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NEITHER JEW NOR GREEK

Ethnocentrism vs. Interculturalism and the Future of the Adventist Church

Lyle Notice, DMin

ABSTRACT

The Adventist Church is one of the most ethnically diverse churches within North America, but with its continued diversity explosion, many churches are segregated by racial lines and ethnicity. With the rise of immigration, what will the future of the Adventist church in North America look like? Will new ethnic immigrants assimilate into white churches? Will Seventh-day Adventist churches eventually become ethnic enclaves that continue to create racialized silos? Is the Adventist church becoming more ethnocentric? How do we foster more intercultural churches?

INTRODUCTION

As a child I vividly remember playing with kaleidoscopes. I used to love seeing all the different colors, shapes, and patterns. I would look into the instrument and see beautiful pictures. Fascinated by the construction of the kaleidoscope, I would take them apart wanting to see how it all worked.

As I got older I learned the unique way in which the kaleidoscope works. Mathews and Park (2011, 15) in their book, *The Post-Racial Church: A Biblical Framework for Multi-ethnic Reconciliation*, explained how it works.

There are two or three mirrors directed toward each other. The arrangement of the mirrors determines the number of reflections, ultimately directing the diversity of the patterns. Despite the irregularity of the shapes, the mirrors transform them into proportioned images that are aesthetically pleasing and intellectually interesting. Removed from the tube, the bits of coloured glass become piles of rubble.

Mathews and Park (2011, 5) pointed out two important things that I believe the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church must do to move successfully into the church of the

future: 1). Either we work together in tandem or we don't work at all; or 2). The mirrors must be directed toward each other to have the visual effect.

This illustration of kaleidoscope shares a great lesson for the Adventist church. We must work together or our church will not work at all; or it will work only in limited dysfunctionality. And we must be willing to face each other and work through our differences and conflicts.

Do monoethnic and monocultural churches foster racial and ethnic divide? My concern is that many SDA churches across North America are becoming more ethnocentric, producing more ethnocultural congregations. With the progress of constant immigration, our churches could become hyper-nationalistic, hyper-ethnocentric, and hyper-segregated.

The Bible provides hope, such as a theology established in Paul's cosmopolitan vision found in Galatians 3:28 (KJV), "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

This paper seeks to discuss the challenges of race, racism, prejudice, immigration, and the potential for intentional intercultural small groups.

THE INVISIBLE COLOR LINE WITHIN THE SDA CHURCH

The SDA Church is considered the most racially and ethnically diverse religious group within the United States of America (US) (Lipka 2015), yet there remains a history of intentional racial/ethnic segregation in SDA churches in the US and Canada (Hollancid 2016). In the US, the SDA Church is organized into regional conferences historically established to give representative organization to Black churches and pastors (Francis 2019). There are also separate SDA conferences comprised of predominately White churches with White pastors (Hector 2017). This raises questions regarding how a church considered one of the most racially diverse religious groups in the US can be, at the same time, ethnocentric and racially segregated.

It is necessary to explore race relations in the SDA Church in the Canadian context because the Church's origins and history transpired in the United States. The origin story remains important because it has shaped not only the Church's theology, but also its entire organizational structure. The SDA Church governance structure was established in the US, and the Canadian SDA Church has taken its cues from the General Conference located in the US, specifically Silver Springs, Maryland. While there are a plethora of sources exploring the history of Adventism and race relations within the United States, there is a paucity of research documenting the history of race relations in the SDA Church in Canada. Are racial dynamics in the Canadian context similar to those in the American SDA Church? Such things need to be considered, especially when drawing close attention to the impact of the diversity explosion, immigration, and the racial and cultural dynamics that will define the Adventist church in the coming years.

WHAT IS HAPPENING RACIALLY?

Many Adventist Churches across North America are separated by race. They serve as ethnic enclaves where the host culture is the dominant and, many times, the only culture. Immigration seems to exacerbate this separation.

While the histories of Canada and the US are certainly divergent, there can be little question that shared values underpin the countries' distinctive cultures. Perhaps most notably, scholars have observed that Canada has a painful

legacy of racism and White supremacy, the vestiges of which persist today (Burrill 2019, Preston 2017, Stanley 2000). Racism continues to be embedded in U.S. institutions—both religious and secular (Griffith et al. 2007). The Seventh-day Adventist Church appears to have fallen prey to this institutional racism, with US churches demonstrating segregation of different racial and ethnic groups (Hector 2017).

