# Culture-Focused Training for Missionaries

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No vocational path is more rigorous or multifaceted than the path to becoming an effective missionary. Among the most important components in this outcome is cross-cultural proficiency. The correlation between intercultural training and the development of such proficiency is strong (Grove and Torbiorn 1985). Nevertheless, many missions organizations still send missionaries to their assignments without any cross-cultural training at all, expecting them to get the knowledge, sensitivity, and skills they need on the job. The persistence and prevalence of this attitude is surprising. The reasons range from the high cost (especially for short-termers) to ignorance of the advantages the training affords.

Most missionary-sending institutions need to be more intentional about cross-cultural training. Requiring missionaries to have a clear call and commitment, adequate theological knowledge, organizational and team training, on-the-job-instruction, and continuing education is fitting and necessary, but it is not enough. Some process for helping missions personnel to achieve intercultural competence is a must.

## The call for culture-focused training

Some expatriates, with the help of their phrase books, live pretty much as they did back home, but missionaries who hope to communicate the gospel effectively cannot get away with that. The Amish and certain Mennonite groups get along quite well in American culture, but they are out of touch. They have frozen certain aspects of Mediterranean culture (like the wearing of veils and the holy kiss) as well as aspects of their own German background (even the language, Pennsylvania "Dutch"). However, because they are so intent on preserving these peculiar forms and old ways, they forfeit their opportunity to communicate their deepest values and beliefs to the culture within which their own is embedded.

Missionaries can be just as insensitive and ineffective. Imagine, for example, a missionary from the West who is in his eighth or ninth year in India but who still relies on English. He rationalizes that his church is an English-speaking church and that God has called him to work with wealthy individuals who have been trained in

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English-speaking schools. Yet, in reality, he has simply gravitated there. But why has he gravitated there? In India, Christianity seldom trickles down through the class structure, but tends to bubble up. And why does he focus on individuals, when, in India, decisions are almost always made collaboratively by families and caste groups? Our imaginary missionary—who has many real counterparts—may tell you that he can travel to any part of the country and get by. But he is fooling himself. Without an intimate knowledge of the language and culture, his impact is restricted.

For one thing, by refusing to learn Hindi or Urdu, or the local dialect, he betrays an attitude of cultural superiority. Second, his cultural ignorance will almost certainly allow him to major on issues that don't connect with felt needs. For example, he may focus on the burden of sin, when his Indian friends are more weighed down with the burden of *karma.* Third he may highlight the very themes which are most difficult to understand. For example, he may highlight God's final victory, completely forgetting that the Indian view of history is cyclic, not linear. A missionary's task is to convey the essence of the Good News in forms a specific people can use, but the missionary with mono-cultural lenses contemplates only half the task—the theological half—and that from a Western perspective.

Many veteran missionaries have lamented this state of affairs. Among their deepest regrets is not having had the opportunity for culture-focused training at the outset of their missionary careers. Alan Tippett, in his *Introduction to Missiology* (1987:95), speaks for many of them: "Frequently I have reflected on those disillusioning first years of culture shock and thought that, had I been able to do a course in anthropology before going to the field, I could have reached in two years the point of effectiveness that took seven or eight." Tippett added that, after fifteen years on the mission field, he felt the need for anthropological study so urgently that he left the field and went back to school.

Donald McGavran (1990:94) is another who added his voice to the need for anthropological studies. "The Christian," he said, "…turns to anthropology with a good conscience."

An Indian evangelist (S. Devasagayam Ponraj 1987:42), counseling missionaries hoping to plant indigenous churches in India, puts it as well as anyone. He offers a set of eleven church planting principles. Of them, he writes:

> These principles are both biblical and anthropological. They are biblical, because church planting is basically God's work; it is based on God's grace…. However…even though church planting is basically God's work, yet it is man's response to God's saving grace. God uses human efforts; pastors, missionaries and evangelists are needed. We have to understand the local people and their cultural context; to study the anthropological factors; and to follow certain methods of approach. Thus church planting is a joint effort of God and man, and so there is the need for studying biblical and anthropological principles.

