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**ADJUSTING AND INTEGRATION NEW IMMIGRANTS IN THE  
AMERICAN CULTURE**

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# **ADJUSTING AND INTEGRATION NEW IMMIGRANTS IN THE AMERICAN CULTURE**

By Daniel N. Diakanwa

## **INTRODUCTION**

Integrating immigrants into their new culture is not an easy task. It requires a period of adjustment by the natives and the immigrants. It further requires an understanding of the dynamics of cultural integration as well as the internal and external changes that occur during various stages of cultural integration.

This workshop will deal with the issue of integrating immigrants in the American culture, examine Trivonovitch's cultural adjustment stages and introduce three major stages of cultural integration based on practical experience and research. These stages are crucial in understanding new immigrants and trying to help them adjust to their new culture. The study will further examine "external" and "internal" changes as two aspects of cultural adjustment that seem to occur among the natives or members of an established ethnic group as they welcome new immigrants.

## **IMMIGRATION, AN INEXORABLE PHENOMENON**

During April and May 2006, millions of immigrants marched throughout the major cities of the United States to pressure the government to legalize over 11 million illegal immigrants who have been living and working in this country. It was, perhaps, the largest display of coordinated protest in United States history involving churches, immigrants' employers, and various immigrant advocacy organizations. The protest was in reaction to the December 16, 2005, U.S. House of Representatives vote to adopt the insensitively anti-immigrant House Resolution 4437. The main points of this resolution included combating the hiring of illegal workers; increasing penalties for alien smuggling and for aliens re-entering illegally; cracking down on alien gang members; aggravated felony provisions; increasing cooperation between border Sheriffs and

federal law enforcement; increasing DHS authority for long-term detention; renewing DHS authority to use reinstatement of removal process; barring terrorist aliens from naturalization, deporting illegal aliens convicted of DUI (driving under the influence); and establishing operational control of all borders and ports (*H.R. 4437 Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005*).

Today, most of these illegal immigrants are legal residents of the United States of America, the third most-populated country in the world, after China and India, with 295,734,134 inhabitants, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. They are living in our communities, working side by side with us in our companies, sending their children to our public schools, and marrying American citizens. As members of the human race, our best response to the influx of immigrants should perhaps be to accept, accommodate, and adopt them within our multicultural society.

According to an Urban Institute study, “The United States is currently experiencing immigration at near-historic levels, with over 14 million immigrants entering the country during the 1990s. Just as many new arrivals are predicted for this decade. By 2004, there were 34 million immigrants, representing 12 percent of the U.S. population. While lower than the historic high of 15 percent in 1900, the share has more than doubled since 1970, when it reached a low of 5 percent. The previous great wave brought immigrants mostly from Europe, but currently more than half are from Latin America and another quarter from Asia.”<sup>i</sup>

The massive and inexorable migration of non-Western people to North America and other Western countries is a symptom of globalization. Our metropolises are rapidly becoming global villages in which we find people from all tribes, ethnicities, religions, languages, cultures, and races of the world. As I see it, globalization as an inexorable trend toward integrating the multicultural people of the world and generating global beliefs, norms and values, and rules and regulations as well as political and socioeconomic systems that will govern them within a global society. Simply put, a global society is an integrated and cooperative universal society in which the nations of the world will virtually have similar cultures and political and socioeconomic systems. The continuous massive migration of the world’s people, the influence of major religious organizations, the mass media, the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the World Bank will probably be the most influential vehicles through which a “new world

order” will be established to rule our global society. (I use the term *new world order* not to imply “new world government” but a new world arrangement of beliefs, norms, values, and policies, political and socioeconomic structures that will be widely espoused throughout the world in the process of globalization.) The European Union foreshadows this type of global society.

