A Critique of the Multi-ethnic Church Planting Strategy

Gustavo Suarez
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

A CRITIQUE OF THE MULTI-ETHNIC CHURCH PLANTING STRATEGY

Gustavo V. Suárez

abstract

This paper seeks to discover if the multiethnic church planting strategy is effective in reaching a multicultural nation. This paper will first take a brief look at the challenges of an ethnic population in North America with primary emphasis given to the Hispanic population. Second, I will present supportive evidence for the multiethnic church planting view. Third, I will present arguments against the multiethnic strategy. Fourth, I will give observations and implications for the church. The main source of argument centers more in the methodology used. The reader will readily see the contrasting theological and cultural opinions of these two groups in their methodologies.

Multiethnic congregations, according to Kathleen Garces-Foley, "are not unique to the twenty-first century, but in American History they have been rare, short-lived, and have almost always perpetuated racial inequality and white hegemony."[1] However, her study of Evergreen Church in Los Angeles also shows that "young, cosmopolitan evangelicals will not be confortable in an 'ethnic' church."[2]

---

[1] Kathleen Garces-Foley, *Multiethnic Congregations,* ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz (Waco: The Center for Christian Ethics, 2010), 62.

[2] Ibid., 63.

Mark DeYmaz, founder of Mosaic Church of Central Arkansas, believes the vision of Christ for the church is that men and women would be one so that the world may know God's love and believe. The local church, then, should be patterned after the church in Antioch, a church that was multiethnic and a church for others.

Demographic estimates data (2007) shows that ten percent of the counties in the United States are already majority-minority counties. Daniel Sánchez's research shows that presently the majorities of Hispanics are first generation and will continue to be so until 2050.[3]

The purpose of this paper is to discover if the multiethnic church planting strategy is effective in reaching a multicultural nation. This paper will first take a brief look at the challenges of an ethnic population in North America with primary emphasis given to the Hispanic population. Second, I will then present supportive evidence for the multiethnic church planting view. Third, I will present arguments against the multiethnic strategy. Fourth, I will give observations and implications for the church.

237

introduction: the challenge of a diverse population

The ethnic population of the United States is rapidly changing the face of North American missions. This population is rapidly growing, diverse, and dispersed. This presents both a challenge and a great mission opportunity. It becomes a demographic, sociocultural, and missiological challenge to the North American church. It also creates great mission opportunities for the church because God is bringing the nations of the world to our doorstep. Will the church be willing to make the necessary changes to thrive effectively in a multicultural world?

The church faces a demographic challenge. The last decade shows that the foreign-born population grew to 38.5 million people or 12.5 percent of the total population.[4] These foreign born represent people from the various countries of the Americas, Caribbean, South and East Asia, Middle East, and other countries of the world. The largest of these ethnic groups in North America is the Hispanic population, which has grown from 22.4 million in 1990 to 48.4 million in 2010 or 114.3 percent growth.[5] Hispanics represent 15.8 percent of the total population.

---

[3] Daniel R. Sanchez, *Hispanic Realities Impacting America: Implications for Evangelism & Missions* (Fort Worth: Church Starting Network, 2006), 23.

[4] Daniel Dockerman, *Statistical Portrait of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States, 2009* (Washington: Pew Hispanic Center, 2011), Pew Hispanic center.

[5] Jennifer Cheeseman Day, *Population Profile of the United States* (Washington: U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), U.S. Census.

Another way for the North American church to understand the demographic challenge is that one in eight people in the United States is foreign born and almost one in six people is Hispanic. Believers must see a world that is no longer homogeneous but made up of many ethnic groups.

The church faces a sociocultural challenge. North America has commonly been labeled a "melting pot." However, North America is not a melting pot but a nation of many nations speaking many languages and dialects. Each language represents unique cultural characteristics. Hispanics, for example, come to the United States from twenty countries and three continents. Although the language is the same, one has to recognize the regional colloquialisms and traditions of the culture to effectively communicate the message of Christ. One implication to believers is that they must think like a missionary. The world is not "over there," but God has brought the world to our doorsteps.

