

Re-entry Challenges - Church Case Studies

Purpose

For discussion among Christians in British churches who teach, disciple or mentor East Asian students who will return home.

East Asian students returning to churches back home often encounter different practices and perspectives from what they have come to appreciate in the UK. The following case studies seek to raise awareness of some common differences, and the background notes to explain some of the reasons behind them. *Understanding these things can help us avoid producing "British Christians" who will be unable to settle into churches in their home countries.*

How to use this resource

- The case studies work best in group discussion, especially if the group is multi-cultural.
- Intended groups: Globe Café teams, church staff teams or student ministry teams, Friends International clusters...
- You might also be able to discuss it with students, but the questions will need adapting.
- The discussions work best if you allow people to engage with the case study before giving out the background notes.
- Each case study raises several knotty issues, so it's likely you'll only get through one in a single (30-45min) session.

Key lessons

- Church practices in other countries/cultures can sometimes appear inexplicable or unbiblical, but they often make sense within their cultural context and are genuine endeavours on the part of local believers to be faithful to Scripture. We need to hear the best defense for these perspectives/practices before judging them.
- Where we come to the conclusion that some teaching or practice in a foreign church is wrong, humility and wisdom are required as we consider what and how to teach international students who will return to such churches. We need to consider not just the specific issue, but the returnee's relationship and attitude to his local church.
- Teaching international students the tools to humbly discern biblical from unbiblical teaching and practice, and what the non-negotiables are, is very important.
- Lessons we hope to impart to international students regarding the local church include:
 - not being consumers when it comes to church
 - not looking back on UK church life with rose-tinted spectacles, thinking its teaching and practices are automatically right/perfect
 - the value of learning to build one another up in the truth (e.g., supporting one another in prayer triplets) so that even if people end up in a less than ideal church, they can still take some initiative in forming supportive relationships centred on a ministry of word and prayer
 - the importance of settling in one local church rather than flitting between several

Disclaimer

- This resource runs the risk of propagating overgeneralisations. We are sorry about that and are not claiming that any of these perspectives or situations are universal, only that they are common enough to merit awareness and consideration.
- It does not seek to give the "right biblical answer" to each question, and fully expects that different groups will come to slightly different conclusions, having weighed up the contexts and earnestly sought the answers from Scripture.

Case Study 1: Baptism and Honouring Parents

Mei Li was a regular at International Café for the year she studied in the UK. In her final semester, she attended a Christianity Explored course and then started to eagerly read the bible 1-1 with you. Mei Li professed faith in Jesus a month before going home to Taiwan. You encourage her to get baptised before leaving the UK, but there wasn't time in the end; she would do it in Taiwan.

3 weeks after her return home, you Skype her to see how she has been doing:

Mei Li found a church fairly quickly. One of her best friends is a Christian and was overjoyed that she'd come to faith. Mei Li went to church with her. When she spoke to the church leaders about baptism, her pastor interviewed her and told her she wasn't ready. She needed to go through a 10-week baptism class, which would only start in 2 months' time. She was also encouraged to seek her parents' blessing for her baptism, and when she brought the subject up with them, it caused an uproar. They forbade her to get baptised. Her church friends have promised to pray that God would change her parents' hearts, so hopefully her baptism won't be delayed too long. One sister shared that it took her 2 years to get her parents' blessing, but God eventually brought them round. Another friend shared that she didn't go to church for 5 years as a teenager because her parents disapproved. They encouraged Mei Li to be patient.

The other big issue on Mei Li's mind is her choice of job. She had trained as an accountant, even getting a masters in accountancy in the UK, but her real passion is music. She has just been offered an accountancy job in a big firm, but she'd love to teach music to children as a freelancer instead and thus have time to pursue a performance career. Her parents are vehemently in favour of her accepting the accountancy job so that she can help pay for her younger brother's university degree. And her church friends all seem united in advising her to honour her parents' wishes as a good Christian witness to them.

