

Cultural Adjustment & Sensitivity Training For Mission Field Workers

This training course is self-paced, consisting of six modules that will help the student understand the concept of culture and provide helpful tips on how to acclimate more effectively in the mission field. An evaluation questionnaire will be provided to you to be completed at the end of the course. This course is to be taken along with the Leaven-Like Evangelism, Teaching Tactics and Mobilization Methodologies course to earn a Certificate of Completion.

This program was designed for missionaries, evangelists, secular workers like doctors, and other healthcare workers on medical ministry missions and community leaders looking to minister effectively in a culturally diverse society.

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Introduction

When an individual relocates temporarily or permanently to a new community or culture for ministry service, it is entirely understandable to experience complicated feelings like anxiety, fear, frustration, excitement, nervousness. These emotions can all happen simultaneously or at different stages of the move. Finding yourself in a new environment away from friends, family, and the familiarity of the home, especially for the first time, can be overwhelming and, if not handled appropriately, can result in a negative outcome. And so, if you find yourself feeling confused or frustrated as you make the transition to adjust to life in your new surroundings, remember that you are not alone. In this training course, we will provide information and strategies to enable you to cope with life in the mission field.

Module One - Missions And The Missionary

For those of you who are not familiar with the term “Missions” or Mission Field,” we will give some definitions of these to understand what it entails.

About Missions

The word missions, in general, is defined as an important assignment or task given to a person or group of people, typically involving travel abroad or outside one’s familiar territory. Within the context of Christianity, missions have to do with an organized effort to spread the Word of God (the good news) to others in diverse places. This is the task/assignment given to all believers by our Lord Jesus Christ when He departed the earth. It is what we refer to as the Great Commission. Matthew 28:19-20. Please note that mission work or missions oftentimes have nothing to do with a particular location in which we serve, but rather the assignment you are meant to participate in, which should constitute the Great Commission.

Although all Christians have been tasked to fulfill this assignment, not all are doing this. As Christians, in one way or the other, we are called to be missionaries. Even though not everyone may get to travel to other parts of the world or different cities within their country to minister to people, one’s mission field can be the community they live in. Thanks to technology, one can also become what is called a “virtual or online” missionary, i.e., reaching out to people in other cities, countries of the world via the internet. Other ways to participate in mission efforts are to give one’s finances and spend time in prayer for all mission field workers/missionaries. There is no excuse not to carry out the “great commission” as a Christian.

The Missionary

Who is the mission field worker? The mission field worker also referred to as a missionary, is a disciple/follower of Jesus Christ, a Christian who goes into a community to teach about Jesus Christ and the Christian faith. Such persons may serve as full-time field workers or part-time. They may operate in the office of an Evangelist, Prophet, Teacher, or Apostle or are gifted and skilled in medicine, hospitality, music, and more. According to dictionary.com, a missionary or mission field worker is sent by a church into an area to carry on evangelism or other activities, such as educational or hospital work. An individual can serve in a mission field anywhere from a few weeks to several years, depending on the assignment or how long the Lord wants them there.

Before we go further, please note that this course is designed for missionaries/mission field workers serving in areas outside their communities. The term missions and mission field worker/missionary will be used more for those individuals serving or doing ministry in communities other than their familiar surroundings such as other towns, cities, countries.

Here are a few portions in Scripture that references missionaries & mission work:

“Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, praise His name; proclaim His salvation day after day. Declare His glory among the nations, His marvelous deeds among all peoples.” Psalm 96:1-3

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” Mark 10:45

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Jeremiah 1:5

“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.” 1 Peter 4:10

“Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:19-20

“After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go. And he said to them, The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Luke 10:1-2

Module Two – Defining Culture & Culture Adjustment

What is Cultural Adjustment?

Cultural Adjustment, also known as Cultural Acclimatization, refers to how long it takes a person to assimilate into a new culture. It is not always a smooth transition. Living in an unfamiliar society takes time and effort. It can be challenging and even more frustrating when there is a significant difference from your own culture. As Missionaries, when you begin to get familiar with the culture and build relationships with the locals, you then begin to learn how to contextualize the gospel message culturally appropriate to the people you intend to minister to.

