

Emotional Intelligence in the Midst of Difference

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Matthew 22:36-40 NRSV

Wesleyan Christians **practice** theology.

The doctrinal standards of The United Methodist Church describe our theology as “practical divinity,”¹ linking our personal relationship with and spiritual growth in Jesus Christ to the work of justice in and for the world. For us, “Scriptural holiness entails more than personal piety; love of God is always linked with love of neighbor, a passion for justice and renewal in the life of the world.”²

We can recite our mission: To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. But transformed to whose standards? How do our cultures, backgrounds and experiences influence the way we understand this and approach it?

The apostle Paul knew that culture played a key role in discipleship in ancient times. The oft quoted text from Galatians 3:27-29 *...there is no Jew or Greek...* was an instruction to Christian Jews, who were the majority, to refrain from imposing Jewish culture on Gentiles as they joined the faith. Paul made the argument that each culture should find its culturally authentic Christian practice.³

This teaching has particular resonance today for the church in the United States as its position of dominance shifts and issues of culture become central. This teaching has equal importance for Christian discipleship and outreach at the local level if the church is to be in ministry with, as opposed to for.

What ‘ingredients’ or thinking pattern will assist us in finding a path forward in the midst of deep cultural differences?

¹ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*, Paragraph 102, pg. 56.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 56.

³ Dearthoff, Darla K., *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2009), 377 (Yancey).

⁴ Adapted by Kristina Gonzalez from Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*; Cherbosque, Gardenswartz and Rowe, *Emotional Intelligence and Diversity*.

⁵ Relies heavily on *Emotional Intelligence and Diversity* by Gardenswartz, Cherbosque and Rowe. <https://www.eidi-results.org/what-is-eid>



INGREDIENTS⁴

1. **Cultural Self-Awareness**, uncovering the values and assumptions that I see as normative.
2. **Self-Governance**, the ability to analyze and understand my reactions and to speak powerfully and authentically.
3. **Intercultural Literacy**, the study of other cultures, how they formed and why they operate as they do.
4. **Systems of Equity**, the ability to create systems where differences are sought, celebrated, and valued.

A pattern of thinking for resilience amid cultural differences.⁵

1. Cultural Self-Awareness

- When I find myself reacting to cultural differences with anger, judgment, disgust or confusion:
- What is going on in me emotionally?
 - What deeply held values, beliefs or patterns of behavior are being touched in me by the interaction?
 - How closely aligned are these values and beliefs with my identity?
 - What are my assumptions of others regarding these deeply held patterns?
 - What implicit biases might be active in me in this situation?

Awareness of our own cultures and worldviews helps us to more accurately understand our reactions to differences and precedes curiosity about how others may differ in their patterns, behaviors and views. Understanding implicit bias helps us to enter intercultural issues with humility.

2. Self-Governance

- When I am caught in the emotion of an intercultural interaction:
- How familiar is this feeling? When in my history have I experienced a similar intensity of feeling?
 - How do the circumstances of this situation differ from those in my past?
 - Is the intensity that I am experiencing appropriate to this circumstance or is it cumulative?
 - Do I perceive that my identity is threatened, and how accurate is my perception?
 - What are the power dynamics of the situation? Who has more power and who has less? By whom or by what is the power ascribed?

Pausing to evaluate our emotional reactions when working interculturally can help us to be more authentic and powerful in our responses, and to understand that others react with similar intensity, particularly to issues of identity.

3. Intercultural Literacy

- When I notice differences between how I act or process experiences and how others do so:
- What might I learn about the cultural norms (ethnicity; language; region; generation; gender identity; sexual orientation; theology; etc.) of the other?
 - How does intersectionality (the intersection of multiple cultures and identities) inform this question?
 - As culture is complex, how do various aspects of our cultures differ or comport? Where might we predict misunderstandings?
 - Who among my relationships might I call upon as a cultural interpreter, one who might help me better understand the complexity of cultural values and patterns that I am experiencing in this situation?

Not every person will behave in a manner consistent to the general aspects of their culture. But knowing something of the nuances of culture – our own and others – cultivates cultural empathy and reinforces curiosity that leads to lasting relationships.

4. Systems of Equity

- When I understand better the multiple and nuanced ways that culture is active in my life and others, I might ask questions disruptive to current systems but with the goal to include:
- In what ways does this governance system better support those of the dominant culture and disadvantage minority cultures?
 - How might the ways in which we meet, converse, make decisions or develop values better represent the cultures present? What are the 'mutually adaptive' ways to create processes that include?
 - How might we approach conflict resolution in ways that uphold the dignity of all?
 - Do we develop ministries from a place of deep relationship and partnership or with a mindset of superiority or problem-solving? Have we 'decolonized' our approach to ministry?

Creating systems of equity requires that we all bend somewhat to a larger purpose, that of beloved community.