

# NAVIGATING MULTICULTURAL MINISTRY IN THE BAPTIST UNION OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

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## 1.1 Introduction

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. For more than two decades I was a pastor in a specific church where all the members were initially of one race and one dominant culture and now there are multiple races and 16 different cultures. Baptist Union of Southern Africa (BUSA) churches are experiencing the movements of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is especially witnessed in what Diesel (2023) calls “transitioning” churches, “undergoing rapid demographic change.” Many BUSA churches are challenged with cultural changes in their demographics (Ihlenfeldt 2017, 20; De Jong 2017, 8; Penrith 2017, 18). This presentation (and questions following) seeks to dialogue around ministry in a multicultural church and also expose this 2023 BUSA Assembly to an intercultural instrument to assist churches who find themselves undergoing pressures linked to globalisation. BUSA has historically and generally developed along cultural and racial comfort zones. Increasingly there are reports of multiculturalism in previously homogeneous, local churches. This journey is not unique to South Africa, but prevalent in many countries around the world (Thurman 2003, 1).

A Biblical survey of culture and multiculturalism reveals what many commentators (Stott 1994; Barnhouse 1970: et al) call the “curse” of the linguistic and cultural divisions originating at Babel, and then beginning to be reversed by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. If this is true, then the multicultural church may become a model of social inclusion, which challenges exclusionary practices in society generally (Tahaafe-Williams 2012, 12). Findings in missiology may assist a multicultural church in creating understanding of the intercultural worldviews and intercultural values. Previously homogeneous, local churches transitioning into multicultural churches need roadmaps of understanding for the future changes.

Intercultural misunderstandings may be limited through worldview comprehension and theological understanding (Georges 2017; Hofstede 2011). Findings in missiology rather than sociological or economic theories, have been found to assist most, in creating understanding between cultures, so as to limit the flight of human resources (Amodio et al. 2007; Gallagher 2001; Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 2000). Understanding intercultural dynamics provides tools to assist with intercultural life together in the multinational landscape (Livermore, Ang, and Van Dyne 2010; Livermore and Van Dyne 2015; Rah 2010). While each

BUSA church is relatively autonomous with minimal denominational financing in the BUSA context, intercultural conflict can empty the coffers of a once vibrant congregation.

The approach has been to focus on a local BUSA church, then on individual persons in that church (Purnell 2005, 13) to create understanding of cultures within the universal of a globalised world (Slimbach, 2011:208). What is happening internationally (Wright 2018, 1) is replicated nationally and locally between mono-culturalism and multiculturalism in the local churches. In the local church significant relationships occur with redeemed individual people. Educational endeavours are used to “promote cultural tolerance, understanding, and respect among all the different cultural groups” (Bogopa 2010, 6).

All humans are created in the image of God and form one human race, without different races, but having diverse cultures. Whilst all people are fallen, language, society, and culture remain gifts from God’s creation and common grace (Jue 2015, 60; Lingenfelter 1996, 225). The Great Commission (Mt 28:19-20) calls us to “go” from our preferred cultural biases to connect and “teach” someone who is “other.”

Culture, as defined by anthropology, is “the structured customs and underlying worldview assumptions” which influence the lives of people (Kraft 1999, 385). Culture is also dynamic, “which relate[s] to particular cultural environments and may therefore be unfamiliar to newcomers” (Holiday 2013, 6). Culture may also be defined interactionally (Ashford 2015, 13) and in reaction to chaos (Peterson 1999, xi). The concept of a society evolving a culture leads to a Trinitarian definition of culture (Ryken 1995, 278). The doctrine of the Trinity provides a “paradigm of God’s relationship with humanity” (Butin 1995, 5). A Trinitarian definition of culture may be: Culture is an attempt to bring unity in their diversity through community. When God brought disunity to the rebellious united defiance of humanity at the tower of Babel in Genesis 11, with the resultant languages, tribes, peoples, and nations (Rev 14:6), so cultures seek unity in their diversity through community. The crux is that community is pulling diversity towards unity, without uniformity (Moltmann 2010, 162). A Trinitarian understanding of culture is thus ontological, (grasping culture in its being) and not descriptively, nor interactionally.

