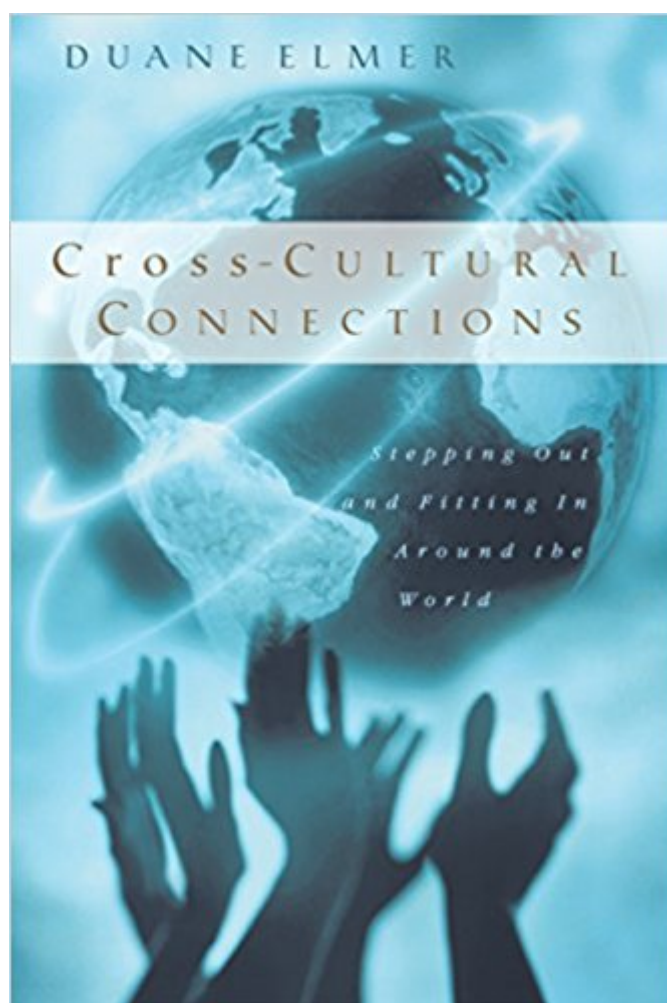


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# Cross-Cultural Connections: Stepping Out And Fitting In Around The World



## Synopsis

With the new realities of global interconnectedness comes a greater awareness of cultural diversity from place to place. Besides differences in food and fashion, we face significant contrasts of cultural orientation and patterns of thinking. As we travel across cultures, what should we expect? How do we deal with culture shock? And can we truly connect with those we meet? Experienced cross-cultural specialist Duane Elmer provides a compass for navigating through different cultures. He shows us how to avoid pitfalls and cultural faux pas, as well as how to make the most of opportunities to build cross-cultural relationships. Filled with real-life illustrations and practical exercises, this guide offers the tools needed to reduce apprehension, communicate effectively, and establish genuine trust and acceptance. Above all, Elmer demonstrates how we can avoid being cultural imperialists and instead become authentic ambassadors for Christ. Whether you are embarking on a short-term mission trip or traveling for business or pleasure, this book is both an ideal preparation and a handy companion for your journey.

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## Customer Reviews

"Elmer has given us a tremendous resource for the twenty-first century. In this day and age people from different cultures and racial backgrounds are intersecting with each other more frequently now than ever before. This thought-provoking, insightful and practical book delivers excellent biblical references to support key principles. A must-read for Christians or non-Christians, local churches, Christian colleges and universities, mission organizations, and those connected to the marketplace." (Alvin C. Bibbs Sr., director, Extension Ministries, Willow Creek Community Church)"It's a delight to