The church faces a missiological challenge. How we effectively carry out the Great Commission to all the "ethna" is at the root of missiological thinking. A person's theology influences his philosophy of missions, which also guides the strategies and methods for missions. Churches and pastors, for the most part, are not equipped to think missiologically. For years, the church has been ministering primarily to homogeneous people speaking one language and of the same or similar culture. Today the diversity of the people brings many new languages, cultures, religion, and worldviews.

The church has great opportunities for missions. The church has tremendous opportunities to reach out to the nations of the world that are coming to the urban areas of North America. Many of these people are looking for political freedom and a better life for their family. The church, more than any other government or secular agency, is uniquely positioned to present the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Great Commission, "to make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19), is a mandate for the church to make every necessary change needed to reach these people groups in their mission field.

supportive evidence for a multiethnic church planting strategy

The definitions of a multiethnic church are many and very diverse ranging from different models of multiethnic churches to including mega churches as multiethnic churches. What is a multiethnic congregation? Art Lucero defines it in terms of ethnic models.[6] A study by Scott Thuma, Dave Travis, and Warren Bird

238

---

6 Art Lucero is the president and founder of Multi Cultural Ministry. He is a leading expert in cultivating multiethnic churches and working with local churches to help them reach immigrant community. He serves as Adult Ministry Pastor at Sunrise Church in Rialto, California, a multiethnic congregation of 4,000.

on mega churches shows, "Thirty-six percent of churches reported having a 20% or more minority presence."[7] Mark DeYmaz explains "multiracial—churches as one in which there are a non-majority, collective population of at least 20 percent."[8] The common thread undergirding each of these definitions is that each church has considerable diversity of class, education levels, income, ages, backgrounds, occupations, and even theological and political styles.

philosophy of the multiethnic church planting strategy

Supporters of a multiethnic church planting strategy are influenced by certain values. The values typically held by many multiethnic churches relate to unity, racial reconciliation, and biblical mandate.

Multiethnic strategies value unity in diversity. These churches have an intentional desire to see people of different cultural backgrounds worshiping together in one language. This belief is rooted in the idea that it is God's desire that our worship will be reflective of what we will experience in eternity when people from "every tribe and language and people and nation" will praise the Lord. (Rev. 5:9) Since the church is a reflection of the larger community, it becomes a "Christian training ground for children, youth, and adults to learn how to live in a multiethnic, multicultural society."[9]

239

Assimilation becomes a strategy to reach people. In essence, the church becomes a vehicle for helping immigrants to assimilate into the culture. DeYmaz sees the importance not only to assimilate but also to be intentional to accommodate newcomers. He sees this as a preparation for both the church and people to receive individuals that are different from others.[10]

Multiethnic strategies value racial reconciliation. People in a multiethnic congregation view the church as segregated and not reflecting the realities of communities. Most books that treat multiethnic churches extensively also speak about racial reconciliation. Mark DeYmaz concludes that the dream of racial reconciliation will not be completed "apart from the establishment of multi-ethnic churches that intentionally and joyfully reflect the passion of Christ for all the people of the world."[11] Gerardo Marti, a sociologist and former pastor at Mosaic, Los Angeles, challenges researchers who have demonstrated the "overwhelming

---

[7] Dave Travis, Scott Thumma, and Warren Bird, *Megachurches Today 2005* (Hartford: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary, 2005), 8, Hartford Seminary.

[8] Mark DeYmaz, *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church: Mandate, Commitments, and Practices of a Diverse Congregation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 4.

[9] Todd E. Johnson, *The Conviction of Things Not Seen: Worship and Ministry in the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 144.

[10] DeYmaz, *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church,* 59.

