

A generation ago, Seventh-day Adventist schools worldwide were relatively homogenous. Few students and even fewer faculty came from outside the local country or region. Even in schools with an element of ethnic diversity, students, faculty, and community shared a common culture.

Understanding Other Cultures: A Necessity For Adventism Today

BY CHARLES H. TIDWELL, JR.

The best way to cope with cultural misunderstandings is to gain greater knowledge. With knowledge may come understanding, tolerance, and ultimately acceptance.

This is no longer true. Most North American Adventist colleges have significant non-American student populations, while many schools in Europe, Africa, and Asia have considerable diversity in "tribal" or regional cultures. The United States, once so insular and unified, is increasingly pluralistic and includes Hispanic, Asian, black, American Indian, and other cultures. This is mirrored at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, where I work. During the 1996 fall term, the undergraduate ethnic background was as follows: 1.1 percent American Indian, 15.9 percent Asian, 21 percent black, 8.5 percent Hispanic, and 53.5 percent white.

As diversity increases, cultural misunderstandings become inevitable. Thus, teachers and students must become actively involved in alleviating these tensions. Intercultural training is no longer a one-way process, with foreign students learning to understand and assimilate into an American way of life. The increase in international travel, the growth of multinational interaction among businesses and

government, and the worldwide scope of the Adventist Church make an intercultural perspective increasingly essential.

Most people (especially foreign students, student missionaries, and tourists) are initially excited about going to a new place, enjoying exotic scenery, trying new foods and customs, and making new friends. Similarly, students and faculty at the home school usually look forward to interacting with visiting students or faculty.

But when cultures collide, the results are often troublesome. Misunderstandings lead to tension, frustration, anger, and sometimes even hatred. American students and faculty may wonder, "Why can't those students or teachers be more like us? Why don't they try harder to adapt?" (Such questions work both ways!) As a result, cross-cultural exchanges are often difficult at best and a nightmare at worst.

Part of the problem is a lack of knowledge, which produces false assumptions, withheld information, and stereotypes. Accordingly, multiculturalism is perceived as a problem rather than a benefit.

False Assumptions and Withheld Information

Local people tend to assume that foreigners already know basic facts about the new country, and how to behave there. For instance, students visiting with Americans may be told to make themselves at home. If staying for an extended period of time, they are probably encouraged to help themselves to food, even to cook their own meals. But in many Asian countries, hosts expect to prepare all food. Saying "Make yourself at home" means to relax and be comfortable, but doesn't extend to preparing your own meals. Because assumptions about behavior differ from country to country, neither side is fully aware of those differences.

Some cultures withhold information to avoid embarrassing a visitor about sensitive areas such as toilet use or bathing practices. It is difficult to tell someone from a country without seat-style toilets that it is incorrect to squat with feet on

the toilet seat! It is equally difficult for a Japanese host to tell his American visitor that one first “bathes” outside the hot tub and then enters to soak and enjoy the hot water. Such tubs are never a place to lather up!

At times, information may be withheld because of an arrogant mindset that if people don't know, that is their problem! Or, not knowing the visitor's culture, a host assumes they share the same customs and thinks it unnecessary to discuss such personal matters. In any case, withheld information and false assumptions contribute to cross-cultural misunderstandings.

Stereotypes

While stereotypes can help us understand generalities about a culture or region, people often assume they are all-inclusive and always true. Stereotypes are dangerous because people who believe them make value judgments about others and the way they act before even meeting them! Stereotypes are particularly problematic when applied to dissimilar cultures (East versus West or Asian versus American). Typically, the East is seen as reserved and unemotional, orderly, cautious, and long-term in planning. The West is seen as open and emotional, disorderly, aggressive, and concerned only about immediate plans.

But such stereotypes do not reflect regional differences within cultures and language areas. Japan is different from the Philippines, though they are only a few hundred miles apart. Similarly, Americans may be quite different from the English, even though both speak the “same” language. But Asians often assume that all white English speakers are the same, and Westerners see all Asians as similar.

