

## A Journey for Christians across Race, Culture and Class

“How do I get to know my neighbor?”

“How do I understand and relate within another culture?”

“Can I and my congregation become culturally competent for the 21st century?”

“What if I make a mistake?”

These and other questions lead us into the process of engaging in a meaningful way with our neighbors of another race, culture, or class. Living and working in mutual partnership in a multicultural world means moving beyond paternalism that seeks to “help” people or a misused liberalism that seeks to make decisions for and about people in order to make them more like us. We are often tempted to enter into relationships with persons of other races, cultures, and classes with an expectation that they will see the world and define problems and solutions the same way we do. When a person uses time in a different way, we attach a judgmental label rather than

recognizing that we simply have different values.

*“Meeting My Neighbor Again for the First Time”* may seem like a strange title, but in this section we will look at how we can meet our neighbors in a new way – with a deeper recognition of our cultural biases. It is important to note that recognizing and valuing our neighbor’s culture does not mean denigrating or devaluing our own culture. That is a byproduct of dualism – if one is good, the other is bad. Living as one body with many members means that all are good. God created many, many varieties of plants, animals, and people and said, “It is good.” God didn’t compare. God created diversity and said it is good.

One of the challenges of meeting my neighbor is to honor my own culture and honor my neighbor’s culture. In the next section we will look at the challenges that arise as we live into that reality together. For now, we will look at how we can meet our neighbor again, as if for the first time, listening, watching, and learning in a new way with full appreciation for all the gifts our neighbors can bring us.

### In this section you will find tools to

- Expand awareness of culture and its dynamics in shaping lives and relationships
- Analyze the culture of your congregation at the what, how and why levels
- Begin to glimpse how someone of another culture may see something you take for granted in your own culture
- Strengthen skills for listening and engaging with people across race, culture and class

Continue to Reflection: The Diversity Dance



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*At a young age, I was captivated by dance on film. Shirley Temple's breezy tap dancing...Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers' courtships in motion...Vera Ellen and Danny Kaye in "White Christmas." Not that I ever saw myself being that expressive. In the sixth grade, my classmates and I got some training in social dance...and was that ever awkward!*

*Still, dance was calling out to me, and finally in my 20s I did something about it. I signed up for a class at a local college. It was part of the continuing education program, so no prerequisite was required. It took several classes before I was comfortable enough to trade in my sweat-pants and t-shirt to be leotard-clad as everyone else had been from the start. Wearing such form-fitting clothing was hardly traditional garb for a girl of my culture. I felt very self-conscious. But after a while, it fit.*

*Eventually, I began to study Chinese classical and folk dance. I loved how swirling panels of fiery red silk (which we call "ribbons") could evoke rainbows and ocean waves, and symbolize wishes for wholeness and joy. Eventually I began to explore choreographing Chinese dance movements for liturgical settings.*

Starting out on a journey across cultures is much like being in a "diversity dance class." Feeling awkward comes with the territory. At first, we may even have to be taught how to stand correctly. Often what we thought we knew about posture doesn't serve us well—and certainly not for more complicated balancing and turning.

Beginners can hardly remember a sequence from one second to the next. We can laugh together about how we get tangled up and trip over our own feet. And by the way, no one is ever "all done" with class. Even lifelong dancers still go to classes. Mistakes are also par for the course. How else do we learn? There's no such thing as getting it right all the time. If we do, we're ready to stretch to the next level.

I've seen a seven-year-old with ballet training pick up a sequence quickly, because she's learned to pay attention and coordinate her body to imitate what she sees. That's how we all begin, by imitating, taking a few steps only. In time, we improve and expand on our capabilities, and the teacher might ask us to tutor others.

**In learning to do “God’s Diversity Dance,” every interaction is going to feel awkward at first** Don’t worry. You won’t fall offstage from spinning too much, too fast. This class has the most patient Teacher, who knows what particular challenges each of us faces in Body movement, and demonstrates for us what the Dance is supposed to look like. Our Teacher never tires of explaining the steps again and again. Are we ever fortunate! With God as our Teacher, we learn to deal with stage fright and learn to perform, so that others can see the Dance come alive, and want to join in.

Sometimes there aren’t many on a particular stage doing a dance. It takes commitment to classes and rehearsals, and a troupe will adapt and perform with those who keep showing up. Those solos, duets and small group dances can also be beautiful and meaningful. But ultimately in the Diversity Dance, the goal is to invite as many people as possible to join in. **Won’t you join in on God’s Great Diversity Dance?**

Continue to For Discussion: Map Story—Reading the Signs



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Yikes! This is hard! That’s exactly what I thought en route to my synod convention on the Long Island Railroad (LIRR). Subway riding in the city was second nature to me as a native New Yorker. Traveling on the LIRR to the suburbs was another matter. If I missed a stop on the subway, I could walk back if I didn’t want to wait for the next train. That wasn’t something one could do on the LIRR. Pay attention, I kept telling myself. Pay attention to what stops are coming up....

A transfer was required in Jamaica, Queens. “What track should I take?” I had asked the ticketmaster, who didn’t know. He suggested I ask the conductor. “What track should I take?” I asked the conductor. She said she didn’t know, and didn’t want to steer me wrong. “Listen for the track announcements,” she said.

I tried that at the Jamaica platform, but it could have been a foreign language to me. What was that loudspeaker voice saying? I then noticed an electronic sign that I could read, and continued on. I felt thankful and a bit more mindful of the stress immigrant people go through every day, as they negotiate unfamiliar environments.

Yes, a journey into new territory in a world of diversity can be hard. We prepare as best we can. We set our sights on the destination. Even so, getting there may be a vague, indistinct, nebulous trek. The people you think can direct you don’t always know the answers. You may not be able to discern the spoken cues that exist. Hopefully there are signs around, and you can read them.

Experienced travelers know that venturing into the unknown isn’t always smooth. That comes with the territory, and some of us are more adventuresome about it than others. However, all of us can build on the skills we possess. We can learn where the signs are, and how to read them. We can gain experience and confidence that will serve us well for any future travel across race, culture and class.

- Have you a “travel story” you’re glad not to repeat? What happened, and what did you learn from it?
- Share a story about how you learned to “read a sign” across race, culture or class.
- What challenges have you experienced or are you experiencing in reading signs?
- How could we improve on discerning spoken or unspoken cues and signs in multi-cultural situations?

Meeting Our Neighbors Completed - Continue to Exploring Cultural Depth



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