In 1974, Alan Tippett served on an ecumenical committee which zeroed in on this problem. It was called the Committee on the Curriculum for Missionary Train-

ing. In spite of the diversity of the group, which ranged from evangelicals to Catholics, there was a clear consensus on the necessity of anthropological training for missionaries. In fact the very first statement in their declaration asserted:

> The training of cross-cultural missionaries for the changing times and conditions of the mission fields of the world in our day, requires more and more understanding and empathy. For many years the discipline of anthropology (especially such aspects as social and applied anthropology, acculturation, cultural dynamics, the phenomenology of religion and ethnolinguistics) has been inadequately utilized in the majority of educational institutions where missionaries are trained. With the availability of this kind of education in our day, the sending forth of missionaries untrained in anthropology is no longer justifiable (C. C. M. T. 1974:1).

There really is no defense for the absence of culture-focused training in the missionary's resume. Only through supplementing theological understanding with anthropological and sociological understanding can missionaries be counted upon to identify and communicate with a people well enough to make the desired impact for the kingdom: the establishment of an indigenous, self-propagating church. As Eugene Nida (1954:250-251) observed:

> A close examination of missionary work inevitably reveals the correspondingly effective manner in which the missionaries were able to identify themselves with the people—"to be all things to all men"—and to communicate their message in terms which have meaning for the lives of all people. Conversely, where missionary work has been singularly unsuccessful, one will always find a failure to resolve the missionary's two great problems: identification and communication.

## A proposal for culture-focused missionary training

What does an adequate model for outfitting missionaries for the cross-cultural part of their calling look like? In what follows, I will briefly describe one model.

The model has three distinct phases or stages. The first has to do with raising cultural awareness, the second with gaining first-hand knowledge about a specific culture, and the third with developing the skills required for an effective ministry within that culture. Although there is overlap, particularly between stages two and three, the sequence of the model is important: the second stage builds on the first, and the third builds on the first and second. To put it another way, the model could be pictured as a ladder, with each rung moving the missionary a little closer to the cultural proficiency required to help establish a truly indigenous church. I have given the following titles to the three stages: (1) Culture-Sensitive Training; (2) Culture-Specific Training; (3) Culture-Smart Training.

### Stage 1: Culture-sensitive training

Given the doleful track record of many missionary sending agencies with regard to cross-cultural preparation—even since the C.C.M.T's statement in 1974—and the

continued resistance of some theological institutions to include even a single offering in missionary anthropology, we cannot ignore the fact that, more than ever, we must affirm the necessity of culture-focused instruction for missionary candidates.

**Two key aims**

In the model I am describing, missionaries would be required to complete a culture-sensitizing program before being accepted for cross-cultural assignments. The primary objectives would be

- to raise applicants' cultural awareness and understanding
- to foster an appreciation of cultural diversity
- to help applicants uncover and evaluate their own cross-cultural attitudes and aptitudes.

These would be achieved substantially through an introduction to intercultural communication and missionary anthropology, including education on such basic concepts as (a) cultural diversity and dynamics, including linguistic diversity and the dynamics of various cultural subsystems; (b) what it takes to adapt to a culture; (c) methods of acquiring intercultural competencies and effectiveness; (d) the significance of cultural forms as conveyers of meaning; and (e) world view (Weltanschauung). Interaction tools, exercises in ethnography, and self-assessment tools related to intercultural attitudes and communication would be employed as well.

**Related objectives**

Creating a consciousness and appreciation of cultural diversity is the primary but not the only aim of this first stage of culture-focused training. Other subordinate, but vital, goals include the following.

**Altering stereotypical and attitudinal biases.** Changing unhealthy beliefs and attitudes before workers get to the field is essential. There is no room for egocentrism or ethnocentrism in the missionary enterprise. Yet, perhaps, in large part because of the absence of culture-sensitive training, cultural arrogance, paternalistic attitudes and other harmful prejudices persist. They are not as exceptional as we might wish.

