

Faith and Society Files: Characteristics of a Multicultural Church

Cultural diversity is a gift of God. This File, adapted from *A House of Prayer for All People*, helps churches as they strive to be multicultural - reflecting the rich, grace-filled patterns that are part of our world and our society.



Characteristics of a Multicultural Church

What do we mean by Multicultural?

'The basic premise is that there is only one race – the human race. This is true both biologically and biblically. The human race is expressed in various 'ethnicities' that are in turn expressed through various 'cultures'. A 'culture' is the whole way of life of a people, and therefore it has many different dimensions. Language, gender, class, age, and religious practice, all play a part in shaping culture.

The word 'multicultural' is being used as a way of talking about diverse and distinct cultures living together and learning to interact with one another. It is not about each culture living separately, so creating self-contained ghettos. It is about valuing diversity, and recognising and respecting the contributions that can be made by different cultures to each other. It is not about each culture claiming a right to be accepted uncritically. It is about all cultures engaging in critical dialogue with each other, so that all can contribute to the building of community and a cohesive society.

Our conviction is that cultural diversity is a gift of God. Our churches need to strive to be multicultural so as to reflect the rich, grace-filled patterns that are part of our world and our society. And all our different cultural norms and practices need to be examined in the light of the gospel lived out in the life of Jesus.'

BUGB Council, March 2011

Characteristics of Healthy Multicultural Congregations

1 *Build on health*

- a Health denotes a community where people interact with each other in respectful and appropriate ways.
- b Feelings and ideas are expressed directly and openly.
- c Gifts of all are welcomed and utilised appropriately.
- d Clergy and laity use power justly and constructively for the common good and recognise the abuse of power.
- e Openness to ongoing education and issues in the community.
- f Spiritual concerns and pastoral care of members are addressed.

2 *Know their history*

- a The study of history reveals both the heritage and traditions of a given congregation.
- b Leads to further discernment of a church's mission and ministry in the present.
- c A willingness to reinterpret history not only from the perspective of the dominant culture but also from the perspective of communities of colour.
- d Who is included? Who is excluded?

3 *Seek committed leadership*

- a Clergy and laity understand the dynamics of power and oppression.
- b Leadership is committed to change.
- c Leaders tend to view building multi-cultural community more in terms of process than as product or programme.
- d Leaders of multi-cultural congregations usually report a 'call' to justice, anti-racism or to multi-ethnic community.
- e Because authentic multi-cultural, multi-ethnic community is difficult to achieve and sustain, it is crucial that leaders are able to withstand criticism, and periods of frustration and disillusionment.

4 Share a rich symbolic life

- a Congregations who are committed to building multi-cultural community eventually change at all levels of the organisation education, worship, governance, pastoral care, outreach etc
- b Leaders adapt to the challenges of making the symbolic life of the church reflective of the various cultures and ethnicities.
- c Need to re-examine the worship, music, education, and all other aspects of congregational life from the perspective of a multi-cultural vision.

5 Develop community and denominational relationships

- a Congregations seek to reinterpret their mission and ministry within the context of their local communities and with the aim of building multi-ethnic, multi-cultural community.
- b Congregations benefit from denominational support and resources.
- c Effective racism awareness and anti-racism programmes share several features:
 - (1) Biblical and theological doctrine that names racism as a sin.
 - (2) A dual focus on teaching and experiential activities.
 - (3) Clearly stated definitions of racism as prejudice plus power, bias, discrimination and other form of exclusion and discussions of culture and ethnicity.
 - (4) Activities that focus on institutional and systemic racism as well as individual racism.
 - (5) Explicit connections between racism and other forms of exclusion and oppression.
 - (6) Strategies and plans for long-term implementation of comprehensive antiracism programme in organisations and communities of various sizes and complexities in a variety of contexts and settings and practical tools and resources for implementing this process.
 - (7) After examining racism within the church, a focus that extends beyond the organisational church to civil society.
 - (8) An approach that fosters ecumenical and interfaith connectedness.

6 Implement an action plan: monitor and evaluate

- a Without ongoing evaluation, discernment, reflection, adjustments, and modifications, any plans of action will lose its relevance, energy or direction
- b As long as injustice remains, so does the need for goals and strategies, action and analysis

7 Cultivate spiritual stamina

- a God calls all mankind to a life of rich diversity
- b Our spirituality reflects the relationships we have with God, other people and the world and is consistent with our cultural and ethnic heritages
- c The process of living out multicultural community impacts our hearts, our minds and our lives and brings about our attitudes and behaviours about God, oneself and our larger society
- d Choosing to live in multicultural community is countercultural and requires a great deal of spiritual stamina
- e A disciplined life of prayer and reflection rooted in a multicultural community of faith is perhaps the greatest source of support for the challenges faced by those who choose to open up their lives in this way.

Adapted by R Alden, from A House of Prayer for All People, by Sheryl A Kujawa-Holbrook, The Alban Institute, Bethesda, MD, 2002. Adjusted by Rosemarie Davidson-Gotobed 2011.

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