

3rd Sharing: Envisioning a journey that Is not finished yet

Acts 11:19–26

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called "Christians."

Following the stoning of Stephen in Jerusalem recorded as the first Christian martyr in the New Testament, the gospel rapidly proliferated. Jesus' followers dispersed widely, reaching Phoenicia (the present-day coast of Syria and Lebanon), Cyprus (a Mediterranean island), and Antioch in Syria (modern-day Antakya, in Turkey).

Their primary aim was to share Jesus' message solely with Jews, a seemingly peculiar mission. What relevance does this mission hold for us in the 21st century? Is it akin to catering exclusively to a specific ethnic group within our churches?

The church in Jerusalem, understandably, sought to avoid further casualties like Stephen's. Despite Jesus' command and the precedent set by Philip and Peter, who witnessed the gospel's power transcending ethnic boundaries, the Jerusalem church maintained a defensive stance. They were cautioned against risking their lives by engaging with or converting Gentiles. However, a pivotal moment emerged when "some men from Cyprus and Cyrene" ventured to Antioch, preaching to Gentiles about the Lord Jesus.

These bold or perhaps reckless individuals declared, "We're not settling; we're heading to Antioch to spread the gospel to everyone, irrespective of their background, but with open ears!" Their daring journey to Antioch, spanning nearly 11,902 kilometres from Jerusalem, catalyzed the establishment and growth of the church. Their efforts were met with divine response, as a significant number embraced faith and turned to the Lord.

Though the Bible doesn't name these men, they were courageous pioneers who navigated uncharted Christian territories, initiating a church in Antioch. Their legacy, courage, and vision should not be overshadowed by biblical giants like Barnabas and Paul. Yes, reading the gospel through the lens of another is important in becoming a gospel-shaped intercultural church!

These unnamed pioneers broke conventions, openly preaching the gospel to Gentile, Greek, and Roman communities. Their actions, while commonplace in today's Christian churches, were radical and risky under the Roman Empire, shattering barriers between people and fostering the Antiochian moment, which signifies the establishment of the Antioch church as a multicultural and mission-oriented community.

These evangelists are unsung heroes, pivotal in Christian history. Their willingness to innovate and preach the gospel in new ways to unfamiliar audiences shaped Christianity as we know it today. Thanks to their vision, the church of Antioch underwent a transformative journey, driven by the Holy Spirit. The division between Jews and Gentiles was dismantled, and the church embraced a mission beyond Jerusalem's confines. Here at Antioch, Paul and Barnabas, the first two missionaries in Christian history, were commissioned. It was here that the term "Christians" was coined, and these newfound believers worshipped and worked together in unity, serving as a model for intercultural churches worldwide.

Becoming an intercultural church isn't a happenstance occurrence or a mere aspiration. It demands a lifelong commitment to carving out a space where everyone is embraced, honoured, integrated, and brought into harmony with God and each other. This emerging community transcends ethnic, cultural, and traditional boundaries, neither tethered to European nor African roots, neither confined by Mennonite nor Pentecostal labels, and neither bound by tradition nor legalism. Instead, it embodies a redeemed, creative fellowship that rises above all other cultural and ethnic distinctions.

What enables the creation of such a transformative, interethnic community?

It happens when our cultural norms, inclinations, and even our identities are willing to flex, not fracture; when the influence of Christ reigns over ethnic pride, challenging ethnocentrism, cultural elitism, and notions of superiority; when allegiance to Christ

supersedes all other affiliations, loyalties, and convictions; and when the person and mission of Christ become the cornerstone of a congregation's collective identity.

The gospel plus, which is appending something to the gospel—be it Mennonite, African, white, Korean, Chin, Ethiopian or any other cultural tag—is superfluous in the journey of collective discipleship. To truly embrace interculturalism, to become a church for all, every cultural and ethnic marker must remain adaptable and open to negotiation.

Anthropologically, this is termed "*situational ethnicity*." Ethnicity or identity is not a term that is rigid and static! It is fluid! Situational ethnicity reminds me of what Bruce Lee, an Asian Martial arts legend said, "*Be water, my friend!*" In Chinese philosophy, there are many proverbs about water which has a metaphor for life. I introduce to you just one proverb said by Laozi who lived in ancient China 500 years before Jesus was born; "*The river benefits all things but contends with none. It flows to places despised by all.*" Yes, water never contends or never stops, it flows. Why not us?

Recall the adaptability exemplified by Paul, who became "all things to all people, that by all means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). His words don't advocate conformity but rather a liberation from cultural preferences and norms.