A multicultural church would include groups of cultures lovingly bringing unity to their diverse communities within a particular environment (Weyers 2011, 23). The different groups in a church who have contact across the misunderstandings of various cultures (ENFORMM 2011, 107), may not fully grasp the differences and similarities between them, which gives rise to intolerance and prejudice (Sarmiento 2014, 606). Christian reconciliation, in churches and by the multicultural church, is more than a naïve ideal, but a need to “participate actively, not just notionally, in Christ’s great unanswered prayer [for] complete unity” (Jn 17:23); (Greig 2016,

279). The multicultural church generally refers to “many cultures in the one Church” usually with racial and ethnic diversity (Tahaafe-Williams 2012, 11). The ongoing challenge in a multicultural church is finding the cultural balance between respect for all cultures and the need for something of a new Christian culture (Folmar 2013, 46).

Cultural competence is an acquired skill to becoming self-aware of culture. Cultural competence becomes a personalised plan of care for others. Cultural competence can be assisted by using an instrument such as the “Questionnaire for Cultural Understanding” (QCU) to begin understanding one’s cultural lens. QCU was developed to assist BUSA churches transitioning from mono-cultural churches to multicultural churches. Cultural self-awareness is a process of discovering oneself (rather than blind ethnocentrism) when serving with individuals who are culturally different from oneself in the church (Purnell 2005, 9).

So what is the theology behind this? Let us look directly into the nature of God.

## **8.2 Trinity and Pentecost**

The Trinitarian unity balanced with diversity in the Godhead and creation, has since tipped towards disunity in the fall of humans on earth, which is seen in division of languages at Babel. Because of redemption in Christ and Pentecost, Keener (2007: 1) concludes: “Babel has been reversed. In the gift of tongues...” Now the Holy Spirit has given the church at Pentecost the languages of many nations as a sign of His purpose. This is the purpose of Jesus’ High Priestly prayer for a united church from every kindred, tribe, people, and nation. A multicultural church is our calling and destiny.

In Acts 2 we see the link to Babel. Babel brought division. The gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost can bring reconciliation to divided languages. The Holy Spirit in us brings unity to God’s diverse people. Supernatural empowering, tongues, and unity, are all interdependent. As in Acts, today in many churches, we see the Holy Spirit shaping the Body of Christ in the likeness of our Saviour. “Christ’s command and prophecy in Acts 1:8 is being fulfilled so that the church (universal and local) is made up of people from “every tribe and tongue” (Rev 7:9)” (Soal 2020, 174).

An exegesis of Acts 2 reveals that “tongues of fire” includes a reversal of Babel. Metaphorically the tongues of fire (Acts 2:3) represents the Holy Spirit who empowers the gift of tongues (Acts 2:4). The promised Holy Spirit explosively empowers the early church to be witnesses to

Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, to the ends of the earth. Luke carefully crafted the Pentecost narrative to theologically link the Babel story of Genesis 11. The languages recorded in Acts 2 represent the various national languages of those who were in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit enabled the various people gathered at Pentecost to hear what was said in their own native language. The Triune God desires all humans to once again be one in Christ. Thus, we need the fruit of the Spirit, like patience, for peaceful intercultural dialogue.

The tongues spoken of in both Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 refers to known languages spoken here on earth. Tongues are thus a sign pointing to global unity, a sign that the confusion and languages created at Babel by God can be reversed by Him.

This list of nations in Acts 2 is reminiscent of the Genesis 10 table of nations. Even the structure and style of Luke's writing of the Gospel of Luke (especially dealing with the sending out of the 70) and the book of Acts, justify an intentional linking of Babel to Pentecost. While multiculturalism in the local church may be seen by some as intoxication (Acts 2:13) yet the very nursery into which the church was born was multicultural.

The thesis that Acts 2 reverses the breakdown of Genesis 11, becomes the theological scaffolding for multicultural churches. Multiculturalism is not simply the latest trend of globalism today. Globalisation may even be a move of the Spirit of God, as we understand the Sovereignty of God (Soal and Henry 2018, 9). The charismatic movement in the past century has invigorated the debate on passages like Acts 2. The Holy Spirit's common grace moving throughout the globe invites us away from narrow nationalism to greater internationalism.