Defining Culture

The term “culture” means different things to different people. It depends on whom you talk to. Wikipedia defines culture as an umbrella term that encompasses the social behavior and norms found in human societies and the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, and habits of the individuals in these groups. In simple terms, culture is the way of life of a group of people within a specified area. It is not innate; it is learned. Culture is merely a socially connected group of people with shared values within a social group or society, and it embodies all aspects of living.

The Elements of Culture - There are five essential elements of culture:

symbols, language, values, beliefs, and norms.

Symbols

In most societies, a person's manner of dressing is a symbol of their social status or class. In terms of religion, the cross represents the Christian faith, and the Jewish culture has the cultural symbol of the Star of David. The Bald Eagle, which symbolizes freedom, strength, and power, is a symbol of America. In ancient Egypt, cats were viewed as semi-divine, and harming a cat was considered treason, making them powerful symbols. The kola nut, whose tree is regarded by some Nigerian tribes to be the first tree on earth, symbolizes solemnity, reverence, communion, hospitality, and tradition in many African cultures.

Language

It will be challenging to understand a person's language without connecting with their culture. Language and culture are interwoven in the sense that the culture of a society forms language. Language is an expression of communication; it expresses cultural values and beliefs, allowing us to express our thoughts and feelings. Language is more than spoken words; it also includes dialects and accents. Dialects refer to different communication with various pronunciations, grammar, and vocabulary from other variations of the same language. When one talks about accents, one is referring to a certain way a group of people speaks. Take for instance, within the same United States, different regions speak differently; persons from the Southern part of the United States may drawl, which means speaking slowly with vowels prolonged. Those in the Northeast speak faster than their Southern neighbors. It is interesting to see how language varies from culture to culture and even fascinating when within that same country, as mentioned in the case of the United States, people speak differently. As a missionary, it is essential to acquaint yourself with one or two native speakers so that they can be translators or interpreters for you throughout your stay in the host nation or country.

Values

Values are a culture's standard for moral behavior, i.e., discerning what is reasonable and acceptable in society. For example, values determine acceptable behavior regarding the justice system, ethics, proper sexual behavior, and attitude towards certain areas such as music and art. When people go against the societal values of a group, there are consequences. In most cultures, if a person robs another, most likely, the individual will be arrested and taken to jail. Values also vary from culture to culture. For example, customs differ in their values about what kinds of physical closeness are appropriate in public. In some cultures, men and women cannot sit together in public places such as a place of worship, but, in other cultures, it is typical behavior. In some cultures, for example, in the United States, individuals maintain eye contact with someone they speak with and expect the same from others. In other cultures, like in most Asian countries, such behavior is considered intrusive or overly aggressive, and avoiding eye contact while speaking is regarded as more respectful. It is essential as a missionary/field worker to know and understand the values and customs of the community you will be serving in to gain their trust quickly.

Beliefs

In any culture, the belief system is an incredibly significant part of society. Depending on the culture, there can be multiple religions such as Christianity, Islam, idol worship, and new age beliefs. These beliefs typically meet the spiritual needs and want of a group of people. For example, in the Christian faith, a man expresses his belief in Jesus Christ

through his prayers, reading, and studying the Bible. In Sociology, beliefs are said to be the tenets or convictions that people hold to be true. Individuals in a society have specific beliefs, but they also share collective values. As a missionary serving in areas where the Christian faith is in the minority, you want to be cautious and wise in ministering in those areas.

Norms

Norms are also referred to as the customs or traditions of a society. The social norms help society define their beliefs about right and wrong and create social pressure to obey those beliefs. Norms define how to behave by what society defines as good, right, and essential, and most community members adhere to them. Standards or norms exist in rules and guidelines that specify how individuals are to behave in a society. Norms hold a person within the boundary of society and its culture. It gives us restrictions concerning what to do and what not to do. It molds our behavior and provides us knowledge and understanding of what is wrong and right.

Module Three – Culture Shock, Stages of Culture Shock & Coping Strategies

Have you ever relocated to another part of the country, or across the globe for work/business, school, or traveled for pleasure? If your answer is yes to any of these, then you may have experienced some level of anxiety, disorientation, and uncertainty because you have now gone from familiar territory to unfamiliar territory.

What is Culture Shock?

