

# Experiencing Transculturalism

TONY WALSH

Those working at the grass roots in any project have a range of wisdom that often remains unrecognised and untapped. It appeared important to redress this common imbalance and to express something of the experience and views of those most involved in transcultural experiences. In order to connect with something of this richness a group of members involved in transcultural congregations were invited to respond to six questions about their Church's story of multicultural development.

The respondents were selected for the range and depth of their experience in the field as well as for the variety of their cultural backgrounds. Some of the respondents were ministers or leaders, others described themselves as ordinary local Church members. The congregations in which they were involved reflected many differences, coming from a variety of denominational backgrounds and were located in a wide range of differing contexts. All were situated in Ireland, some in urban or suburban areas, others in towns or villages, scattered throughout the country

This chapter tries to encapsulate the respondents' reactions in a way which honours their experience. As well as giving a 'voice' to those most deeply involved in this area of transcultural development, it also seemed imperative to reflect the wide variety of views expressed as well as to note commonality of thought and experience where this existed.

Not all those invited to respond did so, and of those who did, not all answered each question. Responses are, however, characterised by a remarkable degree of reflectiveness and insight. Many are profoundly challenging of the respondents themselves and indicate a very high level of both personal awareness and honesty. A number of responses are also quite challenging of the Church structures and of the larger denominational systems. Some question sensitive issues such as existing structures of power, leadership and tradition. Others share very personal aspects of their own journey. All speak for themselves; their views are not necessarily those of others in their congregation or their denomination. Instead,

they are stories of a story. If there is an emergent common theme it may be to suggest that the creation of transcultural community provokes a questioning of the assumed status quo in all sorts of unexpected and frequently uncomfortable ways.

To preserve a sense of privacy for both respondents and the congregations involved, responses are not credited to particular individuals or congregations.

### 1. *In what significant ways has your church changed?*

Some respondents spoke with obvious delight of significant positive alterations in their Church. Others commented on attitudinal changes and one or two mentioned difficulties encountered.

Almost all the respondents noted such obvious transformations as a significant, at times amazing, growth in numbers attending services. Many also described a spectacular increase in the range of cultural backgrounds involved, noting that one new group attending seemed to serve as a catalyst for the involvement of other groups as well:

We have seen a dramatic increase in numbers as different groups have joined the congregation: local families of different church backgrounds and then asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants – from eight different countries and four continents: Africa, USA, Asia, Europe.

Significant change was also reported in the conduct of worship, with services becoming livelier, more varied musically and much more participative.

... a cross cultural group of vocalists now leads the singing accompanied by a music ensemble with guitars, African drums, key board and organ.

We always have Bible readings in a number of languages, and a time of open prayer at every service, so that people can participate in their own way and in their own tongues.

It was felt really important from the outset that people would be able to understand the message, so it is always translated either directly, or

through power-point headings into two or three other languages.

Most respondents also commented on real attitudinal change as members became more open to embracing difference of any kind. Some also instanced what appeared to be a new willingness to enter into deeper levels of relationship; this frequently accompanied the increasing informality of worship:

There is... a definite qualitative change. Oh... the church has become much more open to new ideas, to difference; different ways of worshipping, different ways of doing things. People are much more ready to try new experiences of prayer and fellowship.

New members from different cultures have stimulated friendliness, respect, hospitality, and integration. Worship has become brighter with a time for praise songs in different languages becoming an integral part of each service. Now people will talk together about new ideas and possibilities; not that they'll always agree with everything that's proposed, but they're very willing to discuss and to give things a try.

People are trying new ways of being a community; talking, spending time, connecting. We often have communal meals together. And prayer in small groups; many services now also include a time of testimony and sharing.

In some instances this openness appears to have occurred right from the beginnings of the multicultural experience, almost as if a congregation was poised, awaiting a catalyst to provoke change. In other situations it took a little more time as original members (and perhaps newcomers) dealt with an initial period of uncertainty and fear. At times it appears that this process involved learning to challenge deeply held assumptions about the role of church.

