**Crossing Cultures with Healthy Attitudes**

As we move closer to the actual trip, we need to get into the mindset of going as guests, servants, and learners. We’re going to help children and ministry workers in our host country, not to spread our version of culture to them.

This illustration helps us begin to look at being sent to a different culture through Jesus’ eyes:

- Have you ever considered that Jesus, the Son of God, was also a missionary? He left heaven, stepped out of eternity, and came to us here on earth.
- Have you ever paused to think what it must have been like for Jesus to come to Earth? To leave the perfection of heaven for the brokenness of Earth? To leave His Father’s side to spend time with man, get to know sinners, and eventually die for all mankind?
- Jesus Christ is always our ultimate example. He truly became what Paul desires us to be in 1 Corinthians 9:22 — be *all things to all men.* Above all, our encouragement to you is the same that Paul gave to the church in Philippi: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” Continue to have His attitude as you are preparing to learn, to go and to be transformed.

In coming to earth, Jesus certainly did encounter much that was broken, sinful, and wrong. But He also found much about culture that was simply human, different from His heavenly home. He was able to embrace much about the culture around Him — weddings, travel, religious traditions, food and drink, etc., and use these to connect to the hearts who so desperately needed Him.

You may indeed come into contact with beliefs and practices that don’t line up with Biblical standards. Jesus never pretended that everything about the culture of His earthly world was pleasing to His Father. But neither did He spend His few precious years here making lists of all the things He found odd and attempting to change the way families and communities observed their treasured traditions.

How will we view the cultural differences we encounter? If they surprise or startle us, will we default to considering them “wrong”? Or will we look at them through a wider lens, one which allows us to see the richness of our host country and appreciate this new look at all the ways our brothers and sisters in Christ celebrate life?

**Building Bridges**

Another way to see the embracing of cultural differences is that it’s a way to build bridges. Because we are the ones going into another culture, it is our responsibility to initiate and nourish the bridge-building process. We must be the ones to adjust and make necessary changes to our attitudes and behaviors.

Imagine your upcoming journey as an apprenticeship in bridge building. You can lay the beam, erect scaffolding, and forge cables that make communication between your worlds possible.

Surprise your host community with your initiative at bridge building and you will find their hands joining yours. Building the bridge involves a number of things you can think through before going, as well as others you can work on while you’re there. Unfortunately, some people go on short-term teams and never work at building the bridge. They deprive themselves of some very important personal experiences, which tragically limits their understanding and restricts their growth.

It is useful to remember the roles that will contribute to our ability as bridge builders:

1. **The role of being a guest of the culture.** Think of being a guest in someone’s home. How would you behave, react, interact, etc.?
2. **The role of being a student of the culture.** Think of yourself as a person who is there to study and learn. What behaviors contribute to the success of a student?
3. **The role of being a servant within the culture.** Think of being a person who serves everyone he or she encounters in the country. How does a servant handle differences in others? 

No true bridge-builder has ever claimed that his or her work was easy. It involves planning, engineering skill, the right materials, and lots of labor. But the end result is a safe, trusted path from where you are to where you’re going—a path that welcomes two-way traffic!

**Missionary or Tourist?**

What preparations, both practical and in attitude, can I make so as not to be perceived as a tourist but as a servant? My heart may be right, but without intentionality in my research and my commitment to fit in, I may be perceived very differently than I intend.

Kids Alive serves in many places that see tourists routinely or have a large ex-pat population. Members of the community will be watching your team and wondering what type of group you represent. Many short-term teams are perceived by the nationals and career missionaries who host them more as tourists than as servants.

Thinking about these perceptions ahead of time may help us avoid any sense that our mission is only a side benefit of the trip we're taking. Ask yourself which of the thoughts in each of these pairs most closely describes you:

- **Tourists think:** What can I take on my trip to make me more comfortable?
- **Missionaries think:** What can I do to make the people I'm with more comfortable around me?

- **Tourists think:** I'd like to fix all the problems I see.
- **Missionaries think:** I'd like to know what the people of the culture think are the problems.

- **Tourists think:** I'd like to take you home with me.
- **Missionaries think:** I could live among you.

- **Tourists think:** If I give candy, money, or my shoes I've made an immediate difference.
- **Missionaries think:** What can I possibly do that will make a multiplying, reproducing difference?

- **Tourists think:** I could build a church building FOR the people here for nearly nothing.
- **Missionaries think:** I could plant a church WITH the people here using nothing.

- **Tourists think:** I am on a mission to export my faith and convert people.
- **Missionaries think:** I'm joining God, who is on a mission and already at work among the people.

Motives matter, but so do appearances. If it's likely that I might be mistaken for or perceived as a tourist, then I might very well leave the country having done no more good than a tourist.

**Differences in Christian Cultures**

Many damaging attitudes on the mission field are caused by a misunderstanding of the differences between Christianity and its Western expression. A sincere self-examination of our preconceptions and misconceptions surrounding the role of tradition in worship and practice will help us avoid judgmentalism and fractured relationships as we seek to appreciate the best about the host culture's Christian "personality."

