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# From the Margins to the Centre

## The Diaspora Effect

A Collection of Essays to Celebrate  
the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Tyndale Intercultural Ministry  
Centre

*Edited by Michael Krause  
with  
Narry Santos and Robert Cousins*

From the Margins to the Centre: The Diaspora Effect

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**CHAPTER 13**

# Adjustment Required – Transitioning to a Multicultural Congregation

*Dan Sheffield*

We were standing on the steps of a United Church building situated on a main artery road in Mississauga. There was me (a denominational executive tasked with coaching culturally diverse churches), the minister of the church, and Pastor Jeyarajah, a Sri-Lankan born pastor who was looking for a new facility for his Tamil congregation. The church building was for sale and Pastor Jeyarajah and I were imagining the ministry possibilities at this location.

The church building had been built in the late 1960s on a large corner lot. That was a time when housing growth was booming and new subdivisions were being built. In the 1970s this church was thriving, with families from the largely single-detached homes in the neighbourhood. Now, in the mid 2000s those homes were housing seniors, who could no longer get out to church regularly, or more recent immigrants of non-Protestant, non-Christian, faith expressions.

As we stood on the steps of the church, facing south toward the residential neighbourhoods, the minister said, “We just can’t survive anymore, our attendance of 20-30 cannot maintain this building. In this area, no one is interested in coming to our church anymore.”

The minister went into the building as Pastor Jeyarajah and I turned to face north. Just across the street were three, 20-story apartment buildings. Pastor Jey said, “There are people from my church living in those buildings. Actually, most of my congregation (120 or so) lives within 10 minutes of this church building. This would be a great opportunity.”

This true story highlights the changing realities of Canadian urban neighbourhoods and the Christian churches that have been, until the last several decades, at the heart of those neighbourhoods. Neighbourhood demographics are changing, but many churches are,

literally, not able to see the missional possibilities or to re-imagine ministry.

From my experience, there is another whole grouping of urban churches that are welcoming the nations to join them (which will keep the numbers up – in both attendance and offerings). These churches, however, down-play the cultural differences to maintain a largely, Euro-Canadian cultural expression of congregational life.

At the same time, there is a growing collection of established congregations in urban southern Ontario that are making a transition, re-imagining themselves as intentional multicultural churches. Intentionality is the key word. Making a shift in self-understanding from being a largely *mono-cultural* church (whether, Euro-background, or Chinese, Caribbean, Pilipino, or African) to *multicultural*, requires adjustment that will sometimes (maybe almost always) be painful. Making a conscious, intentional decision to enter transition is required to sustain the adjustments that will be inevitable.

### **Where Has the Lord Placed Us?**

What would lead a congregation to want to consider becoming functionally multicultural, rather than just remaining rooted in one particular cultural milieu? There are several sources from which this desire might emerge.

Some congregations have gradually become aware that their demographic makeup is changing. In practical terms, they are no longer a community of essentially one cultural background. What does it mean to come to terms with their already observable differences, practically?

Another congregation, or pastoral leader, may be wrestling with the theological implications of Scripture regarding culture and the Body of Christ, in passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, Romans 5:9-10, and Revelation 7:9. What does it mean to come to terms with God's acceptance of all nations, tribes and languages, theologically?

Some Christian leaders are also asking, how will a "missional orientation" to their community result in engagement with the different cultures already present there – even if people from those cultures are not yet feeling welcome in their church. Does thinking and acting *missionally*, change how a Christian community relates to cultural differences?

### **How Do Our Leaders Think and Act Regarding Cultural Differences?**

Churches are, in fact, micro-cultures of their own. That is, particular congregations have beliefs, values, and symbols that organize the way they think and act, which determines congregational roles and behaviours. These beliefs, values, symbols and behaviours are passed from one generation to another, so that churches maintain certain ways of understanding and doing things over time. Some of these things are good and right, if rooted in biblical theology. Some of these things are just “the way we have always done it” and may have more cultural meaning rather than solid biblical foundation. And that’s not wrong either, if those cultural values and practices don’t steer the congregation away from biblical values and practices.

When someone “from another culture,” however, enters such a congregation with their own set of values and practices – some biblical and some not – then the culture-shapers have to decide how they will respond. Leaders need to understand how they will lead in the midst of changing cultural demographics.

Organizational culture, or “the way that our church does things,” is rooted in a set of beliefs about how members of the community think the world operates. Christians believe in a living God who is at work in the affairs of human beings – a belief that sets Christians apart from a lot of other social and even religious organizations. We also have beliefs about what it means to “be a Christian,” some of which are rooted in Scripture and some of which are not. Some of the “beliefs” at the centre of a Christian community are shaped by the dominant culture’s way of understanding things, not by Scripture or biblical theology. This mixed-bag can be viewed as an “operational theology” – that is, the things the congregation really believes.

