



CULTURE



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.



MISSION
GATHERING

HOW CULTURE RELATES TO ACCOMPANIMENT

A lens and methodology for mission today

The ELCA Global Mission program unit defines accompaniment as *Walking together in solidarity that practices interdependence and mutuality*. In this walk, gifts, resources and experiences are shared with mutual advice and admonition to deepen and expand our work within God's mission.

You can find a deeper discussion of accompaniment in a DVD featuring Executive Director Rev. Rafael Malpica Padilla called the *2007 Global Mission Executive Briefing*, and in the paper called *Accompaniment: A lens and methodology for mission today*. But in brief, accompaniment is not a new theology but a new theological understanding of mission methodology. It is a living concept that continues to be articulated and contextualized as we North American Lutherans learn from our history of mission practice and our current engagement with companion churches.

Three stories relate to one another in mission: God's story, my story and your story. Often, in the history of mission, lines have been drawn that disconnected these stories, creating an "other" that is separate.

Whose side of the story has God been on? One goal of accompaniment is to acknowledge that God through Christ has erased the lines that divided us so that our stories—yours, mine and ours—are held together within God's story, like the community within the Trinity. But cultural superiority has sometimes been used to draw a line that puts God on our side of the story, so that the "other" has to *become* like someone in order to *belong* to a community.

In mission history, for example, generally Christians in Africa, Asia and Latin America have been asked to set aside their own culture, stories and narratives, in order to join a mission church. This tendency to want to impose our culture on others

is called cultural imperialism, and has been identified by theologians as one of the "impure motives for mission."

How we engage "the other" is the defining question for mission today. Because culture can enable or hinder our ability to engage "the other" respectfully and with open minds and hearts, this paper explores culture and how it shapes and affects us and our relationships in mission.

The concept of culture: How where we come from affects what we think

Culture is the way that we pattern our human activities and give them meaning. It's a sort of second "skin" of language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization and values that teach us how we eat, dress, wed or raise children. In short, culture is how we "do life."

This shared, learned, symbolic system of values, beliefs and attitudes shapes and influences our perception and behavior. It is an abstract "mental blueprint" or "mental code" by which we operate.

Culture is important because it is a filter through which we perceive particular events and attribute value or meaning to them. Culture is an influence, because it shapes our values, our actions, and our expectations of ourselves. Culture has an impact because it influences our own viewpoint, the way we view others and their behaviors, and our relationships.

Characteristics of culture

Culture is learned. The process of learning one's culture is called enculturation. Our "group" models culture for us. As we grow, we learn by observing the people around us and imitating what we see.

Culture is shared and mutually constructed by members of society. Members of a society agree on the tenets of a culture and practice them together. While individuals have their own habits



and values, there is no “culture of one.” Continual cultural interaction reinforces culture. Other people affirm us when we live by the values of our culture, and discourage us when we don’t.

Culture is patterned. Setting the table, greeting one another, courting—the way we “do life” is patterned in behaviors that we repeat again and again throughout our lives.

Culture is symbolic. Culture, language and thought are expressed through symbols. A flag, for example, without the meaning behind it, would be a piece of cloth.

Culture is internalized. Culture is habitual. We take it for granted, and think of it as “natural.” The dominant U.S. culture thinks that the way that looking directly into people’s eyes while speaking is a natural way of communicating. In other cultures, parents might scold a child for doing so, because it is regarded as disrespectful.

Culture as iceberg

An iceberg is a great analogy for culture. Like an iceberg, culture has observable aspects that are “above the waterline” and larger, invisible aspects “below the waterline” that can only be imagined or intuited.

Food, dress and other surface behaviors are influenced by beneath-the-surface values and assumptions. For example, notions of modesty affect the style of dress. In India, for example, a woman may be covered from head to foot, except for her midriff. In the dominant U.S. culture, a woman’s midriff might be covered, but she would still wear shorts.

Even behaviors that appear similar above the water may have different meanings under the water. The OK sign that is inoffensive to most North Americans has negative connotations elsewhere. These different, below-the-water signals are one reason why culture contributes to miscommunication in relationship!

In relationships, we can use the iceberg to deepen our understanding of where other people are coming from, and what brings meaning to the behavior.

Cultural superiority

When icebergs encounter one other, difficulties can occur! We tend to look at the world primarily through the lens of our own culture—a process called ethnocentrism that leads us to believe that our own ethnic group and its culture is superior to others. That leads us to seeing other groups and customs not as “different” but as “wrong.” For example, in the United States, we drive on the “right side” of the road. In Britain, they drive on.....the wrong side!