learn how concerned for the right things we can be and yet still be so far from the mark, which is often the case. It will soon be, I am sure, an adopted, fresh standard of measure for new-candidate missions training, evangelism and even new-marriage counseling. All by their nature involve understanding our too-narrowed selves in crosscultural settings, which this book (get a good highlighter pen) clearly provides. . . . Elmer has successfully placed before us a 'working book' that, while wonderfully written and easily read, also begs you to underline scores of 'make-sense' insights and then tab the page so you can find them again." (M. L. Hillard, former vice president of people development, ServiceMaster)"We live in a world of rapidly increasing cross-cultural connections, which raises the great dangers of misunderstandings, alienations and conflicts. Much has been written theoretically on how to make them constructive. Drawing on his wide personal experience and teaching intercultural communications to those ministering around the world, Elmer helps us to see that crosscultural relationships take place in the realities of everyday life, and shows us concrete ways to build relationships of understanding and trust across the cultural gulfs we encounter in global ministries. . . . Effective cross-cultural ministries begin with interpersonal relationships that bridge the cultural gulfs that separate people." (Paul G. Hiebert, professor of mission and anthropology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School)"Starting with the story of a monkey 'rescuing' a fish from 'drowning,' Elmer shows the rest of us primates how to jump into the chilly waters of another culture and learn to swim with the fish. As one who has seen him do this effectively with business personnel, I am delighted that his insights are now available to far more who are making the plunge--especially those doing so for Christ's sake." (J. Dudley Woodberry, professor of Islamic studies and dean emeritus, School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary)"Elmer makes complicated and technical material easy and practical. He has a gift of connecting both theory and practice in such a way that they become usable. Although written with Western readers in mind, the book reflects Two-Thirds World thinking. It works both ways--for those who wish to cross the cultural limits from the West to the Two-Thirds World or vice versa. For this reason I recommend this book not only to the Western readers but also to Two-Thirds World peoples." (David Tai-Woong Lee, director, Global Missionary Training Center, Seoul, Korea)"With his candid humor and personal applications, Elmer knows how to instruct adults. This is not just a book but a training manual that incorporates some good andragogical principles of adult education. . . . Elmer doesn't just take us to the field, but treats the oft-neglected topic of reentry. The appendix, while directed to a debriefing of a longer term cross-cultural experience, could well be a separate manual to debrief the many short-termers who need post-trip evaluation." (John H. Orme, executive director, IFMA)"Elmer provides a valuable and timely tool for crosscultural work, especially as the

face of world missions is changing. No longer is missions from the 'West to the rest,' but from 'everywhere to everywhere.' This delightful trend in missions makes Elmer's book even more significant. Today, Peruvians face culture shock in China, and Taiwanese are challenged to understand Sudan. Missionaries in multinational teams need to learn to work with their colleagues as well as with host-country nationals. Cross-Cultural Connections is filled with sound principles and fascinating stories. I will be sending copies of the book to each of our personnel directors." (Jim Plueddemann, international director, SIM)"Cross-Cultural Connections will help you understand core values that determine how people in different cultures make decisions and interact in everyday life. I started and finished reading the book on my flight from the U.S. to China. I found many practical insights and a deep perception and appreciation coming from an author that is obviously a cross-cultural veteran. Although I live and travel constantly between different cultures, I was able to reflect on a couple sticky situations of my own with the wisdom offered by the book." (Janson Chan, president, CMR International Corp)"Today's world demands the awareness, mindset and skills that Elmer delivers in Cross-Cultural Connections. Multicultural interactions, once reserved for the world traveler and missionary, are now everyone's experience. For success in missions trips, business trips and in a demographically changing U.S., every Christian needs the insights in this book . . . everyday." (Wayne Shabaz, cross-cultural business consultant and author of The Corporate Genome: Unleashing the Power of Our Diversity)"Once again, Elmer has provided us with an excellent, insightful and interactive guide for preparation for cross-cultural ministry at home or abroad. The applications to interpersonal relationships are many. This is a must-read for any Christian anticipating wider involvement in service for our Lord. I only wish this very useful book had been available to me prior to my international involvement." (Howard Searle, M.D., executive director, Emmanuel Hospital Association (USA))"This book will help us love our neighbors in ways that make sense to them." (Miriam Adeney, associate professor of global and urban ministries, Seattle Pacific University, and teaching fellow, Regent College)