At the beginning it was all a bit scary, it was facing the unknown, and people were afraid and unsure.

The stimulus to outreach and to growth is vital for a healthy congregation. And the recognition that the church must not become a club, inward looking, exclusive, afraid of change or of attempting ventures

in faith. This has meant a strengthening of the original Wesleyan ethos – of an evangelical, evangelistic church.

Unfortunately for many people, I think that the church unwittingly fulfils the function of a bastion against change. It's a place they retreat to, to comfort themselves. In reality it should be a place in which to grow, to be challenged and to take steps of faith.

Posing a question about change can not only provide interesting descriptive information; it can also unearth something of a congregation's core sense of identity, revealing much about how it views itself, its role and its function in the wider society. How an individual or a congregation deals with change is linked to the conscious or unconscious assumptions which they hold about *their* church or about church in general. Sometimes in a rapidly changing society, a church is valued as the one place that is stable and unchanging. Moreover, it may be perceived by some as a place which by its very nature *should* not change. Obviously such deeply held and often largely unconscious assumptive models will be significant, either precluding any major changes or allowing them only at a very modest rate and with considerable resistance. More dynamic assumptive models which accept change and challenge as part of the very essence of church life will allow for a much more ready ability to adapt. The power of these assumptions often resides in the fact that they are largely invisible and therefore are difficult to 'flush out' or reveal let alone challenge.

Even in congregations or indeed denominations where 'bastion' or 'retreat' are strongly underlying metaphors the advent of cultural diversity can over time allow for the transformation of old assumptions. This can allow for their replacement by new and more dynamic models and the concomitant emergence of an array of possibilities.

## 2. *What for you has constituted the most enriching aspects of becoming a transcultural congregation?*

The term 'enrichment' is often used to describe the experience of cultural diversity; of course the precise definition of this experience depends very much on the beholder. Sometimes it implies satisfaction, sometimes challenge; often both. In the second question participants were

asked to reflect on this aspect of their congregation's experience.

The excitement of developing a completely new range of cross cultural relationships, individually and as community was one highly significant area commented on by a number of the respondents:

For me the most exiting part has been meeting so many people from all over the world and the process of getting to know people, so that strangers become friends.

It is seeing two communities coming together, particularly when they're sharing together and seeing each others' culture. For instance, seeing Irish people choosing to sing in your language [Lingala], a language that is foreign to them, it shows how much they want to share with you.

It is seeing people open the heart's door: that's the first sign of seeing people wanting to know you; the second step is seeing them listen to you; the third step is them telling you about themselves. Then you really begin to know who they are. Then you can start working together.

Others speak of how their faith has been stretched. Many Irish respondents speak of how the commitment of those coming from other cultures has excited and challenged them at a spiritual level.

Look at what they've been through and they're still praising God. Their trust, and a times their serenity, in the face of so many past and present difficulties is so amazing.

They're not ashamed to share Jesus, like we sometimes are.

And the experience of enrichment seems to be mutual as newcomers comment on the spirituality of some Irish believers:

They have a quiet faith; they do not shout, but if people in Africa believed and behaved like these Irish believers then the problems there would just go away.

At first because they do not smile so much when they pray, and look sad when they sing those old hymns, you think 'What is this?' But then...then, they show you Jesus, as they open their hearts and doors

and invite you in.

Human beings tend towards being creatures of habit. Organisations of any kind, including Churches, tend, when left to themselves, to avoid change. Encountering different views or practices will often disturb this tendency. Several, particularly those involved in leadership or pastoral roles, speak of the stimulation of having their accustomed understandings and ways of seeing or reacting stretched; of having their minds and imaginations broadened.

I'd come from a fairly predictable evangelical church background; I needed to be challenged, to be moved out of my own framework to a wider view of things. My view and experience of God has been broadened.

So many of those who have joined us are so warm and open. I think as Irish people we can be very guarded; friendly on the outside, but very guarded beneath that friendly façade.