[11] Ibid., 183.

ethnic and racial homogeneity of American churches."[12] Church Growth theorists have seen ethnic homogeneity as a positive factor for growth. However, George Yancey sees the homogeneous emphasis as a contributor to the "continuing and persistent racial gap."[13] Marti highlights the multiethnic work of Mosaic in the words of one of the elders of the church:

> Churches tend to be protected preservations of groups. You go there, and it's all white, it's all Russian, it's all Chinese, it's all Mexican. It reflects more of what America was—very segregated—yet Mosaic represents what America is today. It's not segregated. You go to the university, and it's not segregated; you go to high school, and it's not segregated. Generally speaking, I mean, it depends on what community you go to, but here in L.A. [it] is not segregated.[14]

Multiethnic strategies value biblical mandates. Many church planters target a specific people group before they start a church. However, the multiethnic church planter believes that a church is for all people. It is a safe place for people of all ethnicities to worship God. A study of the New Testament will reveal that the Gospel was first presented to the Jews and quickly expanded geographically, crossing ethnic and cultural boundaries.[15] The multiethnic church planting strategy sees the biblical mandate to reach "ta ethna" as permission to mobilize people "toward intentional involvement in evangelism."[16] Mission is the reason for an emphasis on cultural relevance.

theology of the multiethnic church planting strategy

Most books and articles written about multiethnic churches study the sociocultural and anthropological phenomena more than the theological rationale. Probably DeYmaz is the person that has written the most about the multiethnic church. He also has written the most about the theology of the multiethnic church. I will briefly summarize his three most salient theological arguments.

Envisioned by Christ. (John 17:20–23) The night before Christ died, He envisioned that future generations of disciples would be united as one "so that the world would know God's love and believe."[17] A powerful message is proclaimed every time people of diverse cultural background are of one mind, spirit, and

240

---

[12] Gerardo Marti, *A Mosaic of Believers: Diversity and Innovation in a Multiethnic Church* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 23.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] J. P. Robins, "One People in Christ: Biblical Perspective on Multiethnic Church" (Waltham: Agape Partners International, 2009, blog), 1, http://agapepartners.org/authors/40/Rev.-J.P.-Robins/ (accessed February 15, 2011).

[16] Marti, *A Mosaic of Believers,* 75.

[17] Mark DeYmaz, *Ethnic Blends: Mixing Diversity into Your Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 40.

purpose in and through the local church.[18] The centrality of this prayer was that we would be one. In fact, three times Christ used the word "one."

Described by Luke. (Acts 11:19–26; 13:1) DeYmaz, in explaining these verses, highlights five actions that clearly give theological support to the multiethnic church. First, the missionaries mentioned in Acts 11:20 were from diverse cultural backgrounds. Second, they went to Antioch to speak to both the Jews and the Greeks. Third, the Antioch church was the first to collect an offering for believers living in a foreign land (Acts 11:28–30). Fourth, they had a multicultural pastoral leadership team. Two of the men were from Africa, one from the Mediterranean, one from Asia Minor, and one from the Middle East (Acts 4:36; 9:11; 13:1). Fifth, it was the church in Antioch, not Jerusalem, that first sent missionaries to the world. DeYmaz concludes that it was not "coincidental that the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch (Acts 11:26). For there Christ was clearly recognized in the midst of unity, just as he said he would be (John 17:23)."[19]

Prescribed by Paul. (Ephesians) DeYmaz sees the epistle of Ephesians as prescriptive of "unity and diversity for the local church."[20] DeYmaz understands the "mystery of Christ" not as the Gospel—the good news message of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, and His atonement for sin. Rather, he interprets this mystery to be "that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and share together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 3:6). DeYmaz believes this verse encapsulates all that is written in this epistle and the "very life of Paul's life and ministry."[21]

Christians are not at liberty to create a congregation of exclusive worshippers. DeYmaz believes that the homogeneous unit principle (HUP) is "a valid strategy for evangelism, but a strategy misapplied to the local church."[22] It is acceptable to evangelize by targeting a specific group, but once you commit to establishing a local church, "you are no longer at liberty to create a congregation of exclusive worshipers."[23]

missiology of the multiethnic church planting strategy

The multiethnic church creates an environment for reaching people from all cultures. The North American church is very segregated. Therefore, the multiethnic

241

---

[18] Ibid., 41.

