

*People of the Dream. Multiracial Congregations in the United States.* Michael O. Emerson (with Rodney M. Woo) [Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006]

### **About the Authors**

Emerson is Allyn R & Gladys M. Cline Professor of Sociology at Rice University and Founding Director of the Center on Race, Religion, and Urban Life. Woo is Senior Pastor of Wilcrest Baptist Church, Houston, Texas.

### **Introductory Remarks about Terminology**

This excellent book provides a solid sociological basis for defining and analyzing multiethnic or international congregations. In the US developing such a ministry or congregation necessarily involves confronting the white-black racial issue. Hence the book consistently uses words like race, racial, multiracial and interracial.

Such terminology would have more currency in Australia if, in developing multiethnic congregations, the central issue concerned racial reconciliation between white Australians and indigenous people. However, in Australia the development of such congregations typically involves ministry to non-indigenous people from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Hence in Australia it is more appropriate to use words like ethnicity, ethnic, multiethnic and the like.

There is, of course, a danger here that dominant culture, mainstream white Australians might erroneously call others "ethnics" and not recognize themselves as also having an ethnic identity. Consequently, when speaking of first generation migrant churches it is probably preferable not to speak of "ethnic churches". Instead we might speak, for example, of NESB (non-English speaking background) churches.

Now, let's listen to what Emerson and Woo have to tell us:

#### *Prelude. Decision*

The book begins by introducing Wilcrest Baptist Church located in the suburb of Alief, Houston, Texas: <http://www.wilcrestbaptist.org/index.html>

By 1990 the neighbourhood around the church had become approximately 80% non-white, with a mixture of African Americans, Hispanics and Asians. However, church membership and attendance had dropped from a peak of 500 to less than 200.

Pastor James Windom sent members door to door, inviting people to church. But these teams were sent miles west of the neighbourhood, targeting people of the same ethnicity and class as Wilcrest members. Reactions to this strategy were mixed among church members. The pastor took the homogeneous unit principle (HUP) seriously and, indeed, wanted to relocate the church buildings. He had even chosen a potential alternate site. Many were tempted to follow the pastor and thus the whites into newly developing outer suburbs. The chapter ends with the church at the crossroads. *Would it follow the pastor's direction and relocate OR opt instead to stay put and reach out to a community that had radically changed in terms of its ethnic composition?*

#### *Chapter One. Dreams*

Emerson and Woo estimate that there are over 300,000 congregations in US: "the most common and widespread institution in the United States", more common than all the

McDonald's, Wendy's, Subways, Burger Kings and Pizza Huts combined. Evidently, 55% of Americans have religious membership and, in varying degrees, over 100 million Americans are involved in religious congregations.

Emerson and Woo emphasise how deep-seated congregational racial segregation has always been in the US. Frederick Douglass, fleeing the South, where his 'Christian master' had prevented him from teaching the Bible to other slaves, was appalled by the racial prejudice he encountered in interracial northern congregations. In one church, the blacks only took communion after the whites had done so and left. Douglass called the experience "humiliating" and never went back to that church.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century there was increasing segregation in congregations as racial segregation became entrenched in state and local laws throughout the South. I would chip in here that is the all-too-familiar pattern of the church dancing to the tune played by society. Even Dwight Moody accepted racial segregation in the South. For example, in Charleston he refused to give the Negro churches representation at his evangelical meetings. Emerson and Woo observe that a current survey of the ethnic composition of congregations suggests little has changed since the civil rights movement. Most congregations remain racially segregated.

### *Chapter 2. Distinctive*

We are now told which way the members of Wilcrest Baptist Church decided to go. Pastor Windom was asked to resign. The new pastor was Rodney Woo. His father was half-Chinese and his parents had missionary experience of ministering to poor Hispanics, African Americans and Vietnamese. His father had also taught English to migrants. Rodney's own elementary and middle schooling had been in African-American schools where extremely few pupils were not African-American. His wife, Sasha, was the daughter of Mexican immigrants.

