



The Development and Nurture of Multi-ethnic Churches¹

Ted Ward

One of the choice remarks the first day was: “Children make their relationships, build their connections. Adults see the differences and see them as barriers.” I wonder if this is what the Lord had in mind when he said, “Let the little children come to me.” And then he went on to say, and I wonder if you’ve ever reflected that Jesus went on to use the plural, “And unless you become as children (a relational group, not as each of you becomes a child) you will not see the kingdom.” But unless you become as children, a community, a group, in your relationships with one another, finding the connections, building the relationship, not being obsessed and blocked by the barriers, you will not really see what the kingdom is all about.

I don’t think this is so much a salvation issue that he’s speaking to, as it is an enjoyment issue. Why is the church of Jesus Christ so sad? We haven’t found the enjoyment that comes from building community? Children don’t run around looking for things to be sad about. Children run around looking for things to have fun with.

Let me tell you, at least 9 out of 10 of the observations made by the last panel—worthy stuff, worthy stuff. But at least 9 out of 10 of the observations made could have related just as well to what’s wrong with any mono-cultural church? Did you notice that? We weren’t talking uniquely to the multi-cultural church. I think you said it beautifully: “In the multi-cultural church if you don’t pay attention to those things, if you don’t build those skills, if you don’t get involved at that level of community building, the whole thing disappears right before your eyes.” That’s why so many churches are sad—because mono-cultural churches tend not to disappear. I think in the great providence of God churches were intended to disappear when they became obsessed with barriers and failed to appreciate the enjoyment of experience.

I got into the career of education only to discover that the career of education was really concerned with culture. And you can’t think well of the educative process unless you think carefully about the nature of human society. What makes people the way they are? What makes people interact the way they do? Where are the barriers that break people apart? Where is the joy that people can experience? If you really have some comprehension of education, you get in the process some comprehension of culture. The line between cultural studies and educational studies is a very fine line, if indeed it exists at all.

I am deeply honored by a consultancy. I’m thankful it’s not a lectureship. I can’t think of anything less consistent with what I believe to be important. I think good lecturing is important; I’m trying to do a decent job of it right now. But that’s not where it’s at: Where it’s at is in the interaction, in the experience-sharing, in the “here’s how I look at it/here’s how you look at it; I’ve got to learn from

¹ Ted Ward. The Development and Nurture of Multi-ethnic Churches. Excerpts from closing address to the inaugural Ward Consultation, Chicago, November 1997

your perspective, and you might want to learn from my perspective.” In the process, we’ll both be better off, but more than that, we’ll have fun!

I sat here in these last two sessions saying to myself, “What is it that brings these people together?” It would be very self-centered to claim that it is a consultation in Ted Ward’s honor that has brought them together. Baloney. What is it that brings people together? I believe it is several things. First, you know that in coming together in this kind of frame of reference that you would have a chance to do more than just hear some opinions about something; you’ll have a chance to get your hands on it, and you’ll be able to think about it in a more specific way; and you’ll be able to give and take in the process of dialog.

I think that’s one of the things.

But I think also that there is emerging a kind of sense of community; like a community of the dissatisfied. Maybe many of the people who come here as doctoral students are already defined that way. They are the dissatisfied. They are the people who say, “The status quo can’t be all there is to it.” Fortunately, as we’ve known it and learned it here, such people can also be sensitive, aware, and gentle people. Such people, in fact, can be compassionate people. In fact I think that is one of the stronger driving elements in much of the dissatisfaction is the compassion. Because if we’re really going to relate effectively to people in the name of Christ, we’re going to have to do it with a far keener sense of compassion for them, and for their concerns and for their perspectives.

Further, some of what is added to the experience while you’re here in doctoral studies is a third element: a kind of a strategy element. At a consultation there are ways to get at things. These are not matters that you simply have to murmur, mumble, and fret about. These are matters that can be gotten hold of. There’s a shared awareness that there are skills that will make us more able to deal with these mysteries, those difficulties in a constructive manner and in such a way that we can make some differences.

