

**Lutheran Church of Australia:
Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions**

MULTICULTURALISM AND THE LUTHERAN CHURCH

Adopted by the Commission, June 1993

The Development of a Multicultural Society

Australian society is changing. Two hundred years ago the number of cultural groups was limited to those of Aboriginal societies and white settlers from Great Britain. Many waves of migration coming from various parts of the world and for different reasons have created a multi-faceted Australian society. Over forty per cent of the present Australian population was either born overseas or of parents who were born outside Australia.

Australian governments have struggled with the changing nature of Australian society. Early reactions included trying to retain its white European identity through the White Australia Policy and assimilation practices in the 1950s. Later the term "multiculturalism" heralded a different way of thinking about people from a variety of cultures. Multiculturalism accepts and encourages cultural pluralism. The Mabo discussions and various subsequent Aboriginal land rights claims provide further challenges to Australians to determine acceptable identities and cultures.

Multiculturalism is defined as 'policies and practices that recognise and respond to the ethnic diversity of the Australian community and have as their primary object the creation of conditions under which all groups and members of the community may -

- a) live and work harmoniously;
- b) fully and effectively participate in, and employ their skills and talents for the benefit of the economic, social and cultural life of the community; and
- c) maintain and give expression to their distinctive cultural heritages'. (South Australian Multicultural & Ethnic Affairs Commission Act 1989)

'Multicultural means that we all have needs and desires; we have likes and dislikes. We are different but there is nothing wrong or threatening in that difference. We are seeking a better life for ourselves and future generations and there is no place for an "us" and "them" mentality in our society, today or in the future.' (The national group, the Office of Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs)

Lutherans and Multiculturalism

The Lutheran Church in Australia developed primarily from the migration of Lutherans fleeing religious persecution in the mid 1800s and later from the devastation of war-weary Europe in the 1940s and 50s. We Lutherans have therefore also contributed to the changing texture of Australian society and are challenged to demonstrate our Christian responsibilities to others of non-Anglo Australian nationality. Hence it is timely for us to explore multiculturalism in the

context of the Lutheran faith and the Mission Statement of the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) adopted at the LCA General Convention, 1990 Canberra, amended by the Home Mission Department in April 1991 and renamed the "LCA Statement on Mission" at the 1993 General Convention.

LCA Statement on Mission

The focus of this paper has this Statement on Mission strongly in mind, particularly the parts of the statement that are found in Part 2, 'Mission at Home', under the headings 'Understanding Mission at Home' and 'Some Implications for the Congregation'.

The following is especially relevant: 'Mission work belongs to the essential task of every congregation. The Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20) is directed to every congregation and to every individual follower of Christ ... The mission field of a congregation includes its local community' (which in Australia is likely to include representatives from numerous cultural backgrounds) 'as well as distant communities and foreign lands. Every congregation and preaching place should see mission to people in the local area as belonging to its essential task'(Acts 1:8).

This section also implies the need for a multicultural perspective. 'Every congregation or preaching place needs to define the nature and scope of its mission, and to develop and implement strategies for outreach into the local community, and also further afield as appropriate. The aim and purpose in founding a new congregation or preaching place should be to bring the Gospel to the unchurched in the community, as well as to serve Lutherans'.

Definition of Multiculturalism

As a result of our discussions and study, we offer the following theological approach to multiculturalism:

God enriches humanity and creation with gifts of diversity as a symbol of his mysterious eternal being. However, sin has corrupted our human reaction to diversity, resulting in manifestations of racism, prejudice, hostility, cruelty, slavery and injustice. This corrupted reaction to diversity gives us opportunities to use the gospel to redress these manifestations of sin and to reach out to all people in Christ's name, for the growth of the body of Christ and the advancement of God's kingdom on earth. As God's people we are called to give witness to a God-pleasing diversity. The church as the people of God is called by the gospel to unity in diversity.

