Part 1: One Body, Similar Members
History and Culture
Leader Tips: Getting in Touch with Our Culture

Culture informs our every waking moment. Consider some cultural moments in your day.

- How did you know when to wake up? Did an alarm clock wake you up?
- How did you get ready for the day? Did you shower? How did you get water? Did you save the water for the next person in the family or let it run down the drain?
- What did you eat for breakfast? Why? How did you prepare it? How did you know how to do that? Or did someone else prepare the food for you?
- Did you eat breakfast with other people? How did you know the process of eating – what utensils to use and when to begin eating?
- When did the “work” of your day begin? How did you share work with others?
- Was there a sequence to your work? How did you know that?
- Did you meet and talk with other people? How did you greet them? What was the substance and structure of your conversation?
- Did you purchase anything during the day? Where did you go to buy things? How did you get there? What actions did you follow in making a purchase?

And the list goes on and on. Culture is the shared pattern of life, grounded in values and beliefs, and learned through relationships, that guides our behavior and helps us interpret our experiences. We sometimes think of culture as the food we eat, the music we listen to, our dances, jewelry, art, and hairstyles. Those are all tangible elements of our culture, but those things alone are like a fish swimming in water, culture is all around us. We don’t see it. We’re not aware of it. Sometimes we even think we don’t have a culture! That’s because culture is the stuff of life. It is so much a part of us that it is as challenging for us to step outside of our culture and live, as it is for a fish to get out of the water and live.

Culture takes us deeper into who we are, how we interact, and what we value. As individuals we are shaped and formed in our culture from the moment of our birth. We are socialized in a culture that helps us learn sounds and language, that teaches us our place as girls and boys, that grounds our beliefs, and that shapes our expectations of life. We are cultural beings.

Our national or ethnic culture shapes many of our values and patterns for living, but we also live within secondary cultures of gender, socioeconomic class, age, sexual orientation, work, religion, geography, education, etc., to shape our unique experiences. We are complex cultural beings.

Becoming multicultural does not mean giving up our culture. Becoming multicultural means that

1) we become aware of our culture and how it shapes and forms how we think and how we see the world, ourselves, and each other; and

2) we open ourselves to receive the gifts of other groups so that we can also see and know the patterns and values of their culture and deeply appreciate and respect the greater depth and breadth they bring to our life.

When we see and act – and know God – only through our own cultural lens, we are limited. We are monocultural. We walk one narrow path in life. It may be easy and comfortable, but it is limited. When we work to build relationships with persons of other cultures, races, and socioeconomic classes and come to know how they see the world, how they interact in life, and how they know God, our perspective broadens and we grow as a more complete body. As we add other cultural ways of being,
not our culture. Culture is deeper than an ethnic meal or an ethnic festival of music, dance, and crafts. We have not become a multicultural congregation because we invite people of diverse backgrounds to share their gifts in congregation events several times a year.

knowing, thinking, and doing, we become more than just an eye or an ear or a hand. We become one body with many members, and our understanding of God and God’s world becomes bigger.

We can’t fully appreciate another culture without first being able to see, understand, and appreciate our own culture. Enjoy the journey of discovery of the many differences that already exist within the stories of people in the congregation.

Steps to take in understanding culture:

- Read the stories of our cultural journeys as a guide.
- Write your own cultural story and engage others in sharing their stories.
- If possible, talk with older family members or older persons in the congregation or community to learn more of the gifts of your own and your congregation’s cultural heritage;
- Use the guided process “Exploring Culture – Sharing Our Stories” for small group discussion.
- Explore the cultural story of the congregation through the timeline and the congregational event of “Celebrating our Past – Sharing our Collective Story.”

Continue to Leader Tips: Who we are and Where we have been
Sharing Our Stories and Exploring Congregation History

We don’t begin journeys without looking back at where we have been and asking ourselves “do we want to re-visit the same places or plan for a new journey?” Without that assessment we may simply go back to the places we have been in the past because that is what we know and where we are comfortable. If we choose to do that, it should be a conscious choice, knowing we will not be in a new place.