Many of us have encountered questions like these in our own country as we’ve observed disagreements and struggles over “worship styles” or contemporary Christian music or standards of dress. These issues can be even more troubling for Christians crossing cultures, where the underlying societal differences are already wider and less familiar. It's worth an honest examination of the preconceptions we bring with us and how many of them are truly based on faith and how many are based on “what I'm used to.”
Here are some culturally-based issues that can easily become points of division:

- Church here is louder/quieter/more contemporary/more “old-fashioned” than I’m used to
- Nothing ever starts on time
- Men and women are segregated for worship
- Children are/are not included in the church service
- Dress in church (or anywhere) is too formal/too casual/immodest/legalistic
- Women are allowed/not allowed to take an active role in worship
- Coffee or other beverages are/are not allowed in church
- Church services follow a normal, timely pattern
- Christians are/are not allowed to listen to Christian music
- Christians are/are not allowed to have tattoos (or piercings for men)

Do any of these issues strike a chord? Do some of these differences strike you as wrong, rather than simply different? Your hosts might have an equally hard time with some of these when visiting your church!

Knowing Your Host Culture

Why should I go to the trouble of learning about the host culture when I’m only there for a week? Can’t I just [build the building, hold the VBS, train teachers, play sports]?

Well, of course you can... but if you want to leave behind more of an impact than just the event or the structure itself, it will take more than just work clothes and elbow grease. The more you understand about the culture where you’ll be serving, the deeper the results will be when you leave.

Use the time before your trip to learn as much as you can about your host country and even the cities or communities where you’ll serve. Study maps. Learn how to use the currency. Learn some common nouns, verbs, and greetings. Interview missionaries or other people who are from or have served in your destination. Know something about the local foods. As a team, go to a restaurant that specializes in the food of the country you’ll be visiting. Perhaps you could have a team meeting there.

Learn as much as you can so that when you enter this new culture, some things will already begin to appear familiar:

- **Religion**: What are the major religions practiced? How do these beliefs differ from your own? How devout are the people?
- **Politics**: What is the primary political system of the culture? How long have they operated under this system? How does it differ from the U.S.?
- **Social Structure**: How is the social structure set up? What is the view of family? Male roles in society? Female roles in society? Populations?
- **Geography**: What is the basic geography of the country and the climate? Neighboring countries, cultures, religions?
- **History**: How was the country established? Has there been war? Do they have a strong influence in the world around them as a result of their history?
- **Economy**: What drives the country’s economy? Industry, agriculture, or tourism? What is the standard of living? Average income?
- **Time Orientation**: How does your host culture work around time? Are they punctual or always late? Do they start meetings on time, or when everyone is there?
- **Culture**: What are some of their cultural celebrations and holidays? What about arts, drama, and music? Are their cultural beliefs tied to religion?
Be prepared, too, to answer similar questions about your culture, especially ones that might address popular international preconceptions or misconceptions about Americans. The people around you might be just as curious about your background and customs as you are about theirs.

**Understanding Cultural Differences**

You probably expect to deal right away with a new language, currency, systems of measurement, and even weather. But many of the differences you'll encounter are much more subtle and deserve just as much advance consideration.

Here are some of the differences between U.S. values and some other countries' values: 27

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U.S. Values</th>
<th>Other Country Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change</td>
<td>Tradition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>Hierarchy/Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individualism/Privacy</td>
<td>Group's Welfare</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-help</td>
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<td>Competition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Directness/Openness</td>
<td>Indirectness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Materialism/Acquisitiveness</td>
<td>Idealism</td>
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Consider the contrasts between an “individualistic culture” and a “collectivistic” culture:

**Individualistic Culture**

- Emphasizes goals of each person
- “The squeaky wheel gets the grease.”
- Each person looks after themselves
- Values competition between individuals
- Group loyalty is weak
- Emphasis on individual rights to privacy, property

**Collectivistic Culture**

- Emphasizes group goals
- “The nail that sticks up above the others gets hammered.”
- The group will take care of its members in exchange for loyalty
- Values cooperation within the group
- Group loyalty is primary value
- Little sense of privacy or individual rights

Or how about these culturally-based differences in communication styles:

**Direct Communication**

- Relies more on words, and on those words being interpreted literally
- Criticisms are straightforward and it is okay to disagree, or to say no to people
- Use of active voice in grammar is common (i.e., “I broke the plate.”)

**Indirect Communication**

- Relies less on words and more on non-verbal forms of communication
- People are reluctant to say “no.” “Yes” means I hear you
- Use of passive and sterile voice is common (i.e., “The plate fell and broke.”)

*(These comparisons may or may not apply to the country where you'll serve; they're merely meant to point out the rich differences between cultures.)*

**Stress and “Culture Shock”**

It's easy to assume that a Service Team trip is too short to experience true culture shock. While it's true that