

Toward becoming a multicultural church

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Society in Canada and the U.S. is becoming more and more multicultural, because of the continuing influx of newcomers from across the globe. These newcomers have various statuses on this piece of land: they are immigrants, international students, visitors, businesspeople, refugees, people who come here to join their families. These newcomers may live in your town and visit the shopping malls you frequent. They may even move in next door.

How do you think about these new neighbors when you observe their ways of speaking, dressing, and behaving? What reaction do you have when you hear them speaking in languages other than your own?

You are now meeting and greeting them day after day.

How do you think about these new friends and neighbors when you come across them and observe their ways of speaking, dressing, and behaving? What reaction do you have when you hear them speaking in languages other than your own?

The world is changing; so is the church

Some of these newcomers are Christians; others become Christians after their arrival in

Canada or the U.S. They may attend your church and participate in your congregation's life. Then you have more opportunities to relate to these peoples who are culturally and ethnically different from you.

The children of these new church members may share the same Sunday school classroom with your kids. And one day when you come to your Bible study group, you may be introduced to a person whose race and color of skin is different from yours. You may even be asked to provide services to them, such as helping out in an English language class or being an assistant in a childcare program. Some of these children and their parents have different customs and speak little English.

Human beings may experience culture shock when they face changes that arise with an influx of people of another culture. Specialists in cultural research and studies tell us that human beings usually respond in the following ways when faced with people of another culture:

Xenophobia. Fear of another culture may result in racism, hate groups, and crime. Xenophobic people may blame the newcomers for any misfortune that happens in town. Immigrants' traditions, values, and ways of life may be ridiculed. They may be harassed when they shop in the town. Violence may even break out on public transit. Fear of another culture may be manifested as hate.

Ethnocentrism. The belief that one's own culture is the best may display itself in patronizing people of other cultures or in stereotyping their cultures. It may lead to tokenism, in which newcomers are invited to participate in the dominant culture, but not in a meaningful way.

For example, when church leaders elect council members to represent the growing number of ethnic groups joining the church, they need to examine their motives: do they really want to include these newcomers and open themselves to change that will inevitably result, or do they seek the illusion of representation even as they maintain the status quo?

Forced assimilation. With the belief that everyone should be "like us," people welcome newcomers of other cultures as long as these others will assimilate: people of other cultures can be on our team only if they play by our rules. The approach seems friendly and helpful to others. But people of other cultures are told to integrate into the mainstream culture and give up part or all of their own culture. "English only" is a must.

Acts 15 tells us that some leaders of the early church were willing to accept Gentile converts into their midst only if they became Jews. Do we express the same mentality, without really being aware that we are doing so?

Segregation. Some people believe that different races and culture groups should remain separate from each other. But a "separate but equal" policy usually means "separate and unequal." People taking this position stress that only leaders of their own culture can give appropriate guidance to a group and therefore should do so in separate venues.

Acceptance. People who are willing to respect and welcome people of other cultures seek to coexist, accommodate, and build relationship with them. Tolerance is important in the accepting process. People who adopt this posture see all cultures as equal and worthy of respect.

Celebration. Acceptance is a good beginning, but God wants something more: that we value other cultures. God created us as cultural beings and values diversity in all creation. Celebration

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extends beyond accepting and tolerating to embracing and valuing. People learn to appreciate one another, and they desire multicultural experiences and relationship.

When people of different cultural groups come together, a process of cultural synthesis and adaptation can take place. Then a new culture and new identity are formed that include and incorporate elements of various cultural heritages. In fact the mission of the church of God is not to promote one out-come or one culture over the others but

rather to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to people of every race and language and culture in terms they can understand, and to transform every culture from within so that its life is grounded on values of God's kingdom. According to Isaiah's vision, God's house is to be a house of prayer for all nations (Isa. 56:7).

From this perspective, the presence of diverse cultural and linguistic groups in and around a church becomes a real challenge for the organization and leadership. Church leaders and volunteers may need to undertake some cultural awareness training in order to provide appropriate care and services to their members and contacts.

Stereotypes and archetypes

Stereotypes have three characteristics: They are the perspectives of cultural outsiders, people outside the culture being stereotyped. They are restrictive or limiting. And they are accusatory.

Peter observes that in gatherings within the culturally main-stream church, members of the Chinese minority group speak only to one another, unless approached by an English speaker.

Then they only respond to the speaker's specific question. After a while Peter comments to other church members who share his cultural background, "Chinese people are quiet and cliquish and must not like to speak in English."

Generalizing from limited observation of certain qualities and then attributing these qualities to all members of a cultural group creates a box that limits the way others of that group will be seen by the majority group. Stereotyping leads people outside the group to decide who these others are, without considering the qualities of individuals. A comment based on a stereotype creates barriers to real and fruitful communication and relationship.

Peter could respond in another way. He could begin to learn about Chinese culture from someone within the Chinese culture and so develop a general idea of Chinese values and beliefs. Then Peter would learn that Chinese who are not comfortable speaking English will not want to lose face by making linguistic mistakes.

This alternate response is called an archetype. It allows a person to have a general idea of cultural norms, customs, and values without limiting individuals to that archetype. An archetype is put forward by an insider and is nonaccusatory and non-restrictive. This archetypal model can help us avoid stereotyping, and it can make for better relationships in a multicultural setting.

Misattribution

Misattribution is another big problem in multicultural relationships. It attributes meaning and motive to another's behaviour based on one's own culture or experience. Misattribution is inaccurate and often evokes an immediate emotional response that further weakens the developing relationship.