Duane H. Elmer (Ph.D., Michigan State U.) is director of the Ph.D. program in educational studies and is the G. W. Aldeen Chair of International Studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. In addition to traveling and teaching in over 75 countries, he has provided cross-cultural training to Fortune 500 companies, relief and development agencies, mission organizations, churches and educational institutions. He has also conducted peace and reconciliation efforts in several countries. Recently, he led faculty development workshops at over 25 European and Middle Eastern schools on the theme of Teaching for Transformation. He has

taught at Durban Bible College (Durban, South Africa), Michigan State University and Wheaton College and Graduate School. His articles have been published in journals such as Moody Monthly, Evangelical Missions Quarterly, Christian Education Journal, Discernment, and Christianity Today. His books include *An Analysis of Hebrews: A Programmed Instruction*, *Building Relationships, With an Eye on the Future: Church and Development in the Twenty-First Century*, *Cross-Cultural Conflict and Cross-Cultural Connections*.

Whether you are making specific plans for future missionary work in your own culture or a different, foreign culture, Duane Elmer's book is intended to lead you to take the necessary steps of preparation and prayer before reaching out in this manner. But it is not a mere preparation manual for those contemplating work, be it short-term or longer-term, in the mission field, whether in one's own culture or another. Elmer tackles the adjustment problem head-on, offering insights on just how weighty a matter it is for the first-time missionary.

**Summary** The idea of "fitting in" wherever God may have you go in missions is not only part of the subtitle of this book but it is a premise that "fitting in" culturally will help you understand other people groups and cultures in a way that would have practical applications in missions where sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ to other groups that may not have any background with gospel presentations is at a premium. But is not this a gigantic assumption that needs warrant and justification? Is not the gospel so attractive to fallen audience that it "sells itself" so to speak. Subtly layered throughout the book is a defense of the premise that the guest or foreign cultural perspective cannot be viewed or taken as superior or more "enlightened" or "advanced" than that of the host culture. The point of missionary work is to bridge or span with a minimum amount of anthropological confusion and tension those cultural factors that would prevent the good news from becoming winsome. In short, the gospel "sells itself" when missionary workers get themselves and their cultural ideologies out of the way. Ponder the variety of languages in the world. When a foreign missionary, for example, who comes from a specifically "written word" culture is encountering and interacting with an "orally grounded" culture, his or her goal is emphatically not to convert the orally based culture's memories into a linguistically different form, i.e., the written word. Developing a mechanism whereby the culture has a written alphabet and can historically preserve its culture is definitely not the number one priority. The first goal should be to minimize the cultural and linguistic barriers to

understanding the gospel, not to maximizing those differences or acting as though the gospel cannot be translated into an orally spoken and unwritten language system. This would make an issue out of a non-issue. What makes one culture view hospitality entirely differently from another, to the point where one person is quite mistaken about how to open up his or her home and resources with the world around them? If one can identify some of these “problem areas” where misunderstandings abound, it is less likely that the relationship between host and guest cultures will sour. The missionary worker is attempting to reduce factors like “culture shock” so that she or he can better present a living testimony to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Cross-Cultural Connections, as its title implies, is seeking to discover what makes all peoples both unique and inter-woven. All people groups are made in the image of God but the cultural and ethnic patterns and traditions which develop over time can alienate people groups from each other and from the goodness of the good news which is not about cultural differences as much as it is about upgrading the sinful condition of the human heart. Thus, bearers of the good news from one culture to another should look for those areas which are in common and try to deal diplomatically with those areas where obvious cultural differences could become exaggerated or paramount in communication. In the American cultural milieu where many Christians have ambivalent views and feelings about its history of missions featuring predecessors who brought a whole lot more than the simplicity of the gospel message when they sought to establish the Kingdom of God upon earth, Elmer’s text serves to underscore those multiple areas between ourselves and the Other (different, foreign people groups) which are merely superficial differences (such as adiaphora, indifferent things and not essential matters of faith). The latter do not, or rather, should not, present an insuperable difficulty where Christians would legitimately reject the lifestyle or mores of another culture. Yet, as Elmer is fond of pointing out, quick judgments about the Other are often made without thinking them through adequately. The general thrust is that there are so many other barriers which exist between missionaries who carry loads of western cultural baggage and the host cultures which are receiving their visitation, that it would be preferable to reduce all prior expectations of what the host culture should look like. The expectations for how a godly culture should behave are great, indeed, in Elmer’s estimate. If missionaries can manage those expectations, perhaps they can overcome or even undo those harmful tendencies where the power of the gospel is undermined due to anthropological biases.

