

Missions to Mexico

Training Resources

Ministering in Mexico

By Allan Lee

The following article is a modified version of a presentation made to the staff of Mexican Medical Ministries.

The purpose of these pages is to provide some insights into ministering cross-culturally in Mexico. All of us are, or will be, dealing cross-culturally as part of our ministry. Thus, it is important to try to learn all we can about how to work most effectively in such cross-cultural situations.

The diversity of our missionary community makes the objective of this presentation a difficult one. Some of our number are quite new to cross-cultural ministry, while others have many years of experience. Some speak little or no Spanish, while others are quite fluent. Some are married to Mexicans or have Hispanic roots and thus have had the opportunity to gain lots of insight into the Mexican culture. Wherever you fit in the spectrum, I trust you will be open to consider the suggestions that will follow. Perhaps many of the points I bring out are ones you already know and apply. But perhaps there will be something that gives you new insight that may help you relate more effectively with the Mexicans that God brings across your path - that is my prayer.

We aren't starting on neutral ground

It is important to note that in dealing cross-culturally with Mexicans we are not starting on neutral ground. We are coming into a situation where some strong stereotypes already exist. As Americans we have an uphill battle to relate in ways that show that we, as Christians who claim to love the Mexican people, are different.

Americans are often believed by Mexicans to be pushy, know-it-alls, patronizing, disrespectful of Mexican culture and sovereignty, wealthy, and loose morally. These stereotypes are not without foundation. Let's take a quick look at history to see some of the reasons such stereotypes exist.

- In the late 1840's the U.S. invaded Mexico and forced Mexico to sell half of her territory to the U.S. This is far from forgotten by the Mexican people. Until recently the heroic act of the young military academy students who wrapped themselves in the Mexican flag and threw themselves off a cliff rather than surrender it to the American invaders was commemorated on the 5,000 peso bills.

- From around 1880 to about 1910 Mexico was ruled by the dictator Porfirio Diaz. The United States government supported his rule and helped impede efforts to overthrow him because he allowed lots of U.S. investment in Mexico.

- In 1938 Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas expropriated all foreign petroleum interests after the American and other foreign oil companies showed disrespect for the government officials while trying to resolve a dispute with Mexican petroleum workers. Though economically a disaster, the move was very popular among Mexicans, and until recently was also proudly commemorated on the 10,000 peso bill.

- More recent events such as the kidnapping within Mexican territory of the suspected murderer of a DEA agent, numerous

border incidents where U.S. agents have violated Mexican sovereignty pursuing alleged criminals into Mexico, Proposition 187 in California, and the case of the complications in granting extradition of a corrupt ex-government official to stand trial in Mexico serve to reinforce negative perceptions of Americans.

- Also, what kind of Americans are many Mexicans exposed to, particularly in Baja California? Often those who come to Mexico to party it up, or who go in motor homes or with travel trailers that are worth what the average Mexican makes in a decade or two, or beach lovers who dress in ways that imply loose morals by Mexican standards.

How should we minister in such a climate?

I would like to suggest three basic attitudes that should pervade our cross-cultural relationships with Mexicans. We should have the attitude of a **SERVANT**, the attitude of a **LEARNER**, and an attitude of **RESPECT**.

Jesus gave us the greatest example of servanthood. In our efforts to show the love of Christ to Mexicans, we should do so as servants, not as self-appointed lords or masters.

EXAMPLE: Some Mexican pastors have complained of missionaries who don't seem to them to be servants, but rather just want to carry out their own program, ministering disconnected from the local church, and sometimes even pulling people away from the churches by holding their events at the same time as church services.

I believe we should approach our cross-cultural communication opportunities with the attitude of a learner or a student. We set ourselves up for failure if early-on we assume we fully understand the "rules of the game". The Proverbs exhort us to seek for wisdom as for great treasure to be able to face the challenges of life - how much more do we need to pursue wisdom when dealing with the challenges of cross-cultural relating. Proverbs 19:2 tells us, "It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way."

