

Multicultural Ministry

A Hispanic author suggests how Adventists can pursue multicultural ministry, "The new frontier for the church."

by Caleb Rosado

AS WE HURTLE TOWARD THE 21ST CENTURY, THE new frontier of mission for the church in the 1990s is multicultural ministry. The 1980s were characterized as a decade of greed, selfishness, and exclusivity, where people fended for themselves. Unfortunately, that same model was mirrored in the church, particularly in the church-growth movement, whose heart is the Homogenous Unit Principle. According to the founder of the church-growth movement, "Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers."¹ If there ever was an operating principle that is far removed from the essence of the gospel, it is this one. The point of the gospel of Jesus Christ is *change*, change that saves us *from* our sins, not *in* them, even if the outcome is unprecedented growth! Numerical growth has never been the goal of the church:

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"Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14).² The church's only goal is obedience to the principles of the kingdom of God; "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

The 1990s are beginning to be characterized as the decade of compassion, caring, and concern. This economic and political interdependence needs a unifying spiritual undergirding that recognizes the common ground and sister/brotherhood of all humankind, and carries out ministry consonant with the gospel as enunciated in Galatians 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek [no division based on ethnic difference], there is no longer slave or free [no division based on class and status differences], there is no longer male and female [no division based on gender difference]; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

There is one model of ministry that encompasses the needs and challenges of the multicultural 1990s, and that is *multicultural ministry*. At the heart of this type of ministry

lies the Heterogeneous Unit Principle: *The gospel challenges and empowers people to accept Jesus Christ across ALL social barriers.*

What is multicultural ministry? *Multicultural ministry is the development and implementation of heterogeneous models of communicating the gospel, through beliefs and behaviors that are sensitive to the needs of the culturally diverse population within a church's field of service.* For too long the Christian church has been operating on exclusive, homogeneous models of ministry and styles of worship in a heterogeneous society. It is time for a more inclusive model of ministry. Multicultural ministry, however, is not an exercise in "church busing" or forced integration. What it means is that people should be free to choose where they wish to worship. It represents a diversity of worship experiences within the united body of Christ.

Multicultural ministry is a *proactive* model of ministry, with a clear vision of where society is heading. For example, during the decade between 1980 and 1990, the Anglo population in the United States only grew by a single digit percentage, while the population of color grew by double and triple digit

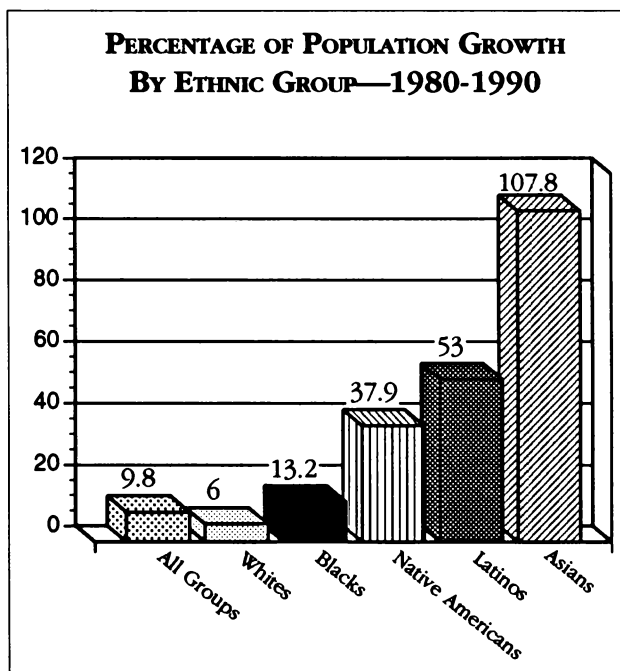
percentages (see graph, "Percentage of Population Growth by Ethnic Group").

Current statistics from the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists place the white or Caucasian population of the church throughout the world at only 11.11 percent. In North America, whites or Anglos are only 57.57 percent of the church membership and declining.³ Such demographic changes will continue to increase in the 1990s.

Traditionally racially homogeneous congregations will be challenged by these changes. There are three types of response the church can take. The first is to *run*, as in the "white flight" pattern of the 1960s. Churches that take this position tend to follow the Homogeneous Unit Principle of church growth, and claim that by so doing they are living the gospel by working only for "our kind of people."

The second type of response is *resignation*—feeling trapped due to the inability of selling the church building and accommodating to what is perceived to be a negative situation. This response results in a static stance toward what could otherwise be a dynamic opportunity.

The third response is *renewal*, a dynamic sense of revival as the church experiences the transformation of its old-wineskin structures into the new wineskins of multiculturalism.



