

A multicultural vision for the church: A theological statement

Issued by the Multicultural Network, Melbourne,
to stimulate discussion and action in the churches

Introduction

- 1 The community of Melbourne and Australia is so multicultural that for the church to be effective in impacting the whole of our community it must be intentionally multicultural and clearly welcome people of all cultures.
- 2 We believe that the Christian gospel contains a multicultural vision for the church. This statement is a brief explanation of its biblical and theological basis; the rewards and challenges involved; and the action it calls for.
- 3 The plain meaning of 'multicultural' is for a group—whether a nation, denomination or a local church—to be culturally diverse, that is, to have people in it from more than one culture and one ethnic identity. The Australian policy of multiculturalism welcomes diversity as long as new migrants are committed to democracy, tolerance, free speech, the rule of law and English as the national language; we see no tension here with gospel values.
- 4 To have a multicultural vision for the church, however, is to go further and work towards valuing cultural diversity in all dimensions of church life.
- 5 It is at the heart of the Good News that Jesus died for people of all nations equally. So the multicultural vision for the church is not merely about Christians in a dominant culture including minority ethnic groups. It expresses the joy and urgency of Christian faith being intrinsically multicultural.
- 6 Even though most of the following statements apply universally, including Australia's indigenous people, we respect the choice of Australia's first people not to be seen as just another immigrant group in Australia's multicultural society; for this reason their special needs will not be discussed here

Biblical and theological foundations

- 7 The Bible itself is a multicultural collection of books in which God is revealed through the experiences of a variety of people with many cultural backgrounds. Cultures are sometimes affirmed and sometimes challenged. There are some passages written from a monocultural view (Deut 7, Ez 38-39), while others welcome the nations under God (Ps 24:1, Is 19:25).

- 8 The human experience of God as three-in-one suggests that unity in diversity is fundamental to reality and that the mission of God as Creator, redeeming Son and Holy Spirit is a multicultural mission: It is the loving dance of difference in unity, not a monoculture, that God seeks (Gen 1:26, Mt 28:19).
- 9 Israel was called in order to be a vehicle of God's blessing to all nations (Gen 12:3).
- 10 The essence of the law was to walk in God's ways, which included loving the stranger and welcoming migrants (Deut 10:19).
- 11 The story of Jonah the reluctant cross-cultural missionary shows God's loving mercy to nations outside Israel, despite Jonah's inability to see past his own culture.
- 12 The prophets called us to do justice, love mercy and to walk humbly with God (Mic 6:8). This call challenges us today to overcome the monocultural views that deprive all those who are outside the dominant culture.
- 13 Jeremiah reminded the Israelites when exiled in Babylon—during their most multicultural period—that they should be involved in wider society and seek the welfare of the city (Jer 29:7). Their period of exile led to the development of various prophetic themes, including a vision of all nations worshipping God (Is 42:6).
- 14 The Psalms often envision the nations turning to God (Ps 22:28, 72:11, 102:15, 117:1) and, in a warning against nationalistic pride, are clear that God judges all nations (Ps 82:8, 110:6).
- 15 Jesus was born in a highly multicultural context. The incarnation of Jesus Christ in first century Near Eastern culture shows that God's eternal love can take particular shape in a culture. God honours human culture through the incarnation while at the same time calling it to be fulfilled in Christ.
- 16 Jesus lived and taught a love for neighbour that went beyond cultural boundaries, including Gentiles (e.g., Mt 15:21-28, Mk 7:24-30, Lk 10:25-37, Jn 4:1-39), and was recognised as the servant of God who will bring justice and light to the Gentiles (Mt 12:18, referring to Is 42:6).
- 17 Jesus' multicultural vision became clear as he cleansed the temple—a symbol of monocultural worship—declaring that it was meant to be a house of prayer for all nations (Mk 11:17) and would have to be destroyed (Mk 13:2) before worshippers could gather from all corners of the earth as God intended (Mk 13:27).
- 18 At Pentecost Jews and Gentiles from 'every nation under heaven' were present and were filled with the Holy Spirit, in the first multilingual Christian service of worship (Acts 2:1-13). The first Christians shared everything together, and many were saved as a result (Acts 2:43-47). The multicultural nature of the early church can be seen from the names of those whom Paul greets in Rom 16.

