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Moving from Cross-cultural to Intercultural Collaboration in Missions

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Abstract: The article is an expanded written version of a presentation at the annual banquet of the Lutheran Society for Missiology in St. Louis on January 29, 2019. Since a cross-cultural approach to mission work has reinforced divisions between cultures, an intercultural approach to mission is encouraged. Unlike cross-cultural interactions, in which both parties can separate and return to their respective cultures with little change, intercultural interaction changes those involved so that they become a new culture. Intercultural interactions are driven by the desire to form lasting relationships. Gert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions framework is a helpful tool for examining cultural assumptions that influence our multicultural mission work. In a collaborative team process, as an example, it was demonstrated that an individual's understanding of terms such as collaboration, team, and community has been influenced by cultural assumptions. To prevent our cultural assumptions from becoming a barrier, we must work with those of other cultures to forge a new set of cultural values.

Mission work, by its very nature, is culture crossing. Paul pointed out, "how can they believe in him whom they've not heard. How can they hear unless someone is sent." He further outlined the necessity of adapting to the mission field culture in 1 Corinthians 9, "I have become all things to all people so that I might save some." While mission work across cultures is not new, today we stand at the door

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of unprecedented opportunity to unreached people internationally and domestically. The bring the Gospel to opportunity is ours due to the large influx of immigrants into the United States. The opportunity is ours because of the rise of social media and economic opportunity, which allows us to collaborate with international brothers and sisters in Christ to a degree that was not possible in the past. To seize the opportunity before us, we believe that our cross-cultural interactions in mission need to embrace the challenge of intercultural collaboration in service to God's mission.

More and more congregations are sponsoring overseas mission trips or urban mission projects. More congregations are also opening their doors as rental properties for ethnic immigrant churches. Much of the mission development in the international mission field is being funded and led by pastors of LCMS congregations in the US. While these trends are a blessing, leading to more people hearing the Gospel message, the trends also speak of the importance of shifting from cross-cultural to intercultural mission work.

The terms *cross-cultural* and *intercultural* are often used synonymously. However, they describe two distinct forms of interaction. The term *intercultural communication* was described first by Edward T. Hall in his influential book, *The Silent Language*.[1] The term describes the development of meaningful communication and interaction through the merging of cultures. Cross-cultural interaction describes reaching across boundaries. However, intercultural interaction is characterized by comprehensive mutuality, reciprocity, and equality.

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The challenge with cross-cultural interactions is that we settle for accommodation rather than embracing transformation in intercultural interactions. A great deal of mission work has been cross-cultural in nature. We go overseas and eat the food, listen to the music, hear their stories, but always we cling to our culture and process the experience through our culture. We allow ethnic ministries to use our facilities. We may, on occasion, share a worship experience in which some of their music is played and some of our music is played. Some of the worship is in their language and some of it is in our language. We may have a potluck where we may try some of their food to be polite, and they may try ours, so as not to be rude. Notice that the differences are tolerated rather than being celebrated. There is a clearly defined line of *us* and *them*. The illustration below is a visualization of interaction that is typical of tourist and cross-cultural mission teams (Figure 1).

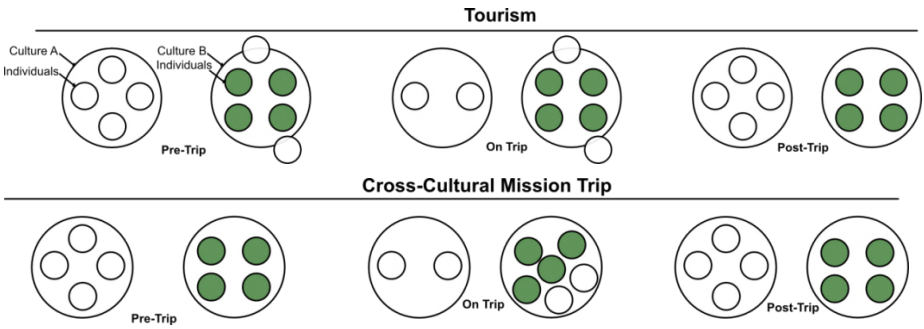

Figure 1.

