

Multiculturalism and Models of the Church, Part I

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I would like us to look at multicultural models of the church in terms of structure. Structure has to do with the way Christians organize themselves as a congregation. How can a congregation best organize itself to meet its vision of multiculturalism? How should the members of a congregation relate to one another in order to make decisions about multiculturalism in the life of their church?

Structural Models of the Church

Most churches recognize the fact that they exist in a multicultural world and have some responsibility to one another. This attitude goes back to the time of the Apostle Paul who we learn in the Book of Acts took collections from Gentile Christians throughout his travels to help the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who were experiencing a hardship due to a draught. The United Methodist Church of which I am a member is structured in such a way that each local church is asked to give in an annual apportionment to the needs of other churches and people throughout the world. The United Methodist Church takes pride in the fact that it is an international and multicultural organization. Each local church is invited to have this sense of being connected to a world-wide multicultural church.

Even within the United States the United Methodist Church is represented by people of different cultures and races. Though the American church is about

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ninety-five percent European American, efforts are being made to be more inclusive. In the last thirty years policies have been designed to integrate the church and to support local ethnic minority churches.

There are ethnic minority churches which may not appear to be multicultural themselves but their existence and growth is helping the denomination become more multicultural. We also need to remind ourselves that some ethnic minority churches are themselves multicultural. The Filipino congregation in Oakland is ninety-eight percent Filipino, but the members come from various provinces in the Philippines which have their own unique cultural heritage and dialect. Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church in Oakland is a Black church but its members come from various countries in Africa and the Caribbean as well as from all over the United States.

At the local church level there are various ways the church has been structured to accommodate multiculturalism. Some local churches have become multicultural by sharing their church facility with another congregation of a different racial and cultural background. This is the case with Melrose United Methodist Church, the Filipino congregation I mentioned above. I served this congregation as the pastor for seven years. Not only is there the congregation of Filipinos, but for over ten years a Tongan congregation has been sharing the building. They have their own Tongan pastor. In addition, there is a United Methodist Hispanic outreach ministry located at Melrose.

Shared facilities give congregations of different cultural backgrounds a wonderful opportunity to do more sharing than just share the church building. The three cultural groups at Melrose have gotten together each year for a multicultural festival and the Tongan and Filipino, who are both Methodist, have joined on various occasions for worship and fellowship. Some churches that share the same facility may even pool their resources for a common mission project in the community.

In the United Methodist system two culturally diverse congregations can share the same facility and the same pastor. There can also be the case where two diverse congregations do not share the same facility but do share the same pastor. The pastor can be in a two or more point charge which means one pastor serves two or more churches. These structures not only offer the opportunity for the pastor to have a multicultural experience but the special relationship of these churches through their one pastor can enable the congregations to do some cross-cultural sharing.

There is also a structure whereby culturally diverse congregations, each with their own pastor, create a covenant relationship with one another. In Oakland, one of our African American churches has established such a relationship with a European American church in a suburb. Though the people are worlds apart, in many respects, they affirm their unity in Christ, and have come to relate with one another through fellowship and mission.

The Oakland Metro Ministry has made an effort to bring the various United Methodist churches in the city together for mission. Although these churches have various cultural and racial identities the Metro structure has given those who are interested a means to come together for multicultural and multiracial programs. The benefit of everyone being United Methodist means that there are some similarities in being church and time does not have to be taken away from the mission project to define what it means to be the church. On the other hand, the Metro offers different ethnic churches the opportunity to come together and learn from one another what it means to be the church from their unique ethnic experiences.

If churches from various cultural or racial backgrounds are really serious about developing multicultural relations they might actually move in with each other. For example, one church might consider selling its church building and move with its assets to the facility of the other church or both churches might

sell their facilities and combine their assets to buy new property in a place that would better enable them to carry on a multicultural mission. This new relationship could either be a merger or a limited relationship in the same facility. The different groups might consider coming together for combined worship every Sunday or just occasionally. Their mission as well as their fellowship might be combined or sometimes separate.

