

THE INTENTIONALLY INTERCULTURAL CHURCH: A PLACE FOR ALL PEOPLES

By Benjamin J. Tse

Introduction

In recent years, North American society has seen an increase in conflict due to an underlying racial divide, especially in the United States.¹ On May 25, 2020, a video of George Floyd, an African American being suffocated to death by a Caucasian Minneapolis police officer kneeling on his neck, started circulating on the internet, causing many riots and protests across the United States against police brutality.² Many Americans rallied behind the Black Lives Matter movement, which started as a movement protesting systemic racism³ but later evolved into a broader anti-racism movement for all ethnic groups.⁴ Many Canadians also sympathized with the movement.⁵ These recent events bring to the fore an important question. How can churches fulfil their biblical call to be a safe place for all peoples?⁶

The purpose of this paper is to examine Jesus' mission for the church and argue that an intentionally intercultural⁷ ideology will make churches within diverse communities safe places for people of any racial or ethnic background. Within the framework of Jesus' mission, the church is a safe place for all peoples when 1) it becomes intentionally intercultural if located within a diverse community; 2) it integrates ethnic expressions of Christianity; and 3) it becomes a community of reconciliation.

¹ Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Anna Brown and Kiana Cox, "Views on Race in America 2019," *Pew Research Center*, accessed Nov. 1, 2020, www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/04/09/race-in-america-2019/.

² Derrick Bryson Taylor, "George Floyd Protests: A Timeline," *New York Times*, accessed Nov. 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd-protests-timeline.html>

³ Justin Worland, "America's Long Overdue Awakening to Systemic Racism," *Time Magazine*, accessed Nov. 1, 2020. <https://time.com/5851855/systemic-racism-america/>

⁴ Kim Parker, Juliana Menasce Horowitz and Monica Anderson, "Amid Protests, Majorities Across Racial and Ethnic Groups Express Support for the Black Lives Matter Movement," *Pew Research Center*, accessed Nov. 1, 2020, www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/06/12/amid-protests-majorities-across-racial-and-ethnic-groups-express-support-for-the-black-lives-matter-movement/

⁵ James McCarten, "Black Lives Matter has more support among Canadians than Americans: poll," *Global News*. Accessed Nov. 1, 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7356841/black-lives-matter-canada-poll/>

⁶ The term "church" will be used to describe the "local church" unless otherwise noted.

⁷ This insight developed with the help of Ron Toews, Director of Leadership Development for the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches.

The Jesus-Centered Mission

Jesus' mission is to seek and save the lost⁸ and form a new community called Christians comprised of all racial and ethnic groups.⁹ Jesus himself models the welcoming of all people groups. He has an open conversation with a Samaritan woman that shocks his disciples,¹⁰ and is friends with Mary and Martha who welcome him into their house.¹¹ He dines with the outcast and marginalized,¹² and even calls the children to come into his arms to bless them when the disciples were rebuking them.¹³ The only stipulation for being included as part of the Christian community is faith in Jesus for salvation.¹⁴ Matthew purposefully frames Jesus' start in public ministry as a light to the world,¹⁵ and Jesus himself calls the temple a "house of prayer for all nations."¹⁶ Jesus builds the new community of the global church welcoming all racial and ethnic groups.

Paul explains the nature of Jesus' mission further for the church in his letter to the Ephesians, referring to the saints as "believers without ethnic distinction."¹⁷ The classification of the people within the church in Ephesus is that of "a new race that is raceless,"¹⁸ with all non-Christian ethnic groups remaining as "separate entities distinct from the church."¹⁹ Rah argues that the biblical concept of nations does not distinguish people groups based on skin color and even if the term "race" referring to skin color is most widely used, the "category of race is a product of Western social history."²⁰ Lopez calls different races "not biologically differentiated groupings but rather social construction."²¹

⁸ Lk. 19:10 (All scripture references are from the English Standard Version)

⁹ Matt. 28:16-20

¹⁰ Jn. 4:27

¹¹ Lk. 10:38-42

¹² Mk. 2:15-17

¹³ Mk. 10:13-16

¹⁴ Eph. 2:8-9

¹⁵ Matt. 4:15-16

¹⁶ Isa. 56:7, Jer. 7:11, Matt. 21:13, Mk. 11:17

¹⁷ Frank Thielman, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 179.

