

Navigating the Multicultural Maze: Setting an intercultural agenda for FEBBC/Y churches

By Mark Naylor

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Introduction

Increasingly churches are facing the multicultural challenge of the Canadian<sup>1</sup> context. An increasing variety and percentage of ethnic groups not only affects approaches in evangelism but also impacts how churches are formed and developed. What should a local church look like in an ethnically diverse context? Recently while traveling to a worship service with a couple passionate for intercultural relationships within local congregations, the husband spoke disparagingly of monocultural congregations, particularly of a Korean group presently meeting in another part of their building. His argument was that unity in the body of Christ obligates believers to not segregate themselves according to ethnic identity, but to place their identity primarily in the new life we have in Christ and meet together within multicultural congregations.

This perspective is driven by a minor but significant trend in North American evangelical denominations to move towards intentionally “multicultural churches.” Based partially upon the image of the nations gathered as one body before the throne of God in Revelation (5:9, 7:9), these churches are shaped by an eschatological vision to become a microcosm of that grand event in this age. Moreover, the practical reality of multiethnic communities in Canadian urban as well as many rural settings, makes such an attempt viable. While applauding this vision, supporting the effort, and sympathizing with the intercultural struggles that inevitably arise, I would like to take issue with those who promote this form of local church as more in conformity with the New Testament ideal than other less ethnically diverse churches. There has been a pendulum swing from promoting the homogeneous unit concept popularized by “church growth” guru Donald McGavran<sup>2</sup> to a sense that multicultural churches are closer to the ideal. The argument of this chapter is that this “either-or” mentality needs to be corrected to “both-and.” In order to fully appreciate the diversity and the unity of the body of Christ both homogeneous as well as multicultural expressions of the church are required. The promotion of one form of local church based on cultural considerations above other expressions is both unhelpful and shortsighted. While appreciated and needed, multicultural expressions of the body of Christ are but one form in the midst of a number of equally valid models. Furthermore, by encouraging intercultural communication between a variety of culturally defined

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<sup>1</sup> While recognizing that “Canadian” is not an ethnic group, this term will be used to represent the distinctiveness of the Canadian culture.

<sup>2</sup> Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

congregations we can avoid a homogenizing sterility and exclusiveness on the one hand and a confusing and unsatisfying mixture of competing expressions on the other.

In this chapter I would like to propose a vision that affirms the many expressions of the body of Christ already present in the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches of British Columbia and Yukon (FEBBC/Y) and yet moves us to greater intercultural interaction in order to meet the challenge of seeking unity while preserving ethnic diversity. Following some clarification of definitions, the current situation in FEBBC/Y churches is described using cultural models and representative examples that demonstrate how this ethnic challenge is being met. A theological understanding of the concept of “church” is then proposed that will accommodate the diversity in ethnic expressions we are experiencing in our churches. Finally, I will outline some practical steps churches can take to invest further in synergistic intercultural relationships.

### Definitions

The terms *church* (sing.) or *body of Christ* are not used for local organized congregations in this chapter but are reserved to express the relationship, interaction and cooperation of believers at any level of organization, whether intra-, inter- or para-church, whether global missions agency or simply interaction for kingdom purposes between two or three individuals. The sense is closer to Paul’s description of the “one body” in Ephesians 4:4, than his use of *ekklesia* when describing a group of believers in a particular locale (e.g., Rom 16:1). The terms *local church*, *churches* (pl.) and *congregation* will be used to express the local congregational nuance of the many ways the English word “church” is used. The reason for this distinction between *local church* and *church* as the broader community of believers<sup>3</sup> or as a network of local congregations will be developed below. In summary, the benefit of locating a congregation as a participant in a broader church community beyond local expressions allows us to affirm the multicultural nature of the church of Jesus Christ, while encouraging a variety of culturally diverse forms on the local church level.

*Culture* is used in its anthropological sense as "the more or less integrated systems of ideas, feelings, and values and their associated patterns of behavior and products shared by a group of people who organize and regulate what they think, feel and do."<sup>4</sup> *Multicultural* refers to the juxtaposition of a number of distinct cultures. *Homogeneous* or *monocultural* refers to the limitation

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to be confused with the concept of the “universal church” which refers to the global population of all believers.

<sup>4</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 30.

of a particular group to one particular culture. *Ethnic* describes a group with a recognized identity based on cultural distinctives such as language.

*Intercultural* refers to the reciprocal interaction of members of different cultural backgrounds, *intracultural* concerns the interaction of members within the same cultural background, while *crosscultural* is similar to intercultural with this distinction that the focus is on those from one particular cultural background intentionally engaging another cultural group (such as missionaries). In promoting the development of intercultural relationships by our churches, I am referring to a sharing of an ethnic group's own cultural perspective while experiencing other cultures in a reciprocal fashion.

### The Cultural Dilemma

Are cultures really that different from each other? Should it not be possible for the centrality of our faith in Christ to overcome cultural conflicts? The answer to both questions is "yes." Faith in Christ *can* overcome conflicts, but the complexity evident in the diversity of language, values, priorities, history and traditions determines how people will express and live out their faith. These differences, each valid within their own context, cause discomfort, miscommunication and tension when diverse ethnic groups attempt cooperation and unity in an area that is as profound as communal expressions of faith.