[19] Ibid., 42.

[20] This article can be found at http://www.outofur.com/archives/2010/06/the_theology_of.html David Swanson, "The Theology of Multi-Ethnic Church" (Carol Stream: Christianity Today, 2010, printed), 1, blog.

[21] DeYmaz, *Ethnic Blends,* 44.

[22] Ibid., 77.

[23] Ibid.

church intentionally attempts to create an environment conducive for people of diverse cultures to worship together.

The multiethnic church reaches primarily the second and third generation immigrants. Since English is the primary language of these churches, they appeal more to second and third generation ethnics. Many of these are English-dominant speakers and some may have even been born in the United States from immigrant parents.

The multiethnic church rejects the homogeneous unit principle as a viable strategy. The biblical motivation for many of the multiethnic churches is that Christ "destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph 2:14). They accept the HUP as an evangelistic strategy but not as part of a local church strategy.

The multiethnic church is intentionally inclusive in selecting a pastoral team. Proponents of the multiethnic church believe that the church should reflect the community. They also believe that the pastoral staff should also be inclusive in reflecting the people in the church.

242

arguments against the multiethnic church planting strategy

The population growth in North America increased rapidly as a result of the influx of immigrants. Two important factors contributing to the growth of the population were the passing of the "Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965" and the influx of new immigrants from Southeast Asia after the Vietnam War. Chuck Van Engen reminds us that a "quick review of American history would point to the fact that the church in the U.S. has been an immigrant church from its very inception."[24] In essence, Van Engen says, "All Christianity in America has been ethnic Christianity."[25]

Mark DeYmaz is one who has argued against ethnic oriented or people groups strategies on a theological basis. Eckhard Schnabel supports this position when he affirms that the "popularity of the 'people group principle' is waning among missiologists."[26] A younger generation of pastors who grew up in a more diverse society, and had a more positive cross-cultural experience than did their parents, is taking the initiative to start multiethnic congregations. However, many of the younger generation do not realize that most of their cross-cultural experiences

---

[24] Chuck Van Engen, "Is the Church for Everyone? Planting Multi-Ethnic Congregations in North America," *Global Missiology* 1, no. 2 (January 2004), 12, http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/122/353/ (accessed February 15, 2011).

[25] Ibid., 14.

[26] Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008), 405.

were with second and third generation immigrants. Their vision is to fulfill God's ideal of unity among the diversity of nations.

The two different perspectives merit that we study the immigrant church of the nineteenth century and the immigrant/ethnic church of the 1980s and 1990s. Van Engen is helpful in providing a historical perspective:

> With a few notable exceptions, the culturally-shaped churches of the last century all shared a common world-view in their Western European roots deriving from the Enlightenment. By contrast, the new immigrant churches of the last three decades in North America represent Christians from every part of the world, a global church located in the cities of North America speaking a host of languages like Spanish, Portuguese, Hindi, Gujarati, Tagalog, Indonesian, Korean, Mandarin, Japanese.[27]

Arguing for or against multiethnic church planting strategies can be very complex. Arguments are reduced to discussions between McGavran's homogeneous unit principle (HUP) and Paul's call for unity in the local church. This complexity is evident in the confrontation that exists between people's sociological and theological understandings that ultimately affect our missiology. This understanding of our surroundings could transform some of our contextual hermeneutics.

243

philosophical arguments

Those that argue against a multiethnic church planting strategy are more likely to be influenced by sociology and anthropology than are the supporters of the multiethnic strategy. However, this does not mean, as many assume, that they have no theological position or ecclesiastical understanding.

There are various arguments against the multiethnic church planting strategy. One argument is that "multiethnic" is not adequately defined. The definitions and supportive evidence often speak in terms of demographics but ignore how to measure inclusion, institutionality, leadership, and inclusive strategies for the diverse groups within the church.

A second argument is that normally in a multiethnic congregation there is a dominant group. The accepted definition is that the church would have at least twenty percent or more minorities to be a multiethnic congregation. According to this definition, however, only "12 percent of Catholic churches, just less than five percent of Evangelical churches, and about 2.5 percent of mainline Protestant churches can be described as multiracial."[28]

---

[27] Van Engen, *Is the Church for Everyone?* 14.