Early cross cultural missions, and the apostles as early church planters, never divided the new churches into homogeneous units. The Holy Spirit did not lead "birds of a feather to flock together." The apostles patiently grew heterogeneous local churches, where many cultures dwelled together. This was because Pentecost symbolised a new unity in the Spirit that transcends racial, national, and linguistic barriers. The sin of racism is often intertwined with monoculturalism, yet the Holy Spirit can untangle the intercultural communication knot.

As in Acts 2 many cultures are gathered these days in many local churches. Pastors today who have an intercultural sensitivity, can effectively proclaim the good news of supernatural life transformation by the Holy Spirit's empowering. What the Holy Spirit did in uniting diverse peoples at Pentecost can still be done in multicultural churches. Socially, if the multicultural

local church can get along, they set an example, bringing greater hope for the wider society itself.

Some of the intercultural conflicts in the early church linked to benevolence for widows, that arose in Acts 6, required structural and administrative solutions in the church. The Spirit-filled seven, men with names from a variety of cultures, were selected for a short duration solution to the intercultural conflict in Acts 6. In this example we see how multicultural conflict can be overcome with the empowering fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 6 gives the observer an example of multicultural conflict around the benevolence for the widows within a church that had expanded with thousands of members. Multicultural misunderstanding needs careful structures to minimise conflict. The lessons to be learned from Acts 6 include:

- The leaders need to facilitate conflict resolution
- All parties (members of the local church) need to be involved in intercultural conflict resolution
- Leaders need to be clear on their own functions and limitations
- Members, who have the confidence of the rest of the church body, need to be selected, to form a small, problem-solving team, like the seven in Acts 6
- This problem-solving team should ideally consist primarily of members from the minority group or culture
- This problem-solving team should be of a temporary nature, dissolving once the crisis is resolved
- Ethical structure, form, and administrative gifts can also be an asset of the church, and then, shared with the wider society in intercultural confrontations (Soal 2020, 176).

These Biblical examples from Acts 2 and Acts 6 give the foundation for heterogeneous multicultural churches. The next section gives further Biblical examples to extend this point.

### **8.3 The Acts and Conflict**

The responses to multicultural conflict that arose once the mainly Jewish-origin Christians were scattered after the stoning of Stephen, thrust conflict resolution onto the new religious refugees. The church in Antioch was culturally diverse by the time of Acts 13 and yet united by the Holy Spirit through prayer and fasting. Antioch became the first sending church for cross cultural missionaries like Paul and Barnabas. Paul would model multicultural sensitivity,

seen multiple times on his missionary journeys, and magnificently in the Mars Hill address (Acts 17). Intercultural sensitivity needs to be internalised and practiced. “Hospitality towards the “stranger” is one powerful tool in bridging intercultural differences” (Soal 2020, 177).

The current debate between advocates of homogeneous churches (rapid church growth proponents) and heterogeneous churches continues. Yet in the NT unity in Christ surpasses all other passions for cultural identity. Christ’s call to embrace the “other” (all the world), includes all categories of “otherness,” enables life together in the local church to function interculturally.

The challenges facing intercultural communication in multicultural churches include:

- Pragmatism, conflict avoidance and inertia.

The benefits of intercultural communication in multicultural churches include:

- a united witness to a watching world
- broader evangelism
- social awareness
- understanding of “others” (especially the poor)
- learned conflict resolution skills
- sacrificial love
- powerful proclamation of Christ making us one Body supernaturally (Soal 2020, 177).

Keeping the unity in diversity may mean different languages meeting separately to hear the Gospel in their home language, but unity can be retained by regular combined meetings, joint administrative and leadership structures. The rich tapestry of cultural experiences vastly compensates for the struggles of intercultural conflict that may only occasionally arise.

The theologically and practically inclusion of the “other” in Acts 15 is witnessed where finally Gentile Christians are accepted by Christians of Jewish origin. Large-scale creation of structure and form to address inequality in multicultural issues arises at the Jerusalem Council. The primary soteriological issue also had a social aspect. In multicultural conflict social issues are often the presenting problem while soteriological issues are the deeper concern. The Bible, rather than culture or pragmatism, must be the foundation of the church’s authority in conflict resolution. The early church in Acts educates the multicultural church today. Reuter (2014, 251) counsels that “[i]t requires courage to let go of cherished assumptions about life because of the sense of security they convey, and it requires openness to explore an unfamiliar cosmology that seems to unhinge our own worldviews.”