A Korean pastor explained the angst suffered by many in his congregation over the young people who were picking up the "rude" habits of Canadian young people in their "disrespect" of the older people in the church. But how do children, who for 6 days are in school or with friends from whom they have learned *not* to bow to teachers and adults, adjust to the Sunday context of a Korean congregation where their actions will be interpreted much differently?

A Canadian pastor and a Hispanic pastor were discussing the possibility of a joint worship service for young people. It became obvious that there are cultural issues that cannot be ignored. The young people in the Canadian congregation often address their pastor by his first name, whereas the Hispanic pastor could not recall one person in his congregation who would not address him with the title "pastor." The Hispanic people tend to be very free with the use of expressions such as "O my god!" and, when people sneeze, "Jesus!" Canadian young people growing up in non-Hispanic FEBBC/Y churches can easily assume that such expressions indicate that the speaker is not even a believer!

When we lived in Pakistan as FEBInternational missionaries one cultural issue that we were never able to resolve involved our children. The Canadian value, which we dutifully taught them,

was that “children should be seen and not heard.” When one of our children came into a meeting of adults we would signal the child to be quiet and just come to one of us and whisper their request. The concern was not to disturb the adults. However, the Pakistani value is that children should always acknowledge and show respect for adults when coming into a room by greeting and shaking hands with each one present. Some unflattering judgments of our ability to raise our children were the result.

The following examples further illustrate the complex problem of seeking unity in a context of ethnic and cultural diversity:

1) Language. Communication plays a primary role in relationships. In order to facilitate intercultural interactions in a local church setting people must bear with the discomfort and limitations of a language in which they cannot freely express themselves, nor fully understand. The choice of a common language is needed and will require people to avoid the subtleties of expression found in their own language in order to relate well to others. The sense of loss will be too great for some and they will need opportunity for an environment in which their language is primarily used.

2) Values. I grew up as a Canadian with individual (I chose my career and spouse), independent (a work ethic that taught me to “stand on my own two feet”) and egalitarian (“hire on the basis of merit”) values. Many cultures are communal (family chooses spouse and vocation), interdependent (such as the landlord / serf relationship), and hierarchical (such as patriarchy and education based on gender). Each of these orientations shape the way people interact and color the expectations they have of each other.

3) Structure / organization. Decision making occurs very differently in a hierarchal setting than in an individualistic, democratic setting. A member’s particular orientation will determine how they perceive the make-up, procedures and conduct of boards and meetings. A “high-context” culture will value the honor given to leadership much more than our Canadian “low-context” culture.<sup>5</sup> Members of a high-context culture will avoid any form of contradiction of the pastor. This is not valued and barely understood by Canadians who do not express their respect for a person by affirming ideas with which they may disagree.

4) Theology. A person growing up in an individualistic society with a strong sense of justice will likely express their experience of salvation in terms of a personal relationship with Jesus who takes our punishment. A person growing up in a communal society with a strong sense of honor and

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<sup>5</sup> For an excellent explanation of “low-context” and “high-context” cultures see Sarah A. Lanier, *Foreign to Familiar: A Guide to Understanding Hot- and Cold- climate Cultures* (Hagerstown: McDougal Pub. 2000), 79-99.

shame will more likely express their salvation in terms of Jesus restoring our relationship with God so we may live as God's holy people.

Unlike the western worldview that explains the world in terms of physical cause and effect (e.g., infection is caused by germs without the need for a supernatural explanation), other cultures integrate the physical and spiritual realms more closely and look for explanations beyond a cause and effect relationship. Such perspectives greatly affect people's understanding of prayer as well as practices such as anointing with oil (Jas 5:14).<sup>6</sup>

Although it is comfortable and natural for people to form groups according to their particular theological emphasis, exposure to and dialogue with other perspectives provides an important corrective to narrow interpretations within the church of Jesus Christ. While sufficient expression of a particular theological understanding is important, other cultural perspectives can provide a deeper and richer realization of God's revelation in this world.

5) Worship styles and music. Worship is an issue of the heart and people worship best in the styles, language and music of their culture. Suitable compromise in this area is seldom satisfactory while the option of providing opportunity for all ethnic groups to worship in their cultural style within one local church context can be impractical. Furthermore, many ethnic groups immigrating to Canada, particularly those from Asian countries, often have more conservative and traditional practices than the innovative and dynamic styles often used in North American churches. Not only do these immigrants fail to worship within the Canadian environment, but their ingrained assumptions and expectations do not permit such a dramatic adjustment.

6) The "language" of prayer. Culturally specific vocabulary, physical posture, idiomatic expressions and liturgical patterns all play a part as people enter into the intimacy of prayer. While people can learn to express praise and requests in other forms, the deepest desires are best articulated through those cultural expressions that are closest to the heart.

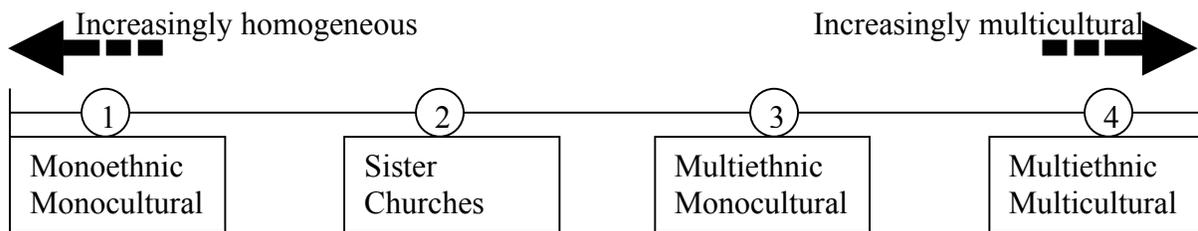
Tensions between cultures demand resolution. As human beings we are uncomfortable with tension and we seek to change the circumstances. The most comfortable solution is to form separate groups. However, a variety of different models are evident in FEBBC/Y churches.

