

The Theology of Multi-Ethnic Church

Diversity isn't just a social issue, it's a biblical one.

An Out of Ur interview with Mark DeYmaz

Mark DeYmaz is the founding pastor of Mosaic Church of Central Arkansas, author of *Building a Healthy Multi-ethnic Church* and co-founder of the Mosaix Network. Mark's recently published second book, *Ethnic Blends*, addresses some of the unique challenges faced by multi-ethnic churches. Urthling, David Swanson, spoke with Mark about the theology and challenges of multi-ethnic ministry.

In the book you argue that the New Testament paradigm for the local church is one that exhibits ethnic and socio-economic diversity. In your years pastoring a multi-ethnic church, what has been the theology that most compels people to embrace this ideal for the local church?

While God's heart for the nations is evident from Genesis through Revelation, such a broad understanding is not enough to inform pastors concerning their approach to ministry. A closer examination of the New Testament, however, reveals a very precise theology upon which the multi-ethnic/economically diverse local church should be built, a biblical mandate that cannot be ignored. Namely,

Christ envisions the multi-ethnic church on the night before he dies (John 17:20-23), so that the world will know God's love and believe.

Luke describes the model at Antioch (Acts 11:19-26; 13:1ff.), the first mega, missional and multi-ethnic community of faith and the most influential church in the New Testament.

Paul prescribes unity and diversity for the local church in his letter to the Ephesians, where his theme is "the unity of the church for the sake of the Gospel."

You make it clear that while all pastors and church planters face significant challenges in ministry, those who pastor multi-ethnic churches can expect these challenges at another level. Why is this?

Two examples illustrate the unique challenges any time race and class are part of the equation: When an Executive Pastor admonishes a Youth Pastor to step up his game, both being white in an otherwise all-white church, the young man or woman may walk away challenged, discouraged, or even frustrated, but he or she will not wonder if race had something to do with it. In a multi-ethnic church, when an upwardly mobile African American member of your staff informs working class Hispanic members that they cannot set up tables in a specific area of the church for a *Quinceañera* celebration, you will not only have to navigate the natural human frustrations but subtle racial or social ones as well.

One of the specific challenges you write about are the differing theological perspectives that often exist within a multi-ethnic church. Are there times when you feel the

tension between your theological convictions and the unity of the church?

Church leadership should not compromise theological conviction for the sake of increasing ethnic or economic diversity within their church. At Mosaic there have been points at which we were tempted to do so in pursuit of diversity. In the early days of our church plant we were so thankful to have anyone show up that the last thing we wanted to do was alienate anyone over a theological technicality!

Over the years we've been forced to consider whether or not to serve communion to a Muslim seeker, to rethink our position on the assurance of salvation for those claiming to be believers, to address if/when/where it is appropriate for a believer to pray in tongues and the role of women in ministry. Such issues are raised in every church; seeking to bring diverse people together in one church for the sake of the gospel only magnifies such concerns and consequences.



As a student of the multi-ethnic church in America you have noted different stages in the movement's development. At this point you see the multi-ethnic church movement in the "Pioneer Stage." By 2020 you envision 20% of churches being at least 20% diverse and by 2050, you hope that 50% of churches will be at least 50% diverse. As you talk with pastors and visit churches, what are you seeing that gives you hope that these next stages will become the new reality for the American Church?

First, let me be clear that such percentages provide just one measurement to help determine where a particular church is along a perceived continuum in pursuit of New Testament unity for the sake of the gospel. Additional factors that should be taken into account include diverse composition of vocational and volunteer leaders, acceptance of various styles of worship and cross-cultural transferability of forms and practices of ministry within the congregation. All of these further define the reality and credibility of a church that describes itself as integrated. Pastors should be careful not to rely upon numbers alone in declaring their churches to be multi-ethnic.

Having said this, I do promote a measurable goal of 20% diversity in 20% of churches throughout the U.S. by 2020, knowing that this goal represents a tipping point that will largely inform local church ministry for the rest of the century. The latest statistics show that Protestant churches were three times more likely to have 20% diversity in 2007

than they were in 1998, and evangelical Protestant churches of 1,000 or more were five times more likely to exhibit this diversity. There are also more books being published on the subject, and multi-ethnic churches (and their leaders) are increasingly the subject of magazine and newspaper articles. A growing number of churches are now describing themselves as “multi-ethnic,” “multiracial,” or “multicultural” on their websites, and conferences are including sessions devoted to multi-ethnic ministry.

How would describe some of the rewards of leading a multi-ethnic church to pastors who have spent their vocational lives within a homogeneous church?

For eighteen years prior to planting Mosaic I served homogeneous congregations. Like my friends and colleagues serving such churches today, I was blessed on numerous occasions to experience God working in and through me for his glory. Nevertheless, my wife and I have found an inimitable dimension of the Holy Spirit, a unique power and pleasure of God, that dwells in the midst of a diverse people seeking Christ as one. Through Mosaic we have ministered with and to so many people who are different from us, people who in one way or another have encouraged, challenged, or validated our calling beyond what we might have ever known had we stayed within the safe confines of the homogeneous church. In addition, visitors consistently tell us that they cannot stop crying during the service. In such moments they sense the Holy Spirit near, in ways they are not accustomed to.

Of course, we also face discouragement along the way. At times, we think, "Let's just go back to doing what is easy, what we know, in a church with people like us." But at the end of the day we return to the roots of our calling, mindful that in pursuing the path of a peacemaker we are blessed to be called "the sons of God," (Matthew 5:9).

I think there can be a perception that ethnically and socio-economically diverse churches are needed in cities, but that America's suburbs and rural areas are mostly exempt from much of what you write about. What has been your experience in this regard?

First, no matter how ethnically homogeneous a suburb or rural area may be, the future is likely to change these

demographics. The latest projections indicate that by 2042, 50 percent of the people living in the United States will not be white. So it is wise for us to plant or develop churches today with tomorrow in mind.

Secondly, even in a rural setting someone owns the shop and someone sweeps it. In other words, ethnic and economic diversity represent two sides of the same coin. In what ways are suburban and rural churches deconstructing barriers of economic class by establishing a church for all people? Do the forms and functions of the church promote a spirit of inclusion, or are they more reflective of the majority culture? What steps are being taken by church leaders to avoid prejudicial favoritism whereby only the wealthy, only English speakers, or only the similarly educated are invited to positions of influence where decisions about the church are made? Where that is not happening, I wonder how church leaders reconcile their practices with the clear instructions in James 2:1-9.

Finally, any attempt to limit or relegate the development of multi-ethnic and economically diverse churches to urban areas is both uninformed and condescending. One's desire to maintain entitlement and privilege is not at all helpful to efforts to express the love of God for all people and therefore, to expand the kingdom of God on earth via the local church.

To wrap up, what baby steps would you recommend to those pastors and leaders interested in leading their churches towards a more diverse expression of the Kingdom of God?

To get caught up to speed from a Biblical, Christ-centered perspective, I would recommend that you read the following books, from two specific categories on the subject:

Theological/Practical: *Multicultural Ministry* (Zondervan, 2004); *Building a Healthy Multi-ethnic Church* (Jossey-Bass, 2007); *Ethnic Blends* (Zondervan, 2010).

Sociological/Foundational: *Divided By Faith* (Oxford University Press, 2001); *One Body, One Spirit* (IVP Books, 2003); *United By Faith* (Oxford University Press, 2004).