¹⁸ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 379. Cf. Stephen A. Rhodes, *The Challenge of Diversity: The Witness of Paul and the Gospels*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 361.

²⁰ Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 67.

²¹ Ian Haney Lopez, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*, Revised and Updated (New York: NYU Press, 2006), xxi.

Whereas race primarily refers to skin color, it is not to be confused with an ethnic group. An ethnic group is “a named social group based on perceptions of shared ancestry, cultural traditions, and common history that culturally distinguish that group from other groups.”²² It can be a mixture of races, for example, African American, or Canadian Born Chinese. Although these distinctions exist in society, they are loose secondary classifications. The gospel is open to all - no one race or ethnic group is more important than the others. Christians take on the identity of “a newly created community which transcends Israel and its privileges and where Gentiles, along with Jews, are on an equal footing.”²³

The eschatological church that is pictured in Revelation is inclusive of all peoples and is a unified new culture.²⁴ John sees a multitude of expressions that “indicates the crowd’s universality.”²⁵ As Niebuhr writes, culture is “always social... and is concerned with the temporal and material realization of values.”²⁶ Church culture, therefore, is reflective of the teachings and practices of Jesus applied to a community. It follows, then, that the eschatological church cannot be completely identified with any one single earthly culture; rather, it is a new culture inclusive of everyone who decides to live their life according to Jesus’ teachings.²⁷ Dave Gibbons names the Christian community as “Third Culture,”²⁸ David Anderson calls it “Kingdom Culture,”²⁹ and Bruce Milne suggests “New-Humanity.”³⁰ Regardless of the name, all argue that the work of Christ is central to forming the culture of the church. Niebuhr, commenting on the view of Augustine, suggests that Jesus Christ is “the transformer of culture for Augustine in the sense that he redirects, reinvigorates, and regenerates that life of man, expressed in all human works, which in present actuality is the perverted and corrupted exercise of a fundamentally good nature.”³¹

²² James Peoples and Garrick Bailey, *Humanity: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* (Belmont: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2009), 389.

²³ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 191.

²⁴ Rev. 7:9-10

²⁵ Leon Morris, *Revelation, Revised Edition*, Tyndale New Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 113.

²⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ & Culture* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 32-36.

²⁷ Eph. 2:19, Gal. 6:10, Phil. 3:20, 1 Pet. 2:11

²⁸ Dave Gibbons, *The Monkey and the Fish: Liquid Leadership for a Third-Culture Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

²⁹ David A. Anderson, *Multicultural Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

³⁰ Bruce Milne, *Dynamic Diversity: Bridging Class, Age, Race and Gender in the Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

³¹ Niebuhr, *Christ & Culture*, 209.

There is a fundamental sense in which the cultures of the earth are all fallen and imperfect, and therefore must move toward the ideal culture that Jesus set forth.

The Intentionally Intercultural Church

The intentionally intercultural nature of the church is inherent in the gospel that Jesus preached. The local church is defined as an organized congregation of Christians formed in a specific geographical location. Throughout the New Testament, the church accomplished Jesus' mission by being a safe and welcoming community. As Kling explains, Christians reached different cultural groups by helping the poor and needy without expecting to be repaid in any way. They did this because God demonstrated his sacrificial love for people by his death and resurrection on the cross, being merciful to humans. Therefore, his people should also be merciful to other people. This Christian view was radically different from the Greco-Roman view that the gods demanded that their followers give alms so that they would receive in return. The Greco-Roman view was a transactional relationship motivated by self interest.³² Like the New Testament churches, churches today accomplish Jesus' mission by creating safe and welcoming communities.

Churches should consider the demographics of the ethnic groups living in their neighborhood. In parts of the world that are not ethnically diverse, a church can accomplish Jesus' mission locally without being intentionally intercultural.³³ However, churches located within a community with different people groups should seek to welcome and integrate them.

