

FROM US AND THEM TO FAMILY

John Dyck, MA, and Ken Pudlas, EdD

Introduction

Earlier articles published in NIMER have dealt with the broad topic of diversity and inclusion. For the most part they discussed the church's responsibility to be inclusive of all persons including those who may be deemed exceptional by virtue of some form of learning challenge resulting from cognitive, sensory, physical, or behavioral differences—in short, on loving our neighbor as per the great commandment.¹ More recently the focus was on creating inviting physical spaces for those who may have physical or sensory challenges.²

We offer here another perspective on obeying the Great Commandment to love God by loving those whom He has created in His image. Specifically, how can the Church, in the truest sense of it being the Body of Christ here on earth, be inclusive and inviting to those who come from other cultures and who bring a unique “evangelical Christian” experience?

The Church in Canada - Demographic Composition

A previous article in this series suggested that apprentices of Jesus are to find their identity in Him. Without denying their cultural or ethnic heritage, they focus on what unites them in Jesus's teachings rather than on what divides them. The Apostle Paul wrote that there is neither Jew nor Gentile (Galatians 3:28). The Gospel of Luke, particularly the first eight chapters, demonstrates how the Church that was established after Jesus' death and resurrection grew from mainly a small, Jerusalem-based group of believers to world-wide fellowship of believers reaching out to every nation.

Given the changing demographics in Canada in general³ and in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia where the authors reside and given the exclusion the authors have experienced in various contexts, what lessons might be available to churches and church leaders to enable churches to be truly inclusive?

¹ For example, see Pudlas, Kenneth A. *Shrinking the Margins: The Church and Diversity*. Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research. www.nimer.ca (retrieved Date Accessed).

² Pudlas, Kenneth A. *Toward Structurally Inviting and Inclusive Churches*. Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research. www.nimer.ca (retrieved Date Accessed).

³ Norris, Doug. “Canada 2020 and Beyond.” *Envionics Analytics*. 28 February 2020.

Table 1

Ethnicity	Percentage of Total Population in Private Households by Ethnic Origins	Ethnicity	Percentage of Total Population in Private Households by Ethnic Origins
English	20.8	Iranian	1.6
Chinese	19.0	Japanese	1.5
Scottish	14.6	American	1.4
Canadian	14.4	Vietnamese	1.4
Irish	11.4	Hungarian	1.0
East Indian	9.6	Danish	1.0
German	9.3	Jewish	1.0
French	6.1	Portuguese	1.0
Filipino	5.3	Austrian	0.9
Ukrainian	3.7	Punjabi	0.8
Italian	3.6	Taiwanese	0.7
Dutch	3.2	Romanian	0.7
Polish	2.8	Finnish	0.6
Russian	2.3	Greek	0.6
Korean	2.2	Croatian	0.6
Norwegian	2.2	Fijian	0.6
Welsh	1.9	Swiss	0.5
Spanish	1.8	Mexican	0.5
Swedish	1.7	Total	!00%

Table 1. Selected data from the Metro Vancouver Population by Ethnic Origin reported in a Statistics Canada 2011 National Household Survey.⁴

Clearly, the Lower Mainland population is diverse in composition. Some areas in the region have a predominant cultural makeup. It may come as a surprise to some that their culture is not dominant in their area. The example of the BC Lower Mainland may be extrapolated across Canada

What are the implications of this diversity for local church congregations? The neighbours they are supposed to love are likely to come from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Debates about assimilation versus accommodation aside, the Body of Christ on earth is to be welcoming and inclusive.

Even as churches focus on what they have in common, they consciously or unconsciously reflect national cultures. Newcomers may need to acculturate into a church culture that is different from what they are used to. Raised in a missionary family in Ecuador, John has a unique experience of cultural identity, one which provides insights into welcoming and inclusive church life. Below, he describes his background and his attempts to adjust to church life in Canada. John's reflections on his own journey can assist church leaders to transform "us" and "them" into "family."

