

## Overseas Personnel Reflect on “Hybrid Identity”

by *Natasha Klukach*

“It is a mixed blessing of being hybrid, completely mixed, inseparable in yourself, who is always trying to fit into one group, yet, at the same time, realizing that it is not possible or desirable.... I claim that this hyphenated and hybrid identity is something we all share as overseas mission personnel to some extent and this is a gift to be recognized and celebrated rather than dismissed or ignored.”

HyeRan Kim-Cragg has unique insight into intercultural identity. Born and raised in Korea, and ordained in the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK), she married David, a United Church of Canada minister, and moved to Canada where she obtained a doctorate in theology. With their two children, HyeRan and David returned to HyeRan's country of birth as United Church of Canada overseas personnel. HyeRan's assignment was to teach at the PROK's Hanshin University, and David's to serve as a university chaplain.

HyeRan shared her experiences of cultural identity at an October 2009 consultation hosted by the General Council's Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations Unit, involving some 30 overseas personnel who had completed their service and returned to Canada since 2005. While her own situation is rather unique, HyeRan suggested that the experience of having a “hybrid identity” was echoed by many other returned overseas personnel.

Could the insights of those who know what it is to feel like the “other” both overseas *and* upon return home to Canada help the United Church as it works on becoming an intercultural church? Tiina Cote, now an ordained minister serving in a rural congregation, completed a theological internship in the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas in Barbados. She wonders whether the church needs to more actively seek out the diversity that already exists, to reclaim cultural identities and stories that may have been forgotten. “To listen to stories of differences within—might that lead us to a celebration of differences that not only can co-exist, but that have co-existed?” she asks. “And here, I wonder, might we find a people's desire to embrace mutual respectful relationships within diversity?”

Ray Whitehead, now “retired” together with his wife Rhea, has had decades of overseas mission experiences in the Philippines, Hong Kong, and China. He cautions that even with such intercultural exposure, he finds being an intercultural church challenging. “I have discovered that no matter how much I get shaken out of my cultural box, there are still tendencies to be overcome,” he shared with participants at the consultation. But like Tiina, he encourages strong cultural diversity as the way forward for the church. “Seeing the way many different cultures interact, learning from each other while maintaining their own integrity, I think we can say that an intercultural church would not be a simple amalgamation of various cultures,” he stresses. Each culture has its distinctions and what is key is encouraging enrichment from other cultures while maintaining that distinct cultural integrity.

Re-entry to the Canadian culture and church can be a mixed blessing: while one is returning “home,” there is a sense for many that there is unfinished—or newly discovered—personal work to do as one committed to God's mission of abundant life for all. As the United Church of Canada presses forward to its vision of building an intercultural church, returned overseas personnel can play a unique role in building an understanding of overlapping cultural identities.