Questions for discussion

- *What are your initial reactions to Mei Li's account?*
- *What are the basic cultural differences that come out?*
- *What background/cultural information would you like to find out more about?*
- *What advice and encouragement would you give Mei Li?*
- *What issues are involved? Which biblical principles/passages would you point her to?*

Background notes to case study 1 (baptism and honouring parents)

Baptism

Mei Li's church is not unique in its approach to baptism. Many Asian churches tend to treat baptism as the culmination of a steadfast, informed decision to follow Christ. Baptism is a public declaration to one's family and friends that you have decided to forsake your previous religious affiliations and align yourself with Christians, calling Christ Lord. Many non-Christian parents allow their children to go to church and attend bible studies etc, but become very upset and actively opposed when their children want to be baptised.

Thus, churches want to ensure that those stepping forward for baptism are ready for potential opposition. They are also keen that people do not publicly declare themselves Christians through baptism and then fall away because they did not know what following Jesus really entailed. In a culture where face is important, this can seriously disadvantage the young Christian. Church leaders are also keen to ensure that the person seeking baptism is not just adding faith in Jesus to a pantheon of other gods or following the crowd, but has personal faith. Hence the practice of holding a baptism class and interview.

Relating to parents

Filial Piety is a deeply ingrained value in Asian culture and in the personal psyche of many individuals. The fact that "honour your father and your mother" is one of the 10 commandments and is "the first commandment with a promise" (Eph 6:2) is important to Asian Christians. It is significant in terms of witness. Parents opposed to their children becoming Christians are sometimes mollified by being shown these verses, seeing that Christianity does not teach their children to reject and abandon their parents. Obeying the 5th commandment is also seen as positive witness because traditionally, one of the key markers of a wise, virtuous person is that they treat their parents well. Conversely, for a young Christian to callously disregard his parents' feelings and openly defy them can be seen as unconscionably ungrateful and immoral.

There isn't a consensus among Asian Christians regarding how exactly they should respond when God's values and commands are in direct opposition to their parents' wishes. Entire books have been written on how to honour one's parents while following Christ* and there is still more to be said. Here are some principles many Asian believers try to live out:

- It is easy to make an idol of honouring/obeying one's parents - it is often the path of least resistance and for many Asians, there is a visceral pull towards this because of childhood memories, cultural expectations, etc. Ex 20:12 needs to be set alongside Luke 14:26, Mtt 10:37 and Acts 5:29.
- On the other hand, to totally disregard your parents' feelings and show contempt for their point of view is surely to fail to obey God's command to honour them.
- So basically, the task is to actively and prayerfully persevere in trying to do all that God calls you to do - get baptised, read the Bible, be an active member of a church, choose a spouse who loves God, share the gospel with family and friends, become a missionary, etc, while also doing all you can to show your parents that you love, respect and care about them. For some, this means delaying baptism for a while, for others, it means not delaying, but finding some other way to show a commitment to their parents.

NB. Getting your parents' "blessing" doesn't mean they have to be enthusiastic. A grudging acceptance is sufficient.

Family Expectations

One practical dynamic worth noting is that whereas in the UK, a system of social security is provided by the state (medical care, unemployment benefits, pensions, etc), in many Asian countries, the only financial plan and safety net you have is your family. Paul's teaching in 1 Tim 5:4 & 8 that Christians should "first of all put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents" and that "anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" makes sense in a way it might not in the UK. Whatever

* E.g., "Following Jesus without Dishonouring Your Parents" by Jeanette Yep, Peter Cha, et al.

choices returnees make when they return will either add to their family's security and welfare or make it less certain.

Furthermore, most international students have not taken out a student loan; they do not owe a financial debt to a bank. Instead, their parents or families have paid for it, often having sacrificed and saved for years. How this debt is to be repaid is often implicit and varies from family to family.

Critiquing the local church

What if we believe Mei Li's local church is wrong in their approach to baptism and honouring parents? Would we encourage her to argue the case with her church leaders or to find another church? If so, we should probably understand that it is often considered inappropriate for much younger people (and younger Christians) to directly disagree with church elders and that many (though not all) local churches would have a similar approach to these two issues. Moreover, Mei Li is such a young Christian, undermining her confidence in her local church may undermine her faith overall.