The experience has challenged us as a church to examine ourselves, to think outside the box and to move beyond the comfort zones in lots of ways.

I think that the most rewarding and exciting aspect is being in the midst of difference and change. It stimulates you to creativity and resourcefulness. You are required to be resourceful in all sorts of unexpected ways. To find resources in yourselves. And in your experience of God.

You learn to expect the unexpected and it's challenging; It's been a very refreshing process; more positive than negative – but definitely not easy.

For years, at an implicit level I think we've questioned our relevance to the wider society. The countryside is littered with derelict Protestant churches; the death of the communities which they represented doesn't seem to have made one whit of difference to Irish life. This can eat away at a community's confidence and make for a very demoralised outlook. I think many of the culturally diverse congregations have shifted significantly in this regard and are looking at themselves

anew. They're suddenly realising that they have something unique and valuable at their core that has allowed things to develop so amazingly. This creates a new sense of confidence.

Respondents continually use such adjectives as 'refreshing,' 'positive,' and 'rewarding', simultaneously reflecting that the process of transcultural development has been 'stretching' and 'far from easy'.

It is probably true to suggest that many congregations, particularly those of a minority status, tend to live out a rather sheltered and sequestered existence with little that speaks of a radical perspective. While they offer a strong and cohesive sense of community, concerns may become small and perceptions inward looking. This inexorably results in a diminution of confidence and an accompanying underawareness of what they might have to offer to the wider society.

However, where they are able to respond positively to the stimulus of influx and the attendant new ideas, this seems to result in a new elasticity of thought and response at a variety of levels. Over time when a community responds positively and continually to such stimuli, the whole internal culture shifts, becoming more open, inclusive and flexible. What at first may be disconcerting results in the expansion of existing understandings and the growth of more elastic constructions of reality. The resultant sense of confidence is bolstered as they uncover something of their own latent resources. This is further reinforced as they are recognised as doing something novel, dynamic and useful by the wider community and indeed at times by society at large. It would appear that for those congregations involved in an engagement with transculturalism the experience is simultaneously enriching and extending, as well as being an invitation to revisit their own sense of worth.

### 3. *What did you find most challenging in the process?*

All the participants suggested that the process of transcultural development had faced them with significant challenges. They noted that such challenges existed primarily at two levels. A number of respondents discovered that real engagement with profound cultural difference was deeply disconcerting, inviting them to levels of reflection and learning that were both difficult and unexpected. Secondly, many found them-

selves profoundly challenged to reflect critically on their accustomed ways of being, and of their understanding of their own role in the church. They confronted unexpected closed areas in their own thought or behaviour patterns, or suddenly recognised an inappropriate attachment to power or control in the fulfilment of leadership or other functions.

Recognising that different behaviours or assumptions, including many of ones own, are culturally determined rather than necessarily right or wrong, can be highly disconcerting, but can also result in the need to radically revise accustomed outlooks in order to fit with this new realisation. It may also invite quite profound shifts in thinking and behaviour in order to allow for more comfortable fit with those of other cultures.

Misunderstanding of our behaviour was perhaps hardest. Sometimes you don't think about cultural difference until you hit against it. For instance in our culture we never invite true friends to visit. They do not need an invitation, your home is theirs and you just expect them to call. Irish friends didn't understand this and thought they were not welcome because they were not invited. And we began to think they did not want to come, because they did not call.

When you experience a certain reaction or behaviour that is unexpected you have to learn to think 'Well now what might that mean in another culture?' rather than jumping to negative conclusions. You also have to be really aware of how what you do or say may be interpreted in another culture. Actually at one stage I became quite paralysed, a bit paranoid really, afraid to do anything. But then I learned to say 'I don't understand what this means,' and to ask for feedback about what I was doing, if I felt unsure. I think we've got into the habit now of asking and discussing, and of clarifying the meaning of behaviour a lot more, and that really helps.