[28] DeYmaz, *Building an Evangelistic Church,* 4.

A third argument is that a multiethnic church encourages assimilation. While this may be a desired outcome, it may also overlook first generation immigrants who also need to hear the Gospel in their language. Assimilation gives the idea of a "melting pot." Yet, North America is not a melting pot but a nation of many nations speaking many languages and dialects.[29]

A fourth argument is that a multiethnic church places undue barriers for the seeker. Naturally, someone who is familiar with Donald McGavran's homogeneous unit principle would argue that "men like to become Christians without having to cross social, linguistic, or class barriers."[30] The multiethnic church seeks to tear down cultural, linguistic, and social issues because of the work of Christ on the cross. While that may be ideal, the missiological question one should ask is, are we reaching the most people with this strategy?

theological arguments

244

Three verses that are normally presented as arguments for the position of one culture in Christ include: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

> But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. (Eph. 2:13–16)

> And have put on the new self, who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him—a renewal in which there is no distinction between the Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all. (Col 3:10–11)

Many scholars underscore the idea of unity in Christ to the extent of eliminating ethnicity, economic power, and gender in their interpretation of Galatians 3:28. Such seems to be the opinion of Nicole, Jamieson, Fauset, Brown, and others. It is my view that a proper interpretation of these verses would be to understand them in terms of our position in Christ. A.T. Robertson, making

---

[29] Daniel R. Sanchez, interview by Gustavo V. Suarez, July 20, 2010, telephone interview, Kansas City.

[30] Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 223.

reference to Galatians 3:28, supports the idea of position in Christ by saying that "this radical statement marks out the path along which Christianity was to come in the sphere and spirit and power of Christ."[31] He adds, "Candour compels one to confess that this goal has not yet been fully attained. But we are on the road and there is no hope on any way than on 'the Jesus road.' "[32] R. C. H. Lenski's observation is that "these and similar distinctions and differences are wiped out as to your spiritual standing."[33]

Timothy George asks, "Does Galatians 3:28 really teach that being 'in Christ' eliminates the three distinctions mentioned in the text? It is clear from the larger corpus of Paul's writings that it does not. Paul himself did not cease to be a Jew once he became a Christian.[34] To ignore the differences in gender would be to violate Scripture. Before the fall of man God created man in His own image, "male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). If one follows the thought of no gender to its logical conclusion, he will find unisex, which is a violation of Scripture.

Colossians 3:11 is very similar to the Galatians 3:28 passage. In this, verse one also observes division on the basis of race, religion, social, and economic class. Lenski mentions,

245

> Some misunderstand Paul's thought and quote various passages to show that we are all one in Christ Jesus, that all national, social, and other differences are wiped out, that 'brother' should be substituted for all of them . . . Here he says that the new man alone counts, that Christ is everything in all and every way, that all else is nothing in religion.[35]

The new man (νέος) is a new creation in the sense that he did not exist before.[36] The present participle (ἀνακαινούμενον) "is being renewed," shows a process of continuous renewal (καινος), which is part of the previous word, and communicates the idea of quality.[37] The two aorist participle, "having put off" (ἀπεκδυσάμενοι) and "having put on" (ἐνδυσάμενοι), denotes a decisive momentary act while the present participle, "is being renewed," denotes continuousness and iteration.[38]

---

[31] Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament,* ed., *The Epistles of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1931), 299.

[32] Ibid.

[33] R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (St. Paul: Lutheran Book Concern, 1937; repr., Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 189 (page references are to the reprint edition).

[34] Timothy George, *Galatians,* The New American Commentary, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 30 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 289.

[35] R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians* (St. Paul: Lutheran Concern House, 1937; repr., Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 166 (page references are to the reprint edition).

[36] Ibid., 162.

[37] Marvin R. Vincent, *Words Studies in the New Testament,* ed., *The Epistle of Paul to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), 523.

