

# Bridging Barriers

Understanding cultural barriers around  
our discernment and formation process for  
candidates of South and East Asian heritage

Good practice for vocations teams, DDOs, BAP  
advisers and theological educators



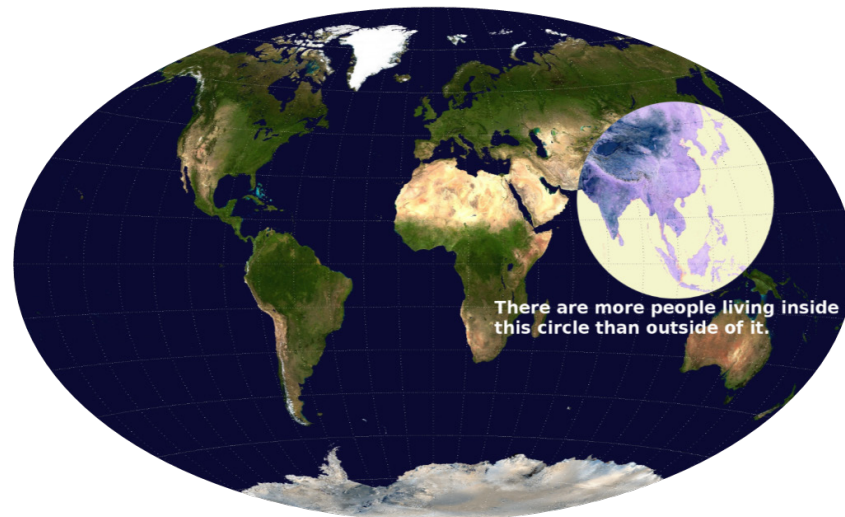
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THE CHURCH  
OF ENGLAND

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## What do we mean by South and East Asia?

South Asia, East Asia, and South East Asia are among the most populous and diverse areas on the planet, with hundreds of different languages spoken. The region includes six of the top ten most populated countries (China, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Japan). It includes the most densely populated country (Bangladesh, not including city states), and also the most sparsely populated country (Mongolia).

There are an estimated 300 million Christians in Asia as a whole, comparable to the entire population of the USA, and this number is rising every day. Christians are a minority in Asia, but a substantial one.

For the purpose of this toolkit, we are focusing on South Asia, defined as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri

Lanka, Bhutan and the Maldives, and East Asia, defined as China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia and parts of far eastern Russia.

For such a diverse area it is very important we avoid generalising or stereotyping. As with anywhere, there is no guide we could offer that would tell you exactly how someone from this part of the world will approach the question of vocation. As Christians, our identity is in Christ, but our behaviour will nonetheless be shaped by our various cultures. What follows is a collation of advice from clergy and ordinands from these regions, reflecting on how they have experienced our discernment process, where cultural assumptions can lead to misunderstandings, and where gifts can go unnoticed or callings unseen.

At Pentecost the disciples were able to be understood by everyone in their native language through the power of the Holy Spirit. Notice how it was the disciples who were gifted with the ability to speak the languages of the crowd, not vice versa. There is a message here about the importance of speaking to people where they are, and not expecting others to conform with our way of doing things first.

Some of what is here is already part of DDO/AV training. The hope is that this toolkit reinforces that learning.

We hope the personal reflections in this toolkit will help equip you to do this, as we work together to foster a culture of vocation that is welcoming and inclusive to all who desire to serve Jesus Christ.

## Acts 2:1

*“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”*



## Explore a sense of calling

Ministers and vocations teams should keep in mind how they are viewed as people of authority.

Hierarchy, and knowing one's place within the hierarchy, is vitally important in some Asian cultures.

You may find more deference and less openness to engage during initial meetings than you are used to. Be mindful that this does not mean that a candidate is unsuitable or disinterested.

A relationship may need to be established before a candidate is more forthcoming on deeper questions to do with vocation and discipleship. People will often wait for permission to speak openly about these things.

Some Asian candidates, because of cultural expectations around humility, respect for those in authority, and reticence in “selling oneself”, might feel less comfortable coming forward for vocations initiatives. A more focused one-to-one approach may be necessary, and over a longer period of time.

You should be prepared to spend hours and to use a full range of questions to help candidates speak confidently about their personal faith journey.

Remember, don't make assumptions about a candidate's theological views simply on the basis of heritage. As with anyone else, it is important to explore a candidate's understanding of different church traditions other than their own.

## Talking points

**I am here to listen to and understand what you would like to share with me.** Purposefully stating this indicates that what will be shared is done so in a safe space, and demonstrates that you respect them as an equal member of the Christian family.

**When did you first go to Church? How did you become a Christian? What do you most enjoy about your Christian life?**

These questions are about establishing trust and developing a relationship, then drawing out aspects of their story.

