

Transforming a Homogeneous Church into a Multi-Ethnic Church Community

Sydney is one of the most multicultural cities in the world. Notably, however, the vast majority of church communities in Sydney are homogeneous. In our own denomination we have such NESB (non-English speaking background) churches as Arabic-speaking, Cook Island Maori, Indonesian, Chinese, Korean, Samoan, Ghanaian and Brazilian. Of course, we do need to qualify the description of such churches as being “homogeneous.” For example, our Arabic-speaking churches attract people who have their domicile in many different Arabic speaking nations, while, for example, our large Chinese churches also cater for a wide variety of Chinese ethnicities. Nevertheless, these churches are applying in one form or other what is popularly referred to as “the homogeneous unit principle” (HUP churches), whether the determinant of homogeneity is ethnicity and/or language.

In addition to this most of our churches that we would not regard as being NESB are still largely homogeneous. Many such churches, especially in Sydney, kid themselves into thinking they are multi-ethnic because they can identify x number of ethnicities or cultural backgrounds or languages spoken in their congregations. However, very often such churches remain substantially assimilationist. They typically do not make any major changes in the way they “do” church, and leadership and other church structures do not reflect ethnic and cultural diversity to any significant degree.

It goes without saying that if Christians simply flow with the current then they will tend to perpetuate these homogeneous units. Some proponents of multi-ethnic churches are dead against HUP churches and will argue these are unbiblical or, at least, that multi-ethnic churches are more biblical and represent the ideal that all churches should be aiming for. Others would argue that the biblical evidence allows for a wider range of church models. Whatever one’s personal convictions may be on this score the fact is that there is a great need for many more multi-ethnic congregations and church communities, given their obvious legitimacy, frequent viability and the rapid rate at which ethnic diversification is occurring in our cities.

Greenwood and Jordan describe the transitioning of Village Baptist Church in Oregon from being a homogeneous church into the multi-ethnic church it is today.¹

This helpful article illustrated some key dimensions involved in making such changes.

1. Leaders from the people for the people.

I would stress that if a church is seeking, in a substantial manner, to reach people who are of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds to those represented in the church then it is crucial that a leader be added to the team whom the targeted people will respect and with whom they will identify. The authors note that with respect to developing a multi-ethnic church model the role played by Sooyoung Lee, a Korean, was of particular importance.

Initially, Sooyoung was part of the pastor’s Bible study group and in that context the two men built a close relationship. In turn, Sooyoung and his wife led small Bible-study groups with their friends, seeing many of them come to know Christ. They became the leaders of the flourishing

Korean Fellowship which is an integral part of Village Baptist Church. Along the same lines East Indian, Hispanic and Chinese fellowships also developed.

2. United Multi-Ethnic Ministry Team

Here I cannot stress enough that if such diverse ministries are to function in a healthy manner in a united and harmonious multi-ethnic church community, then *relationships between the leaders* are of first importance. If these relationships are token and superficial then relationships within the broader church community will almost certainly follow suit. The closer and more vital the relationships between the leaders the closer and more vital will be relationships across cultural and ethnic and even linguistic divides within the broader church community.

Greenwood and Jordan comment:

Forging unity from diversity will require transformational leaders of diverse ethnic background to come together as one. All involved must passionately embrace the vision in order to lead the people with whom they have the greatest influence. There can be no hint of inconsistency, self-positioning, or diversion from the vision if it is, in fact, to take root and inspire change in the established church.

If the ministry team is to function well then the following factors are of considerable importance:

- All members of the team must be theologically compatible.
- Those members of the team leading particular non-English speaking background ministries should be bilingual.
- All members of the team must be involved in the major ministries of the church. They must not be exclusively tied up in their own ethno-specific ministries. They must have a presence and involvement within the congregation as a whole. They must have visibility and credibility. These team members are integral to creating and developing the perception and reality of church life in which the presence of different cultures is expected and normal.

3. Reputation in the Community

The development of a strong multi-ethnic church community in a surrounding multi-ethnic social environment also presupposes that the church has a good reputation in the wider community.

