



A MERGE *pre-trip* RESOURCE



MERGE *Toolbox*

CONTENTS

Session One	4
Session Two	5
Session Three	9
Session Four	14
Session Five	19

WHEN YOU TAKE A MERGE TRIP abroad or connect with a ministry that is cross-cultural to yours, it is important that those connections be authentic and honoring to all participants and to Jesus Christ. The purpose of these five sessions is to help prepare your group to connect to others, develop a deeper understanding of servant leadership, and gain self-awareness that can help shape your perspective on culture.

The five sessions in this toolbox are intended to be used before you travel abroad or cross-culturally. Each session addresses five main themes:

- God's Mission
- Cultural Beauty and Complexity
- Relationship-Building
- Self-Awareness
- Cultural Exchange

All five themes build on each other from session to session. Your group may choose to address one session each time you meet, or engage two or three sessions in a retreat style on a Saturday morning or longer evening. Alternatively, each team leader may choose which elements of a session work best for your group.



God Invites Us into the World to Join His Mission

SESSION ONE

GOD'S MISSION: GOD INVITES US INTO HIS WORK IN THE WORLD

Read *Ephesians 2:1-5, 17-22*.

The apostle Paul had quite a story. He was born a Jew, and as an adult he was a model follower of Yahweh. There were lines drawn for faithful Jews to stay clear of that which made them unclean, and that meant staying away from Gentiles. Paul met Jesus on his way to Damascus, which completely transformed his heart and life. And as if the transformation from faithful Jew to Christian wasn't enough, Paul was later called to share the good news with Gentiles. As a Christ-follower, Paul was continually challenged in his preconceptions. God expanded his understanding of love and grace, which extends to all people everywhere.

In responding to God's call on his life, Paul crossed borders and cultures to interact with people who were not like him. He learned to value people and places that were different from what he was used to and who he was. Through his personal transformation, Paul was able to be a bridge, seeking to heal the animosity between Jews and Gentiles.

Questions for Reflection

- What main ideas stand out in these verses?
- What does this text tell you about Jesus and his hope for the world?
- What is the goal, or end result, of being joined together with people from other cultures?
- What personal challenge about interacting in new cultures do you find from Paul's words?

True connection is made up of love, respect, honor, care, peace, and unity.

Going Deeper

- What hostility exists in our world between cultures? How much of this do you think is human nature? How much is learned?
- What cultural hostilities do you see in North America? What hostilities do you see between North American cultures and other cultures?
- In what ways have these hostilities driven apart the followers of Jesus?
- How do you think God can use a Merge trip to break down the cultural walls of hostility? What specific effort could you make to join God in that work? What change of heart might you need to make for that to happen?



● CULTURAL BEAUTY AND COMPLEXITY: ELEVATOR ACTIVITY

Materials needed: masking tape

This is a role-playing activity that illustrates the rules and norms within our culture that we don't often talk about.

Use masking tape to mark out a square about the size of an elevator on the floor. Invite a couple of participants to enter the elevator as they would in a normal situation. After two or three people have entered, ask someone (either the leader or someone who has been prepared for this activity) to enter the elevator displaying behavior that is not typical for North American contexts. (Examples of behavior that is not culturally normative: standing super close to the people already in the elevator, standing facing the people in the elevator, speaking in a loud voice, asking someone their political views as soon as you meet them, etc.)

Have 1-3 more people enter the elevator with various behaviors that are not typical. After a few minutes, ask the group to reflect on what they saw and experienced.

Reflection Questions

- What did you observe?
- What rules were broken? How did you know they were being broken?
- Did someone teach those rules to you directly? Did you learn them in school? If not, how did you learn them?
- What other cultural rules can you identify that you weren't taught explicitly but you know from growing up in your culture?

● RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING: WHO IS THE GUEST?

For this activity, individuals can work on their own or in small groups.

1. If you invite someone to be a guest in your home, what expectations do you have of them? How do you expect them to act? What steps do you take when you are hosting people in your home, for a party, a dinner, or just to hang out? List them in your journal.
2. If someone invites you to their birthday party, how do you respond when you receive the invitation by mail, or email, or text? What do you do when you walk into their house? What is it like to be a guest somewhere? Do you act differently when you are a guest rather than being familiar somewhere?

Activity

Ask group members to act out various scenarios and see if the larger group can figure out if they are a guest or at home. What is the difference between these scenarios?

- Walk into the kitchen and immediately take something out of the fridge.
- Stick out your hand to shake hands while saying hello to someone.
- Lean in for a hug or kiss on the cheek while saying hello to someone.
- Begin a sentence with, "OMG, you won't believe this."



- Knock on the door and enter a house with a gift that is wrapped.
- Enter the room with arms full of groceries and yelling instructions to other people in the house.
- Go into the bathroom and close and lock the door.
- Go into the bathroom and don't close the door.