We start as ethnocentric people, and through interactions with others we realize that there are many cultural lenses. But having the power to impose the values, belief and culture of one group onto another is cultural superiority. Mixed with mission, it can lead to situations in which people have to “become in order to belong” – that is, have to set aside their culture and worldview in order to be accepted as believers.

For example, while western missionaries to 19th century Africa were often sympathetic to local culture, they “seldom escaped the fundamental colonial assumption of European superiority” that Africa’s cultures and religions were “primitive, inferior and of little or no value,” writes Dr. Jan Pranger, assistant professor of World Christianity at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota.

Intercultural competence

Faced with a plethora of cultural icebergs in our relationships and a tendency to fall back on presumptions of cultural superiority, what should we do?

We are called to adopt a worldview that is open and flexible instead of closed and arrested—a worldview that lets us believe in the power of relationships that dwell in love, exemplified in the Trinity, where three significant others dwell in relationship and love.

Practicing intercultural or cross-cultural competence in relationship is one way we can nurture such a worldview. It’s especially critical now that travel, the Internet and migration have shattered cultural isolation and caused icebergs to collide more frequently.



Intercultural competency is like a universal language that helps us relate across our differences. It helps us see culture not as good or bad, but simply different. Elements/values of this universal language include:

Knowing yourself. How has your community, society, and heritage shaped you? How do these behaviors and core values look to people from other cultures? Tools exist to help you inventory the values and behaviors of our culture, and to help you assess your own attitudes.

Knowing the other. Find out all you can about how “the other” lives, by reading, tasting, experiencing his or her culture, and by being in relationship.

Creating space. Make space in your relationships for authentic learning and sharing. Popular culture focuses on consuming other cultures, through food, music and other “products.” Christ calls us to a deeper exchange. Instead of fearing or fleeing a new culture, Christ invites us to live out of love instead, and utilize our diversity for God’s kingdom.

Each of us holds a different piece of the puzzle. In the space we create to learn from one another, predominately individualistic cultures like ours can teach and share about the value of individuals, while collective cultures can teach and share the value of community.

How well we enter or engage with another culture will depend on our proficiency in the local language, our expertise in the local culture, and our cross-cultural competence. The more culturally competent we become, the more nearly we can engage other cultures. But remember, we never integrate fully! The goal is not integration, but complementary coexistence.

Christ and culture

If culture is neither bad nor good but only different, which cultural values does the kingdom of God embody? Put another way, how are Christians called to engage culture? Questions and tensions between Christ and culture are not new, and today are more pertinent than ever. In his book seminal book, Christ and Culture, Theologian Karl Paul Reinhold Niebuhr explored five answers to the recurring “Christ and Culture” question.

Christ against Culture: This answer presents Christ and Culture as a radical either/or choice. An example of this understanding is the perspective that the prince of this world is the devil, and therefore loyalty to this world would be loyalty to the devil. Monasticism is a positive expression of this point of view. However, this point of view also ignores that we can’t really escape culture, and separates us from relationship with our neighbors. It also minimizes the fact that the incarnate Christ entered into our culture and our humanity, and thus was part of it.

Christ of the Culture: In this understanding, Christ and culture are the same. Christ is subsumed by the culture. On the positive side, this means that North American Lutherans don’t have to be against jeans, beer, or baseball games. On the other hand, ethics could be driven by current trends rather than rooted faithfulness.

Christ above Culture: When Christ is above culture, the word of God is the norm against which we judge culture. This allows us to discern that a practice that a culture may see as positive in fact is counter to God’s will, such as slavery in the pre-civil war American south.

Christ and Culture in Paradox: The paradox view asserts that while both Christ and culture claim our loyalty, there is tension between them. Therefore, under Luther’s doctrine of “two kingdoms”—God’s kingdom and earthly government—we are called to be under and above the law at the same time. On the positive side, this approach doesn’t make assumptions about God’s will, which we can’t completely know; on the negative side, it can lead to quietism, or doing nothing.

Christ the Transformer of Culture: In this view, as Christ comes to us and empowers us with the gifts and fruits of God’s spirit, through us, Christ is able to change elements of the culture that are not aligned with the gospel, practices that exclude, such as the caste system. A danger here is the possibility that we might fill our image of Christ with our values and commitments, assuming them to be God’s will, and then ask God to do our bidding.

**Conclusion**

As we move into engagement in mission under accompaniment, we are called to equip ourselves to participate in God's mission of reconciliation, inviting right relationships and seeing and understanding the other in the image of God. Understanding culture becomes part of our praxis (practice informed by reflection), as we guard ourselves against the temptation to identify a particular notion of culture with Christianity, or interpret mission as "teaching others how we do things." The Spirit invites us to enjoy a lifetime of experiencing and learning about the amazing diversity of our world, as we practice a new way of engaging the other that incorporates all our narratives in God's story.