

The Geneva Consultation
“The Multicultural Church: Why or Why Not?”
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A few years ago, during some post-meeting reflections in a church hallway, I was asked an earnest, searching question by one of our parishioners. “We are such a welcoming and friendly church,” she said. “Why don’t we have more diversity in our congregation?”

Her question struck me at different levels. On one level, I was grateful for the fact that she had noticed the lack of diversity in our Sunday morning gatherings. In fact, of our fourteen hundred members, maybe two or three are black and maybe a dozen or so come from an Asian background. We occasionally have a visitor or two from Kenya or Nigeria, but no African Americans worship with us on a regular basis. We are a very “white” church, no question, and this woman wanted to know why. On another level, I wasn’t sure if she really wanted to know the answer, for chances were it would require something more of her than she was willing or able to give.

I didn’t answer her question that night, not in the way it should have been answered. perhaps because I had not had time to process a faithful and thoughtful answer. But that one question asked with complete sincerity in the hallways of our church building has stimulated for me a number of ongoing conversations about diversity within the life of the church. After some reflection, I realize the answer to her question. Yes, we are a welcoming congregation, and most of our members would welcome a greater level of diversity. We want people of many different races to be a part of our worshipping community, but the problem is that we want them to come and be just like us. We want them to sing the songs we sing, pray the prayers we pray, stand and sit and obey the unwritten “rules” of worship just like we do. “So come,” we might as well be saying, “come all of you. Come and be just like us.”

If we claim we desire diversity, we must understand what that means. It does not have to do with making others just like ourselves. “Diversity,” writes Letty Russell, “has to do with difference. Diversity is not just an ecumenical slogan that is often contradicted by our largely homogeneous church communities. It represents a description of the differences of race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, age, abilities, economic and political status, and much more that are part of the world in which we live. Many differences are God-given actions of creation and lend beauty and excitement to this world. Yet the connotation of difference seems to be that persons and groups who are not like ourselves cause threat and discord to our way of life and particularly to our community.”¹

Nora Tubbs Tisdale, Presbyterian pastor, professor and writer on worship tells of an encounter with a church member who had just attended a church school forum on

¹ Letty Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 158.

worship and multiculturalism. Upon leaving, he turned to Tisdale and commented, “I chose this church because there were people like me here, music I liked, and a homogeneity that made me feel at home. Why now do I have to worry how to make the church a welcoming place for all these other types? Don’t they have their own churches?”²

As everyone knows, people of all different races in the United State *do* have their own churches. As Martin Luther King, Jr. claimed during the civil rights era, “the eleven o’clock hour is the most segregated hour of the week.” And it remains such today. People have chosen, throughout the years to worship with people who are like them in as many ways possible, especially regarding cultural differences. In many cases where whites and blacks have worshipped together, it is because the minority race of the congregation has chosen to worship in the same manner as the majority.

A year or so ago, I found myself in the company of many good and faithful people – pastors, professors, and seminary students who had gathered for the expressed purpose of talking about the church. At this gathering, we were discussing two books, one by Peter Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, and another, *The Church in the Round*, by Letty Russell. Toward the end of our final session, I asked whether the multicultural church was a realistic option for the future. I was surprised by the response I received.

While most around the table agreed that multicultural worship was a good option, they did not all agree that it was a *realistic* option. “People should be free to worship in a style that is comfortable to them,” said one participant. “You can’t force people, or it won’t be worship,” said another. Around the table I heard people of different races and cultures coming up with very good arguments about why worship needed to happen within cultures in order to preserve and not “water down” the experience overall. They weren’t opposed to worshipping with other cultures, but they argued that it should be at occasional gatherings such as Presbytery and not on a weekly basis.

To be honest, I was shocked. I never would have expected such a response from those present at the table that day. I assumed that a diverse cultural worship was what everyone *wanted*, a reflection of the diversity of God’s Kingdom. I assumed that was what every faithful church wanted, only had not been able to achieve. I was wrong in my assumption. My eyes were opened though, to the fact that this issue is full of complexities and people range in their understanding of what it means to be multicultural and whether or not it is important for our worship and our congregations.