The ESRI Diversity Index demonstrates that the United States is becoming more diverse. The Index documents the likelihood that two persons chosen at random from the same area belong to different race or ethnic groups in percentages. The percentages rose from 60.6 percent in 2010 to 64.8 percent in 2019 and are expected to increase to 67 percent by 2024.³⁴ In Canada, there is a similar trend toward diversity. A study done by Statistics Canada released in 2017, using data from the 2011 census to project diversity in 2036, shows an increase in immigrant and second-generation populations. Immigrants are expected to represent between 24.5 percent to 30 percent of Canada's population in 2036 while second generation

³² David W. Kling, *A History of Christian Conversion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 60.

³³ This does not limit a church's participation in missions or other forms of involvement in other global Christian organizations.

³⁴ *Methodology Statement: 2019/2024 Esri Diversity Index* (Redlands: ESRI, 2019), accessed Nov. 1, 2020, https://downloads.esri.com/esri_content_doc/dbl/us/J10170_US_Diversity_Index_2019.pdf

individuals are expected to increase to nearly 20 percent from 17.8 percent in 2011. Second generation is defined as non-immigrants with at least one parent born abroad. The projection for immigrants and second-generation populations combined is between 44.2 percent and 49.7 percent in 2036, up from 38.2 percent in 2011.³⁵

Churches that are intentionally intercultural promote integration; that is, they bring people of different racial or ethnic groups into unrestricted and equal association with others. Intercultural is defined as “relating to or involving more than one culture.”³⁶ Intentionally intercultural ideology would allow the church to become a safe and welcoming community whereas multicultural ideology, with which both the United States and Canada replaced the melting pot model after 1970,³⁷ may not have the same result. Naylor argues that change, assimilation and compromise are required to ensure unity in a multicultural church, and that multicultural local churches will face misunderstandings and frustrations due to how all cultures inherently contrast one another.³⁸ In a multicultural church, each culture remains separate to retain its uniqueness. National pride may hinder unity. Rather than by becoming multicultural, a church can achieve unity by becoming intentionally intercultural because change, assimilation and compromise are only required to that which Jesus commands. In cases where fellowship with other believers and ethnic affiliation or cultural practices clash, fellowship with other believers is prioritized. Integration calls for the local church to become intentionally intercultural for the sake of Jesus’ mission.

The Antioch church was the first to form a unified faith community with many people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Though there was a racial divide causing tension between many different ethnic groups, this diverse group of Christians was still able to fellowship together. They decided that their

³⁵ Jean-Dominique Morency, Eric Caron Malenfant and Samuel MacIsaac, “Immigration and Diversity: Population Projections for Canada and its Regions, 2011 to 2036,” *Government of Canada, Statistics Canada*, last modified January 25, 2017, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91-551-x/91-551-x2017001-eng.htm>

³⁶ *Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. “intercultural”, accessed Nov. 1, 2020. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/intercultural>.

³⁷ Peter Baofu, *The Future of Post-Human Migration: A Preface to a New Theory of Sameness, Otherness, and Identity* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 22.

³⁸ Mark Naylor, “Navigating the Multicultural Maze: Setting an Intercultural Agenda for FEBBC/Y Churches” in *Being Church: Explorations in a Christian Community*, ed. Larry Perkins, (Langley: Northwest Baptist Seminary Bookmark Self Publishing, 2007), 13-42.

affiliation to Christ took priority over their ethnic affiliations. They adopted social norms Jesus taught over their own. At the same time, they did not lose their own culture entirely and were affirmed in their own cultural background.³⁹ In Galatians 3:28, Paul summarizes the concept of the intentionally intercultural church as a community for all people groups without “cultural, linguistic, religious (for Greek, opposed to Jew, conveys all of these) or sexual... distinctions on the grounds that all are now heirs, ‘one man’ or ‘an entity’, in Christ.”⁴⁰ Through integration, a local church becomes a safe and welcoming community for different people groups.

