

TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

Connecting Resources with Ministry

Church Development Discussion Papers

TITLE: Stepping Outside Your Cultural Niche

AUTHOR(S): Kenwyn Pierce

PAPER: 2011-09

REVIEW DATE: January 2011

Multicultural unity may look great on paper. In reality, bringing cultures together can be a complex and demanding task. Kenwyn Pierce reports on UK congregations that have dared to step outside their cultural niche – and reaped the benefits.

There is a welcome for everybody at Kingston United Reformed Church (URC) in south London in the UK. The building hums with conversation as the congregation gathers for the service.

There are elderly people – formally dressed – who have lived in Kingston all their life. Others here are parents bringing their young children. Many are not English – Koreans, Nigerians, Chinese, Russian. There are at least 10 different first languages here.

For Kingston URC minister Rev Lesley Charlton, this diversity is fundamental to being a church. "You cannot call yourselves a church if you are all the same," she says. "It may be a nice group, but a church, like the Kingdom of God, must have room for everybody."

Second language, first choice

Kingston's largest ethnic minority group is from Korea. And as it happens, Koreans have plenty of choice: there are over 40 Korean language congregations in the area. So why do some choose to come to an English-speaking church?

Kingston URC's cultural diversity is no accident. It has worked hard to make the church open to everybody. On Monday nights, the church lays on a conversation evening. Up to nine church members make themselves available to anyone who wants to come in and talk. Many recent immigrants value the opportunity to practice their English. It is also an opportunity to seek practical advice and help.

People come with questions about finding schools for their children, advice about transport and shopping. It's a safe environment in which to adjust to life in Britain.

People from all cultures come here to meet and make friends over a drink. One of the church members makes a short presentation based on their faith, but this is kept light and informal. There is no hard sell here.

To include people who are not confident in English, the entire text of the sermon is printed out and distributed to the congregation. On Tuesdays the church runs a games evening with badminton and ping-pong.

Open church

For the past four years, Suk In Lee has worked for the URC in Kingston, building relations between the cultural groups. He first came from Korea to Britain to work with the national ecumenical body, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. Now he is training to be an ordained minister in the United Reformed Church.

Most Koreans are waiting for the British churches to open their arms, he says. For them their separate churches are a second-best option. Many feel isolated in Britain, and seek refuge in their own congregations. Others find that being in the UK, they want to explore Christianity, says Lee. "They want to understand this country, and the Christian faith is a part of that."

Joining an English-speaking church is no easy option though. Immigrants have to work hard to join a church where they have to worship in their second or third language, and in an alien culture. Essential to all this is the attitude of the host congregation.

For Lee, one of the attractions of working in Kingston was the openness of the church members. "I saw God's presence in here," he recalls. "And a church that is prepared to welcome strangers."

Churches that do open themselves to all cultures are enriched by the experience. "It has changed the way I carry out my ministry," says Charlton. "I have learned from Korean culture the importance of eating together. Now, instead of just visiting homes, I take members of my congregation out to lunch."

Building a multicultural congregation is a slow process. The fastest growing churches are monocultural, says Charlton. "I think that is because there are lots of social hooks for the church to use in order to reach out to people. A multicultural church does not have access to such convenient ways of reaching people."

With God's grace, anyone can help build relations across cultural divisions Lee insists. "It is natural to want to share God's love with everybody, regardless of their ethnic background."

Time apart

But churches of one minority group have a role to play. "There needs to be room for all kinds of cultural models in the church," says Katalina Williams, racial justice secretary of the United Reformed Church. "People don't like the notion of monocultural congregations: it sounds isolationist and against the principle of unity," she says. "While the ultimate goal is complete unity, there are many steps along the way. Engaging multiculturally may mean different things in many different contexts."

Some minority congregations struggle for recognition. The story of the United Reformed Asian Christian Church in Slough, UK, is typical. The church started with the meeting together of just a few Urdu-speaking people from India and Pakistan. When the fellowship started to grow, they sought a mainline church to associate with, so that it could expand its work, explains church secretary Mehboob Anil.

First they approached the local Baptist church, which agreed to allow the group to meet in its hall. This worked well for a while, but they had to meet in the Sunday school room, which had pictures of the children's work on the wall. It was also next to the toilets. All in all the room was not ideal for worship. The church held their services there for a short while, until there was a minor dispute about security in the building. Anil and his congregation decided that it was time to move on.

An American visitor first suggested that the fellowship consider a link to the United Reformed Church. They arranged a meeting in a hotel in London, and began the process of joining the denomination. That was three years ago. Now the congregation has around 35 people attending the services.

The Asian church shares responsibility for the building with the host church. Many people here, especially the older members, do not understand English well. Others have a good understanding of English, but do not enjoy speaking it. For them it is more natural to pray and worship in their mother tongue, Urdu.

The younger people, second and third generation immigrants, speak English very well, and have no problems worshipping in English. To keep a good balance, Anil conducts services and delivers sermons in English and Urdu. We must be sensitive to the needs of both the host groups and the migrant churches, Williams warns.

For many in the UK, it is a daunting process, because the incoming group is often more vibrant than the host. That can be threatening. "We must take the biblical image of all nations worshipping together seriously, but we are human, and we cannot be that without a lot of work. There is a time and a place for people to feel that they belong, that they are at home. In some circumstances that can only happen in monocultural situations."

People want to worship in the language of their soul. If everything is in a particular language, it doesn't always help. The multicultural model insists we make allowances for that group of people, she says. Some churches work alongside each other despite separation along linguistic lines.

Malaysian cultural life is shaped by the country's multi-ethnic and multi-religious character. The Council for World Mission (CWM) member Gereja Presbyterian Malaysia is no exception. Chinese Christians speak Mandarin in church; others belong to English speaking congregations. There are also Malay-speaking churches among the tribal Iban community and local Chinese and Indians. In the local church setting, English and Chinese congregations only get together for celebration events such as church anniversaries. Then the sermons are translated into two languages. Songs are sung in English, Chinese and Malay.

Conflict

But separating for regular meetings can lead to problems. When congregations share a church building, there can be conflict over which gets to use the church on Sunday morning. Sometimes a congregation will find no better time to meet than on a Friday night.

Usually the congregation that owns the building gets priority, says Wong Fong Yang. Gereja Grace Church in Batu Pahat is an exception. The original congregation is English-speaking, and the building is still owned by them. But they made the decision to give the prime-time 10.30 Sunday morning slot to the Chinese-speaking congregation.

It is possible that the days of churches divided along linguistic lines are numbered. Since the 1970s, the language of teaching in schools has been Malay (Bahasa, Malaysia). As the next generation grows up, Bahasa is likely to become the unifying language.

Cultural diversity is an enriching thing, though, says Wong. "English language worship is often very expressive and exuberant, following the pattern of Western youth. Chinese worship, on the other hand, tends to be more serious and reflective. Both are valuable.

"Singing songs from Africa and Korea helps congregations to appreciate diversity of culture. God is at work in all cultures. By celebrating that richness, we can give to one another.

"And it helps us come out of ourselves and experience something different. For example, when we sing an African song, I first think of the suffering of the African people and of God's liberation. But it also makes me move my body. In this way, bringing songs from other cultures widens our perspective.

"Different cultures open us to new experiences of God."

Kenwyn Pierce prepared this article for The Council for World Mission (CWM).

Church Development Discussion Papers are not formal publications of The Toronto United Church Council. They present independent ideas and observations that are intended to encourage discussion and comment among church leaders in local congregations and Presbyteries. The information, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in these Discussion Papers are entirely those of the author(s) and should not be attributed to The Toronto United Church Council. Articles are reprinted with permission.