WHAT IS HAPPENING CULTURALLY?

The statistics for several years have pointed to a revolving door with young adults. A recent report from *Christianity Today* reported that, after the pandemic, church attendance among young people had dropped even further (Roach 2023). Although youth are leaving the church in North America, church membership and attendance remain fairly stable because the void is being filled with immigrants from various places around the world. In the SDA Church in North America, the consistent membership rate masks the reality of loss because immigrants replace those who have left. But that replacement happens in ethnic churches rather than dwindling White churches.

MISSIONARY ROLE REVERSAL

It used to be that missionaries from the West would go “across the seas” and evangelize people on other continents, teaching non-Christians about the Bible, Jesus, and how to live as Christ's disciples. Now the tables seem to have turned. Now, developing nations are sending missionaries to Western nations.

At the same time, church attendance in White churches continues to decline (Granberg-Michaelson 2021, para 3). Years ago it was attributed to White Flight—Whites moving away when people of color moved into an area because the Whites chose not to live or worship with those of a different race. But today other factors, such as a loss of church interest and involvement, plus the increasing availability of online options and a pandemic, contribute to the attendance downturn in White churches.

MULTICULTURAL BUT ETHNOCENTRIC

There may be a rational justification for ethnocentrism in religious communities (Bizumic et al. 2008), namely the cohesion and comradery it affords particular in-groups, in addition to the devotion and defense it may confer. Within the context of faith communities, separation from other cultural and ethnic social groups may be necessary or preferred due to language barriers, solidarity, cultural

familiarity, or other religious considerations. In some cases, however, the identity of such in-groups may lend itself more readily to exclusion than to cohesion. Concerns have been raised regarding the presence of an invisible racial wall that separates Black and White congregants within the SDA Church (Bracey II and Moore 2017, Hector 2017, Oyakawa 2019). Taking into consideration historical and cultural contexts, this may not be viewed by some as a form of positive ethnocentrism but may rather be viewed as a practice of intentional racism (Hector 2017).

It may be tempting to assume that devout Christians reject racism, which ostensibly contradicts their prescribed doctrines. However, scholarly research conducted in The Netherlands reported that Christians who expressed deep biblical convictions also displayed ethnic prejudice and discrimination (Eisinga, Felling, and Peters 1990). Other scholars have found that church members were, in fact, more likely to be racially prejudiced than individuals who are not connected to organized religion (Eisinga, Felling, and Peters 1990). These findings suggest that racism is indeed espoused and acted upon by some Christians, which may shed light on motivations for racial segregation in SDA conferences observed in the US by Hector (2017).

Since the early 2000s, scholars have observed the emergence of multiracial congregations who intentionally choose to worship in community, crossing social, racial, and cultural lines (Davis and Lerner 2015, Kujawa-Holbrook 2002, Priest and Edwards 2019). Multiracial congregations could easily be identified as a conceivable solution to racial segregation within Christianity. On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that the notion of a multiracial congregation may be overly idealistic.

Typically, multiracial congregations take on a White racial framing that represents the preferences and desires of White congregants rather than those of racial minorities (Edwards 2008). Gjeltén (2020) shared a pastor's perspective on integrated churches, citing that growth of multiracial churches is typically fuelled by people of color moving into White churches. Conversely, there has been little to no change in the percentage of White congregants joining churches of color. Bracey and Moore (2017) explored why open organizations remain racially segregated and highlighted the use of "race tests" used in evangelical churches to continue the perpetuation of racial segregation.

While integrated churches are not a panacea for solving the problem of racial segregation within Christian churches, it

is still believed that studying multiracial congregations will help to establish a better understanding of race relations and religion for society at large (DeYoung 2004, Emerson and Woo 2008).

THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH AND RACIAL SEGREGATION

Currently the SDA Church stands out as one of the world's most widespread religious denominations that operates multilingually (Lipka 2015). With over 21 million members worldwide (Wilson 2024), the actively growing SDA Church also oversees various faith-based operations across the globe. While the SDA Church boasts a broad diversity of communities globally, it retains a centralized ecclesiastical governance structure.