**Screening.** Closely related to the goal of altering unhealthy attitudes is the goal of gently turning back candidates who do not respond to culture sensitizing. In this way the training program operates as a high-screening agent, eliminating candidates who prove to be culturally inflexible, give no evidence of cross-cultural giftedness, or appear not to be psychologically ready or able to cope with cross-cultural relocation.

On another level, the training may help would-be missionaries to predict their cultural proficiency—for example, their ability, or lack thereof, to adjust to large cultural distances.

**Cultural adjustment.** Another sub-goal is to provide resources for easing culture shock and for expediting cultural adaptation and adjustment. Again, I quote Tippett

(1987:95): “Frequently I have reflected on those disillusioning first years of culture shock….” Cross-cultural training can and does help prepare missionaries for both psychological and socio-cultural adjustments.

With regard to the first, culture-sensitive training can alert future missionaries to what to expect, and it provides them with psychological preparation for the changes they will experience. This would include (a) tools for managing stress, and (b) tests for assessing, up front, the degree of change and adjustment the candidate is psychologically and emotionally equipped to handle. For example, Ward and Kennedy (1993) cite various studies, and offer one of their own, to show how such factors as linguistic ability, quantity and quality of social support, incidences of life changes, knowledge of the host culture, extroversion, and quality of interaction with internationals affect cultural adjustment.

With regard to socio-cultural adjustment, culture-sensitive training can help candidates set personal priorities that will move the transition along more smoothly. For example, the trainee may be introduced to concepts such as Tom and Betty Brewster’s “culture bonding” (1982), a highly regarded approach to identification with a host culture. Another article by the same couple, “Language Learning Is Communication—Is Ministry!” (1984) offers substantial help to missionaries anticipating learning a language in settings where language schools are not an option. Another benefit of the article is that it relieves some of the anxiety of arriving on the field, not expecting to accomplish anything for two to three years until the local language is learned.1

Culture-sensitive training can also help potential missionaries set reasonable goals by giving them realistic expectations about what they can accomplish in the first few months or years. And it can teach them specific methods of culture adjustment like Furnham and Bochner’s (1986) culture learning approach.

## Components of culture-sensitive training

This brings us to the culture-sensitive training itself and its components. What do such training programs look like? In fact, they may have many looks. Most sending agencies will want to develop their own culture-sensitizing training program like the Southern Baptists’ in Richmond, Virginia. Others will join in cooperative schools like the Asian Cross-cultural Training Institute at Singapore.2 Still others will receive candidates from solid training programs that are already in place at institutions like Asbury, Biola, Fuller and Trinity in the United States.

The best of these programs are ones that go beyond mere instructional training and include elements such as those that follow.

**Cross cultural conversational encounters.** These encounters aim to increase student awareness of the lifestyles, values, and viewpoints of persons from other backgrounds. They usually focus on a few of the positive and unique elements of each culture. They depend upon easy access to persons representing various cultures. One example is Beal’s (1986) cross-cultural dyadic encounter, designed for cross-cultural counselors.

**Games and simulation activities.** Games have proved to be strong allies for culture learning. Most work best as small group experiences. Ted Ward (1984:295-312) describes a number of examples, like: “Baggage Check” designed to help missionaries look at their own “Cultural Baggage”; “Postcard Tour” designed to teach careful observation, along with the art of making reasonable inferences; and “Converting ‘Don’t’ to ‘Do,’ ” a contest focusing on turning negatives like “Whatever you do, don’t drink the water” into positives. Simulation activities are often in the form of games too. Their purpose is to confront participants with culturally unfamiliar situations. See Merta, Stringham, and Ponterotto (1968) for instance.

Discussion of Case Studies. **Case studies can be employed in a variety of ways. For example, the classic, “Bod**y Rituals Among the Nacirema” by Horace Miner is often used in a game called “The View from Outside” which helps participants see themselves as those from another culture might see them (Ward 1984:295). Anthologies of case studies, like Hiebert’s *Case Studies in Missions* (1987) make excellent discussion starters and can be selected to highlight specific issues.