With this in mind, I started asking other people what they thought about this subject. The response was mixed. From blacks, whites, Asians, and Latinos I heard that it is important to be among “folks like us.” Building bridges with other races was fine for other parts of the week, but it took a lot of hard work and many people I spoke with didn’t want to come to church on Sunday to “work.” On the other hand, I also heard from many

² C. Michael Hawn, *One Bread, One Body: Exploring Cultural Diversity in Worship*, (Bethesda: The Alban Institute, 2003), xxiii.

people of differing races a desire to worship together intentionally, even if it wasn't always comfortable. In the end, I learned that we are not all of one mind on this issue.

That being said, I would like to set forth an argument for an intentional multicultural church. Not a church that invites people of all races and cultures and backgrounds to come in and “watch,” or to come in and “be just like us,” or even to worship together on occasion. Rather, in this paper, I argue that diversity in the particular church along with weekly worship is a part of God's vision. I propose a multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial church that starts with a vision of intentionality, inviting all who participate to challenge themselves to learn from one another, welcome and encourage cultural diversity, live the gospel together after the example of Jesus Christ, and make visible God's reconciling work in the world. I will present four reasons why we, in our Reformed Church setting, should consider and even work toward worship in a local church that is welcoming and inviting to people of multiple races and nationalities and cultures.

1) The multicultural church is a reflection of Pentecost

In the second chapter of Acts, we have the powerfully transforming story of a people gathered together in one place, still numb from the loss of their spiritual leader, Jesus of Nazareth. But God has not abandoned or forgotten them. Luke tells us the story of a violent wind filling the house where they were. Tongues, like fire, rested on them and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Each “began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (2:4). Devout Jews from every nation under heaven were living in Jerusalem, and suddenly they heard their own languages being spoken. All were able to hear and learn about God's deeds of power. All were able to understand.

Justo Gonzalez, professor at Chandler School of Theology, writes:

When we look at the story of Pentecost . . . we see a story of extraordinary communication. . . . In its root meaning, the Latin *communicare* actually means “to make common,” that is, to share. . . . And to a degree that too often we fail to acknowledge, to share is to relinquish control. Thus, true communication of the gospel means that it is no longer the exclusive property of the original messenger, but is now fully shared with the other. When the Spirit let the various people in Jerusalem hear the message in their own tongues, the Spirit also paved the way for a church that would no longer be controlled by the original disciples in Jerusalem or their cultural successors. . . . What happened at Pentecost was that at the very moment of its birth, the church was crossing cultural boundaries in such a way that it would be just as much at home on one side of the boundary as on the other. The church is multicultural by birth.³

And God didn't stop here. Just when the Jews of every nation were feeling confident because the power of the Holy Spirit had been sent to them, God challenged them to share the Good News of Jesus Christ beyond even the Jewish people. In Acts, chapter

³ *ibid*, from the Foreword by Justo L. Gonzalez, xiii-xiv.

eleven, Peter reports to the Church at Jerusalem that God's Holy Spirit was now also being sent to the Gentiles. "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (v. 17). The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and beyond changed hearts and minds once again.

2) The multicultural church is a reflection of the kingdom of God

Some would argue that the church *universal* should be multicultural, but that the church *particular* need not necessarily be. This argument assumes that the particular church need not reflect the universal church. I would argue that not only should the particular church reflect the church *catolica*, but also that both should be a reflection of the kingdom of God here on earth.

Brian Blount, in his essay "The Apocalypse of Worship" argues that Jesus is a preacher of multicultural worship, offering a "counter kingdom proposal" which envisions a end-time reality when all people will worship together in one place, and God's house will be a "house of prayer for all people" (Mark 11:17).⁴

He examines Jesus' cleansing of the temple:

Since the Temple has become an institutional symbol of nationalist exclusivism, it must be destroyed before the inclusive kingdom vision that Jesus preaches in Mark can take root and bear fruit. Ironically, impurity occurs as the result of a zealous preoccupation with purity; wholeness could only have come if the Temple had been what it was always meant to be, a place where all peoples from all nations joined together in worship. In Mark's revelation of the future in the midst of the present, then, kingdom worship is multicultural worship. And the Temple, because it has become a symbol opposed to that worship, must be destroyed; another temple, not made with hands, will take its place (14:58; 15:29). And that temple will gather its elect from everywhere (13:27).⁵

The multicultural church is a response to the inclusive nature of the kingdom, where the faithful of all nations gather, not as outsiders looking in, but as insiders, fully included in the fellowship of God, welcomed as full family members by the Father, instructed in grace by Jesus the Christ and nurtured by the power of the Holy Spirit. This inclusive understanding of the kingdom should guide our movement toward intentional diversity within our particular churches and the worship that occurs there in order to witness to what God intends for us.

