

# **“There’s Just One World”**

A Case Study of Intercultural Bridging in West Oakland

by

Mejin Leechor

Masters Policy Report Prepared for  
the Public Policy Program  
at  
Mills College  
and  
Seminary of the Street  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master's of Public Policy

Advisor: Mark Henderson

May 2011

# Executive Summary

“There’s Just One World”

A Case Study of Intercultural Bridging in West Oakland

Mejin Leechor

May 2011

## *Introduction*

In a society rife with divisions by race, class, religion, and other markers of social difference, intercultural community can seem a distant reality. Social and spatial segregation are the norm, fortifying prejudices and patterns of inequality. In this milieu, how can ordinary individuals build bridges of trust and understanding between groups?

In this first-person study, I investigate the formation of an intercultural bridge between two community groups in West Oakland. One is a progressive, multiracial, interfaith group that relocated its headquarters to West Oakland one year ago. The group is affiliated with Seminary of the Street, the client organization for this report and my spiritual home community. The other is a predominantly African-American church in the Pentecostal tradition. I will call it New Life Church, though the name is fictional.

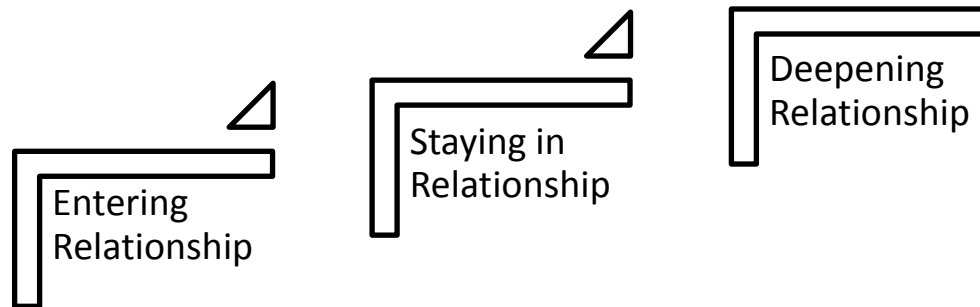
Intercultural bridging is an uphill climb, requiring the negotiation of personal discomfort while challenging deeply ingrained social norms. I explore four behaviors that mitigate culture shock and encourage trust-building: (1) setting aside assumptions about differences, (2) articulating an inclusive ideal, (3) interacting informally, and (4) reciprocating cultural crossings. Once intercultural relationships have taken root, they can support the continuation of the bridging process.

## *Intercultural Bridging*

I use the WORSHIP community’s definition of intercultural bridging, where “bridging” refers to the relationship between groups and “intercultural” characterizes it. First, interculturalism is *disruptive*, entailing a surrender of personal attachment to cultural identity. Second, it is *evaluative*, judging which parts of identity are life-giving and which are not. Third, it is *generative*, forging an entirely new culture from pieces of

the old. Finally, it is *subversive*, confronting systems of power and privilege. The mutually transformative nature of interculturalism defies assimilation-based models of integration. It assumes a two-way bridge that carries traffic not only into the dominant culture but out of it as well.

Below, I offer a visual representation of an individual participant's experience of intercultural bridging (Figure 1). Intercultural bridging is an uphill climb; culture shock is the force opposing it. The journey from being strangers to having a real, mutually transformative relationship is tenuous throughout because each step requires considerable effort to surmount culture shock. There is a perpetual risk of attrition – giving up on being in relationship because the personal costs are too high.



**Figure 1. A Model of Intercultural Bridging**

This study focuses on the points of uncertainty at which individuals can either continue or abandon the bridging process. I identify *bridging behaviors* that mitigate culture shock and enable the bridging process to move forward. I discuss them from the perspective of *home culture* and *newcomer* roles based on the predominant culture and customs of a given activity or space. In a true intercultural bridge, members of both groups occupy each role at different times.

### ***Bridging Behaviors***

#### **(1) Setting Aside Assumptions about Differences**

One way that people stay in relationship across cultural lines is by making a conscious decision to set aside their assumptions about differences. They give up preconceived notions about whether they will be accepted into the unfamiliar and whether they will find the unfamiliar acceptable. Setting aside assumptions is *not*

equivalent to the destruction of those assumptions. It simply demands that people not act on the ones that stand in the way of relationship. Within the context of relationship, beliefs can and do start to change.

## **(2) Articulating an Inclusive Ideal**

A second behavior that enables relationship across lines of difference is the articulation of an inclusive vision of community. In the presence of a newcomer, articulating inclusivity is a gesture of hospitality. It publicly welcomes difference into a space. Group leaders seem to play a unique and important role in initiating this behavior, mediating the presence of a newcomer into a group. Articulating an inclusive ideal can include connecting a situation to its larger social context.

## **(3) Interacting Informally**

Informal interactions invite intercultural relationships into people's personal lives. One way that informal interactions can support bridging is by initiating trust-based relationships that mitigate culture shock in future experiences of cross-cultural immersion. Informal interactions can also serve as a medium for the negotiating cultural discomforts and concerns. Finally, they can provide a conduit for the fourth bridging behavior, reciprocating cultural crossings.

## **(4) Reciprocating Cultural Crossings**

To reciprocate means to return in kind, and in the case of bridging social divisions, what is returned is the willingness to bear the costs of culture shock. A reciprocated crossing reverses the home culture and newcomer roles between groups, turning host into guest and guest into host. Reciprocity is the quality that makes intercultural bridging a true process of two-way integration. Having established individual relationships may be an important prerequisite to the expectation that any crossing will be reciprocated.

## *Recommendations*

- Create or strengthen learning activities in the Seminary of the Street curriculum that develop bridging behaviors
- Involve members of the New Life community in Seminary of the Street leadership and planning
- Continue to practice social reflexivity through dialogue about relations with New Life community and the wider social context
- Bear in mind that institutions do not build relationships of trust and understanding – people do

## *Conclusion*

The experiences of Seminary of the Street and New Life Church have presented a view into an emergent intercultural bridge, demonstrating that it is possible to relate meaningfully across lines of race, class, religion, and worldview. All four of the behaviors discussed in this study involve some element of facing difference and allowing it to have a place in the relationship. We *can* live with difference – but we must learn to live *with* it, not in spite of it or against it.