

Towards a greater diversity in MRC

MRC is an evangelical church in the heart of multicultural East Oxford. Its elders have expressed a desire to find ways (i) to reach minority people groups with the gospel, and (ii) to help the church to reflect better the diversity we see in our community. This brief paper is an attempt to move the discussion along.

1. Defining terms

For the purposes of this paper I want to make a distinction between international, multicultural and intercultural churches. In an international church we *welcome* ethnic minorities; in a multicultural church we *stand together* with them; but in an intercultural church we recognise that *we need each other*.¹ An intercultural church is therefore one where all cultures are valued equally and the contributions and perspectives which each brings are considered essential to the spiritual growth and maturity of the whole church².

2. Theological foundations

Dan Steel's sermon series in the early part of 2018 covered much of the ground for seeking to become a genuinely intercultural church but let me highlight a few themes.

In bringing judgment on the people at Babel (Genesis 11) God designed a multiplicity of languages to enable people to keep his command (ie to fill the earth). This linguistic diversity is therefore a good thing!

The Old Testament people of God were themselves a diverse people. Joseph married an Egyptian, Moses married a Cushite and there was quite a diverse crowd that left Egypt to join the people of God. The inclusion of Rahab and Ruth in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1) also underlines God's intention that Gentiles ("the nations") be included in the people of God.

In John 17:20-23 Jesus prays that the first believers and all who believe through their message might be united so that the world will know the gospel is true. Paul picks up that idea in Ephesians 2-3 where even the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places take notice that those who were once divided by a wall of hostility (caused by ethnic, cultural and theological differences) are now united in Christ. "In the New Testament, Paul demands active unity in the church, a unity that explicitly joins together differing ethnic groups because of their common identity in Christ."³

In Acts 2 God gives the gift of tongues to the apostles so that the nations present in Jerusalem for Pentecost might hear the good news of Jesus in their own language. This miracle was not primarily for communication purposes. Peter preached in Greek and everyone present was able to understand. The gift of tongues was a validation of their heart language and culture. There is no one language or culture that takes preference among the people of God.

In Philippians 2 Paul makes much of our need to put aside selfish ambition and put first the interests of others, using the example of Jesus laying aside his divine rights,

¹ I picked up this helpful distinction at the Birmingham conference of the Intercultural Church Planting Network (ICPN) in June 2018

² In our reflections on this topic we must not forget those from a UK working class culture who are also very different and often neglected

³ J. Daniel Hays in 6 Ways the Bible Changed My Perspective on Ethnic Diversity, Gospel Coalition Blog March 27, 2018

embracing our humanity and dying on the cross. This is fleshed out in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 with the call to learn cultural flexibility for the sake of the gospel. It is also notable that the section in 1 Corinthians 12 about the value of every different part of the body is preceded by vv13-14 which reads: “we were all baptized into one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. And so the body is not made up of one part but of many.” The body of Christ needs its cultural and sociological diversity in order to truly be the body!

In Revelation 7 we are given a vision of the multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual people of God which is clearly God’s goal for humanity. This is not just something to look forward to in the future but something Jesus taught us to pray for “on earth as in heaven.” Growing towards a greater diversity and intercultural unity is therefore a discipleship issue for everyone, not an optional extra. However, when we truly embrace ethnic and cultural difference there comes a great blessing. Every culture perceives the gospel through its own framework and every language captures some ideas better than others and so together with other cultures we can gain a fuller and richer view of who God is and what he is like.⁴ As Paul says in Ephesians 3:18 it is only “together with all the saints” (those diverse saints now united by the cross) that we can fully grasp the height and depth and length and breadth of the love of Christ. Becoming an intercultural church will involve many struggles along the way but it will bring great blessings for us all.⁵ Such unity in cultural diversity will also be a clear pointer to not-yet-believers of the power and wonder of the gospel.

3. East Oxford demographics

For the purposes of this paper I am treating the following 4 wards of the Oxford City Council to be “our area”: St Mary’s, St. Clement’s, Iffley Fields and Cowley Marsh. The National Census of 2011 reveals that in this area more than 23% of the population identify as something other than “white” and half of these are Asian.⁶ In the other Cowley and Blackbird Leys wards the non-white population is similar but includes more black people and fewer Asians. We don’t need to do an accurate survey of our congregation to know that MRC does not reflect the same cultural mix as the general population.

In East Oxford (or within easy reach) there are a significant number of ethnic churches for Brazilians, Nigerians, Serbs, Chinese, Kenyans, Koreans, Punjabis, Hungarians, Zimbabwean, Asians, Iranian and probably many more smaller groups I’ve not yet identified. These are largely mono-cultural and in most cases use a language other than English. In a few cases this is essential for comprehension but more usually simply one of several factors in choosing to be mono-cultural.

