

Stranger in a Strange Land

by Chris Harvey

Paper delivered at the Workshop on Library Services to Multicultural users at the 20th Annual Conference of the Australian and New Zealand Theological Library Association 8 July 2005, Center for Ministry, North Parramatta

Yassou, ladies and gentleman and good afternoon. My name is Christopher Harvey and I am the Librarian at St. Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College located at Redfern in Sydney. I am here to speak to you about my experiences of working in a multicultural environment.

I'll start off by telling you a little about myself, as you can obviously tell by my surname Harvey I'm not a Greek. I'm of Anglo-Irish descent, born in Sydney, a lapsed Anglican, and my experience with Greeks was minimal prior to my starting work at the College in May 1996. My experience of the Greek mind and culture were limited to minimal contact with the local greengrocer, café proprietor or local fish and chip shop owner. Not a good start.

Time

The Greek sense of time, where to start. There isn't one, but they do manage to get things done even though there is a mad rush of activity towards the end, if a deadline is involved. When asked by one of the students, lecturers, or administrators for any assistance I've learnt to ask: "Yesterday, today or tomorrow?"

However, if there is no deadline I've gotten into the habit of saying that it will happen like the "defteri parousia", just have some patience.

Another point about time concerns the students. It's not uncommon for a student to

come racing into the library five minutes before closing and ask for assistance, as they have an assignment due very soon, if not tomorrow. "Always more than willing to help."

I've been undertaking a theology degree through Saint Mark's Theological College in Canberra, which I finish next year.

I've asked on many occasions past and present students why they don't get their assignments done when they get them and why they leave everything to the last minute. The standard answer is, "I work well under pressure".

However, I think Archbishop Stylianos has the correct answer when he says all students are lazy and theological students are the laziest.

A final word on time.

Each year in September the students go away on the Friday afternoon for a weekend retreat. They have never left on time, ranging in running late from about ten minutes to about four hours. I suggested one year that they (the students) organize a book. They all chip in \$1.00 and nominate a time, and whoever gets the closest to the time they leave gets all the money. The students I mentioned this to were mortified that I could tease them so much.

Chris Harvey is the Librarian at St Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College in Sydney.

Solutions

- Expect the unexpected. Also, having been employed at the Archdiocese for over nine years now I know when the busy times of the year are. Constantly remind the students to get the assignments done ASAP.
- Have patience.

Conversations

This was one of the major culture shocks for me. When I first started at the College I was amazed at the number of heated arguments. When I made enquiries to several staff and students at the College about this they were non-plussed. But I have since discovered that in the majority of cases what I thought was a heated argument is just a normal conversation in the Greek language.

Solutions

- Don't assume.
- Do your job and do it well.

Which brings me on to the next topic, language.

Language

When I started at the College I couldn't read or speak Greek. I can now read it, but still very slow and speak it a little, even slower and it's more ecclesiastical Greek rather than conversational Greek.

I still find it exceptionally difficult understanding conversational Greek. If the situation arises where only Greek is spoken by someone I'll usually ask someone to assist and in most cases they're usually more than happy to help out and a three-way conversation ensues.

I'm not sure how many of you have ever watched the Greek news on SBS, but a normal conversation in Greek is like that. No gaps, breathings or breaks between the words, and spoken at a speed that is just astounding.

This reminds me of how the New Testament was written in the original Greek. No gaps or punctuation.

Solutions

- Maintain a good work relationship with the students, staff, and lecturers.
- Listen well.
- Write things down. Learn more Greek.

Gossip

This is something at the College that I find very disconcerting. However, it is also an efficient way of getting information.

Because a large proportion of our students live at the College, as they are from interstate and live in such an enclosed environment, gossip is a problem.

Solutions

- Don't talk about your private life.
- If something is told to you and it's gossip, don't pass it on.

Conclusion

I'd like to close by saying that even though, especially when I started at the College, there was a degree of culture shock on my part I have learnt to deal with it.

I have now been the Librarian at St. Andrew's for over nine years. I enjoy my job immensely (still don't like getting up in the morning, but once I'm up and at work, it's good) and find that the students, staff, and lecturers at the College (and within the Archdiocese) are friendly, supportive, generous and always hospitable.

They have made this stranger feel most welcome.

Thank you for listening ladies and gentlemen.