



Intercultural Competence: Why this and why now?

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As many of you as were baptized in Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. Galatians 3:27-29 NRSV

In his chapter entitled *Intercultural Competence in Religious Organizations* found in the *SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*, George Yancey writes this:

Christians often use the phrase “neither Jew nor Gentile” to indicate the idea that God does not favor one racial/ethnic group over another. However, this passage was provided as the early New Testament evangelist Paul criticized Jewish Christians who attempted to force non-Jewish Christians into accepting their Jewish culture. Paul argues that instead of requiring other Christians to assimilate into Jewish culture, they should be encouraged to develop a faith based on their own culture. Christians generally view this passage as a measure of individual acceptance when in fact it is a statement about cultural acceptance. It can even be argued that this passage is a call to develop intercultural competence.¹

Intercultural competence: Why this and why now, indeed. Let me tackle the second question first. *Why now?* At no time in the history of modern humanity has there been one culture, and at no time in the foreseeable future will there be one culture. Culture is complex and deeply embedded in each of us by the families and communities in which were raised. Our cultures effect how we think about ourselves in relationship to other people, the planet and all that inhabit it. Our cultures inform what constitutes respect, appropriate communication, decision-making and governance. Our cultures shape, at least initially, our concepts of beauty, hospitality, risk, gender and gender roles, family, faith and so on. Our cultures are largely hidden except when experienced in contrast to cultures unlike our own.

The Christian church has made terrible mistakes over centuries in conflating religion and culture, with dehumanizing results. We know that the early Christians added to their numbers through threat and intimidation, and through cultural and literal genocide. We need not go far back in the history of United States (this being written with a US audience in mind) to see the way in which the church was used to force Indian people to conform to European agrarian societal norms and values. The boarding school movement that was started in the United States and duplicated in Canada and Australia devastated indigenous communities. It cast the boarding school generation and beyond into a

¹ Deardorff, Darla K. *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2009), 377.

downward spiral that is only now being healed through acknowledgement of historic trauma and through recapturing of language and culture.

But we are no longer in danger of such reprehensible acts, correct? Well, perhaps not on the scale of the boarding school movement where church and state came together in an attempt to force conformity, assimilation and deference. But do contemporary Christians operate as George Yancey suggests in the passage above, offering opportunities for people from distinct cultural groups to 'develop a faith based on their own culture?' Perhaps the radically inclusive Glide Memorial United Methodist Church in San Francisco, or the community-directed ministries of Church and Community Development for All People in Columbus Ohio are bright expressions of faithful Christian ministries that flex with their membership.

Arguably, the majority of Christian congregations tend to deliver a qualified message of welcome. 'We are glad you're here! Come join us ... but leave your distinctiveness at the door!' Is this a condemnation of the Christian church, or is it a reflection of a society that willfully refuses to dive into the deep water of cultural differences?

Which brings us to the first question, why this? Intercultural competence is a skill. It is arguably *the* leadership skill for this moment in history of the church.

Intercultural competence is about leaning in. It is about listening with one's whole mind, body and spirit. It is about suspending one's own cultural judgments in an attempt to understand how other people think about the world and operate in it given their history, experiences, beliefs and behaviors – their culture – in contrast to one's own. It is about curiosity and exploration, not for the purpose of changing one another but for the purpose of knowing the world more fully, and connecting more deeply. It is about seeking a more complete understanding of God's rich creation, which is better revealed in community. This is Holy Spirit work, and we know it when we experience it.

Honing skills in intercultural competence is critical for all aspects of faithful ministry:

- Offering the good news of Jesus Christ to those who have not heard the message or are disconnected from it.
- Developing disciples that live their faith in their homes, workplaces, houses of worship, and communities.
- Developing community ministries that transform lives and systems.

'Obvious,' you might respond. But if it is obvious, why aren't we living it? Perhaps there is more to this than meets the eye.

