

***Missional in a Multi-Ethnic Context: The Need for Positive Partnerships***

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**Intro**

I have been confronted with a dilemma, which I would like to present to you. During a conference in the Lower Mainland (Vancouver and surrounding cities) on multi-ethnic ministry, a pastor of a multi-cultural church stood up and claimed that the only legitimate local church expression that truly follows New Testament principles is the intercultural expression found in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural church: a variety of ethnic groups worshipping together with the freedom to express their faith according to their cultural preferences. Only multicultural churches are correct (and therefore, I presume, truly blessed) because they represent the vision of John in Revelation of all languages and people groups standing before the throne. This is obviously God's desire and ultimate aim and, therefore, this should be reflected in churches today. There was definitely an implied, if not overt, criticism of other local church models. The expression of intercultural inclusiveness and unity is admirable, but the exclusivity of other models I find a bit troubling. Furthermore, as I will discuss later, there are some weaknesses in this model.

On the other hand, we also have a number of ethno-specific, mono-cultural churches in the Lower Mainland. These churches tend to take the path of least resistance, which tends not to be healthy in the long run. Eg. Conflicted 2<sup>nd</sup> gen Chinese student at ACTS seminary. Felt like a traitor. Alternately, I was talking to a pastor of a Korean church. They have a large sign in English and Korean that reads "Korean Presbyterian". She asked me my advice about how they could transition to a multi-ethnic church, since their church is quite ethno-specific. I suggested that one thing that would help would be to take the word "Korean" out of their sign. She became quite uncomfortable and said that would be difficult.

In short, dilemma I see is this: **how can the preservation and validation of culturally distinct expressions of church be coupled with the seemingly unavoidable break down of cultural barriers if we are to create intercultural unity in Christ.**

**But first, I would like to say a word about “missional” in the title.** By “missional,” I am referring to the act of believers to make the gospel relevant within others’ natural space or context, in contrast to the *attractional* movement of inviting others into our context. In the latter paradigm, the key dynamic is one of power and control versus the need to accommodate and serve others as found in a missional concern. In the attractional orientation we control the schedule, agenda and content. In the missional orientation we do not. Instead it is up to us to discover ways to serve according to the established schedule, agenda and content of others, whether in friendship or as part of an organization. When we do this in Jesus’ name and demonstrate how our commitment to Jesus enhances the aims and relationships of the organizations we are serving, we are being *missional* because through us the gospel is revealed as relevant and redemptive. I believe that both orientations (or movements) are essential for a healthy church dynamic.

Two examples:

My wife, Karen, and daughter, Becky, have 3<sup>rd</sup> dan black belts in karate and are senseis with their own dojo. They work for the good of the club and the Karate organization and, in their position, have many opportunities to speak of Jesus and use Karate as a metaphor for their faith.

Our family is involved with Young Life, a Christian organization that is able to get into high schools and develop relationships with teenagers through “contact work” because they serve the need of schools by providing volunteers.

**My contention and assumption for this seminar is that if we are going to be missional with a cross-cultural dimension,** we need to do intercultural relationships in the church well. I believe that when we can have healthy intercultural relationships in the church, that this will give us the validity and the authority and the means for cross-cultural missional initiatives (I do not have time to argue this, so I hope you will humor me and allow that to be an assumption).

A couple of other definitions:

**Church: Christ-centered believers with a common identity and kingdom purpose who serve and worship together.** Not limited to traditional congregational model of church, but inclusive of it.

**Ethno-specific or monoethnic versus mono-cultural: first is *identity* with one ethnic group, second is the acceptance of one set of cultural *expressions* as the norm.**

Dilemma

**Back to the dilemma** that seems to undermine intercultural relationships among believers in organized churches. The dilemma is between preserving culturally

distinct expressions of church (inclusive of theology, worship and fellowship) on the one hand and the breaking down of cultural barriers in order to have unity in Christ between ethnic groups on the other. One illustration of this dilemma: Eg. Punjabi couple and their love of the Punjabi Zaboor. In order to connect with a Canadian expression of the body of Christ, they had to sacrifice their Punjabi Zaboor. In order to worship using Punjabi Zaboor, they had to limit themselves to a Punjabi community.