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<sup>6</sup> For an clear explanation of contrasting worldviews and their impact on theological perspectives see Bruce Bradshaw, *Bridging the Gap: Evangelism, Development and Shalom*, (Monrovia: MARC, 1993), esp. 21-48.

Culturally Distinct Local Church Models<sup>7</sup>

In developing models of local church based upon cultural concerns it is helpful to picture a continuum from a monocultural congregation consisting of only one ethnic group through to a multicultural local church with a number of unified ethnic groups that maintain their cultural distinctives to some degree. For the sake of clarity and practical application this simplistic model will be simplified even further to indicate four distinct models. Each of these models is represented within our FEBBC/Y churches. A fifth model (see below) does not lie on this continuum. The continuum can be pictured with the four models labeled as follows:



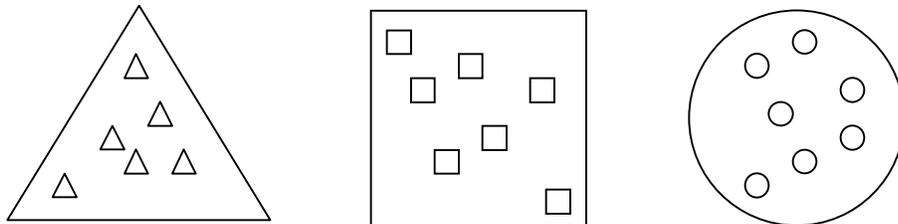
Even though these four models will be discussed as if they are distinct from each other, it is important to keep in mind the dynamic nature of local congregations as they continually adjust to their changing context. Not only can local churches move from one model to another, but transitional stages from one to the other can be envisioned as separate models. Each of the four models will be affirmed as valid as long as they are relevant to their context and making an impact within their setting for the glory of God. At the same time many churches are seeking transition (or should be seeking transition) to another place along the continuum and all churches need to constantly evaluate their current model in light of their changing context. This can be compared to an important dynamic found in Bible translation. All styles of translation – e.g., formal (literal), meaning-based, functionally equivalent - are valid with respect to their intended purpose. However, all versions need readjusting, updating and editing to ensure adequate communication as the context of the receptor audience changes. In a similar fashion, the following series of culturally defined local church models present within FEBBC/Y churches are legitimate within the appropriate context. Nonetheless, leadership needs to be sensitive to the ways the context external to the congregation is changing as

<sup>7</sup> These models are taken from a number of sources and applied here to our FEBBC/Y situation. However, the concept of the continuum is adapted from Sheffield's "multicultural matrix" that moves from exclusive (monocultural) through tolerant and accepting (multiethnic) to inclusive (multicultural). Unlike the model proposed here, Sheffield's model considers the local church to be closer to the ideal as it moves towards the inclusive end of the matrix. See Dan Sheffield, *The Multicultural Leader: Developing a Catholic Personality* (Toronto: Clements, 2005), 92.

well as responsive to the dynamics of the internal ethnic composition so that transition to another model can take place when needed.<sup>8</sup>

### 1) Monoethnic 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. The majority of our FEBBC/Y churches fall into this category, whether our traditionally English speaking Canadian churches or the growing number of Ethnic (e.g., Filipino, Hispanic, Korean, Chinese, Burmese and Punjabi) churches. While not seeking to be exclusive, their cultural preferences – primarily, but not exclusively, language – result in a homogeneous congregation. The primary ethnic group is dominant both numerically and in controlling the positions of power. Both the dominant ethnic group as well as all minorities assume conformity to the prevailing culture. For example, when calling a senior pastor the cultural fit of the individual is assumed rather than an issue to be discussed. Also, the language of business and worship is assumed, rather than negotiated. This model can be illustrated with each large shape representing one culturally defined local church and each small shape a member of that cultural group.



The benefits of such homogeneous units have been discussed and documented by a number of missiologists, notably Donald McGavran.<sup>9</sup> The tensions and frustrations caused by cultural differences are absent allowing the congregation to concentrate on fulfilling their goals rather than expending time and energy on the difficulties that arise from cultural diversity. Moreover, ethnic groups that are minorities within a particular context find room to develop their own cultural expressions of gospel transformation without being overwhelmed by the majority culture.

Nonetheless, freedom from cultural tensions can indicate insensitivity to the local church's context. When there is a shift to a more multiethnic composition in the general population (such as in the urban centers of Canada), churches need to consider the implications. Culturally isolated churches

<sup>8</sup> As Richard Flemming, director of FEBInternational, points out, such sensitivity needs to be coupled with the willingness and courage to implement the necessary changes. The role of leadership in initiating and guiding transformation to a more culturally sensitive model cannot be overemphasized.

<sup>9</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*.

fail to benefit from the interaction with believers who have discovered insights from God’s word based on their unique cultural perspective.

Since the ethnic churches in BC are already situated in a foreign context they need to consider the implication of second generation dynamics. Those who are adapting to the prevalent western culture need support for the transition from their ethnic expression of Christianity in order to live as Christ’s disciples in a way that speaks relevantly to the Canadian context.

