

Mutual Growth in Mission: Insights from Cross-Cultural Ministry Engagement

Priscilla Par

Introduction

Cross-cultural ministry gives an opportunity for people from different cultural, social, and spiritual backgrounds to come together in a shared experience of learning, service, and transformation. This type of involvement particularly benefits theological education because it helps students to engage in ministry settings and reach beyond mere theoretical knowledge. This article explores the findings of a study conducted on cross-cultural ministry opportunities between Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary (APNTS) students and the Chin Student Organization (CSO), a refugee school in Malaysia serving Chin and other ethnic minority children from Myanmar. This study offers important insights into the lived experiences of Chin refugee students, the difficulties they encounter, and the reciprocal benefits of cross-cultural ministry, drawing on participant observation, ethnographic interviews, and focus group discussions. After conducting all the interviews, I completed two coding cycles.

The study's goal was to understand the lived experiences of Chin refugee students, discover the challenges they face, and study how cross-cultural ministry can mutually benefit both CSO students and APNTS seminarians. The study offers an in-depth understanding of the educational, emotional, and spiritual conditions within the CSO setting through qualitative research methods such as focus groups, ethnographic interviews, and participant observation. Overall, it shows how ministry, when implemented relationally and contextually, promotes growth in those serving and those served.

Understanding the CSO Environment through Participant Observation

Participant observation played a major role in understanding the daily life and environment of CSO. The researcher observed students' relationships, behaviors, and needs directly through teaching, leading devotions, and setting up a Bible camp. These experiences proved that CSO serves as an important support network for refugee children navigating difficult, unpredictable lives, in addition to serving as a school.

Despite challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, poor ventilation, and limited resources, the school provides a warm, welcoming, and faith-centered environment. Particularly during interactive activities such as games, singing, and storytelling, which promoted engagement and connection, students demonstrated excitement and a love of learning. Interactive teaching methods proved particularly effective. Through interactive activities, even students who initially showed little interest became more engaged, underscoring the significance of inclusive and relational approaches in ministry.

Students expressed their personal challenges, including concerns about family, health, money, and resettlement, through prayer requests. These observations highlight the school's importance in fostering a feeling of community, emotional support, and spiritual guidance in addition to education.

Challenges Faced by Chin Refugee Students

Ethnographic interviews with CSO teachers further supported the research findings. A teacher described CSO as a safe environment—a place that nurtures hope and faith. The teacher said, "Teachers and staff try to make the school feel like a family where everyone is respected and supported. Even though the school does not have many resources, the students are surrounded by love, kindness, and faith." Although the school provides a safe and supportive environment, students face educational, socioeconomic, and psychosocial challenges. According to the teacher, "Many of our students struggle with financial problems, unstable living conditions, and limited access to proper learning materials. Some have to

help their families earn money, so they miss classes. Others face language barriers, since English is not their first language. Emotional stress and fear about their uncertain future also affect their learning and confidence.” The CSO teacher explained, “Some parents do not have stable jobs, and their children often lack school supplies; sometimes parents have to stop their children from attending school because of financial problems.” Most of the teachers mentioned environmental changes, the emotional stress they experience, worry about their future, and missing class due to family responsibilities.

The teachers’ responses showed that, even though CSO is a safe and supportive environment, CSO students’ educational and socioeconomic circumstances still affect their lives. However, the school helps the students in their studies while they are in school, although external challenges such as poverty, an uncertain future, and language barriers remain as impediments to their holistic development.

Despite these difficulties, CSO is a haven where students can find security, compassion, and optimism. In addition to imparting academic knowledge, teachers are essential in offering emotional and spiritual support. Students’ sense of purpose and belonging is enhanced by incorporating faith-based activities such as Bible instruction and devotions.

Cross-Cultural Ministry as a Space for Mutual Growth

One of the study’s main themes was the concept of mutual growth in mission. A cross-cultural ministry experience can create mutual benefits. The results of this study confirm this notion by showing that the interaction is advantageous to both APNTS seminarians and CSO students. For CSO students, it can provide academic and learning support, spiritual and moral development, and confidence and motivation. According to the CSO teachers, the visiting students (from APNTS) “help teach Bible lessons, English, or character education. Their visits encourage the children and make them feel loved and supported by the larger Christian community. The students enjoy meeting new people and learning from them. It gives them new hope and shows that others care about their lives.” This

illustrates how the interaction can help not only the students' learning but also their emotional and spiritual health. The teacher explained again, "They share not only knowledge but also moral guidance, which helps build the students' confidence and faith. It also gives students a chance to meet role models who care about them and understand their struggles." This shows that the seminarians' engagement in the CSO can encourage students' spiritual growth, provide moral guidance, and foster faith development. The teacher said that the seminarians' presence "really helps the students grow in faith and character. Their presence brings spiritual support and a caring atmosphere to the school." This shows the seminarians' potential to have a positive influence on the CSO students. For the APNTS students, this cross-cultural experience provides experiential and ministry learning, personal and cultural development, student support and mentorship, and holistic engagement activities.

The CSO teacher said that seminary "students gain real experience by serving others with what they have learned about faith, compassion, and ministry in a practical setting." APNTS students can experience real ministry settings beyond the classroom and the book. And he continued, "Theological students can gain real-life experience working with children from refugee backgrounds, learning compassion, patience, and how to teach in challenging situations." The teacher's response demonstrates that APNTS students can develop cultural understanding skills.