One of the models in my dream for Oakland is for a United Methodist facility that would be large enough for several ethnic churches to have their own buildings but a common sanctuary and fellowship hall that would offer them separate and combined worship opportunities. Close proximity makes relationship building easier. The various groups could come together for other programs as the Spirit moves them. They could combine their resources for mission projects in the area. They could also share the cost for the upkeep of the facility and for shared staff. It would also enable the United Methodist Church to give a witness in the community that in the Church of Jesus Christ peoples of various cultures and races can live and work together.

The above model allows for ethnic congregations to keep their own identity while still having a multicultural identity at the local church level. As long as the United States continues to have new waves of immigrants there will be a need for ethnic churches. This outreach extends beyond just offering places of worship for people with various languages, but includes community services and support during crises. As Bishop Roy L. Sano points out in his book *From Every Nation Without Number* :

The ethnic minority local church (in America) has provided a range of community services unmatched by any other institution. The local Church has been a quasi-housing authority, a makeshift employment agency, an *ad hoc* immigration office, and a legal aid society. It has offered supplementary education when public schools fell short of their promise and private

schools were out of reach or closed to racial and ethnic minorities. It created social and recreational outlets when other programs had no room.¹

Another model of being a multicultural church, mentioned in Bishop Sano's book, is Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco. The Reverend Cecil Williams, a black United Methodist, was the former pastor at Glide. He says that he was so hurt by segregation in the church that he wanted to strive for a church whose doors would be open to all persons, no matter who they are. Williams' dream in the 1960s was to create a truly multicultural church when few existed at the time and Glide became his experiment.

At the time there were quite a few multicultural churches that we call "churches in transition." As neighborhoods changed from European American to African American, churches gradually changed, becoming multicultural for a while. However, it was not the intention of the members for their church to be multicultural and multiracial. It was something that happened to them and for some European Americans it was something that was not desired.

Cecil Williams was the keynote speaker at a seminar I attended called, "Babel to Pentecost: Multicultural Experience." This gathering of clergy from the California/Nevada Conference was sponsored by WEEDS (Wesleyan Evangelical Empowering Diversity in Society) in the spring of 1996. "At Glide," he said, "people of various cultural backgrounds join together intentionally to be one congregation."²

In the shared congregational life, each group is invited to contribute. In worship this may mean hymns and liturgical forms offered by each cultural group. Even if English is the common language, when the various groups have their

1 Roy Sano, *From Every Nation Without Number: Racial and Ethnic Diversity in United Methodism*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 105.

2 This model is represented in three case studies from Atlanta, Georgia, described in the book, *We Are the Church Together: Cultural Diversity in Congregational Life*, by Charles R. Foster and Theodore Brelsford of Emory University (1996). In my study of United Methodist churches in Oakland, California, I discovered that Rockridge United Methodist Church and Lake Merritt UMC are also bringing people of various cultural and racial backgrounds together to have a shared congregational life.

own languages, there should be opportunity for people to pray and sing and express themselves in their own tongue with translation for others when possible. The sharing of different foods is a common aspect of the life of a multicultural congregation. The sharing goes deeper with the celebration of various traditions, the telling of stories and the explanation of values. This offers a great opportunity for children to learn what it means to be a Christian in a multicultural environment.

This model of being a multicultural church allows for various ethnic groups to meet separately on occasion for their own solidarity. They may want to worship in their own language, or have their own prayer group, or Bible study where people express themselves in their 'mother' tongue (first language). Some people have expressed one's first language as God's language. This is the language they feel most comfortable in talking with God.

I know of ethnic groups who have a sizable representation in what has been traditionally a European American congregation. They are one congregation and most of the congregational life is shared but occasionally the ethnic group has programs by itself. At Pinhole United Methodist Church in California the ethnic group is Filipino and they are nearly half the total number in the church. Language is not a barrier since the Filipinos all speak fluent English and generally their worship style is the same as the European Americans, but the Filipinos have formed their own choir and other groups, not in an attempt to be exclusive, but to celebrate and retain their own culture.