Jurgen Moltmann writes that the church, Christendom, and Christianity understand their own existence as that which points to what is to come in God's kingdom, as legitimized by the Messiah and the messianic future,

⁴Brian K. Blount, "The Apocalypse of Worship: A House of Prayer for ALL Nations," in *Making Room at the Table*, ed. Lenora Tubbs Tisdale and Brian K. Blount, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001), 16.

⁵ *ibid*, 25.

so that through their profession of faith, their existence and their influence, people, religions and societies are opened up for the truth of what is to come and their powers are activated for life. The church in the power of the Spirit is not yet the kingdom of God, but it is its anticipation in history. Christianity is not yet the new creation, but is the working of the Spirit of the new creation. . . . [T]he church, Christendom, and Christianity witness to the kingdom of God as the goal of history in the midst of history. In this sense the church of Jesus Christ is *the people of the kingdom of God*.⁶

The multicultural church is a reflection of the kingdom of God and all the amazing diversity God has created. The multicultural church is our vision for the future God intends for us.

3) The multicultural church is a response to the gospel

The Jesus we know through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, is a Jesus who exhibited hospitality in some radical and, for some during that time, disturbing ways. He ate with tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 9), he healed lepers (Matt. 8, Mark 1, Luke 5), he spoke with Samaritans (John 4), he did not allow Sabbath laws to prevent him from caring for those in need (Matt 12, Mark 2, Luke 6), he rescued a woman about to be stoned (John 8), he washed the feet of his disciples (John 14:1-14), he blessed the little children (Matt. 19, Mark 10, Luke 18), and he fed the hungry crowds (Mark 6, 8, Matt. 14, 15, Luke 9). He preached his message for all who would hear it and welcomed people without regard to age, class, status, or nationality. The forgiveness of sin was a necessary gift for all, not just for some. New life was offered to all, not just to some.

In *Church in the Round*, Letty Russell uses the metaphor of the round table or the “welcoming” table as she envisions the church as a place where all people have an equal place at God’s table. If we took all the people Jesus cared for and placed them around this table as the community of faith, the diversity would be great and yet the unifying force would be the love of God in Jesus Christ which has drawn so many to the table in the first place. It’s not our table. It’s God’s table. Therefore we must welcome all to the table in such a way that we do not elevate ourselves as the host, rather we are simply members of the family of God, called in Christ Jesus, who have gathered together in response to God’s amazing grace.

John Koenig, in *New Testament Hospitality*, writes that

philoxenia, the term for hospitality used in the New Testament, refers literally not to a love of strangers per se but to a delight in the whole guest-host relationship, in the mysterious reversals and gains for all parties which may take place. For believers, this delight is fueled by the expectation that God or Christ or the Holy Spirit will play a role in every hospitable transaction [Heb. 13:2; Rom. 1:11-12].⁷

⁶ *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, ((Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977, 1993 edition), p. 196.

⁷ Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, 8. I found this quote in Russell’s *Church in the Round*, 173.

Hospitality is not an invitation to become “like us,” rather it is an invitation to join together, on equal ground, to celebrate all that God has done in Jesus Christ and to respond together by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

In Mark 3:31-35, Jesus redefines the terms “mother, sister, and brother.” As Christians, our primary connection is no longer a blood connection. We are no longer only family to those who are just like us. Instead, Jesus tells us that “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (see also Luke 8:19). The family definition has changed and we are kindred spirits because of our connection in Christ and our response to God’s grace and forgiveness with our lives.

In the stories of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the Woman at the Well (John 4), Jesus challenges the traditional notion of the separation of nations and the idea that we are only to care for “our own.” By calling the man who helped the Samaritan a “neighbor” and by speaking himself to a woman of Samaria and drinking of the water she drew, Jesus lets us know that the boundaries of neighbors have changed. We are called to love those in need and to break down the walls that divide us. True love is demonstrated by true welcoming into the family as equals and partners in faith.

