

## 1<sup>st</sup> sharing: Embark on a journey to become an intercultural church

Eph 2:13-22 (NRSV)

*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been **brought near** by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has **broken down the dividing wall**, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might **create in himself one new humanity** in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and **grows into a holy temple in the Lord**; in whom you also are **built together** spiritually into a dwelling place for God.*

"Breaking down and gathering up, gathering up and breaking down!"

This is the theme of MCA's 2024 delegate session, inspired by imagery from Paul's book of Ephesians, particularly in today's passage in chapter 2:13-22. The concept of unity among God's people amidst diversity is a recurring biblical motif present in both the Old and New Testaments. However, the vision of unity within the church, both ecclesiological and eschatological, is most prominently articulated in Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. Hence, I regard this concise epistle, comprising only six chapters and 155 verses, as a guidebook for future churches, especially those embracing intercultural diversity. Within its pages, God's ultimate plan for the church is outlined—to unite all things and all people in Christ, exemplifying unity and reconciliation, and fostering a new, harmonious humanity.

In contrast to Paul's other letters, which frequently include rebukes, this epistle presents practical advice on how we can strive to create a church that is inherently diverse in ethnicity and culture. It's worth noting that Paul's determination to establish a church in Ephesus is rooted in cultural and ethnic diversity, rather than uniformity or homogeneity. Have you ever observed that all, not some, the early churches founded and collaborated with Paul were comprised of multiethnic congregations, not to mention the church in Jerusalem?

People are often misguided about the church in Jerusalem, assuming it was homogenous because it was built by Galilean Jews. Yes, the church was indeed built by the

first generation of Jesus' disciples, but it is untrue that the church consisted only of ethnic and cultural Jews.

In the church of Jerusalem, there existed four diverse groups: Jewish believers whose primary language was Aramaic, Hellenist Jews whose primary language was Greek, Gentiles who had converted to Judaism and later became followers of Christ, and the Ethiopian eunuch and others. The story of the eunuch, who met Philip on the road and converted to Christianity, signifies the spread of Christianity beyond Jewish and Hellenistic confines and suggests that the Jerusalem church was becoming increasingly diverse, ethnically, socioeconomically and even theologically as shown in the Jerusalem council in Acts 15.

Yes, all early churches, regardless of location, started out of diversity, not homogeneity! Safeguarding, defending, or developing homogeneity in the church was considered acting against the truth of the gospel—a sin that would separate and segregate people. Yes, diversity is divine!

Here, I wonder what made it possible for Paul and early church planters to start their congregations from diversity and heterogeneity. Was it because their locations or demographics were more conducive to embracing new cultures and people? Was it because it was easier to approach and convert Gentiles, Greeks, or Romans who were more privileged than the marginalized Jews? Was it because the economic cost of drawing heterogeneous people to the Christian church was cheaper than drawing the homogenous ones?

Paul's intentionality to build early churches was not based on practical or pragmatic reasons but on Christ's model of love, inclusivity, and unity. Therefore, he paid a toll to fight against assumptions and biases about race and ethnicity and to build up the new body of Christ where people see only the completed work of Christ as the means to regulate their ethnic pride and preferences. Paul's goal of the church was not simply about tolerating differences or coexisting uncomfortably, but rather about achieving Christ-centered unity and reconciliation, even though it involved significant sacrifice or cost.

This is called the Ephesian moment—a celebration of gathering up all irreconcilable entities and breaking down the walls of barriers, tensions, and conflicts. This creates a new humanity in Christ, where all different people become fellow heirs, members of the same body,

and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (Ephesians 3:6) and ethnic transcendence finally prevails.

This is the church, this is the Ephesian moment that I have dreamed of since I became a Mennonite in 2004. An eschatological, revelational intercultural church that brings all together to form a mutually equal relationship which surpasses what we once were and practices our heavenly experiences here on earth as prophesied by John of Patmos in Revelation 7:9-10.

*“There was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb and praising Him (in unison).”*

Based on the two examples of the churches of Ephesus and Antioch and with my desperate longing for a new modern-day Ephesian moment to come true here and now at the Mennonite church, I will begin my tripartite reflection on what it means to become an intercultural church.

The first reflection is about the process of becoming a truly intercultural church based on the Ephesian model. My second reflection tomorrow morning is about how to embrace conflict on a journey to becoming an intercultural church, which is inevitable, based on the Antiochian model. And the last reflection tomorrow afternoon is about our God-given eschatological vision to help us continue to pursue becoming an intercultural church no matter what, which is based again on the Antiochian model.

Let’s begin with the first question, “How can we embark on a journey to become an intercultural church? Or which process should the prospective intercultural church go through?”

An intercultural church begins with a process and concludes with a process, which I think is no different from our faith journey. To date, I have not encountered or learned about any intercultural church in North America that has achieved perfect unity and reconciliation. All of them are still in process, in progress!

No matter how grand the vision of a church, no matter how deep its history, no

matter how charismatic its pastor, no matter how financially stable, no matter how diverse its congregation, there is no perfect church; they are all a work in progress.

We should know that the scales from Paul's eyes would fall for his lifetime, not once and Peter's tears of repentance would be shed throughout his lifetime, not once, whenever he hears the cock crows. Yes, life is a process, our faith journey is also a process!

Remember!

Building a successful intercultural church is not our ultimate goal and we are not utilitarians to run only for the best result, the best success. We are process-oriented and we cherish each process we take. Pursuing an intercultural church is only a means, a process for us to come closer to the Abrahamic blessing for all families on earth and fulfil Jesus' Great Commission for all nations to be made of his disciples, and finally reflect on earth what will be in heaven, that is, God's ultimate unity and diversity of worship.