Encountering Irish people in churches, you find that many are ready to meet and invite; but not everyone coming into the new community is ready to step forward to meet them. Many newcomers are not making a step to meet half way which would make it much easier; many in their hearts are not really committing to the new community. At the beginning you sit, then when you see people are willing to open their heart, then you should stand up and take responsibility. Many new-

comers do not do this. They never consider how will my attitude, my behaviour appear to those of another culture, an Irish culture?

We have been brought up to think that the way we prioritise, legislate behave and believe is the best, if not the only valid way to see and do. If you really meet the other person of another culture, you have to be open to questioning all that. It can leave you feeling quite rudderless and uncertain.'

Helping some older members to face their own unexpected and unsuspected tendency towards racism was particularly challenging...for everyone.

For some there was a new awareness of how the *way* in which they occupied their role in the church could either facilitate or block growth; this highlighted the issue of power and control in local congregations. One or two reflected very courageously on their tendency to hold on to control, by preventing change or by adopting a directive rather than a facilitative style of leadership.

What shocked me, as a minister, was not the challenges encountered in transculturalism but my own reactions: being intolerant, holding on to the familiar, trying to maintain control.....This has been very challenging for me personally; ministers are very invested in maintaining control. Some of it comes from the training and maybe some of it is due to the personality types that are selected for ministry. I have had to put a lot of work into learning to be more open, more flexible; to shifting my comfort levels, to let go of control. Because if you don't, if you're not genuinely open, you will find yourself constantly on the defensive and consequently you will create problems, stifle good ideas and prevent growth.

Becoming a minister who is a facilitator of the growth of others, of their ideas and of their roles, is much more difficult than occupying the traditional role of minister-as-boss.

Another leader very honestly acknowledged:

We can believe things quite erroneously about ourselves; for instance we can believe ourselves to be very open to change and development,

but when it comes down to the practice of this openness in a new situation, it is much more difficult. At times in the past I know I presented a façade of openness. But it was a façade. The process of transculturalism has challenged me most profoundly. It has made me look at myself as never before. I now know how closed I can sometimes be.

Religion and identity can be very closely aligned. For members of Irish churches, particularly perhaps the minority churches, congregational affiliation is often not just about spirituality, or even about a social network. It can be experienced as core to people's very identity. Their position or locus of influence in a local church as a result can become very, very important. Change, particularly radical change which may endanger this can be perceived as highly threatening.

Life can revolve around the church. For some people it's the centre not just of their spiritual life but of their social world as well. If they've put in years keeping things going, it can be very, very difficult for them to let go. Because this may mean letting go of their influence, or of the roles that keep them going.

I sometimes watch Mrs.H.....; she's a widow and her family are all long gone. She used to play the old pipe organ we had, and could coax music out of it in a way no one else could. Everyone knew her even in the wider community as the organist in that little Protestant church. Now we've an intercultural praise band and she sits at the back by herself. While the church has gained immeasurably by the changes, I think she has lost out so much. No wonder she wasn't too keen on the new people.

It appears that many congregations now developing into transcultural churches gradually drifted into the area. People of different cultures arrived and the congregation responded without necessarily having a clear idea of what might be implied in terms of change and adaptation. Perhaps few of the newcomers realised this either. The reality that close contact with another culture might imply having to review one's own assumptions and values as well as normative ways of doing things may not have been recognised until the encounter was well under way. It is

also doubtful if many realised that they could find themselves projected into an arena where they were confronted by their own prejudices. Where there has been opposition to cultural diversity, this can have its roots not so much in racism or prejudice, but in the fear of losing influence, control or security.

Those congregations who have even at an unconscious level decided to remain disengaged from multiculturalism, or those individuals or groups who have opted to join churches of their own ethnic origin may have almost inadvertently shielded themselves from the rigours of the challenges embedded in the experience of transculturalism.

