

WHY MULTICULTURAL CONGREGATIONS?

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Abstract

This paper argues that in a multicultural context such as Australian society the presence of multicultural congregations is a litmus test of the catholicity of the church. It summarises some biblical material pointing to a multicultural vision for the Commonwealth of God, including the Babel story, the importance of the migrant in the Hebrew Bible, Jesus' boundary-breaking life and teaching, the privileged position of the marginalised in the Good News, the disclosure of God in the stranger and guest, Pentecost, the early church's acceptance of gentiles, Paul's 'global' mission and the vision in the Book of Revelation of all nations worshipping God. It suggests that it is an essential aspect of the local missional church that it continually explores what it means to be a welcoming space for people of different cultures. Finally, it briefly suggests several steps a local congregation can take on its journey towards being genuinely multicultural.

This paper, like others at this conference, is an exercise in the theological interpretation of the Bible, church and world. I want to argue that, given the multicultural context of most societies in the world—particularly Australia—and the multicultural vision of the Bible, most congregations ought to be multicultural.

The Meaning of 'Multicultural'

A group can be called 'multicultural' when there are two or more cultures represented. But when it is used as an ideal or a policy the term usually means something more. The multicultural policy of the Australian government, for example, entails beliefs, such as that cultural diversity brings benefits. It also entails values, such as fairness, opportunity to participate, freedom from discrimination and freedom to be different (within the law and democratic framework).¹ It expresses an aspiration to be a nation where there is unity in diversity. It means 'not merely tolerating the presence of difference, but viewing the core of Australian identity as embedded in the notion of diversity'.²

A similar dynamic can be seen in the talk of multicultural churches. At a simple, descriptive level a church is multicultural when two or more cultures are represented in its congregations. But the term usually embodies a theological vision, in which churches become signs of the reign of God which embraces all nations. The multicultural

¹ Australian Government, *The people of Australia: Australia's multicultural policy* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2011), Available at <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/multicultural/pdf_doc/people-of-australia-multicultural-policy-booklet.pdf>, 2, 5.

² Peter Kivisto, *Multiculturalism in a global society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 110.

dimension is part of what it is to be ‘catholic’, which means ‘universal’ and ‘all-embracing’, but also ‘inclusive of all kinds of people’.³

I wish to use the term ‘multiculturalism’ in this sense—as embodying a theological vision.

Let me point to some complexities in multicultural language. A multicultural group is usually, but not always, multilingual. ‘Multicultural’ has almost the same meaning as ‘multiethnic’, where ethnicity is an imprecise concept to identify groups, usually minorities, bonded by language, kinship, history, race or culture.⁴ North American Christians tend to prefer the terms ‘multiethnic’ or ‘multiracial’, and more conservative church leaders in the U.S. often reject the term ‘multicultural’ because to them it smacks of cultural relativism and too much tolerance⁵, an odd decision to most missiologists, who are at home with the notion that the gospel takes different shapes in different cultures. The term ‘culture’ is central in discourses such as anthropology, sociology, cultural analysis and missiological contextualisation and it does its job well. But it is also an imprecise term. It can be very general, as in ‘Asian’ or ‘Western’ culture, or specific, in describing sub-cultures, such as those of skateboarders or Indian taxi drivers. I would be hard-pressed to list the cultures to which I belong, because they overlap, change, have fuzzy boundaries and are often hybrid. Nevertheless, we cannot do without a term that points to the integrated system of learned patterns of behaviour, ideas and products characteristic of a recognizable social group.⁶

I propose that a multicultural congregation is one that is made up of a variety of cultures and ethnic groups, which actively contribute to the leadership, direction, worship, style and ethos of the church, and share its power, finances and resources.

As a definition, this clearly falls into the aspirational type, embedded with beliefs and values. It excludes an Australian congregation where many cultures are represented but which is Anglo-Australian in nearly every respect, from the music to the languages heard and the style of the leadership. It excludes the landlord–tenant relationship where church buildings are let by an Anglo-Australian congregation to a migrant congregation with only occasional contact. It holds out the vision of a congregation where difference is welcomed and valued, where different accents are a natural part of the conversation and where different ways of worshipping are experienced regularly.

This vision is based on a missional reading of the Bible.⁷ Such a reading begins by asking what the mission of God appears to be, taking into account the Hebrew covenant;

³ Daniel L Migliore, *Faith seeking understanding: An introduction to Christian theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 272.

⁴ Richard Schermerhorn, ‘Ethnicity and minority groups’, in *Ethnicity*, eds. John Hutchinson and Anthony D Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 17

⁵ Mark DeYmaz and Harry Li, *Ethnic blends: Mixing diversity into your local church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 39

⁶ Brian M Howell and Jenell Williams Paris, *Introducing cultural anthropology: A Christian perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 36 Paul G Hiebert, *Cultural anthropology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 25.