### **THE ISSUE OF INTEGRATING IMMIGRANTS IN THE AMERICAN CULTURE**

Unlike the British and French cultures, the American culture has been described as a culture in the making because of the continuous influx of immigrants which is influencing and reshaping its customs, norms and values. Generally speaking, the American culture is part of the “Western culture’s block, “which is characterized by individualism, task orientation and other cultural elements that comprises the Western Culture.

Although Americans are, perhaps; the most hospitable and generous people in the world, their ethnically segregated communities makes it difficult to fully integrate new immigrants in their society. Many Hispanic, Chinese and new immigrants arrive and work in their segregated ethnic communities, as a result; they fail to learn English and the American culture. I have met hundreds of Hispanic clients, during my seven years as a social service worker, who could not make a sentence in English after residing in the US for more than 20 years. The USA seems to be the only nation where people identify themselves as Mexican-American, Italian-American, African-American and so forth.

Unlike the American government, the Swiss government has generally been doing a better job of integrating immigrants into its society than many other countries. While many Western countries tend to segregate immigrants into ethnic communities, the Swiss government tends to scatter them to various cantons. For instance, upon arrival in Switzerland, many refugees and asylum seekers from Angola and Congo are placed in different cantons. An immigrant cannot move to other canton or town without informing his local government’s officials, who will inquire about his new address, job, and other information. The Swiss government is generally aware of immigrants’ whereabouts.

While the Swiss immigration policy appears restrictive, it facilitates the integration of immigrants into the Swiss culture and obviates the development of segregated ethnic

communities which may result in socioeconomic inequality and social conflicts.

For instance, the 2006 uprising of non-Western immigrants in France, which led to the wrecking of cars and commercial properties, is a result of socioeconomic disparity between the natives and the ethnic communities. While most French citizens live in economically prosperous communities, Most French citizens of African and Arabic descent reside in the poorest communities of France. Even the educated ones among established immigrants are denied jobs opportunities in certain fields of work.

The economic disparity between ethnic communities, as seen in France, England, and the United States often leads to the development of ethnic gangs and creates various socioeconomic ills within a multicultural society.

Today, the American media seems to be the main catalyst of the American culture.

The cultural norms and values America has failed to disseminate among its segregated communities are now and more effectively being disseminated through the mass and social media. Interestingly enough, the American culture is infiltrating and influencing world cultures through television and internet. However, the need to build multiethnic communities in America remains highly important in the sense that it will increase national unity and patriotism as well as dismantle the socioeconomic disparity that exists between ethnic communities.

### **TRIVONOVITCH'S CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT STAGES**

Integrating immigrants includes various stages of cultural adjustment, while there are several studies on cultural adjustment; I find the cultural adjustment stages described by Gregory Trivonovitch relative to my own experience as a former international student and immigrant in the United States. According to Trivonovitch, researcher and Associate Director of the Culture Learning Institute at the East-West Center in Hawaii; there are four stages of cultural adjustment, which include the *honeymoon stage*, the *hostility stage*, the *integration or acceptance stage*, and the *home stage*. As he points out, “these four stages are cyclic in nature, not linear, and a person will encounter periods of adjustment continuously as he or she moves from one situation to another.”

I would like to paraphrase Trivonovitch's adjustment stages in explaining what new

immigrants generally undergo in the process of adjusting within their new culture.

### *1. The honeymoon stage*

This stage is frequently characterized by excitement, anticipation, and inquisitiveness. Newly arrived immigrants are often mesmerized by everything they discover in America. They are excited to have made it into this great nation, and they entertain all kinds of ideas about what they would like to accomplish here. Many have been dreaming for years about coming to America, and now they find themselves honeymooning with America. It is also a romantic stage filled with emotion and expectation coupled with a sense of curiosity and naiveté.