4. *Were there particular events, moments or experiences that were of seminal importance in the experience of transcultural development?*

In a process of change and growth there will frequently be particular events or experiences which are of seminal importance in the development of a project. Sometimes these are actual crossroads, where one direction is taken rather than another and this has made all the difference. Sometimes there are moments of reflection or discovery when scales fall from the eyes of those involved and they see in a new way. Occasionally a particular event or moment can attain a symbolic significance and progress is measured from that time; it assumes a central place in the narrative of a community's development. In recognition of this the next question invited respondents to reflect on such moments in the life of their church. In response some chose particular events which were in some way significant while others focused on particular moments which had promoted insight or had altered thinking in a significant way.

It may be strange to choose a row as a special moment, but it was such a revelation. Two groups from another culture had a major difference one Sunday. It was very public and very loud. People were so ashamed afterwards, they felt so humiliated. One family could never bring themselves to come back. I don't think that I had ever acknowledged before how vulnerable it can feel to be in a minority culture, although I've been part of one all my life. The whole thing made me so much more aware of lots of barely acknowledged issues within my

own life. That in turn alerted me to what may be issues for those in other minority communities in our new Ireland.

There were so many really significant moments. Some of these were very important, symbolically. When two Africans were married the reception was held in an Irish home. That showed the true love that was extended in our community at a time of celebration and excitement. ... Other special times were when Bill and Doreen (Irish members) invited us to their house to a barbecue and again when the whole congregation met together in a house to welcome the new pastor and to eat together. When you are invited to a home then you know the heart is truly being opened to you. It is one thing to worship together; that may be easy. It is when doors of homes and hearts are also open, then change really takes place.

A Nigerian family who had been with us for a while decided to make a family birthday into a church event. They cooked all the food, brought it to the church and invited everyone to stay and celebrate with them. It was a wonderful occasion; Irish members had never thought of anything like that before. Now we have quarterly meals together after the morning service; everyone brings food to share and it's a great opportunity for getting to know people and for strengthening relationships'.

These last two respondents are underlining the importance not just of the abstract concept of Christian love, but of love that is grounded in the actuality of invitation, where the normative societal boundaries are superseded. Irish culture is noted for its warmth; in reality this friendliness can at times be limited to the pub or other external spaces. Opening homes or inviting the community to become part of a family celebration are powerful symbolic gestures that go far beyond the usual norms. The stranger is invited into the inner life and reality of the host rather than being kept at a safer social distance. This can feel quite a risky undertaking, particularly at first, as the hosts are rendered vulnerable to the gaze and judgement of the outsider and indeed to the possibility of rejection or refusal.

The importance of initiative is also being underlined here, and the recognition of how one courageous gesture can create a precedent leading to a greatly enriched community life.

Once we made trip all together [to Glendalough], to see something of the Irish culture and countryside. Some people had never been outside Dublin before, and we all felt 'Oh they're showing us not just love but something that is important to them, they want us to know more about their life, their history, what is important to them.'

Since the start we had a Christmas party every year for the newcomers, with a special meal involved. The third Christmas that the Congolese group were with us they suggested that they would cook the meal. We sampled all these exotic foods that are part of a Congolese way of life, the Chorale sang, and there was lots of chat and fun. Everyone still talks about it. But it wasn't just the event, though that was great. For the first time our African friends were able to show us, involve us in something of their culture. And for a change, perhaps for the first time since they came to Ireland, they were able to be hosts. The balance was being redressed.

Starting the special African style prayer meetings, when everyone met together in homes to pray as we do at home, to share with us in our way, was a big milestone. You knew that people really wanted to come and share as well as to pray together; and everyone was making a very special effort to attend to share our spirituality. It says we are a family learning together from each other's differences.

Starting a praise group was definitely one of the most important developments. There are more than a dozen people involved in it at present, Malaysian, Korean, Nigerian, Congolese, Irish. They use keyboard, drums, konga, piano, guitar as well as vocalists. The group meets every Saturday to practise so they get to know each other really well and have become a very rich intercultural sub-system. They lead at all the services and this has really transformed the worship. It also allows for the inclusion of very different styles of music and praise and is a way of allowing different cultures to share their richness and their particular spirituality in worship. And it allows a much larger and more culturally diverse group to develop and share their talents as well as facilitating more people to actively participate in visible leadership.