- 19 The early church realised that the Good News of Jesus Christ is for all peoples (Acts 10:34), but only after Peter's encounter with Cornelius (Acts 10), a debate about circumcision (Acts 15) and Paul's call to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15, Gal 1:15). It realised that Jesus had called his followers to make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19).
- 20 In Paul's mission the gospel was expressed differently in different cultures (Acts 17). At the same time, he preached a fundamental unity in Christ through baptism (Gal 3:28, 1 Cor 12:13).
- 21 The gospel, for both Jesus and Paul, neither erases cultural difference nor accepts cultural barriers, but relativises them. Christian faith allows people to be different but to overcome cultural barriers.
- 22 An inclusive, diverse community is a sign of the kingdom of God and therefore the multicultural church is itself a part of the Good News (Lk 7:18-23, 13:29-30).
- 23 The New Testament concludes with a vision of a new heaven and new earth in which God is praised in every language (Rev 7:9, 14:6), people of all cultures will walk in God's light (Rev 21:24) and the nations will be healed (Rev 22:2).
- 24 Christians are called to be ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:16-20), bringing peace even between enemies, not to mention those who are simply very different from us. What we regard as 'the other'— what is strange and unlikable to us—can become a source of enrichment in our discipleship. It is a sign of maturity to be able to embrace 'the other' and live with difference.
- 25 As those who have received God's hospitality we are invited to show hospitality. Welcoming others, whether the poor or the stranger, is one of the central ways of sharing the Good News. In this care for the stranger, the refugee and the homeless we can meet angels without realising it (Rom 12:13), or even encounter Christ himself (Mt 25:31-46).
- 26 Our cultures are unique ways in which we express our humanity and are to be valued as different ways in which God can be praised.
- 27 To worship solely in a monocultural context, however, is to be in danger of thinking that our ways are God's ways. We may idealise our culture and even treat it as an idol. To engage in multicultural worship is to be reminded that our own culture is only one way of being human.
- 28 To evangelise beyond our own group we need to engage cross-culturally. A multicultural church trains us for living and working with other cultures, learning in order to share the gospel (1 Cor 9:20).
- 29 A multicultural church also enables the church to witness to all nations globally (Mt 28:19), including migrant Christians engaging with their own people, whether in their adopted country or their country of origin.

- 30 While there is often a need for a monocultural church or small group in order to worship in our own mother tongue or in our own cultural style, we should also build links with those of other cultures, in anticipation of the rainbow Kingdom of God.
- 31 So Christians pursuing a multicultural vision need to live in the tension between the *unity* of the church on the one hand, consisting of congregations that each break down barriers and incorporate all types of people, and the *diversity* of the church on the other hand, with congregations that each worship in a different language and style, churches that deeply express faith in different cultural forms.
- 32 We acknowledge that the multicultural vision of God's gracious rule is a vision that will be realised only when God reigns fully. It has an 'already-but-not-yet' character, challenging us, drawing us into God's future, but beyond us at present. This means that some local churches will look more like a multicultural church than others.

Hindrances

- 33 The greatest hindrance to becoming a multicultural church is the attachment to our own cultures (patriotism, nationalism, ethnocentrism and even racism), believing that our own culture is closest to God.
- 34 Related to this is our negative judgement of other cultures based on superficial observations and selective standards.
- 35 The basic sentiment in this psychological barrier is fear—fear of a take-over, 'contamination', compromise of biblical values, discrimination and the possibility of our children ending up in intercultural marriages.
- 36 All this is the result of the failure to realise that the gospel transcends and critiques all cultures.
- 37 Other hindrances are a simplistic view of inclusion (just saying that people are welcome) without a commitment to friendship, or simply an unwillingness to get out of our comfort zone (it's easiest with people like us).

