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From the Margins to the Centre

The Diaspora Effect

A Collection of Essays to Celebrate
the 20th 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 12

Surviving or Thriving? – Principles for a Church that Is Becoming

Chris Pullenayegem

Canada, especially its urban and sub-urban centres, will look very different in a few decades. How the church reflects this change will largely be determined by how willing it is to adapt to this new reality. In times of change, many organizations default to familiar paradigms and old ways of coping, much to the frustration of their stakeholders. Churches are no exception and in fact, are often the most resistant and last to change. But change they must, or face the inevitability of demise. The challenge is two-fold. The first challenge is that many churches do not want to change. They prefer “slow death” rather than to be reborn into a new and vibrant society. The second is that most churches don’t know how to change or mistake the nature of the challenges before them resulting in applying the wrong solutions. Hopefully the following discourse will shed some light on principles that may help address these challenges. The real test is of course in the willingness to apply these principles and let the Spirit breathe new life and vitality to our churches that are trying to live into a rapidly unfolding and unpredictable reality.

Principle 1: Leverage the Pain, Don’t Fight It: Practice Judo, not Karate

Both Judo and Karate are martial art forms; the latter is an aggressive art, while the former uses the momentum of the attacker to cause disequilibrium and render the attacker vulnerable. Every crisis that the church faces has the potential to become an innovative and creative growth opportunity; no exceptions. A church building that has burned down, the death of the pastor, a busy community centre next door, noisy worship space renters, the decline of membership and reduced financial giving are all “opportunities in waiting.” How we view these can literally make the difference between life and death, and the way

we respond can indicate how tuned in we are to God, or how ready we are to accept the challenge that awaits us.

Pain is real and there is an oft-quoted saying (commonly attributed to Tony Robbins) that most people and organizations don't change until "*the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of change.*" A congregation may not want to change until they realize that they cannot function effectively anymore; bills become unpayable or the congregation dwindles to the extent that there's no one energetic enough to do the work.

There are two anxieties that must be managed to motivate people to change. Survival anxiety and learning anxiety. Survival anxiety is the anxiety that comes with remaining the same. Learning anxiety is that which is associated with the change. The principle we need to consider is, that unless survival anxiety remains greater than the learning anxiety, there is little motivation for change. That's why small churches are much better at exploring innovative ways of being church than bigger ones. Their survival anxiety is raised to an extent that they don't mind examining and accepting the learning anxiety that the change may bring. Unfortunately though, when these small churches begin growing again, many slip back into homeostasis because their survival anxiety has now been reduced. So they revert to familiar routines and practices because they have the numbers and resources to continue doing what they were doing before life became uncomfortable. Think of it as a see-saw; survival anxiety always has to be higher.

Though the principle is important to remember, the strategy to actually make change happen is equally important. The strategy is this: we help people change not by increasing their survival anxiety but by reducing their learning anxiety. So, instead of presenting them over and over again with the depressing rhetoric that "if we don't change we will die," we turn their gaze and attention towards what can be: the possibilities around them. Then we invite them to experiment, experience and see for themselves that change is not so bad after all. Here's an example.

You rent your space to a migrant church that worships in ways that seem so foreign to your sense of propriety and quiet worship practices. You rent only because you have no other ways of raising funds for your own expenses. Your own congregation is a

mere shadow of what it used to be 30 years ago but you still have a building to maintain and bills to pay. Your people know that the writing is on the wall and that if they don't do something different, they will be forced to close.

Sound familiar? That's survival anxiety. But, the fear of doing something different, a.k.a. "learning anxiety," is greater and prevents them from exploring or embracing what can be. Even though they have an opportunity lurking nearby, they are afraid to try anything different, either out of fear, apathy or ignorance.

