

# What's in a Name: Our Multiple Identities

by Wenh-In Ng

The first time I was consciously aware of my “identity” was when I was issued an Identity Card as a resident of my birthplace, Hong Kong. From this, I inferred that it’s something held by only myself and none other. At the same time, I concluded that everyone else also had their own “identity” or uniqueness. Was that way of thinking simply too naive?

According to the Gage Canadian Dictionary, “identity” is “who a person is” or “what a thing is.” The Shorter Oxford Dictionary puts it as “individual existence,” “the quality or condition of being the same,” and “oneness.” The question can then be asked: What is it that makes me who I am? Who am I, anyway?

## Individual Identity

For Wanda West, one of the writers in *Our Roots, Our Lives*, the response is clear. “First and foremost,” she declares, “I...am a child of God. Secondly, I am Black and Canadian.” What would your affirmations be?

For myself, I can affirm that I am a child of God, and also Canadian and Asian. However, I can be also be “identified” by other aspects of myself. By ethnicity, I am Chinese; by sex, I am female; by age, I am old (rather than young or even middle-aged); by profession, I am an educator, specifically, a retired professor; by personality type according to Myers Briggs, I am an INTJ; by family relationship, I am mother and grandmother; by religion, I am Christian/Protestant/United Church...and so on.

## Collective Identity

It is only when I lay it all out like this that I realize how many communities I belong to. Only then do I realize that my individual identity has not developed by itself, nor can it be sustained by itself alone, but by the various communities to which I belong. Not only as individuals but also as groups or collectives do we develop, share, and own an identity. A further question then arises: Who are we?

The matter is not as simple as it looks on the surface. Some of the communities I belong to relate to one another in quite friendly ways and are supportive of each other’s goals and aspirations. Here, I am thinking of The United Church of Canada’s Ethnic Ministries and the Centre for Asian Theology at Emmanuel College where I used to teach. These two bodies often co-sponsor programs and act as allies for each other. Among others of my communities, however, there may sometimes be tension. For instance, the values of my feminist community (in fact, communities, because there are more than one to which I belong) may come into conflict with the more patriarchal, still quite Confucian values of my ethno-culture of origin. On occasion, the values or criteria of my church community may raise questions about the demands of my academic communities. An example would be: Which takes priority, ministry excellence or intellectual rigour? When I reflect on my personal identity in this way, I almost have the sense that I am not one single individual, but a composite of many, a “multiple” self, so to speak. What do I do in such cases? What do you do?

Let’s reflect further on the question: Who are we?

## Church Identity

First, as United Church members and congregations: What makes us recognizable? What would our United Church “identity card” declare about us? I still recall how, during my early years in this country, I attended a well-known non-United Church congregation one Sunday and, unbeknownst to the preacher, got lambasted by him about the United Church’s public concern for social justice and alleged lack of fervour for “evangelism.”

## *Reflecting on Identity*

I felt like rebutting, “But we do both: we are committed to both ‘Christian Development’ and ‘Church and Society’! We used to have a Board of ‘Evangelism and Social Service’-together, not as separate boards!”

These days, of course, I could have quoted parts of our United Church creed at him, especially the part that begins, “We are called to be the Church” not only “to celebrate God’s presence” and “live with respect in Creation,” but also “to love and serve others” and “to seek justice and resist evil.” These days, we can also share the fact that as a church we have apologized (in 1986) to our Aboriginal sisters and brothers for the treatment they received from the hands of early settlers to this, their land.

We can point to the existence of Ethnic Ministries as a distinct unit (since 1996) as evidence of our church’s attention and commitment to ethnic minority faith communities in its midst. We can also point out the fact that our church has an official anti-racism policy (received in 2000 for action) that it is trying to implement. What else can you think of in your specific context?

### **Biblical Reflections**

In the New Testament, the most famous question about identity must be Jesus’ question to the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:20). Notice the subtlety: not directly, starkly, “Who am I?” (he asked that of himself during the temptation in the wilderness, I think-or a similar question, “Who do I want to be?”), but “Who do you say that I am?” It seems that Jesus cares about what his disciples think! But it’s only now that I catch another nuance: identity does not depend only on one’s own declaration, but also on the assessment of others. In other words, what others perceive us to be can affect how or who we are, too. What it says to me is, be careful how you refer to others, call others, and think of others. God’s very mission may be at stake.

How has this happened to those associated with Jesus? I think of the women referred to in Luke’s gospel (8:2) as “some women” apart from the twelve. Not being included in the general term “disciples” has through the ages affected how we conceive of the role and significance of women followers of Jesus-some of whom were the first witnesses to the resurrection, no less, and commissioned by the risen Christ to “go and tell.” On the other hand, I think of how Mark records the extravagant gesture of caring by the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus at Bethany before the Passion, causing Jesus to declare that “wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her” (Mark 14:9).

So, I am learning to be more careful-in how I describe others, in how others are named. People should be able to name who they are, not remain nameless or-this is also quite problematic-answer to the names we use for them. Just as I bristle at being called “oriental” (rather than “Asian”), I am careful to ask a First Nations group how they want me to refer to them-if I was appointed the note taker at a meeting, for instance. “What’s in a name?” asks Juliet (or Shakespeare), rhetorically. I would respond, “A lot! One’s identity may be at stake!”

### **For Further Thought**

In this postmodern first decade of the 21st century, it is fitting that the United Church is looking at its identity. For those of us within Ethnic Ministries, to what extent can we gift the wider church with our special “hybridity” dimension of identity? To what extent can we claim, and invite others to consider sharing, the vision celebrated in the theme song of our racial-ethnic women’s conference *Sounding the Bamboo*, “We Are Many, We Are One”?