Rewards

- 38 One great reward is a sense of oneness in Christ, realising that, though we are many, we are one body.
- 39 Another great reward is a broader understanding of truth and a deeper self-understanding. No culture can fully embody biblical or theological truth. It takes interaction with other cultures to see certain biblical truths that are more prominent in these cultures. This allows us in turn to see the limitations and strengths of our own cultures. Our horizons are broadened thereby.
- 40 Multiculturalism also expands God's kingdom, as it enables us to bring our friends and neighbours from other cultures to the church to hear the gospel.

Challenges

- 41 The challenges are many: different styles of decision-making, different approaches to hygiene, different ways of playing (especially with children and youth), different worship styles, etc. All these can be summed up as the challenge of living outside our comfort zone. Paul's example of being all things to all people (1 Cor 9:19-23) is a model for us. Put simply, a mature Christian will be able to cross cultural boundaries. It is comfortable to stay within our culture, but Christianity is not about comfort; it involves preparedness for discomfort. All the technical difficulties can be overcome as we venture out of our comfort zone into a higher maturity.
- 42 Multiculturalism also challenges us to look beyond our little circles and to see God's kingdom. In a multicultural church, when all resources are supposed to be shared, we can still fall back into a 'them and us' mentality, talking about 'our building' and 'our money'. We need to be reminded that it is all 'ours' in the inclusive sense, and that we all belong to Christ (1 Cor 3:22-23).
- 43 The fundamental challenge is to experience a change of heart so that the costs involved in opening ourselves to sharing equally across cultural boundaries are seen as abundant Good News rather than as a sacrifice. The overcoming of 'tribal' barriers is a sometimes painful but always enriching aspect of repentance, the turning of our lives towards the welcoming God.
- 44 A great challenge comes from young second-generation migrants, who fall between the cultures of their parents and their adopted country. While their English may be perfect it is easy for them to form their own 'third culture', characterised by shyness, low participation, academic achievement and a lot of time spent with each other. These youth or young adults will only feel at home in a multicultural church if they have some from other cultures, particularly Anglo-Australians, whom they can call friends.
- 45 Probably the greatest challenge of the multicultural path is for the church to give the different cultural groups a new identity that they are proud of. This new identity often comes in the form of a heightened experience. The Protestant emphasis on teaching, preaching and studying the Word of God tends to disadvantage those who are not at ease expressing themselves verbally and abstractly. Churches need to rethink their 'from-Word-to-experience' approach in all activities and to consider the 'from-experience-to-Word' approach, allowing ample time for people to share their God experiences before coming to the Word.

What action do we call for?

We urge ...

- 46 All churches in the highly multicultural context of Australia to prayerfully consider aiming to become a multicultural church, whether through the model of linked congregations or one multicultural congregation.

- 47 Churches to cultivate genuine cultural respect within the life the church, recognising each other's cultural expression and accepting it as a kingdom-building resource for the whole church.
- 48 Churches to recognise that giving the various cultures voice, starting with the indigenous people of Australia, is an essential ingredient in church's participation in God's mission in the world.
- 49 Monocultural Anglo-Australian churches to at least actively seek partnerships with Christians of other cultures.
- 50 Monocultural migrant ethnic churches to at least actively seek partnerships with Christians of other cultures.
- 51 Non-English-speaking churches to look to their future and the needs of their youth by linking up with other churches with a multicultural orientation.
- 52 Churches to include in worship elements from more than one culture, celebrating the cultures represented.
- 53 Churches to ensure that their structures reflect the cultural variety present. The presence of people of many cultures is the beginning of multiculturalism, but a church is truly multicultural when more than one culture is expressed in its leadership, decision-making, celebrations, ethos, worship style, décor and public image.
- 54 Denominations to gather people in multicultural celebrations in order to praise God together and learn how diverse we are and yet how united we can be.
- 55 Theological and Bible colleges to offer courses in multicultural ministry and mission.
- 56 Denominations to reflect their multicultural make-up in their structures, such as decision-making style, ways of consulting, constitutions, the availability of translated documents and ways of choosing ordained leaders.
- 57 Churches to pursue a multicultural journey not just as a way of being church, but in a missional framework, seeing unity in diversity as a powerful evangelistic witness to the dawning of the new order of relationships which is the kingdom of God.

The Multicultural Network links churches in Melbourne engaged in multicultural mission and ministry.

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