Make an IMPACT

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

TEN TIPS

1. Operate with a heart of humility and respect.

While on a mission trip, respecting everyone you come into contact with displays the love of Christ. This includes those who are in authority over you, such as the group leader, host pastor or trip leader since they are responsible for the safe and effective conduct of the trip. It also includes the people you are serving as well as others meet that may not be associated with the trip.

2. Convey Friendliness.

Be aware of your facial expressions and what they might look like to someone who doesn't know you. As you are interacting with others, be aware of the signals your body language gives off. Easy ways to be friendly with your body language are to gently smile often and relax your facial muscles. When appropriate acknowledge strangers and greet them with a gentle smile and maybe a nod. Chances are, even if they don't speak the same language as you, they understand the greeting of hello.

3. Be Alert: Observe but don't stare

Pay attention to what is going on around you without looking overly out of place. Observe, but don't stare. Be aware whether you're crossing a street, approaching a large crowd, or entering an area that seems dangerous. Ever seen a tourist staring at the sights and sounds, oblivious to what is going on around them? There may be pick pocketers or opportunities to steal from tourists or missionaries. Conveying a sense that you are alert will often cause a would-be thief to move on.

4. Be mindful about clothing: Try not to stand out

When serving in another country, you want to be intentionally respectful of the local culture surrounding clothing. They know you aren't from there, but aligning your clothing more closely to theirs, avoiding expensive-looking jewelry, and not flaunting your electronics will show respect and may keep you from being a target for would-be thieves. This means adapting even to the most conservative of places and customs, ensuring that nothing will form a barrier between you and their culture. Isn't that the goal?

5. Do some homework before you go.

You don't have to become an expert on the culture you're about to enter, but a google search on the country and culture can go a long way to knowing what to expect. Understand if they're a conservative religious culture or not. Ask your search engine how Americans are perceived there. See if there are any American gestures that may be considered rude, so you can avoid using them. In all cases, be polite and respectful. Showing that you made an effort to learn even a few words in their language can go a long way.

6. Be polite at the table.

When being hosted by local families or groups, consider it a rule to eat what's on your plate. Be thankful that you have food to eat, and don't be wasteful. Someone likely worked hard to prepare your food and it will mean the world to them to see you enjoying what they've prepared.

7. Don't judge.

To put it simply, judging is one of the most divisive things we can do towards other people. When you judge someone due to their dress, culture, way of life, money, or material possessions, you put yourself above them. This isn't the heart of Jesus. Keep an open mind about the new experiences you are having and the amazing people you are meeting, and who knows, maybe they'll teach you a thing or two!

8. Ask permission

When questions come up about situations like traveling, purchasing things, leaving the group, or whether your shorts are long enough... ask! One of the easiest and best ways to avoid conflict and confusion is to ask permission or advice if you are unsure.

9. Remember your manners

Simple, right? You'd think that. Something that is so simple in our own culture can sometimes get lost in another place. Whether due to being out of our normal circumstances, or feeling separated due to language barriers, please and thank you can be forgotten. If you are unsure how to say please and thank you in another language, ask someone for help. At the very least, say it in your own language anyway!

10. Keep the negativity at bay

This is doubly true when negative opinions pertain to personal qualities like culture, daily lifestyle, clothing, food, or politics. You are a guest in the state or country you are serving in. You are the foreigner here. Your ways are different, and the ways of your host country have no right to be criticized by you in public or otherwise. When negative opinions are made, the whole group suffers.