Unlike cross-cultural interactions in which both parties can separate and return to their respective cultures with little change, intercultural interaction changes those involved so that they become a new culture—not a 50/50 mixture of the two cultures, but a combination of the two cultures and new values which can only be discovered through the interaction of individuals who are more committed to the relationship than to their cultural values. Intercultural interactions are driven by the desire to form a lasting relationship bond. Huang and Hsiao noted the distinction in intercultural interactions: "It is not simply information being transferred from one to another but also a way to create and preserve social relationships."[2] The illustration below is a visual representation of intercultural work (Figure 2).

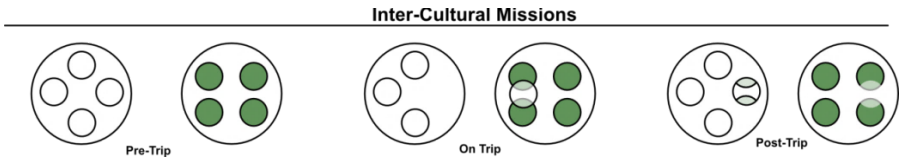

Figure 2.

To be effective and seize our mission opportunities to the next generation of our culture and the next generation of the cultures of the world, we must make the conscious shift from cross-cultural interaction to intercultural collaboration. This shift does not require a change in our theology, but it does necessitate a reassessment of the cultural values that shape our interactions with people from other cultures. It necessitates a commitment to form a lasting relationship with those of other cultures.

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The quest for healthy intercultural collaboration necessitates a conscious shift from cross-cultural to intercultural interaction. By understanding our cultural assumptions and the cultural values of others, we will promote a healthy vibrant mission community that transcends cultural boundaries. We will move beyond accommodation to the genuine community that is ours in Christ. If we do not make the shift, our culture will continue to serve as a barrier, preventing the outward expression of the inward unity we have in Christ. We, believers in North America, will continue to wonder why our denomination is so white and European; and our international mission partners will always feel like clients rather than team members.

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Gert Hofstede describes culture as the programing of the mind.[3] His framework uses six value dimensions (see Table 1) to describe the culture of a particular country. While there are other frameworks that have been developed, Hofstede's framework is approachable and continues to be widely used for cultural studies. Therefore, I will use two of Hofstede's cultural dimensions to describe the challenges and opportunities we face in intercultural collaboration.

Table 1.

Dimension	Description
Power/Distance	The degree to which a culture accepts inequity among its members.
Uncertainty Avoidance	The acceptable level of stress due to the unknown.
Individualism/Collectivism	The value the individual places on self in comparison to the group.
Masculinity/Femininity	The values that shape a culture's response to conflict and competition.
Long Term/Short Term Orientation	The propensity of members of a culture to focus on the present or the future.
Indulgence/Restraint	The degree to which gratification can be delayed.

Hofstede, "Dimensionalizing cultures: The Hofstede model in context," 2011.

Our view of collaboration is that of a group of people who engage in rigorous debate and cooperative work as the group solves the problem for which it was organized. Our understanding of collaboration reflects our cultural values of individualism and power-distance. Individualism, according to Hofstede, is the

cultural assumption that individuals represent only themselves in interactions. In a culture that scores high on Hofstede's individualized scale, a decision's impact on others is not intuitive; it requires a conscious decision. The power-distance dimension of Hofstede's framework describes a culture's expectation of power distribution. In a low power-distance culture, power is perceived to be equally distributed. Everyone has the right to speak up, and opinions are to be considered equally. In a low power-distance culture, there are few social rules and little fall-out should the rules be broken. Because we are from a high individualist culture with low power-distance, we do not rely on the group to develop our opinions and we do not hesitate to share our opinions or challenge the opinions of others.

In contrast to the US culture of high individualism and low power-distance, most other cultures tend to gravitate toward collectivism and high power-distance. People from collectivist cultures are keenly aware of their position within society and their families. The individual does not like to make decisions without the input of the family. The individual's actions can bring honor or shame upon the family and the community. Rigid social rules protect the honor of the community.

Collectivist cultures value collaboration for the development of group identity and for the strengthening community. For people from these cultures, community is the goal of collaboration; the task to be accomplished is a tool for achieving deeper community. This is in contrast to the US assumption that the effective accomplishment of a task is the goal of collaboration and developing a sense of community is the tool to facilitate the accomplishment of the task.