Intentionally intercultural churches also subvert ethnic tribalism, as it works against integration. Nothwehr defines tribalism as “the attitude and practice of harboring such a strong feeling of loyalty or bonds to one’s tribe that one excludes or even demonizes those ‘others’ who do not belong to that group.”⁴¹ Ethnic tribes may provide a safe community for those who belong to them but by definition are not welcoming to those who are outsiders. Although it may seem easier and more natural to segregate churches within the same geographical region based on ethnicity, cultural preferences, and values, the loyalty to Jesus’ mission must be prioritized over loyalty to one’s ethnic tribe. When a church intentionally subverts tribalism, integration becomes possible. The church becomes a safe and welcoming community by proving that a Christian’s affiliation to Jesus’ mission can overcome difficulties and differences caused by divisions based on race or ethnicity.

It is the responsibility of the dominant ethnic group within the church to integrate those who are not part of the majority. According to Jesus’ mission, Peter is rebuked when he is convinced to refuse eating with the Gentiles.⁴² It is clear that Paul does not expect the Gentiles to become Jewish and to follow Jewish practices and traditions. F. F. Bruce states that the effects of not fellowshiping with the Gentiles resulted in the Gentiles feeling “at best second-class citizens in the new community.”⁴³ To exclude others who are also Christians would be counter

³⁹ Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey and Karen Chai Kim, *United by Faith: The Multicultural Congregation as An Answer To The Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 27-29.

⁴⁰ R. Alan Cole, *Galatians*, Tyndale New Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 111.

⁴¹ Dawn M. Nothwehr, *That They May Be One: Catholic Social Teaching on Racism, Tribalism, and Xenophobia* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 5.

⁴² Gal. 2:11-13

⁴³ F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 179.

productive to Jesus' mission. Although an argument could be made that a church could partner with other churches of different ethnicity within the same neighborhood for a common goal, the partnership will remain limited.⁴⁴

Integrating Ethnic Expressions of Christianity

Integration in an intentionally intercultural church includes embracing the ethnic expressions of Christianity found in a neighborhood. In areas where there is one ethnic group, there are no other ethnic expressions to integrate as everyone in the community would operate within a single culture. Even non-believers who are unfamiliar with the Christian culture would understand the cultural expressions of the ethnic group they are from. However, when a church is located in a diverse neighborhood, Jesus' mission calls the church to integrate the different ethnic expressions of Christianity of the people groups living there. While becoming a Christian inherently shifts one's culture to that which Jesus teaches, there are aspects of one's ethnic distinctiveness that need not be changed.

Integrating ethnic expressions of faith creates a safe and welcoming community by providing a fuller picture of the gospel message. Elizondo states that the Christians in the New Testament:

could not be classified according to the classification categories of either the pagan or the Jews. They were both and yet they were neither the one nor the other alone. They were the same and yet they lived differently. They were bound together by a new intimacy and mutual concern that went beyond normal, acceptable behavior within the empire.⁴⁵

There are numerous challenges of integrating expressions of faith but the most prominent are language, cultural values and partisanship views.

1. Different Languages.

One ethnic expression of faith is speaking a specific language. Integration, therefore, is the church overcoming language barriers. Within the British Columbia Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, there are churches with the spoken

⁴⁴ Naylor, *Navigating the Multicultural Maze*.

⁴⁵ Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise. Revised and Expanded* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 106.

language in the name.⁴⁶ Churches of specific language are useful in special circumstances, such as with immigration, or monoethnic communities, for the gospel of Jesus is best understood in languages people best understand. As of 2011, 20 percent of all Canadians report their mother tongue as neither English nor French. This percentage is expected to rise to between 26.1 percent to 30.6 percent in 2036.⁴⁷ Seventy percent of immigrants reported that they neither spoke English nor French as their mother tongue, but 40 percent have adopted English or French as the preferred language spoken most often at home. Churches built around a specific language are at best a short term solution in areas where multiple ethnic groups reside, as “from the perspective of the global witness of the church, they are temporary rather than a permanent form of congregational life.”⁴⁸

The church overcomes language barriers by focusing on the universal principles of the faith and developing short term strategies to handle the complexities of different languages in a single congregation. Technological advancements may be helpful in this regard; however, “our language is not of ultimate value; it too may need to be offered to God in the ‘living sacrifice’ which his cross requires of us all (Rom 12:1-2; 2 Cor 5:15).”⁴⁹

2. Different Cultural Values.

Integration also includes the correction of excessive cultural emphasis. For example, “the excessive emphasis on individualism is crippling to American society, but even more so to the body of Christ.”⁵⁰ Individualism is a very different worldview than the communal, multicultural church described in Acts.⁵¹ Rah argues that

“the American church, in taking its cues from Western, white culture, has placed at the center of its theology and ecclesiology the primacy of the individual. The cultural captivity of the church has meant that the church is

⁴⁶ “MB Churches in BC,” British Columbia Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches. Accessed Aug. 20, 2020. <https://bcmb.org/church-map/> The list includes Spanish, Punjabi, Hindi, Chinese (which refers to Cantonese), and Mandarin.

