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Seven Roads to a Multicultural Congregation

“We believe we should become a multicultural congregation,” the pastor said. “But how can we move beyond ‘hope is our only strategy’ to a plan that achieves results?”

Start by recognizing eight realities that any effective multicultural-congregation plan must take into account:

1. Assume that the United States will continue to receive each year close to one-half of all the adults on this planet who choose to leave the country of their birth to live in another nation.

2. A relatively tiny proportion of those newcomers will migrate here from Western Europe.

3. For the vast majority of new residents, English is *not* their first language.

4. With modest exceptions, when it comes to a desire to become fully assimilated into the American culture, economy, and institutional scene, those immigrants represent three distinctive subgroups: (a) those who were born in another country and come here as adults, (b) those who were born elsewhere but come as children, accompanying a parent to the United States, and (c) those who were born here and continue to live here. The older the age of the new immigrants, the more likely they will be “separatists,” not “integrationists.” They want to retain a tie with Korea or the Philippines or China, etc., and they want to help their children retain a respect for their culture, diet, language, and customs.

5. Participation in the American labor force is usually the number-one road to assimilation. By contrast, worshiping in an already established Christian community in which the religious culture traces its origins back to Western Europe usually ranks far behind their desire for formal education, recreation, transportation, retail purchases, health care, and a half dozen other points of assimilation. Like most third and fourth-generation Americans, recent immigrants usually prefer to help create the new rather than to join long-established voluntary associations.

6. The categories of “Hispanic” and “Latino” are widely used in contemporary America. But the overwhelming majority of Christian congregations that serve Spanish-speaking recent immigrants identify themselves *in terms of the country of birth of their leaders*, such as Mexico, Peru,

Cuba, Honduras, or Haiti.

7. American-born white Christians desiring to reach, attract, serve, nurture, assimilate, disciple, challenge, and equip for ministry adults who are (a) American-born blacks, (b) Caribbean-born blacks, and (c) African-born blacks must recognize the great difficulty in organizing one congregation that is able to attract and assimilate adults from all three of those demographic cohorts. The two highly visible exceptions tend to be (a) very large congregations with a long-tenured senior pastor and (b) the small church served by a long-tenured pastor who excels as a loving shepherd. With American-born blacks, ethnic identity has replaced the call of the early 1960s for racial integration: that is why black “separationists” outnumber black “integrationists” by at least ten to one.

8. One highly visible line of demarcation within America’s ethnic minority population is between the “integrationists” and the “separationists” in marriage. The number of bicultural married couples has been increasing in recent years.



Church leaders whose congregations move beyond “hope is our only strategy” to an effective multicultural ministry recognize that those eight contemporary realities provide the context for planning in the American Protestant congregation, or denomination, in which the vast majority of today’s members trace their ancestry back to Western Europe.

We see the relevance of those assumptions when we observe seven effective multicultural-congregation models in contemporary America:

1. The congregation served by a pastor in a bicultural marriage that focuses on reaching other couples in a bicultural marriage. The white wife married to a black husband explained that the primary reason they chose this congregation was, “Our children were being teased at school about their parents. We want them to experience a social setting in which bicultural marriage is the norm, not the exception.”

2. The multisite missionary church in which the predominantly Anglo congregation launches a second site served by an associate pastor born and reared in Guatemala and a third site served by an associate pastor born and reared in Nigeria. The organizational structure declares, “This is a multicultural congregation with one name, one membership roster, one governing board, one budget, one staff, one budget, and three sites.”

3. Perhaps the most common model in American Christian congregations has been the Anglo congregation with a Christian Day School (kindergarten through eighth grade) that implements an aggressive effort to enroll a larger proportion of immigrant and ethnic minority children. The operational assumption is, “The parents will follow their children.” This model is most effective in reaching and assimilating parents with upward mobility ambitions for their children.

4. A relatively new, but growing, model implemented by the predominantly Anglo congregation meeting in a building that includes three different rooms for the corporate worship of God. In one church’s expression of this model, the first hour of the Sunday morning schedule is *three different worship experiences*: one in English, one in Arabic, and one in Korean. Following those three simultaneous worship services, the second hour is integrated Sunday school classes for all ages. The third hour provides one worship service in Spanish, one in English, and one in Mandarin.

5. Another growing model originated more than a century ago in American church history. Rather than rely on *geographical boundaries* for defining the regional denominational structure, this model places the top priority on *affinity*. For example, several of the regional judicatories within the denomination’s national structure *overlap geographically*: one regional judicatory is for congregations composed of recent immigrants from Korea; a second regional denominational structure is for congregations of American-born members who trace their ancestry back to Western Europe; a third structure is for self-identified theologically

“liberal” congregations; a fourth structure is for self-identified theologically “evangelical” churches; a fifth regional judicatory was organized for recent immigrants from China; a sixth is for American-born blacks who place a high value on self-governance; and a seventh is for persons born and reared in Mexico.

6. A growing recent trend is when the immigrant congregation, now composed largely of American-born adults who are the children of earlier immigrants, decides to unite with an Anglo congregation. Both have recognized that their current facilities, often on an inadequate site, have placed a low ceiling on future growth. One way to mobilize the resources required to provide better physical facilities at a larger site is to merge and together write a new chapter in their history.

7. The model most difficult to implement is an attempt to launch a new mission designed to reflect a high degree of demographic diversity accompanied by an affirmation of theological pluralism.

How can we transform a collection of people—individuals who differ from one another in several respects—into a closely knit, cohesive, and unified congregation? One or both of two strategies are most likely to be effective:

1. Identify a common enemy and rally the people together to defeat that common enemy.

2. Minimize the differences among people by conceptualizing this congregation as a collection—not of individuals, but of several relatively homogeneous small groups of seven-to-thirty-five persons per group—in which each group shares several points of commonality. Examples of these points of commonality include (a) loyalty to a Christian Day School, (b) bicultural marriages, (c) widespread admiration of and strong support for the long-tenured pastor, (d) the same first language, (e) similar age and marital status, (f) the same stage in their personal faith journey, (g) the same gender and/or marital status, (h) a shared preference for the same type of worship experience, (i) spending ten days every year in a volunteer team engaged in doing ministry with fellow Christians in a sister church on another continent, and (j) regular active participation as members of a missional team engaged in helping to alleviate world hunger or sheltering the homeless or some other non-divisive social justice ministry.

Summary: The larger number of (a) “points of commonality” and/or (b) “choices” a congregation offers, the better its chances of becoming multicultural.