Reflection Questions

List the names of some of your closest friends. How do you know they are your friends? How did they become your friends? Do you feel like a guest in their presence? What helped you move from being guests in each other's presence to being at home together?

You have been invited to visit another country to get to know the believers there. You are being invited to join in the life of people who live there, to learn about their life and culture and to become friends. As you begin to think and pray about meeting people in a different place, how will you make friends? How will you connect with them and learn about them as you share about yourself too?

Pray for the people that you will meet. Ask God to open your heart to making new friends.

● SELF-AWARENESS: HOPES AND FEARS

Get a journal for each participant or ask them to bring one of their own. Encourage them to find a journal they can use specifically as you prepare for your trip and bring it with them when you go.

Say to the participants: "When you are writing your thoughts down, let the words flow. Don't worry, no one is going to see what you write, unless you show them. Let the discipline of journaling be a way to process what Jesus is teaching you about God, yourself, the team, and the experience of traveling to another country to participate in what God is doing there."

Before the next group meeting, take some time to think about your expectations for the trip. Write down your thoughts about the following:

- Why do you want to go on this particular Merge trip?
- What do you hope for as a result of participating on this trip?
- What are you excited about?
- What makes you nervous?

Let the discipline of journaling be a way to process what Jesus is teaching you.



● CULTURAL EXCHANGE: COCONUT COMMUNION

In this part of the session we will explore how another culture approaches communion. The goal is to explore how cultures express their faith in ways that are different from Western cultures.

Read or explain: In cultures throughout Asia a coconut is used for the communion meal. Bread and grape juice are not part of the everyday diet and might even be expensive to obtain. In many parts of Southeast Asia, coconut trees are common. Every part of the tree is used to sustain life, particularly in the Pacific Island nations. The fruit of this tree is sometimes used in the communion service to represent both the body and blood of Christ.

Christ's body was broken on the cross, and so must a coconut be broken in order to partake of its fruit. Once a coconut is broken, it produces both the bread and the juice. The meat, or fruit, of the coconut can be broken and shared as the communion bread.

"Take and eat," Jesus invites us.

The coconut water which, like blood, only flows once the coconut has been broken, can be sipped in remembrance.

"This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me"
(1 Corinthians 11:23).

If appropriate, include a communion service during this time for your group. This can be an opportunity to recognize that preparing for and participating in a Merge trip is an act of worship. Receiving communion is a reminder that all people in all cultures are invited to the Lord's Table to remember the saving power of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection.

It may be helpful to receive communion in a way that is different from what your church usually does. If your congregation uses wafers, try using bread instead. If you use little communion cups, try intinction. After the service of communion is over, ask the participants how it felt to worship in a new way, with new elements.

Close this time in prayer.



Going as a Servant, Following Christ's Lead

SESSION TWO

GOD'S MISSION: THE SERVANT

Read *John 13:1-7*; *Philippians 2:5-11*; *Mark 10:35-45*.

Divide the team members into three small groups. Give each group one of the passages listed above and the questions below to discuss. After 12-15 minutes, bring them back to the whole group to share what they learned from the reading.

Discussion Questions

- What does this passage say about the attitude of being a servant?
- How is this different from the way most of the world functions?
- What characteristics describe the heart of a servant?
- Which three traits would be most helpful to us as a team?
- What is one characteristic you want to focus on developing today?
- What would it look like if we applied this to our life together on this team, at home and away?

CULTURAL BEAUTY AND COMPLEXITY: CULTURAL ICEBERG

Materials needed: Iceberg metaphor of culture (Google "iceberg metaphor for culture," and choose one of the images to share with the group.); pages with blank outline of an iceberg

The image of an iceberg is one way we can understand culture. Ten percent of a culture is above the waterline, and 90% is below the waterline. What we see above the water are the elements that help us easily identify cultures, such as food, music, language, and dress. However, the majority of what makes up a culture is actually found below the surface of the water, such as values, beliefs, and assumptions. These elements might be harder to distinguish at first sight. Can we offer some examples here? Look at the model of the iceberg and read through all the aspects of culture both above and below the surface.

ABOVE

*art, clothing, food, music,
money, customs, gestures*

BELOW

*values, beliefs, feelings,
perceptions, judgments, assumptions*

Now on a blank iceberg, fill in the characteristics for your culture. What foods do you eat? What music do you listen to? What language do you speak? Perhaps your group includes people from more than one culture that can be expressed in the various characteristics.



When your group arrives in the country or context you are visiting, it may be easy to notice cultural characteristics that are above the water (language, food, music, etc.). Take a few minutes to brainstorm together some ways you can be curious about the cultural characteristics that are below the waterline. Make a list of what steps your group can take to learn more. Ask each person to commit to two actions they will take, or questions they will ask, to learn more about this culture.

Which characteristics can be written in the part of the iceberg under the water? Are these things you have thought about before?

