



What Is Multicultural Worship?

| *Is it possible to worship with people of such different backgrounds and experiences?*

Introduction

The current buzzword in many Christian churches today is “multicultural worship.” Is this just another church-growth fad? Is it simply a dream of some leaders who want to incorporate music and liturgical toys that remind us of Christians in other countries? Just what is multicultural worship and how does it work?

Actually, multicultural worship appears to be the way God desires us to worship throughout the Bible. God seems to push us to not only tolerate others but to accept them and be one human race. If it were only so simple! Read this next session and see if it resonates with you.

Mila and Ernesto

Mila and Ernesto attended a worship service at a church of a friend. The majority of the parishioners were Cambodian and the pastor was Laotian. The service felt comfortable to Mila and it was actually kind of a relief from the services she had been attending at a “majority congregation” near her house. It seemed to follow a familiar format and she found several similarities to her home church on a small island of the Philippines. They sang some familiar hymns, and although the sermon was preached in another language, there were English Bibles for Scripture readings. After the service there was time to share a meal and meet some of the people of the congregation. All in all, she thought it was pretty great. During the drive home, Ernesto, who immigrated to the United States from Guatemala only two years ago, began to share his disdain for the service. He fumed, “You call that worship? God must have been going crazy!” After he vented for a while, he was able to finally articulate his frustration. Phrases like “that’s not appropriate prayer” and “where do they get their



Imagine your church filled with people of all colors and nationalities, economic levels, and political beliefs, all worshipping God together! The problem is, of course, most of us imagine *them* worshipping the way *we* do.

theology in order to sing those songs?” finally ended with, “Thank God I get to go back to my own church where we know how to really worship.”

Why Is It So Hard?

Most people would love to belong to a church where a diverse group gathers and are friends, sharing the same faith in Christ. Imagine your church filled with people of all colors and nationalities, economic levels, and political beliefs, all worshipping God together! The problem is, of course, most of us imagine *them* worshipping the way *we* do. The problem starts when other worship practices different from ours begin creeping in and people from very different cultural and economic backgrounds try to mesh. For example, imagine an African woman raising her hands in the air shouting “Glory to God” or “Amen” next to the retired banker in a suit who is used to solemn worship! Imagine the homeless person who has not had the opportunity to bathe sitting next to the woman wearing Chanel No. 5.

We may agree that others’ faith is legitimate, but we soon realize how dear our own worship style is to us when others try and change it. That’s Ernesto’s issue, isn’t it? It’s ours as well. And it’s the challenge of multicultural worship.

God's Dream

God has this idea that the people of creation should live together, love one another, and most of all, worship together. In the first book of the Bible, God establishes a covenant with Abraham, forms the Jewish nation, and declares that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3 NIV). The Old Testament contains multiple stories of people being stretched to include others unlike themselves. And in the last book of the Bible--indeed in a grand vision of the end of history--as recorded in Revelation 5:9, John witnessed twenty-four elders singing a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (NIV).

Between these two bookends of history, the people of God have repeatedly failed to live out the biblical theme of covenantal relationships among all peoples. Rather, most people tend to choose to cluster around others who look alike, sound alike, live everyday life alike.

However, at this time in history, some see signs of hope. A new view on cross-cultural relationships, a philosophy called "multiculturalism," is gaining prominence. Multiculturalism promotes harmony among ethnic groups and acceptance of differences among peoples. Significant legal and economic clout supports multiculturalism. Schools, corporations, and nonprofit institutions of various kinds provide multicultural workshops for their employees. Many believe that initiatives like these could bring the peace and justice among ethnic groups that American society needs.

Casual conversation among fellow believers often finds widespread support for this value and it would appear that many Christians long for a culturally and ethnically reconciled church and society. Many people want to weave into the fabric of their worshiping community a set of relationships that build on biblical truths such as God loves those of every culture, salvation is for all peoples, heaven will be a delightful multicultural neighborhood, and followers of Christ should stand out because of their love for others. If God's people would build a community that incarnates these truths, they must develop proper attitudes and behaviors. In

response to the Spirit's work, it would help to develop common understandings on what a reconciled community looks like, why it is desirable and good, and how best to work toward it.

