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Cultural Identity & International Ministers

by Crystal Taylor-Dietz, Psy.D.

With over one-third of U.S. parishes identified as multicultural, 25 percent of newly ordained priests born in other nations, and 10,000 international religious ministers or studying in the U.S. (CARA), diversity enriches and challenges pastoral ministry.

Successful ministry in this diverse environment calls for acculturation – adaptation to a new culture through the adoption of values and customs while retaining elements of one’s own culture. Individuals who struggle with acculturation often have difficulty transitioning

Transition can be smoother with an understanding of identity development

to a new environment and establishing healthy interpersonal connections. They may be at risk for developing depression and anxiety, and their new communities may be impacted.

Their transition can be smoother when the receiving community has an understanding of identity development, what influences identity, and the way cultural identity is formed.

Identity

Identity is the qualities, personality, beliefs and expressions that make up

a person or group. A person’s identity is composed of diverse aspects: gender, sexuality, ethnicity/race, spirituality and abilities/disabilities. These fit within a particular cultural framework, a set of traditions of thought and behavior that are passed down socially from generation to generation.

Identity is closely connected to self-esteem and interpersonal perception. It develops over a lifetime and is affected by life circumstances. Three identities important for international ministry are:

Ethnic and racial identity: the process by which a person develops a personal investment and attachment to his or her ethnic group or national identity. Language is a significant part of this because we learn to feel emotion and verbalize our experience through our native language. We can feel disconnected using a non-native language.

Spiritual identity: the process by which a person develops an understanding of feelings, thoughts and behaviors that relate to the search for the sacred or a higher being (Hill et al, 2000); this includes attachment to a religious institution, such as Catholicism.

Gender identity: the process by which a person comes to understand his or her own experience of gender, including personal attributes and norms, social roles, customs and behaviors.

The filter through which we experience the world and perceive our interactions with others occurs at the in-

tersection where the multiple aspects of our identity (i.e., gender, ethnicity, etc.) meet. Attempting to separate different aspects of another person’s identity, such as race vs. gender, can limit our understanding of ourselves and others.

Multiculturalism

This intersectionality is important to understand in a multi-cultural environment (in which different cultures or cultural identities are preserved within a unified society) since every individual has his or her own cultural and societal experiences and norms.

Building an awareness of one’s own cultural filters, trying to see others through their filters, showing empathy for differences, and understanding the inherent biases and privileges of a majority group are necessary.

Ministerial Acculturation

Simple strategies can help ease the transition for international priests and religious ministers in the U.S.

Prior to Placement

Review prior psychological assessments or have an assessment completed prior to ministry placement.

Conduct a comprehensive interview by a skilled diocesan/community representative, psychologist or other professional. Discuss ethnicity, class dy-

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Case Study Father Charles

by Crystal Taylor-Dietz, Psy.D., and Susan Gibbs

Father Charles grew up in a large family in a small town in Nigeria. His parents were not wealthy, but had a deep faith. They took their eight children to Mass every Sunday and often during the week, and prayed the rosary together every evening.

They were very proud of their eldest son when he announced he was becoming a priest. After completing his theology studies, Fr. Charles was assigned to a parish close to his hometown. While he enjoyed his ministry, he jumped at the opportunity to work in the United States when his bishop entered an agreement with a U.S. bishop who did not have enough priests to meet the needs in his small, but growing diocese.

Fr. Charles was excited about his move. He was placed as a parochial

As the eldest, he was responsible for helping his family financially.

vicar at a large parish. He worked to fit in and attended parish events, special celebrations, deanery meetings and other priest gatherings.

Becoming Withdrawn

Then things began to change. About six months after he arrived, Fr. Charles no longer joined the pastor, Fr. Jim, for meals. He stopped going to the charismatic prayer group on Tuesday evenings and no longer showed up to help parishioners with the food pantry. He seemed moody and withdrawn and often was away from the parish a couple of times each week in addition to his day off.



Parishioners began to complain that Fr. Charles was not showing up. People experienced him as abrupt. Some of the women felt he was not respecting their opinions and suggested it was because they were women.

Fr. Charles just shrugged when Fr. Jim asked if everything was all right. One evening, Fr. Jim simply said, “Something is wrong. I can see it and I am worried about you. Let’s talk.”

Understanding the Challenges

Fr. Charles finally opened up. As the eldest son and because he was working in the U.S., he was responsible for helping support his family financially. It was a stretch to send money home with his small diocesan salary, but he had been managing. Now his father was ill and could not afford the surgery and medication he needed.

Feeling an obligation to help his father, Fr. Charles had found a chaplain position on his own at a home for retired veterans. He was going there on his day off and for Mass and visits a couple of other days every week, plus there was the occasional sacramental emergency. He was exhausted and wor-

ried about his father’s health. He also missed aspects of his home culture and the close-knit family he left behind.

The pastor did not realize the pressure Fr. Charles was feeling to support his family. He was worried about Father’s health, and how this stress could undermine his assignment and engagement with the parishioners.

While understanding Fr. Charles’ worries, Fr. Jim knew that the situation could not continue. Parishioners were beginning to question Fr. Charles and no longer were seeing him as a person, but as “the African priest.” Fr. Charles needed to be engaged with and acclimated to the parish.