On an additional blank iceberg fill in what you know about the culture you will be visiting. How much of what you know is above the water? How much of what you know is below the water? What characteristics do you not know about?

Reflection Questions

- What does it mean to say North America is a culture that holds within it many other cultures?
- What would you write on the iceberg above the water line (i.e., characteristics that are easy to identify)? What would you write below the water line (i.e., characteristics that are more subtle to discern)? Which parts are more important?
- Which aspects of culture do you think most people who go on trips learn about? Are those aspects above the waterline or below?
- What specific steps can take on your trip to learn what lies below the surface in the culture you are visiting?

● RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING I: COMMUNICATION

Materials needed: Print out the examples below or project them on a screen so the group can read them.

Two important tools for building relationships are communication and curiosity.

Today we will look at direct or indirect ways of communicating within culture. Here are some examples of each of these. Read through the examples below in pairs, small groups, or together as a whole group. Identify whether each example is direct or indirect communication? How would you respond if you experienced this situation? Does it feel natural to you? Why or why not?

- A man has a piece of food stuck in his teeth. His friend tells him about it immediately.
- A woman has a piece of food stuck in her teeth. Her friend offers her a glass of water without saying why.
- A man has a piece of food stuck in his teeth. His friend tries to ignore it.
- A team wants to visit a particular tourist site nearby. The local host knows that the site represents an oppressive history for the people of the church and is somewhat offended that the team wants to go. They talk to the team about the history of the tourist site and share why they are uncomfortable with the team going there.
- A team wants to visit a particular tourist site nearby. The local host knows that the site represents an oppressive history for the people of the church and is somewhat



offended that the team wants to go. The church leader suggests two other ideas of local tourist locations to visit instead.

- A team wants to visit a particular tourist site nearby. The local host knows that the site represents an oppressive history for the people of the church and is somewhat offended that the team wants to go but says nothing.

-
- A host gives specific instructions about a dress code, including examples of what to wear and what not to wear. When someone dresses inappropriately, they mention it.
 - A host tells a team to dress modestly but does not provide specifics of what that means.
 - A host tells a team to wear whatever is comfortable for them since they are guests, even though none of the local people wear anything similar to the team.

-
- Your parent tells you guests are coming over for dinner and gives you a list of things to do before they arrive.
 - Your parent asks you to fold the laundry and put it away in drawers but does not say why it is important at that time.
 - Your parent picks up everything and cleans up after you before guests come for dinner.

- When a team leader asks the church pastor what they can do to best encourage the church, the pastor shares his church's current ministry focus and how the team can play a part.
- When a team leader asks the church pastor what they can do to best encourage the church, the pastor asks the team what they can do. He says, "Everything you do is a blessing, brothers and sisters."
- When a team leader asks the church pastor what they can do to best encourage the church, the pastor responds that the team are guests and should enjoy themselves as much as possible.

-
- A farmer from North America visits a community and sees ways local farmers could improve production. He organizes a meeting and leads a workshop to teach local farmers how to engage better agricultural practices.
 - A farmer from North America visits a community and sees ways local farmers could improve production. He goes out to farms and shows the farmers some ideas of how to improve production on their farms.
 - A farmer from North America visits a community and sees ways local farmers could improve production. He spends time asking the farmers how they learned their agricultural practices. He listens, takes mental notes, learns the culture, talks to others to learn more, and develops friendships with the farmers.

Application: Why is learning the communication patterns of a culture so important?

If you come from a direct communication culture:

- You use short, direct questions.
- A "yes" means "yes." A "no" means "no."
- An honest answer has no feelings. It is just honesty.
- You say what you think without worrying about hurting people's feelings.



If you come from an indirect communication culture:

- Friendliness is everything.
- You choose your answers to questions in order to avoid offending or making anyone uncomfortable.
- You avoid embarrassing others at all costs.
- Saying “yes” may really mean, “I want to get to know you better and be friendly.”

How might team members from a direct communication culture misinterpret what someone from an indirect culture says?

● RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING II: CURIOSITY

Materials needed: Print out the examples below or project them on a screen so the group can read them.

The importance of curiosity cannot be stressed enough as you prepare to connect with people from other cultures. Curiosity comes naturally for many people. However, in an international setting, especially where language, smells, and food are unfamiliar, it can be tempting to rely on assumptions. In the sensory overload you experience when visiting a new country or region, it might be easy to rely on your own observations or preconceived thoughts about what you are experiencing, rather than being curious.

Curiosity is a characteristic you can cultivate. The following questions and reflection time will help you think about practicing curiosity and how you can do that when you are in a new country.

In your journal, brainstorm 8-10 questions that demonstrate your curiosity about someone or their culture, their hometown, their food, their customs. After you have finished writing down the questions, share them with a partner or the whole group. Post the pages around the room, or project them on a screen so everyone can read them.