Case Study 2: Church Authority and Expectations

Here's an email from a returnee who went back to Korea 3 months ago:

Dear Andrew,

Thank you for your email to me. I really miss my time in International Café, the bible study and our church. I enjoyed my Christian life too much those days and I felt so free. After 2 years in the UK, I think I forgotten what being in church in Korea is like, or maybe it is because I wasn't very involved before. But I find it hard now.

We always had such interesting discussion in your Bible Study. Everyone could say their view and ask any questions. And it was 1 or 2 hours. Now the Bible Study I go to lasts at least 4 hours - a long time eating and chatting in the beginning, a long time sharing prayer requests and praying afterwards. Then during the long study, the leader does almost all the talking, teaching so many facts I can't concentrate, like a lecture. And my bible study leader expects me go to the Wed 6.30am prayer time before work too, and also help with the youth group on Saturdays. I'm so tired from work already and I have no free time.

Church is also very different. In England, you always encouraged me to go directly to the pastor if I have a problem about his sermon, but when I did in my Korean church, the pastor just looked at me quietly and walked away. Then my friends told me I was being rude! In the UK, we could just call the pastor by his first name, but here, everyone always calls pastor by his title. Maybe it makes him proud? Also I tried to volunteer for the music ministry but the church leaders told me they would pray about it and let me know where I should serve later. Don't I have the freedom of choice?

You always emphasised about grace, and that we don't have to live by rules. But it seems the church in Korea and Christians here care so much about rules. The sermons here always bring up how we should live because we are Christians, and the church leaders and even other brothers and sisters often tell me how to live - I should wake up earlier so I won't be late for church service, I shouldn't watch so much football, I should go for the prayer meeting, I shouldn't make a certain kind of joke, I should be more grateful to God, I should give 10% of my salary to the church or missionaries...

I think maybe I should try to find another church, or maybe I will grow more by just listening to the sermons online from the UK. I think I gain more from that. My church is one hour by bus from my home. It's tiring on a Sunday.

What do you think?

Jung

Questions for discussion

- *What are your initial reactions to Jung's account?*
- *What cultural differences come out?*
- *What background/cultural information would you like to find out more about?*
- *What encouragement would you give Jung? What would you warn him about?*
- *Which biblical principles/passages would you point him to? (What issues are involved?)*

Background notes to case study 2 (church authority and expectations)

Bible Study Formats

Bible Studies where the bible study leader does most of the talking are not so unusual in Korea and China. Apart from faithfulness to the text, the mark of a good bible study in such models isn't that everyone fully engages in a lively discussion, but that the leader prepared well and is knowledgeable, insightful and interesting. Some Asian students genuinely appreciate this model more than a participative model, as they are wary of everyone sharing their own (relative) ignorance whereas a leader who has prepared well and is an older Christian can open up the text much better. And of course, some leaders are careful to draw responses from group members and encourage questions.

Overall, this more teacher-led approach reflects the general education system. It is how most students are accustomed to learning. Finding a more participative bible study is sometimes possible, but not always.

Church Hierarchy

Asian societies are generally less egalitarian than British society - students usually call their tutors Mr Lee rather than Jack, workers tend not to openly disagree with their boss in a meeting, and younger people are often expected to give up their seats for older people in trains.

Within the church, it's seen as common courtesy not to treat the pastor as "one of us", but to show him respect and deference (Heb 13:17, 1 Tim 5:17, 1 Thes 5:12-13 etc). It's also expected that young people should be humble in their dealings with older people (eg, 1 Pet 5:5, Lev 19:32). As a young person who has just come back from a Western education, it's all too easy to come across as arrogant and critical. If a young person has questions about a sermon, he is expected to first check with his peers or small group leader. Humility and patience are required.

Although it is by no means the norm, it is not very unusual for church leaders to be fairly directive in telling someone where they should serve rather than just relying on them to volunteer. The reason is that the church leaders know where the needs are, and also, if God has indeed gifted someone in certain areas, it should be apparent to others too. The priority is on the church body rather than each individual.

