

Making the Transition to a Multicultural Church

By Dan Sheffield

[A reflection on inputs from Multicultural Church Leaders Dialogue, St Louis, 2008]

Recently I have been working with a church in the Greater Toronto Area that was planted in the 1980s as an essentially white, Anglo-European background congregation. Early on, however, people from other cultural backgrounds began to attend largely because of a perceived, common denominational heritage. In the mid-90s the congregation went through a non-culture related hemorrhage that left the group with a largely Caribbean background membership. For almost a decade they have been led by an Anglo-European background pastor with a degree of intercultural sensitivity. Now their congregation is at a crossroads and he is wondering how to engage his congregation in a dialogue about becoming an intentionally multicultural community. One leader spelled it out: “we are multi-ethnic in composition, but it’s really only one culture group that influences the decision-making.”

What Kind of Change?

What would lead a congregation to want to consider becoming functionally multicultural rather than just remaining rooted in one particular cultural milieu? I would like to suggest that there are several directions from which this notion might emerge.

Some congregations may have become gradually aware that their makeup is changing. In **practical** terms, they are no longer a community of essentially one cultural background. What does it mean to come to terms with their already observable differences, practically?¹

Another congregation, or pastoral leader, may be wrestling with the **theological** implications of Scripture regarding culture and the Body of Christ, in passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:12-14 and Romans 5:9-10. What does it mean to come to terms with God’s acceptance of all nations, tribes and languages, theologically?²

Some Christian leaders are also asking how will a “**missional** orientation” to their community result in engagement with the different cultures already present there – even

¹ Eric Law, [The Bush was Blazing but Not Consumed: Developing a Multicultural Community through Dialogue and Liturgy](#), Chalice Press, 1996. Duane Elmer, [Cross-Cultural Conflict: Building Relationships for Effective Ministry](#), Intervarsity Press, 2006. David Livermore, [Cultural Intelligence: Improving your CQ to Engage Our Multicultural World](#), Baker Academic, 2009.

² Eric Law, [The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community](#), Chalice Press, 1993. Dan Sheffield, [The Multicultural Leader: Developing a Catholic Personality](#), Clements, 2005. Kristen D. Johnson, [Theology, Political Theory and Pluralism: Beyond Tolerance and Difference](#), Oxford University Press, 2007.

if people from those cultures are not yet feeling welcome in their church. Does becoming missional change how we relate to differences in worldview?³

What is culture?

But let's stop for a minute – what do we mean when we are talking about “culture?”

Missiologist Paul Hiebert gives us a standard description of culture: “The more or less integrated systems of ideas, feelings and values, and their associated patterns of learned behaviour and products shared by a group who organize and regulate what they think, feel, and do.” In this case, Latinos from Colombia have a common culture because they have acquired a web of meaning about how to think about life and ways of doing things because they have learned these things from family, friends, school, church, and government.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz has a slightly different twist: culture is “an inherited system of symbolic forms that operates as a set of control mechanisms – plans, recipes, rules, instructions – for governing behaviours.” In this approach, multi-generational Canadians have inherited “hockey” as a symbol of our identity. We have learned the rules, skills and behaviours so that an adult will play the game “intuitively” – without even thinking. But hockey also becomes a metaphor or symbol for how we think about ourselves as individuals and a nation – rough and tough, at ease with our cold environment; a team game with lots of room for individual attainments.

These two views of culture help us to understand what it means when people of diverse cultures come together in a social setting – such as church. Two Christians who have been raised in different cultures will have different “webs of meaning,” or ways of seeing the world, for almost everything. They will have different “symbols” which intuitively mean different things to each person. We often end up judging or evaluating people (and their spirituality) based on “our viewpoint” rather than stepping into the shoes of our fellow believer and “seeing” from their cultural vantage point.

If Janet suggests that Maryam should “let her idea go” for the purpose of “fitting in,” she has essentially denied Maryam her connections with her cultural identity. This attempt to minimize difference – perhaps for the sake of “Christian unity” – is a denial of an aspect of her sovereign identity. That is, God, in his providence, allowed Maryam to grow up in Egypt, so there must be something about Maryam's cultural identity with which God is well-pleased.

So, how do we do this, when people of diverse cultures come together?