Neufeld's work (1966 as cited in Hollancid 2016) on *Regional Department and Conferences* found a structural segregation of the SDA Church along a Black-White divide in the North American Division of SDA churches. This partitioning shapes interpersonal relationships within the SDA structure and influences interactions between groups (White, Black, and other races or ethnicities) in Adventist institutions.

Seventh-day Adventism in the United States has a history of racial tension, discrimination, and anti-Black prejudice, which has led to the implementation of an internal racial division with segregated local conferences (Greene 2009). The official separation within the US influences the lower two levels—local conferences and the local churches under them—in the five levels of the SDA Church governance structure. This segregation, entrenched in the church's governance structure, may perhaps be a reflection of the pervasive tension and division that has marked the fight for Black rights and equality throughout U.S. history (Mathieu 2010, Du Bois 2004:2, DuPont 2013, Jayakumar and Adamian 2017, Rodney et al. 2018). Hollancid (2016) argued that while "the SDA Church professes and preaches unity in the pulpit," in actuality, "it is officially segregated along Black-White lines." Korateng-Pipim (2001, 393) echoed Hollancid's perspective, citing the SDA Church's past silence and insensitivity in the face of racial issues and its perpetuation of these issues.

SDA scholar Calvin Rock (2018) noted that Black SDA members were forced to reconcile the church's clear vision of history and salvation with its restrictive social policies, including the refusal of access to churches. Although the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to preach

a universal gospel to every nation and tongue (Rev 14:6), the majority of SDA churches house monoracial congregations. Seljak and Bramadat (2008) observed that in spite of Canada's official encouragement of multiculturalism, Black leaders in Canada continue to face systemic and institutional racism. Korateng-Pipim (2001) remarked that integration has been chiefly limited to Black Adventists joining predominantly White congregations.

Although the Adventist Church is a diverse church worldwide, on a local church level, it can be multiculturally ethnocentric. There are still many mono-ethnic churches that exist. Having mono-ethnic churches is not to be considered a bad thing, but the question is how do we create more inter-ethnic churches that foster unity in diversity?

ARE MULTIRACIAL CONGREGATIONS PART OF THE SOLUTION?

In studying multiracial congregations, it is important to determine what is working and what is not working in the context of intercultural faith communities. In addition to the aforementioned shortcomings and limitations, there are positive social dynamics and cues that can be observed and unpacked through investigations of racially diverse congregations. DeYoung (2004, 3) posited that “multiracial congregations can play an important role in reducing racial division and inequality and that this should be the goal of Christian people.”

Identifying best practices for racially diverse and equitable congregations is valuable for churches, in addition to holding practical applications for other kinds of social environments that are seeking to be more ethnically inclusive.

Intentional Intercultural Small Groups

Drawing on these observations, how might intentional intercultural small groups contribute to the development of positive race relations within the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

Can faith-based small group ministry help to bridge the gap between different ethnic groups coming together to worship? Collins (2020) identified a gap in the research of multiethnic research and faith-based small group ministry. According to Notice (2019, 42):

Groups are collectives of individuals whereby people come together for frequent social interaction, usually with a common purpose or goal in mind. Transformational groups go a step further.

A transformational group is one that not only comes together for a unified purpose but also (a) transforms those within the group and (b) impacts change outside of the group.

Stetzer and Geiger (2014) observed that growth is fostered within communities.

The Bible established community as a critical component of Christian obedience, whereby members are called out of darkness to join in a relationship with Christ (Gen 3:8–10). Small groups also promote assimilation. Searcy and Henson (2008, 4) defined assimilation as “The process used to encourage your first-time guest to continue coming back until they see and understand God’s power, accept Jesus as their Savior, and commit themselves to the local church through membership.”

With the Adventist Church having many diverse mono-ethnic congregations within North America, it may be well for churches to start implementing intercultural small groups. This is where members from different ethnocultural congregations intentionally mix and mingle, creating a diverse small group that engages in cross-cultural learning and dialogue.