In the case of Village Baptist Church, in addition to these non-English speaking background fellowships, a partnership arrangement with a group ministering to Chinese and East Indian immigrants also served to cement the church's reputation "as a safe and welcoming place for people of diverse cultures." This latter ministry involved helping immigrants with housing, transportation, health services and social networking.

4. Intentionality

Village Baptist Church discovered, as they tried to transform an established, homogeneous congregation into a multi-ethnic church community, that people and organisations in the wider community were critical of this attempt and questioned the church's motives. Also, while many churches were renting their facilities to non-English speaking background churches, no other church in the area appeared to share the vision of VBC to become "an integrated community of diverse fellowships, united in our vision for reaching the lost." Quite rightly, Greenwood and Jordan state in bold-type: "transformational leaders pursuing the multi-ethnic church must not yield to the voices that will surely challenge their vision."

Holding to a clear vision is a key aspect of the intentionality needed to effect such a transformation. Another important factor is communication: “transformational leaders must articulate holy intentions and clear objectives in language that can be embraced by the body they seek to influence.”

A third expression of intentionality is purposeful demographic analysis.

5. A Steering Group

It is important to have a group or team charged with the responsibility of helping the church to realise its vision of becoming a multi-ethnic church community. In the case of Village Baptist Church such a group was empowered to provide leadership in the following areas:

- Creation of specific goals concerning worship, teaching and ministry.
- Exploration of ways in which the various cultures in the church might work together to meet the needs of a growing and diverse church family.
- Ensuring that issue and goals associated with the multi-ethnic vision are kept before the church leadership.
- Assessing the cultural ‘pulse’ of the congregation.
- Defining intentional steps for furthering the vision and reaching stated goals.

6. Incremental Steps

As the church moves towards becoming a multi-ethnic church community it is of crucial importance to preserve and foster unity. For this reason the leaders of the church want to avoid any actions that would lead to the splitting of the church. This in turn means that changes will be effected in a wisely judged, incremental manner.

7. Multi-Ethnic Church Activities

The fact must be faced that language often does create a barrier in communicating with first generation and sometimes even second generation members of non-English speaking background ministries (and possibly congregations, depending on the precise model being developed). As Greenwood and Jordan remark: the personal and professional interaction of a multi-ethnic staff speaks to the heart of who we are and what we value as a church.” Beyond this lay leaders need to be encouraged and equipped to relate themselves and those they lead across cultures and ethnic backgrounds within the church community.

It is important to provide contexts in which the above can be fleshed out. Church picnics, concerts and other special events are needed. However, the steering group needs to be heavily involved in making sure these events are carefully planned, remembering that full intentionality is a must for developing harmonious and well-integrated multi-ethnic church communities.

8. Commitment to Developing Cross-Cultural Competency

It is important for leaders and for church members to become increasingly savvy about cultural differences. Obviously, it is impossible to anticipate every potential problem that might develop in dealing with people from varied cultural and ethnic backgrounds. For the leaders it is particularly important to develop competency in approaching such differences, even if at first they don’t understand them, and to “maintain mutual respect for one another in seeking to understand and resolve cultural differences.”

9. Commitment to Multi-Ethnic Worship Services

VBC faced the challenge of having members worship together in a spirit of unity, notwithstanding the fact that services are primarily conducted in English, with many members only able to speak limited English. Since worship in one's first language is so integral to spiritual growth it was decided that each of the non-English speaking background fellowships should be allowed to conduct supplemental worship services in their own languages. In the case of VBC, as a result of careful communication and encouragement of all on the multi-ethnic ministry team, the members of the non-English speaking background fellowships do not substitute attendance at their own weekly meetings for attendance at the worship service for the whole church community.

After experimentation, VBC decided that simultaneous translation was necessary and money for the necessary equipment was raised. Along with this all key documents are translated into the first languages of all of the non-English speaking background fellowships.

It is up to the members of the multi-ethnic ministry team to ensure that language is not a barrier that keeps people from coming to or remaining involved in the church.

¹ Kim Greenwood & John Jordan, "For Those Transforming a Homogeneous Church" in *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church* by Mark Deymaz. San Francisco: John Wiley @ Sons, Inc. 2007 (pp164-181).