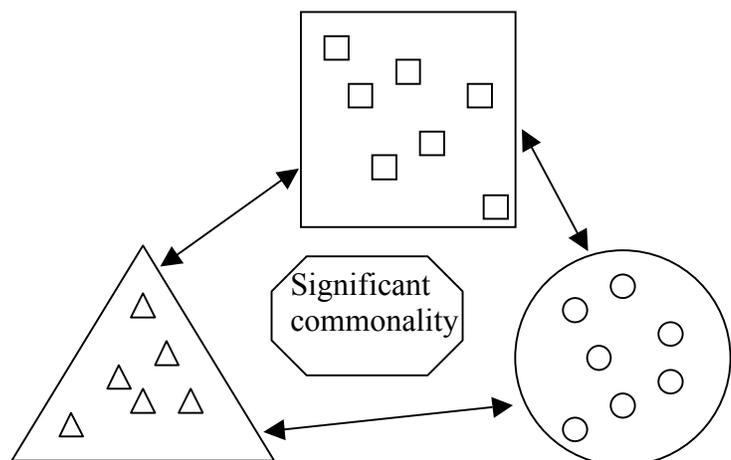
## 2) Sister Churches

In this model, common in our urban centers, two or more separate congregations with distinct cultural / ethnic emphases cooperate together in a significant area that necessitates some level of ongoing interaction, e.g., sharing a building. Ruth Morton Fellowship Baptist, a multiethnic, monocultural Canadian congregation, shares its building with both a Japanese and a Spanish congregation. During a special “Clean up Vancouver” day, the grounds of the building were used as a focal point for people to bring their garbage. Members from each congregation worked together to greet and guide people from the community.

To a large extent this arrangement avoids the stresses of close working conditions when cultural norms are different. It also facilitates worship in a number of languages without the discomfort of enduring meetings in a language that is only understood to a limited extent. It allows each congregation to find its comfort zone in associating and cooperating with other ethnic groups while maintaining autonomy. It provides for second generation cross over when the children of the immigrant population become desirous of a more Canadian expression. The realization of this potential increases when there is intentional long range planning between members of each congregation.

At the same time, if there is no deliberate interaction between the churches to bridge the language and culture gap,

misunderstandings and frustrations will be inevitable because of different assumptions in the areas of cooperation. Concepts of responsibility, ownership and sharing vary from culture to culture and the different perspectives on the treatment of property can result in tensions. For example, if a nursery is

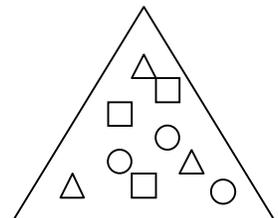


shared, a different standard of cleanliness and the treatment of toys can cause irritation. If these tensions are not dealt with in a manner reflecting cultural sensitivity that results in greater appreciation and accommodation of each other's perspective, the goal of increased cooperation will not materialize. This can be devastating to the children of immigrants who require support for the important transitions to live as effective Christians in this society. The arrows added in this representation of the model indicate cooperation and interaction centered around a significant commonality such as a building.

### 3) 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. The intent of minor ethnic groups is to assimilate into the cultural milieu of the local church. These assumptions concerning the cultural expressions and function of the congregation are usually unspoken. In Canada we have many churches with people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, but decisions are made based on Canadian perspectives. For example, one local church with a number of Filipino families recently held a "baby shower" for a new mother. This practice initiates the family into Canadian customs rather than celebrating the arrival of a child with Filipino customs. Recently at a multiethnic local church I was discussing cultural issues with a Punjabi couple. The wife mentioned how they appreciated the opportunity to occasionally attend a worship service in a monocultural Punjabi congregation rather than their own multiethnic local church. The husband especially enjoys those services because of Punjabi cultural elements such as the musical instruments and singing the Punjabi Psalms. This indicates that their orientation to the multiethnic congregation was one of assimilation into the Canadian expression of church rather than asserting their Punjabi preferences.

The strength of welcoming ethnic diversity within an assumed Canadian format is that it appeals to immigrants whose goal is to assimilate into Canadian culture. The Canadian culture acts as a common structure within which the body of Christ can function with relatively little culturally generated tension. Both Collingwood Fellowship Baptist in Vancouver and Richmond Baptist are good examples of this model as they are highly diverse ethnically and yet function according to the norms (e.g., decision making, leadership, goals, worship, language) found in the majority of FEBBC/Y churches. The model is illustrated on the right.



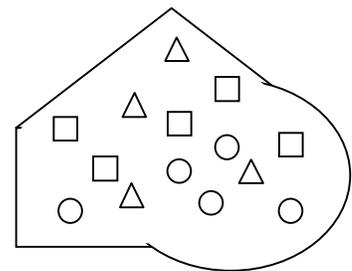
However, when the dominant culture is assumed as the norm it can so overpower other cultural values and concerns that certain ethnic groups may feel frustrated and limited. Because the cultural expectations are assumed rather than negotiated and discussed, unfulfilled expectations based on cultural diversity can lead to discontent. For example, a “time-oriented” pastor can become very frustrated with “event-oriented”<sup>10</sup> members who care little about arriving “on time.” People from some Asian cultures tend to be very uncomfortable with the casual Canadian treatment of elders and leaders in Canada and can interpret the lack of proper address as rudeness. Perhaps the greatest area of frustration and cultural tension in our ethnically diverse FEBBC/Y churches stems from miscommunication and misunderstanding concerning authority and decision making due to the difference between “high-context” and “low-context” values.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, such a congregation may simply not meet the needs of new immigrants who spend week after week struggling in the foreign Canadian culture. On Sunday they are looking for a place to relax and worship in their own heart language and environment.