Meriam Webster dictionary defines culture shock as a sense of confusion and uncertainty, sometimes with feelings of anxiety that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation. Culture shock is elicited by a sudden, drastic change in the environment. It is the feeling of confusion or anxiety that people experience when visiting, doing business in, or living in a different society. Culture shock happens to most people, but its more prevalent in refugees, international students, and immigrants. As a mission field worker, you are no exception from feeling this way, especially traveling, or relocating by yourself.

Common symptoms of culture shock include:

- Feelings of frustration, loneliness, confusion, irritability, insecurity, and helplessness
- Unstable temperament and hostility
- Paranoia
- Criticism of local people, culture, and customs
- Over-sensitivity and overreaction to minor difficulties
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Loss of sense of humor
- Homesickness

The Stages of Culture Shock

We are going to look at the four phases/stages of culture shock that individual experience.

1. Honeymoon Stage (Initial Euphoria)

This stage typically extends from arrival through the first couple of months within the new country. It is described as filled with excitement and curiosity. When an individual first arrives in a new place, everything seems strange, exciting, but, at the same time, intimidating. To adjust, some people take language classes; There was this friend of mine who did not speak a word of English when he first arrived in the US. He was French speaking, from one of the francophone countries, but then he was encouraged to take English as a second language, and 30+ years later, he speaks better English than a person born and raised in England or North America.

My culture shock came when I left Nigeria, the country I was raised in, until the age of 18. A couple of months after arriving in the US, I enrolled in a community college and observed that I was the only black person out of over twenty-something people in the class. It fast became my new normal several classes later, even when I transferred to a four-year college. It was quite uncomfortable; I experienced feelings of loneliness, fear, and anxiety. I had longed to go back home to my friends and family. Another time I experienced culture shock was my family, and I relocated to a rural town in the United States where once again, there were only a handful of people of color. It took me a while to adjust, but it was in this place that God began to establish my ministry and that town became my mission field.

Everyone acclimates differently, which the individual will need to understand while trying to do ministry work. One mission field worker's experience might most likely be different from that of another, even though there might be a few things that they might have in common.

2. Distress Stage (Irritation and Frustration)

This stage might be the most challenging stage of culture shock and probably familiar to anyone who has lived abroad or travels frequently to other places. It usually occurs about after 3-4 months of residing in your new society and culture. The euphoria will wear away quickly. You will become frustrated and irritated at simple things being so different from what you are used to. Like me, you will probably get lost a few times. There are many things and behaviors that you will not be able to understand. This phase is the time you will get homesick and long to go back home. Anxiety and depression may set in, and this is very normal. But its important to understand that this is still the teething period. This phase will surely pass.

3. Adjustment Stage (Gradual Understanding)

During the adjustment stage, a person will find themselves gradually settling into their new community. The anxiety and frustration lessen as the person gets familiar with the culture of the land. Things that used to be unfamiliar and confusing will begin to take shape. At this stage, the person now takes time to study the people, their way of life, and other things that are important to them. Also, moving around becomes more manageable once there is a set routine, new friends, and familiarity with neighborhood and workplace or school have been established. This is also the stage where you are now getting comfortable with ministering to the locals with the help of translators.

4. Acceptance (Adaptation) Stage

In the acceptance or adaptation stage, an individual is now feeling a sense of belonging. One is now feeling confident and getting well-adjusted to the new environment. One sees oneself giving directions, obtaining a driver's license, and now driving around like a professional. The language barrier is no longer a problem; one has mastered the "American" English and doing well within your place of work or school. Of course, there are still moments when you long for home and your mom's home-cooked meals, but you can now handle the feelings better. Also, there is now a healthy balance between living in your new community and maintaining your cultural identity. The Acceptance stage does not mean that you have become an expert at understanding your new home, but it provides you with more awareness and appreciation of your new culture as you continue to strive to adjust to it.

Strategies For Coping With Culture Shock

Now that you know what culture shock is all about, how does one now adjust to one's new culture and the environment healthily? I want you to know that experiencing culture shock is temporary; of course, it takes some time to adjust to something new. And so, it is natural to experience emotions like anxiety, depression, frustration. However, if you feel like it is taking you unusually long to adjust or experiencing an extreme level of anxiety, fear, or depression even after talking with family, or your pastor, seeking professional help might be the best option. Let us look at some tips to help you cope with culture shock.

1. First, you must understand that it is natural to experience emotional responses to adjusting to a new culture and society.