**Discussion of films and videos.** At one missionary training school, a final exam in missionary anthropology consisted of watching the film, *The Mission*, and filling out answers in a study guide on “what went wrong.” The responses, of course, had to relate to the concepts covered in the course. Like case studies, films and videos are powerful tools for initiating discussions of a substantial range of cultural matters, and today the selection is extensive.

**Panel presentations.** Cross-cultural panels usually focus on issues. For example, a panel might focus on how missionaries have been perceived and accepted in specific cross-cultural settings.

### The goal restated

To sum up, then, culture-sensitive training, the first stage of our culture-focused model, happens before missionaries are sent to another culture. The objective is not the spiritual formation of potential missionaries (which, presumably, is already well established) but their cross-cultural formation. Culture-sensitive training recognizes that we are all products of our native culture and that we see the world through that culture’s lenses. Therefore, it aspires to lift us above our cultural limitations by providing us with an anthropological base to supplement the spiritual base already in place. Such an anthropological foundation is indispensable to the missionary. As Nida (1954: xi) has said:

> Good missionaries have always been good “anthropologists.” Not only have they been aware of human needs, whether stemming from the local way of life or from man’s universal need of salvation, but they have recognized that the various ways of life of different peoples are the channels by which their needs take form and through which the solutions to such needs must pass.

Effective missionaries have always recognized this fact and have, therefore, been ready to immerse themselves into the cultures to which God has called them. Less

perceptive Western missionaries, who have carried to the field their biases on individualism, progress, race, and Christian conduct, might, in some cases, have been sensitized too, if such training had been available to them. Or—mercifully—they might have decided to stay at home!

## Stage 2: Culture-specific training

Vital and helpful as it is, the first stage of basic, multi-cultural training is not enough. Every culture is special and unique; therefore, first-stage, culture-sensitive training must be followed up with culture-specific training. In other words, culture-sensitive training provides knowledge about cultures. But from the moment of arrival on the field, the missionary is concerned with gaining knowledge about a particular culture. This is why our culture-focused training model must include an intentional second phase.

This process must not happen haphazardly. Without a disciplined pedagogical program, one that teaches the missionary how to understand the perceptual, conceptual and relational worlds of the people he or she is called to, and not just their language and customs, mediocrity is invited. And where the work of the kingdom is concerned, there is no room for mediocrity. Therefore, even though this stage will involve both formal and informal means, it must be intentional and have definite training goals.

### Stage two components

Stage two components would differ from stage one components mainly in their narrowed focus. Again, the spotlight is now on learning a specific culture.

**Intensive language training.** The missionary described at the beginning of this paper, who had nine years of service in the Delhi region but had never learned Hindustani or Urdu, is not anomalous. The popularity of English has kept many English-speaking missionaries from gaining adequate skill in the language of the people to whom God has called them. Rationalizations for this stance range from "everybody speaks English" to "I'm not good at languages" to cultural imperialism (Smalley 1994). The result is that missionary language competence has been eroding steadily in recent years.[3] It is vital that sending agencies not succumb to any of this. Resistance to language learning is not acceptable. There must not be the slightest toleration of excuses for avoiding it or putting it off. Otherwise the missionary will never get beyond being a long-term tourist, able only to reach other English-speaking expatriates, educated internationalists, persons in the host country who know just enough to trade or provide services, and educated, upper-class nationals (Ward: 1984: 146).

**Formal teaching about the local culture itself.** Along with language acquisition, missionaries need to apply their basic knowledge of cultures to understanding as much of their new culture as possible. This includes delving into its history, its interaction with the environment, its social organization, its economics, its foods, its celebrations, its recreations, its struggles and fears, its attitudes toward other groups

and outsiders, and so on. Some of this can be learned formally. Much of it will be gleaned informally.