Founders in the field of intercultural communication widely agree that intercultural competence is developmental. Individuals and organizations from all cultural groups tend to acquire intercultural skills in much the same pattern. The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, developed by Dr. Milton Bennett, describes a six-stage framework for advancing in intercultural skills. Each stage includes a developmental task designed to move us into increasingly complex understandings of our own and other cultures. The model provides guidance for how we might work effectively with groups

to increase personal and organizational intercultural skills in a manner that invites curiosity, even among those for whom this subject is anathema. Here is how it works in short form.

When we first encounter cultural differences, we tend to deny that these differences have any impact on our lives. We tend to avoid interacting with persons who appear or sound different from our 'norm.' We may discount changing demographics as temporary, choosing to remain insulated in our own cultural group. The development task in this stage of Denial is to provide low challenge opportunities to see the world with new eyes – demographic studies, children at play in the local school yard, changes in products at the grocery store.

As we become more aware of differences, we typically see new cultures as threats to our own. Perhaps a favorite store has changed its apparel to cater to a different aesthetic or signs pop up in different languages, and the changes become personal and unavoidable. 'Us and them' language is common; conformity is required of the newcomer. In the extreme, persons in Defense may be susceptible to recruitment into hate groups, which are present in every region of the United States. (See the Southern Poverty Law Center Hate Map at <https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map>). The task in Defense is to identify commonalities between cultures to engender greater tolerance. Sometimes our Christian faith and mission can be this bridge.

Another aspect of this developmental stage is Reversal where we idealize another culture. Perhaps we have received an outpouring of hospitality on a mission trip, and we judge the entire culture from that experience. In both Defense and Reversal, our understanding of other cultures is quite limited and stereotyped.

When we begin to move out of Defense, we tend to over-rely on commonalities, missing the differences that make a difference. The stage of Minimization – minimizing differences - tends to be comfortable for the majority culture but forces conformity in non-dominant cultures. Relationships tend to be surface in this stage of development, because we are consciously or unconsciously avoiding acknowledging the values, beliefs and behaviors that make us who we are.

Minimization is where most organizations function. This is the realm of political correctness, which while an improvement over Defense still stifles our capacity to engage at deeper levels. In this stage of development, we typically know less about our own culture, and have a tendency to expect that everyone will be comfortable if invited to operate as 'we' do. In other words, we unconsciously project our values and behaviors onto others, sometimes not even knowing that we are living out of a set of learned and practiced thoughts and behaviors typical of our own cultural group. The developmental task, then, is to know our own culture better to avoid projecting our cultural values onto others.

As we learn more about our own culture, we can more effectively embrace that other cultures, while different, are as complex and nuanced as our own. We are better able to draw contrasts between cultures, and set aside judgments based on our own way of operating in the world. We tend to be interested in general ways in which different cultures communicate, make decisions and govern, to name a few. In this stage of Acceptance, we tend to notice and acknowledge differences as simply

different, but we may not yet know how to effectively work with differences. The developmental task is to practice perspective shifting to more deeply understand other worldviews.

As we gain knowledge and experience, we can better shift our perspectives in more complex situations, and even choose to behave differently in cultures other than our own, but from a deep understanding of why societies function as they do. In this stage of Adaptation, we tend to be more creative in our attempts to include, and we tend to find mutually adaptive solutions that are more satisfying across cultures.

Finally, when we have done this work consistently, we may enter a stage of Integration where our movements in and out of cultures, our own and others, are fairly seamless. The task in Integration is to remain grounded to avoid cultural confusion.

As we move through these stages of development, we are increasingly able to engage with progressively complex cultural concepts and increasingly challenging topics (racism, white privilege and other power dynamics, adaptive processes). We tend to see differences as opportunities and seek differences with little outside encouragement.

Did you think about which stage of development describes you? One more point. Research shows that we tend to think of ourselves as more developed in our intercultural skills than is accurate. Sigh.

Intercultural competency is a skill. It is developmental. We can lead more effectively when we are intentional about our own intercultural development, and when we meet others where they are in their understanding of cultural differences and commonalities. Knowledge of the tasks associated with each stage of development helps us design intercultural encounters that balance support and challenge, and invite diversity of thinking and behaving. Effective intercultural learning helps us to live the phrase 'neither Jew or Gentile' as Paul instructed, within diverse and multicultural settings.

Why intercultural competence and why now? Because we must.