What if you encourage a few congregants to try an experiment for 6 months? Have the congregants ask the renting congregation, if they could help in some way. What needs do they have? What can they do to assist their new immigrant members integrate faster? Is it learning English, or minding their kids, or helping with their homework so that parents can do the three part-time jobs they need to work just in order to live decently? What if they did that and then asked their congregation to respond as volunteer teachers, child-care providers, homework helpers, or coaches for new immigrants?

I'm willing to bet that if this congregation warms up to the challenge, they would almost serendipitously discover that their "learning anxiety" is not so bad after all. It's not at all about putting a program together as much as it is responding to a need and letting God work His purposes through it. That's when people are ready to embrace the change that will give them new life and purpose. That's how pain and disruption works when you use it to your advantage. That's how the principle operates.

Disruption is God's way of transforming the church. The early church exploded in growth due to disruption: persecution, marginalization, powerlessness, were all disruptive factors that forced growth. Using the disruption to precipitate creative re-imagining and innovative practices is how people learn that they don't have to die by stagnation. If they can embrace the new, the old will be transformed as well. Innovation doesn't have to be a large project or undertaking, and creativity is not only the purview of "smart" people. Humans innovate all the time and most of those innovations are the small incremental changes that we make to better our lives.

Body builders need to tear muscle (by exercising) in order to rebuild

bigger and stronger ones. That is natures' rule. Why not apply the same rule to the church at this time? As the Western church plunges deeper and deeper into an era of marginalization, loss of power and control (and influence) and are bombarded with an explosion of cultural and religious diversity that has not been experienced on this scale before, we need to ask ourselves if we are ready to tear down so that we can build stronger. By this I don't mean building physical spaces or better church programs; I mean building stronger people, which brings me to my next concept.

Principle 2: Adaptive Challenges Need Adaptive Solutions; Apply the Principles, Don't Force the Outcome

"The single biggest failure of leadership is to treat adaptive challenges like technical problems" writes Ronald Heifetz in his book Leadership on the Line (Heifetz & Linsky 2002, 14). Discerning the difference between even a complex technical problem and an adaptive challenge is a key leadership skill. While technical problems have clear solutions and invite clear strategies, adaptive challenges need to be addressed at the unseen sphere of people's attitudes, beliefs and habits. How often have we been guilty of trying to "fix" an adaptive challenge such as "why people don't come to church anymore" by renovating our parking lots, distributing invitations door-to-door or placing flashy signs on our church lawns? Or worse still, in the context of this chapter, are we guilty of trying to grow an intercultural church without understanding what the real adaptive challenge is - the lack of a missional focus and a missional culture?

The Great Commission is very clear in its mandate. Every believer, not just a select few, is commissioned to "go make disciples." To many this sounds like a command to go out and take captive the "other", turning them into religious adherents. This is far from the truth. What I believe Jesus really meant was that, as we go about our business and live in our world, we look for ways to witness and model our faith. We invite and assist those who are willing to grow in their own faith, on a journey of discipleship so that they too are able to do what we are doing. Call it spiritual parenting if you will, but it's about inviting people to live into God's story and equipping them to invite others as well.

When people sitting in the pews are equipped, empowered and

mobilized to do this, the church attends to its missional mandate. It's not about having evangelism and outreach programs or community engagement initiatives – although these have their place. It is about partnering in the formation of disciples as part of Jesus's strategy of reaching the world with the gospel.

In Canada, we have only just scratched the surface of the missional conversation, and often only because we have been forced into it. The pain of staying the same is palpable. But notice an interesting phenomenon in the approach of various church communities. Older, established "Anglophone" churches seem to concentrate much of their outward focus on those who look like them but don't go to church or have dropped out (i.e. the "nones" and the "dones"). Some entrepreneurial pastors sincerely try and listen to the community around them by spending time in local coffee shops and malls trying to engage the other. But this should hardly be the work of the priest alone. Their primary work is to equip the laity to do ministry and carry out their mandate to obey the Great Commission. And who better to do this, since they, the laity, are the ones who meet every day in coffee shops, offices or schools, constantly engaging with those outside the church? But sadly, because they are not usually empowered, or equipped, to address the complexities of ethnicity, faith and culture and so on, they shy away. Engaging the other is difficult and demanding.

