

*“Let’s Talk About…” is a column in our monthly newsletter where we will learn one thing at a time about how we can love others the way they want to be loved. We will learn something each month that helps us understand and respect people who are different from us a little more deeply.*

### Let's Talk About Language Barriers

On August 27th, we worshiped in both Spanish and English. Sometimes, Spanish-speakers had no idea what was being said. Other times, English-speakers were the ones without a translator to help them. Unless you are bilingual, if you were there that day, you had some moments of just going along with the flow and trusting you had the basic idea of what was happening. Imagine having that kind of experience every single day in all sorts of contexts, and you’ll build some empathy for our immigrant neighbors who come from non-English-speaking countries. So this month, let’s talk about language barriers.

We live in a multilingual environment. It may surprise you to learn that the United States does not have an official language. Under the law, English and Spanish and Swahili are on equal footing. There are about 160 languages spoken right here in Aurora! It’s safe to assume that we will all have moments when we need to communicate with someone who doesn’t share our language. So, how do we bridge language barriers when we don’t have someone (or a phone app) to translate for us?

1. **Use Nonverbal Communication** - Words are only about 7% of the communication we share with each other. Body language, tone, facial expressions, and general “vibes” are the vast majority of how we communicate, even when we do have the words. So when we have a language barrier, this is our first option, because we are already doing it!
2. **Get Creative With Phrasing** - When we learn a new language, we learn a few words at a time. Many people who speak English as a second (or third, or fourth…) language have a more limited vocabulary. Many native English speakers might know a little bit of Spanish or another language but have an extremely limited vocabulary. It’s similar to when you’re having a conversation and just forget a word. Maybe the person you’re talking to can’t remember the word “student” but can understand “person in class.” Maybe you don’t know how to say “almuerzo” (lunch) but you can say “comida” (meal.) Think of simple ways to phrase things, and be ready to rephrase if your first try doesn’t land.
3. **Be patient**—with yourself and everybody else. Don’t raise your voice—that doesn’t make the unknown words suddenly make sense; it just stresses people out. Remember that you’re doing a challenging thing, and so is the person to whom you are speaking. Don’t give up, and keep in mind how worthwhile it will be to see that glint of recognition in your neighbor’s eyes when your communication makes sense.

**Bonus Tip: Try Duolingo or Babbel!** These language-learning apps really can help. I’ve learned over 100 spoken words and a lot of Hangul (the Korean written alphabet) in just two weeks! Sure, all I can talk about right now are babies, foxes, and cucumbers (and I don’t really know how to do plurals yet either), but that’s the beginning of a solid vocabulary. Tl;dr: (that’s Internet for “In summary,”) Be kind to yourself and others, and know that any effort you make to bridge language barriers is deeply appreciated by neighbors who are still learning or simply don’t know English.

*Our “Let’s Talk About…” column is one place where we can help one another learn how to be better allies for all our neighbors. If you have a question you’d like answered, or if there are things you wish others in our congregation better understood about your own marginalized identities or those for whom you are already a strong ally, please submit suggestions to <https://forms.gle/E9eRqZJGLgVaqbDZ9> or email me directly at [virginiag@smokyhillumc.org](mailto:virginiag@smokyhillumc.org).*