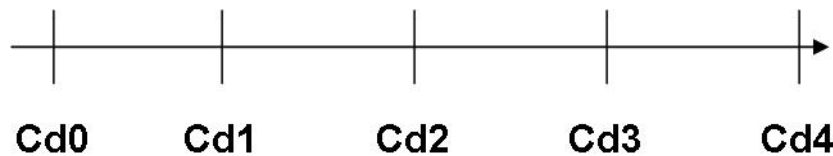


Cultural Distance in Congregations by Mike Ruhl

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Missiologist Ralph Winter has developed *cultural distance*, a useful conceptual tool that assesses how far a people group is from *meaningful* engagement with the gospel.



The cultural distance tool can be visualized by means of a continuum. People groups with “zero cultural distance” (Cd0) have some concept of Christianity and they speak the same language, have similar interests, are probably of the same nationality, and are from a class grouping similar to your own or to that which dominates your congregation. Many of our friends, neighbors and vocational associates fit into this category.

Cd1-Cd2 people groups include typical non-Christians, with little real awareness of (or interest in) Christianity. Often suspicious of the organized church, these people may be politically correct, socially aware, and open to Christianity. Many have been previously offended by a bad experience of church or Christians.

Cd2-Cd3 people groups have absolutely no idea about Christianity. They may be part of an ethnic group with different religious impulses or even a ‘fringy sub-culture’. Many of these people are actively antagonistic toward Christianity as they understand it.

Cd3-Cd4 people groups are populated by ethnic and religious groupings such as Muslims and Jews. Living in the West may close some of distance, but almost everything else about that culture hinders meaningful dialogue, making many of them highly resistant to the Gospel.

I can recall continual—daily--concerns about *cultural distance* while serving as pastor of congregations in Michigan and Minnesota, and even more so as a District Mission Counselor. Is the congregation effectively engaging the culture with the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Or has the witness to the Gospel from the congregation become isolated from and irrelevant to the community culture?

Perhaps the key to closing *cultural distance* is *incarnational*, not attractional.

Almighty God pursued the path of incarnation to span the chasm between His perfect righteousness and wayward human culture which had distanced itself from His perfect

love. *In the beginning was the Word [Christ] and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth* {John 1:1,14}. He did not attempt to *attract people* to His grace and reconciliation through glitz, glamour and gaudy productions. God is a *Missionary God* who took the agape-initiative to leave His comfort zone in heaven, pilgrimage to earth, embed Himself in human culture in flesh, bone, teeth and hair, and to accomplish vicarious atonement.

Is this not the same path for the people of God as they gather in congregations? *Missio Dei* happens as the people of God penetrate marketplace culture by seeping into the cracks and crevices of that culture and ‘becoming Jesus’ to the people in that culture.

Mission does not simply try to lure unbelievers into our sanctuaries and impress them with our productions. Mission does not simply wait till they wander in on their own.

Mission is organic, not theatrical. Mission is about loving those Christ came to save. Mission seeks to close the cultural distance gap. Closing that gap happens through incarnation, not attraction

Questions for Reflection

1. Who lives in your immediate community? How do you know?
2. What percentage of Cd0, Cd1, Cd2, Cd3 and Cd4 people groups are in your community?
3. What strategies exist in your congregation to reach new people? Are they attractional or relational in nature?
4. How does your congregation make the gospel incarnational in the community where God has placed it?