

When you're on the road, enroute to a place you've never been, good clear print directions—and enough lighting to see them—will get you there with time to spare.

Directions may point out landmarks to look for. Better directions will tell you when you've gone too far, so you don't have to backtrack much. And better yet, the latest news on radio can tell you what roadblocks to avoid.

This list points out “road blocks” to avoid while communicating across differences. Thankfully, on any trip we take, God provides the light!

Blocks to Listening

These roadblocks keep us from listening well and block understanding and communication. We each have our favorite. By becoming aware of which ones we use for what occasions and which people, we can find it easier to stop

- 1. Comparing:** Who is better, smarter, funnier, etc.?
- 2. Mindreading:** Pay little attention to words and imagine meaning.
- 3. Rehearsing:** Your attention is on what you will say next.
- 4. Filtering:** Listen to some things and not others.
- 5. Judging:** You prejudge before you hear what they have to say.
- 6. Dreaming:** You half-listen and drift into your own thoughts.
- 7. Identifying:** You relate everything back to your own experience.
- 8. Advising:** You hear only a few sentences and then give advice.
- 9. Sparring:** You argue and debate every point.
- 10. Being Right:** You will go to any length to avoid being wrong.
- 11. Derailing:** You suddenly change the subject.
- 12. Placating:** You want to be liked so agree with everything.

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Continue to Reflection and Discussion: Examining language of welcome



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Language is a powerful tool for interaction among people. When someone speaks our language, we've got immediate rapport. There's a sense that we "come from the same place" and can understand one another. We are likely to feel that the weather's good for smooth sailing.

Conversely, how comfortable are we with someone who doesn't speak our language, or doesn't speak it well? Are we willing to endure some awkward moments, for the sake of our Lord? How willing are we to adapt ourselves, so that we can be messengers of welcome? As an Asian pastor in my synod has said, "Each of us is meant to be God's love letter in the world."

What does it mean to adapt? As it is, we may be confounded in knowing what to say in our own race, culture and class. And now God wants us to communicate across cultures? Just as Jesus did by talking with the woman at the well, tax collectors and fisherfolk

Indeed that's what God wants. How do we do it? For starters, we can slow down enough to listen and learn. We can seek to hear God's voice in any intercultural interaction. We can seek out ways to foster dialogue. Communicating across cultures may not be easy. But its reward is helping to open up a space in which God's spirit can work. We may not have erected the barriers of language in the first place. But we can learn to move them.

What is a language of welcome?

Being bilingual or multilingual is a significant skill in a diverse world. That capability opens up a whole world of possible interactions, relationships, understandings, and bridges. Yes, a person who doesn't speak our language may well speak one, two or more languages that we cannot!

For most of us though, speaking the language of welcome is likely to mean practicing biblical hospitality in English. The reason it is needed is that communities can easily become isolated, each speaking in the language of their own cultures (literally or figuratively.) For example, a church community has a culture of its own, that evolves and can change over time. But often the terminology, the way we do things, is just so foreign to people who are unfamiliar with churches that we may think we are being welcoming, while sending messages that don't relate to others.

Across barriers of race and ethnicity, the giftedness of bilingual social workers, community leaders and others is of great value. Supporting these professionals and leaders is a practical way to lend support. But if we leave the crossing of barriers to bilingual or multilingual persons only, we are forsaking the role that we can play. We can all learn to speak a language of welcome, whether in English or another language. This language of welcome enables the crossing of barriers and building of commonality and interaction across cultures.

From inelegance to grace

Differences of appearance across race and culture can lead to inelegant beginnings. At church events I would often meet fellow members who would tell me, "I'm so glad you spoke to me first. I thought you wouldn't speak English, and that it would be awkward talking with you." I was always glad that this would open up conversations on race and culture. But it also saddened and frustrated

me that people of Asian heritage in the United States are so often viewed as foreign, even when we are not. And in the U.S.A., to be foreign is in too many circles considered to be second-class and devalued.

Life in the United States can be tough for people who don't speak English, or don't speak it well. Not only are job opportunities limited; each day carries a steady stream of stresses and confusions. What a great gift of love and inspiration it is, when a church reaches out to befriend immigrant people with language classes and mentoring! English is a tough language to learn. So many words are not pronounced as they are spelled, and some of the sounds may not even exist in an immigrant's language.

Have a conversation with someone who doesn't speak English often. You'll notice him/her speaking, then pausing for thought...maybe shifting their eyes upward as they think hard about what word fits the conversation. It's hard work for them. Small wonder that speaking English gives them a headache. (And if we are adult English speakers learning a "foreign language," we are likely to have a similar experience.)

How truly we can offer grace to one another, through patient listening and mutual learning!

Speaking largely...as a church

Beyond the personal relationships we may build across cultures, we as the church together are also "speaking" about diversity through our words and deeds. What do people outside our church (whether in its local, synodical, or churchwide expression) perceive that we are saying? (Note: the assessment sections of this resource offer surveys and other methods on finding this out.)

Do people see that we are a place of welcome...
...because diversity is woven into all aspects of our congregational life?

Are we known as a place that is knowledgeable and caring...
...so that diverse peoples will find us relevant to their lives?

Are we a house of compassion and justice...
...where people of various backgrounds can find friends and advocate as they worship God and learn from one another?

Discussion Questions:

- What do you think it means to speak "a language of welcome"? Give an example. And what might it mean to adapt our language, for the sake of the gospel?
- With whom in your life are you being called to "speak first"? With whom can you impart a word or deed of encouragement, compassion, or justice?
- What group does your congregation have opportunity to speak to first, across race, culture or class? And from whom can you ask advice in planning to reach them?
- Name an example of "inelegance" in crossing a language barrier. What are some barriers to communicating? What helps to dispel inelegance/awkwardness and create more grace in communications?
- Is there a language that you would like to learn more of? Find a systematic way to begin. Take a beginner class. Volunteer to help a refugee/immigrant friend/newcomer who wants to learn American English and culture. In the process, you can learn more about their language and culture too. Keep a notebook and jot down basic phrases.

Communication Completed - Continue to Bible Study #1: Who is a Canaanite?



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