What Is Multiculturalism?

Let me put forth an operational definition of multiculturalism: *Multiculturalism is a system of beliefs and behaviors that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society; acknowledges and values their socio-cultural differences; and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context that empowers all within the organization or society.*

Let's take it apart. Multiculturalism is a

“system,” a set of interrelated parts—in this case, beliefs and behaviors—that make up the whole of how humans experience today’s world. It includes what people believe about others and how that belief impacts, and is impacted by, behavior. The outcome of this praxis of beliefs/behaviors is five important actions.

The first is *recognition* of the rich diversity in a given society or organization. For the longest time, racial/ethnic minorities, the physically disabled, and women have not been given the same recognition as others. The one-sided approach to history and education has been a testimony to that fact.

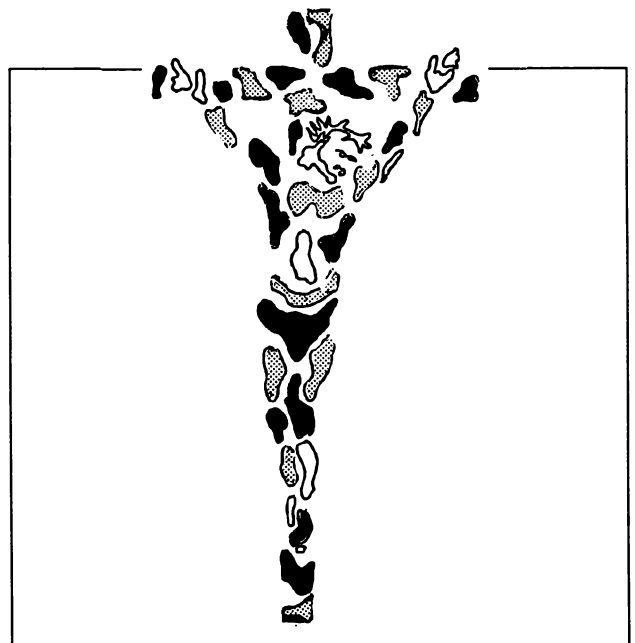
With recognition should also come *respect*—the process whereby the “other” is treated with deference, courtesy, and compassion in an endeavor to safeguard the integrity, dignity, value, and social worth of the individual. Respect and recognition are not the same, since recognizing the existence of a group does not necessarily elicit respect for the group. In a slave economy, for example, the presence of slaves was recognized, but their humanity was not respected. The presence of American Indians in the western expansion of the continent was constantly recognized by whites, but their environmentally conscious cultures were never respected. The contribution of women has usually been relegated to a footnote status. Our nation has a long history of not respecting the rights of the powerless.

Multiculturalism also entails acknowledging the validity of the cultural expression and contribution of the various groups. These cultural expressions and contributions usually are acknowledged only when there is an economic market for them, such as for African-American music, native Indian dances for tourism, or Mexican cuisine. When the business sector wants our money, the advertising industry pictures minorities in a positive light, but in most other cases the entertainment media simply caricatures minority stereotypes,

such as women always in a supportive role.

Genuine multiculturalism will also *support* and *enable* the contribution of the various groups to society or an organization. The word *enable* here is important, because what lies behind it is the concept of empowerment—the process of enabling people to be self-critical of their own biases so as to strengthen themselves and others to achieve and deploy their maximum potential. People’s sense of self-worth, value, and dignity is most often determined by the kind of support and encouragement they receive from others, but also from how willing they are to be self-critical of negative behaviors on their part. If one is practicing self-destructive action, all the external help will go for naught.

The essence of multiculturalism, the undergirding concept of multicultural ministry, is the ability to *celebrate* with the other the power of the gospel to transcend all barriers and bring about a oneness, creating a new humanity in Christ (Ephesians 2:11-22). It was this oneness about which Jesus prayed, and of which he declared that its manifestation would convince the world that God had sent his Son (John 17:23). Multiculturalism enables us to



look upon the other, especially the other that the world has taught us to regard with distrust and suspicion, not as a “potential predator, but as a profitable partner.”⁴

The last part of this definition of multiculturalism—“within an inclusive cultural context”—is most important, because it is here where many people refuse to go along with an inclusive approach to society or to ministry. Many people fear multiculturalism will bring in “foreign” concepts and ideas that will deviate the nation or church from its historic course and transform the United States and the Seventh-day Adventist Church into something different from what they have been. We need to realize that America has always been a multicultural society, whether or not many have been willing to admit it. So also the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church, like the United States of America, has never been a “melting pot,” which conjures up images of a homogeneous, puree-like product. A *stew pot* is a better metaphor to describe the reality of America as a multicultural society, and especially the Seventh-day Adventist Church, as the most ethnically diverse church in the world today. We are a heterogeneous body, a rich cultural stew, where the various ingredients—while maintaining their distinctiveness—have contributed their unique ethnic flavors, all richly blended by the heat of group tension. This is what makes a stew, not just the ingredients tossed in together as in a cold salad, but the application of heat to the pot.

