

Hospitality: What does it look like in different cultures?

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Hospitality is a wide word. It means different things to different people.

Some people extend hospitality with an invitation to a meal at a restaurant. Other people exhibit hospitality with an invitation to their home. And still others demonstrate hospitality by giving other people space and staying out of their business.

We like to think we are hospitable people, but how do we know our efforts are perceived as we intend? Likewise, how do we recognize when people from other cultures are extending hospitality to us?

Answering these questions requires time, patience and self-examination.

Seeing hospitality clearly begins by examining culture



Patty Lane, director of
intercultural ministries
for Texas Baptists

In [*A Beginner's Guide to Crossing Cultures: Making Friends in a Multicultural World*](#), Patty Lane, director of intercultural ministries for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, writes: "A simple [definition of culture] is 'a system of meanings and values that shape one's behavior.' Everyone has a culture, but recognizing the impact of culture on relationships is not always so easy."

Testing Lane's claim is pretty easy. For example, when an Anglo homeowner in a North Texas neighborhood delivered baked goods to her Arab neighbors last Christmas, she did not expect to be asked to wait on the porch until she was handed cookies in return. However, the Arab neighbor felt obligated to reciprocate the gift, leaving the Anglo neighbor worried she had imposed on her neighbor.

For these two neighbors, culture had a direct impact on their relationship.

Similar cross-cultural interactions happen all the time, and increasingly so in a quickly diversifying state like Texas. This also means the potential for misunderstanding is increasing. Caring for people of other cultures calls for moving past or avoiding misunderstanding.

Mark Heavener, strategist in intercultural ministries for Texas Baptists, spends his life in the intersection of cultures and has learned, "When two cultures meet, they are looking at each other through their own cultural lenses."

Therefore, for cross-cultural relationships to grow, participants need first to examine how they themselves see the world and then how the other sees the world.



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Expressions of hospitality across cultures

Anglo-Americans frequently are concerned with time and, to avoid scheduling conflicts, may prefer for someone to call before dropping by their home or office. Many other cultures, however, consider it an honor to receive guests at any time, even unannounced.

Some cultures expect visitors to call ahead to ensure elaborate preparations can be made to welcome and host that person. If the visitor arrives unannounced, he or she will be asked to wait somewhere while those same preparations are made in a flurry of unseen activity.

A common greeting in Middle Eastern cultures includes a kiss on each cheek. While meeting a group of pastors and leaders from different Middle Eastern cultures, Heavener proceeded to extend the customary greeting

but was stopped when his guide told him a particular individual was from a Middle Eastern culture that did not greet with a kiss.

Among Congolese and other Central Africans, it is considered improper for men and women who do not know each other to shake or hold hands. Instead, they touch the back of each others' hands. Imagine how this might play out during the greeting time of a worship service or in a prayer circle.

Hospitality is a matter of honor

Hospitality and honor are tied together in many cultures. To maintain honor while avoiding shame, learning to extend and receive hospitality well is important.

As an example, Heavener notes Anglo-Americans tend to be structured by time, while most other cultures are structured by event.

If invited to an event hosted by people of a different culture, Heavener encourages having a cultural guide who can help explain and walk visitors through the event. Many times, a guide will be assigned, which is an expression of hospitality that should not be rejected.

If the event is a worship service concluded with a meal, visitors should expect to stay for the entire event—including the meal. The meal is the culmination of the event when the real fellowship happens. Leaving before the meal can communicate disinterest in or dislike of the host and thus be a mark of shame.

Another way people in the majority culture can extend hospitality to others is by paying attention to what is happening within their communities or countries of origin. Just as we continue to be affected by “news from home,” immigrants, refugees and others living in the United States also care about what is happening around the world. Hospitality includes caring

about their sources of joy, sorrow and anxiety.

A handful of helpful tips for starting cross-cultural relationships

Starting and growing cross-cultural relationships is easier than many think and richer and more rewarding than many realize.

- Be patient.
- Forget about time.
- Do as the other does. For example, if they remove their shoes, remove your shoes. If they avoid eye contact, then avoid eye contact.
- Accept invitations.
- Ask for help.
- Be gracious.
- Don't assume you have the most to give in the relationship. Chances are, you will be wrong.
- When you attend that meal, you may be the honored guest. When offered seconds, get them quickly, whether you want them or not. Those who do want seconds will be waiting eagerly for you to go first.

Resources

[Patty Lane and Mark Heavener](#) are available to assist churches desiring to learn about crossing cultures.

In addition to Patty Lane's book, Heavener recommended [*American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*](#), which addresses topics such as how different cultures perceive facts, understand the place of the

individual within society, and interact socially.

[*Leading with Cultural Intelligence: The Real Secret to Success*](#) by David Livermore provides a framework for examining one's own culture while learning to navigate other cultures.