Strategies and Lessons Learned

Fr. Jim was not sure how to move ahead. He contacted the vicar for clergy. Together they met with Fr. Charles and generated ideas to help support him, including connecting him with a priest from a similar region of Nigeria who had been in the U.S. longer.

Fr. Charles decided to share his concerns about his father’s health with

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Father Charles, *continued*

the parish. The parishioners quickly rallied around him in prayer and even offered to hold a one-time fundraiser to help Father's family address the financial emergency. They liked that family was so important in Father's culture and asked to learn more about his home.

Fr. Jim and Fr. Charles also set aside time every couple of weeks to touch base about how the transition was going and how Fr. Charles was doing. As Fr. Charles felt the support around him grow, he was better able to accli-

mate to his new ministry.

The diocese used this experience as a learning opportunity. They were happy with Fr. Charles' ministry and grateful he was willing to come to the U.S., but realized it would be beneficial to put more supports in place for international priests.

These included learning more about a priest's home culture and his expectations, perspective and understanding of ministry before he arrives; identifying transition resources, such as acculturation programs; preparing a parish for its new priest; identifying support

structures, such as a priest-mentor in the U.S. who is from the same home region, when possible; and scheduling regular meetings with the pastor to prevent problems from building.

This case study is not based on a particular person. Crystal Taylor-Dietz, Psy.D., is the director of Caritas Counseling Center of Saint Luke Institute and a presenter at the upcoming Intercultural Competencies and Human Formation conference (sliconnect.org). Her recorded webinar on navigating cultural identity is available at sliconnect.org.

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namics and socio-economic status of the person's native region and family, and experiences of oppression. Explore gender and family roles and expectations, spiritual development and identity, and the person's understanding of the role and expectations of priests/religious.

Explore normative experiences and questions about the transition. Share information about the planned assignment and community.

Learn about cultural context. Research the culture and history, talk to others from the region and understand the expectations of priests and religious.

Implement a structured cultural visitation period to acclimate the person to the new culture and expectations. Enroll him in an acculturation program.

Prepare staff and parishioners. Explore cultural identity and diversity in a workshop or structured dialogue prior to being together in a work environment.

Before Ministry Starts

- Discuss ethnicity, class dynamics and socio-economic factors
- Explore gender and family roles, spiritual development and identity, and expectations for priests/religious
- Learn about the person's cultural context
- Establish a structured cultural visitation period and prepare staff and parishioners

Initial Transition (Year 1)

Schedule time to share aspects of the newcomer's culture - food, music, history and experiences - to help the community understand the cultural background and values.

Identify a priest or religious mentor from a similar cultural background to provide support and lessons learned. Schedule weekly check-ins with the pastor/superior. Discuss the transition, focusing on the acculturation process and how it is working for the new minister, pastor and community.

If a Problem Arises

Meet. Be empathetic and exploratory,

not accusatory. Prepare by reflecting on your own identity, bias and privilege that may make it difficult to be fully open to the other person's perspective. Do not excuse inappropriate behaviors, but try to understand the intersecting cultural variables that may be contributing.

Develop a plan together. Identify next steps that address needs and community responsibilities.

Seek assistance from a psychological professional. Acculturation difficulties may result in depression symptoms: becoming withdrawn, isolated, anxious, easily agitated or angry - or there may be another serious issue.

New! Aging and Memory Evaluation; Flexible-Length Treatment

In response to an aging population and increased requests for neurological evaluations, Saint Luke Institute soon will offer an **Aging and Memory Evaluation** to assess whether signs of possible dementia are due to neurological issues or psychological issues.

The three-week, extended evaluation will be available this fall and will include a neurological consultation and workup, comprehensive neuropsychological assessment and medical consultations, as well as group therapies and spiritual integration.

A clinical care manager will assist clients during their stay and with discharge planning.

This specialized evaluation is a complement to our standard five-day evaluation.

We also are introducing flexible-length residential treatment of six weeks to six months to meet a wider range of client needs. Shorter stays will focus on addressing motivation for change on an issue and medication changes.

Learn more at sli.org or call 301-445-7970.



Gary Thompson, Ph.D., Coordinator of Neuropsychological Services

Registration Open for International Human Formation Conference

Saint Luke Institute and Saint Meinrad Archabbey & Seminary are cosponsoring a conference, "Intercultural Competencies for Human Formation," April 16-18, 2018, to address opportunities and challenges in evaluating and forming international priests and men and women religious for ministry in the United States. Learn more and register at sliconnect.org/conferences.

Honor a Priest or Religious

Honor a priest or religious who is or was important in your life with a gift to Saint Luke Institute. Your support will help us provide quality, specialized care to another priest or religious in need.

Visit sli.org/donate or call 301-422-5405. On behalf of those we serve, thank you.

Annual benefit celebrates 40 years of care

Saint Luke Institute is celebrating 40 years of providing compassionate care to priests and religious this year.

From a small alcohol treatment center, Saint Luke's has grown to become an international treatment and education center for clergy and men and women religious, with four U.S. locations, a center in England, a priest-psychologist serving southern Africa and in-person and online education available globally.

Support our ministry of mercy, hope and healing at the Saint Luke Institute Annual Benefit, Monday, October 16, at the Apostolic Nunciature in Washington, DC. The Benefit helps us fulfill our commitment to assist our priests and religious with rebuilding their lives so they may return to healthy ministry.

Learn more at sli.org/benefit or contact us at 301-422-5405 or benefit@sli.org.



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