⁷ Michael Barram, “‘Located’ questions for a missional hermeneutic”, <<http://www.gocn.org/resources/articles/located-questions-missional-hermeneutic>>, Gospel and Our Culture Network.

the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; the belief and practice of the early church; and the biblical understanding of our ultimate hope. Missional hermeneutics is governed by the perspective that due to God's love for the whole world Jesus Christ has come to bring abundant life to all who respond (Jn 3:16, 10:10). It soon becomes clear that a diverse and reconciling church is part of that response.

Biblical Theology of Multiculturalism—A Brief Overview

I will list eight elements of the multicultural vision of the Bible, which is itself a multicultural text, written in different languages, cultures and contexts. I can only give each brief attention here. Each element is found across various types of biblical literature and not just in isolated texts.

1. God is God of all

The God of the Bible is a universal God who wants all to be saved. Abraham's children are to bless all nations (Gen 12:3) and Paul reminds us that the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to those who call on him (Rom 10:12). This necessarily involves us in cross-cultural mission, in inviting the nations to turn to God.

2. God delights in difference

From the variety of creation to the diversity of humans, the evidence is that God welcomes difference and loves all people regardless of culture, nation, class, sex or age. Genesis 10 illustrates this diversity by listing the tribes of Shem, Ham and Japheth, 'by their families, their languages and their nations' (10:31), fulfilling the call to scatter abroad (Gen 9:1)

The story of the Tower of Babel in the following chapter is one of people trying to avoid being scattered and diverse (Gen 11:1–9). It appears to be about God foiling plans to speak one language and assert power and dominance. Walter Brueggemann suggests that it calls for a new sort of unity based on loyalty to God and involving being scattered to all corners of creation as God's agents.⁸

Bernhard Anderson, takes the same tack, looking at the 'horizontal' dimensions of the Babel story (gathering or scattering) rather than the vertical (reaching to heaven in pride). Anderson says that

the Babel story has profound implications for a biblical theology of pluralism.... God's will for his creation is diversity rather than homogeneity. We should welcome ethnic pluralism as a divine blessing, just as we rejoice in the rich variety of the nonhuman creation: trees, plants, birds, fish, animals, heavenly bodies. The whole creation bears witness to the extravagant generosity of the Creator.⁹

3. We are called to welcome the stranger and the migrant

The Hebrew Bible contains a strong tradition of hospitality to the foreigner, traveller and stranger, arising, perhaps, from Middle Eastern customs.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation Bible Commentaries (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 99.

⁹ Bernhard Anderson, *From creation to new creation: Old Testament perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 177.

The essence of the law is to love God and walk in his ways, executing justice for the orphan and the widow, loving strangers or migrants, and providing them with clothing and food. Israelites are asked to respond to the grace that was extended to them by showing grace in treating others. 'You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt' (Deut 10:19). Any sense of being at home is a gift from God and should be shared with others. Patty Lane, in her book, *A beginner's guide to crossing cultures*, quotes in an appendix the biblical passages on welcoming aliens and strangers and it goes for seven pages!¹⁰

Often God's presence is hidden in the stranger. God's messengers often appear as strange visitors, such as the three messengers who visited Abraham at Mamre (Gen 18), or the 'gardener' appearing to Mary at the tomb of Jesus (Jn 20:14-16). Jesus himself appeared on the road to Emmaus unrecognised (Lk 24:13-35). Paul exhorted Christians to show hospitality to strangers (Rom 12:13), as did the writer to the Hebrews, promising that we will often entertain angels unawares (Heb 13:3). Even more deeply, God's incarnation as an ordinary carpenter in undistinguished Nazareth is an example of the hiddenness of God, as is the cross a symbol of life hidden in death.¹¹

4. *Jesus broke out of a monocultural faith*

Jesus challenged the Jewish purity codes of his day. In the Gospel of Mark, for example, Jesus has table fellowship with the impure and invites them to follow him (Mk 2:13-17). He breaks Sabbath rules (2:23-28). He includes Gentiles as he engages with a demoniac in the unclean territory of the Gerasenes (5:1-20). He eats with the Syro-Phoenician woman (7:24-30). The climax comes as Jesus, the 'unclean one' cleanses the supposedly 'clean' temple (15:15-19). He says, 'Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"? But you have made it a den of robbers' (11:17).