**Evaluation and Critique** What is the primary argument in this book? It is not that Christian missions should seek to become indigenous over time, i.e., that foreign missionaries should take more of a role of being “church planters” or “apostles,” setting up local churches

and allowing local believers to structure their church through the Holy Spirit rather than base the local church expression on some Westernized value system that will not attract new and future converts. It is not that “majority world” cultures have not heard the good news and cannot rely solely on general revelation for salvation, i.e., that creation and its wonders in revealing God’s power and salvation, as Paul explains in Romans 1:19-20, is not alone sufficient (or at least ideal) for salvation. Those would have been interesting directions to go in encouraging younger recruits to pursue culturally sensitive and responsible outreach. Instead Elmer goes in a different direction. He wishes to frame an argument that cultural re-conditioning may be a sine qua non for effective missions work where mutual misunderstandings (between host and guest cultures) will not prevail and the gospel message may have as few roadblocks between itself and the human heart as possible. He is concerned that many (or most?) Western or European/North American prospective missions workers may not be aware of the subtle ways in which their culture (or sub-culture) influences the unconscious, sub-conscious, or barely conscious manner of pre-judging other cultures which have many ostensible differences from the guest culture. Yet Elmer often mixes up his international business illustrations with how missionary organization and church groups ought to conduct their kingdom, spiritual business. Elmer more or less assumes that growing corporations who are expanding into other countries with vastly different cultures from ours would be facing the same issues of lack of acculturation and the same type of solutions to overcome the communication differences. This approach seems questionable at best. For instance, Elmer uses an interesting illustration wherein foreigners are entering temporarily another culture in order to work with them for predominantly business purposes. Without specifically accounting for how a business model would vary from Christian missions to the secular workplace, <sup>2</sup> he offers up the notion of “squareness” versus “roundness” in which a person from the “square” culture who has the property of “squareness” will have initial trouble adapting and relating to the “round” culture unless adjustments are made appropriately. <sup>3</sup> He repeats the same information only with graphic illustrations to show how people from the “square” culture might have to grind off some of their edges to fit in with the new, host culture. <sup>4</sup> But a business who is expanding overseas is not in the same situation as a missionary who is living among a different ethnic group and is not concerned with the productivity or work habits of the people group as much as the spiritual orientation of their heart. Also, Elmer may overestimate the differences between geographically distant cultures and underestimate the differences within geographically proximate cultures. That is not to say that he

does not cover the topic at all. But, in the United States, as a case in point, there are many people who are not time-oriented and are very event-oriented. 5 They have difficulty keeping track of appointments and punctuality their entire lives. At best, they can be coached or mentored to develop better time-management skills, but, left to themselves, they are much more