Another model of multiculturalism in the local church is amalgamation. This term is sometimes used to describe the melting pot of American society, the process whereby various ethnic groups merge together to form the dominant identity of America. Some may not think this desirable or even possible, especially for the first generation of immigrants. Amalgamation is usually easier for second and subsequent generations. The American born offspring may lack the

desire to retain their parents' mother tongue and culture because the pressure for minorities to conform to the dominant culture is great, even in the church.

As much as the United Methodist Church would like to be multicultural its heritage is European American and since the vast majority are European American there is an inherent desire to keep it that way. Although the denomination recognizes good reasons for the local minority ethnic church, I believe that one of the reasons the denomination emphasizes the ethnic church rather than integration is because in the process of integration even the dominant culture changes and there is clearly a resistance to change.

When people from various cultural backgrounds come together to be the Church of Jesus Christ with the goal of tearing down barriers people will naturally be influenced by one another. If this integration occurs at the local church level the cultural identity of the United Methodist Church will change. At first it will be multicultural but in time a new amalgamated cultural identity will emerge among the people called Methodists. Amalgamation is not a new theory about the interaction of different cultures and races, but I believe that in the context of the church, with people's motives informed by the teachings of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit, a community of diverse people can learn to live and grow together. Will all of their differences disappear? If so, it takes more than a generation or two. But in the process of amalgamation gradually the old will fade away and a new way of being will unfold.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first heaven had passed away... (Revelations 21:1)

I like the image of the "stew." There are carrots, onions, bits of beef and whatever else suits your fancy. This is a popular image of multiculturalism today, like the "tossed salad" but unlike the tossed salad the stew enables us to see where multicultural relations might be going. As the stew simmers the flavor of the carrots and the other foods are released and absorbed by one another.

The carrots take on some of the taste of the onion and vice-versa. The meat which becomes marinated will taste different than if you ate it separately. Eventually the various items in the stew break down and will no longer be recognizable. Perhaps this is what Israel Zangwill meant by his image of the "melting pot."

The tossed salad image represents one of the other models for being a multicultural church. This is where various cultural groups come together but do not intend to do any sharing or learning. Essentially the carrots say to the onions or to the tomatoes, I will be in the same bowl as you but I do not want to pick up any of your flavors. The onions and tomatoes have the same attitude. They are proud of their unique taste and want to keep it that way.

Lastly, I would like us to consider a model of the church for multicultural and mixed race people. Increasingly the local church is faced with individuals who in their very being are multicultural and multiracial. A model of the church that maintains the separation of the actual cultures and races that exist in one individual may not have relevancy for that person. Multicultural and multiracial individuals have their own unique identity, their own needs, and perhaps a different mission than monoethnic people.

Even though the Bible speaks of all God's people joining together in community, multiculturalism remains a new experience for many American Christians. The members of many churches are still predominately one ethnic group. Of course, some communities are not multicultural, so churches in these communities may never have considered the possibilities of being multicultural. These communities are not multicultural because they have not yet experienced the migration of people from different cultures and races like many of America's larger cities, or because of economic segregation. There is no longer legal segregation in the United States but some communities are segregated for economic reasons. This usually refers to white communities where the real estate is

so costly that people of color have not been able to purchase homes in that community. This is changing, however, as more and more people of color have the means to buy homes in these communities.

I have suggested several ways that churches in either multicultural or monocultural communities can have multicultural experiences. I believe Christians have a biblical mandate, not only to have positive relations with people who are different than themselves, but to build multicultural communities. American Christians can no longer justify the type of church structures that keep people from having multicultural experiences. There will continue to be monoethnic churches in the foreseeable future but even these churches can adopt structures now that introduce multiculturalism.