After the group has examined the first round of questions, go back through the list and add the question “Why?” or “How?” to each one.

● SELF-AWARENESS: FOOD AND CULTURE—RICE!

Materials needed: (1) Everybody Cooks Rice, by Norah Dooley. If you don't have the book you can watch a read-aloud version here: [YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=UH0MF9S_SNS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UH0MF9S_SNS); (2) Participant journals and pens; (3) Rice: If you have time, and if your group is particularly fond of eating, make a rice dish (or a few) to try as you listen to this book and reflect on how food has influenced our home cultures.

Read or listen to someone read *Everybody Cooks Rice*.

(Note: Leaders are encouraged to consider these questions on their own before the session. Take time to reflect on food and how food has been prepared throughout your entire life. What did you learn about culture, gender roles, food scarcity, faith, etc., by observing food preparation?)

Invite group members to reflect on these questions as individuals. Then share reflections in



pairs or small groups.

- How did your family cook rice when you were a child?
- Was it a main part of your culture's diet? Or part of a different culture? Do you eat it in your home or when you ate out?
- Who cooked the rice? How did they cook it?
- Did eating rice help you identify with your culture? Or do you think of rice being from another culture?
- Did you discover rice at a later time in life apart from your home culture?
- Think about mealtimes in general in your home. Who did the cooking? Why?

Food is important in every culture. The foods we grow up with help to shape our identities and how we gather and relate to one another. As you prepare to visit another country, think about how food is important to the people who will be hosting you. How can you show interest in them and in their culture through food?

● CULTURAL EXCHANGE: MATTHEW 5:1-12

- How might the church join the life-giving work of God's kingdom?
- What does God's kingdom look like? What are the kingdom members like?
- As you learn more about what is going on around the world, what needs and opportunities resonate with you? What breaks your heart? What ministry activity is your local church involved in that may connect you to opportunities in your community or around the world?
- What is your purpose in connecting?

Video Discussion

Watch this video, "When Helping Can Hurt," as a group:

▶ [YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=UG5GBS34B_O](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UG5GBS34B_O)

What is the importance of being invited? Who has power in this video? In a situation where one group is extending an invitation to another group, who has power?

Historically in missions, and in colonial situations, people groups have shown up without invitation. Talk about this power dynamic. How do you see it playing out in the video? How has it been a factor historically—in mission and in the history of the US/Canada?

In what ways can mission be done differently? What is the power of an invitation? How can you prepare to enter into a mission situation knowing who has power?

Historically in missions, and in colonial situations, people groups have shown up without invitation.



Who Am I and What Can I Offer?

SESSION THREE

GOD'S MISSION: NEIGHBORHOOD EXEGESIS

Leader note: This activity will take a little bit of preparation. Look up the demographics for the neighborhood where your church is located. If people are from a variety of neighborhoods, gather data about several communities. (Alternatively, you can ask team members to find this information ahead of time.)

Read Jonah 3.

Reflection Questions

- What life-shaping events make up Jonah's story?
- What was the call on Jonah's life?

Distribute copies of the demographic data you found. Ask people to look at the data in pairs or small groups. Participants can also use their phones to look at maps, satellite images, or find demographic information themselves.

- What stood out about what you observed?
- Did anything surprise you?
- Is your neighborhood what you thought it was? If not, why not?

Neighborhood Walk

Take the group out for a prayer walk around the neighborhood. Ask them to walk quietly. Ask: *What do you notice about the neighborhood? Where do you see God at work? Do people seem connected in this neighborhood? Where do you see people working in community together?*

As you walk, pray the Lord's Prayer for the neighborhood. Stop along the way and take time to be silent together, listening for what God is helping you to see and understand about the neighborhood. Stop along the way to offer specific prayers.

To go deeper, we recommend downloading *Relentless Love: A Study of the Book of Jonah* from covchurch.org. Week four's lesson, "Responding to God's Call," is especially applicable.



● CULTURAL BEAUTY AND COMPLEXITY: CALLED BY NAME

Materials needed: projected slides or display paper, journals, pens

Participants will explore naming practices of various cultures, in addition to their own name, to understand how diverse and complex naming practices are.

Project the following section on a screen so the entire group can read it. Discuss these facts together as a whole group or in pairs.

- Do you know that in Korean families the family name comes first and each person has two given names? The two given names are not shortened.
- In some Spanish-speaking countries each person has two surnames—the first is the father's first surname and the second is the mother's first surname. When people get married, they keep both surnames. Women sometimes add “de _____,” the surname of their husband, to their surnames. It is also customary for married people to have names that are different from their spouse's.
- In Sudan, people have three personal (or first) names—the person's first name, their father's first name, and their paternal grandfather's first name. To identify someone, you use all three names.

Activity

Spend a few minutes writing or reflecting on your own name.

- Do you know the story of how you got your name?
- Who gave it to you? Does it have special meaning? Are you named for someone?
- How would you explain the naming traditions of Americans to someone from another culture?

