

Missions to Mexico

Training Resources

Customs & Culture of Mexico

Mexico is actually called the "United States of Mexico." There are 32 states in all. It is a beautiful country, rich with traditions and many diverse subcultures. Most of the Mexican people are "Mestizo," a mix between Europeans (the Spaniards) and the Native Indian tribes of Mexico. This complicated history is deeply ingrained in the Mexican people's view of reality and is detected in many areas, from their family structures to religion.

Family Ties

Family ties are strong. The father is usually the dominant person, and the eldest member is usually the most respected, thereby controlling the family actions. The mother, however, is a major unifying force and advocate for her children. It is very common for the man to be irresponsible and the wife left to manage the finances, children, and household. The children respect and obey their parents very much. In some ways, the parent-child relationship is the most important relationship, often placed above the husband-wife relationship.

Religion

The Roman Catholic Church has been the dominant church for four centuries. This does not mean the people have an understanding of the Roman Catholic Church or its teachings. It does mean they have a sense of unseen forces in their midst. They thank God for everything, they speak of doing things "God willing" and incorporate this idea in other ways in their language and culture. This does not mean they are Christians, although they consider themselves so, nor that they really understand Jesus or God. They turn to the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico, as their guide and help. This maternal figure intercedes on their behalf and is often there to care and defend them against the Father, who is angry with them. Meanwhile, Christ, their brother, came to teach them how to suffer and die. These are general concepts that the common people share. Avoid condemning saints, the Virgin Mary, or the Catholic Church, unless you want to greatly offend non-Christians and lose opportunity for ministry.

Time

In the United States, people are dictated by the clock and the chronology of events. People are constantly rushing from one appointment to the next, trying to be "on time." Sometimes cutting off people who have real needs is done to make it on time to the next appointment or activity. In Mexico, people are dictated by relationships and are more seasonal in following up on events and appointments. Building relationship is much more important than keeping a schedule. Rather than moving on to the next appointment, and cut short a conversation, they will prefer to arrive late. From this emphasis on people, tasks are easily put off until tomorrow. For them, this is right and good. Time efficiency, therefore, is not a high value. However, do not allow this as a "justified" scapegoat for yourself. Focus your attention on building relationships with the people you meet. Make it a point to remember peoples' names. Allow time for people to arrive late to your church services or other scheduled ministry events. You may say the service starts @ 7:00p.m., however many people may arrive @ 7:15 or 7:30. Do not be frustrated at this! "Go with the flow!"

Hospitality

No matter how little they have, the people are very generous and will easily give you their last meal or an item they own. Don't refuse them out of fear of getting sick - you won't (They drink bottled water also, as their bodies cannot handle the municipal water either). Being in a Mexican home is a wonderful opportunity to learn about them and provides a friendly trusting atmosphere in which to share the gospel.

Upward Mobility

When you come to Mexico, you will see many satellite dishes on many poor shacks. In Mexico, the first thing you buy when you're moving upward is a refrigerator, and then a radio or TV. The government, recognizing the illiteracy of many of its people, established a 24 hour satellite TV new network called "S.I.N." This is the main mode of communication.

Roles

Males and females have very defined roles in the Mexican culture. The woman's ideal role is mothering the child in the home. Often times she also works; women in the business world and leadership roles are quite respected. Men are to work and provide for their families, however, they spend much of their time drinking and socializing with other men. (This of course does not include the men from the churches.) They are "macho" in the sense of being proud, valiant, in control, and unemotional. Often when men attend church, they sit or stand in the back. Children are idealized a lot and many people sacrifice very much for their children. Small children are not strongly disciplined or inhibited. The common view seems to be that they are too young to understand what should be done, but parents are very strict with older youth. Don't be surprised, therefore, to see young kids wandering around during church services- this is normal. Parents are strict with older youth, especially the girls. They are heavily chaperoned when in mixed company. The girls are expected to maintain reserve in public.

Education

Most adult girls in the villages have a maximum of three years of formal schooling, many are illiterate. The youth have had the opportunity of five years of schooling, but are not stupid. They are intelligent and possess real wisdom and a keen understanding of human nature. Remember, these adults, though lacking in education, are truly adult in their actions, outlook and ambitions. They have successfully reared families and are operating in an adult society with all the problems and concerns thereof. They have excellent memories.

