



Topic 2: Cross-Cultural Awareness

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One of the most important skills you need in a cross-cultural setting is awareness. Too many times, travelers are guilty of being unaware. Awareness goes beyond just “turning on your radar” when you arrive in a new place. Although this is important, awareness must be cultivated before we ever leave.

I. General Pre-Trip Awareness

Your time in Mexico will be short, so get ahead on gathering information about the country. You can pleasantly surprise your hosts by not asking them basic questions about issues you can easily discover on your own before you arrive. If coming with a group, you may consider ways to research Mexico together. Find good websites and articles and pass them on to the other participants from your church. Keep in mind we will be spending our time specifically within the border region. Think about how this may shape the research process and the types of questions you ask. Here are some good starter questions for research:

- Who are the current political leaders?
- What is the current economic situation?
- What are the present issues in the news?
- What is the recent history of the country?
- What are some of the more significant long-term historical events?
- What are the religious attitudes and traditions?
- What are some of the main social activities?
 - What do teenagers in Mexico like to do for fun?
 - What are important cultural holidays and festivals?
 - What kind of food can I expect to eat?

Research Resources

The Internet has made cultural research relatively easy, though not always accurate. Because of this, we assure these are some good sites for research – though there are certainly plenty more:

- <http://portal.sre.gob.mx/dinamarca/index.php> (Click “Tourism (English Only)” or “About Mexico”.)
- www.countryreports.org (Use scroll feature to locate “Mexico”.)
- www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook (Use scroll feature to locate Mexico.)
- <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cshome.html> (Select “Mexico” from “Choose a Country Study”.)

2. General During-the-Trip Awareness

Awareness during the trip falls into several categories, but we will summarize them in two: *self-awareness* and *place-awareness*.

Self-Awareness

Cross cultural experiences require self-awareness. We have to understand, in some way, where we are coming from mentally, spiritually, and culturally. Most of us have been raised in the United States, which puts us at some unique *disadvantages* when serving cross-culturally. We have more to overcome because we have more expectations. Here are a few self-awareness issues to keep in mind:

- **Instant gratification.** We are used to getting what we want when we want it: food, music, entertainment, healthcare, water, transportation, and the list goes on. Moving into a situation where this is not always the case for a team, and/or those we are working with can put a strain (a good strain) on us and offers valuable time to assess and examine the ease with which we live.
- **A sense of entitlement.** In other words, because we have lived most of our lives getting what we want, we come to believe that if life goes bad, something must be wrong and needs to be fixed. We have a tendency to believe that we deserve things to go smoothly, that we deserve to be healthy and successful, and that any hardship can be (or should be) overcome.
- **A need to be heard.** Because of the ongoing instant gratification and the sense of entitlement, if things don't go well or don't go according to plan, we often feel the need to be heard. The discomfort of the unexpected leaves us wanting to tell someone about how things should be and how we would prefer them to be.

Place-Awareness

There are a few things to be mindful of while you are on YouthWorks. Most of these have to do with the fact that people in the United States are often perceived as loud, rich, obnoxious people who only care about themselves and their own country. Our goal is to show that as followers of Christ, we attempt to break these stereotypes. Here's a checklist to help us begin to process how we engage our hosts and friends in Mexico:

- **Talk less, listen more.** Talk less, observe more. What is taking place around you?
- **Expect the unexpected.** Plans will change, and change, and probably change again. Roll with it. This is a great time not to complain.
- **It's not weird... it's just different.** We must think twice before we speak and react. We must be mindful of our facial expressions and attitudes. Be respectful and understand that we are guests.
- **You're being observed too.** People in the community and church will watch how we treat one another, and they will watch how we interact with the people around us: neighbors, bus drivers, pastors, etc.

3. Trip-Specific Issues

Food

For most of us who have grown up in the United States, food is not an issue we think about. As a nation, we have plenty of it. We actually have too much of it. Not many of us have wondered if we would be able to afford to feed ourselves, and not many of our families have been at risk for starvation. Even if we fall on hard times, we usually have a safety net of people to take for us.

With this in mind, it is important to realize that in most other cultures, specifically in Mexico, food is a significant issue. Be very careful at every meal. Almost every meal will be served to you at camp or by

sack lunch made by Mexican volunteer cooks. At times, if we're lucky enough, our host church may feed us as well—you can assume they have saved special funds to bless you with their gift of a shared meal.

Regardless of where you are, be respectful of food and those who are serving it to you. A significant amount of time, effort, energy, and care will go in to every meal you eat.

