



June 19, 2021

Greetings from Liberia

I often read about churches trying to widen their welcome and share the love of Jesus with a broader, more diverse group of people—often with the community around them which has changed dramatically. I know this is true of my sending church, the ELCA; I see it in urban ministry in the LCL; I hear about it from colleagues who come from other churches around the world. It can be difficult.

One of the things that makes it difficult is all places and institutions, including churches, have cultures that are specific to them. This shows itself in comments like, “Well, everyone knows..” or “Of course you would never do that here” or “We always.” Some things may be the same or at least similar, but there are always differences that show up when new and different people become part of the group.

On a recent Sunday, I worshipped---not in Liberia, but in Charlotte, North Carolina at an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) church with two of my young adult children. We had a great worshipping experience but something happened that made me think about how interesting and sometimes difficult this cross-cultural life can be. Some of us live with people whose life experience and culture are different; others of us live in places with the same cultural values and norms we have always known. However, no matter what our life situation, today’s world is a world where people probably need to live with the expectation of experiencing something different.

My experience on Sunday was small but significant. You see, we prayed the Lord’s prayer and without thinking about it, I prayed it the way Lutherans in the Lutheran Church in Liberia (LCL) pray it. It was different from how we were praying it in North Carolina.

Here’s the difference

In the ELCA church in the U.S. on a recent Sunday:

Our Father (pause) who art in heaven (pause) hallowed be Thy Name (pause) Thy kingdom come (pause) Thy will be done (pause).....

In the LCL church in Liberia a few Sundays ago:

Our Father (pause) who art in heaven (pause) hallowed be Thy Name Thy kingdom come (pause) Thy will be done (pause).....

Try reading those two examples and following the directions. Did you notice? There's no pause between Thy Name and Thy kingdom when we pray it in Liberia. As I prayed last Sunday in that ELCA church, I found myself not pausing when everyone else in the church did; a reminder that my two homes do things differently from each other.

The differences are not just in the Lord's prayer:

In Liberia when we shake hands (back before Covid when we were shaking hands), we snap our fingers together as the handshake ends. Everyone knows that
Here in the U.S., we just shake hands. Everyone knows that.

In Liberia, the cultural rule is that you never offer people things using your left hand. Everyone knows that.
Here in the U.S., it doesn't matter what hand you use. Everyone knows that.

In Liberia during Communion in the English speaking LCL churches, we always sing "Let Us Break Bread Together" during the serving of communion. Everyone knows that.
In most ELCA churches in the U.S., there's no one song sung during the serving of communion. Everyone knows that.

In Liberia when someone comes near you when you are eating, you always say, "Come, let's eat." Everyone knows that.
In the U.S., there are varieties of ways of handling that kind of situation. Everyone knows that.

In Liberia, any pastor attending a worship service in any Christian church is expected to sit up by the altar. Everyone knows that.
In the U.S., in most ELCA churches only the pastors preaching and presiding sit by the altar. Everyone knows that.

In Liberia, LCL women do not wear pants to church. Everyone knows that.
In the U.S., the dress code for women in the ELCA is more flexible. (Most) everyone knows that.

In the LCL, people clap and dance to drums . Everyone knows that
In some ELCA churches, dancing and clapping during worship is just not done. Everyone knows that.

In Liberia, LCL members and churches value relationship over time; people are more important than the schedule. Everyone knows that.
In the U.S., many ELCA churches starting on a time is a value, no matter what. Everyone knows that.

In Liberia, LCL church services go on as long as the Spirit leads, sometimes as long as 3-4 hours. Everyone knows that.
In some U.S. churches, if the service goes longer than 1 hour, people get upset. Everyone knows that.

The list could go on a long time. On that long list are all kinds of things that we as the people of God, coming from differing contexts and cultures, take for granted; we don't even think about them until they are done differently. It is part of why relationships across cultures (and even evangelism) are difficult. I've heard culture referred to as "the water we swim in" or the "air we breathe", meaning when we swim or breathe we are not thinking about the water or the air because they are just there as culture is just there in life. I am only talking about culture in this newsletter today but when you add in different languages which complicate our communication and racism which creates systems that keep some people out, it can get really difficult--- unless.... unless we put loving Jesus and following what he taught as first in our life as Christians and as the Body of Christ.

In church on that recent Sunday, cultural practices took me by surprise and made me think about the number of times cultural differences separate us and keep us from receiving the way God works through all the people of God. You see, when it is different, we feel a bit uncomfortable. Most of us will work hard to keep from feeling uncomfortable. When something is different, our first inclination will be to think and to say that the different way is wrong, instead of just recognizing that different does not mean wrong or less than.

As a dominant culture person, living in a place where I am privileged but my culture is not dominant, my task personally is to see and understand difference but to see it as difference----- not less than or better than; not right or wrong. It is not always easy but it certainly is interesting.

I mean, when was the last time you stopped in the middle of the Lord's Prayer and had to think about it?

God's blessings on the next couple of months of summer ---oh, I mean rainy season. May you stay healthy in this Covid prevalent world we live in.

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If you are interested in contributing to my ministry or signing a covenant to sponsor part of my ministry, check out [Support Missionaries - Evangelical Lutheran Church in America \(elca.org\)](https://www.elca.org) or contact me by email at linda.seyenkulo@elca.org.