# MANAGING
# Cultural Differences
## IN CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS:
## *A Religious-Psychological-Social Approach*

BY CHIMEZIE A. OMEONU AND CHARLES H. TIDWELL, JR.

A student arrives late to class. He knocks on the classroom door and then scurries to his seat. Naturally, everyone looks up, effectively interrupting the lecture. What should you do? Chide him for interrupting, acknowledge and welcome him to class, remind him to be on time, or ignore the interruption?[1] At issue, of course, is culture. Each culture has assumptions about appropriate behavior, even for something as simple as arriving late for class. Understanding how to manage cultural differences is necessary for success in today's diverse, multicultural schools.

Early on, *culture* had a narrow meaning relating to the behavior and expectations of the rich. It emphasized the arts, manners, dress, possessions, and wealth. This has changed. *Culture* no longer deals only with the habits of high-class people, but instead is now applied universally. Missiologist Paul Hiebert defines culture as "the integrated system of learned patterns of behavior, ideas and products characteristic of a society,"[2] that is, the totality of life for a certain group. In other words, everyone has a culture, not just a select few.

This concept is reinforced in Eric Baumgartner's brief definition of culture as "the way a society lives and thinks."[3] Baumgartner expands this by comparing culture on three lev-

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els, which he calls layers. The first layer is the visible one consisting of behaviors, products, and institutions. It involves how people speak, greet one another, eat, sleep, walk, read, and work. It is easy to notice patterns in this area, as actions are carried out in predictable ways.

The second layer is somewhat deeper. It focuses on how differences in values, beliefs, ideas, and feelings affect behavior. Misinterpretation in any area may lead to misunderstandings, even in a school environment where educators are expected not only to be knowledgeable but also tolerant.

The third and deepest layer is the invisible, the worldview layer, which deals with such questions as: What is reality? Is there a God? How did humans come to be here? What is human destiny? Janice Watson describes culture as an internal design for living—a way of thinking and belonging.[4]

### Some Observations on Culture

Understanding other people's cultures is difficult. Most people act as is if there is only one culture—their own. Understanding the central traits of culture is imperative for all educators, from the school secretary to the board chairperson.

**1.** *Everyone Has a Culture:* When it comes to culture, everyone has one. It is important to remember, especially in a school setting which often brings together a variety of cultures. Some students and teachers may not have moved from their origins, while others have grown up or lived in multicultural environments, and/or lived in diverse locales.

**2.** *Culture Is a Lens:* Culture is the glass through which people see the world around them. It helps them assign meaning, as well as interpret issues and behaviors. No matter how strange a culture may appear to outsiders, it provides the framework for belief and behavior for those within that culture. Thus in western Nigeria, young people kneel before an elder, while in the United States they shake hands with adults. Both, however, are showing

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respect from their own cultural perspective.

**3.** *Culture Is a Means of Communication:* Culture is informed by symbols, including gestures and other forms of non-verbal communication. Even language can be symbolic, as when cultures with a shared language use the same word in different ways. To truly understand a culture, one needs to know its language and customs. The meaning of a word or non-verbal signal in one culture may be quite different in another. A word is not the object named, just as a photo is not the person portrayed. For example, in Nigeria, a student may say to a teacher, "I am coming, sir." The student is actually going someplace else, but will be coming by later. In North America, the same words mean "I am coming right now."

**4.** *People Think Their Way Is Best:* An American proverb goes like this: "There's no place like home." This saying embodies the ethnocentric attitude of most people, even in routine matters, such as mode of greeting. The average American shakes hands; the Mexican and French embrace; while the Yoruba in Nigeria think one should prostrate himself or herself before an elder. This "one culture" mentality, also known as ethnocentrism, is based on the idea that "my way is the best."

In a culturally diverse school, faculty or staff members may view the words and behavior of students from other cultures as wrong because they do not conform to the local customs. The reverse is also true. Students from other cultures may see the actions or words of local faculty or students as wrong. Cross-cultural tensions are lessened when everyone knows that there is more than one culture and feels reassured that his or her cultural mores are accepted.

**5.** *People Are Protective of Their Culture:* People bristle if someone speaks derogatively of their culture. We cherish culture because it is an important source of our

identity. In a school setting, it is important to respect the cultural heritage of others. Even if a cultural trait is perceived as wrong, it is important to tread softly. For instance, people value the basic food of their culture, whether it be bread, potatoes, rice, yams, or a communal pot of meal. Those from developed countries need to withhold judgment, especially about the perceived uncleanliness or primitiveness of food or preparation, and recognize the cultural importance of the food.