### *2. The hostility stage*

This stage is often characterized by frustration, nervousness, negative criticism, fear, and sometimes depression. Immigrants are generally frustrated with learning a new language and culture, as well as complying with the complex American immigration and welfare systems. Many of them begin to prejudge Americans' "strange" customs and become frustrated with their fast pace of living, their directness and briefness in communication, their individualism, and their task-oriented mentalities. This stage is also characterized by the psychosomatic reactions of certain immigrants who experience all sorts of malaise and sicknesses resulting from striving to adjust, survive, and be accepted in their new culture. As their myths about America begin to vanish and as they face the looming realities of life in America, many immigrants begin to miss their homes and become disappointed and anxious about their future.

### *3. The integration stage*

At this stage, new immigrants feel comfortable and relaxed in their new environment. They begin to accommodate to their new lifestyle, make new friends, and share more about themselves. They also begin to understand the American culture and government system, become less judgmental of Americans, and understand their rights and privileges. They further begin to make an effort to integrate into their new society and learn their new language.

#### *4. The home stage*

While some immigrants cling to their ethnocentric views and continue to feel alienated; many feel relaxed and “at home.” They begin to work and invest, and they join American churches, organizations, and clubs. They realize that America is where they will spend the rest of their lives, therefore; they make every effort to integrate into their new society.

Since Trivonovitch’s adjustment stages are cyclic in nature, many international students who reside on campus relive these stages as they transition from the American academic culture to its workforce culture and society. Those who decide to stay and work in America suddenly find themselves in a competitive, fast-moving, and individualistic workforce culture and society in which they may have to work with strangers, carefully budget their money, and rent expensive apartments in unfriendly neighborhoods. They have moved from a smaller, protected environment to a larger, unprotected environment in which they experience more cultural shocks. However, those who have been living and working outside the campus have already been inducted into American society and its various aspects.

Furthermore, cultural adjustment is more difficult for international students and immigrants who arrive in predominantly American communities than for those who arrive in their own ethnic communities. For instance, Hispanic immigrants who arrive in Hispanic communities have less difficulty adjusting to the Hispanic-American culture where they can continue to speak their language and work in their ethnic community. The same is true for Chinese who start their American journey in Chinatown.

### **THREE STAGES FOR INTEGRATING IMMIGRANTS INTO THEIR NEW CULTURE**

My experience in working with Christian churches and observing how ethnic members and new immigrants are integrated into traditional/native churches has led me to identify three stages of group cultural integration including; the *acquaintance*, *accommodation*, and *adoption* stages.

#### *1. Acquaintance or acculturation stage*

The term *acculturation* is mainly used to describe the encounter between cultures. The

acquaintance or acculturation stage is a period of multiethnic, “bump-into” encounters, in which new immigrants and natives have trivial relationships. Both groups may meet for business purposes, but they do not intend to develop emotional or meaningful ties with one another.

It is a period of observation, curiosity, and mistrust. People from both cultural groups are generally cautious about how to act and what to say to one another. They spend most of their time observing one another rather than communicating. They have mixed emotions and are afraid to open up to strangers. At this stage, almost 90% of communication tends to be nonverbal, with 10% verbal and brief. People often use terms like *Hello, Hi, How are you, Good, OK, See you, It's a beautiful day today*, and so forth. Occasionally, they put on an artificial smile in their greetings. At this stage, cultural sensitivity is highly needed to start developing relationships.

## *2. Accommodation or transculturation stage*

The term *transculturation* was coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz to describe “the reciprocal process, by which two cultures, upon contact, engage in a system of give and take and adaptation to each other's ways, though often not in an equal manner, resulting in the emergence of a new cultural reality.”<sup>ii</sup> The accommodation or transculturation stage is a period in which members of both cultural groups need to adjust to one another in order to co-exist as a multicultural unit. Due to frequent meetings, the members of both diverse groups begin to develop emotional ties with one another as well as to learn and appreciate each other’s culture. At this stage, members of the dominant culture should exert a great deal of patience, humility, understanding, tolerance, and respect toward the new ethnic group. New immigrants should also be willing to learn their new language and culture at this stage. This does not imply that they should assimilate the new culture, rather; they should learn those cultural norms and values that will help them operate and survive within their new country. Although the established culture is less affected during transculturation, its norms and values are still impacted to a certain degree by the new culture. Cultural elements that often influence an established culture include food, interracial marriages, clothing, religion, customs, and several other elements.

