

On being intercultural

By
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In 1985, the UCA Assembly claimed its identity in Christ as 'a multicultural church' and made a formal declaration to that effect: "The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church". In the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania we are seeking ways of how we can be meaningfully "intercultural" in our multicultural Church. While this evolution has not been without its challenges, it is also deserving of celebration.

Among many things, being an intercultural Church means a church with "mutually respectful diversity and full and equitable participation of our indigenous (first peoples), and second peoples (the Anglo ethnic majority and other ethnic minorities) in the total life, mission and the practices of the whole church".

Australians come from many different backgrounds. We speak many languages. We value many traditions. All of these cultures live side by side. We can be proud of our multicultural society.

One of the great gifts of "multiculturalism" is that it has taught us how to celebrate each other's food, music, clothing, and stories. 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.

The land now known as Australia, before colonisation, was a diverse community with different languages, cultural practices and spirituality. With colonisation, it became increasingly Anglo-Celtic and this dominant culture began shaping the Australian identity.

In this emerging dominant culture people mostly operated on 'autopilot' assuming their way of doing, being and seeing was *the* Australian 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. But they each have much to teach—and the dominant culture has much to learn—about how to walk on more than a single pathway.

Being intercultural works at many levels:

1. It is between all cultures.

It is not just between the majority and the minority. While there have been efforts made to cross cultures between the dominant Anglo Celtic communities and other migrant communities which I hope will continue to grow, there is not much interaction happening among the non-Anglo migrant cultures. We need to explore ways this could happen within and across presbyteries.

2. It is about engaging with the hidden culture.

It is not just about the surface culture (fine art, music, food dress etc) but also about the hidden culture (values, beliefs, theology, attitudes, perceptions, assumptions, spirituality etc). It is about listening, learning and understanding about things that are core to one's being which makes us who we are.

3. It is also about authentic theology.

The Gospel takes different forms and shapes in the context it is communicated and the social situation in which it is incarnated. Our ways of being Church doing mission and doing theology has largely been borrowed from Britain or America. In the history of the Church, we have often confused Gospel values with the values of the dominant culture.

What does it mean for the Church of many cultures to be the church for the whole people of God who are so diverse? What will an authentic theology look like for the indigenous communities? What will an authentic theology look like for Anglo-Celtic communities? What will an authentic theology look like for migrant communities? Does one size fit all?

4. It is about participation.

The Uniting Church today has a dominant culture, too. 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 needs to change. God is calling the whole Church to be more open to each other’s gifts.

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/membership. We don’t want one dominant culture to decide how we do things. God is calling the Uniting Church to change. We need to become more intercultural.

We need to continue to consciously affirm, value and commit ourselves to becoming an intercultural church as we receive, share and celebrate the gifts we are to each other.

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.