**6. *No Culture Is Completely Bad:*** When one recognizes that culture is the basic way of life of a group, it is easier to recognize that there are positive elements in every culture. In a Christian school setting, it is important to help those from cultures whose traits may conflict with Christian values to understand positive ways to modify, improve, or modernize. Administrators and faculty should never make such changes by fiat or force. Coercion typically creates resistance. For instance, trying to force someone to change his or her accent will usually be both resented and resisted.

When one comes into contact with other cultures, the tendency is to judge rather than to try to understand and appreciate. Most use their own culture as a yardstick, viewing others' customs as less important and even weird. This diminishes one's ability to understand others and prevents effective cross-cultural communication.

## Bicultural and Multicultural Societies

Dealing with bicultural or multicultural situations is often complicated. Many nations, regions, and groups are bicultural or even multicultural. For instance, in Nigeria, there are more than 350 distinct cultural groups. Within Edo and Delta (two of the 36 states) alone, there are more than 200 cultural groups. If an individual from the eastern part dominated by the Christian Igbos moves to the northern part dominated by the Muslim Hausas, he or she faces a multitude of cultural barriers (food, human relations, religion, language, and dress) even though the person still lives in the same country.

In the United States, those who have been born and raised in urban environments such as New York City or Los Angeles with their multiple ethnic African-American, Asian, Latino, and Anglo cultures (as well as a higher prevalence of intercultural families) may have difficulty adapting to the relatively homogenous culture of a small town or farming community in the South or Midwest. Yet both the city dweller and the farmer regard themselves as typical Americans.

Multiculturalism is the norm in many Adventist school settings, reflecting as they do the growing multiculturalism throughout the world. Although students and staff often come from different cultural backgrounds, they are expected to eat the same cafeteria food, worship in the same

campus church, and participate in the same activities and entertainments. This raises the issue of individual cultural differences and preferences, which can pose a challenge to teachers, administrators, and students.

### Some Sources of Cultural Differences

Understanding the basis of cultural differences is the first step in learning to manage them within a school setting. Unless one understands that such differences come from largely uncontrollable and often unrecognized factors in an individual's life, it is easy to dismiss other cultures as wrong or misguided at best. Sources of cultural difference range from the physical environment to social mores, and from economic development to health and religious practices. Tensions arise when an individual from one culture encounters or moves into another and faces the jolts of cultural difference and discrimination.

Although each culture is the product of multiple influences, the physical setting is significant. This includes geography, climate, flora and fauna, style of housing, and

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types and availability of food. Many Adventist schools are located in rural or suburban locations. Students and staff who come from an urban environment with crowded housing, traffic noise, abundant shopping, and a variety of entertainment may be confounded by the rural physical environment of their new school setting—spacious campus, filled with trees, chirping birds, and little or no shopping for many miles.

Differences in food are a common challenge. Students or staff accustomed to a rice-based diet may rebel if served meals emphasizing bread and potatoes.

Norms for one's social environment such as methods of greeting, privacy, travel distances, social classes, and attitudes toward time are all culturally determined. Thus, those from polychronic societies, where multiple tasks and events routinely occur simultaneously, often feel oppressed by the strict timetable inherent in a school or office. American students accustomed to the individual privacy of a bedroom often have trouble adapting to the lack of privacy in a dormitory.

Economic differences include the level of development and employment. Some cultures accept unemployment, poverty, and economic hardship, often indicated by the presence of beggars and panhandlers, as the norm. Those from more highly developed societies are often disturbed when encountering such situations. Administrators need to be aware of tensions that can develop between students from differing economic environments.

Clothing has the potential to create economic tensions. Many school systems outside the United States use a standard school uniform. While primarily adopted to foster group identity and school spirit, uniforms can also reduce potential tensions between those who can afford expensive clothing and those with limited economic resources.

Ideas about health and religious practices differ widely from culture to culture. Students and staff who come from cultures with rigorous concepts of sanitation may have unpleasant encounters with those who are quite tolerant of untidiness. On a multicultural Christian campus, there are often differing views of what constitutes the appropriate time and mode of worship, including cultural codes for dress, music, and style of preaching. Men wearing shorts and women in sleeveless dresses in church might be acceptable in some parts of the world, while in other places, people would be aghast at such perceived immodesty.