EXAMPLE: It is all too common for Americans to go to Mexico with the attitude of a teacher who has the answer to problems before they play the role of a student to find out what the specific problems are. For example, I have seen people arrive with an excitement for establishing a Bible school in a particular area, though they haven't even made the effort to find out things like: are there any Bible schools already functioning in the area? How well are they meeting the need? Are there others with a similar vision with whom we could join forces? What churches exist in the area? Would they send their students to a school like we envision? Would Theological Education by Extension be more effective under the local circumstances, etc?

The scriptures tell us to consider others as more important than ourselves. This implies that we should respect others. It is very important in our dealings with Mexicans that we show respect for their culture and for them as individuals, especially given the history of the disrespect so often demonstrated by Americans.

EXAMPLE: A Mexican immigration authority once used the following word picture with me to explain how Mexicans want Americans to respect their sovereignty. He said Mexico is like his house. He wants me to come and visit his house, but he expects me to knock at the door before I come in.

Now that we have established an overall perspective from which to work, let's look at some specifics.

Here come some suggestions

Be an on-going student of Spanish

Perhaps this is stating the obvious, but the more Spanish you can learn the better equipped you will be to work effectively with Mexicans. Your efforts to learn their language show that you are trying to meet them on their own terms, not making

them meet you on yours. When you need to deal with issues that are beyond your present level of Spanish, however, don't be too proud to seek out a translator so that you can be sure that all parties involved clearly understand each other.

Be aware of common courtesies

Shaking hands - It is customary to shake hands when greeting someone and when saying goodbye. When entering a room with several people, it is best to shake hands individually with each person, rather than just giving a verbal greeting as Americans are more accustomed to doing.

"Salud" & "Gracias" - In the U.S. when someone sneezes a person with them may or may not say "bless you", or something equivalent. In Mexico, however, it is almost a social obligation to say "salud" if someone with you sneezes and to answer "gracias" when someone says "salud" to you after you sneeze.

Using "usted" - When speaking with someone older than you, or with a person in a position of respect, such as a doctor or a government official, it is important to use the formal form of "you" - "usted". When you are in doubt it is best to use "usted" rather than "tu".

Accept hospitality - Try to be as gracious as you can in accepting hospitality. Mexicans will often invite someone to have a bite to eat or something to drink, and refusing them can be very discourteous. This is particularly important when you are just getting to know someone. Once a rapport is established there will be more latitude for graciously declining when necessary.

Don't come in with cameras blazing - When visiting a clinic, church, home, etc. try not to come in with your camera or video blazing - it can make you look like an inconsiderate tourist, not a servant of the Lord. Socialize for a while, and ask if it's ok to take some pictures. Be respectful of people.

Gestures - Understanding some common Mexican gestures can help avoid misunderstandings. These are hard to explain in writing, but let's mention them here anyway.

- * Indicating height - Different gestures are used for indicating the height of people, animals, and objects.
- * Calling someone to come - You should wave your hand downward, not upward as in the U.S.
- * Indicating someone is cheap - Slap your elbow with the upturned palm of your other hand.
- * Indicating lots of money - Make a "c" with your thumb and first finger, curling closed the others.
- * Indicating that someone is afraid - With palm up and fingers extended, open and close your hand.

Dress appropriately for the situation - Dress tends to be much more conservative in Mexico, especially in evangelical circles. Most churches expect women to wear dresses or skirts to services. Shorts are much less used than in the U.S. When visiting clinics, churches, or government offices try to dress nicely, not like a tourist on the way to the beach.

EXAMPLE: I have seen occasions when some American pastors and missionaries have made trips to Mexico specifically to visit local pastors to line up caravans for a later date, and they come dressed in shorts and a t-shirt.

Adjust to the different concept of time

Things in Mexico are not as dependent on the clock as you may be used to. Relax and learn to accept it. Be cautious about judging people as irresponsible or unspiritual for not being as punctual as you think they should be. Plan to take advantage of slack time while waiting for activities to get started or for an appointment - talk with people around you, or bring a book or notebook with you to make productive use of the time.