Busyness

As a society, Asians tend to be busy. Achieving a work-life balance is not generally a priority. Most students and young professionals are chronically sleep deprived so it is often just seen as a fact of life.

Within the church, engaging in activities which express your Christian commitment, for example, going to prayer meetings and bible studies, serving in a ministry, doing evangelism, etc, are all seen as important ways to grow as a Christian and love God. Most people assume that feeling tired should not stop Christians from doing these good things - of course service involves sacrifice. Biblical models they might look to are heroes like Paul, who worked harder than any of the other apostles (1 Cor 15:10) and tells us to follow his example, even as he followed Christ's example (1 Cor 11:1). Paul was able to work hard by the grace God gave him, so if people are too tired, perhaps it is because they are working in their own strength - they need to pray more.

On the other hand, the busyness can also be a symptom of a works-based mentality - a desire to repay God for all that He has done for us. There is also the unspiritual motivation of "face", not wanting to look like a bad Christian.

Focus on application

Asian churches tend to speak explicitly and extensively about how we should live as Christians. From a biblical perspective, they would say that Paul, Peter, James and other NT epistle writers weren't shy about instructing and exhorting their readers to live out their faith through their actions, addressing things like how to dress, how to speak, how husbands and wives relate, use of money, etc etc. Christians were told to imitate Paul's way of life (Php 3:17, 1 Cor 11:1) and Timothy was told to live out his faith so that everyone

could see his progress, and to watch his life and doctrine closely (1 Tim 4:14-15). So the focus on the exterior as well as the interior is regarded as normal.

More generally in society, East Asians tend to press advice on each other more than many British people would. Within the church family, this can mean that people take seriously the responsibility to teach and admonish one another (Col 3:16), encourage one another (1 Thes 5:11) and to turn a brother from sin (James 5:19-20).

Unfortunately, the focus on externals can sometimes convey the message that the Christian life isn't essentially about salvation by grace but by works. It can also foster judgementalism and phariseism. Furthermore, not every Christian friend's advice regarding how to live is biblical or helpful.

Christian maturity

Not every returnee can weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of different churches. Criticising the local church to immature Christians may just provide them with an excuse to avoid accountability and costly obedience. Young people tend to see things as black and white anyway, so there may be a tendency to see the British church they are familiar with as perfect and any deviation from that model as unacceptably wrong.

Solo Christianity

Many returnees are tempted to survive as solo Christians, feeding themselves on teaching from the internet but having no fellowship with any Christians locally. There's no biblical warrant for this form of Christianity and experience shows that such returnees lose their faith over time.

Christian life often costs more at home

Being a Christian as an international student in the UK is often fairly comfortable - you're far from family disapproval and societal persecution, you probably experience good fellowship with other students and yet your privacy is respected, churches are welcoming and tend to offer free food and lifts to church, etc. You can't match that experience at home. So the truth that following Jesus will involve sacrifice, service and submission is vital to teach students before they go home.

Case Study 3: The Right Church

Bernard arrived in the UK already a committed Christian from Malaysia. He came to your church and immediately got stuck in, soaking in all the excellent teaching from the pulpit and at bible studies. He was also very involved in campus ministry and received good training at conferences etc. In his final year, he served in student leadership and showed a clear gift for teaching.

A few months before he is set to return home for good, he comes to you asking for your advice about which church he should settle in when he goes home.

The situation is this: He has a home church which he has attended with his family since childhood. His family still goes there and he serves in the leadership team of the youth group, which has about 100 regulars. Although he has been studying in the UK these past 3 years, the youth still keep in touch with him and whenever he is back home during the holidays, he continues to serve there, teaching the young people some of the things he has learnt.

However, he is also very conscious that the preaching and teaching in the church overall is weak. He has grown to value good expositional preaching, but the preaching at home is too often topical, with the pastors jumping from text to text through the bible. And even when the pastors attempt expositional preaching, there is a tendency to use personal illustrations and anecdotes, which he thinks takes away from the truth that authority lies in Scripture alone. The worship band is too showy and draws attention to itself. He has also tried going to a couple of home groups, and the Bible Studies were nowhere as rigorous and text centred as the inductive bible studies in the UK. And the prayer requests shared at the end of the evening did not relate to the passage studied but seemed very worldly - prayer for job interviews, health or children's exam results etc. In fact, the whole church seems worldly to him - many drive to church in big cars, people give special respect to those who have status in society and everyone has the latest smart phone.

