

Go Missions to Mexico

Cultural Perspectives of Mexico

By Mike Fink

Culture is a perspective from which life is viewed and understood. This "way of seeing life", changes from culture to culture. I often ask my fellow Americans, "What culture are you?" It's hard for us to answer because it's just the way we are and we don't think about it. It's like the Texan who thinks everyone else has an accent. To him, his way of talking is normal, and it's others who have the accent. Here are some interesting cultural differences for you to take into consideration as you get ready to embark on your mission trip to Mexico.

Americans tend to be "Time-Oriented" - Mexicans tend to be "Event-Oriented"

- A time-oriented culture focuses on time; they tend to be punctual, efficient and quick. Things start on time and end on time. Church and most activities last a certain amount of time, and you can't add something to the schedule without taking something out. Time frames and punctuality are important. Everything is orderly, neat and in its place.
- An event-oriented culture focuses more on the moment at hand and less on the future. They think differently about time and put it way down on the scale of importance. Everything will work itself out, and there's no need to get undone about a schedule. The value of the event and the moment is what matters. Activities and schedules normally start late, and last longer with no definite time frame to be kept.
- In order for Americans to minister and have impact in Mexico, they must adopt a flexible mindset and not get frustrated if their schedule is not kept.

Americans tend to be "Task-Oriented" - Mexicans tend to be "Tranquility-Oriented"

- A task-oriented culture focuses on getting things done. They are productive and make things happen. They are organized and have an eye to figure out how to get things done the fastest and most efficient way possible.

- A tranquility-oriented culture focuses more on being laid back and having no strife and problems. They would rather spend more time just sitting and chatting than getting something done. They don't worry so much about tomorrow and just focus more on the now. As long as they have a lot of friends and have a peaceful life, consider themselves rich.
- In order for Americans to minister and have impact in Mexico, they need to relax if everything isn't done as fast or efficient as they would like.

Americans tend to have more "Material Wealth" - Mexicans less "Material Wealth"

- You are about to go to a country where virtually nothing will be as good as America: food, houses, clothes, education, roads, manners, cleanliness, medical attention, and a host of other things too numerous to mention. A lot of what you see and experience might be painful, or appear wrong, unjust, and difficult to understand. Your first instinct might be to try to fix these injustices of life. True, there will be thousands of needs, more than you can comprehend, and at some point, you might even feel a sense of despair, frustration, heartache, and loss of hope. You might even feel a sense of anger at what has caused their poverty, and as a result, you might want to try to fix everything. However, even with these apparent injustices the Mexican people, by and large, are as happy or happier than most Americans. The greatest conflict for each group is understanding how these people can be happy with a tenth of what they have.

What Should the Focus of Our Mission Trip Be?

When considering the purpose of why you're going on a short-term mission trip you might think of the following real story and use the gift of listening to try and understand the real needs of those you're going to serve.

John and Amy Derrick, who coordinate mission volunteers for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, have learned that listening to the locals and putting their needs first is crucial to a trip's success.

Once, while serving in Canada, they took a trip to Japan to plan future short-term church-planting initiatives with Japanese Christians. The Derricks' education began in their first meeting, which lasted five hours and seemed to accomplish nothing. "Our first meetings were all about drinking tea, not talking about partnership," says John. He said it was hard for him to be relational with the Japanese Christians when his agenda was to talk about partnership. He consciously had to avoid the topic of

ministry. “They were fearful because of bad experiences in the past of Westerners saying, ‘We know what you need,’” explains Amy. “The point of our trip was to drink enough tea to ask, ‘How can we help you?’”

The help Amy expected to give the Japanese wasn’t the help they wanted, she recalls. She had thought the Canadian team would come to Japan and lead Bible studies and ministry-training sessions. But the Japanese had a different plan. When the Derricks' team arrived in the summer of 2000, they didn’t zoom in with a prepackaged evangelism presentation or building project. They did just what the Japanese had asked them to do - they hung out.

“They just wanted us to come be with them,” says Amy. “Come to flower-arranging classes, visit senior citizen homes, play with the children. It was more about living with people, staying in homes. They wanted our presence to be an impact.”

“A big part of the trip was just being there and having a cross-cultural exchange,” says John. “We were the first Westerners that many of them had seen before, so it was a draw to hold something at the church. The big emphasis was to be there to support their indigenous work and enhance their profile within their community.”

Important Factors to Keep in Mind

- Materialism doesn’t bring happiness, so therefore if they don’t have all I have, it’s okay. The vast majority of the world lives like they do.
- The real need of their heart is Jesus. So love these people, touch these people, smile at these people, and ask God to help them see Jesus in your life.
- While you’re with these people, try to be a learner and pray that God will help you see blind spots in your life as a result of your own culture and worldview.
- We need to understand the difference between relative poverty and real poverty. Relative poverty means they just don't have as much as I do, but their basic needs are being met, and they're not being withheld anything regarding their happiness. Real poverty means they don't have enough food, clothing or shelter and need help.
- Try to relax and not be uptight if your schedule and tasks aren't rigidly followed. Yes, you want to be punctual and work hard, however, not to the degree that it might cause problems.