[38] Lenski, *The Epistle to the Colossians,* 163.

The "dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:14) presents the idea of prejudice of one group for another. It also speaks of the regulations of the Mosaic Law towards these people.[39] The wall communicates the idea of alienation and separation. Paul was accused of taking Trophimus across this wall (Acts 21:28).

In summary, these three verses have been used against language congregations because it segregates people. I like to point out that this is no different than the age-graded Sunday school. It exists in order to provide specific needs of the people.

missiological arguments

Because those who argue against a multiethnic church planting strategy are more likely to be influenced by sociology and anthropology, they tend to support the homogeneous unit principle. Therefore, their missiology is shaped by principles significant to the Church Growth movement.

They believe that men like to become Christians without having to cross social, linguistic, or class barriers. Multiethnic churches add unnecessary barriers particularly to first generation immigrants. The barriers are more than linguistic in nature. Many of the new immigrants bring with them a different culture, religion, political views, economic understanding, and ways to relate to others. Supporters of reaching out to specific ethnic groups will affirm that the church should remove as many sociological barriers as possible. They will also maintain the theological position of the exclusivity of Jesus Christ.

They believe that a changing demography requires a homogeneous strategy. My story is similar to that of many immigrants that have come to America in search of hope and the opportunity to achieve their dream. America is a nation of immigrants and their descendants.

The present demographic reality is that the majority of descendants of immigrants is shifting. The Pew Research Center reports that new immigrants arriving after 2005 and their descendants will account for eighty-two percent of the U.S. population growth between 2005 and 2050.[40] A missiological implication is that the continued influx of first generation immigrants will more effectively be reached with a language-cultural congregation and not a multiethnic congregation.

They believe that the Bible allows for diversity. Diversity is seen from the first pages of Scripture. There is a wide diversity of occupations. Abel was a shepherd, while his brother Cain worked the soil (Gen. 4:2). Tubal-Cain forged all kinds of

---

[39] R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (St. Paul: Lutheran Book Concern, 1937; repr., Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 439 (page references are to the reprint edition).

[40] This report can be accessed at http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=85 Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, *U.S. Population Projections: 2005–2050* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center), Pew Research Center, 1, Publication.

tools out of bronze and iron (Gen. 4:22). Some were carpenters and builders (2 Kings 12:11), and others musicians (2 Kings 3:15). Shipbuilding was another of the occupations mentioned in the Scriptures (2 Chron. 20:36). Peter and others were fishermen (Luke 5:1–7). Luke was a physician (Col. 4:14).

Diversity is also seen in the educational level of the people. Gamaliel, a Pharisee, was a teacher of the law (Acts 5:34), and Paul was his student (Acts 22:3). On the other hand, Peter and John were unschooled and ordinary men (Acts 4:13).

Linguistic differences are also highlighted in the Scriptures. The first biblical list of people groups is presented in Genesis 10. These people were "separated into their lands, every one according to his language, according to their families, into their nations" (Gen. 10:5). Genesis 11 describes how God "confused their language, so that they will not understand one another's speech" (Gen. 11:7). Some scholars have observed this diversity in languages as punishment because of humanity's sinful rebellion against God.[41] Acts 2:5–11 mentions a list of fifteen language groups. According to C. Peter Wagner, it is possible that many more groups were present at this time since the Jewish Talmud indicates there were 70 nations in the Jewish dispersion.[42]

Some biblical examples showing ministry among a diverse people are: Phillip witnessing to the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26–28); Cornelius and Peter responding to the same call of God despite two different cultural backgrounds (Acts 10); and Jesus ministering to the Samaritan woman (John 4).

Diversity, if not properly understood, can easily lead to cultural conflicts. The choosing of seven men to serve tables came as cultural conflict arose between the Grecian Jews (Ἑλληνιστῶν) and the Hebraic Jews (Acts 6: 1–6). The former were Greek-speaking Jews while the latter were Jews who spoke the native Aramaic dialect of Jerusalem.[43] Polhill adds that "there is no reason to picture a breach or separation in the total Christian community—only the sort of 'distancing' created by natural linguistic and cultural differences."[44] The Jerusalem council's (Acts 15) central missiological issue dealt with contextualizing the gospel among a new group of believers.

