

**Thoughts to Consider on
the Global Church and
Short-term Mission Trips**

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Introduction:

I love and am fascinated by culture. Having spent the better part of the last decade (4 years in Tanzania, 3 years as Pastor of Global Ministries at CP) serving in cross-cultural ministry, it has become a passion of mine and I'm grateful that I get to do what I do.

One of the great benefits of serving in such a capacity, and one of the things I enjoy most, is that I often get to interact with people from all over the world. I love getting to know people that have come from many different backgrounds, who speak different languages, live in different ways, and oftentimes adhere to different beliefs.

While this is intended to be a short read, I don't want to miss the forest for the trees. I want to first take a moment to summarize a few things so that we can hopefully get a better glimpse of the bigger picture.

In Acts 17:26, Paul tells the crowd at the Areopagus that it was, "From one man He has made every nationality to live over the whole earth..." and in Genesis 1 we see that, "God created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God; he created them male and female." So, no matter the distinctions (which are hugely important), we are all created by God, in His image, for His glory.

Sin entered the picture in Genesis 3, humanity's relationship with God was broken, our capacity as image bearers was marred, and we were all placed under a curse. This reached new heights (no pun intended) when humanity united in sinful ambition in an effort to construct the Tower of Babylon in Genesis 11. "Let's build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky. Let's make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we will be scattered throughout the earth." The result was that God humbled humanity, confused their language, and scattered them throughout the earth.

Throughout the Scriptures we see God's heart for the nations. In fact, it's abundantly clear that the overall arc of redemptive history bends toward the reconciliation and redemption of every tongue, tribe, and nation to God through Jesus (see Rev. 7). As followers of Jesus we're both recipients and participants - we've been saved by grace and through faith in Him *and* we're called to be co-laborers with God in the fields of harvest. We're given a mandate to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19-20) *and* we're united by the Spirit with *all*

other followers of Jesus, throughout history, as the Global and Universal Church (see Galatians 3:28).

The Global Church is a thing of beauty. It's also tragically messy. As Leslie Newbigin once said, "It is a sinful community. It is, during most of its history, a weak, divided, and unsuccessful community. But because it is the community that lives by and bears witness to the risen life of the crucified Lord, it is the place where the reign of God is actually present and at work in the midst of history, and where the mission of Jesus is being accomplished."¹

Despite all of its messiness, God is working through the Church. As part of the Church, we get to join in and participate in what He is doing to accomplish the mission of Jesus. All of us. Malawians and Americans. Tanzanians and Mexicans. Haitians and Afghans.

It's remarkable.

So what does this have to do with you? What does this have to do with your upcoming trip? Well, quite a lot actually!

Cross-cultural relationships, while incredible and beautiful in many ways, are also tricky and complex. While you're only going to be gone for a few days, your trip is significant and its impact will be felt. You're stepping out of your home culture and into another. You're a guest in a foreign land. As a follower of Jesus, you're going to meet family you've never met before. You're going to impact communities you didn't know existed and they will impact you. You're going to see the beauty of the Global Church and you're going to see brokenness and sin. You're going to love and celebrate aspects of the local culture, and you'll experience things that will make you want to go home.

You'll want to fix things that you shouldn't. You may even sense God leading you to do something you wish He wouldn't.

In the swirl of emotion and jetlag, please remember this: you are an Image Bearer of God and an Ambassador of King Jesus. How you interact with others matters. How you think about what you're experiencing and how you walk away from your experience may very well stick with you (and others) for the rest of your life (and theirs). Culture is complex. Worldviews are confusing. People are people and Jesus is Lord!

¹ Leslie Newbigin, "*The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*" pp 53-54.

So, let's talk through a few things:

Culture & Worldview

What is culture?

“Culture is a way of life of a group of people--the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.”²

It is dynamic not static, meaning that culture is always changing and shifting in response to the outside world.

What is worldview?

Worldview is the way people see and interpret reality. Imagine putting on your sunglasses. Once you've put them on, your lenses have a direct impact on how you view the world. Your worldview is like a pair of sunglasses - it's through your worldview that you observe and interpret reality.

One way of expressing the relationship between culture and worldview would be that our worldview is how we define what we believe and how we look at the world, while our culture is how we express and live out our view of the world.

Why is this important? You may or may not have heard the old adage about the three fish. Two fish were swimming along and having a nice conversation when a third fish passed them by. As he passed, the third fish commented on how great the water felt. The first two stopped and looked at each other in bewilderment, “What's water?” They asked.

