

CHURCH @ CHURCH

# Multi-ethnic church

Our vision is to 'REACH THE CITY, REACH THE WORLD' with the Gospel of Jesus.

CONNECT to God through trusting in Jesus' death on the cross for your sins, and connect to church.

GROW in your relationship with Jesus and others following him, especially through a Growth Group.

SERVE Jesus and others according to their needs, especially a Ministry Team.

This MINISTRY PAPER is designed to help you think about how to build healthy multi-ethnic ministry.

Monday morning. Charlotte settled in at her desk for another day's work and greeted Shadab with a smile. Charlotte got to work in a team that was really culturally diverse, and had formed a close friendship especially with Shadab. They'd connected over their some mutual interests and would chat over lunch, and Charlotte loved finding out about Shadab's culture and sharing her own.

She was constantly surprised to find that many things she believed and did weren't simply normal life like she'd thought, but actually were her culture. In particular Charlotte was struck that Shadab thought Australians are Christians; she thought of Christianity as Australian culture.

Charlotte invited Shadab to church one week and Shadab came. She looked interested, if very out of place. Charlotte had always thought her church modelled a basic Biblical Christianity. Now with a shock she realised how Australian everything was. Everyone's clothing, the music style, the prayers, the sermon illustrations, the service length, the morning tea afterwards, the way people chatted with each other. And there was so much English! Shadab's English was quite good, she'd worked hard to learn it since coming to Australia, but it was still her second language and the talking from the front was so fast with so much slang.

How would Shadab ever understand the message of the gospel that everyone was one just through faith in Jesus? Charlotte considered sending her to a church from her own culture where she'd fit. But would that help Shadab understand we were one in Christ? Would it help Charlotte understand that?

Then it struck Charlotte that Shadab came from a country with very few Christians and there was no church in her culture and language anyway. How could Charlotte's church model the gospel's openness to everyone regardless of background?

We live in an increasingly multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society in which the whole world is coming to our shores. If we want to respond to Jesus' great commission to '...go and make disciples of all nations' then we'll be challenged to think about the demographics making up our churches and the ways we do things as a church that either invite people in or shut them out. Do we 'do church' in a way that tells people they must first become Australian before they can be fellowship with us?

The gospel is a gospel of **reconciliation**.

*For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and **has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility**, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace... - Ephesians 2:14-15*

If the blood of Jesus alone reconciles us to God no matter what nation or language we're from, then a necessary implication is that we become reconciled to each other in the same process. If I am reconciled to Jesus but believe something about your culture separates us, then I'm saying that it must separate you from Jesus too and his blood is insufficient.

There's a growing awareness amongst some churches that the gospel calls for our church communities to be places where this reconciliation is lived out – Multi-Ethnic Churches (MEC). This isn't just an implication for the time we live in today. Right from the beginning, throughout the New Testament, we see Christians from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds not segregating into different ethnic churches but rather wrestling out what it looks like to be and live as the church together. And it gets pretty messy.

In Acts 6:1-7 the young church in Jerusalem hits its first hurdle with prejudice erupting from Hebraic Jewish believers towards Grecian Jewish believers. In Acts 13:13-52 The Apostles plant a church in Pisidian Antioch which erupts into conflict when gentiles come to embrace the faith along with Jews – but the Apostles don't back down. And In Romans 14-15 Paul responds to conflict between Jewish and Gentile believers in one church who both believe their cultural ways of doing things are more faithful to the gospel and who condemn the other. In all these examples the Apostles urge reconciliation and working out how to live together.

Why strive for multi-ethnic Church when it's so hard? The beautiful answer is found in Acts 11:19-30, where believers travel to Antioch in Syria and form the first true multi-ethnic church. When Barnabas comes to the church 'he arrived and **saw what the grace of God had done...**' To be a community that lives, loves, serves and grows together across the things that usually divide people can only be an act of God's grace. And when we become a community like that, it's the grace of God at work that people will see.

## What is the Homogenous Unit Principle?

The Homogenous Unit Principle (HUP) is currently the most popular church model for reaching people from different cultural backgrounds. The theory behind HUP is that people feel most comfortable with people who are like them. Therefore people are reached through churches made up of a particular demographic. Churches are segregated in order to remove cultural obstacles to people hearing the gospel.

HUP is a more efficient, quicker and easier model for reaching people from diverse backgrounds. MEC is far messier, slower and more difficult.

But the big problem with the HUP is what it communicates to the world about the gospel. HUP says the cultural differences between us are greater than the blood of Jesus that unites us. It fails to communicate that the gospel is a gospel of reconciliation – Christ's blood tears down the walls that divide us from each other. Failing to do that is to preach an anaemic gospel. And it fails to understand that dealing with the mess, miscommunication and conflict in MEC is not a hindrance to the work of the gospel but the means God uses to train us to lay down our lives and pick up our cross to be more like Jesus.

## How Multi-Ethnic is Multi-Ethnic Church?

When we talk about MEC, what are we really talking about? Revelation 7:9 gives a beautiful picture of the spiritual reality Jesus has created by his blood – '...a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne and before the Lamb.' However this side of heaven we still face language barriers, differing values and sin. What can we hope for in this life? How multi-ethnic are we meant to be? If a church is mainly Aussies with a handful of people from different cultures, is that a MEC? When can we say 'we're a MEC'?

There are two key markers of a MEC: when there are more people from diverse backgrounds in a church than people from the majority culture; and when the whole church is under leadership made up of people from different cultures. Those are good long term goals and good indicators that we're not putting our culture before the gospel. But even then we won't have reached our goal; we'll still be on the journey to become more like Jesus. A good answer to the question 'how multi-ethnic should we be?' is: 'a little bit more than last month/year'.

## Stronger Together

Two fish who were friends were swimming through the ocean when they met an older fish swimming the other way. The older fish greeted them, 'The water's nice today'. After he'd swum on one of the fish turned to his friend and said 'What's water?'

Christians who belong to the dominant culture of a country can often assume we need MEC so we can love the needy and vulnerable 'outsider' from another culture. But the gospel teaches that we're all needy – for God and for each other. See, like those two fish immersed in the

ocean, we're all immersed in our culture. Our culture surrounds us and shapes our entire environment. It's the lens we see our entire world through and it forms a particular perspective we look through to see our world – including our understanding of the gospel. Whatever our culture, that perspective will contain real insights into our world and how it works, but is limited and so will miss things. And what we do see will be distorted by sin.

And because we're born into our culture, because it surrounds us and we move through it our entire lives, like that fish we often don't even know it's there. We don't

realise everything we see about our world is coloured by a particular perspective – we think the way we see things are just the way they really are. And we have no way of stepping outside our culture and viewing it objectively.

With the humility the Holy Spirit brings we need each other's perspectives to show us what we're missing or misreading because of our culture. The more we humbly listen and don't assume our way is always the right way, the fuller and richer our understanding of the gospel and the Lord we worship will be.

## Resources

Building a Multi-Ethnic Church by Mark DeYmaz

Leading a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church by Mark DeYmaz and Harry Li

Changing Lanes, Crossing Cultures by Andrew Schachel, Choon-Hwa Lim and Michael K Wilson