⁴⁷ Morency, Malenfant and MacIsaac, “Immigration and Diversity: Population Projections for Canada and Its Regions, 2011 to 2036.” *Statistics Canada*, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91-551-x/91-551-x2017001-eng.htm>.

⁴⁸ Milne, *Dynamic Diversity*, 104.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 101.

⁵⁰ Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 38.

⁵¹ Acts 2:42-47

more likely to reflect the individualism of Western philosophy than the value of community found in Scripture.”⁵²

To be able to integrate different cultural values, the church will take into account potential tension between the individualistic worldview and communal concepts.

Another tension which may prevent a church from integrating other ethnic expressions of faith is the underlying assumption that one must adopt the Western mindset to be part of the church. Smith states that resistance to learning other languages and cultures may come from an unhelpful missionary frame, including:

...the temptation to prioritize our ability to contribute to other cultures over their ability to speak to us, the temptation to always elevate our perceived competence over their perceived need, and the increasingly dated notion that Christian witness involves the one-way export of truth from a largely English-speaking Western church to a rather vaguely perceived but supposedly largely heathen rest of the world.⁵³

The intentionally intercultural church seeks to learn from a wide variety of expressions of the gospel. Richards and O’Brien comment on an experiment done by Mark Allan Powell to have students read the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke’s Gospel and retell the story with as much detail as possible. Within the United States, six out of a hundred people who read the story retold it mentioning the famine in Luke 15:14. Using the same method in Russia, forty-two of the fifty people mentioned the famine. Different cultures notice and emphasize different points.⁵⁴

Listening to and learning from minority expressions of Christianity opens the Western Church to broader understandings. Though these different expressions and worldviews may always be in tension, the attitude of the church is one of humility. Seeking to learn from a wide variety of expressions of the gospel acknowledges and

⁵² Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 29-30.

⁵³ David I. Smith, *Learning from the Stranger: Christian Faith and Cultural Diversity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 4-5.

⁵⁴ Mark Allan Powell, “The Forgotten Famine: Personal Responsibility in Luke’s Parable of the Prodigal Son,” in *Literacy Encounters with the Reign of God*, ed. Sharon H. Ringe, Paul H.C. Kim (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 265-287. as cited in E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 14-15.

dignifies diverse knowledge and experience. The intentionally intercultural church then is freed from possible xenophobic beliefs and practice.

3. Different Partisan Views

Intentionally intercultural churches are not prescriptive concerning their members' political views. A Christian's allegiance to Christ transcends national pride and politics. Peter's vision in Acts 10 regarding a Roman centurion named Cornelius is a spiritual encounter through which God teaches Peter "to go with them making no distinction, i.e., without treating them any differently from the Jews."⁵⁵ As a Roman centurion, Cornelius would have very different political views compared to those of Peter, a Christian. Intentionally seeking integration means placing higher value on relationships with other believers than on nationality and partisanship.⁵⁶

Partisan views emphasized within a church can create insiders and outsiders and, therefore, an unsafe community. In an ethnographic study, Bean observes two Baptist and two Pentecostal churches in Canada and the United States with the same theology and traditional morality, over the span of a year. The Canadian churches separated their evangelical identity and partisanship as Canadians viewed themselves as a religious minority in battle against Canadian society as a whole. The American churches in Bean's study integrated evangelical Christianity and political conservatism and viewed these points as being a true American.⁵⁷

Bean concludes that the Canadian church members with different political views practiced mutual recognition. To be intentionally intercultural churches, the American church members, on the other hand, face the challenge of untangling evangelical identity and political identity as they are so closely woven together.⁵⁸ Churches that are unable to achieve this separation will find it difficult to integrate those with differing political views.