He wants to know whether he should find another church to go to. One that helps to stretch and grow him. There is a church in his city which many returnees from the UK and US go to, and he has heard that the preaching is of a high standard. But he is torn, because he would be leaving the church that first disciplined him, and his family will feel hurt. He also knows that if he leaves, it will have an impact on the youth group. And yet, he does not know if he can keep giving in church all the time without also receiving.

He asks you what the Biblical decision would be.

Questions for discussion

- *What are your initial reactions to Bernard's account?*
- *What attitudes (good and bad) do you detect in him from what he has shared?*
- *What cultural and contextual differences should we take into account as we advise Bernard?*
- *Which biblical principles/passages would you point him to? (What issues are involved?)*

Background notes to case study 3 (the right church)

A Critical Spirit

Many returnees struggle with a critical spirit when they return home. They have been exposed to new ideas and practices, expanded their understanding and ministry experience, honed their critical skills through their British degree course and they're now able to dissect every aspect of their home churches with great thoroughness, usually coming up with a dismaying list of shortfalls. Coupled with the effects of reverse culture shock and missing their experience of Christian life in the UK, it's easy for a returnee to feel that there's nothing he can learn from his home church - a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Limited choice

Depending on which city students go back to, there may not be much choice when it comes to finding a church. Students need to calibrate their expectations according to what exists in their location. Setting up an ideal of "excellence" may handicap students. The "quality" and style of preaching which they appreciated in the UK (especially in a large church in a British university city) will be hard to find back home.

Need for discernment

On the other hand, cults are prevalent in many parts of Asia; some cults even have huge church buildings and congregations. It is important to give students the tools to distinguish truth from heresy and non-negotiables from secondary issues, and to be prepared to leave a heretical church no matter the social cost.

The standard of preaching as a top priority

East Asian students returning from the UK, particularly if they have experienced excellent preaching while away, often judge their churches primarily (possibly even solely) by the quality of the preaching. The only way they can imagine growing is through the pulpit ministry.

However, many local Christians would be alert to other aspects of church too - the godliness of church leaders, how sincere their faith is, how loving the church family is and how much they share their lives, whether there are good small groups, whether they try to spur one another on towards love and good deeds, whether the congregation and leaders have a high view of God's word and seek to live under its authority, whether there is a vision for evangelism and discipleship, etc. These are all ways that a church helps us to grow. Even humbling ourselves to learn from imperfect brothers and sisters and serve an imperfect church is a means of growth. Sound (not heretical) teaching is essential and quality teaching desirable, but it isn't the only way to develop as disciples.

Furthermore, students returning home might assume that what qualifies as quality preaching is universal, based on what they most appreciated in the UK. For example, that it should be expositional, not topical, logical not emotional, structured around one main point rather than multi-focal, etc. Many East Asian pastors, even those who regard the Bible as God's authoritative word, do not have the same ideal in mind.

My good vs Our good

As a mature Christian, should Bernard make his decision based primarily on what is best for himself alone, or should he take others into consideration?

While British Christians sometimes face similar dilemmas, the extra dynamic to be aware of is that in Asia, lives are often more enmeshed and interdependent. In an individualistic culture, whatever Bernard decides is generally understood as his personal decision. In a collectivist culture, especially as a respected young leader, his decision is more likely to be read as making a statement, setting an example, etc.

If an East Asian Christian were advising Bernard, some of the things they might ask him to think about are:

- How much his church has nurtured him spiritually in the past and whether there is a debt of love owed.