When Woo arrived he discovered that there were separate Chinese and African American churches using the facilities of Wilcrest Baptist Church. In place of this Woo proceeded to develop what Emerson and Woo call a "multiracial congregation", but which, in Australia, is perhaps better described as a multiethnic or international congregation. We are informed that Wilcrest BC is currently 20% black, 30% Hispanic, 42% white, 5% Asian, with 3% of other ethnic backgrounds. According to the website, 44 nations are represented in the congregation.

Emerson and Woo provide a so-called "binary definition" of a multiracial congregation, namely one in which "*no one racial group comprises 80 percent or more of the people*". Emerson argues that 20% is not an arbitrary figure:

....research in race and gender relations in multiple contexts suggests that 20 percent constitutes the point of critical mass. At this percentage, the proportion is high enough to have its presence felt and filtered through a system or organization. (35)

Applying this binary definition, Emerson estimates that 7% of American congregations are multiracial. However, he points out the number of stable racially mixed congregations is undoubtedly lower than this. He also observes that public schools in 2006 were six times more racially diverse than religious congregations.

The authors also present a "continuous definition" of a multiracial congregation, which is "*the probability that two randomly selected people in a congregation will be of different racial groups*".

So, if a congregation has 50% of one racial group and 50% of another then the probability = 0.5. If there are four racial groups each constituting a quarter of the membership then the probability = 0.75. According to this standard, any value approaching 0.5 indicates there is a substantial racial mix in the congregation.

Applying the continuous definition to Wilcrest BC shows it to be highly unusual, with a probability rating of 0.70. The authors estimate that less than ½ of 1% of American churches are as racially diverse as Wilcrest BC. Further, "Wilcrest is 35 times more racially diverse than the average congregation in the United States".

It is a fact of life that "...the vast majority of congregations are substantially less racially diverse than the neighbourhoods in which they reside". Interestingly, though, ...multiracial congregations are actually 40 percent *more diverse* than their neighbourhoods. Multiracial congregations are unique then not only because they are racially diverse, but because *they tend to be more diverse than the neighbourhoods in which they reside.* (44-5)

While neighbourhood diversity is an important factor in developing multiracial congregations it is neither a necessary nor sufficient factor. Indeed, most congregations in racially diverse neighbourhoods are not themselves racially diverse. Further, not all multiracial congregations are in highly diverse neighbourhoods. Significantly, they also observe that the "more successful a faith tradition is in terms of its overall number of adherents, the more segregated are its local assemblies".

### *Chapter 3. Paths*

The authors have identified two environmental factors as important in understanding the level of racial diversity in congregations:

1. The faith tradition of the congregation. The larger the numbers of people in a tradition, the less diverse, on average, are congregations in that tradition.
2. The racial diversity of the congregations' neighbourhoods.

Racial diversity is also affected by worship style. Also multiracial congregations tend to be younger, on average, than other congregations. Significantly, they observe that the theology of a congregation, whether conservative, liberal, or something in between, does not predict a congregation's diversity. They also recognize that congregations which meet in small groups are more likely to be racially diverse.

Sociologist Kevin Dougherty maintains that the more church members develop interracial ties, the greater the potential for multiracial congregations to survive long-term. Small groups, with their stress on close relationships, clearly enhance this foundational need to form strong interracial bonds.

Wealth and occupation are other variables contributing to the racial diversity of the congregation. The higher these are then the more racially diverse the congregation tends to be. On the other hand, multiracial congregations are more economically mixed than racially homogeneous congregations.