Knowing someone's name is very important. Take time to practice introducing yourself in your group. It may seem silly to introduce yourself to people you already know, but it will be an important part of making connections with your host community. If you are able, practice introducing yourself in the language of the people you will be visiting. Learn how to ask about their name in their language.

To read about naming customs around the world, visit or click on this link: blog.tesol.org/7-naming-customs-from-around-the-world/.

Take time to practice introducing yourself in your group. ... it will be an important part of making connections with your host community



● RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING: CARE

The last session focused on the relationship-building components of communication and curiosity. In this session we focus on care. Authentic relationships are based on communication with one another, curiosity about each other, and deep care for one another. Jesus demonstrates what it means to care for others by using the word “serve,” or service. On your Merge trip you will have the opportunity to serve others.

What does it mean to serve?

Service is often depicted as doing something for someone. However, one of the ways we can truly care for one another is to seek to understand who the other person is and what their needs are. This is where curiosity and communication combine with care.

Consider this example: A young woman traveled to serve at a community service organization in a rural town. The culture was a slower pace than her American university. Their culture valued being with one another over doing. Days went by, and the young woman was only given small tasks to do. The rest of the day she sat around feeling bored. She expressed her frustration to her leader. Why had she traveled all the way just to sit around? They weren't using her gifts, her presence, her abilities. The leader explained to her that the people of the community center didn't need her to do a lot of things. They wanted her to be present so she could get to know them. The best way she could serve was by sitting with the people, even if there was not a lot to do. This was a difficult concept for the young woman to grasp, especially after spending her years in American high school and university, where doing—and doing a lot—was valued highly. Over time she learned to enjoy the quiet times at the community center, and she got to know the other employees and clients well.

The lesson of this example is that service doesn't always mean doing a lot. On Merge trips the best way to serve is to be present and get to know the people you are visiting.

Caring means setting aside our agenda and letting others lead us, make decisions about our time, and set priorities for how our time will be spent.

Activity

Divide the group into pairs. Ask one partner to tell the other person what to do for two minutes. The tasks can be fun but should be kind and should demonstrate how it feels to have someone demand certain behaviors. Then switch roles.

After the pairs are finished, ask them to reflect:

How did it feel to have someone tell you what to do? What makes it okay? Is there a time when you would not want to be told what to do? What does that feel like?

How does humility and allowing others to make decisions for you, or following the lead of others, play a part in servanthood? Are you used to allowing others to lead you? How willing are you to allow a person of a different culture who may not speak your language to lead you? Are you willing to follow their guidance and leadership? Why do you think this is difficult for North Americans?

For a Merge trip to work as intended, the team needs to follow the leadership of the team leader, the Merge staff and, most of all, the leadership of the host church/ministry and culture. Serving others and caring for them well means allowing them to make decisions and lead you.



● SELF-AWARENESS: ABOUT ME

Use the prompt below to write a poem or a few words about yourself. If you are more comfortable drawing or using some other medium, that is great too! After participants have had a few minutes to work on their poem, ask them to share in small groups or with the whole group.

Follow these prompts to write a poem that introduces yourself:

- List three of your names—your full name, a nickname, a way you refer to yourself
- Name three places where you have lived or currently live (i.e., your street, state, country, school, church).
- Name three people you are deeply connected with.
- Name three things you love—food, hobbies, pets, activities, places.
- Name three events in your life that have been important.
- Name three things you want people to know about you.

Reflection

Whenever you meet someone new, you bring all of your own characteristics with you. It may take awhile to build trust, to share something about yourself that is very important but perhaps not visible to the other person. Perhaps there are times when you want to share something about yourself but you do not feel safe to do so or you are reluctant because the other person has expressed no curiosity about who you are. Can you think of a time when you wanted to share something about yourself but felt hesitant?

As you prepare to travel to a new place with a culture that is different from your own, keep in mind that the people you meet will want to share about themselves as much as you want to share about yourself.

- What will you share about yourself when you meet people on your trip?
- What questions can you ask that will help them to trust you, open up, and share about themselves?

Write a few of these questions down in your journal now. Pray for the people you will meet and the connections you will make with them.



● CULTURAL EXCHANGE: SITE HISTORY

(Note: For this section leaders will need to prepare some information about the place you will be visiting. If possible, ask the host leaders to send you some information about their context or share their own perspective on their history, issues of justice and equality, etc. Try to find resources that are not US based—newspapers, historical articles, pictures, etc., that might offer a slightly different viewpoint than your own.)

It is time for a history lesson about the country/region where you will be visiting/serving. To give context, it is helpful to highlight significant events for the country and its people. What national and global experiences have shaped the lives of people your team will serve?

What significant events happened in the place you are visiting 100, 50, 25, 10 years ago? What has happened recently that shapes the life of people in this country? Make time in this session to name important markers in the story of the nation, so team members are a bit more aware of context as they get to know people and learn about life in this place.

