

So, what have you learned?

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What do we learn in cross-cultural relationships? How does our understanding of God's kingdom expand by spending time with people who see the world differently than we do? I was part of a church-to-church conversation where this question came up.

The conversation was in my living room in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. My family and I were hosting an evening with our church leaders and a team of worship leaders from Mavuno and Mavuno Downtown Churches in Nairobi. They are part of the Nairobi Chapel family of churches with whom my church, the Chapel Hill Bible Church, has had a relationship for two decades. These Kenyan churches also have relationships with other churches across the US and they were on a tour, visiting them and blessing them with their musical worship.

The Kenyans and our leaders church filled our living room and over-flowed into the kitchen area which is all one big room in our house. We talked about recent developments in our churches and prayed for one another. Then our minister for young adults asked the question, "What exactly have we learned from each other in all these years?" The room went quiet for a moment. We were each caught off guard by such a simple but important question. What had we learned?

One of the Americans who had visited Mavuno Downtown went first. He said to the Kenyans, "I have learned about joy from you. You have exuberance in your relationship with God that I wish I had. When you lead me in worship, I am able to put aside the things that had been on my mind and enjoy with abandon the presence of God."

A Kenyan replied, "We have learned about love of the poor from you. You come to Nairobi and head straight for the slums." (We are well connected with Beacon of Hope, a ministry among women infected with HIV who live in one of Nairobi's slums.) He explained that Mavuno is a church of middle-to-upper-class urban Kenyans. The poor in their city are so numerous that they have been conditioned to not see them. But when they host people from our church, they see our passion for showing poor people the love of God, and also witnessing their love of him.

"Your faith is what impresses me," said an American. "You take risks that I am afraid to take, and you trust God for the details. Perhaps you have exercise faith more often because your daily lives are filled with more challenges. Here in America, our electrical power is always on, clean water always flows from our faucets, and almost everyone who wants a job can get one? (unemployment in Kenya is about four times higher than in the US). "We Americans live in such comfort that we can get lulled into thinking we don't need God."

Another Kenyan said, "I see my own country differently through your eyes. I see beauty that I hadn't recognized before. I used to take the Jacaranda trees for granted. But when you Americans look at them with such wonder, I too see their beauty and God's handiwork."

Each of these was an example of how people of one culture had helped people of another culture to overcome blind spots and see more clearly the kingdom of God. By seeing God's kingdom more clearly, they were led to praise him more strongly and follow him more fully. This is how we grow when Christians of different cultures develop lasting relationships and spend time in each other's worlds.