

# PURSUING CROSS CULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS AND MINISTRY

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*We don't know where you might be starting from in your desire to minister cross culturally, but let us provide some very elementary and foundational insights. We hope then to build on these to give you some practical help as you pursue ministry across social, cultural, and economic barriers.*

**“Mercy is *compassion*  
toward those  
who are in need,  
resulting in *action*  
to alleviate that need,  
through acts of *charity* leading  
toward *self-sustainment*.”**

**Randy Nabors**

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## ***CULTURE***

First you have to recognize that people, all people, exist in cultures. This is the way God made us, and it became especially true at the Tower of Babel. Some folks seem to resist this notion because they think it divides people. We are not interested here in preserving division, but in helping you to understand the differences that might perpetuate division, in order to help you bridge the divide.

***But remember this...***

Because of the rebellion of man God did send division (Genesis 11:6-9), so we would not unite in our fallen condition and become powerful in our arrogance. This sinful condition leads us to sins and passions that include pride of race and racial superiority (racism), indifference to, hatred, and exploitation of those who are different from us. These can lead to corporate sins of nationalism, ethnocentrism, and class consciousness.

Aspiring to unity and peace does not mean we can afford to deny the reality of our differences of culture and history. Those who are in the position of being a majority culture in a given country are



often unaware that they have made a number of cultural assumptions. They often think that their way of doing things is normal, and therefore “right,” and what minorities do is not normal, therefore “wrong.” They sometimes associate *difference* with moral or value judgments. We know (I am making an assumption about the reader) that there are things in all cultures that can be sinful and wrong, as well as things that are God honoring and beautiful. One of the past failures in missions work has been to make cultural judgments upon whole peoples that were not based on Scripture, but simply cultural prejudices.

## **ESSENTIAL UNITY**

The next thing we need to remember is our *essential unities*; or the things that bring us together. The first point here is the way all humans were created; that we are created in the image of God. All human beings, no matter their race, ethnicity, language, or socio-



economic group have dignity because we are all image bearers of God. All of us are also fallen creatures, we have sinned against God, and no one is immune from how this will affect our behavior as individuals, and as nations.

Those who are in Christ also have one common Holy Spirit who indwells us, and this makes us one with God through Christ, one with Jesus, and one with all the other believers in Jesus, all over the world. This unity means that this is our essential identity, we are children of God, and it surpasses all other points of difference.

Aspiring to unity and peace between Christians means we can't afford to deny the reality of differences, or culture, or history. There is a wonderful verse in Galatians 3:28 which teaches us our essential unity: *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* (ESV) This is in the context of a book that fights for the protection of Gentiles from being culturally assimilated by the Jewish culture. The concept of neither male nor female does not prevent the Apostle who wrote it to spell out differences in function according to gender in his other letters. How would I feel if someone told me "I don't think of you as a man?" Obviously, I am more than just my gender, but it is important to me.



The Apostle Paul also writes in Acts 17: 26, *"And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us."* (ESV)

In this passage we are taught both our unity, and our historical and geographical difference.

## ***We need some awareness...***

To resist the idea of differences robs us of the awareness that we must make changes and adjustments to reach those different from ourselves with the Gospel. Paul, as a great missionary, understood this principle very well when he explained it in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. He teaches us that he could see the difference between Jews and non-Jews, between those under the Law and those not under the Law. He says that he made himself a slave to all, that he might win more of them. This is love, evidenced by a cultural sacrifice and commitment to assimilate or at least to attempt to communicate in a culturally appropriate way to others.



What would we think of an American missionary who

arrived in a foreign land, only to find that the people there did not speak English, and became insistent that everyone there learn to speak English? We would think he was arrogant and ignorant. If we go to some other place, to some other people, we must go in humility and love, so we can win them. But what if they happen to come to us? While it might be wise for them politically and economically to learn our culture and language, what does love require us to do if we seek to win them to Christ?

There is a difference between politics and missions, and it can be hard to distinguish them in our emotions, but they are still there.

America has a dominant majority culture and many minorities. While those minorities seek to assimilate into American culture how can we be sensitive to them in order to become their friends, so we might show them Christ's love? Yes, we often feel we can afford to demand that they do the changing. Yes, we



often feel we can afford to stay apart from them, even treat them as they don't exist. But, that is just the problem. We have often treated social and cultural minorities as if they don't exist, or even as if they were invisible. We have not realized they have had to become cross-cultural in their understanding so they could survive among us.

We can afford to act in a superior and separate way only so long as we fail to realize what it costs those who will never hear or see Jesus because of our superior attitudes.



We have classified their difference as ignorance, and have asked them to forsake what was unique about their culture so they could fit in with us. We have not understood why they seem to stay in their own communities and retain some sense of separateness from us, even though in the past we have refused them entrance into the institutions and context of our cultural life. ***That used to be called segregation.***

Our challenge in cross cultural ministry is to grow out



of our ignorance about culture, people, and history, as well as ourselves. Some of the history we must come to grips with is the history of racism, alienation, and its' attendant pain. Pain is something we would all like to avoid, but to deny it has existed is to again smack other racial and ethnic groups in the face. This is not to advocate wallowing in sorrow or indulging ourselves in group guilt. It is to acknowledge reality, and to begin to understand what others might be thinking about us.

**I**f you want to relate to someone different than yourself then you might have to acknowledge how offensive your very presence could be. The color of my skin might imply to someone who doesn't know me that I am the enemy. This may not be fair, but nonetheless, we all come to a cross cultural meeting with some previous assumptions.

### ***DEVELOP A STRATEGY***

- ***Be humble***
- ***Become a learner***
- ***Listen***
- ***Appreciate***
- ***Pursue relationships***

To relate to someone cross-culturally means I have to become humble, to become a learner, to listen, to appreciate, and to pursue people different from me on their terms as long as it does not compromise the teachings of Christ. If I do not do this then I am not following the missionary and cross cultural pattern of the early church and the New Testament.

**The people with the advantage, in this case those who know Jesus and the Gospel, are the ones who have to do the moving toward groups different than themselves.**

## ***It would be easier if poor people weren't so needy...***

While this is definitely a challenge racially, ethnically, and linguistically, it is also a huge hurdle economically. There is a culture of poverty, and it can be very uncomfortable to pursue the poor. It isn't only that they are different culturally, but it is that they always need something. Some of their needs are so great that there seems to be nothing I can do to help them, or change them. It is easier for me, or my church to not deal with them at all. As with all ministry, and especially across cultural or economic lines, it is foolish to depend on your own gifts or resources. How can the power of God be evidenced if you don't need God to do it?

**So, here is the simple challenge; Attempt what is impossible, difficult, and often frustrating for the glory of God, by the power and grace of God, to accomplish the will of God. That is, that people from every tribe, tongue and nation might be gathered around his throne in heaven.**

**Pursue others, different from yourself, and become their slave in order to win them. Don't come to them from above, but from below. Show yourself to be a friend, one that is willing to take a risk in the relationship, one who is willing to sacrifice, a friend that will be loyal, even across racial, ethnic, economic, and social lines. May the world marvel at how we love one another.**

## **MNA MERCY MINISTRIES VISION**

The purpose of MNA Mercy Ministries is to encourage and equip PCA churches and members to become involved in a growing way with ministries to people who not only need the Gospel but who face circumstances of tangible need or difficulty. While these needs exist everywhere, they are often more prevalent in the concentrated populations of the cities. These concentrations of population offer great opportunity for ministry because city programs can address the needs of many people in close proximity.

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