

This reflection and discussion can be used in small groups or within a larger group that breaks off into smaller groups for the discussion questions and then reconvenes for feedback. It provides a context for understanding the importance of cultural formation as the congregation seeks to enter into mutual partnership and relationship with persons from another cultural background. Share the reflection in your own words, adding your own experiences and learnings.

Introduction:

Culture is a complex whole that informs how we see the world and how we act and interact within it. In Part I we as individuals explored our own cultures and the values that were part of our growing up and that gave our lives meaning. As a congregation we walked back through our history to understand the culture and heritage that shaped us.

These steps of exploring culture are critical to the work of building a multicultural church. The process of exploring culture moves it from the unconscious level to the conscious level. When we become conscious of culture, we can become aware of how it guides and directs our lives and can dialogue with others about our values and how we can shape a multicultural reality together.

We become most aware of our own culture when we step outside of it. When I am immersed in my own culture 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, I have little awareness or understanding of it. I simply look at it as life and spend most of my day on “auto-pilot.” I don’t have to think about how I talk, how I interact, how I think, how I am expected to act with the people around me – everything I think, do, and say seems normal.

When I step outside my culture into that of another, however, I can see that what I take as normal is only normal for me. It is only one culture among many, one way of doing things, and one way of seeing the world. It is not the only culture – the defining culture.

In our global society, many people in our congregations have traveled around the world. Many young people are spending semesters abroad. We have a great deal more contact with cultures that take us completely outside our own reality. Recalling those experiences can help us become better attuned to our own culture and see our own cultural differences within a common U.S. culture where we become more easily tempted to overlook differences and want people to be the same – translated, same as us, where that is seen as U.S. White dominant culture.

Joyce’s story of exploring culture:

Several years ago I was blessed to spend a six week sabbatical in Kenya and Tanzania. I did not go with a group, but for two weeks I took my sixteen year old son with me. With no U.S. White cultural norms around anywhere, we were deeply immersed in another world. My son wrestled with the poverty he saw for the first time and was overwhelmed with the tremendous hospitality. I had to take him to a tourist hotel a couple times to get a Coke so he wouldn’t completely shut down. I had no conception prior to that of the depth of shock there can be to a person’s entire being to enter into

another culture and have to survive in another way of life.

I spent my remaining four weeks in Tanzania, living for two weeks with a family in their home. I felt connected through a value of church and “Lutheran” culture. I felt only a generation or so removed from the subsistence living of chickens, cows, and crops. While I felt deeply connected within some values, I had to step outside my own world to live in a world of values that differed around issues of time, space, and understanding of community and individuals. In daily living, I needed to be “awake” 24 hours a day as I needed to read the signs, watch for cues for interaction, and seek to understand how things were done.

The family I lived with had no electricity or indoor plumbing, but they had a watertank that was filled from a pipe that brought water to their home so they didn’t need to daily travel miles to find water. One evening when I returned to the home, I saw that they had had to go to find water, and I asked why. I was told that their water comes from a water source at the tourist hotel some small distance away. People there complained that the water pump was making too much noise, so it was shut off. I stood there confronted by the reality of two worlds and the possibility that I could have been one of those tourists.

Walking up Ilboru Road in Arusha, Tanzania, one day, I had an “aha” moment of seeing and understanding a few of the different places we stood in seeing and understanding the world. I saw the contrast between formal and informal approaches to learning and life; between structured time and time as fluid and based in relationships; between individualism and individuals within community; between an emphasis on written communication and a grounding in oral communication; between a society based on rational thought and linear movement and a society based on relational approaches and flexible and circular movement.

I came to see more clearly that my way of thinking and seeing the world was based on a historical reality, and my particular ways of life were based on generational teachings and the shaping influences of my family and community. The family I lived with, standing in another worldview, had a way of thinking and seeing based in another historical reality, with particularities also based on generational teachings and shaping influences of family and community. My way was not “better” or “more civilized.” It was simply one way, one culture with gifts to give to other cultures, and gifts to receive from other cultures.

