

Keys to Understanding and Accepting Cultural Differences

Everyone carries with them a set of expectations, habits and worldview that has been largely shaped by their home culture and environment. We can't help where we were born or who our parents are any more than we can separate ourselves from our culture. The question you should ask when going on a VISA assignment is: "How can my actions effectively communicate the person and character of Christ and not just a picture of Christ in my culture?" Most VISA missionaries don't speak Spanish, French or Swahili fluently, so your actions really do speak louder than words.

Learn about Your Host Culture

Learning about your host culture requires a conscious effort. The VISA office will be able to answer many questions related to your assignment, but field specific information will likely come from missionaries or nationals. If you have access to the Internet, you can find a wealth of information about your host country and other travel related information very quickly. It's also helpful to seek people out who've gone before you. If you'd like us to put you in touch with former VISA missionaries, just ask. What you learn now will help you adapt later.

Develop Listening Skills

When you do get to your host country, begin your cultural study by listening carefully to everything you can. Pay attention to how people greet each other. Listen to how men and women talk. Notice how parents speak to their children and how children speak to their elders. Listen to the language as if your very life depended upon it. If you do this, you'll be much more likely to attempt to speak it.

Hone Your Skills of observation

Observe what goes on around you. If you've never traveled out of the country before, you may not realize that the combination of long airline flights, lack of sleep, time zone changes and heat can really numb your senses. Once sufficiently overloaded, you may not feel like paying attention to how close people stand when talking, or whether or not making eye contact should be avoided. Give yourself a chance to sort things out and adjust to the sights, smells and sounds around you.

Ask Questions

Don't be afraid to ask questions. Missionaries and nationals expect them. It shows you are genuinely interested in the people and the culture. Be careful, though, to make sure they are sincere and not judgmental in tone. Remember, most things you wonder about are not wrong, just different. Having an interest in others is the first step in expressing God's love for them.

Keep an Open Mind

While it is true that it may take years, or even a lifetime, to really understand the people of another culture and to master their language and learn their customs; it's also true that you aren't expected to be a cultural expert! Allow yourself room to make mistakes and grow from them. Be teachable. Listening and observing shows humility.

Be Yourself

You don't have to give up your identity when adapting to another culture, but you may find there are differences in your host culture that require adjustments to your *lifestyle*. Christ had legitimate rights. After all, He was equal with God, yet he gave up His rights out of love for us. Modifying our dress or actions out of respect and love for Christ's church is the least we can do. Keep in mind that becoming more like the missionaries you work with is not necessarily adapting to the host culture.

Be Flexible

As a VISA missionary you will be working with all kinds of people. Plans will change, people will be late and problems will arise. In these situations, it's very important not to demand your own way. Work hard at remaining flexible with your plans. The apostle Paul said, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." 1 Corinthians 9:22.

Be a Servant

Demonstrate an attitude of humility, sacrifice, and obedience. The supreme example of this lifestyle is found in Paul's letter to the Philippians when he wrote

If you have a heart – if you *care* – then do me a favor: agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand. Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of Himself that He had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human!* Having become human He stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, He lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death – and the worst kind of death at that: a crucifixion.

Philippians 2:1-8, [The Message](#)

Seek out ways you can help without waiting to be told. Be sensitive to the needs of those you go to serve.

Don't Underestimate the Power of Prayer

Too much change can be overwhelming, but remember you are not in this alone. Jeremiah 33:3 says, "Call unto me and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know." It is only through regularly meeting with God in prayer that you can know Him and His desires for your life.

We are all partners with God in His mission to see all people come to Him. The prayer support network you develop before leaving on assignment is vital. No doubt you will literally feel the prayers of your support group at some point during your ministry. What a blessing to have this kind of support.

Feed Your Soul

The worship services you attend in your host culture may not be in a language you understand and your days may be so hectic it's difficult to find time to study the Word of God. Psalms 119:34 says, "Give me understanding and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart." We must first have God's message in our hearts before we can share His message from our heart.

The Big Picture

When cultural differences begin to get to you, remember that God was around a long time before automotive transportation, McDonald's, Pizza Hut ,TV's and clocks. He's been at work in all cultures since the beginning of time. What you need to ask yourself is, "How can I fit into God's plan as He works with these people?"

Just as God used the Jewish culture, the Aramaic language and a young girl named Mary to manifest Himself through the person of Jesus, He still uses the created orders of culture, language and person to manifest Himself today.