**Discussions of anthropological studies.** An important way to accelerate and advance learning about a specific culture is to study the available anthropological and sociological research.4 This usually takes a little digging. Much material of this kind is published, but much more is available in unpublished dissertations and in ethnographic notebooks that can be found in the archives of certain major libraries. For example, if one wanted to read missionary ethnographies relating to Polynesia, the Mitchell Library in Sydney, Australia would be the resource center of choice. However, study, by itself is not sufficient. Discussion of one's discoveries in a group setting or with a mentor enhances their usefulness still further.

**Journaling and regular debriefing sessions.** Another kind of planned discussion might be a weekly review of a journal or ethnographic notebook containing questions based on the week's observations and conversations. Such journals should be written prudently, however, to prevent embarrassment if they are, later, read by others.

**Exchanging stories.** Listening to and learning to tell stories has multiple benefits. For one thing, in oral cultures, story telling is a primary means of transmitting knowledge. Western abstract forms of communication don't fit. Similarly, drama and music are usually important means of communication in oral cultures. In some places they are almost as important as food (Adeney 1985: 397). Missionaries must latch onto these and other indigenous forms for learning and teaching.

**Observing veteran missionaries.** Another important learning tool for new missionaries is simply the opportunity to accompany and observe veteran missionaries, including, if possible, some working under other sending agencies. Mentoring relationships are especially desirable. However, a caution is on order. Longevity on the field is no substitute for cross-cultural ability. Veteran missionaries who lack adequate cross-cultural skills will be of little assistance.

**Critical incident discussions.** A tool which has seldom been employed in training missionaries is the intentional discussion of critical incidents, described by Cohen and Smith (1976). The idea is to write, in narrative form, brief descriptions of real or hypothetical cross-cultural incidents for use in group discussion. These descriptions would differ from case studies in that they would record an encounter (between persons from the host and guest cultures) from which more than one inference could be made concerning the interaction. And, in fact, the description of each critical incident would be accompanied by a list of possible inferences. The incidents that are chosen would be representative of key problems or cultural differences that anyone working in that culture will, sooner or later, have to face. Each individual participating in the discussion would have the opportunity to choose from the several possible interpretations of the sequence of events in the encounter. Each of the possibilities would then be discussed by all those present, with special attention given to the most preferred explanation. The goal, of course, would be to provide the new missionary with an interactive experience from which he or she will discover new

facts about that culture's rules, values, perceptions and customs.

**Cross-cultural teams.** These days many missionaries have the advantage of working on cross-cultural teams. This new development is not only an asset in the work itself, but in the training of new missionaries. The dynamics of cross-cultural team work very often contribute substantially to the new missionary's sensitivity, judgement, and rate of development as an intercultural communicator.

Actually any intentional, culture-specific approach to learning about those to whom the missionary is called will be helpful. The point is that each cultural group has unique characteristics, many of which may remain hidden to the missionary for years apart from an informed, disciplined effort to discover them.

### Two learning quests

In stage two of our training model, the importance of two key learning quests are key. One is the search for forms that have the best potential of communicating Christian truth. The other is the search for relational keys.

A wonder of the Good News is that its meaning can penetrate any culture through local forms. A "limitation" is that it must employ local forms. It has no choice. The Christian message will not transpose generically or abstractly. One goal of missionaries, therefore, is to search for forms that will convey the gospel with the least possible distortion. But the search must not stop there, for message clarity is also influenced by the quality of interaction between missionaries and their hosts. For instance, God's Word written to the Jews became immeasurably clearer through God's Word manifest in Jesus' Incarnation. So—in addition to a search for appropriate idioms, metaphors and symbols through which to convey the essence of the gospel—the quest is also an exploration for ways to build trust and to show the love of Christ. That sharpens, still further, the spoken or written word.