Immigrant churches on the other hand, focus on their particular cultural/ethnic communities. This is familiar territory: that which requires the least amount of learning. The primary source of their numerical growth is through immigration. The problem is, once immigration flows dry up, so might the growth of their churches. Consequently, if they don't address this demographic change, in a few decades these churches may go the way of their European predecessors. Already one of the main challenges in first generation immigrant churches is finding ways of keeping their children (the so called 1.5 or second generation) connected. In both of these instances, there seems to be a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the challenge and a misreading of God's very clear strategy for the church.

Here's an axiom to consider. If you're a missional church in the GTA (Greater Toronto Area), you cannot help but be diverse; but being a diverse church does not necessarily mean that you are missional. I know a number of churches that are ethnically diverse and host many

nations under one roof, most of whom are immigrant Christians. It does not automatically mean that they are a missional church. But, if the principle of “making disciples” was followed, a church in the GTA could quickly become diverse with more people of different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds finding their way into this Christian community (through conversion and baptism).

Many churches have fallen into the trap of trying to imitate the outcomes of a missional church without following the disciple-making principle. It’s an example of how we try and apply a technical fix to an adaptive challenge. Building an inter-cultural church is not a biblical imperative. That is a misplaced objective. It has to be an outcome of a much greater goal: that of forming disciples who will live together in community and be governed by a Kingdom culture. In fact, the popular image of Revelations 7: 9 that many churches incorrectly refer to as supporting such an effort is actually the picture of a very multi-cultural worshipping community experience; every nation, tribe and tongue! An inter-cultural church has to be an outcome that occurs organically – just as an inter-racial marriage might evolve, the goal being, not to form an inter-racial marriage, but to live out their expression of love with one another!

Yes, I see the value of being intentional about ethnic diversity on the leadership team, giving equal opportunity for participation to all and establishing racial equity in our employment practices. But, trying to build an intercultural church is getting it backwards. God grows and builds the church, as He did in the early New Testament church, while we are commanded to go make disciples, living in such a way that our very presence in the world will be like the influence of salt and light. Why doesn’t this happen more widely? It goes back to the principle of change we mentioned earlier. As long as pastors are trained into a particular way of “pastoring” and laity are permitted to embrace the art of being consummate consumers and feel comfortable in their established roles, change will not happen. Sadly this is exacerbated by our denominational institutions that blindly reinforce the status quo or find it too inconvenient to change it.

The best test of a church’s cultural “diversity” is to observe what happens between Sundays. This cannot be controlled, contrived or forced. Churches point to ethnic-flavoured Sunday pot lucks, picnics, camps as evidence of cultural diversity. True, these are great starts. But

culture runs deep. What is visible in public gatherings is only a small part of the story. The real test is what life is like between these events. Do “our” children visit and play with “their” children? Which families have dinner together? Who goes out with whom to ball games and on bike rides? When you see diversity being lived out in these in-between, weekday times, then you might claim to be a church that is beginning to become culturally diverse.

The other phenomenon I’ve observed about the church’s cultural discourse is the guilt that some churches feel for not having enough visible minorities in their congregation. This is another example of pursuing the outcome instead of applying the principle, which results in guilt and shame, or just a sense of hopelessness and inadequacy. In a rural setting where there are only a handful of visible minority folk, how can one expect to see a large contingent of these same folk in church? On the other hand, if a church is truly missional, it should experience diversity of a different kind. People who are differently-abled, from a different social class than the majority, or from other marginalized groups that may look like the rest but who are not represented in the congregation, may all find a second home in the church.