The temple was the centre of monoculturalism, dedicated to excluding Gentiles and the impure. Jesus said it had to be destroyed (13:2) before it could become what it was meant to be, the house of prayer for all nations, gathered from all corners of the earth (13:27). As Brian Blount puts it, 'In Mark's revelation of the future in the midst of the present, then, kingdom worship is multicultural worship'.¹²

5. *The church was multicultural from the start*

From the day of Pentecost the early church was multicultural, miraculously speaking in many languages (Acts 2:6, 11). The first issues to be resolved surrounded the inclusion of Gentiles in the Good News (Acts 9:15), the equality of Jews and Gentiles before God (Gal 3:28) and the irrelevance of circumcision and Jewish food laws (Acts 10-11). Peter's declaration that people of all nations and cultures are acceptable before God and that Jesus is Lord of all (Acts 10:34-36) was to be decisive in opening the door for Christianity to become a worldwide movement. It began the tradition, evident ever

¹⁰ Patty Lane, *A beginner's guide to crossing cultures: Making friends in a multicultural world* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 174-180.

¹¹ Patrick R Keifert, 'The other: Hospitality to the stranger, Levinas, and multicultural mission', *Dialog* 30 (1991), 36.

¹² Brian K Blount, 'The apocalypse of worship: A house of prayer for ALL the nations', in *Making room at the table: An invitation to multicultural worship*, eds. Brian K Blount and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 25.

since, of translating the message,¹³ exemplified by the way Paul preached in Athens using Greek and pagan beliefs to communicate the sovereignty of God (Acts 17:16–34).

6. *We are called to unity in diversity*

John Barclay argues that Paul, like Jesus, does not erase cultural differences, nor does he accept cultural barriers; instead he relativises them.¹⁴ For Paul Christian faith, at the same time, allows people to be different but overcomes cultural barriers. ‘New life’, for Paul, is to do with a new, welcoming, inclusive and non-hierarchical set of relationships rooted in the practicalities of everyday living. Barclay reads Paul as ‘the fashioner of multiethnic and multicultural communities, which function not to erase but to moderate between differing cultural specificities’.¹⁵

The gospel ‘enables the creation of a new community in which variant cultural traditions can be practised’¹⁶ It is in this context that we should understand Ephesians 4:4, which talks of one Lord, one faith and one baptism. Our being a new creation in Christ gives us a fundamental unity, without erasing differences, but certainly overcoming barriers.¹⁷

7. *We are to particularly embrace the marginalised*

Multicultural congregations will almost certainly include new migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, who are among the most marginalised in western societies. If Christians are to respond to the biblical call to seek justice, show compassion, love our neighbour and serve Christ by housing the homeless, feeding the hungry and visiting those in prison (Mt 25:31–46), then—in a multicultural society—we will inevitably become multicultural congregations. Just as the incarnation was a story of divine marginalisation,¹⁸ incarnational mission will inevitably be multicultural.

8. *The ultimate vision is for a church of all nations*

The journey towards a multicultural church, we need to acknowledge, is one we can only take falteringly and incompletely until the reign of God is complete. As Miroslav Volf says of reconciliation, any attempt to fully resolve the inbuilt tensions between unity and diversity will fail this side of the final reconciliation because as humans we tend always to perpetuate division and exclusion.¹⁹

The ultimate biblical vision, however, is poetically portrayed in the Book of Revelation where the seer is called to prophesy ‘about many peoples, nations, languages and kings’ (Rev 10:11), namely that all nations will worship before God (Rev 15:4) and walk in God’s light (Rev 21:23–24).

¹³ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the message: The missionary impact on culture*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2009).

¹⁴ John M G Barclay, ‘“Neither Jew nor Greek”: Multiculturalism and the new perspective on Paul’, in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark G Brett (Leiden: E J Brill, 1996), 211.

¹⁵ Barclay, ‘“Neither Jew nor Greek”: Multiculturalism and the new perspective on Paul’, 213.

¹⁶ Barclay, ‘“Neither Jew nor Greek”: Multiculturalism and the new perspective on Paul’, 211.

¹⁷ Donald H Juel, ‘Multicultural worship: A Pauline perspective’, in *Making room at the table: An invitation to multicultural worship*, eds. Brian K Blount and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 55.

¹⁸ Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The key to multicultural theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 81.

¹⁹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and embrace: A theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 109–110.