Relationships

Mexican people are very reserved. Team women should not spend much time alone with the Mexican men and team men likewise, should not pay more than polite attention to the Mexican girls. Couples, even married couples, should be reserved in their displays of affection. Holding hands and kissing in public are very much avoided in the Mexican culture and should be avoided by all team members. Team men towards Mexican men: Be sincerely forward. Greet men with a warm handshake and a friendly smile, even if you don't speak a word of Spanish. It is appropriate upon meeting a male to express thanks for his hospitality and the hospitality of his country toward you as a visitor. It is strongly encouraged to remember names! Older men should be addressed as "Senor" (Sir) or. When appropriate, "Hermano" (meaning Brother). Boys should be addressed by their first name. Reserve "amigo" (friend) for boys with whom you develop a friendship. Please keep in mind that these are not strict "cultural guidelines" that must be followed. Don't be afraid of making a mistake. They will prefer that you be sincere with them, rather than acting like a mechanical robot.

Attitude

"Consider others better than yourself." Bear in mind that you are guests in your host's country and city. Mexicans take hospitality very seriously and should be sincerely thanked when making an effort to extend it. Although you are there to serve them, the Mexican Christians, while thankful and blessed by your service, also look upon your coming as an opportunity to serve and minister to you. It is very likely that you will be better educated than the Mexicans you meet. Avoid talking down to them as they are very perceptive of this, especially through the language barrier. Try to be conscientious of your facial and body expressions, as these can also convey messages. In Mexico, lack of education signifies lack of opportunity to receive it, not lack of intelligence. Most of all SMILE! A smile can transcend any number of language barriers.

Church Services

Church will normally be quite a bit different than what you are accustomed to in the states. Church tends to be more lively, expressive, loud, and many will go to the altar before church, or during a altar call at the end. They will tend to raise their hands and oftentimes tears will accompany their altar calls and worship times. During altar calls, many will go forward to be prayed over. Their faith in God to heal them and help them is very real.

Speaking & Communication

It would help if you learned some Spanish words and phrases before the trip to help you communicate better in times of emergency and need, to help you build relationships, and to minister more effectively. The Mexican people always appreciate it when you make an effort to fit in and adjust to their culture. One way to solve this problem is to make a name tag to hang around your neck (try to have a name that is Spanish and make sure you can say it. Nothing appears so strange as a person who cannot say their own name). Don't make up words or attempt to say English words with a Mexican accent (you could end up saying something offensive without realizing it!). Also, be careful of gestures. Hand and arm movements are okay, but you should try to keep them to a minimum. Ones used in the U.S. may not have the same meaning in Mexico. For the Mexican Christians, non-Christian music and dancing are considered worldly and sinful in a culture that has turned away from these things to follow Christ. In situations with Mexicans nearby, they will be unsure that you are really a Christian if you are rocking away to non-Christian music, or even upbeat Christian music (since they can't understand the words.) Joking around in a loud boisterous manner should be avoided as well.

Making Promises

The Mexican culture views promises with much more gravity than does the American culture. Do not promise that you will write or send pictures to anyone unless there is a 150% chance that you will be able to keep this promise upon returning to the U.S. You might ask them to write first, which will then remind you to write back. As surprising as it may seem, it is quite likely that nearly all Mexicans you are introduced to once will remember your name for years to come; especially the children. Do not promise things like: sending them money, building them things, offering them work in the states, or helping them get to the states. We had one situation where a construction owner somewhat jokingly offered a job to a Mexican. This man sold everything he had and arrived in the U.S. to receive his new job. You can imagine how hurt this Mexican was. If you are presented with any questionable situations, please talk with us. Many Mexicans view Americans as a way to get something. Whether it be money, getting to the states, a job, etc. Be very careful not to make promises.

Things are Certainly Different Here

Perhaps the most important thing to realize as short-term missionary in Mexico is that you are a guest in a foreign country. You are the one who does things that seem different. In fact, many things, which are

thought innocent or "normal" at home are quite offensive in Mexico and may keep people from hearing the message of salvation. As a representative of Jesus Christ, it is critical that we be careful of the impression we create.