

The art of grafting in cross-cultural relationships in the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand

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If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches (Romans 11:17–18 NIV).

I have been pondering whether Paul's picture of the olive root and grafted wild olive branches could be a useful picture to use for our current cross-cultural relationships in the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand. Paul uses the picture in scripture to describe the theological, cultural and ethnic issue of gentile or non-Jews as wild olive branches being grafted into Christ where the Jewish or natural branches have been removed due to unbelief. I think there are some interesting elements of that picture that are transferable to our cross-cultural ministry in the LCANZ.

Traditionally our Lutheran root stock has consisted of core Germanic and European cultural elements. Even though there has been some variety within that general 'species' of our church so to speak, our theology, worship and expression of the faith has tended to gravitate to a Western style monoculture. That traditional snapshot, especially in the early to middle of the 20th century, still has a ripple effect today as the LCANZ changes in the 21st century, as Christians from other cultures and ethnicities are mixing and mingling more and more in LCANZ congregations. In other words, our Lutheran root stock or tree is being cut and these 'wild olive branches' from other cultures and ethnicities are being inserted into the LCANZ to a much greater degree over the last decade than any other time in the church's history in Australia and New Zealand.

Now grafting at its most basic definition is the art of taking a small branch or shoot (called a scion), cutting an incision into the trunk or root stock of a tree, and placing that branch into where the tree has been cut. To ensure the graft holds, the graft can be bound and wrapped, and then there is the patient waiting for the tree to heal itself as it channels the nutrients of the tree into the new branch. When the tree is cut, the tree senses it is wounded and so it sends signals to repair the damage and close the wound. If successful, the graft can last for the entire life of the tree. Grafting works best when the grafted branch and the tree are compatible or of a similar species or plant family. This means, for example that a wild apple branch from Mongolia could be grafted into a different variety of apple tree that grows here in Australia; it is the species that matters more than the variety.

In terms of our cross-cultural ministry in the LCANZ, we are grafting different varieties or cultures of Christians into our church family. We've made grafting cuts into the LCANZ tree; those wounds can hurt a little as they challenge our traditional monoculture and

disturb the comfortable. If a Chinese branch for example is inserted into a congregational tree, we slowly adapt to it and eventually may believe it is perhaps not so bad after all. Then begins the learning, and the listening to each other. Very soon we celebrate our diversity, we write about it and begin conferences, and generate awareness and set up and ministry structures, but at the same time we wait and hope for the grafts to take.

We are finding now perhaps at this point that sometimes the graft takes and sometimes it doesn't. There are lots of factors that influence a 'non-graft'; some of us blame Covid-19 for that, others feel that the language barrier is too difficult and want their comfortable church world back again. Some branches fall out, or some wither without a proper connection to the tree. Others lack proper binding and wrapping which helps to secure the branch in place, and still other trees were not cut properly in the first place to ensure a good connection to the branch.

What we are finding is that there is an art and skill to grafting and we are slowly learning it as a church, and especially when it does not work so well. I think there's a shift that's going in the LCANZ that's gone beyond celebrating our diversity; it's the learning of the craft of binding and grafting as we participate with God in that task which is so important.

Whilst grafting Christians from other ethnic groups into our LCANZ family can happen all the way from the size of a single Malaysian family, to a small community of Chinese Christians, all the way to an established Afghan congregation, the process takes time, patience and skill. It is nonetheless something the Lord deeply desires for us. I believe He wants His church to be a unity of diversity, a church of many colours and shades and textures, an olive tree with grafted shoots and branches of different varieties and qualities.

This tree also bases itself not only on Christ, but also on love and the entire Trinity. He exists as one God as a community of three persons, Father, Son and Spirit who according to our teaching and early church fathers, are distinct from each other yet are completely one and of the same stuff or the 'same species'. In the same way, our church needs those key distinctions in the branches yet one in substance as in Christ we are all made of the 'same stuff'. With this in mind, what we fight against is cultural assimilation and absorption, where the larger cultural group try to remove distinctions of the other and '*make everyone exactly like me!*'

Yet as these grafts take, eventually the olive tree does not treat the branches as anything foreign or alien but part of itself. It celebrates those differences and loves them yet keeps them in unity through the Holy Spirit. In the future we pray that LCANZ can learn the art of grafting well, which then can better reproduce itself and grow, using all the distinctive attributes of those different branches that help to enhance and mature our LCANZ vine whom God treasures and loves.

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