

MULTIPLE ROADS TO A MULTICULTURAL CONGREGATION

“We’re not sure how to do it but we believe we should become a multicultural congregation,” the pastor said. “How can we move from our dreams to a plan that achieves results?”¹

Multiculturalism in the United States

Here are the realities that any effective multicultural-congregation strategy must take into account.

- Assume that the U.S. will continue to attract about one million foreign-born adults each year, an annual increase of about 2.5 percent. Immigrants and their U.S.-born children now make up about 26 percent of the U.S. population—about 81 million people.²
- The leading country for new immigrants is India, followed by China, Mexico, Canada, and the Philippines.³
- Approximately 51 percent of immigrants are female.
- For the vast majority of new residents, English is not their first language. Further, half of the 42.1 million U.S. immigrants reported limited English proficiency (LEP).
- The overall percentage of foreign-born adults who are college-educated is about the same as native-born adults (29 percent vs. 30 percent).
- Some states draw a larger number of immigrants. The top five states in terms of absolute numbers are California, Texas, New York, Florida, and New Jersey. But between 2000 and 2014, the largest percentage growth was in Tennessee, Kentucky, Wyoming, North Dakota, and South Carolina.
- Currently almost half of all immigrants chose to become naturalized U.S. citizens.
- Typically, participation in the labor force is the clearest path to assimilation. Immigrants account for 17 percent of the civilian labor force—a percentage that more than tripled since 1970. In

contrast, worshiping in an established congregation ranks far behind an immigrant’s desire for education, health care, and other benefits of living in the U.S.

- The broad categories of “Hispanic” and “Latino” serve as umbrella terms for distinct subgroups of immigrants, who identify themselves in term of the country of their birth (for example, Mexico, Cuba, Honduras, or Haiti).
- Organizing one congregation that is both multiracial (for example, members are African American and American-born Caucasians) and multicultural (the church intentionally engages people from multiple cultures) is extremely challenging.

Multiple Roadmaps

Congregations pursue different models depending on their specific community and available leadership. Here are proven steps a congregation can take to actively pursue a multicultural congregation.



FLETCHER

“TO BECOME A MULTICULTURAL CHURCH,
WE’LL NEED SOMEONE EXPERIENCED IN DEALING
WITH PEOPLE TOTALLY DIFFERENT FROM US...
THE YOUTH PASTOR SEEMS LIKE THE PERFECT CHOICE.”

Bicultural leadership. The congregational leader is an immigrant or in a bicultural marriage. Potential members believe the pastor will understand the issues that arise as a family navigates life across cultures. Other worshippers, who are not immigrants or in a bicultural family, value diversity and appreciate the experiences and perspectives of different people.

Multiple sites and multiple cultures. An existing, predominantly Anglo, church launches a second site served by an immigrant associate pastor. The organizational structure is similar to a multi-campus congregation with one name, one budget, and unified staff. The church launches additional sites as interest and groups are identified. Leaders coordinate some shared activities to build relationships across groups.

One site, multiple cultures. A common model implemented by a predominantly Anglo congregation is a “nested” worshiping community. For example, the first hour of the worship schedule is three different worship experiences in three separate rooms: one in English, one in Spanish, and one in Korean. Following these separate services, the second hour is integrated church school classes. Again, leaders plan many shared activities to build relationships across groups.

Another one site, multiple cultures model that is less common happens over a long period of time. One immigrant family joins an Anglo congregation. Then, they invite another family in their circle and over time more people connected through culture or immigrant experiences become part of the worshiping community. Usually in these cases, success stems from the strong support of a long-tenured pastor and other church leaders invested in deepening relationships across cultures.

Nested educational offerings. An Anglo congregation offers a Christian Day School (preschool through elementary or beyond) and intentionally extends invitations to families with immigrant and ethnic minority children from the community. The operational assumption is that the parents will follow their children and eventually become part of the worshiping community.

Affinity judicatories. Denominations define regional boundaries primarily on geography. However, another approach is to define a judicatory based on cultural or racial affinity—one judicatory for recent Korean immigrants; another separate judicatory structure for Mexican Americans or African-Americans. This strategy recognizes the high value groups place on indigenous leadership development and self-governance.

Merged congregations. Another approach is when an immigrant congregation, now largely made up of American-born adults who are the children of earlier immigrants, decides to unite with a predominantly Anglo congregation. Both recognize that by sharing resources they can grow their ministries and together write a new chapter in their collective history.

New missions. The road least traveled is the decision to launch a new congregation, designed from the beginning to reflect demographic and cultural diversity.

Build on Shared Commonalities

A multicultural church is not a melting pot—a worshiping community where the unique beliefs and behaviors of different cultural groups disappear. The tendency is for the dominant indigenous group in the church to feel that the minority cultures should give up their cultural identity once they become part of the congregation. To transform a collection of people into a unified congregation requires respect for cultural identities and constructive communication that builds trust.

While respecting differences, find points of commonality, such as: (a) commitment to children’s education; (b) support for bicultural families; (c) the same first language; (d) similar age or marital status; (e) same stage in their faith development or shared theology; (f) shared preference for the type of worship style; (g) shared experiences in ministry with Christians in a sister church in another country; and (h) active engagement with a community social issue or advocacy efforts. The larger the number of points of commonality and/or the choices a congregation offers, the better its chances of becoming multicultural over time.

A Journey—Not a Destination

Like all other congregations, the multicultural church never achieves perfection or absolute harmony. They too are a work in progress, ever evolving to become closer to being the body of Christ.

1. Material updated from Lyle Schaller, “Seven Roads to a Multicultural Congregation,” *The Parish Paper*, November 2009, Vol. 17, No. 11.

2. Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova, “Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States,” April 14, 2016, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states>.

3. To explore immigrant populations by state and county see <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-immigrant-population-state-and-county>.