

Intercultural Communication

You cannot not communicate; everything you say or do is communicating, whether it is what you mean to communicate or not. Cultures communicate in many different ways, and the effective witness for Christ is the person who can share the gospel in a way that his or her hearer can understand and embrace.

The world is filled with thousands of people groups that interact and communicate in culturally unique ways. Many breakdowns in relationships, from wars to divorces, give witness to how difficult it is to clearly communicate with people. The more unlike two people are, the greater the likelihood of miscommunication.

All cultures use many different systems for communication. We not only use verbal language, but we also employ many other systems to convey information, such as color, time, space, eye contact, gestures, etc. Every ethnolinguistic group has its own verbal language and its own system for communicating in all the other systems. This often results in confusion. In the same way that it would be pointless to preach in English to non-English speakers, it would be confusing to utilize our other communication systems when communicating in another culture.

Harmless gestures in the United States may be offensive in another culture. For instance, during his second inaugural parade, President George Bush flashed the “hook’em horns” sign to the University of Texas marching band. The next day newspapers in Europe expressed shock and dismay. In their cultures, that same gesture is the sign of a Satan worshiper. Clearly, some miscommunication had occurred. While in the United States the peace sign, the victory sign, and the “okay” sign (making a circle with the index finger and thumb) are all understood and acceptable gestures, they are highly offensive in other cultures.

One Asian culture uses red to communicate good fortune, while another uses it for death. Our culture wears white to weddings, while another uses white for funerals. One culture values privacy and individual rights, while others value inclusion and fitting into the collective. The fact that you are a guest who has been left alone all evening in your hotel room communicates respect to you among one people or an insult if done by another.

Advancing the kingdom and glorifying Christ occurs most effectively through culturally appropriate ministry. Culturally appropriate ministry is sometimes as simple as being sensitive to people from other backgrounds. For instance, if you want to win your Muslim neighbors, you will want to avoid having an afternoon barbecue during the month of the Muslim fast or serving pork if you invite them over at other times. Failure in this would communicate an offense to them.

Learn some of the cultural characteristics of the group you are trying to reach. Engage in culturally appropriate ministry if you want them to hear your gospel message. Remember: you cannot not communicate; everything you say or do will communicate something to others, whether or not it is what you meant to say.

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