EXAMPLE: A relatively new missionary was leading a Bible study, and became frustrated by peoples' lack of punctuality. He made the cultural value-judgment of stressing that if people are really serious about spiritual things then they would arrive on time, rather than accepting the reality of the culture.

Be flexible, as circumstances are frequently changing

It is important to be flexible. Circumstances in Mexico are constantly changing, necessitating flexibility on our part. It is particularly important to be sensitive to this for those who aren't living in Mexico. When you are residing in Mexico you are more likely to be aware of changes as they occur. When you only make occasional trips into Mexico it is easy to assume things are pretty much the same from one trip to another, while in fact there may be some significant changes which we need to respond to in the way we work.

EXAMPLE: I have found that sometimes some of the most inflexible people are ones who have been leading annual trips to Mexico for many years. They are often unaware of the many political and social changes that are occurring between each visit. Like when we began requiring volunteers in San Quintin to follow the proper immigration procedures the greatest resistance was from those who had already come to Mexico many times. "We never did that before, and we never had a problem, so I don't see why we need to do it now," was a typical response.

Understand cultural implications of male / female interaction

This is very important to understand. Actions that may seem innocent by U.S. standards can look very inappropriate through Mexican cultural glasses. It is not wise for married individuals to travel with or be alone with someone of the opposite sex who isn't their spouse. There is a tendency in Mexican culture to believe that men have very little ability to control their sexual impulses, and thus will indulge them when given the opportunity. Your testimony can be damaged (and that of those you represent - the Lord, the church, the mission) when people view your actions, however innocent in reality, through such glasses.

EXAMPLE: On one occasion a married male missionary transported a female volunteer alone by car from the US to a missionary base in Baja 5 hours away, arriving after dark. This was viewed as very inappropriate behavior by the Mexican leadership.

EXAMPLE: On a number of occasions a male volunteer traveled in Mexico on behalf of a mission alone with his girlfriend, even sometimes sleeping in the same room with her. This type of behavior can greatly damage the testimony of the mission, and should not be permitted.

Try not to make promises you won't keep

There has been an unfortunate tendency for Americans Christians to make lots of promises of future assistance while they are visiting Mexico, then fail to follow through or to communicate changes in plans. Strive to be a person whose yes is yes and whose no is no.

EXAMPLE: A Mexican pastor told me he was fed up with promises from American Christians who had promised to send him caravans. No one had ever followed through. Each time he was made to be a liar, getting his congregation excited about the coming of the group and then having them simply not show up, without communicating an explanation.

Understand the relationship component of doing business in Mexico

Effective working relationships in Mexico tend to require just that - relationship - not just dealing with business. This may require a greater investment of time, but it will be worthwhile. Think effectiveness, not efficiency.

EXAMPLE: I clearly saw this principle in the early years of our missions' large-scale film ministry in San Quintin. We had de-centralized and were working with a number of different churches. If I needed to go see a pastor to discuss a schedule change or to get feedback it could mean an hour or two of my time rather than the two-minute phone call that might do the job in the U.S. For example, I might have to drive 20 minutes, to find the pastor is at the store. I'm invited in to wait until he gets back. Would I like a soda? How is the family doing? Etc. It may take a long time, but at the same time a relationship is being cultivated, which wouldn't be nearly so much so by the two-minute phone call.

EXAMPLE: Someone once told me of a documented case where missionary aviation destroyed a man's discipleship ministry in a part of Latin America. Previously he had to make long trips on the river from town to town, during which time he would fellowship with and disciple nationals who accompanied him. Those long hours together built deep relationships. When minutes in the airplane replaced hours in the boat, the bonds weakened with his national disciples.

Expect accountability with resources

It is wise to expect accountability for material and financial resources under your management from the Mexican pastors, doctors, etc. to whom you entrust them. In large part this is to prevent a stumbling block from being put before them by us. What may not seem like a temptation to us could be a strong temptation to someone who earns only 10-20% of what we do and who lives in a society where corruption is endemic. Satan could use such a stumbling block to bring down a servant of God. In many cases it is wise to specify in writing the intent of donations to avoid misunderstandings.