The multicultural church as a test of catholicity

Given the overwhelming biblical evidence that followers of Jesus are called to reach out across cultural boundaries in embrace and reconciliation, the multicultural dimension of congregational life is a litmus test for the catholicity of the church. As we make space for ‘the other’—whether the very different, the strange or the enemy—we are enlarged. In our diversity we better approximate the catholic (or universal, or complete) church. This church ideally reflects the mission of the trinitarian God. As Volf puts it:

We who have been embraced by the outstretched arms of the crucified God open our arms even for the enemies—to make space in ourselves for them and invite them in—so that together we may rejoice in the eternal embrace of the triune God.²⁰

This is why I suggest that most congregations ought to be on the road to becoming multicultural. This is stronger than arguing that denominations should be multicultural, adding together their migrant ethnic churches like a mosaic. It is also stronger than arguing that the church should be a melting pot where cultural differences are forgotten or smoothed-over. To choose a third metaphor, it is to work towards something like minestrone soup, where cultural differences can still be celebrated and seen but enrich each other.²¹

As Paul Curtiss DeYoung acknowledges, there are a few exceptions to this recommendation, contexts where only one culture is to be found, where a common language cannot be found or where recent migrants need a safe place in which to adjust to a very different culture.²² But these make up only a small percentage of congregations.

Paths to multicultural congregations

There are many possible structures for multicultural congregations, from fully integrated congregations to those who meet alongside each other and work at their friendship and unity.²³ Context is usually the biggest factor in which structure will suit congregations best.

For example, in my local church there is currently a need for three congregations—English-speaking, Burmese Chin and Burmese Karen—because of various factors: the large numbers of Chin and Karen people who are recent migrants, with little English; the cultural difference between rural Burma and urban Melbourne; and the need for a safe and comforting space for the many refugees who have suffered extreme

²⁰ Volf, *Exclusion and embrace: A theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation*, 131.

²¹ Ross Langmead and Meewon Yang, ‘Multicultural congregations: A Victorian Baptist perspective’, in *Crossing Borders: Shaping faith, ministry and identity in multicultural Australia*, eds. Helen Richmond and Myong Duk Yang (Sydney: Multicultural and Cross-Cultural Ministry, The National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, 2006), 125–126.

²² Curtiss Paul DeYoung, ed. *United by faith: The multicultural congregation as an answer to the problem of race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 143.

²³ Meewon Yang, ‘Ways of being a multicultural church: An evaluation of multicultural church models in the Baptist Union of Victoria’, Thesis (MTheol), MCD University of Divinity, 2012

persecution and privation. It is my hope that our friendship across congregations, already significant, will grow stronger over time.

A different example is found in other congregations, where there are a few from each of many cultures, and where most migrants have a reasonable grasp of English. Almost by necessity, English is the language of worship—though we must recognise that this has its difficulties²⁴—but many of these congregations are genuinely multicultural, by which I mean that they recognise and affirm cultural diversity in many intentional ways.

Not only are there many possible structures, but the paths to multiculturalism are also many and varied. The most common paths are through sharing food, stories, celebration, practical solidarity and community. Note that these are more relational than programmatic. They assist us in gradually moving from our comfort zone into a learning zone and then an expanded comfort zone. When coupled with an open, porous and hospitable faith community, these practices are also deeply missional, because people from the wider community find these things welcoming and relatively unthreatening.

The path towards multicultural community needs to be intentional, as the default position is for humans (Christians included) to feel most comfortable with ‘people like us’, that is in a monocultural context.

It involves a great deal of learning. Multicultural churches invest time in learning about other customs, worldviews, languages, practices, celebrations, expectations and social roles. Gatherings specifically to learn about these things are necessary, but they are also rich and enjoyable.

The path to multiculturalism also requires a commitment to active inclusion and deliberate hospitality (from all sides). Those from groups other than the dominant culture nearly always need to be invited repeatedly before they will feel at home in a group. Hospitality is a rich Christian tradition in which the guest often becomes the host, reflecting the divine mystery in which, when we welcome Christ, Christ welcomes us home.

It also involves an awareness of the dynamics of power. Those of the dominant culture need to learn to empower others and take a less dominant role while minority groups usually need to learn to assert themselves.²⁵

If a congregation is to grow towards embracing all of God’s people it will also reach out in interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural evangelism. While the two modes are a little different, they overlap in the respectful, intentional reaching out across the divides of faith and culture.

²⁴ Geddes W Hanson, ‘“Multicultural” worship: A careful consideration’, in *Making room at the table: An invitation to multicultural worship*, eds. Brian K Blount and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 145–161.

²⁵ Eric H F Law, *The wolf shall dwell with the lamb: A spirituality for leadership in a multicultural community* (St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1993).

Conclusion

In this paper I've suggested that in a multicultural context such as Australian society the presence of multicultural congregations is a litmus test of the catholicity of the church. If the church is to live into the vision of people of all nations living in God's ways it will need to explore the nature of unity in diversity and the overcoming of the usual barriers in society. It is an essential aspect of the local missional church that it continually explores what it means to be a welcoming space for people of different cultures. This is one of the ways in which the church will be a sign of the transformed community which is at the heart of God's Good News.

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