There is no “right culture”

We have already stated that when missionaries step into a culture that is not their own, things are not at all familiar. Often when this happens, these missionaries experience what we refer to as culture shock. Culture shock is that distress, disorientation, and unrest that accompany any major change in living and working conditions in a different cultural setting. There are several stages that can be seen during this period of culture shock.

The first stage is fascination. The missionary has just arrived after having raised full support, and all the new sights, sounds, and even smells are a fascination—it seems as if Utopia has been found. However, in a true sense, the missionary is seeing things through rose-colored glasses, and not as things actually are. Stage two can be described as frustration. Now that the new has worn off, the missionary can become frustrated with those things that are not normal. Next comes the crisis stage, and the missionary feels he must either decide to totally lay aside his own national identity or pull into a shell and have nothing to do with the new culture.

While neither is the correct response, at that moment he sees only these two choices. Stage four is a time of adapting, when the missionary begins to find meaning in what is going on around him. Finally, there is the stage of acceptance when one realizes there are different ways of doing things, none of which is totally right or wrong … just different.

What can a missionary do to get through this time of adjusting? First, seek an informant: someone who knows the culture and can give some meaning to what is being faced. Next, keep a diary to put into words what one is experiencing. This often helps the missionary to see things more clearly. Third, thank God for these new circumstances and seek comfort and direction from His Word, knowing that He never means us harm. Finally, the missionary must learn that there is no “right culture.” As missionaries seek to learn, they will be better equipped to carry out the task the Lord has given them.

A great book that will give you even greater insight into crossing cultures is Foreign to Familiar by Sarah A. Lanier. It is available at Amazon.com for around $9.00. If you are interested in missions, it would be a timely investment.

Answering Your Questions About Missions

Culture may be defined as a set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterize an institution, organization, or group. No matter where a group of people may live together, you will find a culture that is distinct. As it relates to missions, an understanding of the culture where a missionary serves is vital if he or she will be effective in ministry. The Apostle Paul described in 1 Corinthians 9:19-22 how he had crossed various cultures and had adapted himself to those cultures so that he might be able to reach those who needed Christ. In this edition of Vision we will be looking at some aspects of culture to which a missionary must adapt as he or she shares the Gospel. We’ll also take a look at culture shock, which most—if not all—missionaries experience in this adaptation process. Our purpose is to help those entering missions to be aware of things they will be facing and to be better prepared to readily adapt. We trust you’ll take the time to read on and learn more about his important subject.

FASCINATION

FRUSTRATION

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Why are these people so different?!

Every society has its own way of doing things that are common to all. However, when an outsider steps into that society, things are not familiar at all. While it is impossible for us to discuss all the various and differing nuances of a culture, we will look at four areas that affect missionaries almost immediately when they set foot on their field of service. Interestingly enough, these are very closely intertwined.

The way people interact or relate with each other varies widely within cultures. We as Americans pride ourselves on our individual accomplishments. We are very much task-oriented, with the purpose of reaching a specific goal. Because of this we oftentimes have a tendency to run over people as we strive to finish our task.

However, a large number of cultures are more relationship-oriented, and being with people and interacting with them is seen to have more importance than a task to be finished. When this is the case, the missionary must adapt and develop those close relationships if he or she is going to be able to share the gospel.

Another aspect of culture that many missionaries struggle with is a society’s view of time. We are very time-sensitive and accustomed to deadlines and being in certain places . . . on time. Again, in many cultures, being bound by a clock is not important. Because they value relationships and people so highly, if a person is in need or has just stopped by to visit, that would take precedence over being at a meeting on time. When they do arrive, and because they value relationships, they will take the time to greet each person present . . . even if the meeting has already begun.

Remember Paul’s words, “I am made all things to all men that I might by all means save some.”

A third aspect of culture is the manner in which people communicate with one another. We Americans pretty much tell it as it is! If a boss is displeased with an employee's work, he does not hesitate to tell him or her so. However, in many cultures where the maintaining of relationships is important, a more indirect language is used to exhort or correct one other. Oftentimes, an intermediary is sought to help resolve the issue. Many a missionary has made the mistake of confronting a national, which in the end has caused both to “lose face.”

The final aspect we will note has to do with food and meals. We often look at food as a means of sustenance and grab it while on the go. In many countries this is a time when family and friends gather and each has opportunity to share. Again, we see the importance of relationships. The sharing of food with others is a way of showing kindness and respect. To refuse such an offer can do irreparable harm.

A failure to recognize these nuances of culture can cause both the missionary and the message to be rejected. Remember Paul’s words, “I am made all things to all men that I might by all means save some.”

Reap the rewards of culture shock

I still remember the morning our family stepped off the plane in Lima, Peru, at about 3:00 a.m. after nearly 22 hours of travel. The oldest of our four children was nine, the youngest a little over three months. I still remember the smells in the air and the fact that the airport was under a curfew because the terrorist group had blown up a high-tension electric tower. The curfew meant that the missionaries who were to pick us up were not allowed to be out on the roads for two more hours. To make matters worse, everyone was speaking a language that was totally foreign to me. I must admit, at about that moment I was asking myself if I had really understood God’s call for our family to Peru.

However, the Peruvians accepted us with open arms—both believers and nonbelievers. A young man in the church we attended while I was in language school (my wife Judy already spoke Spanish) went out of his way to help me with my Spanish and to help me adjust to things that were not normal to me. We moved to Trujillo, where we would be working, and another young man came alongside to help me better understand the culture so as to avoid mistakes and have a greater opportunity to share the gospel. I will be forever indebted to these two young men plus many others who helped out along the way. Whatever success I was able to have in ministry was in part a result of their care.

The Apostle Peter experienced something similar in Acts 10 when he was instructed by the Lord to go to the house of Cornelius. Peter was a Jew and Cornelius a Gentile! Peter quickly learned that with God, nationality and culture don’t make a difference. He soon found a new brother in Christ. Peter made the necessary adjustments and defended his position before the Council at Jerusalem.

I can honestly say that having visited a number of different cultures over a period of 25 years, I am the richer for it. I’ve experienced and learned things that otherwise I would never have known. Don’t let the fear of a new culture stop you from answering God’s call. You and those you reach will be richer for following Him!

‘Til next time,

Rev. Steve Fulks
Administrator for Church Relations and Enlistment
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