We used to have a very stable membership. This seems to be chang-

ing. People come and go a lot more now, arriving and spending some time and then moving on in God's providence to take up other roles for Him in different places. I think we're realising that church life may be altering dramatically, becoming less predictable and more varied. People will be with us for a while, sharing with us and we with them, and then they'll move on to other places. It's an invitation to draw on the gifts of a much wider group. God's telling us to look at the bigger picture. I think that this calls for more faith on our part; firstly to trust that He will provide the people and the resources to run the church and secondly to trust the wisdom and experience of those who come in from different cultures. Up to recently I suspect we have probably relied far too heavily on the predictability of our own resources. This moment of realisation has been a real eye opener.

These commentators underline the value of occasions when there are real 'meetings', which go beyond mere surface connection. Perhaps more significantly they underline the importance of an open invitational attitude of mind. They also emphasise the importance of occasions where those who are in a marginal position in the new society are offered, or empower themselves to find, a context in which to demonstrate the wealth of their culture and spirituality. This emphasises the need to be aware of the temptation to see the newcomers as primarily 'refugees' with many needs, rather than as people who have a wealth of resources to share. A central role of the transcultural congregation is not just to privilege participation it is also to find creative ways in which members of different cultures can express and share the wealth of their experience.

5. *Do you feel that your thinking has changed in response to transculturalism?*

As responses to previous questions have indicated, building transcultural community constitutes a constant stimulus to new learning. In reflecting on their experience many of the respondents were able to identify quite fluently how this new learning had impacted on their thought processes. Some indicated a change in the quality of their thinking; in the past they would have been less able, or less willing perhaps, to question or critique.

I think that after a while you begin not just to do a little differently but to think quite differently too. We are so used to our society, our church structures, our accustomed ways of doing things, that we rarely pause to question or critique them at any depth. Are these really the best or most valid ways of proceeding? Do they really serve and advance the Lord's work? We rarely try to get beneath our practices or structures to look at what's embedded there. So much of what we do in churches is about preserving our comfort zones and not challenging the status quo. It's also about preserving sites of power. So many of our committees, rituals, offices and assemblies are about preserving the power and status of the denominational structure, or the elders or the clergy rather than about trying to follow Jesus effectively. Most particularly, much of it's about preserving a very Eurocentric value system which privileges individuality, success and certainty.

Because we're so used to the assumptions that are involved we're inclined to accept things 'as they are' without any real question. In fact things are 'as they are' because our society or our church has chosen to construct its world and its priorities in a particular way. We need to be aware that there are always other choices, there are always different ways of doing things or of seeing things. Real transcultural engagement challenges us to realise that there are so many different but equally valid ways of viewing reality, of prioritising, of doing things. It's not to say that other ways of doing or seeing are always better than what we're accustomed to. That's not the point at all. Rather it's to say there are different possibilities that invite us to question, to re-evaluate and perhaps then to re-create. I sometimes wonder if interculturalism gets only vague support from the main church bodies and tends to exist more at the margins because it is, almost unconsciously, perceived as in some way threatening to the denominational status quo.

Our church hasn't changed much despite all the newcomers, despite our lip service to inclusiveness. It seems that the real issue is that we have continued as on the basis that 'they' are welcome to join 'us'. There are two real problems here as I see it; the first is about control, and particularly about who maintains control, particularly control of



the content of the service. The second is about creating purely tokenistic change which is more cosmetic than real. This preserves the status quo by keeping those in power happy; those without power continue to be excluded in any real way, but appearances of 'doing the decent thing' are maintained. The main problem is not about multiculturalism; it is located in the reaction to it.

