

Introduction

What is a *multiethnic church* and why would any church want to become one? And if a church did want to become a multiethnic church, how would it go about doing so? These are the three main questions we will consider in this material about becoming a multiethnic church.

This material is intended primarily for Anglo church leaders, or men and women preparing for some form of cross-cultural ministry. However, non-Anglo church leaders may also benefit from the material presented here.

American's Contemporary Socio-cultural Context

We must begin our study by thinking in terms of our *American socio-cultural context*. A society is a group of people who live and work together as a community of citizens. That society's culture is how they live their lives on a day-to-day basis. So a socio-cultural context is how a given group or society of people (for our purposes we will think in terms of American people) live their lives—how they work, play, eat, dress, worship, drive, shop, study, raise their children, bury their dead, do business, build houses, police and govern themselves, how they greet one another, how they interact in public, how they treat strangers, how they care for the sick, how they mourn and how they celebrate. On and on the list could go, but you get the point. Culture is everything about how a society of people live their lives.

A very important question about America's socio-cultural context has to do with the ethnic makeup of our American society. What kind of people make up our American society? All kinds. According to Census Bureau statistics, over 35 percent of the American population is made up of non-Anglo people, that is, people who are not of white European background (2005 American Community Survey). Over 35 percent of 300 million people: that's a lot of ethnic and cultural diversity. So when we think in terms of our contemporary socio-cultural context we must think in terms of lots of different ethnic groups living life according to their own cultural habits and traditions.

Another way we can think in terms of ethnic diversity as it relates to American society is to think in terms of language groups. The people that populate the planet Earth speak over 6,000 different languages. People from many of those different language groups have come to live in America. For instance, the Dallas Independent School District reports that there are nearly 70 different languages spoken by the students enrolled in Dallas schools (DISD 2007). In larger metropolitan areas such as New York or Los Angeles that number would be even higher.

People from all over the world have come to America in significant numbers. When they come, they bring their culture with them. They come to America because they want to enjoy the freedoms America has to offer. But when they arrive, they do not stop being who they are. The culture a person is raised in makes that person who he or she is. The family a person is raised in has a lot to do with who they are. So does the

kind and level of religious training a person receives. Generally speaking, however, the culture in which a person is raised forms and shapes that person's way of thinking about and living life. Americans think and act like Americans. Chinese think and act like Chinese. Mexicans think and act like Mexicans. Japanese think and act like Japanese. Germans think and act like Germans. Culturally and ethnically, we are a product of our environment.

When people from other cultures immigrate to America, they do not stop being who they are. They bring their cultural perspectives, habits, and traditions with them. America is, therefore, a multiethnic society. America is multicultural. Americans live their lives according to many different ethnic and cultural patterns. Because of the plurality of ethnic groups and cultural patterns that characterize American society, America can be described as a *pluralistic* society.

This is nothing new. America has been a country of immigrants. Many of the early immigrants were from European countries, but people from Asian, African, Latin American, and other cultural contexts have been coming to America for over four centuries. And before that, the people we refer to as Native Americans migrated here from Asia. America is a nation of immigrants.

When a person immigrates to a new country, from an immigration perspective, he or she is referred to as generation 1 (G-1). If that person brings a child with him or her who was born in the home culture but who will finish growing up here in America, that child is referred to as a generation 1.5 (G-1.5). Children of immigrants born after their parents arrive in America are generation 2 (G-2). By the time a family has reached generation 3 or 4 (G-3 or G-4) a high level of assimilation into mainstream American culture has usually occurred. They speak, think, and act like Americans—perhaps not like Anglo-Americans, but like Americans.

G-1 or G-1.5 immigrants, however, especially if the G-1.5s were teenagers when they arrived in America, do not often get very far in the assimilation process. People who have grown up (or nearly grown up) in another culture can never completely learn American culture. If they work hard, they may learn the language and many of the surface-level cultural behaviors of American culture. But they will never learn the underlying, deep-level structures of American culture. They will never learn to think like an American. Ethnically and culturally, they will always be who they were when they arrived in America. For *foreign-born* American residents or citizens, becoming an American (in the true sense of thinking like an American) is a long and challenging process that takes many years to complete—if it can be completed at all by G-1 immigrants.