Growing an inter-cultural church is one of those concepts that has side-tracked the church from her real focus – growing disciples in our homes, communities and neighbourhoods. I’m not saying that being open and welcoming to strangers who walk in through the church door is not a noble undertaking. But that should only be a start, not an end. It should be the motivation for us to learn more and get excited about extending ourselves far beyond the comforts of our church environs.

Principle 3: Replace fear with love; get to heart of the matter

I’ve walked into many church-based situations where I’ve been the only person of colour or visible minority in the room. I’ve been ignored and have had to insert myself into a conversation just to start one. I’ve seen people peering at me over their coffee cups wondering if they should come over and talk to me. I’ve often mused about what goes on in their minds. I believe that people are inherently well-intentioned and would like to be able to seamlessly shift into a conversation from a person of a “like” culture to one who isn’t. But it is hard for those who fear making a fool of themselves. “What if I ask the wrong question and offend him?” or “What if I can’t understand his accent and have to keep

asking him to repeat himself?" These may be some of the questions percolating in their fear-ridden minds.

Fear is a strong driver of behaviour. The following diagram shows how a heart of fear might cause a downward spiral starting from ignorance and leading to complete isolation from the other. Unfortunately, well-meaning Christians easily get trapped into this endless cycle. Here's an unlikely, exaggerated scenario. A brown-skinned family moves in next door. Ignorance of South Asian culture and religion causes you, an Anglo-Canadian to assume that the man (who wears a turban) is a Muslim. Because of biased information about Muslims, you are alarmed when he constructs a tall antenna in his back yard. "I was right," you declare to your family. "These folk are up to no good! Who knows, they might be a sleeper cell for terrorists!" The anxiety it produces causes you to filter all of their activity through a prejudiced lens. Even a seemingly innocent offer by them to drive your kids to school is met with suspicion. Your survival strategy is to re-locate; far away from this neighbour, into the safety (and isolation) of a culturally "safe" neighborhood. All this, when in actual fact, the Sikh neighbour was only a research engineer employed by a large telephone company.



Figure 1: A Heart of Fear

However, when that heart of fear is replaced by love, as in the next diagram, the entire picture changes. Ignorance is replaced by curiosity and knowledge, assumptions by understanding, anxiety is reduced, not heightened, and integration replaces isolation.



Figure 2: A Heart of Love

This is another adaptive challenge for our churches. Unless engaging the other comes out of an open mind, a heart of love for the other and a willingness to be vulnerable and to learn by making mistakes, not much will change. This is the missional challenge for many of our churches: one that goes to the core of what the TIM Centre does and addresses through its uniquely positioned leadership in programming, advocacy and collaboration. Diversity, especially cultural diversity is God's gift to the church. How we embrace it will decide what kind of church we become.

Reflection Questions

1. Where in your life or ministry has this saying been true? *The pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of change.* Do you believe it is a valid strategy for predicting change? How so?

2. Chris Pullenayegem states: "disruption is God's way of transforming the church." How have you seen that principle at work in the life of your congregation – in both positive or negative ways?
3. Given that many leaders support the idea of intentional multicultural churches, how do you respond to Chris Pullenayegem's statement: "Growing an inter-cultural church is one of those concepts that has side-tracked the church from her real focus – growing disciples in our homes, communities and neighbourhoods"?
4. What are some of the practical ways we can replace fear with love? What steps could a congregation take to see it happen more consistently?

Reference List

Heifetz, Ronald A., and Martin Linsky. 2002. *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading*. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business School Press.



Chris Pullenayegem is an immigrant of Sri Lankan origin and grew up in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic environment, bringing a useful perspective into his work in the Canadian context. With an academic background in law, psychology and change leadership and being deeply rooted in theology, Chris brings wisdom, knowledge and skills in assisting congregations discover and fulfil their God given role, especially in rapidly changing environments. His expertise lies in church renewal processes, new ministry development, faith formation, policy development and cross cultural competency training. Chris is a musician and loves the outdoors (when it's warmer).