We are largely unaware of our own culture and worldview until we interact with others that have distinctly different cultures and worldviews. Step outside of your comfort zone and you're likely to begin to recognize it's baggage.

This can be overwhelming, frustrating, and problematic if we're not careful.

² <http://people.tamu.edu/~i-choudhury/culture.html>

Cultural Differences in South Texas:

During a recent trip to South Texas I was asked to teach during the Wednesday evening service for a local Spanish speaking church. I was leading a small team from our church and we were joined with 20 or so others from a Christian college in Minnesota.

We were told that the service would start at 6:30 PM. At 6:50 I was standing near the pulpit talking with one of the college students as we waited for church members to arrive. He asked me why we were still waiting to start the service as he had concluded that nobody else was coming. Literally, our small team and the 20 college students were the only people in the sanctuary! “We need to give it a few more minutes” I told him. “They’ll come!”

Sure enough, at 7:10 people began taking their seats and at 7:15 the service began.

What happened? Why was the team from Minnesota beginning to think the church wasn’t going to show up? Why did the church service start at 7:15 when we were told it would start at 6:30? Were they disrespecting our time?

Sarah Lanier captures this wonderfully in her book, *Foreign to Familiar: A Guide to Understanding Hot- and Cold-Climate Cultures*.

In her book she writes, “In different countries time is measured out differently. It’s always a good idea to observe first and see how it works where you are at the moment. In the cold-climate cultures, people enjoy using their time efficiently. This allows them to get more done and to plan how much they can accomplish, both of work and of leisure.

The orderliness of the German culture is reflected in the trains running on time, the quick, efficient way business is handled, even the quick arrival of your coffee at a restaurant. To show respect to people is to respect their time. To keep a person waiting is to say, “You are not important, so your time is not important. I don’t respect you or think you have anything more important to do than to wait for me.”

In some parts of each society, regardless of the culture, time is highly valued as a sign of competence, integrity, and respect. The military in any culture or the

corporate executive level of businessmen, for instance, has its own culture when it comes to time and structure. Their survival depends on it.

“Time is money” is a saying in the United States. Almost everywhere I go in the hot-climate world, the cold-climate people differentiate between “island time,” “African time,” “Latin time,” “Southern time,” and “Western time.” There is an assumption that if you are Western, you are time conscious. This is largely true, except for the hot-climate Westerners like the Portuguese, Italians and American Southerners.

Being structured, planned, and time conscious go hand in hand. Being spontaneous, unplanned, and event oriented do, too...When living in Europe, I carried a day-timer divided into half-hour blocks from 7 am to 7 pm. There was a page for each day. If a meeting came up, I would check my day-timer. It would tell me whether or not I was free. My pages were pretty much filled up, and I moved from one appointment to the next.

When I lived in South America, I had a page for each month, and those pages were mostly blank. Yet my days were full as I looked back. They were filled with spontaneous events or routine events that didn't need a day-timer as a reminder.

I was spontaneously asked to lecture at the University of Concepcion, Chile, and to fly to Bolivia, Colombia, and Argentina to teach. I was invited into meetings and asked to help in areas of my skills, and I was also able to do some consulting. However, at the beginning of each month, I could not have told you what I would be doing that particular month. Life just happened, and I responded to it.”³

Different Concepts of Time and Planning Points to Remember

Hot-Climate Cultures:

- *Are not as oriented toward the clock as cold-climate cultures.*
- *Are event oriented.*
- *Are spontaneous and flexible in their approach to life.*
- *Respond to what life brings.*

³ Sarah A. Lanier, “*Foreign to Familiar: A Guide to Understanding Hot- and Cold-Climate Cultures*”, pp.115-116.

- *Consider that saving time is not as important as experiencing the moment.*
- *Recognize that structure is required in some areas of life (the military, for example).*
- *Have informal visiting as part of the event.*

Cold-Climate Cultures:

- *Are time oriented*
- *Are structured in their approach to life*
- *Enjoy using time efficiently*
- *Try to plan their day, saving time is a value*
- *Expecting the event (dinner, the arrival of a guest, or a meeting) to begin at the time announced. Visiting or informally chatting happens before or after the event.⁴*

Islamic and Christian Worldviews:

Contrasts between worldviews are similarly disorienting and frustrating.

During a recent visit with a friend of mine, an Imam from Syria, I was asked to explain Easter. Eager to jump on the opportunity to share the truth of Jesus, I quickly explained the gospel.

My friend calmly and respectfully listened and waited until I finished answering his question before offering his response.

