

Change the rule book!

David Spanagel

This introductory title doesn't mean the gospel and our theology that has been taught so well for in excess of 130 years. A 'rule book' means very little if you don't understand the rules! Our other major focus needs to be on building long term relationships. For as long as we require our First Nations members to meet a majority of expectations set by non-Indigenous people, any progress and changing patterns in the way our church views and approaches multicultural ministry will be small, with change and integration generations away. An inclusive church embraces Galatians 3:28 'all one in Christ Jesus'. To be welcomed during worship is one thing, but to be embraced in all walks of life within the church is a different matter.

To demonstrate the challenge we face, let's remember and thank God for the contribution made to our church by the late Rev. Dr George Rosendale. He impacted the individual lives of so many people across the LCA NZ. However, he has not been able to leave or be the catalyst for any lasting change that might embrace First Nations people in a meaningful multi-cultural way. He used bible stories as a cross-cultural training document with stories being the key to tying diverse cultural groups together. Dr Rosendale took this on as a personal challenge in his younger years, finally mastering this skill by relating the bible through 'stories', the way Aboriginal people have handed down their culture for all time.¹ We need to continue to build on his work using 'stories' as a training requirement for pastors. Education is of major importance with small steps and advancement beginning to emerge. First Nations Lutherans could show what a multicultural church would look like themselves. In reverse, it would be easier to develop a majority Indigenous congregation into a welcoming cross-cultural experience. The range of challenges would be halved. Will they be the ones to adapt or is it other cultures that need to change? Or both?

North Queensland is the ideal location (Cairns/Hope Vale/Wujal Wujal) with strong connections to non-Indigenous congregations to have the maximum impact in cross-cultural ministry, yet our opportunities are few and far between. When connections have been made the impact is huge, the response is let's do this again, but 'again' rarely comes. These occasions present a positive experience of effective ministry and mission, evangelism and outreach.

People who do not have English as their first language present unique challenges. In a First Nations setting nepotism may arise, the need for long term relationships with pastor and church wide workers become very important yet seem to be a thing of the past. If these could be re-established this would be a major contributor to change.

A strategy to build long term and lasting connections with the wider church could begin by adding a further project to our Reconciliation Action Plan whereby every congregation in

¹ George Rosendale et al., *Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards an Australian Aboriginal Theology by the Rainbow Spirit Elders*, 2nd ed. (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2007).

the LCA NZ is linked to a young person or people from a nearby majority Aboriginal community. A Queensland example could look like this; every congregation in the state having two people from the local school at Hope Vale or Wujal Wujal aged from six years old and upwards identified as 'pals' of the congregation. Communication would take place both ways including regular photographs and activity updates culminating in regular visits. We have seen connections like this in the past but always lapsing due to lack of long lasting relationships and interest. Or...because of the success of our Lutheran school system, every secondary school in Queensland 'must' offer three scholarships and enrolment to Lutheran First Nations students. These strategies to begin to 'close the gap' can be the catalyst for a multicultural and diverse Lutheran church for generations to come. However, without a trusting relationship between all parties these initiatives are a battle.

Trusting relationships take time. Identifying people in the LCA NZ who may step up in this way needs to be a priority. Many of us 'think' we have this kind of relationship, but do we? On the other side of the spectrum, imagine always being the poor Aboriginal cousin, ideas rarely taken into account, often treated as if they do not have a voice, and others speaking on their behalf. We have seen these issues over and over again. Even in 2021 there are cases of this in our own church in Queensland!

The pandemic has presented a unique opportunity to open up new connections with local people and the wider church. It has the potential to lead to specific presentations designed for the church-wide audience from the local school, culture centre, kindergarten, NAIDOC activities and the Discovery weekend in Cooktown. These would feature Hope Vale people, who were the first language group to have contact with Captain Cook, and numerous other activities as a part of a variety of presentations to our congregations in this age of technology. This helps us all to understand how First Nations people feel about issues such as Captain Cook or Australia Day.

These observations come from personally working alongside four generations of people. This has encompassed a transition of people in leadership who were aged in excess of seventy. This group made significant progress towards integration of Indigenous people into the wider church, however those in the next generation, although taught well, do not have the same commitment, therefore much of this transition has now evaporated.

I chose to absorb myself into the daily lives of the people, listening, participating in conversations in activities and food, and when someone dies, to be immersed in the same grief as the family (community). To be told 'we know you feel our grief just like we do' is humbling. This cannot be achieved in any nominated number of years, however to a receptive person much of this can be handed down from one to the next, but we (whites) always seem to want to do things 'our way', introducing new ideas rather than supporting local people to develop their own way. Words from non-Indigenous people can be cheap, the proof of their intentions is in their actions. To be taken 'behind the scenes' of another culture provides an understanding not taught in a classroom. To be given the 'honour' of 'Maja', meaning God's authority amongst the Yalanji people, transfers an enormous responsibility to this person. The need to be consciously aware and careful about the way we speak and the words used rises to another level so that there is little chance of misunderstanding. I took this very seriously receiving the following quote: 'we want you to

be involved in the dirty side of our lives too so that you can do your ministry better' is a truly humbling invitation.

To begin 'building relationships' we need to 'ditch the mission trips' that come and 'do'...and now come and 'be with our Indigenous people' and learn from them! Non-Indigenous people often speak 'down' to First Nations people. This is disrespectful with these actions usually not in their comprehension. Even in a conversation, standing when you should be sitting, may often draw a non-genuine response. We need a mindset reset! A truly meaningful cross-cultural ministry must have the prerequisite of empowerment for the Indigenous and extended mentoring for the incumbent in a new ministry.

Reverend David Spanagel was born into a family of Barossa Valley vignerons and followed this career for 15 years. In 1983 he commenced as the Lutheran Church employed Executive Officer of Hope Vale Aboriginal Mission which involved a wide variety of experiences. This was followed by the Project Manager for the establishment of Peace Lutheran College in Cairns and in 2011 being called to be the Pastor at Hope Vale, Wujal Wujal and Coen. Now recently retired.