Who doesn't love Mexican food?! But, you may not be used to eating beans at every meal and are probably used to eating your favorite taco the way you like it. During the YouthWorks week, you will not have control over how much and what you eat. We might be inclined to question why we have to eat the same thing multiple meals in a row, and in moments of frustration, you might want to suggest what seem like reasonable alternatives. This is not our place. There is the temptation at times to not eat something. This is never an option. Refusing to eat something has far-reaching consequences. There are much bigger issues at stake than what we prefer to eat. Even subtly making fun of the food, making faces, or giggling when something is presented can damage relationships that you've been building all week.

The world has been McDonald-ized. You will more than likely have fast food chains and convenience stores near you. It could be that a McDonald's is two doors down from the church you are serving at. It is not about the fact that you *could* afford to skip a meal and go buy a hamburger. This trip is about the fact that you are part of a team, and that team is a part of a ministry. See yourself in the bigger picture, resist the desire to take care of what you want (no matter how harmless it may seem) and go along with the design of the trip as an act of spiritual obedience. When we think of worship, we usually connect that with singing. Try to broaden your definition of worship as living a life of gratitude. This includes receiving our meals with a spirit of thanksgiving. Eating, therefore, is always an act of worship.

The simple rule for food in every situation: Take what you are given, be grateful, and eat it all.

What if I am a vegetarian?

If you have made the decision to not eat meat for personal and/or moral reasons, it is a decision that must be set aside for the duration of this trip. Your convictions and standards are respectable, however, given the potential situations you will be in, these standards must be sacrificed for the greater good of the ministry and team impact.

If you have not eaten meat for a considerable amount of time, you will need to begin early to work up to it. It is not something to jump into on the trip. Here is a basic strategy for re-introducing meat into your diet:

Week 1	Begin with small portions of fish/chicken every other day. Gradually increase these portions. Make sure to eat vegetables and other food you normally eat with this new intake of meat.
Week 2	Continue with fish or chicken, and have one or two meals with small portions of red meat.
Week 3	Have several meals with small portions of red meat, and make sure to also eat lots of fiber and drink lots of water.
Week 4	Eat several meals with a full portion of meat, and have a couple of those be red meat.

What if I am allergic to certain foods?

If you have dietary restrictions because of medical conditions, you must list this on your specific YouthWorks application. The YouthWorks office will ensure your dietary needs will be taken care of and that the nurse will be informed of your condition.

Spending Money

There are very few ways that can alienate us from those who are hosting us faster than the way we choose to use our money. Just because we can and want to purchase, doesn't mean we should.

This trip is not, in any way, about souvenirs or other impulse buys such as: food, ice cream, or whatever. The relationships we form are the most important aspect of these trips. We will spend a week with Nazarene church members, serving alongside them in their church and community. We want this to be the primary emphasis of the trip.

We are consumers by nature. Let this trip be a time away from the almost automatic reflex we have to spend money if given the chance. Please don't ask or hint about shopping. YouthWorks takes a unique stance on shopping. We ask our participants to plan on not purchasing *anything* while in Mexico. Our reason for this is simple: many times, what a high school student or adult leader will spend on souvenirs in one day of shopping totals more than what many of the members of the congregation will make in one month. Let this week be a week of solidarity: a time to consider the lives of those we have the honor of working with. Let it be a different week, a time to not spend and consume, but a time to share and to give.

Church Services

During the week, we will visit churches and often times participate in the services. The way we conduct ourselves in these situations is crucial.

The service could be very different from anything we have seen or heard. This is not a time to react critically or impatiently. Again, it is a time to be aware, and to look and listen. There is no place for the word "weird" here. The time for questions or observations will be later discussed with your leader.

You may find that Mexican church services run longer than the services you attend back in the States. Generally, Mexican culture operates with a more flexible attitude toward time than U.S. culture. Being together with loved ones (family, friends, fellow church members) is such an important value that it doesn't matter as much if the service starts late, runs over time, or lasts longer than our typical 1 ½ services. Please try to be patient while you are in church services, remembering that they are so pleased to have you as a guest.

Also, we can't guarantee that the services will be translated into English. It can be difficult to stay focused (or even awake!) when you can't follow along, and it is totally appropriate to use the sermon time to quietly read through your Bible or write in your journal. Even if you don't speak any Spanish, do give the songs a real effort. Most churches provide the words and it can be great practice to jump in where you can. It also shows that you are accepting their welcome and genuinely trying to participate. Lastly, remember that if the service is translated, it will last twice as long. If this is the case, you're lucky – and may need to mentally prepare to sit for a but longer.

This mission setting is not a time for you to offer or argue your theological or evangelical perspectives with our hosts. We are in their home, and we will be doing things their way, out of a spirit of learning how Christians in another setting are serving God in a community and cultural setting we have just entered.