Stepping back into my U.S. White culture was another shock as I attended my younger son’s soccer game the morning after I returned. I got there by car – surrounded by cars moving quickly toward scheduled destinations on fast-moving paved freeways. I stood on the soccer field sidelines viewing a series of carefully groomed green fields teeming with an abundance of uniformed children. Paid referees kept the rules and parents had leisure time to support their children in their efforts to develop skills of competition and individual excellence. It was challenging at that moment to stand between two worlds. I had seen and experienced a small bit of the complexity of the differences. I had been blessed with a glimpse of second sight into the depth of exploring culture and its meaning.

Transition:

Cultural differences can be seen and experienced at the global level, but they also happen in daily life as we experience different families and their traditions, relate to persons at work who see and experience life differently from us, as we interact with people at our children’s or grandchildren’s schools. Our lives are filled with opportunities to notice and explore the complexity of cultural differences, of learning to dance a new dance or to dance with a new partner with a different step, tempo, and rhythm.

Questions for small group discussion:

- Share your own experiences of a time you needed to interact within another culture or were aware that people were seeing and relating in ways different from yourself.
 - What did you notice?
 - How did you feel?
 - How did you react?
- Describe an event in your day or week. Explore that event for the cultural meaning that lies inside of it.
 - What does it say about how time is viewed; how people see and relate to one another; how people understand and relate to authority?
 - What does that event say about what people value?
- What feelings of awkwardness, discomfort, or uncertainty do you feel as you contemplate entering “the diversity dance” with a new partner?

Feedback:

- What insights or new meaning did you find in your sharing
- What does it take to cross cultures and glimpse life from another cultural reality?

Continue to Presentation and Discussion: Layers of Culture



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LAYERS OF CULTURE

WHAT

Language
Symbols
Artifacts

What we see, hear and experience of culture language, signs, popular sayings, jokes, stories, folklore, art forms, heroes, dances, rituals, games, holidays, history (family, national, and global)

HOW

Customs, Practices, Interactional Patterns
How we live in relationship

How we celebrate, interact, communicate, express, view social roles and authority verbal and nonverbal communication patterns, family behaviors, governmental and social institutions, conversational styles, friendship patterns community roles, gender roles, expression of emotion, practices of child rearing and health care

WHY

Shared Values, Beliefs, Norms, and Expectations
Why we live out and manifest culture in particular ways Values, beliefs, attitudes that drive people and groups attitudes, cultural values, religious and spiritual beliefs, fears, laws, standards, norms, levels of political participation, expectations.

Walk through the explanation of the layers by drawing the layers on a board or newsprint, and/or make copies of the model for participants. [See image below]

Collectively examine the meaning of culture within the life of the congregation. You may want to use examples from “Another Cultural View” as illustrations of differences in culture and the misunderstandings that arise when acting solely from within one’s own cultural perspective.

To better understand the invisible, shaping influence of culture, we will examine it in its different dimensions and unpack it in its complexity. We will look at its layers to see how deeply it informs how we do church, and how it can serve as a barrier to welcoming people and doing church in new ways that embrace an authentic multicultural reality.

The layers of culture are frequently described through the metaphor of an iceberg. What we see on top is only a small fraction of the values, norms, and standards of culture that lie beneath the surface. In looking at it as a pyramid, the structure takes on greater strength. An iceberg can melt; a pyramid has been carefully constructed through the labor of thousands of people and stands strong through all the winds and sands of time.

The pyramid diagram is a model of the layers of culture that shape and inform our lives together within a congregation, a community, and the larger society. The layer we most often focus on is the layer of the “What” of culture. When we attend school, community, or church ethnic festivals this is the layer we most often experience. We watch dances, listen to music, buy art

or jewelry, and listen to the stories, myths, and folklore of the culture. The “What” layer also distinguishes one culture from another in terms of language, history, rituals and holidays. We can be tempted to think that we know a culture when we have experienced and shared in culture at this level. Food, music, and art are not culture. They are manifestations within a culture.