When congregations look back, we can celebrate all the places we have been. In fact it is important to take time to celebrate the past:

- the vision of those who began the congregation
- the ministries that touched people’s lives
- changes of growth through the years.

Honoring the legacy we’ve received gives clearer vision for our journey ahead. An honest look at the past suggests to us what to remember and build on—or what to leave behind.

The process of exploring who we are and where we have been, both individually and as a congregation, is described here as a three step process. Each step is important in understanding who we are and what grounds us.

**Picture this phase of the journey as an assessment of who we are as a body and of the condition of our body.** As we seek to grow as one body with many members, we first need to know more fully the parts of the body that are present. That means knowing our gifts, celebrating the ways we work together, and recognizing the gifts we lack when our body is incomplete.

As we come to more fully know ourselves, we can identify the values, customs, and practices – the shared pattern of life – that give shape to congregation life. We can see our cultural life as one culture alongside others, rather than as the “right” culture with which to judge others. As we seek to grow in relationship with persons of other cultures, we can talk about shared values and about patterns and traditions that can adapt and grow to encompass other ways of relating and doing church.

As in all of this work, the process of knowing who we are and where we have been is an ongoing process. We will come to know our own stories more fully as we listen to the stories of others. But to begin, plan a period of six to nine months to work through the three steps – after the leadership team has already entered into some of this conversation.

- Allow 2-3 months for preparation—informing the congregation, scheduling dates, equipping leadership, assigning tasks.
- Spread the three steps of Sharing Stories, Timeline, and Congregation History over a period of 6-8 weeks, possibly longer if Sharing Stories is done as a
• small group activity within a variety of settings.
• Schedule these activities in conjunction with other introductory material and the Bible studies.

Continue to For Discussion: Exploring Stories of our Cultural Journey
Part 1: One Body, Similar Members
History and Culture
For Discussion: Exploring Stories of our Cultural Journey

Time Frame:
75 – 90 minutes

Setting:
Congregation event or small group settings
Room large enough for participants to gather chairs into small groups of 4 or 5 persons

Schedule
(with approximate time frames)
Introduction to One Body, Many Members 10 minutes
Introduce background and purpose for sharing stories 3 minutes
Present guidelines for sharing 5 minutes
Introduce process and questions for sharing 5 minutes
Model the sharing of stories 12 minutes
Divide into groups of 4 or 5
Share stories in small groups 30 minutes
Large group feedback and process 15 minutes

Introduction to One Body, Many Members:
You may use the reading and reflection on I Corinthians 12 as an introduction. Emphasize our connection as one body and the importance of being grounded in our connections. As we share our stories with one another, we deepen those connections and become more fully aware of the gift of our diversity.

Background and Purpose for Sharing Stories:
Before we cross cultures, we need to know and celebrate the stories of our own cultural journeys. Too often we move across cultures expecting people to interact and respond according to our ways of knowing and experiencing life, particularly when we are formed and shaped as White people within the dominant culture. As we have been socialized into the dominant culture, the particularity of how we have been shaped and formed loses its meaning and we are prompted to see ourselves as part of a general whole without a culture. When our stories remain invisible, we lose a part of ourselves, and we act out of the invisibility of our stories and impose our ways of being on others often without our intention. As people of color our stories have been discounted and left unheard in the dominant culture. Our wholeness as persons is lost in the invisibility of our stories.

Each of us brings a unique story to the work of crossing race, culture, and class. Our stories are part of who we are and give meaning to our journey. As we share our stories, we come to better appreciate our own cultural heritage and can listen with greater care to the stories of others. We honor one another as we share our stories and we are enriched by the diversity of our stories.

Guidelines for Sharing: List the introductory phrases of the guidelines on newsprint, board, or other visible place. Refer to each of the guidelines adding your own explanation using the expanded explanation as a model. Ask for group agreement to these guidelines.

- Listen to each other’s stories. Listen with care and deep attention, not interrupting. Allow each person to unfold their story in their own way. If you wish to hear more after the time of sharing, ask permission.
• Respect each person’s journey. We are all on different places on the journey and in understanding the meaning within our own stories. Listen with respect as people share.

