

Becoming or Planting a Multi-cultural Church by E.J. Rethinasamy

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This article is a follow-up to Dr. Rethinasamy's previous article, "Mono-cultural vs. Multi-cultural" in the July 13 2007, issue of Mission Moments.

Most churches think of themselves as welcoming congregations, and perhaps they are. But to be welcoming, we cannot neglect the changing faces and cultures of our neighborhood. Rather, churches can create an outreach strategy to increase 'foot traffic' with the people of various communities, cultures and languages moving into their communities. Our congregation's presence is to offer the aroma and the taste of God's grace in Jesus Christ to everyone in our community.

A multi-cultural ministry involves clear visionary leadership that attunes the whole congregational life to this journey. A series of Bible studies, case studies, and/or visits with those who are already engaged in this similar ministry can help. Here are some additional suggestions.

1. Be an informed church--biblically, culturally and doctrinally.
2. Look around your neighborhood. Observe the changes. Look for common connections to begin the dialog. When visiting Silicon Valley in Northern California, I observed that many young entrepreneurs and software professionals from South Asia are migrating to the region. Many churches in this community are clueless about this change!
3. Read your church. Are you immersed with your own old problems? Or looking for a new breeze to come in, and looking to be connected to it?
4. Ask God to show you at least one new contact in the growing community.
5. Identify whether or not your church understands the need for multi-cultural flavor.
6. Create a core group within your church or partner with your sister churches in sharing this common vision.
7. Be a user-friendly church. Jesus' incarnation is a custom-made template by the will of God for humanity's freedom from bondage to sin. Undoubtedly, Jesus the Christ is user-friendly and approachable so the churches need to be too!
8. If your congregation is close to colleges and universities, look for an opportunity to create an international student ministry. For more on small group campus

ministries, check out International Student Ministry, Inc. (<http://www.isminc.org>) or Lutheran Campus Mission Association (www.lcma.info).

9. Make yourself present in the community. Be represented in street festivals, presenting the available diversity of your church.
10. If a new community of a different language group wishes to be part of your church ministry or to start a new ministry, do not create an atmosphere in which you are the givers and they are the receivers. In other words, do not create a colonial mentality in your missional approach. Rather, be partners in the Gospel. If an immigrant group wants to rent your facility, whole-heartedly work with them to make it happen. I have seen it happen that in a few years such a group becomes part of the church.
11. Don't let your cultural sensitivity detour your congregation's main objective. Keep the message of Christ on center stage. Always.
12. New immigrant communities often try to re-live their past in their new land. They just live in the community, go to work, earn money, send money to their relatives back home and do not get involved in American issues. This dysfunctional disconnection has to be bridged. Civil governments sometimes rely on churches to help make this connection, giving us an opportunity to begin our dialog.

Engaging in multi-cultural ministry IS challenging from a human perspective and with human efforts. However, it is the will of God that these newcomers' diaspora/relocation is to our place and to our neighborhood. It is God's design that the church addresses this need from the perspective of the Great Commission.

It is an illusion to think that multi-culturalism and trans-nationalism trends are only an urban phenomenon. It is actually an emerging global life style for human survival and it occurs in each of our own communities--in rural America, the Midwest, Silicon Valley, Hollywood and in the Bos-Wash region of the northeast. Human migration is everywhere. For example:

- As mentioned above, Silicon Valley has growing numbers of South Asian immigrants who work for the software giants
- Lincoln, Nebraska resettles hundreds of refugees from Liberia, Rwanda, Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan and more in their towns and suburbs
- Phoenix, Arizona and its suburbs are filling in with new faces from everywhere.
- The "Little Middle East" is a synonym used by many for Dearborn, Michigan.
- A significant Laos-Hmong community lives in Minnesota's twin-cities area
- A large group of Somalian settlers are also in Minneapolis and St.Paul
- The highest concentration of ALL immigrants in every part of the world lives in Queens, New York
- There are more Jews living in New York than in Israel.

- Seasonal farm workers are constantly engaged in a modern-day underground railroad, from Mexico, Ecuador and other parts of Latin America moving upward to Midwestern farmlands and dairy industries.
- Temporary immigrant workers near U.S. borders from Southern California to Texas assist in vineyards, on produce farms and in meat processing factories.
- There are Caribbean, Cuban, Jamaican, Trinidadian, and Haitian immigrants in Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana and countless day workers in numerous range orchards.
- Chinese people are found everywhere, even in the coldest spots of Alaska, serving in the food industry.
- To all of the above, add the children of this soil – the Native Americans, African-Americans, Caucasians and Eastern Europeans who contributed to the American mosaic before the present ‘Age of Migration,’ and who continue to contribute.

Simply stated, these communities are everywhere. We CANNOT ignore them.

For a taste of being a multicultural church, read the vision statement of First Baptist Church in Flushing, New York (<http://www.fbcflushing.org/docs/who.html>)

“The vision of First Baptist Church is to be a multi-cultural, multi-lingual church that contextualizes the Word of God to the World of God. The communities that speak one hundred languages in our neighborhood are the local mission field of the church. First Baptist Church members speak more than forty languages. In the past twenty years the church has also trained more than one hundred interns who have gone on to participate in global missions.

“Currently, the church has three hundred people who participate in the English worship service, two hundred in the Chinese worship service, and one hundred fifty in the Spanish worship service each Sunday. Although the church is made up of three congregations, it is one church, governed by one board of Deacons, one board of Trustees, and under one budget”

Questions for Reflection

1. Who’s in our community? How do we know?
2. What avenues do we have into the various people groups in our community?
3. If we were adding a new staff member to our ministry, what ethnicity would best match our community?
4. Who casts vision for your ministry? Does it include reaching the community?
5. What one step can you take to help connect your church with the community?