#### 4) Multiethnic Multicultural Churches

In this model two or more culturally distinct groups have reached a “critical mass”<sup>12</sup> 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 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. Due to the contrasts between cultures, there will be friction and this attempt to develop appropriate compromises, accommodate representative leadership and adopt suitable decision making processes may be unsuccessful resulting in one group leaving to form its own cultural expression of a local church.

The strength of this approach is that cultural distinctions cannot be ignored which can result in a potentially richer



<sup>10</sup> For an explanation of this and other intercultural dynamics see Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-culturally: An incarnational Model for Personal Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968, 2003), 37-50.

<sup>11</sup> See Sarah A. Lanier, *Foreign to Familiar*, 79-99.

<sup>12</sup> The actual percentage of this “critical mass” when a particular ethnic group will shift from a goal of assimilation to cultural affirmation is dependent upon a number of factors (e.g., leadership, dissimilarity to host culture, strength of ethnic identity, etc.) and so will vary from situation to situation.

congregational experience. Success in a healthy, functioning congregation is the result of intentional sensitivity to and validation of the other dominant cultures coupled with a strong commitment to unity. A willingness to compromise and accommodate the other can be an indication of spiritual maturity and will provide an environment in which the Holy Spirit will stretch believers in unique ways. This model can be visualized as a composite of various cultures.

However, conflict and misunderstanding is inevitable.<sup>13</sup> Political power struggles may emerge and cultural lines may be drawn. Resolving differences is impossible without a clear understanding of the different cultural procedures for conflict resolution. “Agree to disagree” principles will conflict with the need to compromise for unified ministry. Such internal conflicts require cultural diversity training and support<sup>14</sup> to be resolved and can take up an exorbitant amount of time that detracts from outreach ministries and other programs.

As one example, Oakridge Baptist in Vancouver is about 60% Chinese and 40% mixed ethnic but primarily Canadian. This is a multiethnic setting, but a bicultural congregation as only the Chinese section is sufficiently large enough to assert their cultural values, while the remainder is satisfied with the Canadian expression of church. They have separate worship services, but one board with members from each group. The board functions as the primary forum for setting common goals, resolving conflicts and exploring intercultural relations.

### 5) Multiracial churches

A *multiracial* local church is a multiethnic, monocultural congregation that seeks to overcome racial divides and prejudices.<sup>15</sup> This is particularly relevant in a context where there is long-standing segregation between visible ethnic groups. The focus in these churches is on reconciliation and acceptance rather than cultural distinctions and so is actually peripheral to the present topic of intercultural relationships within our churches. However, it is important to understand the distinction between *racial issues* in the church, which concerns unchristian notions of prejudice and intolerance based on color and heritage, and *cultural distinctives*, which affirms diversity in the way people live.

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<sup>13</sup> The difficulty of dealing with these conflicts is proportional to the importance of the cultural differences between the ethnic groups as well inversely proportional to the extent the representatives of these groups have been integrated into Canadian society.

<sup>14</sup> For example, culturally aware individuals are available to lead churches through programs such as *Building Intentionally Intercultural Churches: A Manual to Facilitate Transition*. Edited by Rob Brynjolfson and Jonathan Lewis (World Evangelical Alliance, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> For books on this topic see George Yancey, *One Body, One Spirit: Principles of successful multiracial churches* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003) and David Anderson, *Multicultural Ministry: Finding your church's unique Rhythm* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

Obscuring this important difference is unfortunate as it unfairly criticizes monocultural expressions of the local church. This is evident in the “exclusive” part of Sheffield’s multicultural matrix<sup>16</sup> as well as in a couple of 2005 articles on multiracial churches in *Christianity Today*<sup>17</sup>. The latter failed to clarify the important distinction between the missiologically sound *cultural* homogeneous unit principle as developed by Donald McGavran, from the disturbing practice of *racial* homogeneous communities. The former seeks to develop an expression of the gospel within a cultural group, whereas the latter seeks to preserve racial purity through exclusion.

### Theological considerations

#### 1) Culturally Diverse Local Churches

Some proponents of the multicultural local church overstate their claim that ethnic groups can fully maintain their cultural identity and expression of church while maintaining unity with other ethnic groups in one local congregation.<sup>18</sup> Others insist that it is possible, good and necessary for people to “suspend cultural expectations... [and] undergo ‘a readjustment in identity’ – in order to draw closer to Christ and to one another, rather than to a particular cultural perspective.”<sup>19</sup> In this quote, Sheffield correctly recognizes that for a multicultural congregation to exist it cannot preserve a pure expression of the cultural distinctives of any ethnic group. Such an arrangement involves deliberate “transformation,” “our new way of doing things,” the “influence of others” and the use of “intercultural dialogue forms” that shape those involved in the process. In order to create a multicultural local church such adjustments are necessary. But is it possible, good and necessary for *all* people to belong to a multicultural local church (assuming that pragmatic geographical and linguistic concerns are not a factor<sup>20</sup>)?

