

Missions to Mexico

Training Resources

Cross-Culture Understanding Milestones

"I'm normal; you're weird"

As globalization moves ahead, what can move us forward on the path toward cross-cultural understanding? Travelers in the U.S. often check the numbers on metal mile markers to monitor their journey's progress. For thousands of years, European travelers have depended on numbered "milestones" to mark progress toward their destination.

Cultural awareness is more than just realizing that another culture is different from ours. It is learning to value that other culture. So, how do we get to that point?

Here's some milestones usually encountered in the journey toward true cross-cultural understanding:

Point of departure:

"There's no one else here" Mind-set: Blind monoculturalism

"Our way is the only right way." Mind-set: Ethnocentrism

Different means deficient

"Wait a minute, there may be another way." Mind-set: Willingness to crack open the door

Awareness creates some sensitivity to cultural lenses

"Oh, you mean there are reasons why people respond differently." Mind-set: Tolerance

Discernment gives birth to understanding

"It's OK to be different." Mind-set: Favorable acceptance

Respect for cultural differences

"Multi-cultural living can enhance our lives and even be fun." Mind-set: Appreciation and admiration

Destination: Embracing the joy of multiculturalism and cross-cultural understanding

To invite people to make the journey to cross-cultural understanding is not an invitation to a relativism. Relativism trivializes differences and can even gloss over evil. For instance, an occasional misguided anthropologist has denounced attempts to get tribal groups to move away from cannibalism ("it is, after all their way") As we consider whether to embark on this journey toward bridging cultural differences, we must not be deterred simply because some who have fervently preached "diversity" did so because they had hidden -- and not so hidden -- "agendas" to advance. The road will not always be easy. There will be misunderstandings and clashes of priorities and even deep differences of opinion. Those must not be allowed to lessen the delights awaiting us at the end of this path.