

The Multicultural Church: Tips for Making it Work

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A colleague recently asked me, “Is your church a multicultural church?” The question made me pause. My first thought was, “Of course we are multicultural - just look at us!” There is no doubt the congregation in which I serve is a culturally diverse community. More than 30 percent of our members are first generation Canadians, coming from 23 different countries from around the world. Several of the families who come to our church speak English as a second (or third) language. Several people who have been worshipping with us lately do not speak more than a word or two of English, their mother tongues being Farsi, Hindi and Korean. Is our church a multicultural church? Yes, I would say it is. However, what does that mean? What do we mean by *multicultural*? Why do we want to create multicultural communities? And how do we make multicultural communities work?

What do we mean by multicultural? And what is culture?

The word multicultural is packed with meaning. There are many definitions of multiculturalism. At its basic level it is a “social ideal or value that accepts cultural pluralism as a positive and distinctive feature of...society.”¹ Canadians who were around in 1971 may recall the Canadian Government initiated the Multiculturalism Act (revised in 1985 and amended in 1993), which encourages cultural diversity and protects and preserves ethnic heritage and civil rights. Culture is about deeply held values and beliefs shaped by our life experiences that form our world views and make us who we are. Sometimes we are similar to others culturally and sometimes we are very culturally different from others.

In this article, we will focus on ethnic and racial diversity in the church as a place to begin when looking at culture. All of the areas of cultural significance intersect with one another, so what you learn about making ethnically

diverse communities work will help you understand how to make other diverse cultural groupings in your community work as well.

Why do we want to create multicultural communities?



Recently our son had some friends over to our house to “chill.” I was amazed to discover that among the five of them, their immediate ancestry spanned four continents and represented three religions. Despite their obvious differences of skin colour, accent and food restrictions,

¹See Multicultural Canada online www.multiculturalcanada.ca/Encyclopedia/A-Z/m9

they were all pretty much indistinguishable as typical teenage boys who like to eat a lot and play video games. My son has learned how to be who he is and respect others for their differences while at the same time sharing things in common with them. That is what I believe the church needs to do in an increasingly diverse world.

In terms of ethnic diversity, Canada is the most rapidly changing country in the world. According to Statistics Canada, by the year 2025 all of Canada's population growth will be due to immigration. We shouldn't be surprised. Canada has always been a country of cultural diversity. Even before the first landing of European settlers (immigrants) onto Canadian soil in the 16th century, the First Nations people across the land were diverse both culturally and in language. Canada's rapid cultural growth poses a unique challenge to Canadians and to the church. How will we welcome others different from us into our communities and our churches? How will we create spaces where those different from us feel as comfortable in the church as we feel? As we share our common unity in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, how will we learn to value the differences in others? A recent survey of seven multicultural churches in our denomination across Canada asked this question: What three things do you do well that contribute to the health of your intercultural church, and what three cautions do you have?

Here are their answers in summary:

1. Become multicultural before you are "multicultural"

"Multiculturalism is nice, but it really doesn't apply to my church or community." I heard this comment a lot. But is it valid? All of the churches surveyed began as Euro-white congregations in largely Euro-white communities. Over the last 25 years, the demographics in their communities have changed and they have changed to match the community. Many churches don't realize how multicultural their communities are. I have served in small town, rural and suburban settings in Ontario, Nova Scotia and British Columbia, and in every community there was ethnic diversity either through immigration, historical immigrant settlements, or by acknowledging our proximity to our Aboriginal communities. In the small town of Gravenhurst, in the heart of cottage country in Ontario, the Muskoka Multicultural

Association reports that 10.3% of all Muskokans are first generation Canadians. Knox Presbyterian Church in Bracebridge, Ontario, offers English language classes to people in the community whose first language isn't English. This is the growing reality for many communities in Canada that thought they were "monocultures." The truth is, diversity is everywhere, and one of the ways the church is the church is to learn to accept diversity and embrace it. A country church I served in near Cambridge, Ontario, offers Spanish classes to encourage people to understand and appreciate the Spanish culture. Nurturing a healthy respect for diversity can give your community a broader understanding of the worldwide Christian experience and how to relate to others of a different culture.

2. Diversify your leadership

Does your church leadership reflect your congregation's and community's demographics? If your church is culturally diverse, then the leadership should be culturally diverse too. Make an extra effort to invite people from different cultures and backgrounds to participate. I am not referring only to sessions; think about your ushers and greeters, board of managers, church school and other committees.

3. Give it some thought

Unity is *not* about making everyone the same. Unity is learning how to accept and value the differences in others. Sometimes this takes





intentional work. Of the congregations surveyed, five have engaged in an intentional time of reflection and discussion with their sessions and session committees about the emerging demographics of their congregations and their local communities and what to do about it. One congregation surveyed offers cultural diversity training to its members; another congregation discusses the challenges and joys of cultural diversity at its session retreats.