2. Have a positive attitude – Do not be judgmental; learn to appreciate and respect your new host country's culture. Do not give room for stereotypes.
3. Stay connected to your family and friends back home. Digital technology has made it easier to communicate with loved ones. Thanks to WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram.
4. Avoid making comparisons between your home country and your new community. Continuously doing this will prevent you from settling down quicker. Focus on the why you are there (the mission work).
5. Share – Sharing your own culture with your new friends, neighbors, coworkers, is a great way to cope with culture shock. It is exciting to share your culture with others.
6. Be mindful of the feelings of people you meet to prevent offensive behavior, such as interrupting a conversation without a previous warning.
7. Travel – Make it a habit of visiting places, research popular tourist attractions around the country, or within the state with fellow mission workers. Take a trip via bus, rental car, go with a friend, and enjoy the beauty of your adopted or host country.
8. Practice good self-care – eat well, exercise, and get adequate sleep. Be always prayerful, Study and meditate on God's word. It is especially important to do all these things.
9. Find out where your local grocery store that sells your home foods and other necessities is located. Finding these places is a significant relief and an anxiety reducer for many people, but you must learn to adapt if you do not find them.
10. As a missionary, you must also affiliate yourself with the local church if possible or attend home fellowships so that you are continually surrounded by the people of like minds and you are not forsaken the fellowship of the brethren who will be able to offer strength and support.

Module Four - Essential Skills for Missionary Service

In order to be effective as a Christian missionary, there are specific skills that one must have. These skills will help one stay focused on the assignment and remain committed to the work. Below are several essential skills that every missionary must-have.

A Christian Missionary/Mission Field Worker Must:

1. Be comfortable sharing their faith with others.
2. Have a passion for God's work; Missionaries must have a passion for people and seeing the kingdom grow.
3. Be culturally sensitive. Be mindful and respectful of the norms, beliefs, values and overall culture of your host nation or country (this will be discussed more in module six).
4. Attempt to learn the language prior to arriving in mission field/host nation. Although you will still make use of interpreters/translators, it helps to still make an attempt at learning the basics. It shows genuine interest in the culture of the people.
5. Be adaptable. Being able to adjust to your surroundings and situations will have a direct impact on your success on the mission field.
6. Show empathy/compassion to other's predicaments.
7. Be patient. Things may develop slower than you anticipated. There will be barriers/hindrances due to cultural differences that may occur and so one will have to exercise patience and allow the Holy Spirit to take control.
8. Show humility. Remember it is not about you, it's about God and whom He is sending you to. One may get his or her feelings hurt. It is important to stay humble and focused always.
9. Show resilience. Resilience is the ability to recover from and adapt to change, and usually change that brings hurt with it.
10. Be a team player. One must have the ability to work within a team or group to fulfill God's purpose for a community, society, or family. Depending on your gifts and skills, you will be assigned certain tasks within a team. You might not agree on everything as a team, but you must learn to tolerate, respect each other, and keep your eyes fixed on the one who has sent you. (i.e., the Lord God) and staying focused on the assignment/goal.

Module Five – Serving in Dangerous Regions – Evaluating Risks

Generally, traveling to unfamiliar destinations has its risks. Danger can occur anywhere in the world, including your backyard. Nevertheless, it is always good to be vigilant and cautious. When embarking on mission trips to unfamiliar places whether alone or in company of other missionaries, be alert, cautious and prayerful. In certain regions of the world, people/governments are not friendly towards Christians; in fact, they are dangerous to the average Christian/believer.

Statistics

According to a recent article by the Gospel Coalition, the most dangerous places for Christians include the following ten nations: North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Pakistan, Libya, Eritrea, Yemen, Iran, Nigeria (even with half the population being Christians), and India. Those of the Christian faith are frequently attacked; discriminated against at work and school; homes and churches are burnt down; they risk sexual violence, torture, arrest, and much more. The 2021 World Watch List reveals that persecution is exceptionally high on the continent of Africa, where one-in-six Christians in Africa endure faith-based discrimination and violence. In Nigeria alone, ten Christians a day are murdered on average due to their religious beliefs. Other countries on their list and not mentioned above include Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. The number of people being killed for their faith in Jesus Christ just last year alone worldwide was over 4,700. Over 340 million people living in all these countries mentioned have experienced severe persecution. These statistics are staggering. They are indeed shocking.