What provides the impetus for a church to become multiracial? Possibilities include:

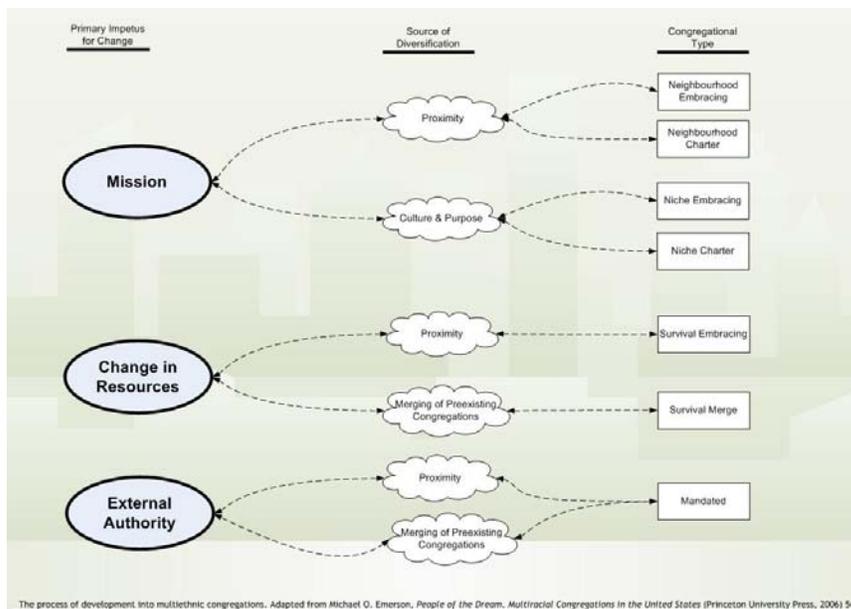
1. *The church's own goals* - the church actively seeks this.
2. The church is forced to move this way because of *changes in resources*, e.g. a decline in membership, budgetary constraints or provision of a new resource may create a perceived opportunity.
3. *Denominational leaders* strongly influence or even mandate such a development.

Factors in the successful development of a multiracial church include:

1. An *available population* of racially different persons - a must.
2. People attracted by the culture and purpose of the congregation. Typically such churches draw from their region and not just locally, that is, create "population opportunity".
3. A merging of two or more preexisting congregations may immediately generate cultural diversity for the total church community. Sometimes while such developments increase ethnic diversity they may, at least initially, result in a decline of membership - some members may reject such a merger.

## Types of Multiethnic Congregations

(Here I have taken the liberty of substituting "multiethnic" for "multiracial")



### 1. *Neighbourhood Embracing*

This is the first of four types of multiethnic congregations generated by a sense of mission, i.e. congregations which develop multiethnically because they purpose to do so. Those congregations which do this in the light of a change in the population of their local neighbourhood are *neighbourhood embracing* multiethnic congregations.

### 2. *Neighbourhood Charter*

This is the second of four types of multiethnic congregations generated by a sense of mission. Congregations which from the very start seek to be multiethnic congregations are *neighbourhood charter* multiethnic congregations.

### 3. *Niche Embracing*

This is the third of four types of multiethnic congregations generated by a sense of mission. These are congregations which develop multiethnically because of the effectiveness of a particular ministry strategy. So Midwest Baptist began as a white congregation but developed multiethnically because of a bussing (niche) ministry which attracted many blacks and Hispanics. Other examples of *niche embracing* multiethnic congregations might be those which develop this way because of English-as-a-Second-Language classes or Playgroup ministries.

### 4. *Niche Charter*

This is the fourth of the four types of multiethnic congregations generated by a sense of mission. These are congregations which begin as multiethnic church communities. Being multiethnic is their niche hence they are *niche charter* multiethnic congregations.

### 5. *Survival Embracing*

A significant proportion of churches that eventually become multiethnic do so not because of their mission but because of a change in resources. So when the ethnic composition of the neighbourhood population changes the membership of many local churches declines and with it financial and other resources, e.g. lay leadership and other spiritual gifts. Some churches sell their church building and move or else stay in the neighbourhood, but close their doors. Other congregations change their concept of mission and seek to attract their new neighbours. These are *survival embracing* multiethnic congregations. Examples in Sydney include Parkside Baptist - a church in the ethnically diverse Fairfield area which declined to a very low number of Anglos before a new pastor, Mathew Kuruvilla, moved the church to embrace its new neighbours. Other examples are St. John's Anglican church, Campsie and the Christian Community Church (Brethren), Campsie.