The result of such compromise and accommodation would be a loss of cultural elements and expressions that can only be preserved within monocultural congregations. Sheffield’s statement assumes that abandoning cultural perspectives represents a positive development. However, it is precisely those unique cultural perspectives that provide the multifaceted expressions of the church of

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<sup>16</sup> Sheffield, *The Multicultural Leader*, 92.

<sup>17</sup> Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim, *All Churches Should Be Multiracial*; available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/004/22.33.html> and Noel Castellanos, Bill Hybels, Soong-Chan Rah and Frank Reid, *Harder than Anyone Can Imagine*; available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/004/23.36.html>; internet; accessed 21 August 2006.

<sup>18</sup> From conversations with those involved in multiethnic churches.

<sup>19</sup> Sheffield, *The Multicultural Leader*, 76.

<sup>20</sup> See DeYoung et al., *All Churches Should Be Multiracial*, for this caveat.

Jesus Christ. Such willingness to sacrifice culturally unique local church expressions would be similar, to paraphrase the quote above, to insisting that one must choose between speaking English (a particular cultural perspective) or drawing close to Christ, rather than recognizing that English is one vehicle through which our spiritual relationship with Christ is expressed. In the same way, any and all cultures can function as appropriate forms for an expression of the body of Christ, and multicultural local churches by nature serve to diminish, transform or limit unique cultural expressions.

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.

The biblical basis for validating culturally specific local expressions of the body of Christ is that the variety of nations and languages is presented as a blessing of God to be appreciated, rather than a curse to be overcome. Genesis 10 recounts God’s blessing of Noah’s sons and descendents “by their clans and languages,” *before* the tower of Babel.<sup>21</sup> Diversity in the praise of God is celebrated in the Psalms, e.g. Ps. 148.<sup>22</sup> During the transforming event of Pentecost people did not hear the message in one language that everyone understood. Rather each person heard the message in their own tongue (Acts 2:8). The great concessions to the law afforded the Gentiles in Acts 15 by the apostles were not intended to be emulated by the churches of the Jewish believers, but represented a contextualization by James permitting different cultural expressions of the body of Christ.<sup>23</sup> The image before the throne in Rev. 7:9 does not point to a loss of cultural identity in order to achieve unity, but rather a multifaceted expression that would include all cultural and linguistic expressions.

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<sup>21</sup> Stephen A. Rhodes. *When the Nations Meet: The Church in a Multicultural World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 24.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>23</sup> Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), 47.

This may very well be intent of Rev. 21:24,26 which speaks of the nations bringing their glory and honor into God's city.<sup>24</sup> Most importantly, the incarnation of Christ provides us with the fundamental paradigm whereby the gospel, God's glory and God's word can be sufficiently revealed and expressed within diverse cultural settings. "Incarnational thinking is the recognition that God deals with nations within their cultural reality, not from the outside. The apostle Paul is a clear example of this perspective in his goal to become a Jew for the Jews and a Gentile to win the Gentiles (1 Cor 9:20,21)."<sup>25</sup>

Those visionary people within the FEBBC/Y who believe in the value of working out appropriate compromises between ethnic groups to form a context within which unity can have communal expression as a local church are to be commended. This task is both appropriate and helpful in exploring the complexities of cultural compromise as well as presenting a facet of the church that can educate and inspire us concerning the value of intercultural relationships. Sheffield provides insight here:

'Intercultural relations' defines the ways in which people lay their differences on the table as a matter of course and work, communicate, coalesce across those differences in order to understand and be understood. Empowerment is about the process by which people learn from new information, new ways of thinking, and begin to act confidently upon those insights.<sup>26</sup>

Nonetheless, this should not be the vision for all people or all churches. Monocultural churches preserve an expression of Christianity that is also legitimate and one part of the universal expression of the kingdom of God. This uniqueness cannot be maintained in a multicultural local church where change, assimilation and compromise are required to ensure unity.

## 2) Multicultural Church (Body of Christ)

Many scholars interpret Jesus' plan for the church primarily as it refers to the local church. While there is good reason for this (e.g., the epistles address local congregations), an unfortunate result can be a tendency to be inward looking, to equate "building up the church" as numerical growth of one particular congregation, and a desire and expectation to express all aspects of the body of Christ within one local group. However, even as the missional church concept<sup>27</sup> encourages people to see the essence and vision of the local church as *outward*, measured in its impact on the

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<sup>24</sup> I owe this insight to Richard Flemming.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Naylor, *The Intercultural Communication of the Gospel*, unpublished 2003, 41.

<sup>26</sup> Sheffield, *The Multicultural Leader*, 73.

<sup>27</sup> See my missional articles found in *Cross-Cultural Impact* at [www.nbseminary.com/CCI.htm](http://www.nbseminary.com/CCI.htm) for further clarification and review of relevant authors.

world, even so a broader vision of the church as encompassing believers beyond a singular congregational expression allows believers to participate in the multicultural mosaic that is Jesus' body.

It is important to recognize and affirm that the church of Jesus Christ is greater than any one local expression. We need not all strive to become multicultural in our local churches to reflect the Rev. 7:9 vision. Rather we need to recognize that the church *is already* multicultural. No one congregation is capable of reflecting, nor required to reflect, the vast diversity of the body of Christ. Instead the people of God, in whatever context they interrelate in the name of Christ, *are* the church as they live out God's kingdom and reveal God's glory. Paul's address to individual churches in the epistles was not because he held their autonomy and distinction from each other as an essential part of their identity. Rather it was due to practical considerations of geographical distance as his practice of addressing all believers in one place as part of a "church" (*ekklesia*, sing., e.g., 1 Thess. 1:1) indicates. The important affirmation of all believers as "one body" in Ephesians 4:4 as well as Jesus' reference to "my church" (*ekklesia*, sing., Matt. 16:18) points to a nuance of "church" that goes beyond local expressions.