In Christ, our cultural and ethnic identities are no longer fixed; it is no longer us who live, but Christ who lives in us (Galatians 2:19-20). As Christians, our lives are now governed solely by Christ, not by any specific cultural framework. The only requirement for being a Christian is openness: "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me" (Revelation 3:20).

If you staunchly cling to your cultural or ethnic identity, unwilling to negotiate or adapt, an intercultural church may not be your comfort zone. It challenges us to transcend the confines of our individual traditions and create a new, third way where all nations and tribes are valued, honoured, and empowered.

Becoming an intercultural church should be a movement of renewal, challenging traditional and institutional norms. It requires a shift away from outdated paradigms and a revival of the evangelistic fervour witnessed in the Antiochian moment (Yes, new wine must be put into new wineskins). It beckons us to engage in God's ongoing work of peace and

reconciliation in the world. Merely patching up old systems won't suffice; pursuing interculturalism isn't just another item on a checklist. It demands a radical reorientation of hearts and minds, a commitment to embrace the diversity that reflects the richness of God's creation.

Unless we are transformed by the spirit of radical reformation, unless we hold on to an unshakable vision to fulfil God's mandate on the unity and reconciliation of all nations, and unless we persistently pursue this vision to come true at all costs, our longing for an intercultural church remains a mere fantasy, destined to falter and fail.

Only visionaries, only those whose spirit is open, curious and venturesome can achieve this eschatological vision that is prophesied by John of Patmos in Revelation 7:9-10: "A great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, stand before the Lamb of God and praise Him all (*in unison, not four-part cacophony*).” Then and there, peace will finally prevail.

Now, I invite each of you to close your eyes and envision the future of our congregation with me:

Suppose you pull into the parking lot on Sunday at some point in the future. A few years have passed, and we all look like a little older. Imagine the scene as you step out of your vehicle toward the doors of the church.

As you enter the foyer, you're welcomed by a Liberian brother and a Korean sister. You make your way into a sanctuary where you're surrounded by people from very different social classes and economic circumstances. A Latino worship director is welcoming everyone as you slip into your seat. To your right, there's a single mom with two children lifting their hands in worship. In front of you, there's a homeschooling family of six. Besides you, there's a group of college students; across the aisle, a Pakistani couple and a young African man named Jay who has a 1990s flat high-top fade, all of them singing with all their might.

Onstage, you see some people, men and women and children and youth, who are clean cut and others who are tattooed out, some who are fashion forward and others who are fashion clueless. Everyone is worshipping as one. You're overcome with emotion, and all

you can think is, Jesus is beautiful, and so is his interethnic, intergenerational and inter-socioeconomic bride.

And then you wonder, When did it happen? How did my church become so transcultural and diverse?

Now, open your eyes. This isn't a tale spun from my whimsical imagination. It's a glimpse into the Kingdom vision shared by Jamall Williams, pastor of Sojourn Church Midtown in Louisville, Kentucky, during one Diversity Sunday. Years passed and this vision materialized into reality in his church.

Dear brothers and sisters of MCA, joyful bearers of good news!

Where do we stand? Who are we? Are we the church that welcomes, embraces, and nurtures visionaries, entrepreneurs, risk-takers, innovators, and even those considered unconventional? Who among us dares to turn this grandiose, reconciling, and redeeming vision into reality here and now? Who will carry the banner of this visionary quest?

Remember, only a vision of the future can transform our present actions. Heed the resolute advice of Ted Bolsinger, a leadership expert who wrote *Canoeing the Mountains*: "*The world in front of you is nothing like the world behind you. Embrace an adventure-or-die mindset! You can't go alone, but you haven't succeeded until you've survived sabotage. Adaptation is everything* "

Our journey is far from over. The world is evolving rapidly, our time is limited, and we are getting old. What are you doing?

"Gird up your loins, forget what lies behind, and strain forward to what lies ahead. Proceed on towards the road less travelled, shouting with a full voice, 'Our God is near,' and dreaming a great dream that God's will be done in our church as it is in heaven.

I'd like to conclude my four-part reflection with a single word imparted by my spiritual guide, Eugene Peterson, just before his passing.: **Vamos!** Let's go, brothers and sisters! Let's go to *the other side* as our Lord Jesus did!

Questions:

- 1. Have you ever sensed the urgent need for change within your congregation? If so, which areas/functions of the church need to be revamped or restructured?*
- 2. To what extent is the Mennonite church receptive to embracing changes originating both internally and externally?*
- 3. Are you personally prepared to take risks and muster the courage to embark on a significant journey or guide your congregation through the challenges of a shifting world? On a scale of 1 to 10, how receptive are you to innovation and change?*
- 4. What knowledge or skills do you need to acquire to effectively lead and transform your congregation in uncharted territories that lead you to God's ultimate plan of perfect unity and harmony?*