Planting and Leading Multicultural Churches

How you start, and how you lead, multicultural churches makes all the difference

by Dan Sheffield
Matching a need in our society

*Demographic shifts demand re-thinking the cultural dominance of Euro-background churches.*

Church development in the 21st century is taking place amid two massive demographic trends:  
- the numerical and cultural dominance of large urban centres,  
- the cultural diversification of the population.

The “nations” are coming to us here in North America. Several Canadian and American cities represent the most diverse urban agglomerations in the world. Politicians, social workers, law enforcement workers and local governments are struggling to find answers to the challenge of difference in our communities.

In an increasingly multicultural and urban society at least four types of people do not fit our traditional homogeneous churches:  
- interracial couples and families;  
- newcomers who prefer speaking English and want to engage with other cultures  
- urbanites who appreciate living, working and ministering in the midst of ethnic diversity;  
- Gen Xers and Millennials who often despise racial/cultural separation

*It will take new, multicultural churches to reach these groups.*
The biblical case for multicultural churches

“all peoples on earth will be blessed through you”

“After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb… and they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb’” (Rev 7:9-10).

Christian Scriptures reveal God’s intention is to create a peaceful community of Jesus-followers, from all cultures and ethnicities. One new people, with many gifts and ways of seeing, expressing worship through a diversity of representations, all centred around Jesus (Eph. 2:14-18).

God’s desire is that all peoples would encounter His love, justice and grace, and would find cause to worship Him and lift up His name.

In major metropolitan areas around the world, multicultural churches can serve as microcosms that reflect both a fulfillment of the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20) and a foretaste of the coming reality.

*The multicultural church becomes a living picture of what can be done on earth and a foretaste of what will be in heaven.*
“If God can transform people into the likeness of Jesus Christ, he can certainly build communities that transcend racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural differences.”

Howard Snyder
Defining some terms

*Multicultural, Intercultural? Which is it?*

**MULTICULTURAL**
An open, accepting, inclusive *environment* facilitated among people shaped by different cultures.

Settings that are multi-ethnic in composition and where cultural values are *recognized, respected and embraced*, beyond the simple *acknowledgement* of ethnic/cultural diversity.

**INTERCULTURAL**
Within that open, accepting environment we still have to learn how to *live and engage together* in practical terms.

Intercultural engagement requires the acquisition of skills that enable dialogue in and amongst the beliefs, values and behaviours of our different neighbours.

*Communities become multicultural, in part, through the development of authentic intercultural communication practices.*
Church models for responding to cultural difference

Congregations respond to change in diverse ways.

**Monocultural/Multi-Ethnic**
- An environment that is undergoing social & cultural transition
- People of diverse cultures are welcomed
- Maintains dominant culture values and minimizes difference
- Familiar worship patterns and “in-group” power sharing
- Assimilation

**Multi-Congregational Mode**
- Existing church plants/hosts multiple ethno-specific congregations that correspond to neighbourhood realities
- Host church recognizes difference including its own cultural dynamic and that of others around it
- Coordinating council where common ground is sought, along with intercultural learning and fellowship

**Multicultural Church**
- Intentionally developed as a response to a culturally diverse social environment
- Congregation accepts and affirms difference as enriching
- Utilizes one common language while designing worship, ministry, and leadership practices that reflect a variety of cultural perspectives
- Integration

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The multicultural church does not emerge naturally – we naturally prefer to engage with people like ourselves. It emerges as we become others-oriented – because that’s what it means to follow Jesus.
What is a multicultural church?

The multicultural church draws different perspectives into the decision-making processes of the congregation.

The multicultural church is a community of believers that
1) has an **intentional desire** to draw together people of diverse cultural backgrounds as a sacramental, missional community in the city;
2) has **reconciliatory, relational practices** which accept and embrace a diversity of peoples;
3) has **empowering leadership processes** which draw diverse cultural voices into the decision-making structures of the congregation.

The **monocultural, multi-ethnic church** has many people of different ethnic backgrounds present, but the leadership processes follow one particular culture’s way of doing things.