### 6. *Survival Merge*

These are also churches which experience a change in resources and which, in order to survive, merge with another congregation. Hence the name *survival merge* multiethnic congregations.

### 7. *Mandated*

These are churches which become multiethnic because an external, denominational authority, either strongly influences or directs the congregation concerned to become multiethnic, either because of the need to reach out to a now ethnically diverse neighbourhood or because of the decision to join with another congregation of a different ethnic background.

The main variables that underlie the creation of multiethnic congregations are:

1. The Primary Impetus for Change
  - a. Mission
  - b. Change in Resources
  - c. External Authority
2. The Source of Diversification
  - a. Proximity of Multiethnic Population
  - b. Attractiveness of Culture and Purpose of Church
  - c. Merging of Preexisting Congregations

Concerning the survivability of a multiethnic model:

- If the primary impetus for change is external authority then the congregations that become multiethnic for this reason are less likely to remain so.
- The best primary impetus for a sustained multiethnic congregation is mission.

Generally speaking, it also seems that **the broader the area** from which a congregation draws its ethnic diversification, the greater the likelihood that it will sustain its multiethnic composition. If a congregation is only relying on its immediate neighbourhood to sustain its ethnic diversity then its multiethnic composition will only persist as long as the neighbourhood also remains ethnically diverse.

Emerson hypothesizes that ethnic diversity generated by merging preexisting congregations is the least likely of the multiethnic congregation types to survive as multiethnic congregations because:

1. The source of continued diversity is uncertain.
2. Off-putting difficulties develop associated with the differences of culture, social networks and internal authority structures.

George Yancey provides an alternate taxonomy for multiracial congregations:

1. *Leadership multiracial congregations*: a leader or leaders attract a diversity of people.
2. *Evangelism multiracial congregations*: effective proselytizing strategies attract a diversity of people.
3. *Demographic multiracial congregations*: ethnic diversification of the neighbourhood results in a ethnic diversification of the congregation.
4. *Network multiracial congregations*: an expansion of social ties causes growth of ethnic diversity.

Yancey's study reveals that the most likely of these four models to grow are network multiracial congregations.

#### *Chapter 4. Folk*

The key question asked in this chapter is this: How many people attend congregations in which their own racial group is not 80 percent or more?

Here Emerson and Woo distinguish between a multiracial and an interracial congregation:

- *Multiracial congregation*: no one racial group constitutes 80% or more.
- *Interracial congregation*: from the viewpoint of the individual, the congregation is not 80 percent or more of his/her race. (It can be 21% of another race or 99% of another race)

The authors observe that the "more choice people have, the more they end up in homogenous congregations". In the US there are many more white Protestants than white Catholics and Others, so it is not surprising that white Protestants are the least likely to be in racially mixed congregations.

"Social capital" is a key good that may be held by an individual, small group, organization, community or a total society. It comes from successful relationships,

referring to the resources that accrue from social networks; the objective associations between individuals that are reciprocal, trusting and display positive emotions.

