**MINISTRY COMPASS**

**A Multiethnic Model of the Church**

***Russell C. Rosser***

The First Baptist Church of Flushing lives out its worship and witness as a multiethnic, multicultural, and multicongregational fellowship of believers in Jesus Christ. This one church with numerous congregations is one as a people in membership under the oversight of a team of pastors and spiritual leaders. This united community of faith in the triune God ministers in the midst of religious pluralism, paganism, and diverse ethnicity in a neighborhood that speaks over one hundred languages.

*Intentional and supernaturally empowered local churches under the guidance of the Spirit of God will establish the people of God in ethnic and racial reconciliation.*

We believe, as Christians who articulate and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, that we have a “reconciling influence on the contemporary confusion of tongues” in our multilingual community. The people of God believe that “human language can express ultimate truth—the truth necessary for salvation—not because it is discoverable through autonomous human Reason, as Enlightenment thinkers vainly hoped, but because God has spoken in Scripture” (Colson 1996).

Diane Sawyer, the veteran broadcaster on “Prime Time Live,” recently asked Billy Graham, “If you could wave your hand and make one problem in this world go away, what would that be?” Without pausing for breath, Dr. Graham quickly replied, “Racial division and strife.” This will not be achieved with the waving of a wand, but through the reconciling gospel of Jesus Christ in local churches that experience the {190} power of Pentecost. Nothing in our global village can bind us together but the reconciling message of the cross. The ground at the foot of the cross is level. Christ, alone, brings us together in his body.

The local church is God’s answer to separation. Intentional and supernaturally empowered local churches under the guidance of the Spirit of God will establish the people of God in ethnic and racial reconciliation. This is reflected in the book of Acts as God intentionally worked through a process of reconciliation. The culmination of that purpose is dynamically portrayed in Acts 13. The events which took place in Antioch constitute a major paradigm shift or “sea change.” This was the place where God broke down the walls of segregation through the message of the cross.

The urban and ethnically divided community in Antioch had a population of one million people. The church had an ethnically diverse eldership and congregation intent on bringing communities of Asians, Greeks, Middle-Easterners (Arabs, Jews), and North Africans into one glorious body to demonstrate the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:14-16 is the Magna Carta of the Church. In reference to Jew and Gentile, Paul writes,

For [Christ Jesus] is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility . . . . His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility (NIV).

The church is composed of Jew and Gentile, bond and free, rich and poor, educated and formally uneducated, male and female (no gender divisions), old and young (no generational divisions).

The multiethnic, multicongregational church is a church that has adopted the challenge of biblical justice and mission in the context of cultural diversity, racial tensions, increased pluralism, and multiple linguistic and cultural complexities to build symbiotic relationships and harmony between diverse groups, intent on bringing biblical reconciliation between them. The foundation for this display of the Kingdom of God is the reconciling power of the cross of Christ that brings people to obedience to the vision of God for all humanity. The multiethnic and multicongregational church provides for both autonomy and interdependency.

Paul Hiebert offers the following definition of the multiethnic church:

A multiethnic church is a church in which there is 1) an attitude and practice of accepting people of all ethnic, class and national origins as equal and fully participating members {191} and ministers in the fellowship of the church; and 2) the manifestation of this attitude and practice by the involvement of people from different ethnic, social and national communities as members in the church (Hiebert 1996).

The First Baptist Church of Flushing is an integrative congregation committed to seeing various ethnic peoples come together to have a strong influence on one another’s lives and upon the structure of the church. It lives out its life and ministry in a community of rapid ethnic change. In the years from 1980 to 1987 the Asian community, many of whom are Chinese and Korean, grew from ten to fifty percent of the total population. During this same period the Caucasian community dropped from eighty to thirty-five percent and many of these whites are Jewish. The Hindu and Islamic peoples are also a significant part of our neighborhood with numerous temples and Islamic Centers. The Hispanic, African-American, and West Indian communities are also present among us. Our congregation faces the challenge of not only a transitional community but also a multilingual community.

The ministry of First Baptist Church is committed to justice and mercy. This is demonstrated in its varied holistic mercy and social ministries in the community. A well-staffed Pastoral Counseling Center has touched the diverse community with professionally trained counselors who serve clients in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Mandarin, and Cantonese. Through the years the congregation has provided legal services for immigrants, an English Language Institute for ESL training, Chinese language instruction for second-generation Chinese, a food pantry, clothing and housing assistance, ministry to children and spouses with loved ones in prison, and pregnancy counseling as an alternative to abortion.

The following statements reflect the realities of multicultural congregations such as First Baptist:

* they grow best in an atmosphere of love, loyalty, and mutual respect.
* they mature when their identity is grounded in God’s Word and a deep commitment to the biblical doctrine of reconciliation.
* they expand when leadership is shared and representative of the ethnic diversity of the community.
* they mature when the community of believers is nurtured through ethnically diverse but experiential God-centered worship, edification, and fellowship that is bathed in prayer and deepening relationships with one another.
* they expand most rapidly by word of mouth as enthusiastic believers share their story/spiritual journey in the marketplace and community.
* they grow as they serve the community and one another. {192}
* they grow when they extend a warm and genuine welcome to visitors from other cultures.
* they expand when they become a port, rather than a fort; they are missional in all their ministries and target groups.
* they grow when a healthy pride and biblical understanding is nurtured and understood by all.
* they mature when the worth and value of every person is respected in a spirit of humility and love.
* they grow when all members recognize that they are in ministry and that unity is not uniformity, but unity appreciates the diversity of the body.
* they must have a strong commitment to servanthood.
* they change in their ways and means as they evolve and deepen relationships with one another.

I believe that the next revolutionary revival will occur in the urban world. For those ready to take up the challenge of multiethnicity in their communities, I recommend the following:

* Act by faith as you seek to expand the ministry (Isa. 54:2-3).
* Keep your goals before you. For us they are: revival, recontextualization, and reconciliation.
* In the words of William Carey, “Be a plodder,” and in the words of Winston Churchill, “Never, Never, Give Up!”
* Embrace the spiritual value that every member is gifted by the Spirit of God to serve the body of Christ and the community.
* Keep a balance of evangelism and social action. There is no dichotomy between pietism and social concern. God calls us to both personal holiness and corporate justice.
* Endeavor to keep the unity of the body of Christ. It is hard but rewarding work.

**WORKS CITED**

* Colson, Charles. 1996. “Quit the Babel-ing,” *Christianity Today*, 8 January.
* Hiebert, Paul. 1996. Quoted in Manuel Ortiz. *One new people: Models for developing a multiethnic church*, 149. Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity. The FBC of Flushing is discussed in this book on pp. 78-84.

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