4. Do something different

- Offer ESL and conversational English classes for the community.
- Hold VBS soccer camps for kids for whom soccer is a national sport.
- Hold a cultural bazaar to learn about different cultures around the world.
- Have a *Games of the World* night with your youth group. One evening we had Korean members of our church teach some traditional Korean games to the children. It was fun for all, but it also helped the Korean kids feel more at home.
- Engage in Bible study techniques that have a different perspective when it comes to considering the scriptural message through the eyes of others. Eric Law offers the Kaleidoscope Bible Study method, which can be accessed online at www.losangelesdiocese.org/ki/questions_for_reflection.html. The United Church of Canada also offers a Postcolonial Bible study technique in their resource called *That All May Be One*, available through the United Church Publishing House.
- Try pairing a long-time church member with a new person to help the person feel welcome. In our congregation, we pair Korean-speaking members with new Korean visitors to help them with translation. This way they can have some of their questions answered in a language familiar to them.
- Focus on mission. Many of the congregations in the study make mission awareness a priority. Learn about the world and care for the world.
- Several of the churches polled have actually engaged in cultural diversity training.

5. Celebrate in worship

Worship is the central act of a Christian. Worship is the way we express our devotion and love for God. It is in worship that our spirits and souls are renewed and enlivened. But we don't all agree on the best way to worship. That is because there is no one right way to worship God. The congregations in this study all understood the importance of making worship meaningful for all people.

- Music: try some hymns from different countries. The choir could introduce the hymn to the congregation first and then get the congregation to join in. Don't be afraid to use different instruments in worship too. Remember: most global hymns were not intended to be played on the organ.
- Lay participation: Involve different people in the worship leadership. One congregation invites people from different cultures to offer a testimony of their life experiences that lead to their acceptance of Christ.

- Banners: Add banners to the sanctuary that celebrate your diversity. One congregation is intentional about making sure the images on banners and on posters are not all "white" but reflect the cultural diversity of the community and the ethnicity of the holy family.
- Try something different: Don't be afraid to do something out of the ordinary. Take risks. One congregation makes a point of highlighting the cultural customs of one or two nationalities at Christmas. Another congregation holds *Dinner and a Movie* events where a movie that has a particularly poignant message about culture is viewed and discussed (see *My Name is Khan* as an example).

6. Celebrate FOOD together

Every church polled had one thing in common: FOOD! Eat together, have pot lucks, celebrate different foods and countries they come from. On World Communion Sunday, we had a liturgy of



the breads and presented breads from around the world, placing them on tables around the Lord's Table. We remembered each country in prayer. After Communion, we shared the *bread*s and *spread*s during coffee hour. Go to <http://liturgyoutside.net/Breads.pdf> for a sample liturgy. Another church has turned their Scottish heritage night into a Celebration of Cultures night. In addition to the wonderful Scottish fare, other foods from different cultures are shared.

Some cautions:

1. Don't force it!

Creating a healthy, welcoming church takes time. People need time to get used to change and growth. Be patient. Pray. "The church is an organic community that will naturally flourish and attract all kinds of people if they experience the love of God in worship, ministry, social events, etc. In this way the church is shaped by the Spirit becoming a true reflection of the Kingdom of God...the congregation will take ownership of who they are and what they can be...and then who knows where it will go." - I. McWhinnie

2. Practice what you preach

Be careful to be genuine in your welcome. Some congregations say they are "friendly" but don't really welcome strangers, especially if they are different. Be "decidedly non-biased."
- D. Sutherland and J. Smith

3. Make it known

Don't forget to communicate the fact that you are a multicultural congregation. All of the congregations in the study agreed that this was an important part of growing as a

multicultural community, but only half of them made an effort to communicate this in printed material or on the Internet. Communicating your diversity can help bring people to your church. St. Mark's Church in Mississauga is a very diverse community. As part of their congregational visioning process, they designed a logo and mission statement that communicates their diversity to anyone coming to the church. Many churches that see themselves as diverse communities make a point of stating that fact on their websites, in Sunday bulletins and in vision statements. Glenbrook Church in Mississauga has a beautiful statement about its diversity on their website. Check it out online. In fact, if you don't have a website, get one. You can have one set up for free through The Presbyterian Church in Canada's national office. It is as easy as going to pccweb.ca and filling out an application.

Participating in this study: The Rev. Grant Johnston at North Bramalea, Brampton, Ontario; The Rev. Paul Kang at St. Andrew's Humber Heights, Toronto, Ontario; The Rev. Ian McWhinnie at Glenbrook, Mississauga, Ontario; The Rev. Kathy Brownlee at St. Mark's, Malton, Ontario; The Rev. Dr. Jim Smith at Central, Vancouver, British Columbia; and The Rev. Dr. David Sutherland at St. Andrew's, St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. I have also included my own congregation, Thornhill, Ontario.