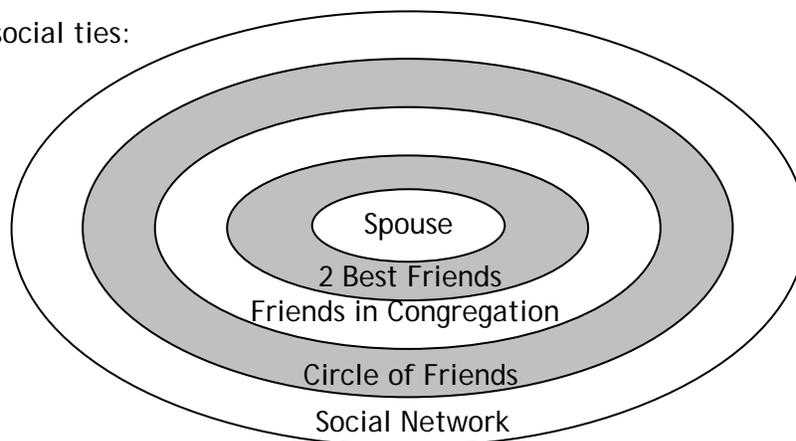
*Bonding social capital* develops from micro-bonds between individuals within already well-established groups and is characteristically inward-looking and associated with homogeneous groups. *Bridging social capital* develops from bonds that form between people across groups and is characteristically externally focused and involves linking disparate individuals and groups which do not have shared histories or identities.

The development of one type of social capital often curtails developing the other. Strengthening bonding social capital is associated with increased prejudice and discrimination as one's own group is favoured over other groups. Allied to this is the creation of out-group antagonisms. Conversely, the development of bridging social capital is connected with the maintenance of segmented social networks and the generating and reproducing of inequality between groups.

In attempting to overcome the problems associated with bonding social capital by emphasizing bridging social capital there is a real danger of undermining, weakening or terminating the organization concerned. The authors propose that racially diverse congregations, like racially and economically integrated schools, serve as *bridge organizations*, which uniquely provide the possibility of simultaneously building bonding and bridging social capital.

Social ties between homogeneous and ethnically mixed congregations are compared. In homogenous congregations 86% of members say that all or most of their friends are of their own race. In interracial congregations only 25% say this. However, it must be recognized that in many racially mixed organizations, for example, a desegregated school, friendships can remain largely homogenous. This is NOT the case in racially mixed congregations. The majority of people, regardless of their race, had greater diversity in their friendship circles *after* becoming part of their present congregation (racially diverse Wilcrest) than before.

The rings of social ties:



On any ring of social ties, *people in mixed-race congregations are, on average, considerably different from other Americans.*

Emerson found that respondents who attend mixed-race congregations also currently live in more racially diverse zip codes than do respondents who attend racially

homogenous congregations. It is also more likely they used to live in a racially mixed neighbourhood and attended a racially mixed school while growing up.

Hollinger describes the US not as a single melting pot but as actually containing five melting pots: Indian/Native American, African American/Black, European American/White, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian American/Asian. Emerson adds *Sixth Americans*: people who are biologically part of one of the five melting pots, but seem to operate outside their melting pot in most aspects of their social relations. They live in multiple melting pots simultaneously. The Sixth American world is a racially diverse world with some homogeneity sprinkled in.

#### *Chapter 5. Attractions*

Why were people attracted to Wilcrest Baptist Church (106). A survey yielded the following results: 40% Worship (music, preaching, pastor); 23% Personal relationships; 22% Location; 18% Vision of diversity; 15% Friendliness; 11% Programs

For most in interracial congregations, the congregation was already interracial when they first came. Only a minority originally come to such congregations because they are interracial. They usually come for the same reasons people go to any congregation: personal invitations from friends or family, a convenient location, friendliness, meaningful worship or attractive programs. Most people do not come to interracial congregations because of commitment to some abstract ideal such as racial diversity or improved race relations. They come primarily because of a connection with someone who already belongs to the congregation and end up feeling at home there themselves.

Sociologists Moskos and Butler found that if racial diversification and improved race relations were to occur in the US army then "the central focus of the organization or program cannot be racial diversification and improved race relations". Emerson and Woo note that the multiracial congregations they studied did not try to become multiracial for the sake of becoming multiracial. They doubt such a vision would meet with success. Rather, a congregation becomes multiracial when people of all cultures feel welcomed, as it pursues some higher goal that, according to the congregation's vision statement and teaching, "can only happen in the multiracial context."