What comes to mind when many try to visualize an American is a northern European phenotype, blond and blue-eyed. Those who differ from this image are labeled as hyphenated Americans. It is implied that they are not yet quite Americans, and have not divested themselves of their past completely enough to be included.

In American society, “heat” has come from racial and ethnic conflict. Fire, however, is dangerous, because if one turns up the heat too high or leaves the pot on the fire too long, or simply neglects it, the stew will be burned. The stew pot has been burned on many occasions—in Detroit, Watts, Newark, Miami, New York, Chicago, Yonkers, Bensonhurst, and most recently in south central Los Angeles; all have experienced the fires of racial riots, revolts, and rebellions. Watched carefully, the heat of this group tension will bring out the creative juices of the various cultural groups seeking to resolve their conflicts. The

result is a special cultural blend that gives the people of the United States of America their unique character in the world, character that even differentiates them from former compatriots in the very countries from which they came.

Such a process cannot be described as assimilation, perhaps the most inappropriate concept by which to describe the American ethnic experience. Assimilation—from the Latin, *assimilare*, to make similar—is the process whereby newcomers to society are encouraged to give up their cultural way of life and adopt, as quickly as possible, the values and cultures of the host society. It is an ethnocentric, one-way process of cultural exchange, in that only the newcomer is expected to adapt, with the implied promise that group acceptance will be the social reward. Yet few groups in American society have been completely absorbed to the point where they have lost sight of their ethnic heritage and cultural contribution to the nation.

A more appropriate concept that reflects the real American experience of group interaction is *transculturation*, a term coined by the renowned Cuban anthropologist, Fernando Ortiz. *Transculturation is the reciprocal process by which two cultures, upon contact, engage in a system of give and take and adaptation to each other's ways, though often not in an equal manner, resulting in the emergence of a new cultural reality.*⁵ It is a two-way process of cultural exchange, in which the various groups learn from each other, each impacting the other, without totally losing their unique distinctiveness. This rich blend of ethnic groups, coming together on the basis of coalitions of interests and not of color, with a common set of values, is what makes the United States of America distinct and gives us the competitive edge in the world today.

At question here is, What constitutes an American? For many persons living in the United States, what comes to mind whenever they try to visualize what an American looks like, is a northern European phenotype, blond and blue-eyed. Those who differ from this visual image of what is perceived to be an American are labeled as hyphenated Americans: African-American, Mexican-American, Native-American, Asian-American, Italian-American, Greek-American, etc. The implication is that they are not yet quite Americans, and have not divested themselves of their past completely enough to be included. Some may never be included because they cannot change their skin color.

It is this latter point that led Eduardo Seda Bonilla to conclude that there have been "two ways" of adaptation for minority groups in the United States—one for ethnic or "cultural minorities and one for racial minorities."⁶ For the former, all they had to do to be accepted was to "discard their culture." For the latter, persons of color, the issue was more complex, since the shedding of culture made no differ-

ence in their acceptance. "If anything, it made things worse."⁷ They have simply not been accepted as genuine Americans.

So what is an American? In the narrow definition of the term, an American is anyone who is a citizen of the United States of America, either by birth or naturalization. The result is a delicious stew, a beautiful mosaic, that reflects the beauty of God's family.

Mexican Nobel laureate Octavio Paz wrote,

What sets worlds in motion is the interplay of differences, their attractions and repulsions. Life is plurality, death is uniformity. By suppressing differences and peculiarities, by eliminating different civilizations and cultures, progress weakens life and favors death. The ideal of a single civilization for everyone, implicit in the cult of progress and technique, impoverishes and mutilates us. Every view of the world that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes a possibility of life.⁸

Obviously, the more ethnically diverse a group, an organization, or nation is, the greater the possibility for group tension and ethnic conflict. As sociologist Lewis Coser puts it: "The greater the structural or cultural diversity of those who unite in a coalition, the more their interests other than in the immediate purpose are likely to be divergent if not antagonistic." What's the solution? Coser continues: "Such a coalition, if it is not to fall apart, must attempt to keep close to the purposes for which it was formed."⁹ And what purposes are these? Those purposes for America found in our Constitution and the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all [persons] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these, are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." For the church, this is the essence of the Gospel—*inclusiveness*—oneness with God and oneness with one another (Matthew 22:34-40; Galatians 3:28).