- Whether his influence with the youth group is such that by staying, he can bring significant change to the whole church over the next 10 years by introducing good inductive bible study methods and expositional preaching to church leaders of the future.
- Whether his going will stumble anyone, especially the youth. Will they leave with him, or stay but be disparaging of church leadership and practices? How will he explain his decision to leave?
- What is his family's spiritual situation? Will Bernard's leaving have any effect on their walk with the Lord?
- It is true that if he is unable to grow personally, he will be unable to help anyone else. But is he sure he cannot grow while a member of that church? Can he try to find/develop a small group of likeminded individuals within the church? Can he supplement the teaching he gets by reading or listen to online sermons?
- Would he consider staying and praying fervently for change within the church and also within himself?

Relating to local church leadership

As a long-standing member of the church, Bernard should try to speak to his pastors back home if he is seriously considering leaving the church. To simply leave without a word of explanation would not be ideal.

Case Study 4: Communal Life

Coming to the UK as an undergraduate, Laura first got to know Christians through International Café, then a local church. Over the next few years, she came to faith and became thoroughly involved in church, where she was much appreciated as an active, enthusiastic, dependable church member. Most of her Christian friends were British, while most of her non-Christian friends were Chinese.

After 5 years, Laura decided that since she would one day return to China, she should start going to the local Chinese church in preparation. Every time she sees you over the next few months, she recounts a new discovery of the differences she is experiencing:

- People are so emotional during the service, they're often crying. After the sermon, they turn to me and ask, "What did you feel?" I never feel anything! Should I?
- People in church talk about spiritual things all the time. Whatever I share, they always turn it into spiritual advice or something from the bible. In British church, we can talk about normal things like TV or sports or jokes. The Chinese church feels unnatural and impersonal.
- One Sunday, I helped in the Sunday School for young children. Then at coffee break, one of the sisters asked me how it went and I said, "Terrible. I don't like children." She looked at me and said, "I'll pray for God to grow more patience in you." I was shocked. In British church, I think I would have got a laugh or some sympathy.
- In our bible study group, people share so much, even very personal problems, sometimes on the first day they meet the group. Once, one girl shared and cried so much that I got uncomfortable, and as the group leader that day, I lightened the mood and changed the subject. Everyone looked at me like I did something wrong.
- Oh, and they always want to hold hands when they pray in the small group. Why must we hold hands?
- The small group meeting always ends very late, even though everyone has work the next day. We eat together first and when the bible study is over, we talk for a long time. Also, one girl lives far away and her bus only comes once an hour, and *everyone* waits for the bus with her. Once I was so tired I just said goodbye and went home first; everyone looked so surprised at me!
- Apart from Sunday service and Friday bible study, we're always meeting up - for meals, to help each other move house, to go to the beach. Sometimes I think I need more personal space, sometimes I think it's nice.
- When I got baptised, everyone in the small group came, even a guy who just joined the group that day. They had to travel for 90 minutes to get to the venue.
- During the summer, half the small group went home to China and we were scattered. But everyone still wanted to meet to pray, so we decided to Skype once a week. The Skype prayer usually lasts 3 hours, because people join late and then all the sharing needs to be repeated.

During those months, as Laura shares her stories, she's constantly tempted to go back to the British church she knows and is comfortable with. What do you say to her?

Questions for discussion

- *Of the differences Laura has noticed, which do you see as cultural and which biblical?*
- *How would you advise and encourage Laura?*

Background notes to case study 4 (communal life)

Ethnic Churches

It is an excellent idea for students who have come to faith in the UK to experience something of what going to church back home would be like by going to an ethnic church. It gives students the chance to process the differences while still in the same city as trusted Christian contacts.

It is unlikely that the local ethnic church will be exactly like the church the returnee will eventually go to at home, but it will still be a helpful stepping stone.

Group orientation

Most of the differences Laura notices are simply expressions of a group oriented culture in the church context. (Some practices are peculiar to this church.) But after 5 years of only experiencing British church culture, Laura has probably imbibed something of British individualism and assumes it is the norm for church life. In the Chinese church, she experiences a greater emphasis on doing things together, which has a higher demand on her time and feels like inefficiency at times. There is often an understanding of the church being your family in Asian churches (it is common to call other believers “brother” or “sister”), with all the corresponding interdependence and entanglement characteristic of an Asian family.

