

Cultural Intelligence: Does Jesus care about yours?

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ARLINGTON— Jesus, who commanded us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, is interested in our cultural intelligence, or how well we relate to people of different cultures. Furthermore, if we are to obey his command to make disciples of all people, then we must learn to interact with people from different cultures.

To help Texas Baptists grow in their ability to develop cross-cultural relationships, Becky Ellison shared insights she has gained from scholars Philip Jenkins and David Livermore regarding cultural intelligence.

Ellison is a consultant with the [Christian Women's Job Corps and Christian Men's Job Corps](#), ministries of WMU of Texas, and teaches part-time at the Garland School of Social Work. She led a workshop on cultural intelligence during Texas Baptist's Family Gathering.

What is cultural intelligence?

Cultural intelligence (CQ) is defined as the “capability to relate, respect, express care, work and serve effectively across cultures.” CQ requires an awareness of cultural dynamics operating below the surface of interpersonal interactions. A humorous example involving green tea and sugar was given in the first few minutes of a TED talk by Sheena Iyengar, which can be viewed below.

TED talk by Sheena Iyengar

Examples of such dynamics include the use of tattoos and the way people

behave during prayer. In some cultures, girls are tattooed to safeguard them from being stolen before marriage, while in other cultures girls tattoo themselves to tell a story. Some cultures consider it rude to pray with legs crossed, while others consider it disrespectful for men to pray while wearing a hat.

Culture is complicated

Such outward signs and behaviors are determined by one's underlying culture. Culture is a set of "attitudes, customs and beliefs...transmitted through language, material objects, ritual, institutions and art from one generation to the next." Culture is shaped by one's country of origin, language, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, education, socioeconomic status, political views and many other variables.

People think, feel and react in accordance with the rules of their respective culture. These rules form an individual's identity and are used in one direction to bind a group of people together around a shared identity and in another direction to establish boundaries between one group of people and another.

Why does cultural intelligence matter?

Sociologists, economists and demographers talk of the world being flattened by advances in transportation and technology. The flattening of the world is seen in the mass migration of people around the globe, which is bringing the world's 5000 cultures and subcultures into increasing proximity. One consequence of such contact is fear and misunderstanding leading to growing tensions between people.

As people grow to understand one another better through developing cultural intelligence, fear and misunderstanding are reduced, leading to the

prevention or lessening of tension and conflict.

For followers of Christ, cultural intelligence matters because communicating the gospel requires the ability to move beyond tensions generated by cultural misunderstandings.

When your neighbor is not like you

Jesus did not command us to make disciples among our friends. Jesus commanded us to make disciples among all people. At a time when our neighbors are increasingly unlike us because people from all over the world are coming together to live in the same communities, followers of Christ must get to know other cultures. They can do so by engaging in a four-fold method outlined by David Livermore, author of several books on cultural intelligence.

- **Drive:** Discover your reason, or motivation, for increasing cultural intelligence.
- **Knowledge:** Gain knowledge about different people. Ask questions. For example, is that person from an individualist or collectivist culture? How does that person relate to authority? What is that person's view of time? Find a CQ coach to help you gain knowledge.
- **Strategy:** Determine ways to effectively engage your learning.
- **Action:** Get involved in cross-cultural relationships using your knowledge and strategy.

When your neighbor is more like you than you realize

Ellison shared that “the average Christian is poor, theologically conservative, female and a person of color.” She also said Nigeria is now

one of the top missionary-sending countries in the world, further noting 46 percent of refugees resettled in the United States are Christian. These statistics counter the thinking of many American evangelicals, who still conceive of Christianity being strongest in the U.S.

The changing complexity of Christianity reveals another reason for followers of Christ to develop cultural intelligence, which is that their brothers and sisters in Christ are increasingly unlike them. Therefore, to maintain the harmony and unity called for by Christ, Christians must learn to navigate their cultural differences.

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