

Diversity—are you ready for this?

Tanya Crooks

How am I supposed to support this complex community? I had just begun as principal at Redeemer Lutheran College in Rochedale, Queensland, and was met by this challenge: How do we embrace diversity, cultural and otherwise at the college as an arm of the ministry of the Lutheran church? Now I own upfront that I am from an Anglo-Saxon background and so form what most in our country would consider the dominant cultural group. Yet when I first joined the Lutheran church as an adult, even I felt instantly alienated when I was asked over and over who my ancestors were with the expected response being a known Germanic name. When I declared that I had no such pedigree, fellow Lutheran church goers or colleagues would turn away, politely finding themselves with no point of reference. So, it was when I was appointed the principal of one of our most multicultural Lutheran schools that the concept of belonging was already on my radar.

Providing education in a Christian context is a wonderful challenge. Even from its inception, Redeemer was to be 'a school firmly grounded in Christian teaching and faith in the Lutheran tradition, serving students of many faiths and of no faith. It aims to strive for excellence in education, developing the whole child far beyond formal instruction in classrooms, science laboratory or library.'¹ Intentionally established as a school for the community, Redeemer now serves families with heritage from all around the world, with almost 50% of our current student population speaking a language other than English as their first language. The biblical and theological conviction that God has made of one blood all nations of men and women (Acts 17:26), drawing them 'from every tribe, language, nation, and race' (Rev 5:9,10 TEV) is our firm foundation.

Like all communities of great diversity, there are struggles, pain, conflicts, tears, and fears that we experience; the tension and suspicion, especially in the early days of the recent world pandemic, the misunderstandings that occur when people of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds come together to intentionally live together as a multicultural faith community.

These challenges are at the core value of my principalship and as spiritual leader of a multicultural school. Redeemer is not alone in this challenge. As cities, suburbs, schools and congregations change around Australia with the arrival of immigrants from Asia, Europe, Africa, Latin America, Middle East, Pacific Islands and the Indian sub-continent, the church, school and more particularly the school leadership team, will have to come up with creative and practical ways to develop and nurture cultural and religious harmony within our community as an outpouring of the mission of the church.

The presence of these different cultural and racial groups in our local communities is a major, massive, mind-boggling, millennial shift for Australian Lutherans, both at school

¹ L. Robin Kleinschmidt, *River of Hope: Reminiscences of the First Years of Redeemer Lutheran College* (Underwood, QLD: Kingswood, 2005), 20.

and congregational church levels. We need to be aware that this shift is not going to change direction anytime soon. For many of our schools and churches, this idea of multi-racial and multilingual work and worship seems far over the horizon. However, immigrants will continue to arrive, even during a pandemic. We will be challenged to respond in at least one of two ways: either turn our back and see our congregations and schools dwindle, or extend the hand of fellowship and embrace our brothers and sisters from other cultures and faiths.

Cross-cultural or multi-racial ministry is nothing new. We see it in scripture, and Jesus practiced it through his ministry. We have the story of Pentecost. 'It is no accident,' writes Cheryl J. Sanders, 'that the Spirit chose an international, multicultural gathering of believers in Jerusalem for the Pentecost outpouring, whose testimony was that in our languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds and power. Pentecost is God's remedy for disunity. Many languages, many colours, many cultures, but one testimony of one God.'²

Leading a multicultural school is a daunting but truly desirable challenge. It requires us to create new traditions and symbols that incorporate both the indigenous and the foreign-born experience. One of the fundamental lessons we need to learn is that a multicultural community is not a melting pot in which all the unique features, styles, and behaviours of different cultural groups disappear so that we can achieve unity in diversity in Christ. This is without doubt one of the most difficult issues to deal with in building a multicultural community. The tendency is for the dominant indigenous group in the church, in our case from a Germanic background, to feel that the minority cultures should give up their cultural identity once they become part of the congregation or school, but that is not multicultural ministry. Multiculturalism is a dynamic process that allows many cultures to maintain, embrace, and respect their cultural identities or uniqueness while engaging in dialogue that builds trust and embraces grace.

I most recently went looking for the contact details of the pastor who leads the Cantonese speaking Lutheran congregation that worships in our college chapel. As I opened the LCA Yearbook it became apparent that even our church structures and organisation separate out our congregations according to heritage. Not listed like any of our other congregations, here at the back of the directory are listings for SMP—Special Ministry Pastors and congregations. The word 'special' is loaded in our contemporary setting, meaning either better or belonging to a specific group. Aren't these communities of fellow Christians all 'us' in the body of Christ?

