

The Cultural Table Tool

Being with the CULTURES unlike us

Revelation 7:9 ...I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb... (NIV) In heaven, we will be with and know people from different cultures. Why not start now?

A shared meal around a table can be an effective bridge-builder across cultural differences (racial, political, etc.) because eating around a table:

- **Conveys hospitality and welcome.** Inviting someone to a table communicates welcome, value, and inclusion.
- **Levels the ground.** At a table, everyone sits as equals.
- **Reveals your common humanity.** Sharing a meal reminds us of our mutual dependence on the same basic needs. Food is a universal language.
- **Facilitates more natural and relaxed conversations.** Communication flows more freely over a meal. Food slows the pace, encouraging listening. Food comforts, lowering defenses.
- **Fosters unity.** Breaking bread together can heal and restore relationships across divides.
- **Creates a shared experience.** Positive memories around a meal can form bonds that transcend differences and spark friendships.

As you prepare to engage in the Cultural Table:

1. Be observant of the people you regularly encounter from another culture (someone at work with a different ethnic background, a neighbor with a political yard sign who votes differently than you).
2. Pray for God to open a door for conversation and a table invitation.
3. When the door opens (and it will), step into it!

Cultural Tables with people who are different from me ethnically.

- As you pray about who to invite to the Cultural Table, you might consider engaging in activities that expand your cultural experiences (eating at an ethnic restaurant in a part of town that is unfamiliar to you, attending an event that represents a different culture, visiting an ethnic church with a different worship style, volunteering at ESL, etc.).
- When you meet at the table, encourage cultural exchange. Meals often include foods tied to history and tradition. Trying one another's dishes opens the door to stories, heritage, and perspectives that deepen understanding and respect.
- Over a series of meals, ask open-ended, story-inviting questions.
- Ask common questions about where they (or their family) are from, their childhood family, their education/training/career, their job now, their family now, and their interests and hobbies.
- Ask general questions about their culture (foods, traditions, customs, holidays, faith, values, strengths, challenges). Avoiding stereotyping.
- Leave room for the person to share as much or as little as they want.
- Listen more than you speak, asking follow-up and clarifying questions.
- Close with appreciation for the time together.

Cultural Tables with people who are different from me politically.

A shared meal can be just as effective in bridging divides across political lines as it is across ethnic or racial ones because a meal:

- **Humanizes one another.** Political debates often reduce people to labels (“conservative,” “liberal,” “right,” “left,” etc.), but sitting down to eat reminds us that we are first people with stories, families, and needs.
- **Shifts the focus.** A meal centers on nourishment, hospitality, and presence, not arguments. It provides common ground that is not defined by party platforms. A shared meal shifts the relationship from opponents in a debate to neighbors at a table.
- **Encourages listening.** Over a meal, people are more likely to listen, ask questions, and share personal experiences rather than just exchange talking points.
- **Models civility.** Eating together creates a natural rhythm of turn-taking, respect, enjoyment, and gratitude. This can spill over into how we approach sensitive political conversations.
- **Builds trust through vulnerability.** Inviting someone to your table or accepting their invitation communicates openness. Sharing food involves a level of vulnerability that can soften hardened stances.
- **Creates shared stories.** Memories of laughter, hospitality, and kindness around a table often linger longer than disagreements, paving the way for future dialogue.

Ground Rules for Political Conversations at the Table

For a table time that is constructive instead of combative:

1. **Set the Table with Hospitality.** Emphasize that the goal is connection, not debate. Differences will exist, but everyone is welcome.
2. **Keep the Big Picture in Mind.** The goal is to build the relationship, not to win an argument. There can be reconciliation without complete resolution. Over time, good relationships create the trust needed to have harder conversations.
3. **Focus on Stories, Not Slogans.** Encourage personal sharing (“This is how I experienced it...”) rather than repeating talking points. Stories invite empathy, while slogans often entrench division.
4. **Listen More Than You Speak.** Practice active listening, making sure people feel heard before offering your perspective. Ask questions out of genuine curiosity, not to “trap” or “win.” The goal is not to ignore differences, but to grow in understanding.
5. **Avoid Hot-Button Triggers...at First.** Don’t jump straight into the most polarizing issues. Start with shared values: family, community, hopes for the future, service, local concerns.
6. **Honor the Meal.** Keep the meal itself as a symbol of unity. Practice respect and gratitude and enjoy the food together. If conversation gets tense, return to the food or a lighter topic to reset.
7. **Stay Respectful in Disagreement.** Agree to disagree when needed, without mocking or dismissing. Avoid interrupting or raising voices.
8. **End on a Positive Note.** Close with appreciation for the time together. Highlight something you learned or respected about the other person.