Expressing feelings and sharing deeply

This varies from person to person of course, but in general, British people tend to be a little wary of setting too much store by their emotions, trying to provoke an emotional response, and crying in front of others. High functioning individuals tend not to share too much of their personal struggles and family problems with everyone; they are generally expected to be independent and carry their own burdens. There is also a tendency to avoid coming across as being needy, or too earnest or serious.

Many East Asians don't have the same norms.

NB

These dynamics are possibly the reason why East Asian Christians sometimes find British fellowship groups rather cold, or think that local people are holding them at arms length.

Case Study 5: Boundaries and Work-Life Balance

Keiko came from a Christian family in Japan but she never really owned her faith until coming to the UK as an undergraduate and getting stuck in to church and campus ministry, growing significantly. Post-graduation, she considered doing a discipleship programme in the UK, but she decided she would make the most difference back in Japan. So she signed up to do a year of student work in a big city, working alongside three local staff as well as two young missionaries from Singapore and Korea.

Keiko was really impressed with her team. All of them came to meet her at the airport and then spent the day with her, helping her with all the logistics of moving in and praying earnestly with her. She shared an apartment with the Singaporean and Korean girls, and they made her feel at home, freely sharing whatever they had.

The other girls had a routine of meeting at 6.30am every day to pray together before their own Quiet Time, and soon, Keiko joined them as well. Students often come to the apartment, which is like a second home for many of them. Student work is demanding, as bible studies and meetings take place in the evenings and then students go to the staff afterwards for advice and counselling. Keiko and her flatmates often return home around midnight. In addition, they also try to go to social events the students invite them to, wanting to be like Paul, who delighted to share with people not only the gospel of God but his life as well (1 Thes 2:8).

Keiko's Japanese team leader is a gentle and humble man who leads the student work and pastors a local church. He has four children. He often looks tired at team meetings, and when Keiko asks him about it, the explanation is often that a student/church member called him in distress at 11pm, so he didn't get to bed until 2am. Once he told Keiko that it was hard being responsible for the well being of so many people.

Saturday is the team's day off, but this only remains a day off as long as students don't call a meeting on a Saturday or invite you to a party. Keiko once asked her flatmates about this, and they explained that social time with students wasn't really work. When she tried to explain the concept of boundaries and work/life balance, they said this seemed like a Western concept. They said Paul did not have a balanced life but a single-minded life; the metaphors he used for the Christian life are running a race and fighting a fight (2 Tim 2:3-6, 4:7, 1 Cor 9:24-27 etc), in fact, he wrote about being "poured out like a drink offering" (2 Tim 4:6, Php 2:17). Her Singaporean friend shared that she actually values the times when she feels so exhausted she literally cannot go on in her own strength but has to depend on God. It is how she experiences 2 Cor 12:9.

As Keiko's UK mentor, you hear all this from Keiko over the months. Although she is still zealous, you can see she is often tired out and is starting to show symptoms of depression. When you bring it up with her and suggest she sees a doctor however, she says she has discussed it with her team and they feel it is spiritual attack and they are praying for deliverance.

Questions for discussion

- *What are your initial reactions to Keiko's account?*
- *What are the cultural differences that come out?*
- *What background/cultural information would you like to find out more about?*
- *What advice would you give Keiko?*
- *Which biblical principles/passages would you point her to?*

Background notes to case study 5 (boundaries and work-life balance)

The norms of working life

In general, life in East Asian cities is demanding - long working hours and chronic sleep deprivation are considered normal. In Britain, many people at least theoretically approve of the concepts of work-life balance and boundaries, but that is often not the case in Asia.

These expectations are carried over into the church, where they can take on biblical justification as well. After all, if secular workers can work so hard for the sake of a human boss and temporal reward, how much more should church workers do for the sake of the King of glory and for eternal fruit?

Attitude to suffering

Traditional Asian religions and philosophies esteem asceticism, suffering and self-sacrifice. This perspective can unconsciously carry over into Christianity, so missionaries, pastors and church workers are often seen as better Christians than ordinary Christians. But also, the more such Christian workers suffer, the more godly they are regarded. The expectation can be that they will be poor and overworked, possibly persecuted.

