

Cultures blended and cultures valued in Wellington

Jim Pietsch

Like many of the cities and some of the regional centres in New Zealand and Australia, Wellington is a multicultural city. People have come from many different countries for many different reasons and made their home here. Some have come as refugees, some have come to study, some have come as skilled migrants. Some have been here for decades and are well integrated into the community, some are more recent arrivals. People expect that they will have contact with people of ethnic diversity as they go about their daily business at work, in the shops, at schools and universities, and in many of the community organisations. People expect that they will meet people with an ethnic diversity when they worship in churches.

While our St Paul's Lutheran church certainly does not include all cultural groups, I identified over twenty different nationalities from six continents in the list of members and friends of our congregation, which numbers only a little over one hundred. So we too are a diverse multicultural fellowship.

Many of the nationalities are represented only by one or a few persons or a single family. So multicultural in this context does not mean two or more cultural groups with their own community dynamics. Rather it means that people have come together and formed a blended culture where people have a sense of belonging and acceptance regardless of their national and cultural background. It means that those people who have come into the congregation more recently have not come because they found a cultural group with whom they identified. It means rather that they could see that people were accepted and welcomed no matter what their cultural background might be.

There is also a Tongan Wesleyan group who worship in our church in their own language, and who join us for worship once a month and sometimes bless us with beautiful song. So they are a distinct ethnic group who are present with us sometimes.

Bishop Mark Whitfield has prepared liturgies that use Te Reo Maori (Maori language). In New Zealand Te Reo Maori is an official language, and it is common practice in most public spheres to include a Maori greeting. Incorporating Te Reo Maori in our liturgies not only communicates to the few who have a Maori heritage, but also marks us as a NZ church. A NZ church today is an inclusive church. This is also a common practice in other denominations.

Otherwise our language is English. There has been an instance where a family moved away from the congregation to a congregation that worshipped in their own language because they found the English language difficult. On the whole we have learned to avoid the idiomatic short cuts and assumptions that are difficult for those for whom English is a second language and to support those who find it more difficult to communicate in English.

Lutherans are a small minority in NZ, and those who seek out the congregation may be Lutherans who have come here from other countries on a short-term or long-term move. For some, such as students from Papua New Guinea, coming to NZ is a big cultural step, and being welcomed by a Lutheran church gives them an important point of faith identity in their new country. Others bring their backgrounds from a range of Lutheran churches and bring a more diverse spectrum of theological backgrounds. With a sense of tolerance more progressive and more conservative perspectives also blend together.

There are others who do not have a Lutheran background, but who come seeking a church that expresses a clear faith and offers a warm spiritual home. And there are others on a spiritual quest. We have met Chinese students who think of learning about the Christian faith as part of their experience in a Western country. In all these situations, a simple atmosphere of acceptance is a powerful witness to the gospel.

I have emphasised inclusivity and a blended culture which is itself an expression of the way Christian faith speaks across human cultures. But there are also times when we want to affirm the variety of cultures. An example might be to use their native heart language for a reading or a prayer on Pentecost Sunday. And the cultural variety makes for a delicious international dinner.

A Catholic friend told how his priest colleagues, who have come from Asian countries, pointed out how Western our way of thinking and communicating is. As we meet people from different cultures we become more self-aware. Our way of thinking is not the only way of thinking. Biblical stories, for example, might be heard in rather different ways by people with different cultural backgrounds, and our faith expressions are enriched as we listen and learn from one another.

We also want to be culturally sensitive in our pastoral response to people. Different people may have a different sense of spirituality. Western thinking is highly individualistic. Asian experience may have a stronger sense of community.

Those who have come from more religious societies may be surprised and dismayed to find how secular and apathetic to any form of religion our society has become. Some have come from societies of religious pluralism. They may be very protective of their Christian solidarity. Or they may bring interfaith respect and support.

Many of our members have some or all of their families living far away. We have learned to understand their separation, especially the enforced separation of the pandemic. Their church family provides for a need when personal families are absent.

The vision of the heavenly host in Revelation 5:9 is a vision of 'members of every tribe and language and people and nation'. Coming together with people of many cultures in a congregation gives a small sense of belonging to this vast body of people brought together by the saving message of Christ.

In our congregational life we are living as a blended family. People are included and accepted. People find a home where they can live and grow their faith. At the same time as each person is valued, their culture is valued too.

Jim Pietsch is the pastor of St Paul's Lutheran Church, Wellington NZ. His previous ministries were at Whyalla, SA, which included a significant Aboriginal ministry, at Waikerie, SA, a more mono-cultural community, and at three congregations in the northwest suburbs of Melbourne, where there were many post-war European migrants. He has also served as theological manager at Openbook which connected him to the ecumenical and theological scene.