A multicultural local church is one legitimate expression of what a congregation should strive to be in a multiethnic setting, but should not be regarded as the epitome that each local church should seek to become. Rather it is one expression of the church of Jesus Christ that requires a variety of expressions in order to fully express the transforming power of the gospel. No single local expression can be all that the church is intended to be. Churches that attempt to give many cultures exposure and appreciation are limited by a number of factors (e.g., time, language, values) that can only be fully expressed in ethnic churches. Rather than viewing monoethnic churches as "less than" God intends, it is more appropriate to see them as "part of" what God intends for his church. Conversely, rather than seeing a multicultural local church as "less than" God's desire due to the necessary compromises and assimilation that occurs, it is more appropriate to see this model as playing an important role in God's kingdom<sup>28</sup> by encouraging healthy and synergistic intercultural relationships.

### 3) Local Churches as part of the Intercultural Church

If the primary expression of the church of Jesus Christ is understood to be broader than, and yet encompass, local church expressions of the body of Christ, then the need for all churches to be

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<sup>28</sup> The kingdom of God is understood here as all that is under the reign of God, which includes, but is not synonymous with, the church of Jesus Christ.

multicultural vanishes. At the same time, if a local church is to participate fully in what the Lord is doing within his church it is essential that it participate in and identify with that broader church experience. This necessitates the development of intercultural relationships with other culturally diverse churches. That is, in order for the multicultural church to fulfill its potential as the Bride of Christ, it must also become an *intercultural* church. There must be an intentional investment of believers to stretch beyond their cultural comfort zones and develop significant relationships with Christians of other ethnic identities. When each congregation views itself as one expression of the culturally diverse body of Christ, a paradoxical and creative tension develops that leads the local church to become both a unique part of the body of Christ influencing other ethnic or multiethnic churches and be itself shaped by the cultural expressions of others. By validating a continuum of local church models as given above, space is provided for people to fully express their own cultural preferences, while encouraging interaction and cooperation according to the level they see fit. Galatians 2:1-10 provides a basis for the spirit of cooperation and affirmation required between churches (Paul, Barnabus and Titus meet with the church in Jerusalem for affirmation of the gospel message and partnering in the evangelistic task), as well as a biblical validation of culturally defined local church planting efforts (Paul and Barnabus to the Gentiles, James, Peter and John to the Jews).

Furthermore, when Christians within their culturally diverse expressions of belief develop intercultural relationships with other believers, a mosaic of faith and a broadening of spiritual horizons can occur that will impact those outside the kingdom. Interaction and cooperation between each of the models represented in FEBBC/Y churches can create a synergy and vitality that energizes, challenges and transforms the way life in Christ is lived out.

### Developing Intercultural Relationships within Culturally Distinct Local Church Models<sup>29</sup>

In quoting Bruce Barton, Phill Butler relates an illustration that he applies to evangelism but which is also appropriate when considering how to develop intercultural relationships:

How do you get on a moving train? Do you approach it from right angles? At best you'll be embarrassed. At worst you'll be injured. No, the only way to get on a moving train is to come alongside, approximate the speed of the train and, then, all you have to do is step on....

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<sup>29</sup> Another important consideration is the indicators and processes for *transitioning* from one type of local church model to another. For example, a group of sister churches may consider the value of consolidating into one congregation, or due to generational assimilation of ethnic groups into the Canadian culture, a multicultural congregation may need to shift to a multiethnic, monocultural local church. This is a question that deserves further study but space does not permit discussion at this time.

[Instead of this] we often:

- Ignore the fact that the train is already moving
- Appear to care less what direction it's taking.
- In effect, ask the individual we're hoping to influence "to get off the train" so we can talk on *our* familiar turf, in terms familiar to us.<sup>30</sup>

How can intercultural relationships between churches be developed in sensitive, synergistic ways? The encouraging news is that much is already happening. A first step for any congregation with a vision to enhance intercultural relationships in its setting is to network with those who already have an intercultural agenda and are working to fulfill it. How are they expressing their relationships? What changes are they seeking to implement? What is the common goal they are working towards and how does it benefit each ethnic group? What is the forum for dialogue and cooperation?

However, nothing will occur unless the local church is committed to *intentionally develop synergistic relationships* with believers from other cultural contexts. This interaction needs to be *intentionally developed* because only an intentional investment will succeed. People gravitate away from the discomfort of intercultural relationships unless the will and vision is there to design and implement an agenda. The interaction needs to be *synergistic* in that it must result in kingdom development in order to have value and for people to maintain a passion for continued cooperation. Further the interaction needs to function on the basis of *relationships* that are holistic and develop a sense of value for each participant rather than being merely utilitarian.

Opportunity for education and training in cultural diversity should be taken advantage of. Equipping some members so that they can understand their own cultural preferences, recognize and prevent misunderstandings as well as facilitate the resolution of tensions can do much to prevent failure in intercultural relationships.

In addition, the identification and utilization of bicultural "bridge" people will open doors of mutual understanding. These people, usually the children of immigrants, have from their childhood been enculturated into two distinct ethnic groups and therefore understand and can live comfortably with the underlying values and assumptions of both groups within the appropriate context. They are so familiar with the complexities and subtleties necessary to successfully function in and appreciate each cultural group that their innate ability to shift from culture to culture provides invaluable guidance.