Culture has to do with our identity, our expressions of who we are, what we value, the grid through which we interpret and experience the world. As followers of Christ within a people group we want to find full expression of what it means to follow Christ within that cultural framework. This is done by creating a **dialectical tension between our context and the biblical text**. It is our context that provides the language and concepts necessary to understand God's word, it is God's revelation that speaks into and transforms our context. It is the outworking of that creative tension that allows us to discover how to express our faith appropriately. This, I believe, is not just good, but it is our responsibility before God. It is a working out, I think, of the command to Adam to name the animals:

**Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. <sup>20</sup> So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals (Gen 2:19,20).**

What I believe God was saying, at least partly, was "Give meaning to your context. *Interpret* your world, *Express* that meaning, that relationship to your life." Naming expresses relationship. With this same dynamic, as people centered on Christ in our context, we discover how to express the reality of being God's children in our reality. And in the same way, Christians in different cultural contexts discover how to express that relationship with God in Christ in a way that resonates within *their* context. This, of course, is just another way of expressing **contextualization** or inculturation.

But there is a problem. Whenever we look inward and strengthen and develop our own cultural expressions, we **create distinctives that are, by definition, different from expressions in other cultural settings. This results in a phenomenon of "strange making."** The more isolated we are within our own culture, the more we develop cultural myopia – seeing things from only one perspective. This exacerbates bigotry, racism, judgmental attitudes and a lack of graciousness. In short, it undermines unity in the body of Christ.

On the other hand, to focus on *commonalities* between cultures, rather than *distinctives* within cultures, causes a different set of problems. There are great benefits to this approach: theologically it is Christ who binds us together. We are “in Christ.” Symbol of Pentecost in which one message is proclaimed in many languages and, of course, the vision of the nations before the throne in Revelation. Jesus prayer in Jn 17 is an appeal to oneness.

Furthermore, having experiences with other cultures stretches us, open doors to new understandings and give us questions that we did not even know needed to be asked – As Peter discovered while praying on the roof in Acts 10.

But the problem with focusing on **commonalities in order to create intercultural unity is that those cultural expressions that have deep significance for an individual are lost**. Rather than worshiping with depth and comfort, it seems shallow and uncomfortable. Instead of significance that resonates with the deeper meanings of life as defined by our cultural roots, there is a sense of loss as we try to understand expressions of following Jesus that do not have their roots in what is important to them. Eg. Becky needing to go to Punjabi chapel at the hospital. Sindhi music sounds harsh to western ears.

That is a description of the **dilemma** as I see it. The stronger the **cultural identity and development of cultural expressions of faith**, the greater the tendency of ‘**making strange**’ which undermines **unity**. The stronger the move **towards ethnic groups finding a compromise resulting in intercultural expressions of faith** for the sake of **unity**, the less **culturally distinct expressions of faith** are developed and maintained.

But I want to avoid the impression of a sucker’s choice here. That is, two bad options with no solution. On the one hand we have two ethno-specific, mono cultural churches (say a Korean church and a Filipino church) who are living separate lives. There is peace between them because there is no interaction. But, without interaction, without relationship, there is also no unity and we are called to unity. On the other hand, we bring these two congregations together and we get friction. Why? Because the other group doesn’t do things right. Their priorities are mixed up, they don’t show proper respect, they get their knickers in a twist about mundane things. (Of course neither of those groups would likely talk about knickers).

This raises a few **questions**:

- ⊕ **Is crossing cultures necessary for unity or is it sufficient to coexist peacefully and with respect?**
- ⊕ **Or is the benefit gained by maintaining the diversity experienced in ethno-specific expressions of church greater than intercultural expressions?**
- ⊕ **Should intercultural relationships be initiated at a macro (organizational) level, or at a grass roots, micro (individual) level, or both?**
- ⊕ **Is it possible to maintain cultural distinctives while developing intercultural unity?**
- ⊕ **If intercultural relationships are a priority, is there a process to accomplish this without losing the distinctives?**
- ⊕ **Can we take a passive approach (ie. wait for the next generation)?**

(This begs the question, since the assumption is a melting pot and a loss of cultural identity)

These are some questions to start with, but other questions and perspectives are appreciated.

Why I think this is important.