Drawing on Notice (2019) and the work of others, Tan (2021), and Collins (2020), further research should be explored concerning the ability of racially and ethnically diverse small groups to address racial divides and segregation among SDA Church communities in Alberta, Canada.

BUT WHY DOES IMMIGRANT CHURCH GROWTH MATTER IN NORTH AMERICA?

In the book *Diversity Explosion*, William Frey discovered:

America reached an important milestone in 2011. That occurred when, for the first time in the history of the country, more minority babies than white babies were born in a year. Soon, most children will be racial minorities: Hispanics, Blacks, Asians, and other non-White races. And, in about three decades, Whites will constitute a minority of all Americans. (2015, 1)

The non-Hispanic White population is projected to shrink over coming decades, from 199 million in 2020 to 179 million people in 2060— even as the U.S. population continues to grow. Their decline is driven by falling birth rates and the rising number of deaths over time as the non-Hispanic White population ages (Vespa et al., 2020, 3).

In terms of numbers and percentages, Whites will lose their majority position and status.

But with the realization of immigrant population growth impacting church attendance and church growth, there is a fear among the White population with these new cultural and racial changes taking place. The resulting fears come from the thought of losing privilege, losing status, and Whites' social and cultural lives being disrupted by minorities or immigrants moving into places and spaces where Whites were once the dominant population group.

For the SDA Church this means, in the words of Frey (2015, 3-5),

1. The rapid growth of “new minorities”: Hispanics, Asians, and increasingly multiracial populations.
2. The sharply diminished growth and rapid aging of America's white population.
3. Black economic advances and migration reversals.
4. The shift toward a nation in which no racial group is the majority.

If we parse the data correctly, this ultimately means the Adventist church will become less White and more multi-ethnic and more multicultural. We can expect to see the majority White communities disbanding, dispersing, and ultimately leaving the church or possibly forming new ones. The question must be asked, “Why do White church members leave when immigrants of another color arrive? What can be done to stop Whites from leaving?”

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR IMMIGRANT YOUTH IN THE SDA CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA

Taking stock of what the younger demographic thinks and believes about the church is very important. Gen Z and Millennials value diversity and inclusion. A Pew Research article (Parker et al., 2019) stated, “Majorities among Gen Z and the Millennial generation say increasing racial and ethnic diversity in the U.S. is a good thing for society, while older generations are less convinced of this (p 6).”

Members of Gen Z ultimately believe racial diversity is a good thing for society. While they attend school, work in jobs, and participate in community events with diverse populations, it could be confusing to see one homogenous ethnic group when they go to church.

Even Millennials appear to value diversity and have more progressive views on racism in comparison to older generations, such as Baby Boomers. The authors of *Racial Stasis* shared:

We find that White millennials are not relying on “older” versions of racial animus or explanations of persistent racial disparities but instead employ a new set of racial logics—a mix of color-blind racial ideology and diversity ideology. Both allow millennials to appear to be more racially progressive because they can claim to “not see race” while also appreciating racial diversity (DeSante and Smith 2020, 287).

The idea of diversity was addressed in the book *Gen Z Goes to College*. “Gen Z's beliefs about diversity and social justice are almost certainly influenced by their exposure to a wide range of people different from them” (Seemiller and Grace 2016, 37).

The sentiments of Gen Z and Millennials valuing diversity might be because “Millennials are generally believed to be the most ethnically and racially diverse generation in American history” (Mills 2020, 111).

Leaders in the SDA Church in North America would do well to note the younger demographic welcomes diversity and racial inclusion. Today's young people want to be in spaces and places with a diverse set of people. They want to be in faith gatherings that welcome and foster diversity. SDA Churches that continue to house only people groups of one ethnic make-up will provide a limited experience of the Body of Christ in the present, and will lose the future of their church. A lack of concern and interest in racial equality and social justice bothers the younger generation.

An article entitled “How the Church Can Fuel Back Gen Z's Desire for Justice” solidified the claim that Gen Z cares about race relations and diversity:

New data on American Gen Z show that, when it comes to addressing injustices in society, racial injustice is a shared top concern among both teens (32%) and young adults (35%). When looking at the data segmented by race, Black, Hispanic and Asian Gen Z all clearly identify racial injustice as their top concern (Barna 2023, p 1).