Managing cultural differences not only requires a basic understanding of their differences, but also a recognition by administrators, faculty, and staff of the havoc such differences can cause. This tension, often called *culture shock*, is the temporary trauma that affects mental attitudes and physical health. It results from the cumulative jolts received while living and working in another culture. Everyone—students as well as staff—experiences culture shock when in long-term contact with a different culture.

In attempting to understand and minimize cultural tensions, the Christian educator should first focus on the causes and effects of the differences and then use the following approaches to deal with them: (1) religious, (2) psychological, and (3) social. While detailed knowledge of others is helpful in managing differences, Christian educators also need appropriate approaches to deal with problems in these areas.

## Managing Cultural Differences: The Religious Approach

To adjust personally or to help others adjust to a new culture requires Christian love. Keep in mind that each person is an individual for whom Jesus died and avoid treating anyone as inferior. Instead, let people first see that you love them and have a personal interest in their welfare. Once a friendship is established, they will be more willing to share the intricacies of their culture and to seek help fitting into a new culture.

There is danger in focusing exclusively on regional or national ethnic traits. There is also a unique Christian culture that binds believers worldwide based on a "Thus says the Lord." In every word, thought, and action, we must ask: "How would Jesus say it? How would Jesus do it? What would Jesus think of it?" A Christian culture follows the principle of "for me, to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:21, KJV). When a believer works or studies in a Christian environment, even when immersed in another culture, adjustment becomes easier because of a shared worldview.

There is also a unique Adventist culture. Although

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there are significant differences stemming from local and national cultures, there is still a worldwide similarity to Adventist belief and practice.

Try to avoid a know-it-all or do-it-all spirit. Working with other cultures or living in a new culture creates opportunities to do great things for the Lord. However, it can also create significant tensions for people trying to observe the tenets of their religious faith. Be sure to maintain a regular devotional life of mediation and prayer. Keep in mind that in everything, God is in charge. Take study and worship seriously. You must be thoroughly grounded in the basic principles of your faith and have a vibrant relationship with Jesus Christ in order to share your beliefs.

As Ellen White notes, "special efforts should be made to come close to hearts by personal efforts. Avoid running down . . . ; do not let the people receive the idea that your work is to tear down, but to build up."[5] Following this advice will help you adjust to a new culture and aid your students in adjusting to their school home.

It is just as important to apply a religious approach when dealing with a few students as with a larger group. One or two individuals from a different culture may, in fact, require closer attention, since they lack the support of their own cultural group and may feel marginalized.

Finally, teachers and administrators need to be especially aware of the tendency to give preference to one's own culture. Because they are authority figures, the "preferred leadership" culture may trump the cultures of the students. A religious approach recognizes the need to begin with Christian love and to expand one's understanding of cultural differences through personal relationships and one's devotional life.

## Managing Cultural Differences: The Psychological Approach

Each student and staff member comes "preset" with a cultural disposition on every aspect of life—from words and actions to beliefs. To unlearn culture is not easy. For instance, a student who finds himself or herself in a school that serves vegetarian meals needs time to adjust both mentally and physically to the new diet. The same is true for the student who does not belong to any denomination and who now finds himself or herself in a school where religion courses and chapels are compulsory. Administrators need understanding and wisdom to handle such situations.

Students and staff in our institutions need coping mechanisms to deal with aspects of school culture, such as compulsory chapels or a vegetarian diet, which cannot easily be changed because the administrators and constituency view them as obligatory. The school handbook

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should offer an in-depth explanation of the rules so students know in advance what is expected of them. School personnel need to help students develop a mindset that recognizes school regulations as part of the educational experience. At the same time, educators need to be nonjudgmental and sympathetic, considering alternatives whenever possible. In other words, students need to understand the importance of rules in maintaining a safe, orderly school environment while administrators and faculty need to recognize that rules need to be based on sound principles rather than whim or custom.

Serious problems ensue when students perceive administrators and supervisors as rigid and unapproachable. Ideally, administrators should take the initiative to break down such barriers, but students should also be encouraged to take the first step. Thus, administrators can have a suggestion box where students are encouraged to write short statements about the cultural difficulties they are facing and offer suggestions of ways the teachers and administrators can make the transition into the new culture less traumatic. This will help administrators to better understand what the students are feeling and enable them to identify a solution.

Individuals in a new culture need to be realistic. This involves taking time to understand the various situations and to map out strategies for adjustment. They should identify cultural differences and gather information, including learning new customs and taking note of taboos. Administrators need to take an active role in teaching new students, particularly those from other cultures, the special customs and taboos of the school, such as how one is expected to dress and behave during worship.