Fitting In - Culture

When I arrived in Canada at the young age of 16, my parents decided, for a variety of reasons, that I should stay complete high school in Canada and then be able to attend a Canadian university. At the time it was not clear to me that I was not very Canadian though I spoke English and looked Caucasian. I knew that I did not want to be in Canada, and that I did not fit in. I was a TCK, Third Culture Kid, which added another layer to my culture and meant that I was never going to fit anywhere. I grew up and saw myself as an Ecuadorian. I attended an Ecuadorian local school, my church was with local people, and my friends were all Ecuadorians. The only place I spoke English or learned North American cultural norms and behaviours was at home.

It was only later, when my American wife and I went to live in Colombia after a year of marriage, that I was able to put together an important piece of my identity. Several months into our life in Colombia, she observed, "I'm realizing I did not

⁴ Metro Vancouver Population by Ethnic Origin, 2011 NHS. Source: <http://www.metrovancouver.org/services/regional-planning/PlanningPublications/PopulationbyEthnicOriginNHS2011.pdf>

marry a Canadian at all. I actually married a Latino in white skin.” Apparently, I felt so at home in the Colombian culture that I had completely reverted to being Latino. I now describe myself as a “white face with a brown heart.” I realize that residing in several countries and learning from my experiences has given me a unique perspective on cultural diversity. I also understand that, in some ways, a person who grows up in a different cultural setting will never fully integrate into an adopted country, no matter what the circumstances are.⁵

As a child, I was myself the object of some prejudice and exclusion. As a blond, blue-eyed, white child, I was distinctly different everywhere I went. I became accustomed to that, though I knew I could never fully be accepted for who I was. When people talk about their encounters with racism, I can identify with their sentiments. Many times, as I walked the streets of my city, I endured being called out as an obvious “gringo” (a despective term for “foreigner”), sometimes mockingly, other times with considerable hostility. Being different made me try even harder to integrate and become accepted as just one more Ecuadorian. One place I did feel accepted was in the church where I attended with my family. Though we were different, including socioeconomically, the acceptance there was unconditional.

When I arrived in Canada, where the physical appearances were not as distinctly different, I still did not fit in. Though I appeared to be the same on the outside, my way of thinking and my behaviour was more in line with my Ecuadorian background and often did not fit with the typical Canadian behavioural norms. For example, Ecuadorian culture is warm and physically relational. Standing very close to someone during a conversation is important. Walking down the street with an arm around the shoulders of a male friend is a manifestation of close friendship. Both those practices are unacceptable in Canadian culture. Again, I became the target of misunderstandings and felt I was a misfit. To compensate, I found myself conforming to expected behaviours for my age level, especially in the church where I was attending, though they sometimes were not consistent with my values. My evangelical church clearly was not sensitive to any deviation from their expectations for Christian conduct. They clearly expected conformity to long-established “Christian” norms.

Diversity can be represented by ethnic or cultural norms of behaviour that may not necessarily fit with Canadian cultural norms, including church cultural norms. In the 50 years since I entered an evangelical church in Metro Vancouver to the present, have churches been forced to alter their approach to diversity because the culture has obligated them to do so? Or have they missionally re-examined how

⁵ Annamaria Recupero, “Mixed Reality for Cross-Cultural Integration,” *Frontiers in Psychology*, 17 July 2018.

Jesus demonstrated and taught unconditional acceptance of all people and now are applying his example to an increasingly diverse population? Changes due to external pressures are, at best, temporal and will change again when the culture changes. Changes of heart, of attitudes shaped by precepts and values with profound spiritual origins, are permanent and effective responses of churches to the diversity of their communities.⁶ It has been demonstrated that changes are most effective when people consciously change their attitudes by their own free will and can control the changes. Given recent events that have highlighted racism on many levels in Canadian society, missional re-examination would seem to be a starting point for churches desiring to improve their welcome and inclusiveness.

Steps to welcome and inclusivity begin with individuals. I was fortunate to grow up in a situation where diversity was the norm. The churches I attended naturally assimilated diversity with a remarkable openness, surprisingly free of prejudice. The Ecuadorian churches where my parents were involved as missionaries included mestizo, mulatto, black, Indian (that is how native people in Ecuador refer to themselves) ethnicities and some with European or Asian backgrounds. Little distinction was made, leading to a refreshing harmony and unity of spirit. This may have been a result of the common socioeconomic status of these churches. Perhaps it created a greater openness to difference.

