

# Developing a multicultural mindset— integration or cooperation?

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The LCANZ's Cross-Cultural Ministry department exists to support the multicultural vision of the church. While in many of our congregations this would best express itself as one multicultural community combining and sharing different languages and cultures, there are sometimes circumstances when integration is not the best approach.

For example, at Magill in South Australia I serve two congregations. One is an English-speaking congregation of mainly German heritage (Pilgrim Lutheran), while the other (Adelaide Deaf Community Church—ADCC) serves the Deaf Community<sup>1</sup> using Auslan (Australian Sign Language). Since 2017 the congregations have worked in *cooperation* to bring God's Word to both Deaf and hearing people, sharing a pastor and church plant. However, there are no intentions to integrate, as the linguistic and cultural needs of the congregations are very different, and combining would likely hinder fulfilling those needs.

In this article, I wish to share some of the things we have learned in our joint ministry, in the hope that it might benefit other congregations in similar situations (e.g. congregations serving first-generation migrants who find it difficult to integrate into Australian culture and learn the English language).

Admittedly, many of these learnings are not unique to such situations and could also benefit congregations looking to integrate multiple cultures. Please note also that we don't claim to be experts in cooperative cross-cultural ministry. Our joint ministry at Magill is a 'work in progress', and I present our learnings in the hope of assisting fellow learners on their respective cross-cultural journeys:

## 1. Offer hospitality

Prior to 2017, the ADCC did not worship at Magill. Upon agreeing to work together, Pilgrim invited the ADCC to share their church plant. In doing so, the Chairperson of Pilgrim used the phrase: 'We want you to make Magill your home for as long as you wish.'

This was not merely sentiment, but has been put into practice in many ways, big and small. Not only have the ADCC been able to share the worship and communal spaces, but they have been able to make them 'homely'. For example, they have been able to put up their own banners in the worship space, converted a room into a video studio for recording Auslan resources, and have had a say in other technology upgrades.

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<sup>1</sup> The capitalisation of 'Deaf' in this article is deliberate. It shows respect for those denoted as members of the Deaf community (and who are usually Auslan users), as opposed to those who can't hear ('deaf').

The sense of ownership and belonging this hospitality has given members of the ADCC has been demonstrated in the continuation of the partnership beyond an initial two-year trial period. It has also led the ADCC to desire to contribute financially to the upkeep and improvement of their 'home'.

## **2. Support language-learning**

The formal relationship between the two congregations is defined in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). One of the points in the MOU is: 'We agree to respect each other's cultural differences and to consider opportunities for cultural awareness, enrichment and connection.'

Aside from demonstrating this respect through the hospitality mentioned above, one way we have attempted to further cultural connection is through language learning. While this can be confronting to many Australians who don't have a second language, there is no better way to show respect for another (even if you can only learn some basic words/signs and phrases).

Since many of the Deaf are already very adept in communicating with a hearing world, our focus has been on encouraging members of Pilgrim to attempt to learn some basic Auslan. To this end we offered a series of introductory Auslan courses prior to Covid.

While this was unfortunately put on hold in 2020 (and has, sadly, lead to much being forgotten), we have not given up. We plan to continue to explore ways in which both groups can learn the others' language, including offering further/refresher Auslan classes for the hearing, and tutoring in written English for Deaf members.

## **3. Identify and equip bridge people**

Given the very real barriers presented by different languages and cultures, we have found ourselves heavily reliant on a small number of 'bridge' people. These are both Deaf and hearing who have expressed willingness to engage with people from the other congregation.

Some of this engagement is informal, such as encounters over a coffee between services, or participation in a small group made of roughly equal numbers from each congregation. The friendships developed through these encounters have then supported any 'business' between the congregations, as people already know and trust each other.

While these 'bridge' people have so far developed organically, we can probably be more intentional in identifying and equipping them in the future. We could also be more pro-active in identifying potential bridge people and encouraging them to consider becoming more active in cross-cultural ministry (e.g. offering scholarships for language-learning).

## **4. Learn from one another**

Finally, we have found it helpful to cultivate an expectation within both congregations that they can be enriched by the other. Without this, there is a danger that we unconsciously default to the dominant culture (in our case Australian/English/hearing).

One practical way in which we have tried to cultivate this attitude is by holding a combined service twice-yearly. In that service we have sought to equally include both cultures and languages, procuring the services of an interpreter to ensure everyone can follow along.

While in some ways this has created an unwieldy hybrid of a service, where both cultural groups have had to give up something, it is continually met with appreciation. People have been gently nudged out of their comfort zones and have started to learn different ways to worship God, enriching their understanding of how we can relate to Him. While always worshipping together would be detrimental (the needs of the two groups are just too disparate) an occasional time together is edifying.

I can only scratch the surface of what we have learned at Magill through our joint ministry, but I hope this overview of cooperation in our context may be of wider benefit. If you would like to learn more or discuss any of the above points in greater depth, you are very welcome to contact me. Please go to <https://www.lca.org.au/deaf> for more information about the Deaf ministry and for my contact details.

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