The authors also discovered that "...far from integration leading to assimilation, at least in the overall context of the multiracial congregations my colleagues and I studied, *integration helped people grow more secure in and proud of their cultural identities*". Indeed, sociologist Ecklund compared second-generation Koreans who were in Korean congregations with those in multiracial congregations, seeking to determine what difference this made to the civic identity of Koreans of similar socioeconomic standing - how they perceived what it meant to be American, including "how they relate to and understand their ethnic identity in relation to others."

She discovered that such Koreans in Korean churches preferred to see themselves as white (not black or Hispanic) Americans and talked about being Korean relatively little. But it was much more probable that Koreans in multiracial congregations would view themselves as being Korean and not white. Such Koreans emphasized the differences and similarities between themselves and other racial and ethnic groups. They saw little to be gained from assimilation and valued preserving their cultural

uniqueness. Consequently, the civic identities of second-generation Koreans in Korean congregations were *assimilating* while those of their counterparts in multiracial congregations were *protean* or *fluid*, having many sides. Her study indicated:

Korean Americans in these multiracial congregational contexts were able to reconcile their American and Korean identities, and do so without discomfort. They could construct cohesive identities while living in multiple worlds. (119-120)

The authors discovered that whites in interracial congregations are, on average, younger than those in uniracial congregations, and, on average, about the same age as white Americans who do not regularly attend religious services.

Compared to whites in uniracial congregations, whites in interracial congregations are less supportive of the statement that the number of immigrants should be reduced, less supportive of the statement that there is too much talk today in the United States about racial issues, less likely to be upset if their child were to marry someone of another race, and less likely to prefer living in a neighbourhood that is 75 percent their own race and 25 percent of other racial groups.

Whites also overwhelmingly take an individualistic perspective to social change, a worldview nourished in homogeneous congregations and social networks. Whites in uniracial congregations typically believe the best way to change the US is to change individuals. Whites in interracial congregations are less likely to share this viewpoint.

#### *Chapter 6. Shadows*

Emerson and Woo observe that “white culture tends to separate intellect and passion, often described as separating mind and body.” The white founders of the US sought to create a democracy in which non-elite white people would be ruled by reason rather than feelings and passions. Consequently, they emphasised that good white Americans should prioritise mind over body, typically contrasting such Americans with blacks and Indians whom they believed were ruled by their passions.

Such differences are also expressed in public debate. White culture emphasises presenting fact and citing experts, being dispassionate, impersonal and calm. Public debate should be low-key, excluding affect. Being personal or emotional during debate is considered ‘losing one’s cool’ and as trying to win debate by deception.

However, in black culture the validity of ideas is tested through animated, interpersonal, confrontational discussion. Debate is heated with raised voices and the display of affect. Debaters show concern for the topic and allow false ideas to be exposed so that truth might survive. Whites are intimidated by this approach and see it as angry argumentation, not debate; as overly aggressive and too personal.

Cultural sociologist Penny Edgell distinguishes two main types of conflict:

1. *Within-frame conflict*: people and groups share the same expectations and similar habitus (Bourdieu; a deeply seated, all-encompassing set of preferred tastes, smells, feelings, emotions, and ways of doing things). Resolution: routine processes enforcing compliance with agreed-upon expectations. Routine steps are accepted and the decision is usually abided by.
2. *Between-frame conflict*: divergent habituses, divergent standards of what is right, or divergent expectations about how things ought to be done. Often there are questions over identity, who we are, and ‘how we do things here’.