Many, ignoring culture, expect the body of Christ to be united into one cultural tradition. Unity does not mean uniformity. Should a non-Hispanic meeting someone from Mexico encourage him to retain his Spanish or to give it up? Or do we help the individual do what he wants, whatever it is, going along with

247

---

[41] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary,* trans. John H. Marks (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1961), 148.

[42] Peter Wagner, *Spreading the Fire: A New Look at Acts—God's Training Manual for Every Christian,* The Acts of the Holy Spirit Series (Ventura: Regal Books, 1994), 87.

[43] John B. Polhill, *Acts,* ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 176.

[44] Ibid., 179.

him both linguistically and ecclesiastically?[45] Ralph Winter mentions that some verses might allow one to make the assumption that God will ultimately unite all believers into one new people consisting of one new cultural tradition. He adds that there seem to be far more references on the other side.[46]

observations and implications

The primary goal of both the multiethnic and homogeneous church planting strategies is to reach people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The main source of argument centers more in the methodology used. An individual methodology is influenced by both theology and cultural preference. One can readily see the contrasting theological and cultural opinions of these two groups in their methodologies. The growing ethnic population in North America presents certain implications to the local church.

248

sociological implications

The church needs to understand generations. The present demographic shows that most of the language-cultural groups represented in North America are primarily first generation. Since Hispanics have resided in North America for more years than new immigrants have, some are second and third generation Hispanics. Estimates show that sixty percent of Hispanics make up this segment. A strategic question one should ask is, should we plan to start churches among the forty percent of first generation? Absolutely! This segment of first generation Hispanics comprises 20.2 million people that need to hear the Gospel in their language. However, the ministry of multiethnic churches includes other ethnic groups, many of which are first generations.

The church needs to define multiethnic. The multiethnic definition needs to be clarified in a way that everyone is using the same terminology. Presently multiethnic is defined mostly in terms of demographics. This definition fails to measure inclusion, institutionality, leadership, and inclusive strategies for the diverse groups within the church.

Each church should determine who they will target as a mission field. The strategic plans should include outreach to specific generational, socioeconomic, and cultural groups. The methodologies used will mostly be determined by their theological and cultural preferences.

---

[45] Harvie Conn, ed., *Reaching the Unchurched: The Old-New Challenge* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 26.
[46] Ibid.

ecclesiological implications

The church must take a position and determine the answer to the question, what is the church? Their answer will influence their methodology, shape their strategies, and guide the structure they will use for church development.

An important implication to the church is to understand how the church will function in a given culture and still be the church. What are the ecclesiological non-negotiables that are not based on culture but on Scripture?

theological implications

Although each holds to a different methodological approach to reaching people, both believe in the authority of Scripture and the exclusivity of Jesus Christ. A theological implication to the church is to maintain Christ-centered biblical teaching in the midst of people from diverse cultural, religious, and political backgrounds.

249

missiological implications

The church needs to understand diaspora missiology. A changing demographic requires a homogeneous strategy. The United States is home to many language-cultural groups of the world. Among these, one finds students, immigrants, and refugees. Many of these people speak a language other than English. Therefore, the most effective way to present the Gospel to them is by communicating in their native language.

The church needs to understand missional theology. The priority should not be to congregate many nations in one church; rather, the priority should be to see the transformation of many people groups in one city.

conclusion

While there are good arguments on both sides of the multiethnic church planting strategy, one must ask the question, is the multiethnic church planting strategy effective in reaching a multicultural nation? The rapid demographic, sociocultural, and missiological changes are changing the face of the North American landscape. Presently, most immigrants to North America are first generation communicating in a language other than English. In addition, first generation Hispanics number in excess of twenty million people.

