

# The Unspoken Codes of Cultural Empire

*by Adele Halliday*

Empire manifests itself in many different ways, one of which is cultural. And within our church, there are many systems of cultural domination, or a “cultural empire.” Culture is our ways of doing things and our patterns of behaviour. Culture is collective knowledge, a way of being.

Within the church, many ways of doing and of being have unspoken cultural codes. These often exclude people from non-dominant groups who cannot easily decipher the code that dictates the ways in which we are church together. People who embrace diverse ways of worshipping God, different ways of singing, unique ways of gathering in community, different concepts of time, of listening, praying, and of hearing one another often feel excluded because they have ways of doing things that are different from the dominant culture. Some First Nations peoples will not speak in a large group unless they have taken time to consult with their entire community; the one who then speaks, speaks for many people in their community, not as an individual. Some African and Caribbean Canadian cultures desire to clap, dance, and engage in call-and-response during worship. For some African and Caribbean cultures, time moves at a different pace than is understood in North America; worship and fellowship times extend longer, meeting times are considered fluid and not rigid, and there is always time for relationship building and conversations. Many Deaf people find it difficult to worship in most United Churches, which still embrace a dominant “hearing” culture. Several people who speak English as a second language—or do not speak English at all—find it impossible to participate in regional and national church gatherings, which still tend to embrace a dominant English-speaking culture.

Within the context of cultural empire, however, different ways of being together are devalued or ignored. The impact of cultural empire is that people who fall outside of the dominant cultural group are excluded. For example, some people cannot fully participate in the church’s life because the dominant languages of access in the church—which remain mostly hearing and English-speaking—exclude their cultural communities. Many other cultural communities often either feel forced to conform, or to ignore their own culture when they are in church. For example, many Black peoples feel that we have to choose a church context on a Sunday morning: either we can worship with many members of our own racial and cultural community, or we can choose to be in a United Church congregation in which we will be in the numeric minority. While the content and theology of the worship in United Church contexts speaks to us, we miss the music, movement, and fluidity that comes by being in a Black church. Many racialized peoples, therefore, speak of living as bicultural beings: existing comfortably in their own cultural group, and then coming to church and worshipping in a cultural context that feels alien.

The reality is that the United Church—in spite of striving to become a justice-seeking church—still embraces dominant cultural ways of being church together. Perhaps the church has woven the gospel and dominant cultural values together in ways that make it difficult to discern where what we do in church is a cultural value, not necessarily a gospel value. This can lead to the dominant culture being perceived as a superior culture. First Nations peoples often remind the rest of the church that it lives out a colonial context that excludes them. One of the great challenges of being church in society is that our church can reflect inequities in society. Within society, of course, there is systemic racism, cultural superiority, and exclusivity. These also exist within our church.

Jesus also lived in the context of empire. Yet Jesus also challenged the Roman Empire of the day, which was exclusive to people from non-Romanized backgrounds. Jesus preached that the context of empire was at great odds with his radical vision of inclusion. Jesus did not simply offer to “include” those who were on the margins; rather, Jesus enabled those encounters with the marginalized to shape him and change him as in the

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case of the Syrophenician woman. In Jesus' encounter with this woman—a woman of a different racial and ethnic background from him—the woman challenged his racial and cultural assumptions, and because of her words, Jesus changed his mind and his actions (Matthew 15:21–28; Mark 7:24–30).

What might our church be like if we enabled encounters with marginalized peoples to shape us and change us? This is the vision of intercultural ministries; a vision of deep transformation. “Intercultural” means mutually respectful relationships among and between cultures. If we enable transformation through intercultural dialogue, perhaps we would then enable encounters with each other to shape and move us toward the creation of community that resists empire. Embracing intercultural ministries is a transformative vision that moves far beyond individual interactions among people from diverse cultural groups; it is bigger than focusing only on one's individual identity.

Cultural exclusion exists in the context of racism—systemic, institutional, cultural, individual—affecting our ways of being church together. Challenging a cultural empire, therefore, needs to effectively address power inequities and racial injustice. If empire is a system of domination, and if some cultures within our church's system remain dominant, then dismantling empire will be a radical shift—it will change how we have meetings together, how we gather together, how we welcome each other. It will transform our prayers and liturgies, our communities, and change people in power. Dismantling empire, and embracing intercultural ministries, calls us to examine issues of access to decision-making bodies by minoritized and racialized peoples; it calls us to change those systems so they are no longer dominant and exclusive, but radically inclusive.

Intercultural gatherings have begun, and they have already begun to challenge empire. In March 2007, a national consultation on intercultural ministries was held, bringing together peoples from First Nations communities, racial/ethnic minority communities, and francophone communities to talk about experiences as racialized and minoritized peoples within the church. Many spoke of a cultural empire and the challenge to be church within a system of domination, how we could struggle to be church together, and how we could change this church together.

Sounding the Bamboo is an intercultural gathering for racial/ethnic minority women and First Nations women. One of its goals is “to educate ourselves about racial justice and gender justice in order to deepen our analysis of our experiences as First Nations women and racial/ethnic minority women, and feel empowered to faithfully minister.”

The Journeys of Black Peoples in The United Church of Canada is also an intercultural gathering for self-identified Black peoples of diverse backgrounds—at the recent Journeys event in April 2007, many spoke of exclusion within a church that they still love, and how we could work together to build more intentional and inclusive communities.

The Task Group on Intercultural Ministries has begun its work on defining intercultural ministries in a Canadian context, analyzing intercultural alternatives to empire, and visioning how the church's commitment to interculturalism can be transformative.

Slowly, in different places and different spaces, intercultural gatherings are revealing more about cultural empire within the church, and people are strategizing around ways to challenge empire and create deep, authentic communities of faith within The United Church of Canada. Intercultural ministries is a call to community. It is a call to justice, to reject cultural dominance, and to embrace diverse communities. It is a call to transformation.

For additional reading on links between racial power and empire, please see *Mandate*, May 2008.

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