Between-frame conflicts are more common in multiracial congregations than in uniraical congregations. Indeed, Emerson observed various misuses of power (which always occurs to a lesser or greater extent) in multiracial congregations, namely to:

- declare what styles of music will and will not be used;
- determine what historical religious leaders looked like racially;
- decide which teachings to emphasise, and which to downplay;
- determine what religious education literature to use;
- decide which pictures or other art goes on the walls;
- declare who the spiritual heroes are and why;
- decide which aspects of history to remember and how to interpret the past;
- decide who is mature in their faith, and who is not;
- determine how much race and ethnicity will be talked about;
- declare that race is not important and will not be discussed;
- declare that the race of those in leadership does not matter;
- look at and treat the non-majority groups with paternalism;
- force others to assimilate or leave the congregation;
- determine the culture through which the faith will be interpreted;
- determine the culture through which the faith will be practised;
- make others feel powerless;
- remain ignorant about other cultures;
- determine if change will happen and the pace of change (almost always, *slowly*);
- make people feel small, unimportant, like outsiders;
- deny having power.

### *Chapter 7. Momentum*

Emerson and Woo identify seven vital principles which must be followed if people in multiracial congregations are "limit the shadows, fight off nightmares, and create healthy congregations", namely:

1. An institutional commitment to racial equity, clearly stated.
2. Leaders who are personally deeply committed to racial equity.
3. A common purpose that supersedes racial equity.
4. Structures to ensure racial equity (to ensure outsiders come to be and feel like insiders, that they belong and have a voice).
5. Internal forums, education and groups (space to discuss issues, learn about race issues, discuss misuse of power).
6. Be a DJ (DJs must constantly adjust the volume, bass level, and treble level depending on the size of the room, the acoustics, and the number of people in the room. Leaders of multiracial congregations must treat adjustments as normal, make them often, with a larger purpose in mind - what works today cannot be assumed to work tomorrow).
7. Recognise that people are at different places, and help them move forward one step at a time.

### *Appendix A*

In this appendix Emerson and Woo provide a critique of multiculturalism, noting that its singular focus on culture has weaknesses. Pluralistic multiculturalism wrongly treats cultures as static and pure, as uninfluenced by other cultures, "as if culture really

were like a pane of coloured glass." This does not allow for the improving and purifying of cultures through contact with other cultures. Pluralistic multiculturalism deems it to be intolerant to speak of cultures as having negative aspects.

Indeed, many forms of multiculturalism appear to trivialize inequality. Justice is identified with a right to practise and live in one's own culture and ignores the need to address socioeconomic inequality. While multiculturalism achieves some worthwhile ends, it does not address inequality and injustice and actually hinders these goals, insofar as it excludes other solutions. Consequently, while multiculturalism "may be a necessary step...it is not the final step".

In this context Emerson sees multiracial congregations as harbingers of a new stage of US race relations.

### **Concluding Comments**

The Australian context is not the same as that of the US. The need for US church models that will effect deep racial reconciliation between blacks and whites is not replicated in Australia to anything like the same extent. Also, it is to be doubted, biblically and theologically, that there is any one model for dealing with ethnicity that is the "right" or even "ideal" model, notwithstanding the vision of Revelation 7:9. There will be no marriage in heaven either. Does this mean that singleness is the "right" or "ideal" model for dealing with sexuality? It is not helpful to insinuate that what are often dubbed "first generation" churches or language-based congregations are somehow inferior or deficient, except in the same way we might say all earthly expressions of church fall short of all they could be.

Yet, there is undoubtedly a critical need to especially develop multiethnic churches, especially in Australian cities, for a number of reasons. The ultimate community of God's people will be multiethnic (Rev 7:9), so the development of international congregations is clearly in tune with this. Many of the neighbourhoods in our metropolitan centres are rapidly increasing in ethnic diversity and there are many people who are best reached through such models, especially for a range of persons whose ethnic identity includes those who have become alienated from their ethnic roots, those for whom such roots are of marginal importance and those who are bi-cultural. Further, racial prejudice is still a problem for us and there are too many mono-ethnic churches, or churches with a very narrow range of ethnicity (including many "Anglo" churches), which are introspective and substantially exclusivistic. Consequently, international churches are indeed an important witness to the depth of unity the cross of Christ effects.

This book is a key resource in identifying the essential foundations, factors and principles upon which the development of a viable multiethnic church depends.