Change happens in a church’s operational theology when leadership begins to ask the hard questions, challenging their assumptions: What are we doing? What results are we having? Why are we doing this? Is this really what we believe? This can be the beginning of organizational change. To explore how a congregation can develop toward becoming an intentional, functional, multicultural congregation, leadership must become more culturally self-aware: aware of how culture impacts what they do, in one way or another. Culture must be brought to the table, not left parked outside the door of the church boardroom.

Leaders develop intercultural competence through an increasing

capacity to perceive, to recognize cultural differences for what they are. This competence is built upon actual relationships and experiences with people of diverse cultures, combined with reflection on that experience. Knowledge of different cultures is not the same thing as intercultural competence. Intercultural competence requires increasing the *experience of difference* coupled with *reflection and integration of insights* (Sheffield, 2007).

Thus the transition toward an intentionally multicultural church can only happen as congregational leaders become increasingly more self-aware regarding their own experiences with cultural difference. From my practice this seems to happen best in the context of guided learning experiences facilitated by intercultural development practitioners. This may be through a more formalized learning opportunity like a bible college, seminary, or institute like the TIM Centre, or in the form of local church-based training by experienced intercultural facilitators.

### **A Dialectical Model for Congregational Transition**

In the past couple decades, as intentional multicultural congregations have gradually emerged in the North American context, some best practices have risen to the surface. One of the learnings is that transition does not happen in a straight line. We need to imagine a meandering pathway, or perhaps “two steps forward, one step back.” A dialectical, or iterative, model suggests that each move forward, may be precipitated by an encounter or disturbance to the status quo, which is then challenged or meets resistance, causing a return to reflect, adjust and reimagine the next step forward. The following outline gives an overview of this kind of meandering, engaging, reflecting, developmental approach.

#### **Cycle One: Become Conscious**

The process of change normally begins with some sort of crisis. It may be a gradual decline in attendance or perhaps a change in who is actually attending services. Either situation may cause long-time members to wake up and become conscious that something has changed. This moment of awakening must be used as an opportunity to exegete the change or crisis. Explore what has been happening to produce this point of self-awareness. Are we concerned about this

situation because there is no one left to teach Sunday School? Are we concerned because we are uncomfortable with “those” people, or are we concerned because we have lost our sense of mission?

This will undoubtedly lead to a need to exegete the community surrounding the church. Explore what is actually going on: demographic changes, social needs, physical, town-planning changes in the neighbourhood? Who is living in the neighbourhood these days? What are the needs that no one is responding to? What long-term plans does the city have for this area?

The final exploration in this stage is to exegete the congregation – what have we been doing that led us to be oblivious to the changes around us? What have we become that has produced such disconnection between ourselves and our neighbours? What is really important to us? What do we believe? What do we value? Are we prepared to adjust to our changing circumstances? This exercise is crucial for examining the organizational culture of the congregation as well as the intercultural self-awareness of the leadership core.

### **Cycle Two: Develop Consensus**

The next transitional cycle of dialogue requires the development of congregational consensus about the direction of unfolding ministry. Does the congregation want to do the work to become a multicultural church, engaged in mission in their diverse neighbourhood? As a congregation seeks to develop a new consensus, the disorienting encounter is with Scripture – a re-examination of familiar passages and themes in light of new realities. In essence the congregation needs to hear a new story, rooted in Scripture, of God’s engagement with all cultures in the course of developing a new humanity centered around Jesus.

The encounter with the God of Scripture must then lead into listening prayer and spiritual discernment. God, what are you saying to us? These things that we have become conscious of in our community, are they of concern to you? Please God, give us insight and discernment as we seek your presence and activity in our neighbourhood.

Scripture suggests that God hears these kinds of prayers and will not leave a discerning leadership community without wisdom. Wisdom developed through collaborative engagement with the people of God will lead to Spirit-guided direction. A draft, preliminary, conceptual plan about where to start will emerge.



### **Cycle Three: Engage Culture – Build Trust**

As soon as a leadership core begins to move from research, listening, and development, to action, disequilibrium will automatically reappear. They must talk about, and take action, to reorient their congregational culture. The most common initial reaction to change and difference is defense of the existing culture. Leaders seeking to help a church transition to a functionally multicultural congregation must prepare for personal and corporate sacrifice. Leaders will be criticized for this – they are seen to be taking more interest in “the other,” than “us.” The congregation will lose people who cannot, or will not, make this transition.

As a congregation seeks to engage with people of other cultures, trust and rapport must be built – this is only done through developing authentic intercultural relationships. Transition to a multicultural congregation will only happen to the degree that a leadership community has relationships of friendship, understanding, trust and mutual critique with people whose culture and worldview they do not fully comprehend.

These relationships are built upon the development of intercultural competence – acquiring skill in intercultural dialogue. Intercultural competence requires coming to understand how a person of a particular culture thinks and behaves; to understand the values, customs, norms and behaviours of a friend’s culture – from her perspective (Chen & Starosta, 1998). And she must understand yours. Then a leadership community has the grounds for dialogue and mutual critique. With these elements in place, and increasing, the transitioning congregation starts to have an environment where new patterns of interacting are taking on a life of their own.