In the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew, we find the parable of the sheep and the goats. Jesus warns that when the Son of Man comes and the nations are gathered before him, the ones who will inherit the kingdom are the ones who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, *welcomed the stranger*, cared for the sick, visited the imprisoned, and clothed the naked. We are familiar with the needs of the sick and hungry and imprisoned, but Jesus intentionally included in this list the call to welcome the stranger. In our communities, we are surrounded by those who are strangers in a foreign land. Welcoming them does not mean saying, “come and be like us.” Nor, I believe, does it mean, “here’s some money – go and build a church for other strangers like you.” Welcoming strangers means inviting them in, learning from their cultures and languages, and sharing the gospel as one community of faith.

In Matthew 28 Jesus gives the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . .” Perhaps Jesus meant that each nation would then worship within its own community. Perhaps. But let us remember that our communities have changed and “all nations” are now in our backyard. How can we obey this commissioning without welcoming all to a multicultural experience of God’s grace?

4) The multicultural church as a vision of God’s reconciling work in the world

Recently, I had the privilege of being in the company of a well known Professor of Sociology and Religion and author of many books documenting religious trends in the United States. During our time together, this professor shared his brief experience as a

United Methodist pastor with me. Following graduation from divinity school, he was appointed to a church in rural South Carolina during the height of the civil rights movement. Though he had grown up in the south, he was not of one mind with his southern parishioners regarding race. Before his first year in ministry was over, he faced a conflict with the lay leaders in the congregation he served. One night, at an officer's meeting, one of the stalwart members of the church told the group that he had heard that a black man was going to come and worship with them. Before that happened, he wanted to make sure they were prepared. He proposed posting two strong men by the door in case the man showed up, so they could escort him out. The young pastor protested and sought to convince them that this was not the way of Jesus, but it became clear where the lay leaders of the church stood. He decided to lay all his cards on the table. "If you do this, I will not be able to remain here as your pastor." With not so much as a glance at him, the members of the board voted unanimously *not* to let blacks worship with them. My friend announced his departure that week.

In the United States, these memories are very real for many people. Only forty years have passed since the huge divide between people whose skin looked like mine and people whose skin looked very different began to narrow. But it did not happen overnight, and it is not ancient history. Though we have moved far from the events of those days, racism is not an issue of the past. Racism is an issue that we confront in more subtle ways, but in real ways, each day. A multiracial church, especially a black and white one, will have this common history and must not be afraid to talk about it and discern new ways for justice to be done for those people who are forgotten and marginalized today.

Thankfully, the issue now is *not* the exclusion of people of other races from worship or at the Table. However, as Lukas Vischer, former director of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, writes "Reconciliation cannot be communicated if it is not celebrated by the community as a whole, if the barriers that separate people from one another are not overcome and transcended within the community itself."⁸

Now perhaps it is appropriate for me to say here that for the sake of this argument I am making an assumption that the community surrounding a given local church is not homogeneous. In the United States, and I know in Great Britain as well, cultural diversity is a very real part of most communities these days. The United States was first inhabited by Native Americans, then by white Europeans, then by African slaves, then by Asians and Mexicans. Now people from every country on earth can be found living in the United States. And few communities can truly claim homogeneity.

Because of this, a church that does not reflect its surrounding community is missing out on the important work of reconciliation as the community of faith. If we are called to be people of Pentecost, if we are called to reflect the kingdom of God, if we are called to

⁸ "Worship as Christian Witness to Society," in *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches Past and Present*, ed. Lukas Vischer, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 421.

respond to the gospel, then the multicultural church and must be a part of our intentional response.

From Theory to Practice

This is not a simple task and this paper does not presume to answer all the questions regarding implementation of the vision of the multicultural church. Many barriers stand in the way of making this proposal become reality. The issues at this point are manifold and require intentionality that moves the particular church above and beyond an open door and a hearty handshake. In order to be genuine in our welcome, we must set forth in as many ways possible our desire to be multicultural through our architecture, our music, our use of arts, our liturgy and our worship experience. Particular churches around our world have done it in the past, are doing it today, and will do it in the future. Not because it is easy, but because it is the vision of the kingdom of God, even here, even now.

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