Evaluating Risks

In preparing for missionary work, especially to regions of the world that are dangerous to believers, people of color, etc., it is crucial to evaluate the risks that you might face. Risks, as we all know, are a part of life. Regardless of wherever we are, be it at home or in unfamiliar regions where we travel, we must always be prepared for the inevitable, staying alert and cautious, as mentioned earlier. Risks in the mission field may include an outbreak of a disease, accidents, kidnappings, robbery, and more. As Christians, it is vital to remember that God is always with you no matter what. "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." Isaiah 41:10. Also, He has gone ahead of you to prepare the way and make every crooked place straight. "I will go before thee and make the crooked places straight" Isaiah 45:2a.

In conclusion, before heading out to the mission field, every missionary, with help from their church, should assess the potential risks and ensure that they are equipped and supported with prayers, resources, and everything else they might need.

Module Six - Cultural Sensitivity and Awareness

What is Cultural Sensitivity and Why is it Important?

Cultural sensitivity is being aware that cultural differences and similarities between people exist without assigning them a value – positive or negative, better, or worse, right, or wrong. The American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) describes cultural sensitivity this way: "Cultural sensitivity is universally recognized as the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs that enable people to work well with, respond effectively to, and be supportive of people in cross-cultural settings. Cultural sensitivity is not solely the acceptance of cultural differences, but rather a transformational process that allows individuals to acknowledge interdependence and align with a group other than their own."

Cultural sensitivity is crucial because it allows one to function in other cultures effectively. It will enable one to respect and value different cultures, which can help reduce cultural barriers between missionaries and the local people, employees and employers, teachers, and students. Cultural sensitivity is also important because it provides a protective (safe) and nurturing groundwork that people can draw upon in times of worry and anxiety.

What is The Difference between Cultural Awareness and Cultural Sensitivity?

"Cultural awareness" is the subsequent stage of understanding other culture groups, being open to the idea of changing cultural attitudes. "Cultural sensitivity" recognizes differences between cultures but not assigning values to the differences (bigger or worse, right, or wrong).

Tips on How to Be Culturally Sensitive and Aware.

Here are a few helpful ways to practice cultural sensitivity in your community, workplace, schools, and everywhere you go. Practicing cultural sensitivity only applies to mission field workers but even in your professional and personal lives.

- Have excellent communication skills: You might not understand their language. However, you can always use a translator that several businesses and schools in the U.S. have or look for an individual who speaks the language and ensures that you clarify what is being said to you and vice versa to avoid miscommunication.
- Practice good manners - I always tell my children that no matter where you are, always make sure to please and thank you in your vocabulary. These two words

are also an essential part of the business conversation in the United States and other parts of the world. In the mission field, show respect and be polite always.

- Be interested in learning the language of those whom you are serving, ministering to. Observe, listen, and make an effort to learn.
- Be respectful and mindful of the culture of your work environment. Pay attention and ask questions for clarification when needed.
- Faith and Religious Beliefs – plays a significant role in cultural sensitivity. You might not understand their belief system, but as a professional there to serve your clients or patients or as a missionary there, you must acknowledge and respect it to serve the local community in your host nation.
- Acknowledge that one's skin color does not define their culture - According to Dr. Steven Moffic of Current Psychiatry, culture goes beyond the color of one's skin. He states that darker-skinned persons are universally identified as "black," African, or African American, but there are darker-skinned persons in other ethnicities such as Hispanic and Asian.

One must be respectful and understanding to be able to connect effectively with the people. They will be more likely to trust you and respond positively when you show them some level of respect. Take the time to understand others' (those you are serving) personal cultural beliefs by asking thoughtful, respectful questions. Also, when speaking to older adults especially, use appropriate titles (such as Chief, Mrs., Mr., Dr) instead of first names, and pronounce their names correctly.

Conclusion:

As you serve in the mission field as Christ's ambassador to the nations, operate with the consciousness that cultural differences between yourself and the people you serve exist and appreciate the differences. I hope that this training has provided you with some basic information on how to acclimate or adjust to life in the mission fields. Whether you are there for two days or two years, this course is a valuable resource to guide you into settling down with ease, ultimately making a life for yourself as the Lord uses you for His glory in your new environment.