

What Is the Intercultural Church?

(A Plain Language Document)



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What Is the Intercultural Church?

God is calling the United Church to change. We are trying to become more “intercultural.” What does that mean?

God’s Spirit Brings People Together

Remember the story of **Pentecost** in Acts 2.

A crowd gathered to hear the apostles speak. People came from many different cultures and backgrounds. But each person heard God’s word in their own language.

No one had to give up their identity. God’s Spirit brought them together in a new way.

The members of the early church respected each other. They learned from each other. And they worked together as equals to build something new.

That’s the kind of church God wants for us today.

Cultural → Multicultural → Intercultural

Canadians come from many different countries and backgrounds. We speak many different languages. We value many different traditions.

All of these cultures live side by side. Canada has many **cultural** communities. Canadians are proud of our **multicultural** society.

The United Church wants to go one step further. In our church, we want people from all different cultures to listen to each other and be heard.

We want everyone to participate fully. We want our leaders to be as diverse as our population. We don’t want one dominant culture to decide how we do things.

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Jesus Set an Example

Jesus brought together a community of believers. He did not exclude anyone because of **race, class, gender, or social norms**. He made everyone feel that they belonged.

In fact, Jesus did more than include people who were left out. He met them and learned from them. Here is a story of a time when Jesus allowed himself to be changed, as told in Matthew 15:21–28 and Mark 7:24-30.

Once, Jesus was travelling in the northern land of Canaan. As a Jewish man, he was an outsider in this place. A woman recognized him, however. Her daughter was sick with an evil spirit, so she begged Jesus for help.

At first, Jesus did not answer her because she belonged to a race that the Jewish people looked down upon. But the woman insisted. She shouted for help again. The disciples told Jesus to send her away. He turned to her and said, "Please go away. My job is to help only my own people."

But the woman would not leave. She kneeled down in front of him and pleaded, "Lord, help me."

Jesus was annoyed. He said to her, "It is not fair to give good food to a dog when a man's own children are hungry."

The woman did not like being compared to a dog. But she loved her sick daughter very much. "I agree that your children must come first," she replied. "But a dog can still live on the crumbs that fall from the dinner table."

Jesus was astonished by this reminder that all races and peoples are included in God's family.

"Woman, your faith is great!" he shouted. "I will do as you ask." And the Canaanite woman's daughter was healed.

God Is Calling Us to Change

Today, there are Christian communities all over the world. These communities live out the values that Jesus taught—**gospel values**.

But each community uses its own language. It has its own images and traditions. And its members interact in ways that make them feel comfortable.

In the history of the church, we have often confused gospel values with the values of the **dominant culture**.

For example, when missionaries came to Canada, they brought the Christian religion to the Aboriginal peoples who live here. They brought European culture with them, too. Often, missionaries taught Christianity and European culture as though they were the same thing.

The United Church has apologized to Aboriginal peoples for this mistake. We know that it caused a lot of pain. And we're trying to learn from each other so that we can walk together again.

The United Church today has a dominant culture, too. You can see it in many churches and gatherings. People might not even notice what they are doing. But they often act as though it is "normal" to be White, English-speaking, and middle class.

Our ways of being church together need to change. God is calling the whole church to be more open to each other's gifts.

We don't know exactly what an intercultural church will look like. But it's an exciting opportunity. God is calling us to work together to build something new.

Learn from the Bible: God Gathers All People

No one is a stranger:

“Do not mistreat foreigners who are living in your land. Treat them as you would an Israelite, and love them as you love yourselves. Remember that you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.”

(Leviticus 19:33-34).

There is a house of prayer for all God’s people:

And the Lord says to those foreigners who become part of his people, who love him and serve him, who observe the Sabbath and faithfully keep his covenant: “I will bring you to Zion, my sacred hill, give you joy in my house of prayer, and accept the sacrifices you offer on my altar. My Temple will be called a house of prayer for the people of all nations.” The Sovereign Lord, who has brought his people Israel home from exile, has promised that he will bring still other people to join them.

(Isaiah 56:6-8)

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What Can Church Communities Do?

It will take faith, trust, and openness to become more intercultural. Here are some things you can do.

Worship

- Regularly let different cultural groups influence your style of worship. It's not enough to do this once a year on a special occasion.
- Preach about anti-racism. Celebrate all the cultures that are in your community. Talk about our call to be an intercultural church.
- Use diverse imagery to describe God. In the Bible, God is described as being like
 - an eagle
 - a loving father
 - a protective mother hen
 - a rock
 - a roaring lion
 - a potter
 - a judge
 - a jealous husband
 - a woman giving birth
 - a good shepherd
 - a persistent widow
 - and many more

Leadership

- Share leadership among racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. But be careful: Don't assume any one person speaks for their whole group.
- In meetings and decision-making, ask: Who is present? Who speaks? Does everyone feel included?
- Make sure leaders learn how to work with different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups:
 - Provide opportunities for meaningful encounters with other cultural communities.
 - Ask leaders to attend workshops to increase their understanding of other cultures.
 - Hire a consultant to teach cross-cultural communication.
 - Organize exposure trips to other countries.
 - Provide leaders with anti-racism training.

Community Life

- Create opportunities for different cultural groups to mix as equals. Don't let any one culture dominate. Everyone contributes, and everyone's cultural traditions are celebrated.
- Look at the ways the community interacts. Whose voices are heard? Whose voices are not? Keep working at it.
- Learn what languages people are most comfortable with. Can everyone understand what is being said? Is everyone able to contribute? Do whatever is possible to ensure everyone has a chance to use their own language.
 - Try to express yourself in plain English, not academic English.
 - Consider providing simultaneous interpretation and written translations.
 - Invite people to pray in their own language—God does not require English!

Learn from the Bible: God Calls Us to a New Earth

God promises happiness:

The Lord says, "I am making a new earth
and new heavens...
The new Jerusalem I make will be full of joy,
and her people will be happy...
Wolves and lambs will eat together;
lions will eat straw, as cattle do,
and snakes will no longer be dangerous.
On Zion, my sacred hill,
there will be nothing harmful or evil."

(Isaiah 65:17-25)

God will make all things new:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...
And I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem,
coming down out of heaven from God...
I heard a loud voice speaking from the throne:
"Now God's home is with people!...
He will wipe away all tears from their eyes.
There will be no more death,
no more grief or crying or pain..."
Then the one who sits on the throne said,
"And now I make all things new!...
To anyone who is thirsty
I will give the right to drink
from the spring of the water of life
without paying for it.
Those who win the victory will receive this from me:
I will be their God, and they will be my children."

(Revelation 21:1-7)

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