An American friend of mine lived for many years in the Philippines before moving to Japan. When he returned to the Philippines for a visit, a close friend remarked that he had become cold and unfriendly. Why? When he greeted his Filipino friends, he briefly bowed and then shook hands, in keeping with the customs of Japan. But they expected him to embrace them and chat with his arm around their shoulders, as was customary in their

culture. Since he didn't, he was labeled as unfriendly!

Differing Systems

Because false assumptions, withheld information, and stereotyping contribute to cultural barriers, administrators, educators, and students need to take steps to overcome them. A beginning step is to recognize the dramatic differences between cultures. Failure to do so, particularly in the areas of religion, ethics, customs, education, recreation, and language, is often the source of conflict.

Although most international students at Adventist schools are church members, an increasing number hold other religious

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beliefs. But even when they are Adventists, they may have a different cultural perspective. There is an inherent difference between Western countries, where Christianity is the dominant religious perspective, and societies where Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, or Hinduism is the norm. In addition, secularism, a world view with little regard for religious beliefs, is increasingly dominant in many urban areas. Thus, every society holds core concepts based on its moral perspectives. Failure to understand this can lead to misunderstandings.

In the related area of ethics, different cultures often have a contrasting ethos. For some, ethical values focus on the effect of an action on the group—society, community, or family. In others, the effect on the individual is the primary consideration. This contrast even permeates government. Socialistic governments occur more frequently when community is valued, while democratic forms tend to dominate societies that place a high value on individual rights.

Differences in Everyday Activities

But differences in everyday life create the most obvious source of cultural tensions. Various cultures have clearly differing views on the ordinary activities that most individuals take for granted—how to eat, dress, and talk.

Food: Some expect bread as part of a

meal; others insist on rice. Neither will be satisfied if their preferred staple is regularly missing. Even eating styles may cause tension. Those familiar with chopsticks may find a knife, fork, and spoon unwieldy. And those accustomed to using utensils (chopsticks or fork) may subconsciously see those accustomed to eating with their fingers as “uncivilized.”

Dress: World travelers have seen an increased tolerance for different clothing styles. It may even be argued (at least on the basis of anecdotal evidence) that blue jeans and T-shirts are widely accepted as standard student dress. But most cultures still have firm views of what is decent and publicly acceptable. Misunderstandings arise when the expectations of two cultures conflict. Thus, bare-chested men playing a basketball game may be perfectly acceptable in one culture but seen as offensive in another when the game is played publicly.

Talk: Even assumptions about polite conversation can lead to cultural misunderstandings. A visitor from Asia who asks specific questions about one’s salary is not being nosy. Likewise, an American inquiry about personal health is perfectly acceptable within his or her culture, but may be offensive to others.

Teachers and students should also recognize that concepts of pedagogy and discipline vary dramatically. A student or teacher from a society that emphasizes lecture and rote learning will be at a dis-

advantage in a culture that values discussion and conceptual learning. Conversely, a student from a society with a clearly defined classroom hierarchy may be lost in an American classroom that seems lax in both discipline and structure.

Finally, language itself is a major barrier. Problems range from a basic lack of communication through failure to comprehend foreign words to difficulty in perceiving the meaning of words pronounced in a “peculiar” accent. Listeners may also find linguistic nuances or colloquialisms baffling. For instance, the simple American greeting, “How’s it going?” often puzzles non-Americans. They understand each word but don’t recognize that it requires only a response of “Fine” or “So-So” rather than a detailed explanation.

What Do Foreigners Think?

The best way to cope with cultural misunderstandings is to gain greater knowledge. With knowledge may come understanding, tolerance, and ultimately acceptance. My understanding developed by living as a foreigner for a significant portion of my life—10 years in India as an adolescent, seven years in Canada (which, despite the misconception of many Americans, is a different culture!) and, most recently, 12 years in Asia. Through experience, I gained a fuller insight into how foreigners think and why they act in a particular (or even peculiar) way.

