

Cracking the Culture Code

Dear Amos,

Frequently we fail to notice things of great beauty, different perspectives, or uniqueness just because of mindsets. Too often, we see only what we expect to see, thus missing so much around us.

Pastors and churches can also develop myopia. Regarding the lost around us, for example, experts have prescribed ways *to reach them*. Yet a limited perspective will trap us. We will never penetrate our respective harvest fields unless we widen our vision.

Fifteen years ago, my wife and I drove through the Great Salt Lake desert of Utah to pastor a church in the shadow of the strong Latter Day Saints (LDS) culture. At the time, I didn't realize how much my 25 years of missionary experience would enhance my approach to this new ministry.

For instance, just living in another culture helped me to understand what it feels like to be an outsider, to not understand the meaning of what is taking place. I know what culture shock feels like, and some of the ways of dealing with it—both healthy and unhealthy ways. This has helped me be aware of how unchurched people feel the first time they visit our churches. Our culture can be a foreign experience to them.

In order to bridge the cultural gap, it's crucial for us to *understand the words of the context in which we're working*. Since each culture has its own

language, effective communication requires that we know that language. And of course, it's not just knowing words, but understanding the meaning behind each expression. We can use the same words, but to different people they can have totally different meanings.

It's also important to *understand the values and assumptions of that culture*. For example, I learned that in the Utah culture, having a good feeling about something is more important than proving it by facts.

Early in this new setting I discovered that many Christian churches in Utah were doing evangelism with an *us-against-them* mentality. Thus, a fortress-like mentality developed, and with this mind set comes fear. The community is seen as the enemy, and so walls of security are erected. The emphasis of ministry is turned inward, rather than outward. After all, if someone is basically perceived as the enemy, it's not easy to welcome them into the *fort*.

I also observed that many evangelical Christians felt like second-class people. The LDS culture is very predominant in every area of life—political, social, work, television, radio, and of course, religious. They have an attractive, well-kept church building in every neighborhood. In contrast, until recent years, there were very few large, attractive evangelical church campuses. As a result, many Christians felt intimidated to reach out to their LDS neighbors. Most didn't expect to see any significant growth in their churches. And, to a large extent, their expectations were fulfilled.

Rather than lament, however, our church sought to crack the culture code. We adopted a broader philosophy of evangelism, and designed new programs to carry out that philosophy.

First of all, we were committed to the fact that God is not powerless to act in our context—that it is possible for a church based on biblical teaching and living out that teaching to flourish in this culture. This took a while for many of our people to really believe, but as God blessed us with growth, their attitude changed.

Next, we committed ourselves to building bridges (rather than walls) to the community around us. Right up front, this meant no Mormon-bashing in our church; no jokes, no put-downs. And it would start from the pulpit. We wanted our people to be free to invite their LDS neighbors and friends to any of our programs and feel assured that they would not be embarrassed by negative comments. We wanted people investigating the faith to be able to do so freely without being put on the defensive by ridicule or any thoughtless comment. We wanted them to be presented with the claims of the gospel without throwing in unnecessary distractions to their search.

We developed attractive programs to which our people would be enthusiastic about inviting their neighbors. Some provide low-key evangelism, such as our *dinner theater* at Christmas time. This includes a candlelight dinner, music and a drama piece written with our culture in mind. Our *Easter pageant* also provides this type of opportunity. Our Sunday morning services are designed with seekers from our community in mind. Our *Wednesday family night*

also provides us with a great tool to reach the community. This involves a prepared meal and several electives for adults, plus programs for children and youth. One of our classes during the fall quarter was called *Cross-Cultural Living in Utah*. Another was *Fresh Start* for those with questions about their LDS faith.

Amos, even after many years of ministry, I need to keep studying the surrounding culture. Many important nuances are not readily apparent, and like everywhere else, the landscape keeps changing. Therefore, our vision needs continual renewal and programs need ongoing attention for greater effectiveness.

What will our churches look like in five, ten or fifteen years? Doing business as usual? Or being part of the exciting things that God is doing? Let's embrace an expanding vision that looks for ways to reach those in our communities.

Yours in the Master,

Les McGee

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To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.

1 Corinthians 9:22