As for how long it would take for us to reach this ultimate goal of the reflection of the diversity of God's Kingdom here in our church no one knows. What we know for sure is that God will be pleased to journey with us as we strive to talk through it, pray through it, and even fight through it. What we know for sure is this difficult, uncertain journey will be our burning bush and only by approaching it, accepting it, processing it, will we be blessed.

Now I'd like to introduce the three noble processes for homogeneous congregations to transition into intercultural, Christ-centered, gospel-shaped congregations. These processes will finally guide them towards "the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ," as stated in Eph 4:13.

**Process 1: Diversity in the pews.** This means diversity in terms of race, culture, social status and class. If the church lacks a desire to be intersectionally diverse, and is satisfied with the current level of homogeneity, status quo, by interest and ethnicity, it fails to meet even my first criterion of starting an intercultural church. It is a club and not a church. In becoming a church, an intercultural church, homogeneity, the mentality that believes the church should be a place for those who are like us is a grave barrier that needs to be broken down!

Diversity in the pews can be easily observed by assessing with whom people sit and

through whom the worship service is performed.

As the title of a book by New Testament scholar Scot McKnight suggests, a church and church service should be “a fellowship of different,” not a fellowship of similars. We are encouraged to practice this ethnic unfamiliarity and discomfort as often as possible while we are on earth so that we may not be confused and confounded when we meet them in heaven and worship with them shoulder to shoulder.

However, if the church stops at this level of diversity in the pews only, it becomes no more than a display of cosmetic, thin diversity. The church should strive to go beyond this as our faith journey advances. People’s colour should be a declaration of the gospel, not a decoration of the church.

**Process 2: Diversity in the pulpit.** A congregation does not become intercultural through a recipe that says, ‘add diversity and stir in the pews.’ The intercultural church begins with an unswerving initiative to form an interracial, diverse leadership team, dismantling power and privilege imbalances in the group. It pursues a balanced representation both in the pew and in positions of power.

We need to consider who is occupying leadership positions at church. Are the leaders all the same race or ethnicity? If so, this level of church remains at process 1. If the congregation has become diverse, that diversity should be reflected in its leadership. Factors such as gender, age, education, social status, experience and ethnicity should be considered when choosing leaders.

Out of all the early churches mentioned in the New Testament, the church in Antioch, the first Christian church built outside of Jerusalem provides a specific example of interethnic leadership. In Acts 13:1, Luke has listed the five leaders of the church at Antioch not only by gifting and role, but, significantly, by ethnicity as well. Surely, it is more than coincidental that two of these men were from Africa, one was from the Mediterranean, one was from the Middle East, and one was from Asia Minor. Such indirect prescription is informative for the church today and, certainly, for the prospective intercultural church.

**Process 3: Lived reconciliation by status inversion.** Once both congregation and leadership have become diverse, the church should pass this final litmus test to see how much

it has embodied the meaning of reconciliation. The Greek origin of reconciliation, “καταλλαγή” (katallage) goes deeper than simply keeping hostile parties at bay. It literally means, “to change, or to exchange.”

According to theologian John de Gruchy, when we are reconciled, we exchange places with the other and are in solidarity with—rather than against—the other.

Reconciliation is not an abstract notion but an act of exchanging places with others—deconstructing social strata through a newly created equal humanity in Christ. More specifically, it brings about the radical inversion and transformation of people’s old statuses and perspectives.

We can imagine how the Roman centurion Cornelius’ life was changed after his encounter with Peter, the marginalized Jew. The true reconciliation happened once Peter and Cornelius experienced “exchanging their places,” in which the marginalized Jewish apostle Peter crossed the ethnic boundaries and the Roman colonizer Cornelius discarded his position of power. Once an authentic mutual exchange in status and perspective occurred between Peter and Cornelius, true familial bonds were built and a true Ephesian moment came true.

Brothers and sisters,

Becoming an intercultural church involves a strenuous and consistent process of pursuing the aim of reconciliation, that is, inverting our statuses and perspectives, and entering new relationships with others that shape us. Apostle Paul’s whole aims and intentions can be summarized under the one-word *reconciliation*, which “is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” as is in 2 Cor 5:18.

To make this noble reconciling process happen, our rigid traditional identities should be ready to be bent, not broken. With impermeable boundaries in keeping our cultural and traditional identities, we will ultimately remain alone and fail.

Only in a flexible, open and inclusive situation that allows the last to become the first, the weakest to become the strongest, the unfortunate to become the fortunate and the guest to become the host will true reconciliation bear fruit, and only then will the church have

become truly intercultural.

Until a new intercultural haven unfolds, “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10:23). Until a new Ephesian moment rushes into the rigid, homogeneous soil of the Mennonite church, let us keep on journeying, “pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:14)

Move out, move on, move forward! The road is long and time is short!

### **Questions:**

*1. At the inception of your church's construction, what was the makeup of the congregation? Was it predominantly composed of individuals resembling yourselves, or was there a deliberate effort to assemble a diverse and heterogeneous community akin to Paul's endeavours two millennia ago? What narrative defines the genesis of your congregation?*

*2. Being challenged to be “intercultural” can sometimes be heard as needing to fully “give up” or “break” with our traditional ways. That is a misrepresentation of inter-culturalism. If we really embrace “bending” (rather than breaking) our traditional identities, will that give us enough security to bring multiple traditional identities alongside each other as equally enriching to all?*

*3. Lastly, can you recall your most recent experience of witnessing or participating in an Ephesian moment—experiencing unity in diversity—either within your church community or in your personal lives?*

*Pair up with a person who sits next to you and share your personal experiences and observations.*