³ John Perkins, *Beyond Charity: The Call to Christian Community Development*, Baker, 1993. Craig Van Gelder, *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry*, Eerdmans, 2007. Holt, Simon C. *God Next Door: Spirituality and mission in the neighbourhood*. Acorn Press, 2007.

What does a multicultural church look like?

Well, that's the dilemma, because many congregations in urban areas can "look" very diverse but not actually address the issues that develop multicultural communities. I would like to suggest that there is a difference between *multi-ethnic* and *multicultural*.

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

The *multi-ethnic-multicultural church* intentionally draws different cultural perspectives into the life and leadership processes of the congregation.

The multicultural church is a biblical 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 processes 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.

But let's stop for a minute, we may be getting ahead of ourselves. This article is discussing *how to make the transition* to multicultural. We will come back to what multicultural "looks like" again later!

How does change happen in an organizational culture?

We need to remember that churches are little micro-cultures. That is, particular congregations have beliefs, values, and symbols that organize the way we think and act – they determine our roles and behaviours. These beliefs, values, symbols and behaviours are passed from one generation to another, so that churches maintain certain ways of understanding and doing things. Some of these things are good and right, if rooted in biblical theology. Some of these things are just "the way we have always done it" and may have cultural meaning rather biblical. And that's not wrong either, if those cultural values and practices don't steer us away from biblical values and practices.

When someone "from another culture," however, enters our congregation with their own set of values and practices – some biblical and some cultural – we have to decide how we will respond.

Organizational culture, or "the way that our church does things," is rooted in a set of beliefs about how we think the world operates. For Christians we believe in a living God who is at work in the affairs of human beings – which belief sets up apart from a lot of other social and even religious organizations. We also have beliefs about what it means to "be a Christian," some of which are rooted in Scripture and some of which are not. Some of those ideas at the centre of our "beliefs" are given to us by our culture's way of

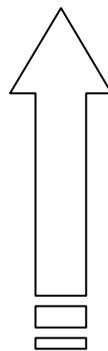
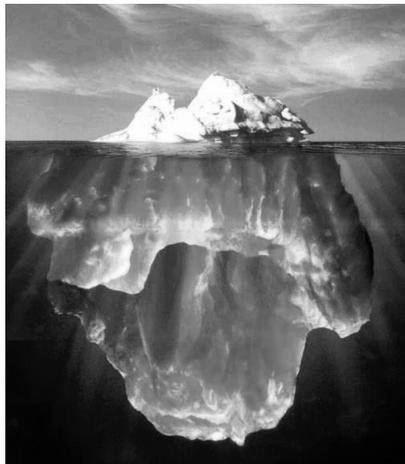
understanding things, not Scripture or biblical theology. We call this our “operational theology” – the things we *really* believe.

On top of what we believe, then, we develop ways of organizing ourselves. We develop assumptions and expectations for how things should happen and how we should conduct ourselves, based on our beliefs and worldview. For instance we believe we should pass our faith on to our children and encourage them to follow Jesus. So we develop certain assumptions about how we should do this. Or often we inherit expectations of certain behaviours to meet this value. Sunday School was one generation’s response to passing faith on to our children. Now many churches just continue offering Sunday School with no reflection on why we do it – “we’ve always done it this way.” Even if Sunday School was a tool that was developed in the 1700s, we are still doing it pretty much the same way as we’ve always done it!

And so we develop behaviours, patterns and activities to demonstrate our beliefs, values and assumptions. Often these behaviours or activities no longer have a meaning that we understand, we just do them. Even with declining Sunday School attendance, teachers who don’t have time to prepare, and – perhaps most telling – even the kids who attend Sunday School don’t end up in the faith, or in the church, as teenagers or young adults. But we continue the activity, because “we’ve always done it” or it “seems” like a good thing to do.

Change happens in organizational cultures when leadership begins to become aware of “Why we do, the things we do?” When leaders ask the hard questions: What are we doing? What results are we having? Why are we doing this? Is this really what we believe? This is the beginning of organizational change.

