



An Exercise in Cross-Cultural Understanding

INTRODUCTION The exercise described in this unit is taken from an intercultural training workshop in which participants generate hypothetical cultures as a way of understanding the role of values in shaping culture. After imagining and describing the characteristics of two contrasting cultures, participants speculate about what would happen if representatives of each of these hypothetical cultures came together and sought to establish a mutually beneficial relationship with one another. In the process, they can develop a clearer understanding of the challenges people face when they encounter people of other cultures and why conflict between them so often arises.

To take the exercise one step further, one might pose the question, "What if those two integrated value systems were inherent within one individual?" This is the question that for Asian Americans and other minorities, holds a key to understanding their identity and the inner struggles resulting from being bicultural. And for Asian American and other minority Christians, it can open the door to developing more effective leadership, outreach, and ministries.

THE NATURE OF VALUES AND HOW THEY OPERATE IN CULTURE

An understanding of the nature of values is essential for understanding insights related to culture and for making sense of the exercise.

What are values?

One Christian sociologist defines values as "... whatever an individual within a group considers of importance. In each automatic or consciously made decision some value underlies the choice of one thing over against another."¹

Another scholar more simply defines values as "culturally derived notions of right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, true and false, positive and negative, and so on. They influence our social perception by providing us with a set of basic precepts from which we judge the behavior and beliefs of others."²

How do they relate to one another?

Values are not very useful when seen as isolated units. In reality, values interrelate and affect society as unified systems.

...[V]alues (are) "culturally derived notions of right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, true and false, positive and negative, and so on."