The multicultural church seeks ways to **accept and affirm (rather than minimize) difference**, while creating a community of solidarity around commonly-held faith beliefs.
Why are multicultural churches needed?

The people of God are called to break down walls of separation as a sign and foretaste of the kingdom of God.

Multicultural churches are needed because more varieties of churches are needed. We will not reach Canada by establishing more churches like the majority of those we have now. Many people are falling through the cracks of existing churches. In an increasingly multicultural, urban society, there are whole groups of people who do not fit into the traditional categories of churches.

The impression some people have of Christian churches is not what God calls us to be. The people of God are not barrier builders. Jesus has destroyed the barrier of hostility between humans and created one new family built on reconciliation. We are called to join Jesus as he goes about making peace (shalom).

If the church is not able to demonstrate the incarnational message of Jesus’ life and resurrection, then we of all people are most to be pitied.
“The church is the one political entity in our culture that is global, transnational, transcultural... and the tribalism of nations occurs most viciously in the absence of a church able to say and to show, in its life together, that God, not the nations, rules the world.”

Stanley Hauerwas & Will Willimon
Who should lead a multicultural church?

Leaders of multicultural churches require skills beyond the basic pastoral toolbox. The multicultural leader...

- **Envisions the eschatological reality** Develops a theology of culture and diversity. Able to construct and communicate a story of the multicultural congregation as an embryonic form of the heavenly kingdom.

- **Embodies the relationships** Lives a way of life that reinforces the values and practices. Has authentic relationships and intercultural dialogue flowing from a spirituality rooted in servanthood.

- **Embeds the vision** Communicates values and practices that define group identity and power dynamics. Ownership of the vision at all levels is built via collaborative engagement.

- **Embraces cultural diversity** Develops understanding about how cultures are shaped by beliefs, values and behaviours. Moves from ethnocentrism, and minimizing difference, to hearing “the other” fully – without passing judgment.

- **Enables intercultural empowerment** Creates an environment where diverse voices interact with equal standing. Where power is de-centralized and all can engage confidently.

  *This new, reconciled, humanity is going to need a new kind of leadership.*
The Spirit sets a person on the road to becoming what one might call a "catholic personality," a personal microcosm of the eschatological new creation. Catholic personality is a personality enriched by otherness...

Miroslav Volf
How should multicultural churches be planted?

*Multicultural churches need to establish their DNA from the beginning.*

**TEAM**
Lone-ranger church-planting will not produce a multicultural church. As a culturally diverse core team learns and adjusts to one another, while developing their vision and values, they live out and model a hopeful alternative.

**LOCATION**
In the midst of culturally diverse neighbourhoods. In and amongst people who have already begun adjusting their worldviews to live with difference.

**VISION**
A clear picture of the values and goals must be developed. A theology of diversity must be communicated and understood among ministry leaders.

**WORSHIP**
What happens at the front must reflect your intentions. Worship must touch the minds and hearts of people from different cultures – and this takes intentional learning, adjusting and planning.
Can a mono-cultural church transition to multi?-?

*It is very challenging to make the shift from mono to multi – and it takes time & effort.*

1. **BECOME CONSCIOUS**
   Pay attention to the changes in your community – *exegete the neighbourhood*. Examine the culture of your congregation – are you ready for the work required?

2. **DEVELOP CONSENSUS**
   The congregation needs to re-engage with a missional reading of Scripture, to seek God in prayer, and to discern a way forward together.

3. **ENGAGE CULTURE**
   Disequilibrium will emerge as the existing congregational culture is confronted with difference. Working through cultural differences with forgiveness and grace will lead to relationship and competence.

4. **EMPLOY CRITIQUE**
   Pay attention – again. *What have we learned?* Are we self-aware regarding our intercultural competence as a community? What do we need to adapt, adjust or reformulate?
Key resources

*Learning from those who have thought about, and lived, the multicultural church experience.*

“It may not be too much to claim that the future of the world will depend on how we deal with identity and difference.” Miroslav Volf