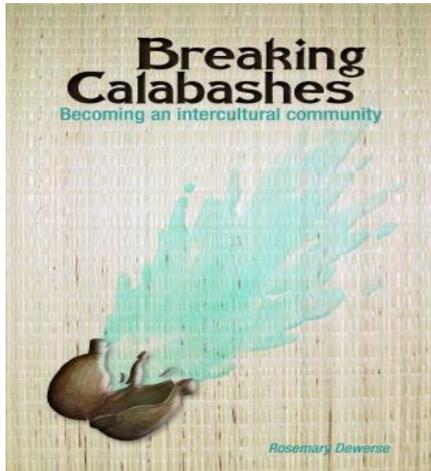


Book Review: Breaking Calabashes: Becoming an Intercultural Community, by Rosemary Dewerse



The church tribe I belong to, the Baptist Union of Victoria in Australia, will be exploring in 2014 how we can be 'Better Together'. Like many churches in the Western world, we desperately want to re-orientate ourselves around mission. We are coming to realise that any single local church, and any mono-cultural group, are unlikely to be able to face the challenge of mission on our own. We need one another. This is true of churches as we support and learn from one another. But we also need one another with our diverse cultural and other different backgrounds.

Rosemary Dewerse is a Kiwi, or New Zealander, who enjoys an ethnically diverse marriage and family. She has worked in intercultural contexts including Central Asia and Maori communities, and is Director of Missiology and Coordinator of Postgraduate Studies at Uniting College for Leadership and Theology in Adelaide, Australia. Dewerse has sought to identify the "calabashes" (a metaphor drawing from a Maori legend) that need breaking to form respectful and mutually enriching relationships with people who are culturally different. Her method was to seek out and learn from teachers who are epitomizing the embrace of intercultural relationships, eighteen of whose voices find their way woven into the book.

The calabashes that need breaking, and the suggested counter-behaviours are:

1. Stereotypes are useful for understanding people.

Instead, we need to care for identity by asking with genuine interest, 'who are you?' and listen to people's hybridity.

2. My voice is most worthy.

Actually, we need to listen to silenced voices, including women and people of other cultures who Western speakers and academic processes sometimes dominate.

3. Cultural ignorance is bliss.

We cannot pretend we live in a mono-cultural world, and so we need to nurture 'epistemic ruptures'. We need to see with new eyes how other people see things.

4. Our kind is better than your kind

Rather than keeping 'them' at a distance from 'us', we need to personally engage with people of other cultures, but also boldly advocate for and deal in justice in our neighbourhoods and society.

The book offers a combination of principles and stories. It teaches practical actions for different approaches to leadership and decision-making that invites and values the 'other' rather than marginalising them. But I especially appreciated the inspiring stories of transformation and conscientization, as Dewerse illuminates the power of welcoming voices who are culturally different rather than the damage of marginalizing them. She is a truth-teller who calls intercultural bad behavior and marginalization for what it is. But she also models 'mission-in-reverse'. Intercultural witness is not about bringing Christ to people, but as an Italian American man explained, 'bringing your relationship with Christ into your relationship with another human being' (p.62) and mutually learning and respectfully being open to conversion from one another's perspectives.

For the sake of the global church, and especially the declining church in the West, we need to identify and develop missional practices. One of the most important practices is hospitality to the stranger and people of different cultures, and by extension different traditions, genders, abilities, persuasions and ages. This is a powerfully transformative practice, as one of Dewerse's poems expresses (pp.62-63):

To choose to listen

really listen

to the other we have silenced

and

to discover

two-way mission

will

I am realising

mess with theology

potentially

change our answers to

Who is God

and

What does it mean to be human?

open up

the possibility of conversion

redefine faithfulness

demand a commitment to

speaking the truth

and a commitment to

listening for it as well.

Breaking Calabashes is one of the most beautifully written books I have read this year. It is not merely a field guide for intercultural communication, but a moving memoir of the author's journey of belonging and learning from her intercultural experiences and the stories of other teachers she interviewed. It is ideal reading for Christians and church leaders who want to foster the richness of intercultural community, and for students of intercultural communication or anyone wanting to go beyond the rhetoric of multiculturalism to the reality of loving and learning from sisters and brothers from different backgrounds.

A Leaders' Guide is available to guide discussion through the book and the author blogs at www.breakingcalabashes.com.

[1] *Breaking Calabashes: Becoming an Intercultural Community*, by Rosemary Dewerse. (Unley, SA: MediaCom, 2013.)