4. Cultural considerations

Reviewing the recent movie Crazy Rich Asians Hannah Chao says that “when we are seen and known, we are acknowledged as human beings with inherent dignity and value. We are neither mistakes nor outsiders. We belong. The beautiful uniqueness of who we are is celebrated, not whitewashed or marginalized.”⁷ Until we have lived as a minority in a different culture we find it hard to understand just how deep culture runs in our veins. It touches every part of our lives and when we are immersed in a context where our own culture is not appreciated it affects us at

⁴ See also Eddie Arthur, blog post 31/10/2018 at <https://www.kouya.net/?p=9331>

⁵ For further discussion of this topic see Harvey Kwiyan, One More Terrible Thing to Waste: Cultural Diversity, <https://www.gc-connect.org.uk/author/harvey-kwiyan/>, accessed 24/10/18

⁶ See table in the Appendix

⁷ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/profile/hannah-chao/>

the deepest level.⁸ As those who live in our own, predominantly white middle-class, culture we have to go out of our way to ensure that other cultures feel welcome. To simply offer a handshake and a polite 'welcome to MRC' is not enough. We need to take the time to know them, to understand them and to appreciate all they have to offer.

The presence of people from other cultures does not in itself mean we are truly diverse. A black African deacon in a well-known 'multicultural church' has gone on record as saying that "this was not a multi-ethnic church – it was a white church to which black people could come along. All the agendas were white, the worship was white, the preaching was white, even the food was white. So how could we really become inclusive?"⁹

If MRC is to be a church which truly loves and honours every member, the body metaphor (1 Corinthians 12:12-26 – see s.2 above) suggests that the only option open to us is to aim to become an intercultural church. Otherwise we will end up "sitting happily in the pews of our churches surrounded by persons of our own cultural tribe, playing the music of our own preference, while wondering why those around us look just like us. We will develop whole (bad) theologies ensconcing our musical and aesthetic preferences, effectively barring the door from those whose culture is too expressive, too loud, or too different. And we will wonder why they don't come. Here's why: *We don't want the headache, and they know it.*"¹⁰ If MRC is to become genuinely intercultural we "will need to be intentional about appreciating the uniqueness of the subdominant cultures and encouraging them to be expressed within the church community."¹¹

5. Moving forwards

Mark Deymaz¹² suggests that there are 7 core commitments of a multi-ethnic (intercultural) church. I will use five of them to highlight ways in which we can move further towards a goal of becoming an intercultural church.

5.1 Take intentional steps

If we are to be obedient to God's call to unite across cultures and to love our ethnically different brothers and sisters we need to take some radical action. It will need to be done slowly and carefully if we are to take the majority of the church with us but we must do something. Our default will always be to prefer what is familiar and comfortable so intentional steps need to be taken. It won't just happen! Remember "the comfort of the familiar becomes idolatrous when anything unfamiliar is delegitimized."¹³ I recommend that a plan of action be developed (incorporating some or all of the proposals below and others) and a person or persons be appointed to ensure the plan is carried out.

5.2 Empower diverse leadership

From interviewing leaders of intercultural churches and reviewing many books and articles¹⁴ on this topic I have noted a universal agreement that such churches only

⁸ Much more could be said about the experience many people from ethnic minorities have had of racism and how that affects their perception of churches

⁹ David Wise, Multi-ethnic worship, Issue 63 of Ministry Today

¹⁰ Adam Mabry, TGC blog 7th Feb 2017

¹¹ Felix Aremo, Co Mission blog 2nd July 2018

¹² Mark Deymaz, Building a healthy multi-ethnic church, 2007

¹³ Brett McCracken, TGC blog 5th Oct 2018

¹⁴ eg Malcolm Patten, Leading a multicultural church, 2016, pp118-134; Kumar Rajagopalan in Baptists Together Spring 2018, p12

truly emerge when there is a diversity of leadership. Philip Herklots, the pastor of Cornerstone Church in Headington (possibly the only genuinely intercultural church in Oxford) told me that they have diversity in every area of leadership including elders, music team and children's group leaders.¹⁵ Deymaz believes such leadership must be intentionally sought ¹⁶ and I would suggest that we plan to do what we can to attract and employ diverse leaders.

5.3 Develop cross-cultural relationships

It should be our goal to do this across the church, both individually and corporately. We may be surprised by the connections we already have with those who are culturally different, whether neighbours across the road, parents at the school gate, staff at the corner shop or local supermarket or among those we work with. Perhaps we should all encourage one another to ask God to give us a friend from another culture (both inside and outside the church) and to actively look for how God might answer.

As a whole church we might research possible projects we can engage with in partnership with an ethnic church, and then celebrate later with a joint service. Alternatively we could plan a multicultural service with 2-3 ethnic minority churches using musicians from all of the congregations and possibly putting together a gospel choir for the occasion. We might also want to consider how best to encourage evangelism among the diverse groups of East Oxford. There are already a few involved with the Syrians and other Muslims but there may be ways more of us could rise to the challenge.

5.4 Pursue cross-cultural competence

"The biggest barrier Christians face in developing communities hospitable to people of every ethnicity and culture is their ignorance about their own culture"¹⁷ and more generally of how culture functions and how integral to an individual's identity and value is their particular culture. It will be essential for us all to move from *cultural destructiveness* and *blindness* to *cultural awareness, sensitivity and competence*.¹⁸ This will need regular cultural awareness training and encouragement to build relationships with those who are culturally different and to listen well to their perspectives. The three Cultural Awareness sessions at the Greenhouse beginning 31st March will be a first step towards doing this.