“My friend, thank you for sharing. However, you need to know that for me, as a Muslim, it makes no sense whatsoever to say that Allah would become man. It also makes no sense to me when you say God has a son. I don’t believe Jesus died on the cross and there is no such thing as the resurrection. I’m sorry if that is offensive but the things you are saying make no sense to me.”

While offensive to us as followers of Jesus, what my friend said is an open window to what many Muslims believe of Jesus (or Issa). This doesn’t mean that the gospel isn’t true. What it means is that I’m looking at the gospel through a Biblical worldview while he’s listening and interpreting what I’m saying through an Islamic filter. My gospel presentation assumed certain things about his worldview that weren’t true and, in all honesty, it wasn’t the best way to introduce

⁴ Lanier, pp. 118.

the concept. There are better ways (Biblical ways) to explain the gospel of Jesus to someone coming from an Islamic background.

Unpacking the Message From Our Cultural Baggage: A True Story

One modern example of such a practice:

“New believers need to be introduced to the whole range of Scripture. They must learn to consider the Bible as their final authority. Teaching needs to emphasize the principles God wants people to follow about loving their neighbor, forgiving each other, peaceful interaction and respect in the family. Instead of teaching these principles, the human tendency is to substitute rules about foods, ceremonies, rituals, times, and places. Paul states the principle clearly in

Romans 14:17-18:

“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.”

What we observed in the Bahinemo church made this passage come alive. After the majority of people in Wage village came to Christ, we urged them to go to God for wisdom and direction regarding how they should act, what they should or should not do, which ceremonies could be kept or dropped, dealing with sin, etc. We gathered passes that were not yet translated on topics for which they were seeking answers. We tended to be impatient about some activities we knew were displeasing to God, but we carefully avoided telling them our opinion. We wanted the leaders and everyone to develop a relationship with God and learn to hear His voice, rather than following us.

They focused on loving each other and making peace with their brothers. They looked at different aspects of their ceremonies and took out those rituals that caused pain or could be associated with any spirit beings. They keep the aspects of the ceremonies that brought unity, beauty, joy and peace. They revived a lost art of village court to solve conflicts rather than yelling and fighting about issues. They could not see any scripture against polygamy, but decided it was selfish for the older men to have several wives when the men under 30 had none. They did not require anyone to divorce (which was unheard of in the group), but they forbade anyone to marry a second wife if there was a single man without a wife. This rule drastically cut the rate of adultery and promiscuity

in the village. After 15 years all the young men had wives and most of the polygamy was gone by the natural process of death.

A missionary must be a learner in the community he/she serves. They must learn the ethical and spiritual values of the host community and compare those with both the Bible and the values of their own culture. This will sensitize them to the way the Spirit is convicting and teaching this new community so they can reinforce it. As more and more people become believers, they can help as a group to discover God's will for them. As they direct new believers to the Word of God, they will be able to work out their own salvation "with fear and trembling."⁵

So, we've touched on culture, worldview, contextualization and some of the difficulty of cross-cultural ministry. Now let's take a look at the global church and close with a quick point on serving the poor.

Short-term Ministry & The Local Church

While we might be overwhelmed at the thought of crossing cultures and engaging with other worldviews, God is on the move through the global church. As I mentioned earlier, the arc of redemptive history is bent towards the reconciliation and redemption of people to God from every tongue, tribe, and nation. God is moving mightily. Countries that were once the focal point of western missionaries have begun to send missionaries to western countries. The church in places like Malawi and Tanzania is thriving and growing.

While the church in the West had its season of prominence, a global shift has occurred:

- "When we live in North America, we can easily think, "I'm part of the happening place," or, "Our issues *are* the global issues." But it's humbling to remember that the United States and Canada together represent somewhere between 5 and 6 percent of the world's population. What this means is that roughly 94 percent of the world's population lives outside of our two nations."⁶

⁵ T. Wayne Dye, "Discovering the Holy Spirit's World in a Community", *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement Reader*, pp 493-496.

⁶ Paul Borthwick, *Western Christians in Global Missions: What's the Role of the North American Church?*, pp. 36.

- In the 1980s statisticians reported that the worldwide church of Jesus Christ was, for the first time since the first century, predominantly non-Western.⁷
- The statistical center of gravity for global Christianity is now in sub-Saharan Africa: <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/blog/centerofgravity/>
- If we want to visualize a “typical” contemporary Christian, we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria, or in a Brazilian favela.⁸
- If current growth continues, Africa will be the most Christian continent on earth by 2025.⁹
- The largest church in Europe is pastored by a Nigerian missionary. The largest church in London is pastored by a Nigerian missionary. One of the five largest churches in New York City is pastored by a Nigerian missionary.¹⁰
- The Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria has already planted five hundred churches across North America.¹¹

The Church in Malawi, for example, is growing rapidly (one of the fastest growing Christian populations in the world). However, like much of the majority world church, churches in Malawi tend to be very poor materially.

