

Defining Intercultural Ministries

by Steve Willey

Right near the end of the Christian Bible, in John's vision of the great in-gathering of all creation, God calls us to pay attention: "See, I am making all things new!" (Rev. 21:5). In end times, and beginning times, and in all the in-between times, the Creator is always bringing new things out of nothing, and making something new out of things that are old. It is creation's greatest joy to be so intimately caught up in God's innovating love.

I felt an inrush of that joy when the news arrived that the 39th General Council had adopted the proposal that The United Church of Canada commit itself to becoming an intercultural church. This means a church with "mutually respectful diversity and full and equitable participation of all Aboriginal, francophone, ethnic minority, and ethnic majority constituencies in the total life, mission, and the practices of the whole church." Is this a vision of something brand new, or something new out of something old? Whichever it is, by faith we believe that the Creator is now urging us into a closer, deeper, and more equal relationship with one another.

One of the great gifts of "multiculturalism" is that it has taught us how to celebrate each other's food, music, clothing, and stories. Interculturalism promises to take us deeper. Why do we need to go deeper? Let me tell a few brief stories.

Not long ago, I was speaking with a colleague who told me of some new tensions in the congregation where he was the ordained minister. This once exclusively Caucasian group rejoiced when some people from the Caribbean began attending worship. But now the long-time members were growing irritated that the parents among the newcomers were not "controlling their children" but allowed them to run around the building as if they were in their homes. He was feeling frustrated, as well. The new members seemed to think nothing of arriving after the service had already started, and then coming and going while it was in progress. He also admitted to feeling personally offended that they would often come and go while he was in the middle of his carefully prepared sermon.

This was a situation where new conversations needed to take place. This was not about insensitive individuals who needed to be chastised. Neither was it about a vehemently racist White congregation incapable of embracing new ways. It was about a lack of understanding of how cultural values differ. Not all cultures share the same understanding of the relationship between public and private space, the role of children, the relative importance of punctuality, or showing respect through certain types of deferential behaviour.

I had similar lessons to learn when I arrived as the interim minister at Centennial-Japanese United Church in 2002. I went there with a vague notion about the importance of "face" and indirect methods of expressing one's opinion in Japanese culture. But it wasn't until we convened large gatherings of members to discuss the future of the congregation that I began to understand more fully.

Whenever I issued an open invitation to those in attendance to "stand up and share with the whole group what you are thinking or feeling," virtually no one would respond. Some of the younger generation were comfortable speaking their minds in this setting, but the elders usually sat in silence. This represented a significant loss of experience and wisdom in the congregation's process of discernment.

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To address this concern, we held a series of “green tea conversations.” With its deep resonances of hospitality and community, the green tea filled the room and the gathering with warmth. When the time came for discussion, small groups were created. Those who had been uncomfortable proclaiming personal revelations in the big group found the small groups to be a much more agreeable place. They could speak quietly and thoughtfully without fear of public embarrassment.

While I was serving that same congregation, we invited the Rev. Emmanuel Ofori, then minister of the Ghana Calvary Methodist United Church in Toronto, to be guest preacher at a special worship service honouring John Wesley. To my surprise, he arrived on Sunday morning accompanied by his spouse, his children, and several other members of his home congregation. Why did this take me by surprise? Because I did not understand the importance that Ghanaian culture places on the person-in-community and the honouring of one community by another.

These are just a few stories. But they illustrate that if we are going to become a truly intercultural denomination, we need to become more fluent in each other’s cultural values, patterns, and ways of looking at life. This is especially true for those of us who are part of the racial, ethnic, and cultural majority. Since birth, most of us English-speaking White peoples have been able to operate on “autopilot,” assuming that our way of doing, being, and seeing is the Canadian way. Members of racial, ethnic, and cultural minority communities have had to be fluent in the ways of the majority culture in addition to those of their own culture. They have much to teach—and we have much to learn—about how to walk on more than a single pathway.

This is one of the reasons why the 39th General Council of The United Church of Canada has invited and empowered racial/ethnic minority communities to offer leadership in helping the United Church become an intercultural denomination. If those of us who are accustomed to operating on autopilot are not attentive to their leading, we are more likely to misname reality. We are more likely to mistakenly think that when an Arab Canadian man looks directly into our eyes while speaking he is being aggressive; that when a Japanese Canadian woman casts her eyes downward when introduced she is suffering from low self-esteem; that when a Filipino Canadian or First Nations person speaks quietly in public he or she is displaying personal shyness; or that when a Korean Canadian congregation calls upon a third party to act as a mediator it is showing an inability to resolve conflict on its own.

We hurt one another when we make these mistakes. Circumstances get confused, conflict is kindled, and those who have been misunderstood feel even more marginalized.

Knowing the life and message of Jesus as we do, we believe that this is not God’s will for the church. The Spirit is testifying to a different vision, one of an interculturally competent denomination with members fluent in the church’s rich and diverse cultural identities. Beyond mere tolerance, deeper than celebration alone, lies what Dr. Samuel Kobia, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, calls “a horizontal sharing of the gifts of grace.”

Moving toward a more free and equitable sharing of the richness of God’s diverse gifts is our task, our goal, and our hope.

This article originally appeared in *Seeing Ourselves*, the Ethnic Ministries newsletter, Fall/Winter 2006.