How this can affect Christians in general is that serving in church to the point of burnout is not always discouraged. Furthermore, Christians might also consider going into full-time Christian work simply as an expression of Christian commitment (i.e., not necessarily out of calling or gifting).

It would be unfair to say that these attitudes are purely cultural. Rather, they are enforced as Christians read about

- Jesus, who had nowhere to lay his head and gave his life for us,
- Jesus' disciples whose rest after their mission trip was interrupted in order to minister to the crowds,
- the early disciples who boldly served God despite severe persecution,
- Paul who was beaten, whipped, imprisoned, shipwrecked... and financed his own ministry,
- Old Testament prophets like Job, Jeremiah, Hosea and Ezekiel - none of whom had easy lives.

Arguably, the biblical norm is that God's servants suffer.* At the very least, God's servants need to be prepared to suffer.

Holistic thinking vs categorisation

Speaking very generally, people in Western societies more readily compartmentalise/categorise different aspects of life and relationships. Activity X is leisure and not work, Relationship Y is work and not family, Decision Z is just business and not personal, etc. Traditionally however, East Asians often do not make those distinctions so cleanly. For example, your boss might also be your father, and you relate to him at work and at home in a way that reflects both realities. Going for karaoke with your colleagues is sort of leisure... but if you do not go it will affect your work dynamics.

For a pastor to tell a member of his congregation that he will not see them or join them for an event on Saturday because it is his day off would usually cause offense and even consternation - is his ministry just a job, or is he genuinely serving? Does he really care about me as a person, or am I just of professional interest? (A more acceptable excuse might be for the pastor to say he is really tired and needs to rest, or that he has a family engagement he really needs to honour, etc.)

Mental Illness

This was just glancingly referred to in the case study (ie, Keiko's possible depression) but it is worth knowing that generally in East Asian countries, people often do not regard mental ailments as they would physical ailments, i.e., as having a physiological cause and therefore treatable with medication. Depression and anxiety are more often seen as emotional problems, to be dealt with by a change of circumstances or

* Ajit Fernando's article "To Serve is to Suffer" (www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/august/main.html) is a helpful introduction to one Asian attitude to suffering. His book *The Call to Joy and Pain: Embracing Suffering in Your Ministry* explores the themes more fully.

attitude. Christians might also regard it as spiritual in origin, and pray for deliverance. This is gradually changing however.

Why Rest?

When British Christians try to convince East Asian Christians that they are taking on too much, they sometimes base their arguments on terms like work-life balance, maintaining proper boundaries and self-care. But the latter do not necessarily share the same understanding of these concepts as desirable or biblical ideals. Rather, they can be misunderstood as valuing self more than others, protecting self rather than depending on God, and offering just parts of yourself rather than devoting yourself wholly to God and God's people.

It might be more helpful to unpack the concepts, perhaps picking up on a couple of the following:

- Humbly knowing our limitations as human beings. Our bodies need rest - that is how God made us. Jesus was sleeping on the boat when the storm hit.
- Acknowledging God's sovereignty. We are not God and we are not the Messiah. People should not depend on us the way they depend on God.
- The Sabbath principle. Even God rested from his work, and He clearly set in place a Sabbath principle of rest for us. Being able to cease our labours for one day a week shows that we understand that fruit comes from the Lord. (Some Asians will argue that that the Sabbath does not apply to ministry, since Jesus healed on the Sabbath, so you will need to think of why it does apply.)
- Resting for the sake of others - we often do not realise how impatient, judgemental, demanding and quick tempered we get when we are operating at capacity for extended periods of time, but the people around us feel the brunt of our exhaustion. It is often pride or a wrong image of God that makes us take on a bigger workload than we can actually handle graciously. Are we in danger of being like the older son in the story of the prodigal son - working grudgingly for God as if he were a hard master, and not appreciating our privilege as sons?
- Our responsibility to our families and friends - it is not just our "official" ministries that God has entrusted us with. He has given us the gift of families and friends, and we demonstrate our love for them by spending time with them and enjoying them.