Cross-cultural competence will be essential in our discipleship of non-western believers so we don't end up squeezing them into our white middle class value system. It will also be vital in our pastoral care since different cultures will have a wide variety of expectations of what this will look like.

5.5 Promote a spirit of inclusion

This will include a multitude of things, both large and small but, as Deymaz insists, "inclusion begins with worship"¹⁹. A consumer mentality to church can lead to an unwillingness to embrace different styles of but the spirit of Philippians 2 should be encouraged. Here Paul insists that considering the needs and preferences of others is more important than considering our own and we need to be encouraged to see that a willingness to be "comfortable being uncomfortable"²⁰ is part of our Christian

¹⁵ Interview with Philip & Dorcas Herklots, 1st Nov 2017

¹⁶ Mark Deymaz, p72

¹⁷ Sandra Maria van Opstal, *The Next Worship*, 2016, p40

¹⁸ from a continuum developed by Christina López, referred to by Deymaz, pp103-107

¹⁹ Deymaz, p109

²⁰ Deymaz, p110

discipleship and ultimately for our own good. A good place to begin might be to invite suggestions from those we already have from minority cultures.

There are many aspects of our morning worship where diversity can be encouraged and which will be appreciated by most of us. Along with music our Sunday gatherings can involve a diversity of people and styles in leading, praying, reading the Scriptures. In our intercessions we can ensure we pray for issues affecting the nations from which our congregation originate. Other languages²¹ can be incorporated in simple responses and in use of the Lord's prayer. Visually we can use flags and decorations which reflect other cultures and we can ensure that those from the minority cultures are given regular exposure at the front. As we begin to develop the Old School House there will also be many ways in which cultural diversity can be expressed both in design (eg provision of hardware for simultaneous translation) and décor as well as in the mix of those encouraged to make use of the building.

The importance of public affirmation of diversity cannot be underestimated. On our website and in our announcements, publicity, resources and leadership of Sunday (and other) gatherings every effort needs to be taken to ensure we promote this vision of every culture welcomed, valued, needed and represented.²²

Final thoughts

Over the past couple of years MRC has been blessed to have some godly African students in the congregation who have enabled us to make a start in growing diversity within the church. Having Mbali as a ministry trainee this year is also a significant step in this direction. Their contributions have been much appreciated and I am confident that with careful and prayerful leadership we can take further significant steps in becoming truly intercultural.

Further reading

1. 'Baptists Together' magazine Spring 2018 is short and has lots of helpful perspectives and practical ideas. Download for free at: https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/513632/Baptists_Together_magazine.aspx I would recommend a quick look at pp11-24 before we discuss this paper.
2. Andy Jolley, Growing Leaders from Diverse Cultures (Grove Booklets L21)
3. Malcolm Patten, Leading a multicultural church, SPCK, 2016 – easy read and written for UK context.
4. Mark Deymaz, Building a healthy multi-ethnic church, Jossey Bass, 2007. Excellent material though applications relate better to US context.

²¹ There has been no space to discuss the importance of people's heart languages which form an essential part of their cultural identity but I believe that use of these languages in appropriate ways in our worship is vital in promoting inclusion. See Patten pp82ff

²² Patten, pp70-71

Appendix

East Oxford demography										
	St Mary's		Iffley Fields		St Clements		Cowley Marsh		Total	
	Actual	%	Actual	%	Actual	%	Actual	%	Actual	%
Ethnicity										
White	4195	78.71	4350	76.14	4712	73.37	4735	72.85	17992	76.58
Mixed	234	4.39	229	4.01	226	3.52	228	3.51	917	3.90
Asian	680	12.76	867	15.18	740	11.52	1057	16.26	3344	14.23
Black	178	3.40	209	3.66	187	2.91	422	6.50	996	4.24
Arab	15	0.28	32	0.56	45	0.70	25	0.38	117	0.50
Other	28	0.52	26	0.46	42	0.65	33	0.51	129	0.55
Total	5330		5713		6422		6500		23495	
Religion										
Christian	1870	38.82	2195	42.11	2370	43.32	2846	44.61	9281	42.42
Muslim	440	9.13	646	12.39	479	8.76	1114	17.46	2679	12.24
Hindu	52	1.08	75	1.44	58	1.06	107	1.68	292	1.33
Sikh	10	0.21	8	0.15	15	0.27	30	0.47	63	0.29
Jewish	57	1.18	32	0.61	46	0.84	14	0.22	149	0.68
Buddhist	56	1.16	53	1.07	72	1.32	67	1.05	248	1.13
Other	30	0.62	37	0.71	49	0.90	42	0.66	158	0.72
None	2302	47.79	2166	41.56	2381	43.53	2160	33.86	9009	41.18
Total	4817		5212		5470		6380		21879	

From: www.citypopulation.de
Information derived from UK National Statistics, census 2011