develop an appropriate way for presenting the gospel to the LCBC according to the insights which have been evaluated in light of the biblical truth. The presentation can be in a form of teaching, Bible study, preaching, or/and sharing (Figure 9).

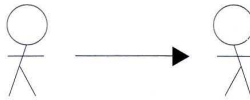
Figure 9: Illustration of steps for sharing the gospel to the LCBC



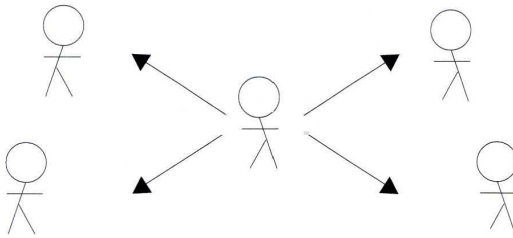
The CC should design a program for the mission to the LCBC and set challenging, realistic, and measurable goals. The program needs to be carried out persistently. During the process, evaluation of the progress and corrective measurement are required in order to adjust the program according to the new found needs and ensure the productivity of the program. The program must be supported by equipping the CC believers to perform the ministry. The CC needs to approach the LCBC both individually and corporately (Figure 8). “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22).

Figure 8: Illustration of individual and corporate evangelism

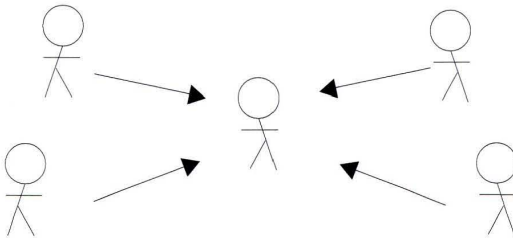
1. Individual influencing an individual



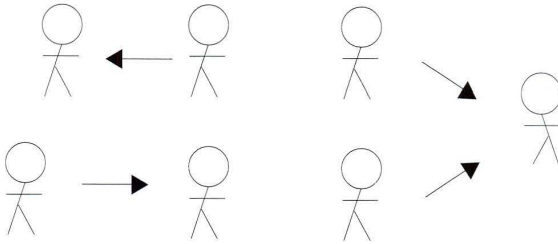
2. Individual influencing a community



3. Community influencing an individual



4. Community influencing a community



The CC should attempt to have more contacts with the outside world to get more information for mission. The CC can send its believers to various parts of the world to receive training so that they can be exposed to various ideas and gain new insights for mission. In this way the CC can equip its believers with the adequate knowledge to mission the LCBC. The significant task in mission to the LCB is to lead them to see the monotheistic God. There is only one Master of life, God - the Father of all, who provides our needs and takes care of us. He is the one and only divine being worthy for humanity to worship.

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Endnotes

¹ Brunei is a country situated on the northeast coast of the island of Borneo.

² Brunei has a population of 348,200. The largest population group in Brunei is Malay (73.8%), followed by the Chinese (14.8%) as the second largest population group. Other population groups are aborigines and others (11.4%).

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnic_Chinese_in_Brunei.

⁴ Contextualization must be done in light of the biblical truth.

⁵ The gospel must be presented in a way that the LCBC can understand and feel related.