These are the values that multiculturalism

elicits and seeks to protect and enhance. Our other values, such as racism, sexism, intolerance, and xenophobia, must be discarded, as they destroy what is best and admired most of the gospel, the values of freedom, equality, justice, and inclusiveness.

What Makes a Church Multicultural?

The mere presence of an ethnically and racially diverse membership, due to legal, moral, or social imperatives, does not make a church multicultural. This is merely being concerned with affirmative action.¹⁰ In other words, the number of ethnically diverse people sitting in the pews does not make a church multicultural. All that this may simply represent is that people have gained access to the church—they've gotten through the front door. But if all a church does is give access, then people may leave, just as quickly, out the back door.

Neither is it merely a concern for understanding, respecting, valuing, and celebrating the differences among the various groups in a congregation. Valuing diversity is important, as it may engender an awareness of and a sensitivity to differences, but it does not necessarily translate into structural changes.

What makes a church multicultural is whether or not its "five P's"—perspectives, policies, programs, personnel, and practices—first, reflect the heterogeneity of the organization; second, are sensitive to the needs of the various groups; third, incorporate their contributions to the overall mission of the organization; and, finally, create a cultural and social ambiance that is inclusive and empowers all groups.

In other words, the heart of what makes a church multicultural lies in *managing* diversity—the proper management of the diversity in an organization for the empowerment of all

groups, which includes changing mindsets as well as the underlying culture of an organization, especially if this culture is what is impeding change, in order for the church to more effectively accomplish its mission. This is what makes a church multicultural.

The church and its many institutions and organizations have to get beyond affirmative action. This was the main accomplishment of the 1960s and 1970s, giving people access to the system. In the 1980s the concern was with valuing differences. Now, in the 1990s and into the 21st century, the push is for managing diversity (see graph, "The Process of Change").¹¹

Many churches and organizations, however, haven't even begun to address affirmative action, much less managing diversity. This is where the five P's come into play, because the rapid changes taking place in society are forcing institutions to move away from a lethargic business-as-usual, reactive mindset, to a proactive one that anticipates and implements change.

Perspectives refer to the vision without which people, as well as organizations, perish (Proverbs 29:18, KJV). What is *vision*? Vision is the bifocal ability to see what lies ahead (farsightedness), as well as the various impediments that exist between the present and the future (nearsightedness), and how to avoid them in order to arrive at the future. It must be bifocal, for focus on the future at the expense of the present, or vice versa, will result in loss and in a detour in the mission of the organization.

A sense of vision and mission will lead to appropriate *policies*, the guarantees that make known the intents of the institution. Policies give rise to *programs* that put in action what the institution is all about. But effective programs cannot be run without the right *personnel*, reflective of the diversity in the organization. The last P refers to *practices*, the actual conduct of the organization.

Of these five P's, the most important is the

last one, *practices*. An institution such as the church may have the best perspectives, policies, programs, and personnel, but these are only cosmetic until practiced. And it only takes a small number of personnel who, in their practice, refuse to go along with a program or fail to implement a policy, for an otherwise well-designed plan to be sabotaged. As the saying goes in Spanish: “*Podemos destruir con nuestros pies lo que construimos con nuestras manos*”—“We can destroy with our feet what we build with our hands.”

These five P’s have to alter present structures and cultures, especially if these are exclusive and do not benefit everyone in the organization or society. Karl Mannheim, the renowned German sociologist, gives us the reason:

To live consistently, in the light of Christian brotherly love, in a society which is not organized on the same principle, is impossible. The individual in his personal conduct is always compelled—in so far as he does not resort to breaking up the existing social structure—to fall short of his own nobler motives.¹²

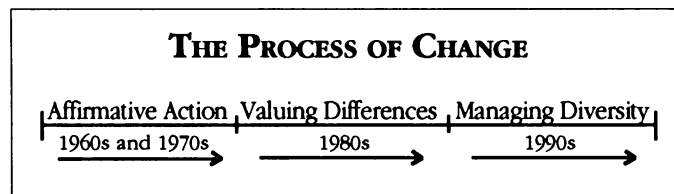
This is why structural change—a new paradigm of inclusion—is necessary.