We come to know a culture in greater depth when we look at the “How” level. Here we begin to understand how people interact and go about the living of their days. At the “How” level we understand and can participate in conversations that follow the rituals of the culture in greeting one another, in determining the form and substance of a conversation, in using nonverbal language, in speaking with children, parents, friends, work colleagues, and authority figures. At this level we learn our gender roles

and how we view children and the elderly. We learn how to run meetings, how to express emotions, and how to view and use time. We learn how to structure our lives together in political structures, community and social institutions, schools, and churches. When we enter a culture that is unfamiliar to us, we need to pay close attention to this level in order to negotiate life and enter into relationships with persons of that culture. We need to be alert to signs and cues that help us negotiate within the culture.

We become more fully bicultural or multicultural when we understand and appreciate the “Why” level and when we can act out of those values. Reaching this level in a culture in which we have not been formed and shaped is a lifelong journey. We enter this level with deep honor and respect and a deep desire to know what gives a culture its life and meaning. This is the level at which we define the values that shape the how and what of life. Our values, individual and social expectations, norms and standards of behavior, and belief system form the foundation on which the higher levels of the pyramid are built. When crossing cultures, it is critical to be aware of this layer and be able to listen without judgment to the “Why” layer of another culture.

Cultural dominance is perpetuated when one culture establishes its values and norms as “right” and as the determiner for judging other cultures. When White Americans don’t think of themselves as having culture, they have a tendency to simply think of themselves as the norm against which others are seen as “multicultural.” In the U.S., White cultural dominance has been perpetuated at all levels – in the telling of U.S. history from a Eurocentric viewpoint, in developing and affirming European-based images of Jesus, in defining formal structures and patterns for learning, in valuing the mind, the individual, and time as money.

In seeking to work across cultures, we need to recognize the cultural values, norms, and beliefs that we hold are one set of values, norms, and beliefs. The challenge for a genuine multicultural society and church is to see and understand that not all cultures hold the same values and not to judge or rate cultures based on our own value system.

As we become intentional in incorporating other cultural symbols in worship, we need to recognize that the “What” layers are attached to the “Why” layers. When we change music to include other cultural traditions or we hang images of Jesus from other cultures, the reaction may be intense because it is reaching down and touching a particular value or norm. Dialogue needs to happen at the “Why” level in order to shift understanding and embrace change.

Discussion on Layers of Culture

Small groups can be formed around the three layers with each group looking at the questions formed around that layer and keeping notes for large group feedback and continuing discussion. The large group can focus together on the last question.

Spend time looking at the layers of culture, addressing the following questions.

- **Share examples of the “What” of culture in your congregation** – What food is served at congregation meals? What music and styles of worship are used? What art work hangs on the walls, or is reflected in images and symbols? What holiday are celebrated? Whose histories and stories are told? What is the length of time for worship?
 - What meaning do those symbols of culture have for you? Why?
- **Share examples of the “How” of culture in your congregation** – How are congregation rules and patterns of behavior developed and put in place? Who makes decisions and allocates resources? How are decisions made? How do people

communicate and relate to one another? How is time viewed and used? How are thoughts and emotions expressed?

- Which practices and patterns are most important to you? Why? What would it mean to you to incorporate other practices and patterns into the life of the congregation?
- **Share examples of the “Why” of culture in your congregation** – What values are important to your life together? What norms and standards guide life in your place?
 - What values would you be unwilling to change? Why? What would it mean to incorporate other values?
 - What will it take to move beyond assimilation and truly welcome other cultural norms and values and ways of doing things as part of the congregation?

Exploring Cultural Depth Completed - Continue to My Neighbor's World



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