I would not want to be in a doctoral program that was concerned solely with techniques—techniques, management, methods, how to do it. God deliver us from that kind of simplicity, because that stuff never transfers well. It works here, it works there, it might work somewhere else, but what’s the theory underlining it, what’s the basic stuff there? What are the rudimentary values? What are the foundations of it all? Many of you here in this room know full well that there are such foundational ways to reason, to understand, to reflect, and to learn.

Then of course there’s the fourth factor that I have known to be true and I’ve seen it here in the several sessions we’ve shared together: just plain energy. This is not a lethargic community; this is a group of people who, when they see a task to be done and somebody takes the responsibility, it’ll get done, and it will get done well. Should this not be what it is we are trying to bring into the churches so that the dissatisfaction can be eased over against a larger wholeness of the church as people function together?

Now that’s where we get into diversity in culture. I do not take a negative view of culture; I take a very positive view of culture, in the same way that I take a positive view of everything that God put together in the creation. Culture is not a consequence of sin; culture is not a consequence of the fall; it is not a consequence of the Babel experience. Culture is a consequence of God’s own moment of self-reflection in which he looked at what he had created and said, “It’s not good.” God put the first great

diversity on board. And from that diversity all other human diversities track. God did it, and he did it before the fall.

Our God is not the creator of sameness; he's the creator of diversity. We should not be afraid of diversity. Diversity in the church does not cause us to say, "What do we do about it?" We should ask rather, "What do we do with it?" We are the people who have the possibility of bringing encouraging hope not only to one another, but within the church. And not just within the North American church, but the church in the world today. And it's a delight to know that so many people are among us relating effectively in this culture-context, among some of us who are the most monolingual and restricted in our cultural perspective of all the people on God's green earth. But as we look out at that diverse world through the eyes of people sitting to our left, right, in front of us, in back of us, we realize that we have the potential of affecting a lot of this world for the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is in this community a nurturing of revolutionary commitment that is absolutely on target because it is absolutely a perpetuity of the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. We are in the business of nurturing revolutionary commitment of people. Some prayed earlier, "We do this as agents of change in unjust worlds." And we must through it all keep a clear recognition that we're not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers. Sin enters so quickly into those diversities among people that become conflicts among people. We live in a time in this world when the world is in a great deal of stress because of cultural proximity.

I use a simile like this: I think that the whole world is like a fairly flat field full of puddles, and when the water table has been historically, relatively low, those puddles are all relatively isolated; a little one here, a little one there, a bigger one there, and so on. Those puddles are people, little puddles of people. But the world's water table is rising. You can't see it all, but it's underneath. As the water table rises, what happens to those little puddles? All the puddles become larger, but they also begin to touch one another, and as these puddles touch different colors of puddles which seem to bring with them the color of the soil of their area, as they touch each other, you begin to see wild little swirls of colors coming together. Little by little these puddles become a kind of chaos; because puddles are no problem at all as long as they are insulated and isolated from one another. But the world we live in no longer allows that particular geology. The water table has risen, and barring some kind of a major catastrophe, it has risen permanently.

We're living in a world where interactions among cultures are the name of the game. I think we do well not to think exclusively of this issue of inter-culturalness and multi-cultural churches as an urban matter. Now we've had lots of conversation in the past couple days and a lot of mentioning of the urban. I believe the urban is particularly important because the urban has become the provocation for attention to the issue. You don't want to knock it, saying, "Well, now we're aware that the world is becoming highly urbanized and there are some new problems associated with the new urban complexes." Yes, but the interesting thing is that the suburban and the rural and the countryside worldwide are affected also affected and are becoming much more culturally diverse.

In the urban situation, we just can't ignore it; whereas in the rural you can still do your thing on a mono-cultural basis and get away with it. You can also get away with it in the suburbs, because the suburbs deliver you the largeness of the city without the tensions of the city. It's just too comfortable. And that's one of the things we have to take seriously: How can we wake up the people of God?