Our society is so rushed and so focused on doing rather than being that it's easy to forget that the core building blocks of relationship and Christian fellowship are actually quite simple. Difficult but simple! The first is the priority of listening. Its only if we listen carefully, caringly and non-judgementally that we will learn about the other – whoever they are. The second is the importance of discussing and dialoguing continuously. If people are continually involved in both formal and informal processes of discussion it is much harder for difficulties to become 'solidified'. There will always be different attitudes and expectations, particularly when you're dealing with people from different cultures. Getting these out in the open, exploring them openly, often helps people to shift, or at least to understand the position of the other, and if people understand then they can often move. With either listening or discussing the problem is time. Both take inordinate amounts of time, but they're very worthwhile.

We as people coming in from other countries should have more commitment to show what we can do, or who we can be in the community. Often we are not saying or showing what we can do. We have entered the house, eaten the meal and now we just sit down. Sometimes for those who come in to a church they are afraid to suggest, or are not suggesting. Often because back home we are used to accepting the minister or priest as the authority figure...we only do things if they tell you what to do. They are never, ever challenged. So it becomes a habit not to express a view or opinion; to say everything is o.k. when it is not. If something goes wrong in the church then, you can blame without having to take responsibility.

New learning not only results in new behaviours; it also frequently creates radical and sometimes unexpected changes in pre-existing outlooks. What was in the past accepted as normal can suddenly be opened

to critique and questioning. Contact with people from other cultures can ultimately promote a radical questioning of accepted norms and structures in one's own society or community of faith. Perhaps this is one of the more unexpected results of openness to cultural diversity.

While being greatly enriching, this shift does not necessarily guarantee a comfortable fit with the status quo, societal or denominational. This may well have long-term implications for how transcultural congregations are perceived by both. And in turn this will tend to be of significance in defining how their evolving needs are met. It is interesting to note that the Waldensians, the small but influential indigenous Protestant church of Italy, are considering a radical re-vamping of their ministerial training programme in order to address multicultural issues.

#### 6. *What do you see as important for the future?*

Finally, respondents were asked to comment on future plans based on what they had learned in the evolving process of developing a transcultural community. Much of what was shared was very practical. Looking to the future the importance of partnership and participation was emphasised again and again as was the need to involve women in the development of strong, culturally diverse local leadership.

It seems very important in the context of an intercultural congregation to develop a strong non-Irish leadership to have input into decision making and particularly to have a significant voice in the future development of the church. So far while three African members have been elected to the church council their attendance at meetings and their contribution to discussion has been very disappointing. I'm not sure how we can change this and encourage the development of really meaningful and active Christian leadership in this context. Perhaps when people become more settled in Ireland, and are guaranteed that their future is secure here, they may feel more able to contribute more realistically. A second issue is the development of a number of home fellowship groups, meeting in the different areas of our small city. These would nurture participation and help people to grow spiritually and in cross-cultural relationship. They might also with time aid the development of leadership skills and responsibility.

Women's place and role within the church is traditionally limited. While this is changing, I'm not sure that it's changing either fast enough or meaningfully enough. There is a huge need to validate and value women's ways of knowing and doing and to utilise their leadership skills. Of course, in the context of interculturalism this is something of an issue, as many of the new cultures now in Ireland have an even more patriarchal and paternalistic attitude to women than that of Irish churches.

To work more with women. On the surface it seems that in many societies women have small roles. This is not true. For us women are the ones who really push; they are the strong ones.

Invite the suggestions of new-comers; go to the fields, harvest the opinions, views, suggestions...and their contributions. Ask 'What do you think we should do...what would you be willing to do?...what would help?' This starts people to think, it involves them. Many people from Africa are not used to thinking, to being asked for their opinion on church, only gradually will they learn to change, to realise that their view is valued. Only then will they become responsible. The pastor, the leaders should not just visit, they must consult, discuss, feedback and discuss again.

Responses also emphasised the profoundly fulfilling nature of transcultural development but did not shrink from recognising the difficulties involved. They emphasised the need to be tentative rather than prescriptive, to experiment and to risk rather than being tied to rigid plans or to traditional approaches.