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<sup>30</sup> Phillip W. Butler, *Well Connected: Releasing Power and Restoring Hope through Kingdom Partnerships*, (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2006). Chp. 5, p. 7 as cited in <http://www.connectedbook.net/images/WellConnectedChap5-AProcessNotAnEvent.pdf>.

Some specific suggestions:

### 1) Monocultural monoethnic churches

For Canadian monocultural churches:

- Partner with an ethnic congregation and cooperate on common projects. Start small by having a picnic together, celebrating communion or taking advantage of a community event to serve together. The development of this relationship can lead to more extensive activities such as a short term missions trip or an ethnic church plant.
- Partner with other monocultural churches or ministries in their intercultural agenda. For example, Grace Baptist in Hope is developing ministry opportunities with First Nations, Nordel Baptist in Delta is exploring ways to connect with their multicultural context, a number of other churches and ministries are involved with immigrants.

For ethnic works in a Canadian context:

- Partner with a Canadian monocultural congregation. This can be mutually beneficial in addressing issues such as facilitating cultural transitions for the children and grandchildren of immigrants.
- Partner with FEBInternational and Northwest Baptist Seminary to train leaders for missions in their country of origin. Joe and Lourdes DeGuzman work with FEBInternational in their home country of the Philippines and their impact on the churches on the island of Palawan provides an excellent example of the potential of such an arrangement.

### 2) Sister churches

The arrangement of shared buildings by ethnically distinct congregations is a resource with potential that is often not fully realized. Such churches have opportunity to take advantage of the proximity with these congregations to develop important synergistic and lasting relationships.

- Form a committee with members from each congregation to set an agenda of cooperation. These members can also be equipped with cultural diversity training.
- Make intentional plans for interaction towards a mutually beneficial goal. For example, a new local church plant, a joint service for those who wish to transition to a more Canadian style of worship, a short term missions trip, joint meetings to discuss theological issues of interest to both groups.
- Encourage and provide opportunity for all ministry staff to minister crossculturally. Segregating or limiting ministry leaders to work among only one ethnic group hampers the development of a

vision for intercultural development by failing to break down cultural walls and thus perpetuates misunderstandings.

- Explore the ways some churches are taking advantage of their situation. Faith Baptist and El Redentor in Vancouver are two culturally distinct sister churches that have a number of cooperative initiatives while ensuring that diversity is maintained with unity. Guisachan Fellowship Baptist in Kelowna took the initiative to bring in a Hispanic pastor.

### 3) Multiethnic monocultural churches

- Clearly define the monocultural nature of the congregation to avoid conflict and unfulfilled expectations. Focus on the benefits that come from the integration and assimilation of other ethnic groups.
- At the same time, recognize and celebrate the ethnic diversity evident within the congregation.
- Partner with ethnic churches to complement the monocultural focus. Encourage people in the congregation to participate in their own ethnic expression of church in addition to the multiethnic congregation. The recognition that the church of Jesus Christ is broader than any one expression permits a partnership with other congregations to provide what each other lacks and thus fulfills the needs of the people.

### 4) Multicultural churches

- Recognize both the limits and value of this model and be honest about expectations and objectives. All representatives must be committed to an ongoing negotiation of cultural compromise as well as a spirit of celebration for the differences.
- Cultural diversity training is highly recommended because this model requires both time and skill to deal with inevitable conflicts that arise from intercultural disagreements.
- Be prepared to transition those ethnic groups out of the congregation that cannot adjust to a common agenda.

### Conclusion

Multiculturalism in Canada is under fire. Does “making room” for other cultures result in the destruction of Canadian values and increased friction between ethnic groups? Is assimilation into Canadian norms required for unity and prosperity? Samuel Huntington, a professor at Harvard University, has astutely proposed that conflicts in this age will occur due to clashes between distinct

cultural communities or civilizations.<sup>31</sup> Every day the newspapers provide support for his thesis. Attempts at multiculturalism seem increasing naïve and idealistic, and yet globalization necessitates the interaction of people across cultures. In many ways this seems to be an unsolvable dilemma.

The church of Jesus Christ has an opportunity in this environment to demonstrate how people from diverse cultures can find unity within the identity provided in Christ.<sup>32</sup> Some will be called to manage accommodation and compromise for multicultural expressions. Others will demonstrate the ability to sensitively help immigrants to assimilate into the host culture. Still others will focus on maintaining ethnic and cultural identities and worship forms while maintaining important intercultural relationships. Each of these models for the local church is a viable part of the mosaic that makes up the church of Jesus Christ. Affirming these models as well as implementing an agenda to engage in productive intercultural relationships will do much to help us as followers of Jesus Christ be an example of unity in diversity to the world. In this way Ephesians 2-4 provides a biblical pattern for unity within the multicultural diversity that is found within the church of Jesus Christ. As we develop intercultural relationships to pursue common goals for the sake of the kingdom, my hope is, as expressed by Dean Flemming, that we might “hear the Scripture story afresh so that the church might learn to sing the gospel in new keys within the rich mosaic of contexts in our world.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), e.g., 36, 224-225, 309.

<sup>32</sup> The implications of multiculturalism for Canadian churches are vast and deserving of further study, but are unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>33</sup> Flemming, *Contextualization*, 24.