Therefore, it is my conclusion that in order to effectively reach a growing, diverse population, the most effective evangelistic method is a homogeneous

strategy. In addition, the most effective method to disciple, equip for ministry, and mobilize people groups is within their ethno-linguistic cultural context.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

———— R.C.H. *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians.* St. Paul: Lutheran Concern House, 1937. Reprint, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961.

————. C.H. Lenski. *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians.* St. Paul: Lutheran Book Concern, 1937. Reprint, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961.

Conn, Harvie, ed. *Reaching the Unchurched: The Old-New Challenge.* Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984.

Day, Jennifer Cheeseman. *Population Profile of the United States.* Washington: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2010. U.S. Census Bureau.

DeYmaz, Mark. *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church: Mandate, Commitments, and Practices of a Diverse Congregation.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.

————. Ethnic Blends: Mixing Diversity into Your Local Church. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010.

————. "The Theology of the Multi-Ethnic Church." Interview by David Swanson (June 18, 2010). *Out of Ur* (2010): 1–4.

Dockterman, Daniel. *Statistical Portrait of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States, 2009.* Washington: Pew Hispanic Center, kterm, 2011. Pew Hispanic Center.

Garces-Foley, Kathleen. *Multiethnic Congregations.* Edited by Robert B. Kruschwitz. Waco: The Center for Christian Ethics, 2010.

George, Timothy. *Galatians.* The New American Commentary, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 30. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994.

Johnson, Todd E. *The Conviction of Things not Seen: Worship and Ministry in the 21st Century.* Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002.

Lenski, R.C.H. *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians.* St. Paul: Lutheran Book Concern, 1937. Reprint, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961.

Marti, Gerardo. *A Mosaic of Believers: Diversity and Innovation in a Multiethnic Church.* Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005.

McGavran, Donald A. *Understanding Church Growth.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdman Publishing Company, 1980.

Passel, Jeffrey S. and D'Vera Cohn. *U.S. Population Projections: 2005–2050.* Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center. Publication.

Polhill, John B. *Acts.* Edited by David S. Dockery. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992.

Rad, Gerhard von. *Genesis: A Commentary.* Translated by John H. Marks. Louisville: Westminster Press, 1961.

Robertson, Archibald Thomas. *Word Pictures in the New Testament.* Edited by [LM1]. The Epistles of Paul. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1931.

Robins, J. P. "One People in Christ: Biblical Perspective on Multiethnic Church." Waltham: Agape Partners International, 2009. Blog. http://agapepartners.org/authors/40/Rev.-J.P.-Robins/ (accessed February 15, 2011).

Sanchez, Daniel R. *Hispanic Realities Impacting America: Implications for Evangelism & Missions.* Fort Worth: Church Starting Network, 2006.

————. Interview by Gustavo V. Suarez, July 20, 2010. Telephone Interview. Kansas City.

250

Schnabel, Eckhard J. *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008.

Swanson, David. "The Theology of Multi-Ethnic Church." Carol Stream: Christianity Today, 2010. Printed. Blog.

Thumma, Scott, Dave Travis, and Warren Bird. *Megachurches Today 2005.* Hartford: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary, 2005. Hartford Seminary.

Van Engen, Chuck. "Is the Church for Everyone? Planting Multi-Ethnic Congregations in North America." *Global Missiology* 1, no. 2 (January 2004): 1–27. http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/122/353/ (accessed February 15, 2011).

Vincent, Marvin R. *Words Studies in the New Testament.* Edited by[LM2] . *The Epistle of Paul to the Colossians.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1977.

Wagner, Peter. *Spreading the Fire: A New Look at Acts—God's Training Manual for Every Christian.* The Acts of the Holy Spirit Series. Ventura: Regal Books, 1994.

Gus Suárez is a national missionary with the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention and professor of church planting at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Gus has served as pastor, church planter, and denominational leader in New York, Maryland, New Mexico, and the Northwest Baptist Convention. He has a bachelor's degree from the University of Maryland, a Master of Divinity from Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, and a Doctor of Ministry from Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary. He is presently a Ph.D. student at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary majoring in Evangelism and Church Growth.

251