Since immigration is an ongoing process, with millions of people arriving in America each year, there will always be people in America who have not been fully assimilated into mainstream American culture. There will always be millions of people in this country who are *culturally-other*. As Christians, what is our responsibility to these *culturally-other* or *ethnically-other* people? We have two basic responsibilities to ethnically-other people. First, we have an obligation to tell them the story of Jesus, helping them understand how they can be reconciled to God, enjoying the relationship with him that he envisioned from the beginning. It is the same responsibility Jesus gave to all his followers—to preach the Gospel to every person. It would be better, I believe, not to have to think of it in terms of an obligation or responsibility, but of an opportunity

to share with others something that is precious to us. But whether we see it as an opportunity or an obligation, Jesus wants his followers to share their faith with those who do not yet enjoy a renewed relationship with God.

Second, whether we think in terms of obligation or opportunity, *the idea is to tell the story of Jesus in a way, and provide an atmosphere for worship and community*, that is culturally sensitive, appropriate, and relevant to ethnically-other people. What, exactly, does that mean? It means that because America is a multiethnic society, churches in America must become multiethnic churches. If Christianity is going to be relevant in the America of the 21st century, it is going to have to meet the needs of American society in appropriate, relevant ways. Since ethnic diversity is a defining characteristic of contemporary American society, a relevant church will be an ethnically diverse church, a *multiethnic* church.

Being a multiethnic church requires that we understand something of the cultural needs of ethnically-other people. It means understanding their emotional, social, and spiritual needs. It means analyzing cherished assumptions regarding church forms (the way we do things), and it means understanding how to make the Gospel and Christianity appropriate and relevant to people who are not just like us.

Jewish believers 2,000 years ago struggled with this same issue as some of those brave souls began sharing the Good News with people who were ethnically and culturally different than they were. It was a challenging process then and it remains a challenge today. In the chapters that follow we will discuss how a church can become a multiethnic church.

Multiethnic Churches and Church Unity

Before we begin, however, an important issue needs to be addressed. In the New Testament, there is a tremendous emphasis on unity. The cultural challenges between Jewish and non-Jewish believers prompted Paul to address ethnic issues. In his letter to the believers in Ephesus, Paul spoke of Jesus having torn down the wall that divided different ethnic groups (Ephesians 2:11-18). Jews and Gentiles were to be united in love and respect. They were part of the one universal body of Christ. There were to be no divisions in the body. This included divisions rooted in ethnicity issues.

Unity in the body of Christ is absolutely essential and is a given assumption of this study. All believers are one in Christ regardless of their ethnicity. The body of Christ should not be divided for any reason. And yet in this study about ethnicity issues in the church, I will advocate the absolute necessity of a church and worship context that is culturally appropriate for the people involved. I will advocate the need for separate worship assemblies based on cultural needs. How can that be? How can anyone advocate oneness and separateness simultaneously? The answer is quite simple: *oneness in the body does not require that all believers worship in the same assembly*.

In the first century, Christians worshipped in house churches. In a large city such as Corinth, there may have been a dozen or more groups of believers meeting in separate houses. All of those combined believers made up the body of Christ in the city of Corinth. The same was true in Rome or Ephesus or any other large city with multiple house churches meeting throughout the city. There was one church in Corinth, one in Rome, one in Ephesus and so forth. Each group of believers was the Lord's church and

part of his one universal church. The fact that the church in each of those cities met in several small groups did not mean that the church in those places was not unified.

Believers do not have to worship in the same assembly to be united in Christ. They can worship in different assemblies and still be one in Christ. Believers worshipping in Spain, Africa, Germany, Japan, India and Brazil may be worshipping in different locations, speaking different languages and utilizing different worship forms, but they are still believers united in Christ through a common faith and the indwelling Spirit. Location, language, traditions, and forms are irrelevant to the kind of oneness (unity not uniformity) that ought to characterize the body of Christ.

In the following chapters, when we discuss the needs of ethnically-other people in relation to church and worship contexts, we are not suggesting segregation based on ethnicity because we, as Anglos, do not want to be with ethnically-other people. Such racism would be sinful and absolutely unacceptable for Christians. The reasons for accommodating the cultural needs of ethnically-other people is so they can come to know Christ and can worship and serve him in a context that is appropriate and relevant to them given their current socio-cultural needs. What I am advocating in this material is a biblically sound approach (as well as an anthropologically and sociologically sound approach) to meeting the emotional, social, and spiritual needs of non-Anglo people, people who make up a significant percentage of the American population.

There is some overlap in some of this material and material I presented in *Evangelizing Immigrants* (Mission and Ministry Resources, 2006). Readers are encouraged to refer to that text for additional information about outreach and ministry to non-Anglo groups.