Iceberg view of organizational culture



Ways of Doing

Leadership roles are developed so that the organization performs with a high level of efficiency in delivering the behaviours and goods that emerge from the values and structure

Ways of Thinking

Structure is organized to serve the requirements of a culture at a specific time, based on their values and beliefs

Ways of Being

Different cultures have different sets of beliefs and assumptions that shape their imaginations

So if we want to explore development toward becoming an intentional, functional, multicultural congregation, we must become more self-aware. Aware of how culture

impacts what we do, in one way or another. We must bring culture to the table, not leave it parked outside the door of the church board room.

Intercultural Self-Awareness: what do we mean?

Intercultural communications professor Milton Bennett has developed a model and assessment tool (1977, 1986, 1993, and 2004) that I think is particularly helpful for becoming more self-aware of how we are doing with culture. In his *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (DMIS), Bennett describes movement across a continuum from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. By ethnocentrism he is referring to the experience of viewing one's own culture as "central to reality." Beliefs, values and behaviours acquired through our primary socialization (how we grew up) are seen as adequate descriptors of "the way things are." By ethnorelativism Bennett is referring to the experience of viewing one's own culture as just one organization of reality amongst many legitimate possibilities.⁴ In using the suffix "relativism" Bennett is not referring to moral relativism, but specifically to the notion that differing cultural perspectives should not be seen as superior to one another, but as relative. "That ethnic group's expression of its beliefs and behaviours is just as legitimate as mine."

Bennett identified six distinct types of experience across the continuum from ethnocentrism to ethno-relativism: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation and integration. A typical mono-cultural upbringing will normally result in a *Denial* of cultural difference. This is the situation where one's own cultural perspective is viewed as the only real one. Other cultures are either not noticed at all, or they are viewed in a rather vague manner. *Defense* against cultural difference is where one's own culture is viewed as the best or the "most evolved" form of civilization. Culture difference is noticed but the world has become organized into "us and them," where one's own culture is superior and other cultures are inferior. A modification of this polarized situation is referred to as *Reversal*, in which the individual has a negative view of their own culture and regards other cultures as better than their own. This perspective may be shaped by an idyllic, short experience in another culture, or a profoundly pessimistic view of one's own culture.

The person in denial can't see any other place to eat except McDonalds or A & W. Defense would say "I've eaten at that Thai restaurant, but you won't catch me there again – what do they put in their food?" Reversal says, "Thai food is fantastic, why would you ever eat at McDonalds – do you know what they put in their food?"

1 Milton J. Bennett, "Becoming Interculturally Competent," in Wurzel, J. (ed.) Toward Multiculturalism: a reader in multicultural education (2nd ed). Newton, MA: Intercultural Resource Corporation, 2004. p.62. Bennett's *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (DMIS) was developed in his doctoral research at University of Minnesota (1977) with a grounded theory approach involving the use of theoretical concepts to explain a pattern that emerges from systematic observations.

behaviours, not to substitute one set for another. This stage is typified by the ability to shift cognitive and behavioural frameworks from one context to the next. Adaptation is usually not achieved without at least 3 years experience in another culture.

The person who is experiencing the adaptation stage will frequently shift both their frame of reference and their behaviours so as to think and act from the perspective of the culture they live amongst. This shifting is done with authenticity and is perceived as such by persons of other cultures.

The final stage in Bennett's model is *integration*, in which one's experience of self is expanded to include the movement in and out of different cultural worldviews. Here, people are dealing with issues related to their own "cultural marginality"; they view their identities at the margins of two or more cultures, and central to none.⁵ Entry into this stage is often accompanied by a sense of disorientation and alienation: "I feel like I don't belong anywhere." With positive encouragement through support from others of like orientation, a constructive marginality results in Peter Berger's "multicultural man."⁶ Integration is not necessarily better than Adaptation, but it reflects a growing number of people, including members of non-dominant cultures functioning within the bounds of a dominant culture, long-term expatriates, and "global nomads."

The development of intercultural sensitivity – the way through ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism – is via the increasing capacity to perceive difference. This capacity is built upon actual experience combined with reflection on that experience. Cultural knowledge is not the same thing as intercultural sensitivity. Intercultural development requires increasing experience of difference coupled with reflection and integration of insights. In the words of George Kelly:

A person can be a witness to a tremendous parade of episodes and yet, if he fails to keep making something out of them..., he gains little in the way of experience from having been around when they happened. It is not what happens around him that makes a man experienced; it is the successive construing and reconstruing of what happens, as it happens, that enriches the experience of his life.⁷

The transition toward an intentionally multicultural church can only happen as leadership becomes increasingly more self-aware regarding their experiences of cultural difference. The multicultural congregation starts to take form when the leadership community is functioning with confidence in the *acceptance* or *adaptation* stage of Bennett's continuum.