- What are some historical highlights of the place you will be visiting? What kind of government do they have? What are some challenges they face? In what ways are they strong as a country, city, or culture?
- When you hear about the needs in the area you will be visiting, do you have the urge to come up with plans to fix the problem?
- Do you tend to have a “US is #1” attitude about the world? What does that mean for the economy? Can we clarify this question—is it referring to global economy? the place where the team will visit? (Also, will participants have enough information to answer this?) What does it mean for cross-cultural ministry to believe that the US is #1?
- The North American perspective is just one perspective in the world. What are some ways you can consider different perspectives?



Growing Together, Ready to Learn

SESSION FOUR

GOD'S MISSION: LEARNING FROM JESUS

Read Mark 6:30-44.

The story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 is a beautiful illustration of how God can work miracles. One of the lessons we see in this passage is how God can take what we give, no matter how big or small, and turn it into something that is life-giving and abundant. Your participation on this trip is an opportunity to offer your gifts to God and then to watch and see how God uses them.

Another note: Jesus uses this situation to teach the disciples. They were helping Jesus in his mission of serving others as well as learning from him at the same time. This trip is an opportunity for you to do this too. You will be able to work alongside one another to serve Jesus and the host community. God will use your gifts for the glory of the kingdom and the good of the neighbors. This is also a time for you to learn from God.

Take some time to write in your journal about what gifts you can offer God. Ask God to help you think of what gifts of service you can offer. Ask God to open your heart to what he might be teaching you during this time of service and learning.

● **CULTURAL BEAUTY AND COMPLEXITY: LEARNING ABOUT A CULTURE THROUGH FOOD**

Find a way to cook food from the culture you are planning to visit. If possible, cook this together.

Put group members into pairs or small groups and ask them to work together to create food from the country you will be visiting. Encourage people to try everything! This is good practice for when you will be visiting.

After you have eaten, ask them to reflect on the experience of trying new food.

● **RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING: WALKING SURVEY**

Materials: Questions prepared ahead of time for this group survey.

Ask the entire group to stand up. The leader will read a question out loud. Individuals can move to either side of the room depending on their answer to the question. If they do not agree with either answer, they can stand in the middle of the room.



For example: Do you prefer mustard or ketchup on your hot dog? Mustard stands on the left side of the room and ketchup stands on the right. Anyone who likes both, or neither, can stand in the middle. (Leaders can feel free to add questions that would be specific to the context of the group.)

Questions:

- Do you prefer winter or summer?
- If you had to eat the same thing every day for a month, would you pick pizza or tacos?
- Would you rather go to a concert or watch a movie?
- Do you prefer Harry Potter or Star Wars?
- Do you like to sleep in or get up early?
- Do you love to win or hate to lose?
- Would you rather play video games or do a jigsaw puzzle?
- Would you rather sing a solo or in a choir?
- Are you an introvert or an extrovert?
- Do you prefer soccer or baseball?
- Would you rather craft or sew?
- Which is better: gummy bears or chocolate?

Reflection

Ask the group to reflect on the activity. Did anyone learn anything about someone in the group that they didn't know already? What was surprising?

Relationships are built in a variety of ways. Sometimes we learn about people through simple, day-to-day tasks or preferences. Think about how some simple questions can help you get to know people on your Merge trip. What are some questions you can ask to build trust, learn about their likes and dislikes, and begin to build a friendship?

● SELF-AWARENESS: WHERE ARE YOU FROM?

Materials: post-it notes 2x2, pens, or markers

Give each participant a few sticky notes. Watch the video "Where Are You From? The Game."

▶ [YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=RU_HTGJLMVE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RU_HTGJLMVE)

Reflection Questions

- What stood out about this video?
- What was funny? What was awkward or hard to watch?
- What did the interviewer assume about the woman he was interviewing?
- Why do you think he assumed that?
- What damage can we cause when we make assumptions about someone's identity based on their skin color?

Tell the group we will take a few minutes to write down our general assumptions about the culture we will be visiting. Write the positive generalizations and the negative ones too. The point of this exercise is to identify your general assumptions about the culture you will be visiting.



● CULTURAL EXCHANGE: THE BODY OF CHRIST—SEEING WHITENESS

Materials: Enough paper and pencils for everyone. One large sheet of note paper to record the group's responses. This activity is taken from the article "Seeing Whiteness: Exercises in Understanding Race," by Reggie Williams.

Read 1 Corinthians 12.

1. Give everyone a piece of paper and a pencil.
2. The instructions are simple: Listen to the prompt, don't say anything out loud, and then write down a response.
3. Read the following prompts, and give group members a few moments to reflect and then write down how they respond to the prompt. Answers can be phrases, a word, or pictures. The point is to write down the words that honestly come to mind. Prompts:
 - Asian people
 - Middle Eastern people
 - Black people
 - Latino /(Latinx) people
 - Native American people
 - White people
4. Invite participants to read their responses aloud. Take care to ensure that what is spoken aloud is not hurtful, insulting, or damaging to anyone. These should be written on the notepad for everyone to see.