### **Cycle Four: Employ Critique**

This fourth cycle may seem counter-intuitive – if everything is moving along as it should, why evaluate? A congregation, however, should be regularly evaluating what they are doing. It was likely a lack of regular evaluation for years, perhaps decades, that required this intervention in the first place. And it must be reiterated that when an organization embarks on a process of evaluation, disequilibrium will emerge again, because human beings naturally resist having their performance evaluated.

The first area to assess and evaluate is intercultural competence.

How are we doing in the development of relationship, experience, understanding, acceptance and adjustment? There are several useful tools for conducting this kind of self-awareness assessment. Honestly examine how far the leadership core, and the congregation, has come; identify where the community is presently, and discern forward direction for growth in intercultural competence.

Results from this kind of assessment may lead to the need to adapt and reformulate the conceptual plan. Now that the congregation has more intercultural experience and competence it is quite possible that many of the preliminary notions of how to develop a multicultural congregation need to be reworked – as other voices are actually being listened to and perspectives incorporated! This in turn will lead to the need to adjust ministry practices and intercultural communication patterns.

### **Potential Barriers and Hindrances**

This outline of a process for transition to a multicultural congregation comes out of the hearts and minds of experienced practitioners – leaders who have been working at this kind of ministry, in some cases, for decades. What these practitioners know is that this work is not as simple as a diagram or an outline in some article. In particular, a lack of commitment or priority to becoming more intentionally multicultural can slow down the process for years. Congregation members will see that your leadership team doesn't 'walk the talk' and may opt to leave.

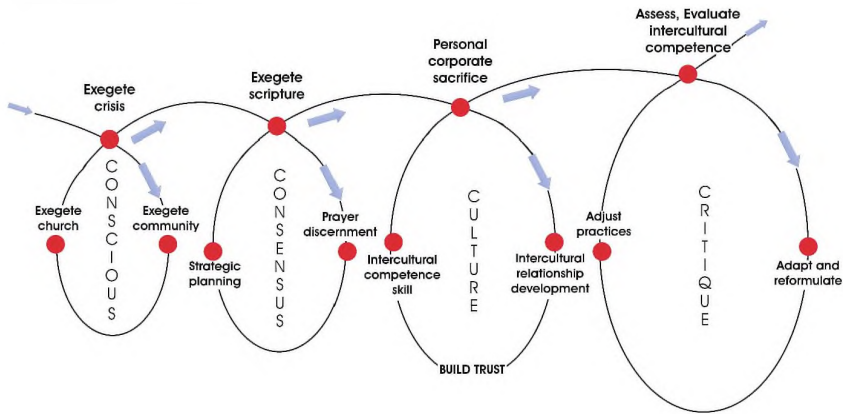
In some cases, ethnocentrism or fear will rear up, often from unexpected sources. This should push leadership to re-examine the basics of where prejudice and privilege come from, as well as progress in intercultural communication and developing trust. Conflicts between different culture groups may emerge in a congregation that is rooted in decades (or centuries) of life in another land, for which pastoral leaders have no skills or understanding.

Even with the best of intentions, logistical barriers may work against relationship building, preventing congregation members of differing cultural backgrounds from actively engaging with one another. And it is more than possible that scarcity of the fruit of the Spirit, such as patience, kindness and self-control may affect the development of a healthy multicultural congregation as well.

Despite these barriers and hindrances, this work has value and eternal

significance. The story at the beginning of this chapter recorded the reality of a church and leadership that could literally not see the changing world around them in light of the gospel. The future of the church in Canada will not look more like me (white, Euro-background, two centuries of family residence on this land). God is building a church in Canada and it will be made up of different languages, peoples, and nations. Will our leaders and churches adjust to be inclusive of these differences, or will our churches continue to be ghettoized by culture and ethnicity? Engaging and adjusting around cultural differences in the body of Christ is one of the most powerful signs that the good news of Jesus is still suitable for planting new life in the new soil of the new Canada.

**Dialectical format for transitioning to intentionally intercultural congregation** [Figure 10: (Multicultural church leaders dialogue, St Louis, 2008)]



### Reflection Questions

1. Sheffield asks, “Where has the Lord placed us?” A challenge would be more appropriate that a question here. Walk through your church or home neighbourhood with a Christian from another culture. Ask: What do you see? What would you do if you were living here?
2. Have you ever had someone become a part of your congregation

who has shaken things up because they see or understand things differently than the rest of the congregation? Perhaps it was a leader or new pastor. How does the congregation respond to that person? How does that person respond to the rest of the congregation? What has been the result?

3. Sheffield describes a model with four cycles: become conscious, develop consensus, engage culture/build trust, and employ critique. What stage would be hardest for your organization or church?
4. What's the biggest barrier to relationship building across cultures? How have you dealt with it?

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