Class is a factor in the make-up of congregations in Ecuador. Latin American culture is class-based.⁷ From colonial times, an aristocracy or oligarchy has owned and governed almost everything. The working classes, in many cases akin to slavery, served the needs and purposes of the rulers, often being cruelly exploited. Over time, a small middle class has emerged which increasingly plays a role in the functioning of contemporary society. However, the overall class structure still is mainly composed of a disproportionately small ruling class served by a massive working class. In Latino daily life, the two classes co-exist for pragmatic reasons, but not on fair or equal terms. Evangelical churches can be defined by the neighbourhood where they are located and/or the class of people who make up its composition. People of wealthier backgrounds rarely attend a church largely made up of working-class believers and vice versa. Although in recent years there has been

⁶ Richard Petty & John Cacioppo, "The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Volume 19 (1986)

⁷ Faletto, Enzo, "The history of the social stratification of Latin America", *Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean*, August 1993

some movement to overcome class distinctions,⁸ there is still a long way to go before there is anything which resembles total integration or inclusion.

Canadian churches can be uncomfortable for potential attenders in a different way. Although there are notable exceptions of churches that gather in intercultural congregations and use a diversity of languages in their services, many churches serve a specific cultural and language group.⁹ In larger urban settings where the population includes diverse ethnic and cultural groups, there is a profusion of ethnic-based churches where a particular cultural and language group dominates. These churches often have several generations of congregants with different needs, culturally, linguistically or both. However, Canada is fundamentally an egalitarian nation with less class distinctions than most countries. Although socio-economic differences exist in Canadian society that cannot be denied or glossed over, they generally do not carry over into evangelical churches in distinctive ways. Pristine Mercedes and Cadillacs share church parking lots with beat-up Fords and Chevrolets on Sunday mornings. Generally, wealthy and working-class people are treated similarly inside church buildings. Whether that reflects Canadian attitudes and culture in general or a deeper level of caring for all people inspired by our love for Jesus is a matter of debate.

Fitting In - Worldview

My wife and I taught in a local school in Colombia for five years. While there, we adopted the lifestyle and customs of our Colombian colleagues. When we returned, we found that our worldview was substantially different from that of other Christians with whom we became acquainted. Couples our age and at a similar stage in their marriages were focused on different life goals. It appeared that acquisition of material goods took precedence over reaching out to people who were different or in greater need.

We were even more challenged by the tendency to associate with others who are “more like us,” who shared similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds. At the same time, our Mennonite church was emerging from its more German traditions and beginning to accept groups from Indonesian and Latino cultural backgrounds. This was important to us; we appreciated the open attitude toward other cultures on the part of church leadership. As we became involved with the Latino group, however,

⁸ Francisco Ferreira, “Economic Mobility and the Rise of the Latin American Middle Class”, *World Bank Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 2013

⁹ Douglas Todd, “Ethnic Churches Flourishing”, *The Vancouver Sun*, 5 February 2011

we found ourselves excluded from many opportunities to interact with other couples. In part it was a matter of conflicting schedules, but also there was little effort to understand our involvement with “them.” Eventually, the church became increasingly intercultural. It is now a mix of many nations and languages, sometimes more by accident than by design.

Fitting In – Inclusive Praxis

As my wife and I have participated in this change, there have been some fundamental tests of values and beliefs. What does no “Jew or Gentile” distinctions in the church mean? How much do we have to re-examine entrenched beliefs that make it difficult to distinguish between what is a biblical and what is a cultural interpretation? It is refreshing to see church people honestly wrestle with accepting all people, without prejudice, and how to integrate multicultural worship, teaching, and other components of church life. The process of learning how to put welcoming and inclusion into practice is ongoing, as recent events in Canadian life continue to challenge churches.¹⁰ The COVID-19 pandemic particularly has shown how easy it is to become isolated from the world around us.