• Be open to share and grow. As you share, you may be surprised at the new insights you discover. As you listen to others, you may find significant connections and may be reminded of other events in your own story.

• Respect confidentiality. As we share the stories of our past, we may be sharing things we seldom talk about. It is important to share the vulnerabilities and pain in our stories, and we need to hold them in deepest respect and care as we listen. You may speak about your own story outside your small group and you may share your own growth in insight or understanding as you listened to others, but do not speak for someone else or share their story without openly expressed permission.

**Process and Questions for Sharing:** Tell the persons present that after you as leaders model the process of sharing, they will be sharing their own stories within small groups. When you re-gather as a large group, people will be simply reporting back how it felt to share stories and where they saw connections. Tell people they will each have six minutes for their sharing and you will let them know the time. It is helpful to have the questions listed on a board or newsprint, or printed out on slips of paper to be handed out at this time. Read through the questions.

• Describe your culture (in whatever way you define that) as it shaped your life and worldview in your early years. What values guided life?

• Who were “your people” when you were growing up? How did being a part of your family/group/community shape and form you?

• Who were people on the outside of your group? How did you become aware of them; how did you feel toward them; and what experiences influenced your feelings?

Note that culture is as each person defines it in his or her life. Culture is defined as a lens through which life is perceived and lived as a particular experience of reality. It is the place from which one receives values, norms of behavior, and ways of seeing and being in the world.

**Model the Sharing of Stories:**

Have one or two persons model the sharing. If both White people and people of color are in the group, make sure that your leadership represents that diversity and that both a White person and a person of color model the sharing. Take time to carefully prepare for your sharing and be prepared to be vulnerable in that sharing. The depth of the sharing within the group – and therefore, the depth of the connections that are made – will depend on the depth and vulnerability you model. We have presented our stories in this resource as a model of our walking with you in this journey. If it is helpful, you may refer to our stories to help you prepare for the sharing of your story.

**Divide into Small Groups:**

Based on the number of people who are present, divide the group into small groups of 4 or 5. It is best to have people count off in order to mix people up and have them share with new people.

**Share stories in small groups:**

Have a timer and a soft bell or other non-jarring audible signal to let people know when
six minutes have passed. Be watchful of the groups to note whether a group has not moved on to the next person after a reasonable time for that person to finish their sharing after the audible signal. You may need to give a word of encouragement directly to a group to move on to the next person. Groups with 5 persons have 5 minutes per person to share.

Large group feedback and process: When the time is complete, invite participants to come back to the large group, staying together as a small group. Invite responses and feedback.

- What were your thoughts and feelings as you shared and as you listened?
- Where were the connections in the stories?
- What differences did you find in the stories?
- What did you learn about yourself or others?

Close with a brief statement on the importance of knowing our stories. Thank people for their willingness to take the time to share and listen. Encourage them to continue to explore the people, values, and traditions that have shaped their lives. Invite them to use these questions to deepen relationships with others in the congregation – including people they have worshipped with for years. Close with prayer.

Continue to Reflection: Lily’s Story, Joyce’s Story
Exploring our Cultural Journey – Lily’s Story

I’m Chinese American from Cantonese heritage—that is, the Canton province in the southern part of China. My grandfather was a Methodist minister who served Chinese communities in western Canada; my mother was a deaconess, organist, youth leader and missionary in Canada and Hong Kong; and my father came to the United States under the auspices of a Christian high school in Canton. So church culture was a major part of my life since childhood. I grew to realize that faith life wasn’t a “Sunday only” thing. Rather, it was a whole life with God, who wants us also to connect well with other people.

Born in New York City, I also have an American heritage. After American school, I’d go to Chinese school every day for language and history lessons. I had homework nonstop, it seemed! It was hard to keep up. After a while, my parents decided I should concentrate on English school. After a while I spoke mostly English everywhere, while my parents spoke at home in a mix of English and Cantonese.