The transculturation stage is the most sensitive stage in multicultural integration. It is here that multicultural conflicts mostly occur. In addition, this stage determines whether both groups

will develop into a multicultural community.

Cultural adjustment is generally successful when new immigrants are introduced gradually into an established group or community. In this case, the level of tolerance tends to be higher than where there is a great and rapid influx of newcomers into the established cultural group. In the latter case, there is a roughly 80% chance that both groups will split into segregated cultural groups or communities.

For instance, a former Mexican student of mine once told me how the pastor of a white American church he was attending asked him to stop bringing more Mexicans on Sundays. When he first came to this small church, he brought only his family. The following Sunday, he brought two other Mexican families, and in two months, the Mexican membership outnumbered the Anglos. This rapid increase in Mexican membership started to make some Anglo members uncomfortable, especially an influential elder who threatened to leave if the pastor would not stop them. One day, the American pastor called this Mexican student to his office and told him politely to stop bringing his ethnic people to church for a while.

Racial and ethnic segregations in American churches have resulted in the development of ethnic and race-based churches. The fact that countries like the United States and others generally give immigrants the freedom to choose where they want to reside tends to segregate them into their comfort zones or communities. Chinatown, Little Italy, and other ethnic neighborhoods are more likely products of discrimination against immigrants or, the product of the immigrant's tendency to congregate around their own people for acceptance and assistance. As mentioned previously, the danger of allowing the development of ethnic communities within a multicultural society is the socioeconomic disparities that might exist between them. Members of poor ethnic communities may vandalize residents of wealthy communities due to socioeconomic inequalities.

### *3. Adoption or enculturation stage*

While the term *enculturation* is used to signify the process of assimilating new immigrants or ethnic group into a dominant one, I will use it to signify the process of integrating immigrants into their new culture. At this stage, new immigrants who make an effort to learn their new

language and culture are generally accepted, adopted, and treated with respect.

While the cultural norms and values of older first-generation immigrants remain generally unchanged during enculturation, the norms and values of their children who migrated with them undergo significant changes. Their fresh minds easily absorb new customs and new ways of thinking and doing things through their newly embraced educational system, media, and friends. Enculturation often creates family tension between first-generation immigrants, who unswervingly cling to their cultures, and their children, who quickly assimilate their new culture. It is a stage in which open-minded immigrants feel accepted and begin to join associations, churches, and various institutions of their new country.

### ***External and internal changes***

External and internal changes are two aspects of cultural adjustment that seem to occur among the natives or members of an established ethnic group during cultural integration.

External change tends to take place during the accommodation stage. It allows members of an established culture, community, group, or organization to restructure their physical environment or make external changes in order to accommodate the new immigrants. Established group members often keep an artificial relationship with the newcomers; they tolerate them and provide some basic services to help them adjust to their new environment. They also provide services, such as language classes, job training, and job search, and help them with food, clothing, and shelter as well as do various acts of kindness without generally treating new immigrants as equals. At this stage, members of the established cultural group tend to view new immigrants as second-class citizens.

Internal change starts taking place during the adoption or enculturation stage. It deals with attitudinal transformation of the members of an established culture. It generally changes the negative and ethnocentric attitudes of established members toward new immigrants to positive ones. It also allows established members to adopt them as full members of their group, community, or culture.

Internal change does not necessarily occur at the group's level but rather at the individual one. It helps someone get rid of prejudged ideas about new immigrants and develops meaningful

relationships with them. The members of the established cultural group start inviting new immigrants to their homes for dinner and holidays, they treat them with respect, appreciate their cultural norms and values, allow their children to play with immigrant children, and develop trust and confidence in them.

