

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Faculty Publications

Fall 2020

Is the Multicultural Congregation a Myth?

Willie Edward Hucks II

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs>

Is the Multicultural Congregation a Myth?

By Willie Edward Hucks II

Ancedotal evidence reveals that the majority of churches, regardless of denominational affiliation, are monocultural—based on descriptors such as race, ethnicity and language. Outside of university or large academy settings—usually in large, diverse cities—the multicultural congregation is a rarity.

The Misnomer of Multiculturalism

Large institutions such as churches and universities like to tout their diversity, and deservedly so when propelled by progressive leadership. According to the 2020 Campus Ethnic Diversity survey of national universities, conducted by “U.S. News and World Report,” Andrews University ranked #2, tied with Rutgers University and behind only the University of Hawaii, Hilo.¹ Churches like to boast of the number of countries represented in their congregations and number of languages spoken by their attendees in an effort to establish their multicultural credentials.

Such interpersonal heterogeneity, however, can often mask an existing cultural homogeneity. Although executed more subconsciously and in an unintended fashion, the expectations of the dominant culture overshadow the internal strivings of all others, creating an environment where it is assumed the non-dominant cultures assimilate or acquiesce, leading to the dominant culture subsuming all others.

Far from being multicultural, such an organism exists to perpetuate the mirage of togetherness. This brand of unity is reinforced via the philosophical underpinnings of misapplied Scripture (e.g., Ps 133:1; John 17:21). Such an entity may be multiethnic or multiracial; but it can hardly be termed as multicultural.

The Manifestation of Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism does not have to be mythological, nor do its characteristics have to be contrived. But how does one recognize vibrant multiculturalism within a congregation? For the sake of brevity, I suggest two questions to be considered.



“...religious space is not just about practicing one’s religion; it is also about living out one’s ethno-racial identity..”

Does the preaching take into consideration the various cultures represented? While many see Christianity as transcending culture, Christ still lived within and ministered to the culture of His time. It is fair to expect that those who attend church each week want to hear a sermon that speaks to their cultural realities.

The concern, however, arises as to how the preacher can tailor his or her sermon to an entire congregation unless a common denominator is established and addressed. COVID-19 presented such a common denominator in March and April, as it became the theme of every sermon, resulting in biblical tools that enabled listeners to manage and survive the health crisis.

But what happens when a non-dominant culture group is shaken to its core, impacted by an event more so than other cultures within the congregation? Does the preacher ignore the one in order to satisfy (read: not make uncomfortable) the others? My most recent unsettling event transpired with the death by asphyxiation of George Floyd. Can I attend a “multicultural” church and hear a sermon that provides tools for me to survive systemic racism that I and others in my culture know has always existed?

Does the music take into consideration the various cultures represented? If a church brags about its multiculturalism, does it showcase that multiculturalism through musical expression?

Music provides the third rail of church life in a multiethnic setting. What invariably transpires is, as stated earlier, the non-dominant cultures acquiesce to the lyrical tastes of the dominant culture. Such assimilation establishes anomalies in light of what is considered normative. To state it another way, one style is deemed *spiritual* while others are viewed as *cultural*.

Such an artificial delineation between “spiritual” and “cultural” obfuscates the reality that all worship takes place within a cultural context, and not so-called “ethnic” worship alone. Hence, in an effort to ameliorate the task of worship committees, the theology of unity has been misapplied in a way that creates a liturgical conformity which leads to worshipers consciously or subconsciously questioning whether or not their culture clashes with biblical spirituality. Korie Edwards, a sociology professor at Ohio State University, writes, “There are challenges for both congregants and clergy. That is because religious space is not just about practicing one’s religion; it is also about

living out one's ethno-racial identity. People do not quite realize how much of their religious practice is also a way of doing ethnicity—until they have to share their religious space with people who do not share their ethno-racial identity.”²

Demythologizing Multiculturalism

The challenges to which Edwards alludes are not insuperable. They can be successfully tackled with open-mindedness, commitment and intentionality. I offer several suggestions.

Stop using the word “segregation” when referring to various worship settings. The term *segregation* has often been utilized within the context of black-white relations.³ Segregation, by definition, connotes a forced separation of groups; when the truth is that every church is open to anyone who wishes to attend or join its membership. Churches are already desegregated. *Segregation* becomes code for “You don’t want Christian unity!”—thus clouding the deeper issues surrounding race relations.

Eliminate the focus on “ethnic” worship and “ethnic” concerns during special occasions. When black preaching is relegated to Black History Month or Hispanic music is experienced only during Hispanic Heritage Month—although the worship planners mean well—it normalizes what the dominant culture views as acceptable and categorizes all others as anomalous. A multicultural worship experience should create an environment that regularly displays music from all people-groups, and not only on special occasions. Likewise, Black preachers should not have to be invited to preach only in February, or preach in a manner or on subject matter that guarantees the hearers will not experience discomfort. Self-regulating in terms of singing or preaching tragically feeds into the DuBoisian concept of double-consciousness.⁴

Pentecostal Multiculturalism

On the Day of Pentecost, “devout men, from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5)⁵ were heard speaking in their own languages. Even then, some were tempted to think that because they didn’t speak the language that was expected, something was wrong with them (see Acts 2:13). Peter corrected their failed theology (vs.14–18), recognizing that these visitors would return to their own congregations and fulfill God’s commission.

Could it be that Adventism has created a crisis that need not exist? Could it be that the effort to encourage multicultural congregations overlooks the fact that ours already is a multicultural denomination that has successfully penetrated North America and every corner of the earth? The foundation for such multiculturalism was birthed from the first Pentecost after Jesus’ death.

There is room for congregational multiculturalism *and* Pentecostal multiculturalism. The aim of Christianity is to reveal Christ everywhere and in the language that people understand. This proves to be the true demonstration of ministry in and through the body of Christ to every nation, tribe, tongue and people.



Willie Edward Hucks II, DMin, serves as chair of the Department of Christian Ministry at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, and is also professor and chair of the Seminary’s Ethnocentrism, Racism, and Social Justice Committee.

² Korie L. Edwards, “The Bittersweet Reality of Multiracial Churches.” <https://studyingcongregations.org/the-bittersweet-reality-of-multiracial-churches/> (accessed July 3, 2020). For deeper insights, read her book *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³ In the vast majority of those instances, blame is placed at the doorstep of Blacks and Regional Conferences for the “segregation” that exists. Too often, those who speak thusly don’t know the history behind regional conferences, will admit that they don’t fully understand the history, or fail to know that regional conferences and their churches are more integrated than is publicly discussed.

⁴ W.E.B. DuBois first articulated the concept of *double-consciousness*, published under the title “Strivings of the Negro People” in the August 1897 issue of *The Atlantic magazine*, when he wrote, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

⁵ All Bible references are from the New King James Version.