I took my studies very seriously, because that was my responsibility. I knew from a young age that everyone in the family had a responsibility. Dad and Mom had their jobs, while the job of my brother and me was to do our best in school. I grew to love learning, reading, the arts, and words. But the greatest love of all was to know I was not alone in this world. I had a family and a purpose for my life. I had a role to play, and work to do, in keeping the family healthy.

We cherished our belonging to the family. To honor what we cherished, we lifted up the value of not pushing for what we might want individually. Instead, we wanted to be mindful of others and their needs also. Even the way we share meals together reflects this value. Round tables are preferred, so that everyone has equal access to the center of the table, where the food is placed. We each have a bowl of rice, and chopsticks with which we reach for food to put into our bowl, to eat. So if you see a favorite food, it’s not right to scoop a huge amount of it for yourself. While you eat, you watch, ask and share so that everyone is respected.

So I was shaped by Christian church, Chinese, American, family and group values, in the context of immigrant life of Chinatown, New York. Friends and family in my community were my people. Being part of them gave me a deep sense of home, and belonging. This was especially important because from television and experiences outside our community, I knew that we were considered “minorities” and “different.” And being different in mainstream culture is often considered not good. Although we were Chinese, and could draw from lessons learned in 5,000 years of culture, achievement and struggles, there were plenty of people outside our community who considered us undesirable and unwelcome here.

Still, my parents wanted to introduce me to the wider world of cultures beyond our own. My Mom, an educator by profession, taught me to love music and performing arts. My Dad was well known in our community as manager of one of the largest banquet-sized restaurants in Chinatown. I met customers from across the United States and many places around the world. So my favorite image of “One Body, Many Members” is one of diverse peoples happily sharing a meal together. I also have warm

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memories of big picture details; such as older African American women, wearing corsages on their dresses, being lovingly assisted into our restaurant by male family members. People from so many backgrounds enjoyed taking their mothers or grandmothers out for Chinese dinner on Mother’s Day.

But people outside our group could be hostile to us too, I knew. When I was 12 and on vacation away from New York, a group of small-town boys accosted a girlfriend and me as we strolled down the street with our ice cream cones. “Hey you -- Chinks! Where were you born, Chinktown?” they sneered. We ran, but they pelted us with stones from the gutter so that our backs were bruised. At the police hearing, the mother of two of the boys didn’t even pretend to be sorry. “You can’t blame the boys and their friends,” she told the police chief. “They’re only children!”

That was a major turning point in my life. I was astounded that the white woman defended what her sons had done, instead of teaching them right from wrong. Anti-Asian violence has been part of Asian community life ever since Asian people came to these shores. I have experienced it personally. So to this day I know that in the land of my birth, I can be targeted for violent attack at any time, from people who would hurt me and then justify their actions.

“My people” today are family and friends of various backgrounds who seek to build harmony among peoples—lifting up the values of kindness, generosity, justice and compassion. They include volunteers in Chinatown, New York, are teaching Cantonese to people of any background who want to learn. They include members of the Chinese dance group I belong to, who are working hard on a benefit concert to boost the education of children in need in China. They are church friends who astound me with their dedication, commitment, and love across barriers of race, culture, and class.

They are all my people because when I am with them, I feel that God is among us. I fell that God is infusing our interactions with the joy of friendship and shared purpose for peace amid diversity. They are a gift in my life, and I am blessed to know them.

Exploring Our Cultural Journey – Joyce’s Story

My ethnic cultural heritage is German with my ancestors on both sides of my family coming to the United States from Pomerania (Pommern) in 1843. As devout Old Lutherans they could not tolerate the Prussian government’s establishment of a state-mandated Union Church nor its requirement that their children must be educated at state-run schools. With their fellow travelers, Georg Gotthilf and Hanna Louise (Raasch) Ziemer, journeyed to the U.S., purchased land, and established their life northwest of Milwaukee. Five generations later, that is where I grew up.

While my mother’s first language was still German after four generations, my parents never spoke German to my sister, two brothers, or me. The language, along with much of the German culture, was pushed aside after WWII. I grew up with little identification with any German culture.

