

**PME Resources**  
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**BOOK REVIEW | BREAKING CALABASHES: BECOMING AN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNITY, BY ROSEMARY DEWERSE**

By Darren Cronshaw

Intercultural intelligence is a foundational skill for contemporary Army leaders that helps foster a future ready workforce. We need to express the Army value of respect regarding the difference and contribution of people from different cultural backgrounds. This is important for teaming behaviours with culturally diverse teams in our workforce. It is also critically imperative for understanding allies and adversaries from different cultural backgrounds.

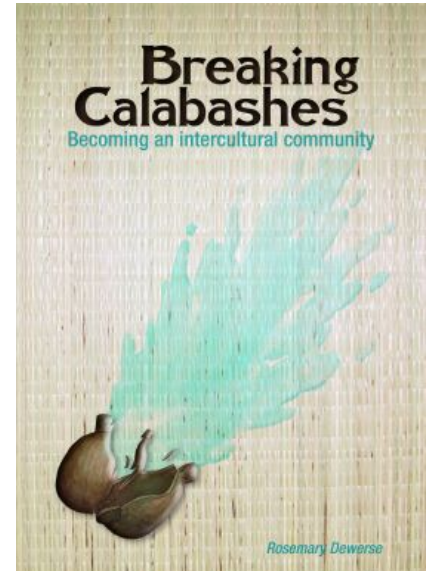
As a chaplain, the church tribe I belong to and denomination I used to work for, the Baptist Union of Victoria, explored back in 2014 and 2015 how we can be “Better Together”. Like many churches in the Western world, we desperately want to re-orientate ourselves to be more relevant in a changing society. As churches we increasingly understand that our mission is to cooperate with God in helping bring the world more into line with God’s dream of justice and peace. But we are also coming to realise that any single local church, and any mono-cultural group, are unlikely to be able to face the challenge of this task on our own. We need one another. This is true for churches that support and learn from one another. But we also need one another with our diverse cultural and other different backgrounds. A similar dynamic exists for Army. As people of different cultures we need to understand and learn from one another. This is true of us as Army as a service within a larger organisation. It is also true beyond us as we partner with others for shared strategic objectives. Equally it is true as we necessarily seek to avoid conflict in the first place with potential adversaries. But what are the postures and behaviours of cultural intelligence and intercultural communication at its best?

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 wrote this book when she worked as 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 helpful method was to seek out and learn from teachers who are epitomising 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-behaviors, 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 conscientisation; Dewerse illuminates the power of welcoming voices who are culturally different rather than the damage of marginalising them. She is a truth-teller who calls intercultural bad behavior and marginalisation for what it is. But she also models “mission-in-reverse” or being open to being converted and changes by people of other cultures we relate to (rather than just thinking we have the wisdom to teach “them”). This is challenging language for people of religious faith including Christians. For Christians, 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. This same principle applies to intercultural learning in other contexts, including Army. What do we have to learn from soldiers from other cultural backgrounds, whether Australian soldiers or soldiers from other countries working alongside or visiting us?

For my work and leadership in churches, and now my chaplaincy in Army, I am convinced that one of the most important practices to foster good teaming is hospitality to the stranger and people of different cultures, and by extension different traditions, genders, abilities, sexual orientations 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. 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. I found it ideal reading for Christians who want to foster the richness of intercultural community in church contexts, But it is also a rich resource for students of intercultural communication and leaders in other spheres including Army who want to go beyond the rhetoric of multiculturalism to the reality of inclusion and learning from and welcoming the contribution of people from different backgrounds.

Notes:

A version of this review was originally published in *Journal of Missional Practice* 4 (Spring 2014), accessible at <http://journalofmissionalpractice.com/index.php/issue-4-spring-2014>

The book's publisher details are Unley, SA: Mediacom, 2013.

A Leaders' Guide is available to guide discussion through the book and the author blogs at [www.breakingcalabashes.com](http://www.breakingcalabashes.com).