⁵⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 196.

⁵⁶ Acts 10:1-11:18

⁵⁷ Lydia Bean, *The Politics of Evangelical Identity: Local Churches and Partisan Divides in the United States and Canada* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 89-90. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.student.twu.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=821941&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 224-226.

A Community of Reconciliation

The church is called to be a community of reconciliation for all people groups, even in the midst of animosity. In diverse communities, disagreements based on culture must not be confused with racial issues such as prejudice and intolerance. Issues of racism are often complicated and the definitions change over time as new ways of thinking develop. While the simplest definition of racism is “policies, behaviours, rules, etc., that result in a continued unfair advantage to some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race,”⁵⁹ it does not cover all the nuances of this complex issue. However, it is a useful starting point for discussion.

The nature of Jesus’ mission directly counters racism and discrimination. Intentionally intercultural congregations are places of racial reconciliation because people of all cultural groups can physically gather without being a threat to one another. A church is not only able to create a safe community by treating all racial and ethnic groups with dignity, divisions based on race or ethnicity can be bridged and healed. The barrier broken down in Ephesians 2:14 is the “partition” (μεσότοιχον) meaning “middle-wall,” which probably refers to the wall in the temple dividing the court of Gentiles and the court of Israel. Paul envisions the physical space of the temple being filled with both Jews and Gentiles, mixing together. He expects a positive communal experience. O’Brien states that “nothing less than a new creation, and entirely new entity, was needed to transcend the deep rift between the two. Coming together was effected through Christ’s death. The result was not an amalgam of the best elements of the two, but a ‘new person’ who transcends them both.”⁶⁰

Part of the difficulty for an intentionally intercultural church in becoming a community of reconciliation is agreeing on what is acceptable across the diverse cultural groups because the Bible does not address every single detail of life. There are many gray areas creating tension due to different preferences. A general principle when determining what is acceptable in a church is to measure the church’s beliefs and practices with the teachings of Jesus, and change the practices that do not align. When there is no clear answer, the church can choose to “see tension as

⁵⁹ *Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. “racism”, accessed Nov. 1, 2020.
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/racism>.

⁶⁰ O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 200.

something to embrace rather than to avoid and eradicate.”⁶¹

Living in tension is difficult in practice. Race and religion in the United States has been a heated and complicated issue.⁶² Most North American churches are still monoethnic. Martin Luther King, Jr., said that "I think it is one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hours, in Christian America."⁶³ According to a study done by Pew Research Center in 2014, Christian groups are less racially diverse than other religious groups.⁶⁴ A study of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 2015 examined how many ELCA congregations have at least 20 percent of attendees not part of the majority ethnoracial group. Data from over 10,000 congregations spanning roughly 15 years show that 96.4 percent of ELCA churches were not multiracial in 2012.⁶⁵

To be communities of reconciliation, churches will seek to move people groups from a negative position of healing past hurts to a positive position of dignifying one another. At times, churches in North America have been clearly racist, hindering Jesus' mission. For example, some major denominations in Canada oversaw the process of putting Aboriginal children in residential schools to assimilate them into the dominant culture. This practice continued even after Canada signed the United Nation's Declaration of Universal Human Rights.⁶⁶ Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized on behalf of the Canadian government admitting that

⁶¹ David A. Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence: Improving your CQ to Engage our Multicultural World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 189.

⁶² See Michael O. Emerson, Elizabeth Korver-Glenn, and Kiara W. Douds, "Studying Race and Religion: A Critical Assessment," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1, no. 3 (Jul 2015): 349–59. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.student.twu.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edo&AN=ejs42280091&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁶³ Martin Luther King Jr., "Interview on 'Meet the Press,'" *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Volume V: Threshold of a New Decade, January 1959–December 1960 (Volume 5)* ed. Clayborne Carson et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 435.

⁶⁴ Michael Lipka, "The most and least racially diverse U.S. religious groups," *Pew Research Center*, accessed Sept. 1, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/>. The top six racially diverse groups in order are: Seventh-day Adventist, Muslim, Jehovah's Witness, Buddhist, and *nothing in particular* with Catholic in 7th place and other Christian groups follow.