Personal Appearance & Clothing

We have no plans to ruin your personal sense of fashion or comfort—we promise. We do, however, ask that you approach your appearance and choice of clothing in the same way we expect you to think about food and eating while on the trip. We're not just spending time in Mexico, but we're representatives of the *Nazarene Church* in Mexico and associating with Mexican Nazarenes. Mexican Nazarene culture is more conservative than most of the churches we attend in the States. We must be mindful of this and respond appropriately. It is not ok for you to be the exception.

We'll get the hardest guideline out of the way first: we have to be very careful about piercings. Up to two piercings in women's ears are acceptable. Beyond that, you'll need to remove other piercings for the week. This includes: men's earrings and **any** facial, belly-button, or tongue piercings. Clear plugs are available for most piercings so that the hole doesn't close over the week. Thanks in advance for complying with this rule.

If you have a tattoo, and it is easy to cover up, we also ask that you do attempt to keep it hidden for the week. Please don't let the fact that you have a tattoo make you nervous about attending. Tattoos are becoming more acceptable now and we simply ask that you cover them if possible.

Even though it will be hot and some of us may be involved with light physical labor, we want to be careful not to look sloppy. It can be a sign of disrespect to wear paint stained shirts and jeans shredded with holes. We have actually been asked by church members in Mexico why so many visiting groups from the States bring their worst clothes on the trip! When you decide what to wear, select items that are comfortable and in good condition, (but not necessarily your number-one-favorite pieces of clothing).

A specific packing list can be found in our "Packing and Travel Tips" section. As you decide what to pack, please follow our standards for appearance that you will find listed there.

We ask you to trust us – we know the culture well enough to judge what is appropriate or not. If a YouthWorks staff member asks you to change, it is nothing personal. It's simple – just do it and don't complain.

Life in Mexico & Bilingual Camp-Setting

Our favorite component of the YouthWorks week is the interaction with and participation of Nazarene Mexican high-school students. Teens from all the Nazarene district you are visiting will be with us all week. Living, serving, sleeping, eating, and worshipping side-by-side is so fun, but can also be challenging. We'll provide you with some insights into Mexican culture and what it is like to be in a bilingual setting.

Time: The concept of time in Latin America is viewed much differently than in the U.S. In fact, Americans are pretty unique in our general need for control, schedules, plans, and punctuality. It's ok that we value these things, but it's also just as ok to operate under a different set of priorities. The use of time during your trip is not about being the most productive, but being present and available for whatever may be asked of you. In Mexico, there is a high cultural value placed on time spent together—not necessarily on when that time starts or ends. There is also much more emphasis on rest and down-time than we allow

ourselves in the States. You may feel like you are “just sitting around” or “wasting time”, but we guarantee you are not. Your very presence, simply *being with* the people at camp, in ministry, or on your team is honored as a gift.

Remember also that you’re going to be with a large group the whole time and everything will simply take longer because of our size. On YouthWorks trips, it is common to have to wait for the bus to pick you up or to stand in a long line for meals. When this happens, please try to refrain from jokes about being on “Mexican time”.. It is hard to move a group this size of YouthWorks around the city and camp and our hosts to an amazing job of organizing all this.

Mexican Teammates: You may find that some of the Mexican teens on your team may not be able to spend the entire time at camp, or may pop in and out. Sometimes, there are family obligations and commitments, or work schedules that they have to deal with. Be understanding of this fact if some of your Mexican teammates live in this reality.

Spanish Language/Bilingual Atmosphere: We don’t expect that you know Spanish in order to come on the trip. However, if you do speak Spanish, you’ll definitely be tired by the end of the day! You’ll most likely be asked to translate conversations between some of your teammates and you’ll be busy making new friends. If you don’t speak Spanish, you’ll probably get frustrated at times. All this is normal. In an environment where two languages are going on at the same time, keep these things in mind:

- Some of the Mexican teens will know English – but don’t expect a certain level of proficiency. Be as patient and helpful with their English as you’d like to receive when you’re trying out a second language.
- All public presentations/worship songs/signs will be in both languages. We are careful to translate everything that we generate. This translation takes extra time, and it is very important that we all are patient and don’t tune out just because we don’t know the “other” language.
- When in your team/small group, there will be an official translator who has agreed to serve in this function.
- Speak slowly enough for your translator to understand you and pause every 2-3 sentences to wait for translation.
- Even with the best intentions, your tendency will be to make side comments in your own language and rush through jokes without letting those be translated. This leaves people out and can divide your team. Be sensitive to the way you use your language throughout the week.
- The bilingual aspect is probably the most uncomfortable piece initially. Most likely, it will feel hard and awkward, especially in the beginning. This is completely normal – and most everyone is going through it. Be patient with yourself, be bold enough to try out the Spanish you do know, and be willing to laugh at yourself!