Discussion

In his article, Reggie Williams writes, "White is often the most challenging category to describe. It is the backdrop against which all the other categories of race are seen. Whiteness functions as a social-political organizing norm, arranging all of humanity according to proximity to the template of the ideal white human. Yet it remains invisible to most white people, so whites struggle especially hard to describe it. By asking them to write about white people, we are inviting them to wrestle with making whiteness apparent."

Williams writes, "This exercise highlights the regulated understanding of humanity in the collective imagination of the room. People can see their thoughts next to those of others—a transparency that is unlikely to arise in conversation."

Ask the participants, "What do you notice when you see our responses written next to one another?"

Reflection Questions

- What commonalities do you observe about these labels?
- How did it feel to write down these generalizations?
- Who, in your experience, assigns these labels? Who makes them up/what defines each person?
- How does this activity affect the way you are preparing to enter your site placement?

The goal of this exercise is not to categorize people. Rather, it invites us to confront stereotypes or assumptions that are often associated with various groups of people. We may have formed some of these generalizations ourselves. We may have picked up others from family, friends, movies, TV, or other media sources.

These labels have shaping power. We miss the point of this exercise if we look at these stereotypes and think, "Well, I'm glad I don't put people in boxes like that," or, "I'm glad I don't think that way."

Whites, by and large, enjoy the luxury of promoting the importance of the individual because they benefit from living in a racially stratified society where whiteness is normalized. In most social interactions, whites get to be seen as individuals. Racial minorities, by contrast, become aware from a young age that people will often judge them as members of their group, and treat them in accordance with the (usually negative) stereotypes attached to that group.



Cultural Complexity, Walking Together with Deeper Understanding

SESSION FIVE

GOD'S MISSION: WALKING ALONGSIDE ONE ANOTHER

A Bible Study from Ecuador, Kichwa-Spanish speaking Indigenous Community.

By Esther Moreira, Merge coach to Ecuador and staff at Santiago Partnership of IPEE

One Sunday we arrived at the host church with a group from Merge. When we got off the bus we were surprised to see all of the adult women, youth, and girls standing in parallel lines along the path to the entrance to the temple. If this was written by an Ecuadorian, can we clarify why they would have been surprised to be greeted this way?

They were wearing beautiful, traditional garb and carrying roses in their hands. As we walked that flowery path, we were greeted with warm smiles upon on faces with pink cheeks painted by the sun.

Doing whatever is in our power to make guests feel welcome is an important cultural custom for Latinos and in this case for the indigenous Ecuadorian community as well in all regions of the Highlands, Amazonic and Eastern coast, we carry it in our veins!

It goes beyond making a good impression. It's about how glad we are to welcome you—that's our way of showing it! Proudly wearing colorful outfits embroidered with their own hands, ornaments and braids in long, jet-black hair to the rhythm of cheerful dances accompanied by folklore and songs in the Quichua language. Delicious typical Andean dishes will not be lacking as we are proud to offer you a roast guinea pig or baked pork accompanied by mote—white beans and whole cooked potatoes, which were planted and harvested by our own hands and carrying the flavor of the effort of long hours of work under the sun. Everything we offer our guests is more than “just” food—it is our own hands that we offer you. It is a sign of respect and cultural welcome.

How to respond to such an act? How to reciprocate such a show of affection and consideration?

The Parable of the Growing Seed

He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come” (Mark 4:26-29, NIV).

In the Gospels, Jesus tells about 50 parables to teach spiritual truths to the multitudes. His daily stories help every listener to understand the truths revealed in a practical way.

The parable of the growing seed is part of the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1-9), where Jesus compares the sower with the one who proclaims God's Word and the seed as being the Word of God that falls on different types of soil with different results. The seed, regardless of whether its fruit is good or bad, grow hidden, sown deep in the earth with the possibility of spreading roots and root downward, and germinate the



first leaf upward, giving it stability for plant growth.

In this parable, Jesus refers to the growth of the seed as a natural process. The human has no influence whatsoever, we only contemplate the process of life: “The seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.”

Although it is a small grain (Mark 4:30-32), the seed carries within itself the potential to produce life. But it cannot sow itself. It needs hands to spread it and the proper soil to germinate.

Application

What if we received these expressions of affection and cultural welcome as a seed that we call “hospitality”?

As a good seed, hospitality is a beautiful and powerful way to serve others. Hospitality is like a hand extended to another hand that hides behind the back of fear or pain. It is a small, almost insignificant seed with an amazing power that can bring peace, calm, and relief being sown through a kind gesture, a smile, a greeting, an invitation to a lunch, to say welcome abroad, to show interest in others suffering. Hospitality is the extended hand that shows welcome to the newcomer—someone who is new to your neighborhood or to your school, to someone who looks different from you but who has the same sparkle in their eyes.