Doing this first makes it easier to talk about understanding of vocation. Having built a friendship, it is good to ask how the person feels faith has made a difference in their lives. Bearing in mind, ‘relationship’ is vital.

For many East Asians, ‘Guanxi’ is important. Guanxi refers to the system of social networks and influential relationships, especially in China, which facilitate business and other interactions. The way information is given and how much can depend heavily on the Guanxi network and relationship.



### Contributor Biography

## Aggy Palairt

Aggy was born in Hong Kong and raised in England, before studying neuroscience and nutrition in Scotland. Aggy felt called to ordained ministry after participating in local mission. She studied at Trinity College and was ordained in 2021. Aggy is currently a curate at St Mary

Redcliffe in the Diocese of Bristol.

“I love watching God at work, seeing lives transformed, joining in his mission and sharing the love of Christ.”

Aggy has represented South Bristol at deanery synod and on a Bristol-Uganda Link trip. In her previous church, Aggy coordinated Sunday school, was part of the worship team, and was a member of the PCC. In her spare time, she loves playing music with others in an orchestra.

## Advice for DDOs and BAP Advisors

The point about hierarchy and deference is even more important here. Reticence or a seeming unwillingness to speak about gifts and achievements is not necessarily a sign of unsuitability. It may need time to build a trusting relationship to draw out these things. The more 'extrovert' elements of the selection criteria may not be obviously identifiable for some Asian candidates,

but appropriate placements and encouragement should help with this.

Assistance and support may be needed to give candidates confidence and experience in activities such as the BAP Group Exercise. In some Asian cultures, this exercise could feel very alien, as they may not be used to 'talking shops'. Some Asian candidates may need more

### Contributor Biography

## Sarah Siddique Gill

Sarah was born and brought up by a Christian family in a predominantly Muslim village in Pakistan. She taught the Bible for seven years at the United Bible Training Centre in Gujranwala, where she enjoyed working with Christian girls and women, aged 14 to 60. Alongside, she completed her Masters degree in Islamic Studies from the University of Panjab.



In 2002, Sarah was invited by the Church Mission Society to work in South Africa encouraging South to South sharing of resources for ministry and mission. She was then invited to Bradford in 2005 to work with Anglican, Methodist and Baptist Churches in the predominantly Muslim surroundings of Manningham.

It was here Sarah felt called to ordination. She trained at Queen's, Birmingham, and is now Priest-in-Charge of Woodhouse Close Church and Associate Minister in the Parish of St. Andrew with St Anne, Bishop Auckland where she is delighted to work both with Church and the local community.

encouragement in speaking up, and reticence should not necessarily be held against them, as they may simply feel uncomfortable about making points in contradiction to other members of the group. In Western culture, challenging appropriately is strongly encouraged, but it can be very much the opposite in some Asian cultures. Sensitivity is needed in assessing a candidate's skills for leadership and collaboration.

It is very unhelpful to assume that a person who speaks with a strong accent needs to improve their language skills: this is often not the case. Suggesting it as an area of development can feel

patronising or hurtful, even though a candidate might not express this for reasons of respect and courtesy.

Building confidence and helping a candidate to share with the DDO and BAP advisers without being afraid or nervous about their different cultural etiquettes or linguistic challenges is all part of strengthening and encouraging them to discover their vocation. BAP advisers need to remember that they are engaging cross-culturally. Give time for questions to be answered and be very patient when misunderstandings arise.

*I had successfully completed post-graduate studies but needed help with public speaking. My diocese recognised this and provided voice coaching. It was transformative"*

## Yunghee Koh

## Talking points

### How does faith affect your family?

Family is often considered by many as more important than individuals. Personal faith and vocation only makes sense when family and community are involved, so talk openly about how being a priest is perceived within the family.

Emphasising the academic qualifications to be gained through ordination training, and the opportunities for doctoral research

afterwards, can be reassuring for family members, particularly if the family places high value on academic achievement.

### What made you follow Jesus Christ?

As Christianity is a minority religion in Asia, the candidate may have left a well established sociocultural network in becoming a Christian. Remember though that no candidate's faith journey can ever be assumed.



## Advice for TELs about Training

Be aware that the education system in England may be different to what people are used to. This could range from relatively minor things like how references/footnotes should be formatted, to much more major aspects like the expectations of seminar/tutorial debates.

Developing confidence within a more 'extrovert' Western culture is key within training. This includes building confidence to lead, to speak publicly, and to participate in the sorts of groups and committees common within the Church.

These skills are not necessarily lacking, it is rather that 'permission' needs to be assured for some Asian candidates that they may engage in this way.

## Talking points

### "What does Jesus look like?"

Much of the imagery of Jesus in western art is white. Studying Black and Asian Christian theologies can be a major learning experience and a challenge to how all of us visualise our faith.

### Church history and growth

Outside of the West, Christianity is growing, and in many places exponentially so.