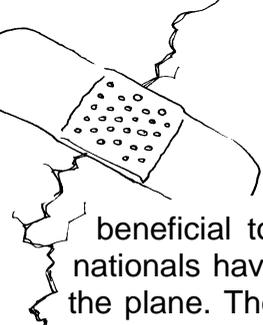


*One should never take
"Well done, thou good and faithful
servant" too literally.*

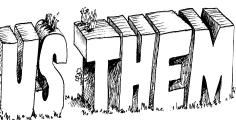
**THE ONLY
ACCURATE WAY
TO UNDERSTAND
OURSELVES
IS BY WHAT GOD IS
AND BY WHAT
HE DOES FOR US,
NOT BY WHAT WE ARE
AND WHAT WE DO
FOR HIM.**

ROMANS 12:3, THE MESSAGE

Guidelines For A Positive Cross-Cultural Experience



These guidelines are to help ensure that your mission experience is beneficial to you and to the host country. Dedicated missionaries and Christian nationals have been working hard to spread the gospel long before you stepped off the plane. They will remain there long after you leave. Following these tips will help ensure that careless action does not jeopardize their ministry.



EMPATHIZE: Put yourself in the shoes of those you are visiting. Try to see things from their perspective.

DON'T EVALUATE: Try not to attach “good” or “bad” labels to the new things you see. Most things are just different from what you are used to.

ALLOW SOME GRACE: Be careful not to criticize the missionary or national leader, even if you think he is wrong. Defer complexities to those who know and understand the culture, customs and history of the host country. Keep in mind that what you see in two weeks is just a glimpse of the whole picture.



CLIQUEES: Avoid standing and sitting with only English-speaking people. Mingle with the people in your host country.



FOOD: Eat what is put before you without negative comments. As Elizabeth Elliott once said, “Don’t you dare sing, ‘Where He leads me I will follow’ unless you are willing to say, ‘What He feeds me I will swallow’.” In many cultures food and sharing a meal are very significant social activities. Often your host will have gone to great lengths and expense to prepare a meal for you, their guest. Do not reject them and their kindness by rejecting their food.

TRANSLATION: When using a translator, remember that what you say will become twice as long. Speak clearly and say only a sentence or two at a time. Don’t quote poetry or use puns. It doesn’t translate well and most humor gets lost.

TIME: Many cultures are more event oriented than time oriented. Be prepared to “hurry up and wait.” Pray, practice memory verses or read an article if you get delayed.

SPORTS: If you engage in unorganized pick-up games, be sure to mix with both teams. Never play an “us against them” game. Don’t get too competitive. Maintain good sportsmanship.

PHOTOS: Be sensitive when taking pictures. Don’t offend by taking pictures of what nationals might consider their private space or a negative aspect of their country. Ask permission before capturing them on film.



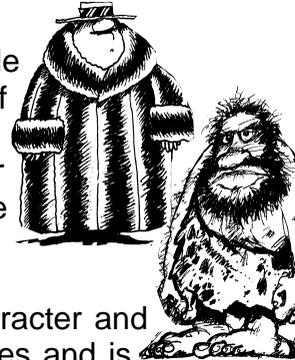


MONEY: As in any large city, including those in North America and Great Britain, you should take care to protect your money and travel documents.

IS ANYONE
OUT THERE
LISTENING?

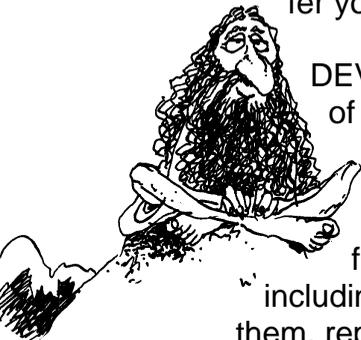
TALKING: Don't talk about the country or its people assuming that those around you don't know what you're saying. You would be surprised at how many people understand English. Be careful about joking. Jokes and sarcasm are easily misunderstood and the tone of your voice is often interpreted as negative. Be sensitive to your volume. Avoid being considered loud and obnoxious.

DRESS: Be careful in the way you dress. Be considerate of the people you're going to serve. Don't overdress or display evidence of economic superiority, or underdress giving them reason to misunderstand your morals. Modesty is not defined by your culture, but by the culture of the country in which you're ministering. Simple and unassuming clothes are best.



RESPECT: Your conduct should reflect a high level of Christian character and commitment. Polite and courteous behavior is expected at all times and is to be extended to *everyone*. Avoid any writing or speaking that would be offensive to the government or to the established religions of your host country.

WEALTH: Be careful not to let your sympathies run away with your judgment. You may feel like emptying your pockets to help certain individuals, but your partiality could create problems. If you want to leave a gift for someone or if you brought things to give away, check with the missionary and/or national leader first. Usually they prefer you to leave the items with them to distribute after you've left.



DEVOTIONS and PRAYER: Devotional time will be an important part of your daily scheduled activities. Your spiritual growth is the most important part of your mission. Prayer is a necessity!

DAMAGE CONTROL: If there happen to be problems on the field, keep them in confidence. There are problems on every field including those in your own back yard. If you feel obliged to talk about them, report to Free Methodist World Missions but not elsewhere.

**Don't let these Guidelines Scare You off.
Use Your Best Judgment and Be
Yourself.**

