

Crossing Cultures



Go Impact

We are called to step over cultural divides to connect with unreached peoples and share the gospel. We do so knowing that the gospel is not tied to any culture, including our own, and can make itself at home in any culture, while challenging and transforming every culture. Our goal is not to turn people from other cultures into North American Christians, but rather to allow the Holy Spirit to transform them into biblically faithful Christians within their home culture.

God is not whatever each culture wants to make God be. Instead, our cultural perspectives both limit and enhance our understanding of who God is.

David Livermore, Serving with Eyes Wide Open

Accept that different is okay.

As you prepare for cross-cultural ministry, take to heart these basic principles:

God is present in every culture, already working, already preparing hearts. There is something of His ways in every culture, and no single culture epitomizes all of His ways. Look for aspects of the host culture that open the door for the gospel.

Differences between cultures are not necessarily better or worse, right or wrong, but are simply different. Each culture has different ways of providing context, making decisions, relating to authority, handling uncertainty, and managing time. Different... not weird.

Crossing cultures is hard work. It means stepping out of your comfort zone of what is familiar, easy, assumed, and known. It requires humility and patience to be a learner.

Research your host culture.

Gather information about your people group and setting. Some good resources are:

peoplegroups.org
joshuaproject.net
operationworld.org

Communicate in-depth with your field hosts. Don't badger them with constant questions (remember, they are engaging in the mission), but do have a thorough conversation about culture. Here are some topics to pursue and questions to ask:

FAITH AND RELIGION

- What religion should we study to help us understand the people with whom you work?
- What evangelism training would be most helpful to have before coming to the field?
- How can we best share our faith in this setting?
- Are there some Christian phrases that hinder the presentation of the gospel in the culture? (Example: Muslims may be offended and respond poorly to descriptions of Jesus as the "Son of God.")

FOOD

- What are best practices for being safe with food and drink?
- How does someone graciously decline a particular food dish due to allergies?

- What is the most appropriate response if a national offers or serves us alcohol?

(NOTE: If anyone on your team has any allergies or medical needs related to food, please make provisions for this and tell your field hosts in advance.)

CUSTOMS

- What cultural norms do we need to know in order to avoid making cultural mistakes?
- How should we treat the different age groups (children, youth, adults, older adults) in the host culture?
- Are small gifts appropriate to give to nationals with whom we work, visit, or stay in their homes?
- What types of small gifts are appropriate in this situation?

POLITICS

- What are topics we should avoid in conversation with locals?

GENDER

- How should we interact with the opposite sex? What are the norms for interacting with the same gender?
- What is appropriate dress?

Develop a training plan.

Preparation for your group should include intentional efforts to help them grow in cultural sensitivity and intelligence. Some teams like to create special experiences like a retreat; others integrate cultural training along the way. Here are some ideas to get you started:

Explore using the WMU's Youth on Mission curriculum or the International Missions Study.

Assign a book to read and discuss as a group.

- *Serving with Eyes Wide Open*, by David Livermore
- *Foreign to Familiar: A Guide to Understanding Hot and Cold Climate Cultures*, by Sarah Lanier
- *Before You Pack Your Bags, Prepare Your Heart*, by Cindy Judge

- *Short-Term Mission Handbook*, by Tim Dearborn
- *Mack and Leanne's Guide to Short-term Missions*, by Mack & Leeann Stiles

Take a field trip to explore and prayerwalk a local ethnic community. Include a meal at an ethnic restaurant and practice appropriate cultural interaction.

Invite a language teacher or native speaker to introduce your group to the host country language and teach some basic terms.

Watch a movie or documentary about the people in the host culture. Preview what you will watch beforehand to make sure it is appropriate and portrays the culture accurately.

Include cultural awareness activities in your preparation meetings. Many ideas are available from educational and teaching sites.

Practice cross-cultural interaction.

No cultural preparation is better than personal experience. Explore the possibilities for relevant cross-cultural experiences in your vicinity. Many churches engage in ministry to immigrants or international students and would welcome your help. Here are some additional ideas:

Learn more details about those you already know from another culture. Seek quality time with them in which you ask a lot of questions and do a lot of active listening.

Research Christian organizations that minister to refugees or immigrants in your area and explore ways your group may be able to serve.

Go to a house of worship of a different faith. Visit a temple, synagogue, or mosque (research and ask in advance about rules of etiquette!). With an adult, talk with the religious leaders. Read the literature you find there – what does it reveal about the centrality of the religion, what's valued, and what's taught?