It can be discouraging having to adapt to a context of historic decline and the challenges this brings.

Don't assume that quietness is a sign of a lack of social integration or linguistic skills.

Social life and social gatherings, especially around alcohol, can be uncomfortable if not part of one's upbringing. It can take time to choose what is appropriate in such social gatherings without alienating oneself from others.

There may also be cultural norms around accommodation which should be respected.

A diverse teaching staff is an advantage, so consider inviting guest lecturers from across the Anglican Communion to add to the breadth of teaching ordinands receive. Consider also where you advertise when filling vacancies.

On the other hand though, candidates from these regions are less likely to see decline as inevitable and bring much needed hope and expectation that the call to be a growing church is real and achievable. Consider how this perspective can be shared with other ordinands.



## Contributor Biography

### Andrew Zihni

Andrew Zihni was born and grew up in Hong Kong to Greek and Chinese/Thai parents. In childhood he much enjoyed travelling around China, Thailand, and Singapore, which played an integral role in his cultural and personal formation.

Having moved to Britain in the late 1980s to attend boarding school in Kent, he subsequently studied at Eton and Oxford before being ordained in 2002.

Andrew served his curacy in a former mining town in the Diocese of Sheffield, then ministered for eight years at St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, as Minor Canon and School Chaplain, which combined formal teaching and pastoral responsibilities at St George's School with organizing the daily services and state occasions at St George's Chapel.

Andrew was previously Assistant Director of Vocations in the Diocese of Southwark and is now Canon Precentor of Southwark Cathedral.



*From Pakistani female perspective, I found difficult to live in ... mixed accommodation. I made a request to [be moved to] the accommodation with females only. My request was honoured. I felt at ease, secure and confident. My mannerism of approaching altar for communion with head cover and without shoes also attracted leaders/students attention. Takes extra time to understanding [cultural] contexts.*

**Sarah Siddique Gill**



## Contributor Biography Taemin Oh

Taemin is a vicar at the parish of St. George's Enfield, London, and has been since 1st September 2014. He trained residually at St. Stephen's House, Oxford, and served his curacy in Colchester. Taemin is interested in sacramental life and devotions, Church growth and mission, and encouraging vocations to ordained ministry.

He is also a Commissary to the Archbishop of Korea, Vocation Adviser and Dean of BAME Affairs in the Edmonton Area.

## Summary

1. Don't equate reticence with lack of ability
2. Consider hierarchy perceptions
3. Wider family expectations matter
4. Consider the social implications of one's faith journey
5. Reflect on how Jesus is depicted globally in art
6. Don't make assumptions on tradition
7. Be aware of social norms, especially around alcohol and accommodation
8. Ensure a cross-cultural diversity of teaching staff
9. Consider how lived experience of church growth can be shared
10. Remember that we are all individuals, made in the image of God. We all bring a special uniqueness that God wants us to use.



## Contributor Biography Yunghee Koh

Yunghee was born in Jeju in South Korea. She came to the UK with her husband, Taeseok in 1995. She raised a family of two daughters, worked as a Marketing Negotiator and Accounts Clerk, and gained an MA in Children's Literature at Roehampton University. Yunghee became a Lay Minister in 2012 at St James's Church, New Malden. She read for a degree in Christian Ministry at Durham University and joined St Mary's Church Wimbledon in 2016.



Yunghee was deaconed in 2017 and ordained into the priesthood in 2018. In December 2018, she assumed responsibility for St. John the Baptist Church, Wimbledon.

## Contacts

To learn more about cross-cultural understanding in discernment and formation you can contact the ministers who contributed to this toolkit using the contact details below:

Andrew Zihni [Andrew.Zihni@southwark.anglican.org](mailto:Andrew.Zihni@southwark.anglican.org)

Aggy Palairot [aggypal@gmail.com](mailto:aggypal@gmail.com)

Sarah Gill [sarah\\_siddique\\_gill@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:sarah_siddique_gill@yahoo.co.uk)

Yunghee Koh [yungheekoh05@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:yungheekoh05@yahoo.co.uk)

Taemin Oh [taemin.oh@gmail.com](mailto:taemin.oh@gmail.com)

You can also get in touch with our Minority Ethnic Vocations Adviser, Rosemarie Davidson-Gotobed at [rosemarie.davidson-gotobed@churchofengland.org](mailto:rosemarie.davidson-gotobed@churchofengland.org).

Rosemarie is leading on the creation of a mentor directory to help foster a culture of inclusion in the vocational discernment process.

Find out more at [churchofengland.org/mentoring](https://churchofengland.org/mentoring).

Another great organisation to connect with is AMEN - the Anglican Minority Ethnic Network. AMEN promote the presence and participation of Anglicans of minority ethnic heritage in all structures of the Church in the service of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Their website is [www.amenanglican.org](http://www.amenanglican.org).