⁵ Bennett, p.72.

⁶ Peter Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967.

⁷ George Kelly, *A Theory of Personality*. New York: Norton, 1963, p. 73.

Multicultural/Intercultural?

It may be helpful to pause and comment on the use of ‘multicultural’ and/or ‘intercultural.’ Practitioners in the field of intercultural communications use ‘intercultural’ as a descriptor of a process of *dialogue between people* of differing cultures. That is, it is possible to acquire skills in passing ideas and information between persons of different worldviews for the sake of finding common meaning. Someone who is interculturally competent is, therefore, able to effectively and appropriately use communication tools to elicit meaning in a specific cultural environment, even if not their own.

‘Multicultural’ is language used by educators and social philosophers as a descriptor of a process for *including* the *perspectives* of differing cultures into our understanding of our world and our diverse communities, in particular. That is, the voices of people functioning with different worldviews should be accepted (not just tolerated) as part of our community.

A faith community will mutually adjust its practices, so that different values and expressions find their way into shaping the ethos of that community. To put it another way, a functional, accepting, adapting, multicultural congregation is made up of individuals who are interculturally competent. In fact, interculturally competent leaders are required, or necessary, to mutually sort out those cultural values which do not find their source in biblical, kingdom values – in both the dominant and minority cultures.⁸

A Dialectical Perspective on Transition and Change

OK, now that we understand all about the different stages of intercultural self-awareness ☺ let’s get back to a process for transitioning to a multicultural congregation. Let’s also just note that if “change” is what we would like to see happen, “transition” is the meandering path toward those desired, “changed,” outcomes.

In April 2008 a group of multicultural ministry practitioners and educators from Canada and the United States gathered in St Louis to look at best practices in this field. One of the results of that dialogue was the development of “a dialectal format for understanding transition to a multicultural congregation.” The following outline gives an introduction to this process of meandering, ongoing engagement, reflection and development. (see diagram at end of article)

Cycle One: Becoming Conscious

This process of change normally begins with some sort of crisis. It may be a gradual decline in attendance or perhaps a change in who is actually attending services. Either situation may cause long-time members to wake up and become conscious that something has changed. This moment of awakening must be used as an opportunity to **exegete the change or crisis**. Explore what has been happening to produce this point of self-awareness. Are we concerned about this situation because there is no one left to teach

⁸ cf. Kymlicka, William, “Multicultural State and Intercultural Citizen,” Theory and Research in Education, (2003, Vol 1 (2) pp. 147-169)

Sunday School? Are we concerned because we are uncomfortable with “those” people, or are we concerned because we have lost our sense of mission?

This will undoubtedly lead to a need to **exegete the community** surrounding the church. Explore what is actually going on: demographic changes, social needs, physical, town-planning changes in the neighbourhood. Who is living in our neighbourhood these days? What are the needs that no one is responding to? What long-term plans does the city have for this area?

The final exploration in this stage is to **exegete the congregation** – what have we been doing that led us to be oblivious to the changes around us? What have we become that has produced such a disconnect between ourselves and our neighbours? What is really important to us? What do we believe? What do we value?

Cycle Two: Develop Consensus

The next transitional cycle of dialogue requires the development of congregational consensus about the direction of unfolding ministry. Does the congregation want to do the work to become a multicultural church, engaged in mission in their diverse neighbourhood? The dialectical model suggests that each move forward is precipitated by an encounter or disturbance to the status quo. As a congregation seeks to develop a new consensus, **the disorienting encounter is with Scripture** – a re-examination of familiar passages and themes in light of new realities. In essence the congregation needs to hear a new story, rooted in Scripture, of God’s engagement with all cultures in the course of developing a new humanity centered around Jesus.

The encounter with the God of Scripture must then lead into **listening prayer and spiritual discernment**. God, what are you saying to us? These things that we have become conscious of in our community, are they of concern to you? Please God, give us insight and discernment as we seek your presence and activity in our neighbourhood.