## Stage 3: Culture-smart training

The focus of the first stage of our model was on multi-cultural knowledge; the focus of the second stage was on culture-specific knowledge; the emphasis of this last stage is on developing and refining cultural performance skills that allow the missionary to function (as far as is possible for an outsider) indigenously. I call the preparation needed to acquire these indigenous skills, culture-smart training, because the goal is to become just that—culture smart. The terminology is, of course, borrowed from the expression, "street smart" used to describe certain people who live in large cities. Just as "street-smarts" are those who have developed a certain shrewdness for coping in the urban environment, so culture-smart missionaries are those who have gained a truly intimate knowledge of the ways of the people among whom they are living. They have discovered many subtle facts about their adopted culture, have learned to see the world through that culture's perceptual and conceptual framework, and have acquired a thoroughgoing knowledge of their hosts' felt needs, decision-making processes, lines of authority, family structures, and much more. This in-depth cultural knowledge contributes immensely to the refinement of relational and

communications skills. It prevents mistakes, sharpens judgement, enhances creativity, and fashions new channels through which the Holy Spirit may work his convicting and converting power.

What brings about this quantum leap in cultural ability? The best answer is that it is not a leap, but the fruit of a long process. The level of intercultural understanding and skills development of which we are speaking comes through the long-term application of the two forms of culture learning we have already outlined. In other words, culture-smart missionaries have developed the habit of reflecting critically on their own cultural values, attitudes, beliefs, and identity as the result of being sensitized to culture and culture diversity. They have also become students of the new culture in which God has placed them—learning, among other things, the culture's language, customs, history, and values. Finally, they have been, and are, participating in the day-to-day life of that culture, grasping it in ever more detail until they have begun to see what no outsider sees, and have begun to hear what no outsider hears.

One of the most important keys to culture-smart training is the missionary's competence in participant-observation and ethnographic writing. These skills—described in works like James Spradley's *Participant Observation* (1980)—should be introduced in the first stage of missionary training so that, by the last stage, they are second-nature. Becoming culture-smart demands building on what has come before. While support and encouragement are helpful, the last stage of culture-focused training is largely self-directed. In great measure, it will depend upon the comfort level the missionary has achieved as a long-term participant-observer in his or her adopted culture. In other words, culture-smart training involves going beyond the formal study of anthropology to the daily practice of it. It involves going beyond understanding the mechanics of a culture to appreciating the nuances of it. Most of all, it involves going beyond learning a people to living among them and loving them as they are, as members of a unique culture that, in its own way, is as able to express the good news of God's grace as one's own.

## Conclusion

Cross-cultural proficiency is what has always set the great missionaries apart from the rest. The great missionaries have always been those who, out of love for Christ and his creation, were willing to make any sacrifice to draw near to the people to whom they were called. They have learned to think and see as their hosts do. They understand their history and their sense of time and space. They have made it their consuming business to discover the felt-needs of the people and, in order to do so, they have entered into their lives in extraordinary ways, fully identifying with them. That is how they have become culture-smart in addition to being culture-sensitive and culture-specific in their focus.

Let us hope that an ever-more widely-held consensus for the need of an intentional and disciplined adherence to a model such as the one proposed in this paper might produce a greater than ever number of such culturally-astute missionaries in the years to come.

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[1] The Brewster's insight is that missionaries can share themselves and the Good News in the process of learning. They also disagree with the idea that short-term missionaries don't need to become involved in language learning. They too must adopt the "learner posture" if they want to be anything more than tourists.
[2] For a discussion of the advantages of such schools, see "Missionary Training—The Indian Context" by Ebenezer Sunder Raj in *Internationalising Missionary Training* (1991:61).
[3] Smalley cites a number of examples of this phenomenon, which he explains in terms of a worldwide language hierarchy, with English at the top of the pyramid. He cites a dozen predispositions and rationalizations for English language imperialism and prescribes the need for the "cultural conversion of the language learner."
[4] Examples include: Tippett's *Solomon Islands Christianity* (1967), Christian Keysser's (1980) account of his work in New Guinea, and J. Waskom Pickett's (1933, 1938, 1938b) studies of group movements to Christianity in India. There are many such anthropological gold mines for missionaries working in various parts of the world.