## 8.4 Mystery

The mystery that the Gentiles are included in Christ as equals with Jews (Eph 3:6) through the union of both with Christ is known because God revealed that in Ephesians 3:1–13 (Douglas 1982, 805; Schoenheit 2019, 1; Snodgrass 1996a, 159; Strong 2001, 1247). To preach and yet fail to teach the mystery of Christ fails to teach the local church as God's word "in its fullness" (Col 1:25). All cultures uniting as one "is inextricably linked to the gospel of Paul; and not simply where eternal life is concerned, but also where the local church on earth is concerned" (DeYmaz 2013, 2). John Piper (2016, 1) commented that when the apparent fears of some white Christians are sparked by black refugees protesting injustices, "what seems to be missing among many Christians, is a solid Biblical conviction that ethnic diversity in the church is a beautiful thing, and part of God's ultimate design for His people." The local church is to be "functional outposts of God's kingdom," and prototypes of God's end-time community, and a witness to the powers (Snodgrass 1996b, 174).

To faithfully minister in a multicultural community, churches need transcultural pastoral care. "Churches should have a pastoral care ministry that reaches across different cultures and ethnic groups so that everyone receives the care they need" (Johnston 2018, 1). A transcultural church is "a community that reflects, embraces and enjoys the diversity of its context, but by the power of the gospel transcends it and creates one new community in Christ" (Tan 2018, 1). Transcultural care is serving in the local church to give and receive from one another where no one needs to deny their unique cultural flavour. Yet each person accommodates others to create something culturally new and united under one Sovereign.

The political debate between multiracialism and non-racialism parallels the missiological dialogue between multiculturalism and transculturalism. Transculturalism would seek to transcend culture, while multiculturalism has been accused of perpetuating cultural differences. The choice about which path to pursue, may be guided by the eschatological promise. Revelation 5:9 and 14:6 remind us that in the end God has purchased for Himself people from "every tribe, language, people, and nation." Thus cultural distinctions remain eschatological. This eschatological hope guided this research to find tools to assist with transitioning homogeneous churches toward multiculturalism rather than toward transculturalism. Transculturalism is still a growing church planting thrust to be admired. Both multiculturalism and transculturalism mysteriously witness to the cosmos.

## **8.5 Worldviews**

Naugle (2002) reiterates that a worldview is of key importance to understand a person or nation (Kuyper 2007; Schaeffer 1982; Wolters 1983). Worldview is the cause that will lead to each cultural effect (Chesterton 2007). Worldview is the basic outlook on life, a theory or perspective on the cosmos and a view of the universe (Geisler and Watkins 2003). Worldview may be understood as different lenses through which we perceive our reality. Kant first conceived of the term “worldview” which resonates in many disciplines. Worldview may even be used as a synonym for philosophy. Cultural worldviews are the cultural lens through which a culture observes their world. In comparing cultures, cultural worldviews may be placed along various continuums (Livermore, Ang, and Van Dyne 2010; Livermore and Van Dyne 2015). Every nation, tribe, people, and language (Rev 7:9) make up what may be called culture.

From ten cultural worldviews eighty questions have been extracted as a self-testing diagnostic instrument which was field tested with eighty participants.

## **8.6 Cultural Values**

Cultural values differ from cultural worldviews, in that values are not hidden. Values are evident in the surface observation of a culture. A cultural value is a “distinctive” learned pattern of worth to the culture and perceived as right, though generally it is simply a preference “predisposing them to favour particular ideologies” (Kluckhohn 1951, 395; Liu 2016, 2). Conflict arises around the perceived “rightness” of values. Some abstract values have been entrenched as rights (United Nations 1948), but culturally, values change. A value can be defined as an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct is socially preferable to a converse mode of conduct (Rokeach 1973, 5). Seldom is a cultural value a theological issue. Appreciation and accommodation of differences enrich fellowship.

From three triads of cultural values seven questions have been extracted to be used in the self-testing diagnostic instrument.