Multicultural worship is the gathering of people representing all the cultures of creation for the purpose of honoring God. We do so through several means including music, movement, and speaking, and these occur through varieties of expression such as singing, silence, dancing, preaching, responsive reading, and dramatic presentation. The difficulty is that not all congregations go about it in the same way. Some churches engage in a lot of singing and other forms of music that are a very meaningful way for some worshipers to express their faith. Other churches prefer long periods of silence for meditation and prayer. Some congregations enjoy boisterous clapping and body movement throughout while others find it distracting. So then, how do we make this work? Is multicultural worship a realistic expectation for the people of God?

Examples of Multicultural Communities of Faith

Interestingly, some of the congregations that do multicultural worship very well did not set out with that goal in mind. They didn't piece together songs from one part of the globe, prayers from another part, and readings from still another. While that approach may be tempting and some people may feel good for having done so, it's important to remember that rather than a performance revue of global traditions, the goal is that all the people of creation would worship God. Rather, these congregations focused on the individuals who would gather as a community of faith and paid very close attention to what connected them to the God who created them and allowed them to worship meaningfully.

New City Church in Los Angeles is rooted in the Young Nak Korean church. The church is very forthright: "New City Church of Los Angeles is a non-denominational, multi-ethnic, multi-socioeconomic Christian church in downtown, Los Angeles. It is a church where anyone can come as he or she is. We welcome everyone, whether you are Black, White, Latino, or Asian, live in a penthouse loft or skid row, work in U.S. Bank Tower or are on welfare, voted for Obama or McCain, are gay or straight, have a morally upright lifestyle or a loose



Multicultural worship was God's idea that the people of creation should live together, love one another, and most of all, worship together.

one. Come as you are" (www.newcitychurchla.com). The response to this invitation has been overwhelming and this multicultural congregation is thriving.

Armitage Baptist Church in Chicago (www.armitagechurch.org) went through a significant transformation, beginning with their founding in the 1960s and undergoing brutal attacks as recent as the early 1990s. They had to decide if they were going to give it all up or stay. Rather than be run out by gangs and radical groups who would disrupt their worship services, they decided the future of the congregation was there. Today people from over forty nations attend. Parts of the journey were painful and mistakes were made along the way. But, their faithfulness translates into every language and crosses every barrier and that's why they thrive even today.

Sonrise Christian Fellowship in Simi Valley, California (www.sonrisesimi.org), is a foursquare church that has also been thriving for about twelve years. One of the opening statements in their brochures and on their Web site is "Come as you are. We want you to be comfortable. From wing-tips to flip-flops, pumps to flats . . . what's important is that you come!" As the church was in its formational stages, the founding pastor went from door to door and personally engaged people in conversations, asking to hear their stories. He wanted to hear directly from them about where they used to worship, what would compel them to get up on Sunday morning and go to worship once again. He asked what was meaningful to them in their relationship with God, what was missing from their relationship with God, what they struggled with on a daily basis, and what gave them joy in the midst of the daily grind. As he listened and prayed about all he learned, he wove their stories with God's story and over time the congregation was born. Today, there are over 4,000 people who worship together.

Each of these churches finds its roots in different traditions and their understanding of Christianity varies in its confessions and creeds. But, the place where each of these

TRUE MULTICULTURALISM

- Does true multiculturalism require overcoming differences with regard to politics, sexual orientation, class, religious tradition, and so forth?
- Is it possible to choose just one or two of the categories and still be multicultural?
- What does God require?

congregations intersects with one another and shares common ground is in their journey of being multicultural.

Getting Started

As you can see, there are some differences between each of these churches. While they're all Christian, they are of different denominations. Two are set in a cosmopolitan city while one is in a smaller town; two are located on the West Coast and one is in the Midwest. At the same time, these congregations share similar characteristics. It is these similarities that bring about an effective multicultural community of faith that engages in worship that includes all of God's creation.

Sustain a Vision

See yourselves as multicultural. The first thing each of these churches has in common is that they all want to be open and inviting to everyone. While that may seem like an obvious presupposition, it is important to note that more than just wishing or hoping it would just happen, each of these churches made it abundantly clear that everyone was welcome to be a part of the worshiping community. Openness is authentic in that it is truly inclusive of all of God's creation. There are those worshiping communities that think they want to include everyone, when in fact they still want to be able to control who gets admitted. New City Church makes sure their invitation to all is authentic in so many ways. In addition to the statements made on their Web site, they make this invitation obvious in their worship setting as they gather around tables, provide a meal, and make sure that one or two people share their stories during the course of the worship experience.

