

# Multicultural church—Why try?

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Make no mistake about it: living as multicultural church is hard work. It can be difficult, challenging, exhausting. Sometimes it feels just too hard.

So *why would we even try?*

Well, because *the multicultural church has always been God's plan for His people*. Consider John 3:16 (CEV): 'God loved the people of this world so much...'

This is made clear in the Old Testament. God speaks in Isaiah 51:4<sup>1</sup>, 'my justice will become a light to the nations', and in Isaiah 56:7, '...my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'. Jesus endorsed these words, quoting them directly in the temple (Mark 11:12–20). Bookended by the parable-in-action of the unfruitful fig tree, Mark records Jesus' anger that his people had failed to prioritise God's mission.

Paul writes of his call to carry the gospel to the multicultural gentile world in Romans 1:1–5 and Galatians 2:1–10. Thank God! Without Paul it's unlikely we'd have become part of the church.

Of course, the classic New Testament witness to the multicultural church is the great Acts 2 unravelling of the ancient Babel confusion—not by cancelling linguistic and cultural characteristics, but by the amazing outpouring of the gospel through each of them: '...we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!' (Acts 2:11)

To God, the multicultural mission of the church is not an optional extra. It can't possibly be an optional extra for us either. The early church reflected the cultural mix of the communities in which it was planted. The contemporary church will, if it understands its mission, reflect the cultural mix of the communities where it lives.

So, once we accept multiculturalism as our norm, *what sort of Christian community do we need to be?*

Firstly, a *Christ-centred* community. Colossians 3:16–17 stresses this: 'Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly... And whatever you do...do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus...' When we focus on the person and work of Jesus for us, we are set free from legalism. We are not tied to a model of church life which has grown out of our own cultural backgrounds. We are delighted when the gospel is shared in ways that different people can 'hear'—even if it's not to our personal taste.

Being *united around Word and sacrament* is essential for multicultural ministry. Acts 2:42 describes the church as '[devoting] themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer'. We pay close attention to God's Word itself and foreground its central truths in clear and straightforward ways. We pray together, trusting

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<sup>1</sup> All scripture quotations are from the New International Version unless otherwise stated.

the Spirit to show us what's important. We avoid being prescriptive about how the Word applies to others' lives and cultures, but rather let the Word speak into their situations.

A multicultural church is a *deeply attentive* community—listening closely to God and to each other. We foster slow dialogues. We step outside our comfort zone, listening as much as we talk, working hard for open and respectful dialogue, being honest about difficulties, being alert to the perspectives of others, practising reflective listening—and giving time to each other. In Acts 2:46–47 we read: 'They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God...'

Multicultural churches flourish only when the church is a *safe place for everyone* to be and do. A safe place to disagree. A safe place to be different. A safe place to make suggestions 'out of left field'. What discipline this requires! We practise good manners—towards everyone, even when they can't hear us. Speaking respectfully of others at all times is the only way to create a safe space. Any disrespectful or inconsiderate talk destroys this safety for everyone. So we bring our habits of speech into line with Luther's exposition of the Eighth Commandment: '...speak well of them...' (SC 1,8).

Romans 12:3–21 is godly advice for the multicultural church. Slightly paraphrased, verses 3–6a tell us: '...Do not think of [your way of doing things] more highly than you ought, but rather think of [your way of doing things] with sober judgement... We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us...' So, Christ's people take a *down-to-earth* attitude to our own cultures. We rejoice in the diversity of God's world. We understand that the gospel transforms cultures, rather than homogenises them. We accept that no culture (including ours) is Christian in itself, but rather that, redeemed by Christ, all cultures are gifts of God.

Paul advises in Romans 15:1–3a, 'We who are strong ought...not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbours for their good, to build them up. For even Christ did not please himself...' A multicultural church recognises that other Christians have an equal place with us in God's family. This is very different from sentimentality or charity. Rather, we understand the negative effects (intentional or unintentional) of power imbalances. The practical measures we take to be *inclusive* to all cultures are not unfair but rather are steps to overcoming continuing imbalances.

So, *what might the multicultural church look like in practice?*

It's more than just having people from a range of cultures on the membership list, or attending a synod, or worshipping in the same church building.

The deeply multicultural church is a *dynamic, creative, multifaceted* community. The cultures within our community enrich our church life. They stand out in our arts, social events, music and worship. They expand our understanding of what's possible, and of what's important. They are visible and audible in our significant interpersonal interactions, our corporate worship, our organisational structures, our leadership, the makeup of groups and committees, and the ways we socialise together.

It's a *storytelling* community, a *truth-speaking* community, and a *story-creating* community. Ephesians 4:15: '...speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become...the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.' Each person, each culture, each

church group has a unique and valuable story. Each reaches into the future as well as the past. We welcome all these stories, listen to them with empathy, accept the ways they challenge us. Shared in love, they help us create new stories together which proclaim the mighty acts of God for His people.

A multicultural church '*speaks everyone's language*'—youth, people without a church background, family and community languages, children. Worship, studies, devotional material, music and children's activities foreground home languages and cultures so that the gospel connects with each person's inner life. Is this really practical? Yes, when all the groups in our community have a voice. They might wish, for example, for a competent person to interpret key parts of the sermon or children's talk; to sing some verses of well-known hymns in a community language; to use an online scripture app to print the readings in a community language as well as English, or to add a multilingual key text to a children's activity sheet; to roster community members to read the gospel lessons in their language alongside the English reading. The specifics will grow out of each group's needs and gifts.

It is *participatory*. We remind ourselves that reaching individuals with the gospel is more important than presenting a polished worship experience. We make space for everyone to contribute. We show interest in everyone's family connections, skills and talents, and cultural norms. We are alert to any hidden assumptions which inadvertently create 'insider' and 'outsider' groups.

In a multicultural church *responsibility is shared*. People are confident, and are supported, to do things in their own ways. We recognise people's ownership of their own culture, language and skills. We don't take over. Instead, everyone takes a turn, everyone is flexible, and everyone takes a share of responsibility. We recognise that a range of approaches may be supported by good reasons, and we try for a 'both/and' approach rather than an 'either/or' when possible. For instance, if sitting down to sing means that people from a different tradition find it hard to express their joy through music and movement, perhaps they could regularly lead a song where everyone stands to sing.

All of this is *intentional*. We do not leave things to chance. We design our structures to be straightforward; our liturgical journey to be predictable and uncomplicated; our communication to be in plain English; our decision-making to be transparent. What we do will be tailored to our own unique circumstances. We do what we're gifted to do. We don't have to be all things to all people. And our dialogue is ongoing. Cyclic consultation and evaluation in partnership with all our cultural groups is our permanent strategy.

Above all, we are *patient* with each other. St Paul wrote to the quite multicultural, and sometimes quite dysfunctional, church at Corinth: 'Love is patient, love is kind... It always perseveres' (1 Corinthians 13:4,7). So we all practise patience—with languages we don't understand, with food we don't particularly like, with ways of doing things which may feel uncomfortable. This is the attitude which God gifts—and calls—each one of us to gladly show. None of us misses out, because we all rest in the care of our Father who has created us, rejoice in the grace of Jesus which covers us, and trust that the Holy Spirit is enabling His church.

'In Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others' (Romans 12:5).

Is living as multicultural church difficult? Yes. There's no quick fix. We will always be a work in progress. But *because we are who God has made us to be, walking together as a united and truly multicultural church is possible.*

*So why wouldn't we try?*

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