What is at issue in multiculturalism is not just sensitivity to other cultures and racial/ethnic groups that are marginal to the dominant culture, but an entire paradigm shift—a different mindset—which gives rise to a whole new way of seeing the world as inclusive; and brings a change in institutional and societal structures, so as to create an environment (local, national, and global) that is inclusive of all groups, is safe for differences, and where everyone benefits. The basic point in managing diversity is this: “If, when all is said and done, you look around and notice that everyone looks like you, you have done it wrong!”¹³

Managing diversity is an ongoing process that unleashes the various talents and capabilities that a diverse population bring to an organization, community, or society, so as to create a wholesome, inclusive environment that is safe for differences, enables people to reject rejection, celebrates diversity, and maximizes the full potential of all, in a cultural context where everyone benefits. Multiculturalism, as the art of managing diversity, is an *inclusive* process where no one is left out. Diversity, in its essence, is a “safeguard against idolatry.”¹⁴ It prevents one group from serving as the norm for all other groups. Therefore, one of the dangers that must be avoided in grasping a proper understanding of multiculturalism is what can be termed *bashism*. Bashism is the tendency to verbally and/or physically attack another person or group based solely on the negative meaning given to group members—due to biological, cultural, political, or socioeconomic differences (such as gender, age, race/ethnicity, political party, class, education, values, religious affiliation, or sexual orientation)—without regard for the individual. The motivating factor for bashism is fear, arising out of ignorance of the other.

One of the backwashes of a narrow view of multiculturalism, especially as espoused by some women and persons of color, is what I call *white maleism*. White maleism is the tendency of minority groups to blame white males for most of the social evil in the world today, especially as it relates to sexism and racism, and view them as selfish, ruthless, unrepentant, and unredeemable, and, as a consequence, refuse to recognize and accept the contribution that many white males have made, continue to make, and desire to make, to remove oppression.

While much of oppression today has been



the historical byproduct of the abuse of power by white males, not much is gained in terms of creating an inclusive, caring, compassionate church and society, by reversing the process and excluding many white males who have been instrumental in creating the "house of abundance" and structures of inclusion. Some of us persons of color would not be where we are today if it were not for culturally, politically, and morally aware white males who opened institutional doors, made decisions, implemented policies, and stood in the breach to bridge the gulf of intolerance. The effective management of diversity includes, empowers, and benefits all persons concerned, whites included.

But some are threatened by this inclusive process. Why? Because they see multiculturalism as having to give up power in order to make room on the stage of life for new characters in the play.

Unfortunately, the beaches of time are strewn with wreckage from the many ships of Christians that set sail for ports unknown in search of

power, but who ran into the gale winds of greed and the coral reefs of corruption, and ended their journey drowning in seas of racial despair. Life is a journey we Christians have to take. The going may not be smooth, the set course will not always take us through sunny, tropical waters; once in a while the storms at sea may deviate us from our desired destination. But how one runs the good ship the Church, how one treats the crew, and how one maintains the course through to the end of the 20th century, will determine the success of the voyage.

Multicultural ministry is the new frontier of ministry for the church into the 21st century. It is a ministry that reflects the gospel, that serves as the compass that enables us to become true Christians and at the same time *world citizens*—a people who are able to transcend their own cultural, sociopolitical, and religious reality and identify with humankind throughout the world, at all levels of human need—and thereby guide us into our heavenly port.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970), p. 198.

2. Unless otherwise noted, all scriptures cited are from the New Revised Standard Version.

3. "The Major Ethnic Ratios in the SDA World Church and the NAD." NAD Multilingual Ministries, December 1, 1993.

4. This concept of managing diversity for exclusion comes from my friend and colleague, Samuel Betances. There are also certain phrases throughout the article that are classic phrases of Samuel Betances, to whom I am in debt for his influence on my thinking and understanding of diversity.

5. This definition is the writer's and is adapted from Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).

6. Eduardo Seda Bonilla, "Ethnic Studies and Cultural Pluralism," *The Rican* (Fall 1971), pp. 56-65.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

8. Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1985).

9. Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York: The Free Press, 1956), p. 144.

10. By affirmative action I mean social policies encouraging favorable treatment of socially disadvantaged minority groups, especially in employment, education, and housing, without regard to race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, in order to reverse historical trends of discrimination and to create equality of opportunity.

11. For a fuller discussion of these three stages, see R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr., *Beyond Race and Gender* (New York: Amacon, 1991).

12. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1936), p. 195.

13. Samuel Betances, "Harness the Rainbow: Diversity and the Bottom Line," video lecture presentation. Distributed by Determan Marketing Corp., Chicago, Ill., 1992.

14. Brian Wren, "What Language Shall I Borrow? Worship: Language and Gender," presented at the Second International Conference on Adventist Worship, April 7-10, 1993, La Sierra University, Riverside, Calif.