The results of the latest national census today reveal we're a fast changing, ever-expanding, culturally diverse nation. In communities across the country, there is an increasing variety in terms of country of birth, languages spoken, whether people are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, and religious affiliation (or secular beliefs). [The 2016 Census](#) shows that two thirds (67%) of the Australian population were born in Australia. Nearly half (49%) of Australians had either been born overseas (first generation

² Cheryl J. Sanders, *Ministry at the Margins: The Prophetic Mission of Women, Youth and the Poor* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 98.

Australian) or one or both parents had been born overseas (second generation Australian).

If this is who we truly are as Australians, what should the response of the Lutheran church in Australia and all of its divisions be? On the synod floor I hear mutterings about how our schools are not filling the pews in church. Firstly, Lutheran schools were never established to provide additional members of the church, but were rather formed to provide a Lutheran Christian education for those who desired it. However, even if you prescribe to the view about growing congregation numbers, if an increasing majority of those who could come to our church are treated as 'special', why would they feel welcome? Our efforts as a church should be to overcome these cultural barriers in the acknowledgment that God made us all and loves us all as bearers of His image.

A few years back I was provided the opportunity by Lutheran Education Australia to travel with fellow principals on a tour of key Lutheran sites in Germany. This was a seminal experience for me. One of the most memorable occasions was attending a church service in Neuendettelsau, the home of *Mission EineWelt*. This congregation is regularly visited by Christians from all around the world and has embraced the idea of inclusion. On the day we attended we were handed headphones so that a member of the congregation could translate the service for us live. Not only were we able to participate in the service in a meaningful way but so were the Papua New Guineans who joined us listening in Pidgin. This was a congregation who knew how to welcome in a meaningful way, not separated but integrated.

In our small corner of the greater Lutheran community, Redeemer continues to embrace even greater diversity, finding ourselves richer as a community. From Lunar New Year Celebrations to reading of scripture for Pentecost in students' own first language, from ISQ projects around parent engagement in Prep and One for non-English speakers to genuine engagement of our First Nations people through projects such as Tchooyah Telee playground, a working party for an Reconciliation Action Plan, translating key documents into Chinese for our parents to the deliberate recruitment of a greater diversity in staffing and governance, we honour all of God's creation.

This prayer spoke to me recently as a reminder of walking in the shoes of the other. I hope you will pray it with me:

It's hard to feel we belong

by Rev Helen Richmond³

³ Rev Helen Richmond, 'It's hard to feel we belong,' in Uniting Church National Assembly, [Prayers for a Multicultural Church. Mission Prayer Handbook](#) (1991-2003) (slightly amended version of the original as printed in The Uniting Church in Australia, *Mission Prayer Handbook: Even These Stones Will Cry Out. Meditations and Prayers* [The Assembly Commission for Mission-The Uniting Church in Australia, 1996], 60). Permission to republish the prayer has been granted by the Uniting Church of Australia National Assembly, and by H. Richmond. Currently minister of Casuarina Uniting Church, NT, Helen has a long history of engagement with people of different faiths and cultures and has written a number of books arising from her doctoral research and pastoral experience. Cf. e.g. Helen Richmond and Myong Duk Yang, *Crossing Borders: Shaping Faith, Ministry and Identity in Multicultural Australia* (Sydney: UCA Assembly & NSW Board of Missions, 2006); Helen Richmond, *Blessed and Called to Be a Blessing: Muslim-Christian Couples Sharing a Life Together*, Regnum Studies in Mission (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016).

Voice of a newly arrived migrant:

It's hard to feel we belong, we've been uprooted and replanted in foreign soil. Our roots are shallow and sometimes it feels like a strong and gusty wind will blow us away.

In a borrowed language it is hard to share the pain and hope or whisper our fears and prayers.

It's hard to find our way It's hard to feel we can have a say in the way things are done around here.

We learn your language. You don't know ours. If you take the trouble to sit with us, long enough, we will open our hearts to you, then we may belong to you and this church that has accepted us, but not yet opened its heart to us.

Response:

God may Your Church have ears to listen and hearts to feel, that together we might find ways to cross the divide that lies between us, that bridges of justice, understanding and love can be built.

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