The teacher continued, "Church and Sunday School already teach the Bible, but it is also good to include biblical values in school life, like kindness, honesty, respect, and forgiveness. Teachers can show these values through stories, lessons, and how they treat others. It helps students live out their faith in everyday life, not just in church." From such an experience, the APNTS student will be able to develop their mentorship skills. Not only that, the teacher suggests "leading morning devotions or short Bible lessons, helping with English or reading practice, organizing games, art, or music sessions, talking with older students about life and faith, and assisting teachers in class or homework time" as tasks for the seminarians. These activities can allow APNTS seminarians to apply their theological knowledge, build relationships with students, guide them on their spiritual

journey, and mentor them to grow in a godly way. By doing all these things, APNTS students can gain skills in teaching, counseling, and cross-cultural ministry.

After two coding cycles, the findings reveal that CSO provides a holistic and supportive environment where students can experience a safe, nurturing space that gives them a sense of belonging in the community. CSO strengthens students by integrating faith and education, purposefully promoting values and character formation alongside academic study. However, the students still have educational barriers, socioeconomic challenges, and environmental instability. Even so, the visiting teachers contribute significantly to the children's academic, spiritual, and moral development.

Through Christian formation and the opportunity to be a positive influence on students, the visiting teacher gains experiential learning, cultural understanding, mentorship, and leads students through holistic engagement activities. Therefore, such a cross-cultural ministry promises mutual growth in mission both for CSO and APNTS participants.

Research Details

I conducted the focus group via Zoom with selected participants. These participants included a student leader from APNTS, an APNTS faculty member, an APNTS board member, and an administrator. They discussed several topics during the focus group, including the types of student activities that would be most effective or problematic, the strategic, operational, and resource considerations involved, key learnings, and possible obstacles.

The APNTS administrator, faculty member, and student leader were positive and supportive of this project. The participants highlighted the following aspects: ministry preparation; skill development; curriculum support; cross-cultural engagement and student support; refugee child support and holistic care; spiritual preparation and safety; and the institutional role and resource networking. Participants noted that engagement can provide a student with a real ministry experience in a cross-

cultural context and can prepare them for future ministry while developing their skills. Moreover, the participants suggested that the project be aligned with the school curricula. The participants also discussed cross-cultural issues and student engagement. The participants suggest learning the language and culture to make meaningful, effective cross-cultural ministry possible. Moreover, the participants suggested including refugee child support alongside holistic care, such as addressing the emotional, psychological, spiritual, and physical needs of refugee children through ministry and education. Spiritual preparation and safety were also emphasized. The participants advised prayer for students participating in ministry trips, along with safety awareness. In conclusion, the participants highlighted the possibilities for an institutional role and resource networking. The participants advise making a connection with the organization and accessing resources for students.

The two-cycle coding process of the focus group produced findings indicating an opportunity to emphasize holistic ministry skill preparation, where students can improve their practical skills, grow in effective program planning and curriculum support, and experience spiritual readiness essential to meaningful ministry. Furthermore, involving the institution along with other resource networks provides an opportunity to support students who want to engage in cross-cultural ministry.

Analysis

My research provides the following findings. First, the Chin refugee children studying at the CSO school in Malaysia experience a safe, nurturing environment. CSO offers a supportive environment for Chin refugee students. It provides a family-like, caring atmosphere; a faith-centered environment; and a hopeful environment for students. The teachers help them grow academically and personally. However, the students are still experiencing educational barriers, socioeconomic challenges, and environmental instability.

Second, a cross-cultural ministry experience can create mutual benefits for all participants. APNTS students will gain mentorship skills, grow in

personal and cultural development, and receive a hands-on ministry experience. This interaction will promote not only academic development but also the spiritual development of CSO students.

Third, the APNTS faculty, administrators, and students expressed concerns about the possibility of developing an experiential learning opportunity in cross-cultural ministry for APNTS students at the CSO refugee ministry. These included concerns about language barriers, cultural differences, and the safety of the APNTS students participating in this cross-cultural ministry with CSO. The APNTS focus group participants also recommended that we create a pre-deployment course to train seminarians in cultural intelligence, child development curriculum, safe practices, and good missiological practices.

Conclusion

This study's findings indicate that cross-cultural ministry between APNTS students and CSO creates the possibility for a meaningful platform for mutual growth. While Chin refugee students face significant challenges, including educational limitations, socioeconomic hardship, and emotional stress, they benefit greatly from the presence of caring individuals who provide support, encouragement, and guidance. At the same time, APNTS students gain invaluable experience that shapes their personal, spiritual, and ministerial development. Through direct engagement with refugee communities, they learn to apply their knowledge in practical ways, develop essential skills, and deepen their understanding of God's mission in diverse contexts.

Mission is not a one-way process but a reciprocal exchange where both parties grow and learn from one another. By fostering genuine relationships, embracing cultural diversity, and addressing real needs, cross-cultural ministry becomes a transformative experience that extends beyond the classroom and into the realities of life.

In conclusion, developing structured cross-cultural ministry programs can significantly enhance theological education while also providing meaningful support to marginalized communities. Such initiatives reflect

the heart of Christian mission—serving others with love, humility, and a willingness to learn—and offer a powerful model for holistic and transformative ministry in today’s world.