At the church where we attend,¹¹ our small group, also called a life group, is an example of how inclusive practices may be integrated into the habitual functions of a church. The main purposes of the group are to have fellowship, study the Bible and grow in faith together. Before we started meeting, we did not know each other well. At present, we are a group of twenty people. Seven were born in Canada and thirteen were born in nine other countries with distinct ethnic and cultural differences. There are eight different first languages represented, with English being the group’s *lingua franca*. Ages range from 35 to 72 years, and marital status varies. In many ways, the group reflects the Metro Vancouver context. Especially over the past five years, the members of the group have melded together as a community that meets weekly for the stated purpose and has ongoing connections on a variety of levels. The group serves as a case study for what might work to bring people from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds into a larger, inclusive church setting.¹² First and foremost, the group decided to maintain a cap of about twenty people, mainly because trust is a significant component of a harmonious group.¹³ Trust can only be achieved as small number of people get to know each other in a more than

¹⁰ Adam MacInnis, “Evangelism Not a Priority in Canadian Churches”, *Christianity Today*, 13 October 2021

¹¹ Willingdon Church, Burnaby, BC.

¹² Rachel Gilmore, “The Benefits of Small Groups in Smaller Churches”, *Christianity Today*, 2 August 2010

¹³ Dana Brownlee, “5 Reasons Why Trust Matters on Teams”, *Forbes*, 20 October 2019.

casual fashion over a long period of time. In addition, most cultures are highly relational – they interact and thrive in community. Community does not happen in anonymous large groups. It develops as people get to know each other personally, meet frequently and build meaningful relationships. A stated commitment to the group over a longer period of time helps the group develop trusting relationships and become a family.

Second, the group has been drawn together by a shared mission to people who, like us, come from many countries and when they arrive in Canada as refugees have many needs which can only be met by caring and compassionate people. Sixteen years ago, the organization, Journey Home Community, originated in this group.¹⁴ Although it has grown considerably, and now has a professional staff, it continues to be a focal point for volunteer service by members of our life group. As immigrants ourselves, we are empathetic to their needs and are better prepared to share in their need for meaningful relationships.

Third, group members intentionally learn about each other's cultures, both academically and experientially. We eat our ethnic foods together during the year; eating together is fundamental to growing relationships. We share our traditions and celebrations, and sometimes participate in events that are important to someone's culture. For example, we learned some of the deeper cultural and historical meanings of the Chinese New Year. Sometimes members must explain and provide context to certain practices in a culture. For example, we learned that hugs, which might include an air kiss on a cheek, are important to several cultures in our group. To other cultures, hugs are almost anathema. Over time, we have had open discussions about this practice. All the members of our group have adopted hugs as an important part of greeting each other and now agree that they are important.

Fourth, we have become a community as we have maintained consistent connections in our daily lives apart from the group. Some members of the group keep in touch with each other via various social media networks. Others share meals, play games, and plan social activities. The group fosters connection through a weekly email communicating coming events, prayer concerns, relevant pieces of information or links, as well as through other forms of communication. Ongoing, clear and consistent communication is essential for deeper engagement among people of various backgrounds.

Fifth, sharing life events is important in building caring communities. Life events, such as birthdays, weddings, memorials, and other ceremonies, are important in most cultures. Sharing life's trials and traumas by supporting each other through

¹⁴Journey Home Community website: <https://www.journeyhomecommunity.ca/>

illnesses, job loss, miscarriages, moving, family problems, and other challenging life experiences is crucial. The ability to share and support will only happen where there has been a deliberate effort made to build trust, a quality that for some cultures comes only after trustworthiness has been tested over time. This is an important factor in building trust in most Latino cultures, for example, where personal relationships are built over time, with much informal conversation and interaction, as participants get to know each other more deeply through sharing on a personal level.

Language creates different meanings and nuances, depending on how something might be said or on the vocabulary that is used. When integrating a diverse community from various languages, it is important to understand how these differences colour what is being communicated. For example, Spanish does not have a word for “compromise” as it is used in English because compromise is not a shared cultural value. Other words must be found to express this concept as it is applied in English. Various languages translate certain biblical words or phrases differently than English translations. Our group often compares the meanings our translations lend to certain words in Scriptures; doing so enriches both our understanding of the Bible and of each other. Even the way characters are constructed in certain Asian languages can influence the meaning of a word. Churches need to consider the significance of language differences when people from other cultures are seeking to understand one another. Churches that desire to foster community in a diverse congregation need to pay attention to the role of language in intercultural communication.¹⁵