I have learned (often to my surprise)

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that different cultures have more in common than one would think by looking only at the externals of dress, food, and speech. First, basic concepts of integrity and morality transcend culture. Second, all societies uphold the importance of decency and appropriate social behavior, of family and society (including government), and of religious and ethical beliefs. Most societies have similar rules (although not always codified), which are generally understood and accepted. But it may take close observation to realize that the values one cherishes at home are present in another culture.

A confounding factor is that people may behave differently at home than they do in a foreign place. This is especially apparent in foreign transfer students. Many people, including tourists and students, don't seem to follow their own basic value system once they leave home.

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One reason for this is freedom from constraint, since “no one” knows (i.e., no familiar group such as family, church, government, or society serves as a restraint). In addition, travelers are often unaware of local customs (unless clearly spelled out) or do not care about them. Thus, Americans visiting an Asian temple may refuse to take off their shoes either out of ignorance or unwillingness to get their feet dirty.

The duration of the visit may affect the severity of visitors' ignorance or apathy. Tourists and short-term business vis-

itors tend to ignore both their own and local values and often are unwilling to investigate the values of people at their destination. Long-term visitors usually maintain their own values but also invest time and effort to learn and integrate the values of the new culture.

People who travel tend to be different from those who stay home. Travelers have a greater sense of adventure and a commitment to acceptance; while those who stay home tend to be more intolerant! Ironically, then, those at home will criticize foreigners who visit. And visitors, who are tolerant, may encounter hostility toward themselves, their country, and their culture.

Finally, there is a contrast in perceptions. Attitudes and behavior are often interpreted in different ways. For instance, Americans trying to be friendly may be viewed as “aggressive.” Conversely, Japanese, who consider lengthy or frequent eye contact as impolite, are seen by many Westerners as shifty or unreliable. Thus, a foreigner (whether a student from Asia, Europe, or Africa or an American student missionary abroad) may act, speak, and dress in ways appropriate in his or her own country. However, in the new land, people perceiving such things differently may take offense.

Developing Knowledge

The key to successful cross-cultural exchanges is knowledge—developing a sense of what others are like, and consciously exploring what makes them “tick.” Although a course in intercultural relationships is a good first step, one may also develop such insights through books, videos, and personal contact.

1. *Read widely, including current publications on intercultural communications.* (See the suggested reading list below.) However, understanding must go beyond theory. Obtain guide books for a quick access to factual data about a country: tourist sites, monuments, heros, climate, foods, products, and language. Next, briefly review their history to gain a sense of their past. Finally, read their literature (and listen to their music) to gain the

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broadest sense of what a people value and of how they relate to one another.

2. *Watch videos or movies.* Visual representations of people have become an important factor in communication. But be careful to choose representative movies rather than “popular” films. Just as the United States should not be stereotyped by its many “police” movies, so Hong Kong is not like a Jackie Chan adventure, nor Japan like a Godzilla movie, nor Britain like the adventures of Mr. Bean. The best movies are character studies or dramas in the best sense, stories emphasizing the values and mores of a culture. Indeed, seeing is understanding.

3. *Make personal contact.* Practical knowledge and understanding truly come through meeting and interacting with people. Once you begin to know and trust an individual, it is easier to know, to understand, and finally to accept his or her culture.

It may be difficult for some to make personal contacts. Here are some suggestions: Be active rather than isolationist. Search for and participate in cross-cultural programs (this is especially appropriate in a school setting). However, beware! Students, while generally more open, are often likely to “conform” to their society's values. A young person may not yet act or “believe” exactly the way most adults do.

Understanding Culture Shock

Knowledge and tolerance still aren't enough. Every visitor (including foreign students and student missionaries) will at

some point display actions or attitudes commonly called “culture shock.” This is normal and predictable. It merely confirms that one is experiencing the natural conflict that results from two systems interacting.

Initially, most people are tolerant of a new culture. They enjoy, participate, and often try to assimilate. But after a few weeks, there comes a reversal, a tendency to criticize, reject, and even despise everything—food, dress, customs, language, even the people. This “reversal” is called culture shock. Fortunately, it is usually temporary.

Culture shock is also cyclic. It reappears after a few months and then again a year or so later. Even after many years abroad, it will resurface. Although I spent more than half of my life outside of the United States, I still had occasional episodes of culture shock.