⁶⁵ Kevin D. Dougherty, Brandon C. Martinez, and Gerardo Martí, "Congregational Diversity and Attendance in a Mainline Protestant Denomination," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, no. 4 (Dec 2015): 668–83. doi:10.1111/jssr.12229.

⁶⁶ Eileen Markey, "The Reckoning" in *America* 218, no. 14 (Jun 2018): 18–26. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.student.twu.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=130236783&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

“[t]hese objectives were based on the assumption that aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal.”⁶⁷ These actions created segregation between peoples and deep wounds in that cultural group, and did not emulate the new community in Christ.

A notable failure in American history is when White, Christian slaveholders used the Bible to justify slavery. In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass, himself an American slave, comments on the White churches stating: "Between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference- so wide that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked."⁶⁸ The rift between many African Americans and Caucasians still is felt today.

What is positive is that racial diversity within congregations and at all levels of church leadership is trending upward. Using skin color as the metric for multiracial and using data collected between 1998 and 2012 by the National Congregations Study, Dougherty and Emerson show that the percentage of American multiracial congregations rose from 6.4 percent to 12 percent.⁶⁹ Dougherty and Emerson also point to an increase of Black leaders in multiracial congregations, jumping from 4 percent in 1998 to 17 percent in 2012. Although there is an increase, it is minute as 70 percent of multiracial congregation leaders are White and 50 percent of parishioners in these congregations are White.⁷⁰ Reconciliation requires more than coexisting without enmity and at the same time without interaction. People groups must come together to form “a mutual relationship which surpasses what they once were.”⁷¹ They positively influence one another and share gifts as a mutually benefiting, unified community.⁷²

While statistics from a national study of all churches has not been completed in Canada, a smaller study of 55 churches that have over 1,000 people attending per

⁶⁷ Stephen Harper, “Indian Residential Schools Statement of Apology - Prime Minister Stephen Harper,” Government of Canada, accessed August 20, 2020.

<https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100015677/1571589339246>

⁶⁸ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 118.

⁶⁹ Kevin D. Dougherty, and Michael O. Emerson, “The Changing Complexion of American Congregations,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57, no. 1 (Mar 2018): 24–38. doi:10.1111/jssr.12495. The threshold to be considered multiracial is at least 20 percent of a congregation is comprised of another race or ethnicity.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 34.

⁷¹ O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 194.

⁷² Rom. 12:4-7

weekend in Canada done in 2015 using the same metric as Dougherty and Emerson reveals that 62 percent of these churches are multiracial. Although these congregations in Canada are more racially diverse than those in the United States, of the 55 churches surveyed, 93 percent of the senior pastors are White.⁷³ Even though a trend cannot be calculated, clearly there is a need for more multiracial leaders.

Conclusion

While communities are rapidly becoming diverse, churches are slower to become intentionally intercultural. The challenge is to integrate all peoples in a diverse community, overcoming differences for the higher calling of accomplishing Jesus' mission with the help of the Holy Spirit. Willingness to integrate different racial and ethnic groups acknowledges that the gospel has reached them, too.

Benjamin Tse has a BA in Practical Theology majoring in Youth Work from Columbia Bible College and is currently an MDiv Candidate in ACTS Seminary. He served as the International Language Ministries Pastor at Willingdon Church in Burnaby, BC, for five years and is currently the English Ministry Pastor at Pacific Grace Mandarin Church in Burnaby. Benjamin is trilingual and a second generation Chinese-Canadian. He is passionate about pastoral ministry, especially helping the next generation to follow and love Christ.

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Tse, Benjamin J. "The Intentionally Intercultural Church: A Safe Place for All Peoples" Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research. www.nimer.ca (retrieved Date Accessed). Peer reviewed.

⁷³ Warren Bird, "Large Canadian Churches Draw and Estimated 300,000 Worshippers Each Week: Findings from a National Study," *Leadership Network* (Oct 2015), <http://files.efc-canada.net/min/CdnLargeChurchReport2015.pdf>.