Scripture assures us that God hears these kinds of prayers and will not leave us without wisdom. Wisdom developed through collaborative engagement with the people of God will lead to Spirit-guided direction. A draft, preliminary, **conceptual plan** about where to start will emerge.

Cycle Three: Engage Culture – Build Trust

As soon as we begin to move from research, listening, and development to action, disequilibrium will automatically reappear. We are talking about, and taking action, to reorient our congregational culture. Our first reaction to change and difference is defense of the existing culture. Leaders seeking to help a church transition to a functionally multicultural congregation must **prepare for personal and corporate sacrifice**. You will take flack for this – you are seen to be taking more interest in “the other,” than “us.” Your congregation will lose people who cannot, or will not, make this transition with you.

As you engage with people of other cultures you must build trust and rapport – this is only done through **developing authentic intercultural relationships**. Your transition to a multicultural congregation will only happen to the degree that your leadership community has relationships of friendship, understanding, trust and mutual critique with people whose culture and worldview they do not fully comprehend.

These relationships are built upon the **development of intercultural competence** – acquiring skill in intercultural dialogue. Intercultural competence requires coming to understand how a person of a particular culture thinks and behaves; to understand the values, customs, norms and behaviours of your friend’s culture – from her perspective.⁹ And she must understand yours. Then we have the grounds for dialogue and mutual critique. With these elements in place, and increasing, the transitioning congregation starts to have an “all-by-itself” environment.

Cycle Four: Employ Critique

This fourth cycle may seem counter-intuitive – if everything is moving along as it should, why evaluate? Let’s say, we should be evaluating what we are doing, because it was lack of regular evaluation for years, perhaps decades, that got us started down this path in the first place. And let’s say, once again, that when we embark on a process of evaluation, disequilibrium will emerge, because most of us do not want our performance evaluated.

The first area we need to **assess and evaluate is our intercultural competence**. How are we doing in the development of relationship, experience, understanding, acceptance and adjustment? There are several useful tools for conducting this kind of self-awareness assessment. Honestly examine how far you have come, where you are now, and where you still need to go.

Results from this kind of assessment may lead to the need to **adapt and reformulate the conceptual plan**. Now that we have more intercultural experience and competence it is quite possible that many of our preliminary notions of how to develop a multicultural congregation need to be reworked – now that we are actually listening to and incorporating other voices besides our own! This in turn will lead to the need to **adjust ministry practices and intercultural communication patterns**.

Potential Barriers and Hindrances

This outline of a process for transition to a multicultural congregation comes out of the hearts and minds of a group of experienced practitioners – leaders who have been working at this kind of ministry, in some cases, for decades. What we all know is that this work is not as simple as a diagram or an outline in some article. In particular, we have found that a **lack of commitment or priority** placed on this movement toward becoming more intentionally multicultural can slow down the process for years – and that will lead to people moving on from your congregation. They will see that your leadership doesn’t ‘walk the talk.’ In some cases **ethnocentrism or fear** will rear up, often from unexpected directions. This leads you back to the drawing board on the basics of where prejudice comes from, as well as intercultural communication and developing trust. **Conflicts**