It isn't even a matter of foreign missions, though some of you have asked the question why we have put the emphasis in this consultation on the North American context? Well, there are at least two things you have to think about. First, there is the reality of an ethnocentric habit. If we ask North Americans, particularly in their institutions, to take a look at an issue like multiculturalism, they're going to come at it primarily from a North American perspective. But the other side is that the North American situation is itself a kind of doorway, a kind of . . . put it this way, you've got to get that community aware enough of itself, self-critically, or they are never going to relate effectively to the rest of the world. In certain respects we've got a bigger problem in North America.

We've talked about ethnicity; we've talked about diversity. We've not differentiated these very well. They're not easy; they're terminologies, and I don't think terminologies ever are the way you define your playing field, but I have a suggestion: God created diversity. Jesus accepted diversity, and brought together 12 of the strangest combination of people you ever saw. He then took that strange group all over the countryside among people who were even more different from themselves. Look at the map of the travels of Jesus Christ with his 12 disciples and note the situations of cultural difference that Jesus deliberately took his disciples into. Why did Jesus do that?

Jesus believed that diversity is something you deal with, not to remove it, not to make it all alike, but to comprehend it and to recognize that what God is doing in the world is simply taking all these bits and pieces we called earlier "the puddles" and forging them together. Such diversity is a hindrance to some; but it's an energy to others.

When it comes to ethnicity we have an even more mystical problem; partly because it's a bigger, heavier word. I understand ethnicity this way. Ethnicity is what my history has made of me. Every one of us has a history. Parents, grandparents, a name, tradition and, in some cases, certain vocations. A language. A way of looking at good and bad; a way of talking about successful; a way of relating to family members who want to know what you're going to do when you grow up. And that's ethnicity. It's what history has made of who I am.

And these matters of ethnicity for some, unfortunately, become a source of pride; when they cause people to see themselves as superior to, as having better answers than, another. You do remember the Pharisee's prayer? "God I thank you that I am not as one of these." I think this is what the gospel really wants to redeem us from: that view of ethnicity. But the gospel does not want us to accept a different view that presumes that there is nothing about ethnicity that is to be held on to. Ethnicity is not the property of one group.

My view is that God has given us a precious moment in history when there are people here working in multi-cultural situations and learning important things that all the people of God should be listening to and learning from. It distresses me to realize that one of the most under supplied careers in the world is diplomacy. In the world! There are not enough competent diplomats. There are not enough people going into those experiences that would provide the sort of training suited to diplomatic service.

We know that we live in a world that is increasingly chaotic because of the incapacity to mediate, because of the incapacity to deal diplomatically or in a civil manner with people who are different. Christians, the people of God, ought to be coming forth from all of our churches with some competencies as peacemakers! Reflect on the names of the Lord Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace among them. And don't caste this issue in purely eschatological terms and say, "Well that's a millennium type

of thing and some day it will be fulfilled.” You will miss the point. It is to be in the DNA of the people of God worldwide to be peacemakers.

Where do we learn those skills? I think we learn those skills in churches. Until we take the nature of the real world and the transformations that are occurring in it more seriously, we will continue to go right along tooting the same whistle, pushing our boat down the same channel, and the laziness that infects the church will get to us.

We’re not concerned about conformity; we’re concerned about congruency so that our lives are flowing more in parallel and in relationship. We don’t have to be alike. God wouldn’t have made diversity if he didn’t believe in it. The issue is: Are we letting diversity or difference block us and stop us? Somehow in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we have to be the people who spread the good news, the gospel, that the Lord Jesus Christ has come, and that in him there is no difference.

Let’s pray together. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we would seek to be servants worthy of your name. We would seek to be those who place Christlikeness at the very center of the history that we each have become. Go with each of us; bless us; guide us; make us your servants; make us effectively your ambassadors; help us to rejoice in the truth of the message we carry. Make us aware of the dignity of the callings you have given to us. We bless you for those callings, gifts, and we praise you for this assembly and the ways in which you have brought us together. We pray that it may happen yet again. But beyond that, we would not become an organization, a club, a gathering, a habit, but we will become people of action, energized by the realities of the transforming that you do in our lives and in this world. In the name of the Lord Jesus we do pray. Amen.