

The Bi-Lingual Model

Description

Immigration often means a new culture with a new language. Church can become a way to maintain the culture from one's mother country. Challenged by the newness, the low social status, the financial pressures, and that difficult new language, church for an immigrant group offers relief and comfort in a new land.

It maintains the culture of the mother country. Church can be an all-day experience with religious programming, good food, fellowship, family orientation, social activities, more food, and it's all done in one's original language! Such refreshment can keep people going in their struggle their next week in the new country.

But what happens with the next generation? What is their mother country? What is their mother language? The next generation usually is more adaptable, and with the educational system in America, probably gets more immersed into speaking English (or "American") than the first generation. And the second generation learns that to get ahead, fitting into the larger culture is a must! How will the second generation relate to church?

For the second generation, church becomes the foreign country, where practices, power structures, personalities, and passions seem out of place compared to the American life they consider home. Language typifies this split. While their parents' mother language

dominates the church, English dominates their world. Which will they choose? Do they even have a choice?

Sometimes this takes more than one generation to fully change. But as long as generations stay in America, the melting pot will continue to melt from the mother country to the country of mixed ethnic groups and multicultural norms. Either return to the original country, live in a small niche in America in which you can maintain your ancestral heritage, or make America your country. Few move seamlessly among those options. Most have to choose one or have it be chosen for them.

Language becomes a dividing line and observable indicator in churches when the youth group operates in English and the church service uses the mother language. Over time, a separate "youth church" in English might run concurrently in a different room while the "regular church service" takes place in the sanctuary. Once this occurs, you have two churches, and they will become increasingly distant.

As long as immigration continues, fresh faces, families, and young people will continue to long for the ways of the mother country in the church. Such a demand might maintain attendance and participation of new young people since it reminds them of their roots. But the second and third generation will slowly slip away. On-going immigration obscures that reality. But when immigration dwindles or stops, the drop out from ensuing generations clamors for a change.

Critique

Because the church doubles as the cultural and religious center for the immigrants, differentiating between those two is difficult or impossible for some to do. Changing the order of service, the introduction of new technologies, and using English all stand in contrast to worship the way the immigrants recall it from their years back home. The immigrants might be surprised if they returned to their roots to see that changes may have occurred “back home” as well! Nevertheless, changes at church threaten their security and stability. This becomes increasingly troublesome as people age.

Ironically, parents who came to America for the sake of their children find themselves losing their children to the American way. This includes not only the language, but also the values and movement towards secularism and materialism rather than godliness and family solidarity. Over the generations, grandparents might be entrenched in maintaining the mother culture in church, while parents span both the old and the new and the grandchildren speak only English and prefer an English-speaking church where their American friends attend. Sometimes it seems like the only element young people appreciate about the mother country is the food.

Possibilities

Bi-lingual churches provide a combination of both worlds into one unique culture. A bi-lingual church honors and respects both countries/worlds and seeks to bring them together for worship. This necessitates clarity in purpose and dialogue regarding priorities of worship, culture, personal preferences, and negotiables.

Being unique is fine. In fact, everyone is unique, which makes everyone the same! But it takes intentionality, openness, give-and-take, and graciousness as well as communication skills that include listening in order to stay connected. A bi-lingual church provides a key avenue for this to happen. But unless immigration continues, eventually it will become an American church and no longer even a bi-lingual church. The Bi-Lingual Model forms an important link for immigrating communities in the transition that covers a number of generations.