There is also the phenomenon of reverse culture shock. Students, student missionaries, and long-term travelers, once they return to their home country, have to readjust to its culture.

Thus, what appears as a negative attitude by a foreign visitor or a returning compatriot is often just a temporary expression of culture shock. Everyone who stays more than a few days in another culture can expect to experience this phenomenon.

In order to cope with culture shock, one must learn to accept different ways of doing things. It is important to remember that each country has developed practices and procedures that “work” for them. Unfortunately, it is easier to question the actions of another culture than to try to understand or to accept them.

When tempted to ask “Why do they do things that way?” consider the reasons. For example, Asians wonder, “Why don’t Americans remove their shoes when they enter my home?” And, conversely, Americans might ask, “Why do Japanese visitors always take off their shoes upon entering my house?” The central answer to such questions is that this practice works for them. It grew out of their language, customs, or history. So, taking off shoes lessens cleaning chores in a home without a major entryway or one with straw mats. Even when the original causes for a custom have disappeared, the practice

may still remain.

Usually, it isn’t a matter of right or wrong. It reflects what works in that society. The trouble is, we often think our way is the only right way when in fact, there are many correct ways to do things. Consider eating, for instance. Which is better—fingers, forks, or chopsticks? All are correct or acceptable in the right situation.

Culture shock can be minimized if we understand that there is more than one correct way to do things. We can also cope with the inevitability of culture shock by recognizing its short-term nature. The fuller the understanding, the less effect it will have.

The Benefits of Intercultural Exchanges

Because of changes in world travel, along with the demands of business, education, government, and church, we must develop an intercultural awareness and train ourselves and our students to reduce the conflicts and tensions of the past. Interculturalism is a fact. Moreover, it is not just a necessary evil, the price of doing business or of working in a modern world. Instead, consider its benefits.

It enriches. Learning about others provides us with alternatives for attitudes and behavior. Individuals and even societies often act a certain way because they don’t know another way. Meeting other cultures gives people more choices.

It enlarges. Learning about other peoples and other cultures gives each society a broader perspective on themselves. When one understands others, he or she begins to understand self. One may then recognize the cultural bias underlying many things often taken for granted—eating, work, recreation. More importantly, he or she may recognize that such things are not a matter of right and wrong but rather are what works for a particular place and time.

It is enjoyable. There is much that is charming, amusing, and rewarding about interacting with other people and places. Cross-cultural exchanges are enjoyable—if understood properly.

Most of all, it is *humanizing*. By learning about people we perceive as different from us, we discover the essential humanity of all cultures. Although we do many things differently, what is remarkable is how much we have in common.

Sometimes the externals, the little things, hide what we share. The key to cross-cultural relations is acceptance, both of one’s own culture and that of others.

Finally, don’t be afraid that acceptance will mean losing your own sense of culture. Instead, study others. Learn, expand, explain, and, most of all, enjoy! ☞

A Beginning Reading List

Adler, Nancy J. *International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior*. 3rd ed. Cincinnati, Ohio: South-Western College Publishing, 1997.

A good textbook approach to intercultural communications and management practices.

Axtell, Roger E. *Do’s and Taboos of Hosting International Visitors*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1990.

A generalist view of intercultural relations in business practice. Practical focus includes how others view Americans, hosting protocols including dining and drinking, and general cultural tips arranged by country.

Landis, Dan, and Rabi S. Bhagat, eds. *Handbook of Intercultural Training*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1996.

A collection of essays on theory, methods, and context of intercultural training. Includes some area studies.

Morrison, Terri, Wayne A. Conaway, and George A. Borden. *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: How to Do Business in 60 Countries*. Holbrook, Mass.: Bob Adams, 1994.

A generalist handbook giving brief cultural overviews, protocol, and business practices for more than 60 countries—mainly major European, South American, and Asian countries.

Culture Shock: A Guide to Customs and Etiquette. Singapore: Times Books International, various dates.

This guidebook series offers fairly detailed individual books for more than 30 major countries—primarily Asia, Europe, and North America.

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