People from collectivist cultures value collaboration. However, research has shown that expectations regarding collaboration differ between people from the US and people from collectivist, high power-distance cultures.[4] Collectivist cultures value collaboration for the development of group identity and for the strengthening community. For people from these cultures, community is the goal of collaboration; the task to be accomplished is a tool for achieving deeper community. This is in contrast to the US assumption that the effective accomplishment of a task is the goal of collaboration and developing a sense of community is the tool to facilitate the accomplishment of the task. You will note that both cultures value community and the doing tasks in collaboration, but from very different perspectives. The task-oriented approach to collaboration in the US continues until the task is completed. In contrast, in cultures that value community in

collaboration, the need to collaborate continues beyond the completion of a task as an expression of community.

A high power-distance culture is one in which inequality of people is accepted. We envision collaboration as a round table where everyone has equal opportunity and all opinions are valued equally. In the US a lower power-distance society, power is shared and great care is given to provide equal opportunity. People from high power-distance cultures expect the leader to lead the group process. Others may contribute to the group work as they are invited to do so by the leader. Those who hold a high position in the group context are not to be challenged or contradicted. It is every member's responsibility to avoid bringing shame upon the leader or more valuable members of the team. While there are differences among cultures, generally the leader is the oldest and the most accomplished person in the group, regardless of who was selected to be the leader by the organization.

There is need to have a deeper conversation about the implications of differences in cultural assumptions regarding collaboration. Additional information on the subject of interculturalism and the church can be found by listening to the presentation of the 2016 Multiethnic Symposium at Concordia Seminary, which was organized under the theme "Communities of Hope: One Community in Christ." While the topic of interculturalism versus cross-culturalism is rooted in academic research, it has practical implications. It is helpful to consider three practical applications that can facilitate a transition from cross-cultural to intercultural work:

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First, respect authority. Know who has the power and show respect to the leader. It means using titles to address people. It means that you speak first to the leader and get his or her permission to involve others in the project. This can be challenging, because in many cultures the leader is an elderly member of the culture who has little or no English language ability. The translators are younger members. We need to avoid the temptation to talk to the translator rather than through the translator or to engage the translator in leadership discussions.

Second, recognize that people from collectivist high power-distance cultures seek to avoid bringing shame on those in leadership position. Therefore, they may not share information or viewpoints that could harm the reputation of the leader. Our cultural values may perceive such action as a lack of integrity or even sinful deception. However, in the collectivist culture, bringing shame to the leader or upon one's family is a greater sin. Therefore, communication strategies need to be

developed that support clear and accurate reporting while eliminating, or at least minimizing, the potential for shame.

Third, relationships are very important. Take time to get to know the other person's family. Take note of names, birth order, and significant family lore. Be prepared to talk about your family and community. While most of our interactions are task oriented, for those of a collectivist culture, strengthening community bonds by sharing food, drink, and family information is the most important task at the start of any endeavor.

We have the unprecedented opportunity for collaboration with foreign missionaries to reach the ethnic immigrants populating our cities and to expand our mission reach into new areas of the world. And yet, to be successful, we will need to understand that, for many cultures, collaboration isn't just about getting a task accomplished in a more efficient manner. It is about building a community that endures beyond its assigned task. It is about giving recognition to respected leaders in a community and learning how to empower the least of a culture to be a part of the collaborative process.

The impact of culture on the collaborative process is one example of the impact of culture on our efforts to work interculturally on mission. Cultural assumptions shape our understanding of commonly used mission field concepts such as team, identity, body language, and community. What is needed is not just adaptation to cultural differences, a good first step, but a merging of cultures as we form long-term, transparent relationships. Through that merger, the body of Christ is strengthened and healthy mission collaboration may occur.

Endnotes

[1] Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1980).
[2] Xiaoxia "Silvie" Huang, and E-Ling Hsiao, "Synchronous and asynchronous communication in an online environment: Faculty experiences and perceptions," *Quarterly Review of Distance Education* 13, no. 1 (2012): 37.
[3] Gert Hofstede, "Dimensionalizing cultures: The Hofstede model in context," *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* 2, no. 1 (2011): 8.
[4] Manuela Aparicio, Fernando Bacao, and Tiago Oliveira, "Cultural impacts on e-learning systems' success," *The Internet and Higher Education* 31 (2016): 58–70, retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2016.06.003, and Sehoon Kim, and Gary N. McLean, "The impact of national culture on informal learning in the workplace," *Adult Education Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2014): 39–59, retrieved from http://doi.org/10.1177/0741713613504125.