

Culture Shock – Living and Serving in Other Cultures

You probably know already that going overseas is not like going to Texas. When you travel internationally there are differences – food, language, modes of living, transportation – that are easy to identify and talk about. But you need to be aware that there are differences that are much deeper – differences in the way that people see the world, ideas, and make moral judgments.

Seeing Through Your Cultural Lens

Culture refers to the total way of life for a particular group of people. It encompasses their assumptions about the world, customs, traditions, language, belief system, social structure and norms. You are the product of your North American culture. There are things that you believe are true, right and normal that have nothing to do with Christianity and everything to do with your identity as an American living in the 21st century. You look at the world and process experiences through this cultural lens.

Through this lens, the sight of three Indian men sleeping side by side in the same bed is shocking. The men in the bed simply think it is an efficient use of space. Keep in mind that cultural confusion cuts both ways. If you are a young American woman walking down the street in a Muslim country, and you try to be friendly by smiling sweetly at the Arab men, you may have, in fact, given them the wrong signal.

Anticipating Cultural Differences

Awareness is the best way to pre-empt being blindsided by cultural differences. Lack of privacy, in particular, can be unnerving to Americans. Bathroom facilities, for instance, may not be private, but shared. You may not find a toilet at all, but simply a hole in the ground. When you do find a toilet, you may not find toilet paper.

Worship is an event in many cultures. There may not be only one sermon, but four. Meals can be eventful as well. Be prepared to be adventuresome at the dinner table. Often you will insult your host or hostess if you refuse to share the food from their table – it isn't always crucial that you know exactly what you are eating.

Culture Shock

Cultural differences are fascinating – not frightening – as long as you are prepared for them. Find out whatever you can about the culture in which you will be working. Be aware that at some point during your overseas experience, cultural differences may make you feel uncomfortable or unusually emotional, or a condition often termed “cultural fatigue,” or in a more severe manifestation “culture shock”. Culture shock has been described in this way, “What happens when you take a man out of his own world and put him down in a place where the assumptions are so different that he can't possibly understand them”

Transcending Culture

You will probably be tempted to be critical of cultural differences. Remember that your judgmental attitude can interfere with the work that the Holy Spirit intends to do through you. Your mission is not to change the culture of the people you encounter, but to introduce them to Christ. Christ transcends your culture and theirs. The truth of the Word of God and the identity of Christ is your common ground.

Pray about ways that cultural differences can be used as a witnessing tool. Casual and oftentimes entertaining discussions about culture, customs and traditions can naturally present an opportunity to share your faith. For instance, it is impossible to talk about the way we celebrate Christmas without mentioning the person of Jesus Christ. Cultural differences are not walls that are impossible to see around and need to be destroyed. Cultural differences are more like open doors leading to conversation, deeper understanding, and ultimately to Christ.

Cultural Differences that Rankle Americans

- **The Language Barrier:** Nothing is more frustrating than not being understood. Many Americans travel with the highly offensive notion that everyone, everywhere, should speak English. However, that notion is false. When you travel to another country, you bear the responsibility of trying to make yourself understood. Learning a few key phrases could head off minor disasters. You may want to start with simple survival phrases and greetings. Then spend as much time with the nationals, and you will be surprised how much you pick up.
- **Privacy:** Living in America is all about capitalizing on and demanding our private space. In most other cultures privacy is neither a priority nor a possibility. Prepare to be jammed into buses, to share bathrooms, to give up some of your closely guarded personal space.
- **Different Notions of Time:** Your watch will probably be the thing that you least need on the mission field. Don't be annoyed if NOTHING runs on time. Relax, kick back and leave your day planner at home.
- **Mobility:** Learn to love public transportation. It is the norm in most places outside the U.S.
- **Convenience:** Not everyone has a microwave, a computer, running water, a telephone, a car, electricity 24/7, a toaster, hairdryer, etc.
- **Choice:** Don't count on finding 108 brands of cereal – in fact, don't count on finding cereal at all. You may find yourself eating rice for breakfast.
- **Poverty:** Very few countries enjoy the standard of living which we are accustomed. Material wealth is not always synonymous with happiness. You aren't on the mission field to share material wealth, but the gospel.

Handling Culture Shock:

- **You aren't alone:** Culture shock is practically inevitable. Take comfort in knowing that almost everyone who lives overseas for a substantial period of time experiences culture shock in some form and to some degree.
- **Learn from it:** Culture shock stems from an in-depth encounter with another culture, in which you learn that there are different ways of doing things that are neither wrong nor inferior. If you meet the shock of cultural differences head on, you can be liberated from the notion that our culture possesses the single right way of providing for human needs.
- **Look for the silver lining:** List the positive things you can identify about your present situation.

- Dig Deeper: Consciously look for logical reasons behind everything in the host culture that seems strange, different, confusing, or threatening. Take every aspect of your experience and search for patterns and interrelationships. Try to trace every action, habit or idea that you think is “strange” to its underlying value or values.
- Avoid bad influencers: Stay away from other Americans who may be in a permanent state of culture shock and want to spend their hours commiserating with you.
- Laugh at Yourself: Inevitably you will make mistakes because of your lack of familiarity with local culture. Don’t be overly sensitive – blush, laugh and get over it. Often your national friends will find your mistakes not only amusing, but also endearing, so long as you are a good sport.
- Be a friend: Invest yourself in relationships with nationals. Try to develop a deeper, more intimate relationship with one or two people. National friends can help you untangle some of the cultural threads that seem so confusing to you.
- Stay Busy: Busyness isn’t always a form of denial. Keep your mind occupied by getting out into the culture and learning the language. Don’t lounge around feeling sorry for yourself.
- Seek the Lord first: Ask the Lord that He might give you a deeper appreciation and understanding for the culture. Pray that He would open your eyes to see how He is working.