EXAMPLE: This principle was really brought home to me during a short-term mission experience in Peru. A long-term national employee who worked in the mission finance office was caught with his hand in the till. The mission leadership very humbly accepted part of the responsibility, feeling they had put a stumbling block before the brother by not holding him sufficiently accountable, because they had trusted him so much.

EXAMPLE: Suppose a caravan leaves a donation with a Mexican pastor. Is it for his personal needs or for the church treasury? It would be good to stipulate in writing. That way if it is for him he can silence any criticism that he kept for himself what was intended for the church, and if it is for the church there will be less temptation for him to divert it for personal needs.

Understand the non-confrontational tendency in the culture

There is often a reluctance to deal with problems based on the hope that the problems will resolve themselves tomorrow or the next day, and confrontation will not be necessary. This is unfortunate, as slight mid-course corrections could avoid many a major falling-out. Thus, don't assume that everything is ok in your working relationships with pastors, etc. just because they don't bring anything to your attention. There may be points of stress that they don't feel are worth the risk to the relationship of mentioning to you. Try to overcome this reluctance by showing a sincere desire to know of any problem areas so you can make any needed changes, and by asking specific questions about the status of different aspects of the working relationship.

Give credit where credit is due

When reporting on what God is doing through us in Mexico, be careful to give credit where credit is due. Mention the individuals, churches, and para-church organizations that played a role in a particular program or event. Our literature sometimes reaches the hands of such people, and relationships can be severely damaged if they perceive we took all the credit for something in which they or their organization had a significant role too.

Share these principles with your volunteers

It is important to share relevant basic principles for ministering effectively in Mexico with the volunteers under your supervision - whether weekend helpers, caravans, interns, or staff members. It isn't enough to understand and apply sound principles for working cross-culturally ourselves - we must make sure that those who serve under our responsibility have sufficient understanding to be able to minister effectively and without reflecting negatively on our testimony.

SOME LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

(A note from Missions to Mexico) These requirements have changed over the publishing of this article and for current requirements, please go to our website and consult: [Crossing the Border & Tourist cards](#)

Understand your legal position in Mexico

If you are not a Mexican citizen, then you come to Mexico as a visitor. It is a privilege, not a right. Mexican law requires you to acquire a tourist card (FMT) for visits of over 72 hours in the northern Baja. Technically, a tourist card alone is inadequate if you will be doing volunteer work, as this is not a tourist activity - the sponsoring Mexican organization (Religious Association or Civil Association) needs to acquire permission for you. (These laws have changed in the recent years)

The laws regarding Mexican churches Depending on your specific role, it may be important to you to understand a little about the laws that affect the Mexican churches. In recent years the churches have gained legal status in Mexico, which gives them more rights but also makes them subject to many laws just like any business. To be legal, churches must be registered as part of a Religious Association before "Gobernacion". They must also register with "hacienda", the Mexican equivalent of the I.R.S., and present accounting for income and expenses. Labor laws now apply to church personnel, too. To hold religious activities in public places they must request permission in writing from the authorities at least 15 days in advance. Plans for new structures should be approved by the authorities. The demolition of old structures requires authorization. **(We at Missions to Mexico, will take care of all requirements regarding building and ministry.)**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - My background in cross-cultural interaction with Latin Americans I acquired my foundation in the Spanish language in high school. In college I began interacting with Latin American students and monolingual college employees, while taking a few more Spanish courses. In graduate school I interacted a lot socially with Hispanic students, and led Bible studies in Spanish. I took a 6 month break from my studies to participate in a short-term mission experience in Peru. While finishing my graduate studies I was a missions and Hispanic ministry intern for a year at my church. I have served in Mexico with Mexican Medical since 1986, mostly in the San Quintin area of Baja California, plus a year and a half in Palenque, Chiapas. In 1989 I married my wife, Rosy, who is a native of the San Quintin area. Spanish is the language of our home.