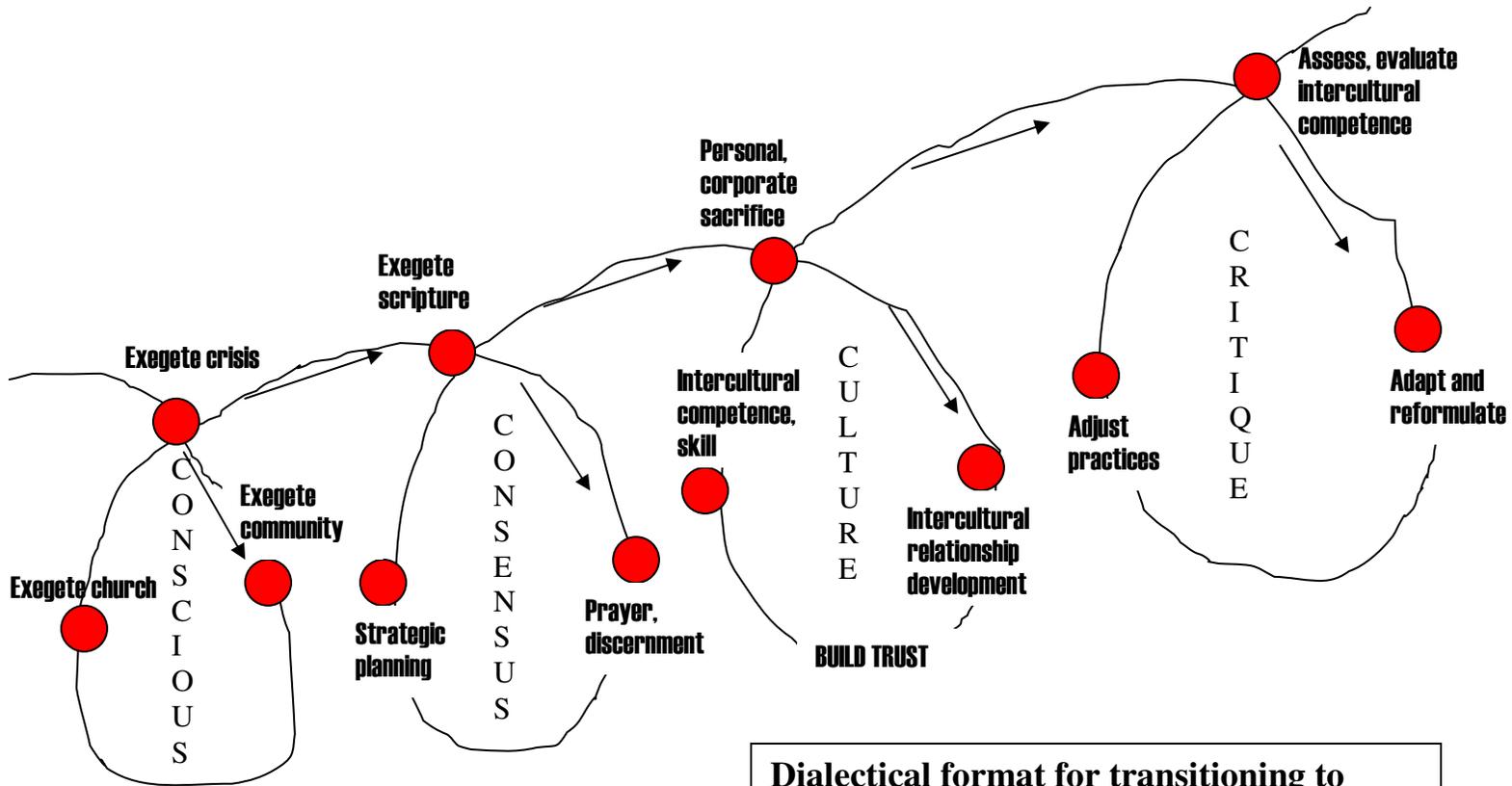
⁹ Chen, G & W. Starosta. (1998) *Foundations of Intercultural Communication*. London: Allyn and Bacon.

between different culture groups may emerge in your congregation that have decades – or centuries – of history in another land, for which you have no skills or understanding. Even with the best of intentions, if people from different cultures, who attend your congregation, do not live near one another, **logistical barriers** may work against the development of trusting relationships. And who knows, maybe plain ol’ **scarcity of the fruit of the Spirit** may show up as well – things like patience, kindness, and self-control.

At the beginning of this article I mentioned a congregation whose leadership team wants to begin this transition journey. They need to begin the process of **becoming conscious** by exegeting their community and congregation, but I started with helping them understand what they are feeling – about being ‘out of place’ somehow. *Exegeting their crisis* required looking at themselves – becoming more aware of how their own experience of cultural difference prepared or hindered them from going any further.

Organizational change and transition always begins with becoming more aware of who we are and how we function – that is, understanding ‘our’ culture. Then we can start to envision being something different.

[I want to acknowledge the particular input of ideas, models and diagrams from Brian Seim (SIM Canada), Howard Olver (Free Methodist Church, Canada), Ken Baker (SIM USA), Dana Roberts (Grace Chapel, MA) and Donna Millar (Salvation Army, Canada)]



Dialectical format for transitioning to intentionally intercultural congregation.
 (Multicultural church leaders dialogue, St Louis, 2008)