“event-focused.” Given that Elmer seems to be aware of the primacy of body over verbal language, he probably could have fruitfully devoted a bit more time to the subject. If it is true, as some have argued, that a majority of human communication (regardless of the cultural or ethnic group to which one belongs) is body language, not in carefully choosing a particular verbal expression, then it would appear that Christian testimony would not become more powerful to outsiders, even if we have a larger vocabulary. This issue of psychology is worth further exploration, though Elmer does not spend much time on it. Many (not all) non-Western cultures would be astounded by the degree to which American-based missionaries take for granted the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment and free speech. Other societies certainly would not brook such free and easy expression of particular political or moral viewpoints, particularly those which are controversial, by law or strongly entrenched custom. In many cultural situations, it would not be the case that a cultural group or network would be opposed, in theory, to free speech and open debate, but rather they would feel very uncomfortable and abashed or shamed in striking up a conversation about a tribal taboo or forbidden area of discussion. 6 Shame versus guilt is often covered as two opposing socio-moral forces, as it is in Elmer’s framework. 7 However, it is critical to note that many apparently “guilt-oriented” societies, such as the United States, have strong measures of shame in place regarding particular behaviors, such as parents disciplining their children in public. This reviewer experienced a form of culture shock within a closely knit Jewish renewal community years ago as a young adult. Though he is not biologically or religiously Jewish, he decided that it would be edifying to learn more about the historic roots of the Christian faith by visiting and spending time in an intensive meditative and spiritual journey with this Jewish community in Philadelphia, PA. far from his parent’s and their mid-western culture. He participated in several contemplative and mystical exercises where words of the Torah came more vividly to life. Mainly, he lived with a Christian, non-Jewish family while attending various informal Jewish renewal courses which helped in his adjustment. However, when he attended intensive retreats in Jewish renewal, he often felt overwhelmed. On one occasion, he felt that he could not participate and needed time alone, away from the group. Although he could not articulate what he was experiencing, his colleagues who participated in the full retreat understood his sudden withdrawal. He was experiencing something like what Elmer calls “Strategic



Withdrawal Syndrome (SWS), though the terminology sounds a bit jargonistic. 8 In this context, Elmer mentions shavat (Sabbath rest) but not necessarily in the most practical manner for those who are contemplating missionary stints. Jesus proclaimed Jubilee (land-rest and people-rest as well as debt forgiveness) and shavat. 9 The advice for prospective missionaries to practice intentionally the cessation from labor would be very helpful, particularly in view of the fact that most cultures do not emphasize around-the-clock productivity that western cultures do. There is plenty of culture shock that would be had by western missionaries and some of that shock can be moderated or alleviated by disciplines before the foreign assignment.

I was required to read this book for a Christian Mission Outreach class. I loved it. This book will help the novices and the experts in building relationship in an unfamiliar culture. In an indirect way, it says that even when one's relationship with their parents, one experiences a cross cultural difference. For the values of one's parents is probably not exactly the same as one's values. So the question becomes how do you reconcile with that? The book identifies several aspects of a person and a culture that will cause tension. As I, myself, have moved to a different state, I was feeling anxious about fitting in. Well as time went on I started understanding what was to be expected of the people in the state and what was to be expected of me. I found this book very insightful and practical. Also, the chapters are short, so reading this book in one's spare time will not be a problem.

This book is excellent if you are preparing for short or long term missions work. This is also excellent in just learning to interact with people in general. Great for evaluating your worldview, and considering how you can be most effective in a cross-cultural setting.

Good book. Short and to the point. A lot of it is common sense -- or maybe that's because I taught sociology. But what helped is the key phrase that there's no right way or wrong way...it's just "different." I've already used that concept on my trip many times

This book isn't just theory. It gives clear examples of the principles it defines and keeps the reader interested and contemplating how they do or will react cross culturally. Enjoyable edifying read!

From the very start, Duane Elmer makes a clear case that we need to take the time to understand our own culture, how other cultures function, and then taking measures in multiple aspects to fit in

with others.

Elmer puts extensive experience living in other cultures to use in guiding others (Christians and all others) in navigating the murky waters of cross-cultural interaction.

This book is aimed at Christian workers who are in cross-cultural ministry, but the insights in the book are not limited in application to Christian work. The author clearly lays out the issues that you will \*very\* likely encounter in a cross-cultural situation. He has vast experience in cross-cultural situations, and he taps into it very well with appropriate illustrations and stories. The tone of the book is very casual and friendly, making a daunting subject seem very approachable and understandable. The book has built-in application sections and activities (which I didn't do) that could really deepen the content if you took the time to work through them. It is not a book that you can read with your brain turned off. I highly recommend it to anyone who will spend any significant amount of time in another culture.

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