**External Change**

- Accommodation
- Environment change
- Mind change
- Material support
- Tolerance
- Artificial relationship

**Internal change**

- Adoption
- Attitude change
- Heart change
- Moral support
- Acceptance
- Natural relationship

While immigrant’s integration seems impossible in ethnically segregated cities, it is possible in cities where intentional effort is made to mix people from different countries and cultures in multiethnic communities. The ethnic mixture helps open-minded immigrants to adjust to their new culture at a faster rate than those residing in segregated communities. It forces immigrants to learn their new language, customs, norms and values; it also helps the natives accept and help new immigrants as they see their willingness to adjust to their new language and culture.

*(Excerpt from “Understanding, helping and counseling immigrants” by Daniel Diakanwa)*

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<sup>i</sup> Urban Institute, a nonpartisan economic and social policy research organization

[www.rbc.com/canada/before/finances/benefits.html](http://www.rbc.com/canada/before/finances/benefits.html)

Gregory Trivonovitch. *Stages of Cultural Adjustment*

Fernando Ortiz. *Tobacco and Sugar*. New York: Vintage Books, 1970

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## **ABSTRACT**

Integrating immigrants into their new culture is not an easy task. It requires a period of adjustment, by both the natives and the immigrants; which will facilitate the integration process. This workshop will deal with the issue of integrating immigrants in the American culture, examine Trivonovitch's cultural adjustment stages and introduce three major stages of cultural integration based on practical experience and research. These stages are crucial in understanding new immigrants and trying to help them adjust to their new culture. The study will further examine "external" and "internal" changes as two aspects of cultural adjustment that seem to occur among the natives or members of an established ethnic group as they welcome new immigrants.

## **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

Workshop participants will be able to:

1. Understand the importance of integrating new immigrants and international students in the American culture.
2. Understand the dynamics of integrating new immigrants and international students in the American culture.
3. Understand the internal and external changes that occur during the process of integrating immigrants and international students.
4. Get some insights on counsel and assisting new immigrants and international students.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Daniel Diakanwa has worked for over twenty six years in various positions within The Salvation Army. His multicultural experience includes pastoring a Salvation Army multicultural church in Brooklyn, New York (2001-2004); working as Cross-cultural Ministries Bureau Director for the Salvation Army Eastern Regional Headquarters (1991-94); and African Heritage Consultant (1994-2001). He has also worked as a social worker for The Salvation Army in Harlem and Queens, New York (1984-1991), and as part-time Counselor for the Salvation Army Adult Rehabilitation Centers in the Bronx, New York (1991), and in Mount Vernon, New York (2000-2001). Daniel's further experience includes counseling and ministering to African immigrants, UN diplomats, and international students as well as helping them with immigration applications, translation, and interpretation.

Daniel has published three books including *Key to Intercultural Ministries* (2000), *Global Ministry in a Global Society* (2006), and *Understanding, Assisting and Counseling, Immigrants* (2006). He is also the co-author of *Soldiers of Uncommon Valor: The History of Salvationists of African descent in the United States of America* (2007) and has made literary contributions to *The Historical Dictionary of The Salvation Army* (2006).

Furthermore, Daniel has been the editor of *Cross-Cultural Vision, A journal of The Salvation Army Multicultural Ministries Department in the Eastern Territory* (1995-2000) and has written several articles in Salvation Army publications around the world. He has lectured at various Salvation Army schools, seminars, and social service conferences throughout the United States and Canada.

He holds a Bachelor's degree from Nyack College, New York, an M.P.S. degree from Alliance Theological Seminary, and an M.P.A. degree from City University of New York (Bernard Baruch College).

Daniel is presently working as the Pastor of the Salvation Army church in New Rochelle NY. He is married to Charlotte, and they have four children. He is a naturalized American citizen and native of the Democratic Republic of Congo. He has lived in the United States since 1977 and has traveled throughout Africa, Europe, and Canada for vacation or for conducting multicultural ministries workshops.

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