We may receive this seed of hospitality in our hearts, allow it to sprout and grow, share its good fruit with those around us, and spread the seed of God’s hospitality.

If we return to the question, how to respond to an act like this, I would say that the best we can do is enjoy, laugh, eat and although it seems simple, we only need to say, “Muchas gracias.”

Welcome to this side of the kingdom of God.

● LEARNING ACTIVITIES: SHARE YOUR FOOD

- Share your eccentric, weird, personal favorite combinations and allow others to taste it. For example, I love to eat apple with salt, coffee with pieces of cheese in it, or avocado with sugar.
- Try to explain in your own words what you like best about it.
- Listen and enjoy the expressions and gestures of others.
- As you listen to others in the group, respond to their sharing with respect and consideration.
- Investigate the dishes that are typical of the place your Merge trip is visiting. What else can you learn? What clothing do they wear? What is their traditional music? Explore other areas of their culture that may interest you.

Group Reflection

Name some examples in the Bible where people showed hospitality.

Choose one of those examples and meditate on that story and how the hospitality affected the present and future of the hosts and their guests.

Personal Reflection

What experiences do you have with hospitality? What thoughts, fears, or concerns come to mind when you think of showing hospitality to a stranger? Is there someone in your life you can show hospitality to? What other good seeds would you like to plant in your heart?



● CULTURAL BEAUTY AND COMPLEXITY: WORSHIP TOGETHER

Note: Before this session, try to find a worship song in the language of the place where you will be visiting. If possible, find a song that is well loved by the congregation you will be visiting.

Spend time learning the song so the group is prepared to sing along with the congregation while you are visiting.

● RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING: NO LONGER A STRANGER

By now the team members should know each other fairly well. This activity will help the members dive even deeper in getting to know one another.

Divide the group into pairs, making sure that people are with someone they don't know well. Ask each pair to ask each other the following cultural questions about themselves and then report their findings to the rest of the group.

- Describe your family. What are the major traditions your family embraces? How have these traditions become embedded in your family culture and why?
- Describe your faith. Why is your faith important to you? What major events in your life have led you to the place you are in your faith journey?
- Describe your culture. What are three values you hold most dear about the culture you live in? Why are those values so strong in your life?

Ask the group: How would questions like these create familiarity and understanding with the strangers you will meet on your upcoming Merge trip? How will questions like these create common ground, and cultivate love and empathy with your hosts?

● SELF-AWARENESS: CULTURE SHOCK

Materials: Make a copy of the culture shock graph for the team members to review. This can also be projected for group discussion.

As a team, each of you will engage all five senses as you visit a new place. It is common for participants to experience culture shock while on the trip. Culture shock takes various forms and can appear at any time. It is important to recognize the symptoms.

Some ways people experience culture shock:

- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Homesickness
- Panic attack
- Fatigue
- Stomach issues
- Lack of appetite
- Withdrawing from the group
- Withdrawing from the hosts (only hanging around your group)
- Excessive amounts of time sleeping or using phone
- Lack of confidence
- Loss of motivation
- Boredom
- Being highly critical of host community



Discuss this entire list with the group so that everyone is familiar with the potential symptoms and signs. Make a list of ways you can help each other through moments of culture shock.

Here are some things that can help:

- Talk to a friend.
- Take a short break from the group with someone to help bring you back into the group.
- Eat meals at regular times.
- Sleep at regular times.
- Name aspects of the host culture that are nurturing or familiar.
- Talk through a strategy to get through the rest of the trip.

Invite each trip participant to write in their journal some ideas about what they will do when they experience culture shock. Have them answer these questions:

- How do you know when you are tired?
- How do you know when you are stressed?
- Do you know what you are like when your limits are being pushed? If so, what are some warning signs that you pay attention to? What do you do to help?

Write a personal plan for when you notice any of the culture shock symptoms listed above. Share some ideas with the group so you can all help care for each other well during times of stress, homesickness, and unfamiliarity.

● CULTURAL EXCHANGE: ME OR WE CULTURES

Watch this video as a group.

▶ [YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=78HAKZHEQCG](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78HAKZHEQCG)

Based on this video, do you think that you are of a “me culture” or a “we culture”? What makes you think that? What seems different about the other culture? Are there things about the other culture that would be difficult for you to get used to? If so, why?

Reflect together on which culture type your group is generally. Write down as many examples as you can think of that identify which type of culture the group is from.

What kind of culture will you be visiting? Based on this video, how do you think your own culture is different from the one you are visiting?

After Your Trip

Contact the Merge office—merge@covchurch.org—for the follow-up sessions available to debrief from your Merge experience.