The culture that shaped my life and world view as I was growing up was a rural, farming culture in which family and church were the primary social institutions. We attended church every Sunday, shared in morning and evening family devotions, and enjoyed many church activities. I shared a room with my sister and I enjoyed playing dolls with her, but actually preferred playing in the sandbox with my brother and cousin. In addition to my nuclear family, I was surrounded by an extended family of grandparents, aunts and uncles, and many cousins. Holiday gatherings were large affairs with a regular “children’s table” in the kitchen. Birthdays and anniversaries always gave reasons for gathering together.

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The rural, farming culture shaped my life within the rhythms of the seasons and a deep love of nature. My world view was shaped around a sense of self-reliance and hard work. Our family's livelihood depended on a daily routine of milking morning and evening and long hours and hard work during the planting, growing, and harvesting times. Outcomes in life, however, were also highly dependent on the weather, and so my world view was set in a context in which I knew that ultimately I was not in control and one in which I learned the value of interdependence. While often seen as independent, farmers relied on each other for mutual assistance. When my family's barn burned down when I was a baby, the surrounding community was a critical part in the rebuilding process.

I didn’t always appreciate the limits to my life growing up on a dairy farm. Time wasn’t my own – or of anyone in our family. Time was set by the cows and by the work of the seasons. The place I found greater freedom was in school. Neither of my parents had gone to high school because of the need of their families on their farms, but they highly valued education. We were expected to do well in school and to go on to college. College was not an unknown in my family since my father’s brother was a pastor, and each generation and branch of the family seemed to have at least one pastor.

The values of self-reliance, hard work, interdependence, and education all shaped my life, but the underlying values that gave meaning and shape to my life were an interconnection of God, family, and land that were so tightly interwoven that I couldn’t have separated them. They were foundational to my being, and also served to define who “my people” were.

My church family, my immediate and extended family, and our neighbors were “my people.” The small and close community of those groups gave me a sense of belonging and safety as I was growing up. My identity was shaped within those groups and I saw myself more as a part of the whole, sharing and expressing common beliefs and ideas, than I saw myself as an individual. Both the need to rely on one another within the family and the central place of faith expressed through the church fit together to shape me to fit quietly within the whole.

The people outside of my group were everyone else. I became aware of some people outside my group when I was able to go along on the “egg route” that my parents had in Milwaukee. My grandparents had established customers for eggs, chickens, and vegetables at some time in the past, and my parents continued the route every Friday. When we went into some of the houses, I was aware of very different smells and different patterns of talk. I was curious about the differences, but since my parents never made anything of the differences, I didn’t ask and simply absorbed a curiosity and wonder about how people lived in different ways. It wasn’t until years later in talking with my sister that she looked at me with surprise and said, “Didn’t you know that they were Jewish?”

Belonging to an American Lutheran Church and attending the Wisconsin Synod grade school of the church my mother had grown up in, I saw myself as an outsider. Several of the students in the school were my cousins and all were children living and growing up around me and were my friends, but I felt outside the group when my sister and brothers and I were excluded from participation in Christmas Eve practices and other rehearsals for singing in church. The four of us had to sit in the last pew in the back of the church while our fellow students practiced. I wondered how people could say God loved and included everyone when it didn’t feel that way.

I had little awareness of others outside my group. When I attended high school I knew my parents wanted my closest friends to be Lutheran and not Catholic. I was also very aware during high school that to be labeled “farmer” was not cool and I wrestled with
that part of my identity and even tried to distance myself from it. I had no direct contact that I remember with persons of color until I attended college. I had not heard comments, derogatory names, or stereotypes of other people from my parents, so entered into those new contacts and new relationships with curiosity and a deep desire to learn.

The identification of “my people” has grown and expanded in many wonderful and precious ways since those early years. I have experienced many turning points that have expanded my view of God to a far bigger and more gracious God; my view of land to a concern for all of creation; and my view of family to a global understanding of all of God’s people. “My people” today includes a vast array of members of God’s family and through them my life has been blessed in unimaginable ways.