Students and staff alike need to understand the aims and objectives of the school, concepts that are often embedded in the mission statement but rarely discussed. All rules and regulations should be based on principle, should take into account the mores and customs of the various school cultures, and should be carefully developed with input from all levels within the school—administration, faculty, staff, students, and constituents.

From a global perspective, each school is unique and must recognize what makes it so. As Sylvan Lashley observed: "Each of the church's institutions has developed in a different set of demographic, social, political, economic, historical, legal, and cultural contexts, producing a rich and diverse array of roles and functions. Although their overall mission and basic roles are similar, the manner in which these play out differs. Attempts to standardize these roles and functions may well be difficult in a dynamic and changing world."[6] In other words, we need to recognize that there will always be differences and concentrate on specific cultural behaviors along with mental processes to deal with cultural preferences.

## Managing Cultural Differences: The Social Approach

Humans are social beings with an innate desire to interact and relate, so socializing helps them build friendship and mutual trust. Because people enjoy being recognized for who they are and what they do, schools must provide social time for relaxation and informal interaction among students and staff. Such times encourage togetherness and acceptance.

There are several strategies for developing and maintaining social groups in a new or different culture. While learning to fit into the group, one must also interact at a personal level. While every organization has chains of command, organizational levels, and concerns about seniority, these should not be over-emphasized, even in those societies with a strongly hierarchical structure. One positive lesson the United States has taught the world is that every worker is important and that no one, not even the administrator, is indispensable. Because schools have clear hierarchies, it is imperative for administrators and faculty to develop relationships and interact with students one on one so that seniority and position do not receive undue emphasis.

It is not helpful to over-stratify differences. This can lead to hostility and divisiveness. Urban/rural; developed/developing/third-world; Christian/secular; have/have-nots; educated/illiterate; hourly/salaried; single/married—these terms can cause sharp divisions in a school setting. Care should be taken in handling diverse groups. If such cultural differences are not dealt with sensitively, they can divide people and damage cultural interactions.

Finally, Ellen White counsels: "Every true disciple is born into the kingdom of God as a missionary."[7] Social contact with other cultures is an opportunity to be a bridge builder. By bringing different people together, schools have an opportunity to share the gospel through social interaction. Attempts to evangelize without socializing will be both stressful and counter-productive.

## The School as a Family

Adventist schools often bring together people from different cultural backgrounds. These differences may create problems and tensions, including culture shock, that make assimilation and adaptation difficult. Applying religious, psychological, and sociological principles to managing these cultural differences can help everyone live together as a united multicultural family.

Indeed, these principles may be seen as an attempt to operate a school as a family, where brotherhood and sisterhood is a constant focus. Applying these principles can produce a school that models the words of Paul in Colossians 3:11 where there is no Jew, no Greek, no bond, no free, no barbarian, no Scythian. Using the management skills described in this article can help all Adventist schools achieve the ideal of becoming one in Christ Jesus. ✐

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. In most North American schools, students who are late are expected to enter as unobtrusively as possible. In other parts of the world, late students knock as they enter the classroom to acknowledge that the space they are entering "belongs" to the teacher. Knocking is not an interruption but a request to be admitted.

2. Arthur F. Glasser, Paul G. Hiebert, C. Peter Wagner, and Ralph D. Winter, *Crucial Dimensions in World Evangelization* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1976), p. 45.

3. Eric W. Baumgartner, *Passport to Mission* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1999), p. 58.

4. Janice Watson, "Communicating With People Who Are Different," A Lecture Presented at the Fourth Missionary Camp Meeting, Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University, July 8, 2004.

5. Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1976), p. 227.

6. Sylvan Lashley, "Should Adventist Colleges and Universities Differ From One Another?" *Journal of Adventist Education* 65:2 (December 2002- January 2003), p. 7.

7. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1952), p. 19.

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## Techniques for Managing Cultural Differences

- **Respect and Celebrate:** Appreciate the cultural heritage of others.
- **Listen and Evaluate:** Consider others' cultural perspectives when crafting policies and rules.
- **Adjust:** Change words, action, and thought to allow for the cultural views of others.
- **Make It Personal:** Spend time in prayer and meditation, seeking wisdom from God. Develop and foster one-on-one relationships with those from other cultures.
- **Be Principled:** Address cultural challenges in ways consistent with Christian principles.