A final factor in bringing people of diverse backgrounds together is that cultures also vary in how they approach differing opinions or even conflict. Some cultures value direct, clear statements about what a person is thinking, even though they may seem offensive. Some cultures value how a person feels and try to avoid offending the other person. These cultures are focused on “saving face.” In lieu of direct tactics, people from nonconfrontational cultures express their differences ambiguously. Unless these differences in communication are understood and communicated, there may be serious misunderstandings. Our life group has had to work out conciliatory discussions rooted in different approaches to resolving conflict. Inclusive churches are continually aware of how they may sound to other parties, choosing words and tones of voice that are less confrontational to honour diverse values.¹⁶ “Speak[ing] the truth in love” requires sensitivity.

¹⁵ Susan A. Gelman and Steven O. Roberts, “How Language Shapes the Cultural Inheritance of Categories”, *PNAS*, July 25 2017

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Fitting In – Churches Reaching Out

This article mainly focuses on bringing diverse peoples into community in the church setting. The experience of a worldwide pandemic also provides an opportunity to broadly examine how churches are to carry out Jesus' clearly expressed values towards their neighbours (Matt 22:37-39). The pandemic forces Christians to answer whether they care for others as themselves (Lev 19:34). Do personal fears about wellbeing hinder reaching out to help those who are different ethnically and socially and in need, without any kind of prejudice? The needs may be physical, or material, or deeply spiritual. Are racist attitudes present, not just in the larger society, but also in churches? By contrast, when people from many nations and ethnic groups gathered at Pentecost, there was no distinction made for ethnic or racial provenance; instead, there was a sharing of possessions and a fellowship born of their love of God.¹⁷ The horrors experienced by Canadian Indigenous people, with the historical involvement of churches, are being exposed.¹⁸ The pandemic also has brought to light significant social and economic disparities in Canadian society - access to health care and other services reveals disproportionate differences in the ability of people to respond to the pandemic's deleterious effects.¹⁹ Churches can demonstrate their commitment to God's mission to reach the world by creating new ways of loving all peoples unconditionally, as Jesus commanded.

Summary and Conclusions

When Paul wrote that there is no distinction between Gentile and Jew, he was not suggesting the obliteration of cultural differences. Rather, he was teaching that no culture, race, gender, or level of ability is more valuable or less *Imago Dei* than any other.

How do churches fully embrace and model Jesus' teaching? From the lived experience of a "white person with a brown heart," what can church people, individually and collectively, learn about including - in the fullest sense of the term - those who don't fit in for any reason, including being used to different ethnic and cultural norms.

¹⁷ Acts 2:44-47

¹⁸ Emily McFarlan Miller, "Churches Confront Their Role in Residential Schools for Indigenous Children", *The Washington Post*, 8 October 2021

¹⁹ Zara Liaqat, "Why Covid 19 is an Inequality Virus", *Policy Option*, 30 April 2021

John Dyck, MA, was born to missionary parents in Guayaquil, Ecuador. He taught high school in Colombia and Richmond for 33 years, and then served as an instructor at Trinity Western University for 12 years. John volunteers with Journey Home Community, which serves refugee families who come to Canada seeking asylum. He has been working with WorldServe Ministries for the past 14 years developing leadership and providing resources for church planters and children's ministry in Cuba.

Ken Pudlas earned his doctorate at the University of British Columbia, and recently retired as a Professor in the School of Education at Trinity Western University. He was instrumental in establishing and teaching special education courses at both UBC and at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee prior to his tenure at TWU. Prior to his university career, Ken taught students with special needs in the K-12 public school system in several districts in British Columbia. Dr. Pudlas developed and was the Director of the MA in Educational Studies in Special Education program, approved by the BC Ministry of Advanced Education and launched in the summer of 2014. This program seeks to bring together head (knowledge) and hands (skills) motivated by the heart in order to empower educators toward inclusive praxis. Dr. Pudlas also developed the Minor in Special Education program which has grown in popularity as pre-professional teachers realize the ever-increasing diversity among learners in today's classrooms. He has done extensive research on the Full Inclusion model of service delivery and has presented locally, nationally, and internationally on topics related to learners with diverse needs.

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