Let me illustrate the strength and weaknesses of the two sides of this dilemma through cultural models of churches that I see in Lower mainland (Vancouver and surrounding cities), before proposing a way forward.

**This section is based on observations presented in the article, *Navigating the Multicultural Maze: Setting an Intercultural Agenda for FEBBC/Y Churches* (Naylor 2007), that describes existing church models in the lower mainland. The models are based on cultural dynamics and are my personal observations. This is available online as a download with power point (google *Intercultural Agenda Northwest*).**

**Monoethnic (ethno-specific) Monocultural Churches:** This model refers to those congregations that consist almost exclusively of one cultural group and do not experience the tensions resulting from cultural differences.

**Sister Churches:** In this model, common in our urban centers, two or more separate congregations with distinct cultural / ethno-specific emphases cooperate together in a significant area that necessitates some level of ongoing interaction, e.g., sharing a building. Eg. Spanish church in Nordel: Kids in nursery destroyed toys. Hard feelings. Now two sets of toys locked up.

**Multiethnic Monocultural Churches:** This model describes those congregations in which a number of ethnic groups are represented but one ethnic group is dominant and the cultural norms of that group are generally followed. Minority ethnic groups gravitate to this when they have a desire to integrate. Common in Vancouver. Baby shower in the Cdn way. Experience a loss of expressions of faith that they value.

**Multiethnic Multicultural Churches:** This model describes a church with two or more culturally distinct groups that have reached a “critical mass” so that their thinking shifts from a willingness to assimilate into the prevailing cultural milieu to a desire for language, theology, values, congregational organization and worship expressions more in line with their own cultural preference. Recognition of this shifting dynamic by the dominant ethnic group leads to a negotiation of values and structures in order to develop common ground within which the two groups may function harmoniously.

In a very real sense, the phrase “multicultural local church” is an oxymoron. Cultures provide a framework of reality and identity for society that includes language, organization, values, theology and forms of worship. Because they are internally consistent and provide an integrated means to organize and relate to the world, all cultures in one way or another contrast and oppose each other. *Two groups with separate cultures cannot live and work together without accommodation.* The stronger the desire to preserve one’s own culture, the stronger will be the opposition to other cultural expressions. The greater the willingness to accommodate to another culture, the greater the demand will be to sacrifice one’s own culture. Thus, by nature a local church that seeks to be multicultural by embracing other cultures can only succeed when there is willingness on all sides to compromise and sacrifice certain cultural concerns for the goal of creating a common expression of the body of Christ with which all can identify (*Navigating the Multicultural Maze*).

Eg. Oakridge – two congregations, one board. Difficult, because leadership and decision making is one of the more sensitive areas of cultural distinctions.

Richmond – Chinese congregation left. Why? Critical mass without corresponding power and control.

**Continuum:** These culturally delineated church models can be represented on a continuum from homogeneous to multi-cultural.

Solution:

The dilemma is this: a separation of people groups leads to distrust or criticism of those we do not know. So how do we continue to validate culturally distinct expressions of church while simultaneously breaking down the racial and cultural barriers that prevent us from appropriate expressions of our oneness in Christ.

My solution is that I believe that every church should have an **intercultural agenda** (macro intention) that encourages individual exposure to (micro) and interaction with other people groups. That is, **each church needs to maintain a creative tension between maintaining cultural distinctives while developing synergy through intercultural interactions.**

My simplistic suggestion is that we pursue a “both-and” approach, rather than “either-or.” No matter what model the church follows, have an intercultural agendas *that maintains the model*. Do it well. Each church should intentionally engage other cultural expressions of Christianity for their mutual benefit and should engage other cultural groups for the spread of the gospel message. We want to validate our own cultural expression of Christianity fully. At the same time, we need to develop an intentional intercultural agenda in order to both validate other cultural expressions of Christianity and to enrich our own experience.

This is not bringing what we have to others (one way), but engaging others to discover how they live out their faith.

Examples:

STM teen trip to Colombia. Worked with teens in Colombia to run a camp for kids.

STM to Tanzania. Each person lived a day with a Tanzanian and just did what they did.

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Naylor, Mark 2001. Navigating the Multicultural Maze: Setting an Intercultural Agenda for FEBBC/Y Churches in *Being Church: Explorations in Christian Community*. Langley: Northwest.