Is it possible that part of the reason we see young adults leaving the church is because of the lack of racial unity and diversity within their local church? If the older generations take on the mindset of racial diversity and intentionally

look to foster racial inclusivity, what could the future Adventist church look like?

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN RELIGION AND ETHNICITY

From a sociocultural perspective, there is a strong connection between religion and ethnicity. According to Smith (1978, 1156), “Sociologists have long stressed the interrelated functions of religion and ethnicity.”

It could be argued that in some cases there are some religions that are tightly fused with ethnicity, described as “Ethnic fusion where religion is the foundation of ethnicity, or, ethnicity equals religion, such as in the case of the Amish and Jews (Yang and Ebaugh 2001, 369).

For ethnic groups within the Adventist Church, there are traditions and cultural norms embedded into religious ideology that may make it difficult for interethnic church worship. But with that being said, it should not deter us from trying to create and foster more racially inclusive worship spaces.

WILL IMMIGRANT RACIAL MINORITIES ASSIMILATE INTO WHITE CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA?

The question can be asked of the Adventist Church in the context of immigration, “Will future immigrants of the North American SDA Church assimilate into White churches? Yang and Ebaug, in an article entitled “Religion and Ethnicity Among New Immigrants: The Impact of Majority/Minority Status in Home and Host Countries,” asked important questions regarding immigrants and assimilation that can be applied to SDA church members.

Do new immigrants follow the steps of earlier ones in their cultural and religious assimilation? For example, do new immigrants remain attached to their traditional religion and experience intensified religiosity? Does the immigrant church facilitate assimilation of its members or serve mainly as a bastion for preserving ethnicity? What changes do immigrant religious groups undergo in their adaptation to U.S. society? (2001, 367)

New immigrants are likely to attend a White church that is locally convenient for them if there are no ethnic churches that reflect their racial and cultural history. In the cases where there are ethnic church options, the new immigrants will assimilate into their ethnic church, but could adopt

Western cultural and social nuances, especially if they have younger children.

THE BLACK SWAN: WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM SKATE CULTURE

It has been said that before Europeans discovered Australia, they believed all swans were white. (Taleb 2010). The first black swan sighting shocked these explorers from the other side of the world. “Black swan theory” shows us that sometimes what seems impossible or unfounded or unbelievable can actually become a reality. In more definite terms Taleb (2010, 26) explained how this develops:

First, it is an outlier, as it lies outside the realm of regular expectations because nothing in the past can convincingly point to its possibility. Second, it carries an extreme impact (unlike the bird). Third, in spite of its outlier status, human nature makes us concoct explanations for its occurrence after the fact, making it explainable and predictable. I stop and summarize the triplet: rarity, extreme impact, and retrospective (though not prospective) predictability. A small number of Black Swans explain almost everything in our world, from the success of ideas and religions, to the dynamics of historical events, to elements of our own personal lives.

As a skater for the past 12 years, when I travel, I take my skateboard with me and I look for skate parks. I have now visited many countries, including the Philippines, South Africa, China, Mexico, England, and Mongolia. I have found skate culture resides in an interesting multicultural community. There are usually people from various ethnic backgrounds that deeply connect and engage around hanging out, listening to music, and skating. Skate culture has a unique ability to bring people from all walks of life and all ethnicities together. There is a global or universal community that intersects at the center of skateboarding. I believe skateboarding culture is like a black swan. The multiethnic community it fosters is not seen in most places in the world.

While the SDA Church or other places within society may seem to be highly and intentionally segregated, skate culture does the exact opposite and intentionally allows people who are considered to be outcasts and on the fringes, to be “in.” Perhaps skateboarding could be a black swan case study for remedying church segregation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These are the recommendations for dealing with the future incoming immigration and the further racialization of ethnic churches within the Adventist Church