So, how do we function when serving in the midst of poverty?

“Many churches and short-term trips that focus on poverty alleviation tend to think that poverty is primarily about a lack of material things such as food, clothing, and shelter. As a result, they tend to focus their efforts on providing these material things to low-income people. In contrast to this common view of poverty, low-income people tend to describe their poverty in far more psychological and social terms, often expressing a profound sense of shame,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, pp. 1-2.

⁹ Borthwick, p. 36.

¹⁰ Ibid., 29.

¹¹ Ibid.

inferiority, helplessness, vulnerability, and social isolation. This disconnect between how we think of poverty and how the poor actually experience poverty is at the heart of the crisis in poverty alleviation efforts. We need a sound diagnosis of the underlying disease of poverty if we are to apply the proper treatment.

From a Biblical perspective, poverty is rooted in broken relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. In this light, material poverty is a symptom of something deeper. We need to stop treating the symptoms and start treating the underlying causes of poverty; indeed, treating the symptoms, e.g., continually giving handouts of material resources, can actually make matters worse by undermining the materially poor's dignity and stewardship. We need to see poverty alleviation as a process of reconciling both the materially poor and non-poor to right relationship with God, self, others, and creation. In other words, poverty alleviation is about participating in the reconciling mission of God.

Here's the uncomfortable truth: because poverty alleviation is a long-term process of reconciliation, not a momentary provision of material goods, a standalone, two week trip cannot significantly and directly contribute to poverty alleviation. But the trip can make poverty worse if we are not careful!"¹²

So, what does all of this mean for your trip?

Local leadership is CRUCIAL. The local church is our partner - they understand the culture better than we ever will, they speak the language, they operate within the local worldview, and they are uniquely gifted by God to serve in their home context. We are just guests who have popped in for a few days. Whatever we do we must do under the leadership of the local church lest our efforts to do good things be couched in unintentional paternalism.

Recognize your LIMITATIONS. Your role most likely needs to look more like praying, listening, and encouraging more than leading, teaching, and directing. Sit down, listen to local leaders, observe and admire the local culture, praise God for the beauty of the local church, and pray for God's kingdom to come and for his church to flourish.

¹² Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *Helping Without Hurting in Short-Term Missions*.

We're not there to do something FOR someone. Again, you are a guest. Support and encourage the local church and fight the temptation to be the hero. The best of intentions can create unhealthy expectations and destructive relationships now and well beyond your time on the ground.

We're not there to do something TO someone. Your best intentions can destroy an individual's personal dignity. People are not projects. They are image bearers. Treat those you encounter with humility, graciousness, respect, and honor. Remember that they are God's idea. He gave them breath.

We serve WITH the local church. We come alongside the existing body of local believers, submit to local leadership, and serve to encourage and equip our brothers and sisters.

A Final & Important Reminder:

Don't hand out money and be mindful of how you view and interpret what you encounter. It's not always as it seems. The kids you see playing soccer in rag tag clothes may very well show up dressed to the nines on Sunday morning. Again, it's important to remember your stepping in and out quickly. Cultural differences, world view differences, and the short amount of time you will actually be on the ground all give you plenty of reasons to be quick to pray and listen and to be slow to judge and assume.

Finally, think of the local impact when the ministry taking place comes through the local church! Think of the limitations when it doesn't!

Conclusion

This is an opportunity to experience what God is doing locally through the global church and to participate in it! It's an opportunity to listen, pray, and learn from our brothers and sisters in Malawi. It's an opportunity to press into the beauty of the global church and the majesty of what God is doing to reach every tongue tribe and nation.

It's an opportunity to encourage and refresh our Malawian brothers and sisters.

It's an opportunity to pray for the church.

Challenge yourself to be slow to judge the local way of life. If you find yourself frustrated or exasperated with certain elements, press in to that and pray for wisdom.

Suspend judgement. Pray. Praise God.

Challenge yourself to look at your own culture and worldview and prayerfully ask the Lord to show you ways that you need to grow. What can you learn from the family of God in Malawi? Look for things that you love about the Malawian people and enjoy your time there. You'll never forget it!

Let me know if you have any questions, thoughts, or critiques by sending an email to: Jpierce@Churchproject.org