Two women serving on the same committee are assigned to pair up in order to talk about a subtopic. Ly is a Hmong woman and Susan is Anglo-Canadian. When the conversation ends, they each share their comments about the other to a person of their own cultural background. Ly says that Susan spoke very fast and was eager for Ly to make certain commitments in the course of the conversation. Susan tells her friends that she found her encounter with Ly frustrating. She observed Ly sitting quietly with her arms crossed, refusing to talk. She also said that Ly would only listen and gave little response.

See how each woman interpreted the behaviour of the other through her own cultural lens? If each one had understood more of the other's culture, their interpretations of the other would have been quite different. Ly would have understood that Susan's

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rate of speech only indicates where she was born and grew up and does not mean that she is trying to be unclear, pushy, or domineering. She would understand that Susan's culture is result oriented, so the expectation that conversation would yield some kind of commitment would be usual. This information would have helped Ly to avoid her misattribution.

Likewise, if Susan had understood Ly's culture, her conclusions would have changed. In Ly's culture, it is a sign of respect to sit quietly while someone is speaking, and it is inappropriate to make a commitment hastily.

This cultural awareness would have given Susan the ability to attach a totally different meaning to the encounter.

High and low context cultures

What is context? Context includes *environment* (location, setting, decoration etc.); *process* (how the meeting is arranged, how participants are invited, and how guests are introduced etc); *expression* (body gesture, facial language, tone of voice, etc.); *appearance* (clothes, jewellery, hairstyle, etc.). Different cultures relate to context in different ways. Low context cultures attach little importance to context, while high context cultures attach great significance to context.

People of a high context culture believe that the context of an event is as important as the event itself. Low context cultures believe that the content of the message is more important than the context. In other words, people who belong to low context cultures value directness.

Some years ago, when an Anglo-Canadian church invited some Korean Christian families to form a worship service in the Korean language, the Korean community responded positively. The pastor of the hosting church thought that instead of locating

the brand new worship service in the sanctuary, where the main worship service took place, it would be better to hold the Korean worship service in a classroom in the church basement. The pastor belongs to a low context culture, and he thought the smaller group would feel cosier and the participants would be more at home if they gathered in the basement. But the Korean families felt humiliated and thought they were being treated as second-class members of the church. They believe that worship belongs in the sanctuary.

Many Asian cultures are high context cultures. Remember that for high context cultures, the setting or context of a meeting or interaction will be as significant as the meeting or interaction itself. High context may not always mean formal, but it will mean that one pays attention to the context. What did the church inadvertently communicate through the context of the event? By bearing in mind this cultural difference, we can remove obstacles and enhance opportunities for building cross-cultural relationship.

Culture shock

In a multicultural society in a postmodern world, newcomers and long-standing members of the church need to cultivate a new culture in which they can live and worship together. Culture shock is the experience of anxiety or frustration that comes of not knowing the rules or having the skills to adjust to a new culture. Culture shock is almost inevitable when you approach or are approached by a new culture.

Joseph doubtless experienced culture shock when he was betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt (Gen. 37). But he eventually learned a new language and acquired a new way of living in the new environment. God did not leave Joseph alone. To the new immigrants, the God of Joseph is the same God who takes them to this new land and helps them adjust to the new culture. To the existing members of the church in Canada or the U.S., the same God is able to help us embrace and walk along with these Christians who come from other parts of the world.

How can we be approachable?

How can newcomers and long-standing members who share church life together be more approachable?

Be open. Openness is an ability to welcome people into our presence and help them feel safe and comfortable. Openness and approachability are keys to helping newcomers overcome culture shock and make new friends. Most of the time our actions reveal a certain degree of openness to others. Trust can grow as we are willing to open ourselves and make ourselves approachable.

Smile. A genuine smile and warm greeting convey welcome to others. On Sunday morning, we should show others our genuine smiling face. Our smiles will warm church life and remove cultural barriers. If we all have a genuine smile on our faces, both new-

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comers and long-time members of the congregation will find the church a peaceful and relaxing place to talk, share, and worship together.

Reach out. Jesus reached out his hands to people, so why shouldn't we? Move toward people, either by holding the door open as you see them coming, or by physically drawing near as they come into the church. These gestures are simple ways of reaching out to people in our church. Our words of greeting and our handshake may make someone's day.

Ask questions. People feel valued and respected when others approach them and warmly ask them about their life, family, and activities. But our questions must reveal honest interest in others. When people

respond to our questions, we have to listen attentively. Then we need to let our thoughts and concerns flow into the conversation. When this exchange happens, people will sense bonds forming within the congregation.

Engage people. Invite people into small group conversation, projects, and activities, and their sense of belonging will grow. Never turn away people who want to join in; don't leave them feeling unwelcome and rejected.

Make no judgment. Last but not least, be slow to make judgments when socializing with someone whose culture is different from yours. Try to learn more about that new culture and be considerate of the situation of others who may find it difficult to speak a new language or get used to new practices.

Tom Sine's words in *Wild Hope* continue to be worthy of our attention: "We are headed into a future in which we have the opportunity to be enriched by the many and expanding ethnic cultures that [constitute] our country. But before we can receive each other's gifts, we must repent and be reconciled to one another across racial and cultural barriers."¹

Note

¹ Tom Sine, *Wild Hope* (Tunbridge Wells: Monarch, 1991), 142–43.

About the author

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