Hear People's Stories

Just as New City Church is intentional about story sharing in their service of worship, all of these congregations

were intentional about listening to one another's stories. Some went door to door in the neighborhood surrounding the church facility, some engaged in conversations in coffee shops and food courts, and some transformed existing congregations on the edge of extinction. In each instance, the key was listening to stories, valuing each person's experience, and incorporating all of those individual experiences into the formation of the worship experience. As new members are integrated into the community, their stories are added to the collection. And, as new understandings are reached about the community of faith that is also the body of Christ that extends around the world, those stories are integrated as well. As the community of faith grows, so does the collection of stories.

In addition to valuing each other's stories, it is also important to know and share the church's story. The Web sites of many multicultural churches have a section called "About Us" or "Our History" or "How We Began." It is in this section that the story of the church is told. As newcomers venture through the doors of your facility, part of the process of inviting them to belong is sharing with them the story they might become part of.

Of course, the story that enlightens and gives even more meaning to each of our individual stories is *the* story. The story of the people of God is the reason we gather to worship and parishioners want to know this. They are especially looking for ways in which their story connects with God's story, and so it is important to lift up that story in a way that is real and relevant.

If you're listening to one another's stories, you will start to realize that every gathering of individuals is multicultural in that we each bring our own story to the group and the experience of one person is unique and representative in and of itself. So even if your congregation is mono-cultural in some respects, its diversity is in the collection of individual stories. And, while this may not be the final step in reaching full multiculturalism, it is a definite step in recognizing and valuing the diversity of all of God's creation.

Ensure Full Participation

Every effective community of faith that is truly multicultural is very intentional about making sure that everyone's voice is heard and that everyone has the opportunity to provide input, sharing his or her gifts

with the community. Some communities set up a mechanism of small groups so that even if the congregation is very large, individuals have a way of providing input. Other communities utilize a system of leadership networks. Whatever the means, the goal is simply to make sure the community is not dominated by just a few individuals who get to make all of the decisions.

For example, who gets to decide what style of music will be utilized in the worship service? And, who designates the particular hymns that will be sung from Sunday to Sunday? Abuses of power can rise out of these issues if there is no mechanism providing full participation by all.

Make a Commitment

These congregations made a decision to stay the course. They decided that they were going to weather whatever storms might come. In some cases there were abuses by people in positions of leadership. In other cases, traumatic circumstances could have caused the congregation to disperse. The truth is, multicultural worship does not come about easily and there will be hardships or challenges along the way. The participants in any worshiping community are just as human as one another and that means that conflict is inevitable. When you add in the dynamics of being multicultural, the conflicts become even more complex and require that much more to resolve. Pastor Woo of Wilcrest Baptist did not hesitate when asked to reveal that, "Not only have there been many positive outcomes, but there have also been many more difficulties."¹ Multicultural congregations typically experience conflict generated by racial and ethnic groups having different expectations, tastes, patterns, experiences, feelings, and interpretations. That means that communities that choose to be a multicultural community of faith need to understand that being such requires commitment. Just like any other commitment, the proof is in the ability to remain faithful when living together is difficult and messy and draining.

Conclusion

Given the inevitability of conflicts and the obvious amount of extra energy it takes to be a multicultural worshiping community, it is probably no wonder that they do not exist in large numbers or that they often do not last very long. After all, people work very hard and their lives are filled with a multitude of demands made

ELEMENTS IN ORGANIZING MULTICULTURAL WORSHIPPING COMMUNITIES

- Identify others who also resonate with the call to include all of God's creation.
- Pray. Pray. Pray.
- Enable all of the necessary elements:
 - articulate the vision
 - share stories
 - implement a mechanism for full participation
 - make the commitment

upon them every day. There are any number of choices to be made, tasks to be accomplished, and battles to be fought.

Clearly, this is a choice for those who are not afraid and want to be faithful. Being a multicultural worshipping

community is not easy or neat or something that will remain in constancy once all the pieces are put into place. But God calls us to be visionaries who are strong and courageous, and to do what is righteous in God's eyes.

So take courage, be faithful, and receive the invitation to be a multicultural worshipping community. Find others around you who are also responding to the call so that you will be able to support one another throughout the process. And when you find each other, remind yourselves to pray. Ask God to walk with you, giving you wisdom and strength, and bringing to fruition all of your good work. Then, begin the process of putting together all of the elements described above.

About the Writer

Mienda Uriarte is a Presbyterian minister who consults churches in a variety of areas including cross-cultural ministries and social issues.

Endnote

1. Michael O. Emerson, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the U.S.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 147.