## **8.7 The Questionnaire for Cultural Understanding (QCU) Instrument**

The development of a “Questionnaire for Cultural Understanding” (QCU) instrument to help churches undergoing the changes that arise from multiculturalism in BUSA, uses the findings on worldviews and values. The QCU developed forms part of a whole “Journey Towards



Understanding Differences” (JoTUD) weekend seminar. The JoTUD focused primarily on different tribes, languages, people, and nations (c.f. Rev 5.9).

The planning of JoTUD takes place over a nine-month period, coordinated by the church’s Executive, or a missions committee or a Global Focus committee (Reesor 2003, 77). The objective of JoTUD was to increase the understanding among participants, of different tribes, languages, peoples, and nations. In turn, JoTUD also increase the care among the various cultures of the church. The structure of a JoTUD weekend is meant to include Biblical teaching, small group learning experiences, the self-assessment instrument and social activities. All these aspects are intended to help in guiding the local church toward harmonious multiculturalism.

The JoTUD buffet of systematic Biblical teaching with opportunities for dialogue in small groups, led by the leaders in the church, all help in dealing with what may be an emotive subject. The JoTUD is a journey and not a destination (MA Van der Westhuizen, Greuel, and Thesnaar 2018, 9). Multicultural understanding in a transitioning local church remains a process that leads to interculturalism. Misunderstandings can easily resurrect old ingrained intolerances of “others” (Russo 2000, 109; M Van der Westhuizen, Greuel, and Thesnaar 2015, 2). Relationships built and growing communication form the process which transforms a multicultural group of different cultures who share space, into an intercultural group who share experiences in that space (MA Van der Westhuizen, Greuel, and Thesnaar 2018, 16). The JoTUD is also a development towards understanding, in an ongoing pilgrimage, “a moving towards positive intercultural awareness” (MA Van der Westhuizen, Greuel, and Thesnaar 2018, 9).

The whole JoTUD weekend experience raises an awareness of cultural identity. The purpose of the small groups is to facilitate the sharing of that understanding in a non-threatening manner that grows all the participants’ understanding of each other and the identification of common ground (in Christ) which may lead to greater compassion and deeper genuine care (MA Van der Westhuizen, Greuel, and Thesnaar 2018, 19).

Of those who completed the “Questionnaire for Cultural Understanding” (QCU), 88% found the questionnaire “very helpful” or “about right”. As with the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), many people who complete the QCU have an *eureka* experience as they become aware of different worldviews and values. This supplies a “learning moment.” “In this moment it is possible to show how such fundamental aspects of our lives as leadership, decision making, communication, and motivation are shaped by our value orientations” (Gallagher 2001).

The “Questionnaire for Cultural Understanding” (QCU) may be used in other BUSA churches, preferably in conjunction with a JoTUD weekend experience. The QCU develops knowledge and dialogue regarding the subject of multiculturalism. This multiculturalism may be developed into interculturalism with greater care and understanding (MA Van der Westhuizen, Greuel, and Thesnaar 2018, 19).

To assist churches that were once only one culture, embracing multiculturalism needs to combine the theological teaching and the practical questionnaire. Change is never easy. Change is not an individual activity. “As difficult as it may be to implement, it is not only individuals who need to gain cultural intelligence — it may be that the entirety of the system must be changed” (Rah 2010, 193). Will we flee in fear from the cultural changes?

## **8.9 A Closing Thought**

Remember C.S. Lewis’ humble reminder about culture, especially in relation to Niebuhr’s position that “Christ transforms culture,” that Christians are to be agents of cultural transformation as they carry on the work of God through their “ordinary cultural activities” (Niebuhr, 1951; Ryken, 1995:278), even using the “foolishness” of teaching and preaching (1 Cor 1:21):

If we had foolishly un-Christian hopes about human culture, they are now shattered. If we thought we were building up a heaven on earth, if we looked for something that would turn the present world from a place of pilgrimage into a permanent city satisfying the soul of man, we are disillusioned, and not a moment too soon. But if we thought that for some souls, and at some times, the life of learning, humbly offered to God, was, in its own small way, one of the appointed approaches to the Divine reality and the Divine beauty which we hope to enjoy hereafter, we can think so still (Lewis 2013, 63).

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The "Questionnaire for Cultural Understanding" (QCU) may be taken at

URL: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeQGTnIOYC4fOpMD491BAQIV5w5UqUp2ecTWBguLWyiiktYCA/viewform>