- **Research and Scholarship:** I believe that there is a gap in the research when it comes to immigration and the church as well as empirical scientific research when it comes to race relations within the SDA Church in North America. More research that could be transformed into practical best practices would be considered helpful for the future race relations of the church.
- **Cosmopolitan Theology:** I believe that Namsoon Kang's seminal work *Cosmopolitan Theology* needs to be taught and shared within churches, conferences, and academic institutions. Kang established a theoretical framework with important implications for cultivating racial harmony within the church and broader society. Critically, Kang suggested that the personhood and humanity of fellow citizens take precedence over divergent traits such as race, gender, and skin color. In her view, only by employing this perspective are we able to nurture relationships that traverse cultural and socioeconomic lines, boundaries, and borders. This biblical affirmation of cosmopolitanism serves as a foundation for a systematic theology and ministry that promotes effective social justice. Kang's (2013) theory of cosmopolitanism proposes a theology that embraces group-based allegiances in addition to a broader collective morality (Neutel and Keith 2016).
- **Conference Department of Diversity:** Many businesses, educational institutions, agencies, and non-profits have a department or office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. It is high time that our conferences have this type of office. If we are going to deal with and sort out the challenges that come with immigration and the future church, we must be intentional about creating the structures that help to support, educate, and provide resources.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** At the local church level there should be regular cultural sensitivity training. This will help in building and establishing interpersonal relationships among church members. Understanding how different cultures operate and function is key to relationship building.
- **Intergroup Relationship Training:** This is where we learn about the ontogenesis—the birth and development—of prejudice within people groups. What is the origin or prejudice? What causes prejudice in children? How is it shaped and formed over time into adolescence? How does it manifest itself in adults? What does it take for people with prejudice to change?
- **Explore Cultural Intelligence (CQ) Strategy:** Pastors, administrators, and church members should be trained on a regular basis in the area of cultural intelligence. This would include fostering a capacity to function successfully by embracing diverse groups of people. Primary emphasis could be placed on understanding cultural history, learning a new language, immersion into different cultures, and training about how to think globally.
- **Develop and Foster a Culture of Intercultural Community with the “4 Cs of Intercultural Agreement”:**
 1. *Competence:* Developing competency in building and establishing intercultural community.
 2. *Commitment:* Commitment to foster and encourage diversity within community.
 3. *Contribution:* Agree to contribute wholeheartedly and benevolently to the beloved intercultural community
 4. *Character:* Always agree to display a loving character, which recognizes the dignity and value of all people of various cultures.
- **Intercultural Small Groups:** It is my belief that intentional intercultural small groups on a local church level will be key in helping to establish deeper cultural engagement between members of different ethnic backgrounds. It would take the willingness of church pastors and church members to be willing to have various members from different ethnic backgrounds come together and meet at least once per week for deep cultural exchange, preferably over food. The idea is that an intercultural group of church members from various cultural backgrounds agree to the growth and development of the group for four to six

months. The group would meet on a weekly basis for spiritual development, social interaction, and community outreach. Intergroup contact will help to lessen prejudice and open up consistent opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and dialogue.

CONCLUSION

The consensus among SDA scholars suggests that racial segregation persists within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Canada and the US. While SDA Church pioneers were historically abolitionists (Blanco 2019), today the church is complicit in the role of racial segregation. Some Christians argue that racial segregation within the church is a natural result of kin seeking kin, while others adopt a color-blind perspective, willfully ignoring the distinct traditions of diverse cultures (Lewis-Giggetts 2011).

It is believed that multiracial congregations play a significant role in providing practical solutions for understanding race relations within the Church and addressing issues of racial segregation (Emerson and Woo 2008). Let us validate and promote the worldview that, when possible, Christian congregations should be multiracial (DeYoung 2004).

Christians should strive to address racial issues, underscoring the important role of multiracial congregations in reducing division and inequality.

As immigration increases in the coming years and more ethnic growth takes place within the Adventist Church worldwide, we will need to consider intercultural intergroup relations. If we do not start to foster intercultural dialogue intentionally and strategically, we run the risk of the Adventist church becoming nothing more than ethnocentric silos segregated by race rather than a deeply intercultural church.

It's time that we take Paul's cosmopolitan vision of Galatians 3:28 to heart when he wrote, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave or free, male or female. For you are all one in Christ."

We should not fear the change, but embrace the future identity of the church, a diverse intercultural church that is preparing for the coming of Jesus Christ. The Church, it turns out, is a kaleidoscopic multi-ethnic bride ready to see her true love, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

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