Biblical Expression of Multiculturalism

1. God reveals himself in Scripture as being one God, yet as a harmonious, loving community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God delights in variety, diversity and life. Such diversity is reflected in the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2.
2. The story of the many nations begins in Genesis 11(:1-9). There we read of the beginnings of many different languages and of many different countries 'even over the face of the whole earth'. The scattering of the nations was the result of the punishment of God for the sin of pride in themselves and the desire of the people not to be dispersed over the whole earth. By scattering the people, God limited the combined potential at that time for people to do evil.

God prevents such human attempts at uniformity. They are misguided and sinful. Human beings are divided by different languages and therefore, different cultures, in order to prevent them from overstepping their limits. God bestows the deliberate gift of diversity in creation as a creative step for the enrichment of all. In Acts 17:26, St Paul spoke of this to the Athenians (at the meeting of the Areopagus), saying that 'From one man he made every nation of people, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live'.

3. This account precedes God's calling of Abram in which his plan to save the nations begins:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you, I will curse; and all the peoples on Earth will be blessed through you. (Gen 12:2-3).

In this promise, we see that God will create a new nation to bless those punished in Gen 11. He will also 'make their name great.' (cf the human effort in Gen 11:4).

4. This promise was fulfilled in the creation of the nation of Israel (Gen 32:28; Ex 19 ff). God's plan of salvation in the Old Testament also extended to include the Gentiles. (Ps 18:49; Isa 11:10)
5. While he set apart Israel, God kept other nations in view. Israel took its place among the other nations. The other nations were often used actively by God to test Israel's faithfulness and punish its unfaithfulness to him (Judg 3:20-23; Isa 44:28-45:13).
6. Israel's continual unfaithfulness as a nation of God, proved to be its downfall (Jer 52). From the midst of Israel's unfaithfulness was prophesied a child who would be born to be the 'light to all nations'. The fulfilment of this prophecy occurred with the birth of the baby Jesus to the Virgin Mary.
7. Matthew's Gospel records the same prophecy from Isaiah (Is 9:1-7), as Jesus sets out on his ministry, to signify that Jesus' ministry was a fulfilment of this prophecy (Matt 4:12-17).
8. Jesus' gospel ministry was not limited to the Jewish nation but was for all. He treated all people with love, truth and compassion. One notable account is in his dealings with the Samaritan woman in John 4. There, almost a whole Samaritan village comes to faith by his ministry to her. One important discussion Jesus had with this woman concerned worship. In this, Jesus highlighted that, for worship, it was 'spirit and truth' that mattered, not location (John 4:19-24). Jesus never worried about spiritual matters. It is interesting to note that the range of Jesus' ministry took place in Galilee, the multicultural centre of the world at that time.
9. Jesus came for the salvation of all nations and all people (Luke 3:6; John 3:16).
10. When Jesus was crucified, Pilate had the notice written: 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews', in Aramaic, Latin and Greek for all to read and understand (John 19:19-20).

11. As Jesus died, it was a Roman centurion who said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God' (Mark 15:39).
12. In Acts 1:4-8, a conversation that Jesus had with his disciples is recorded. In it, he told his disciples to 'be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth'.
13. This conversation is supported in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit was given and manifested himself in the gift of 'other languages'. Acts 2:5 says: 'Now there were staying in Jerusalem, God fearing Jews from every nation under heaven'. These Jews heard 'the wonders of God declared in our own tongues' (Acts 2:11). This is primarily a miracle of speaking and, secondarily, of hearing and understanding different languages.
14. Later in Acts 8, we read the story of the church in Judea and Samaria, of the conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch and in Acts 10 of the giving of the Spirit to the Gentiles (v 44, 45). So the good news spread throughout the world and continues to spread today.
15. St Paul was the apostle chosen by Christ to spread the good news to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). For Paul, baptism unites us all regardless of human barriers. In baptism we become 'in Christ' (Gal 3:26-29; Col 3:11).
16. Finally, it is in worship that all the nations and tribes are joined together. We experience this in part now here on earth (Heb 12:22-24) and then finally forever in heaven. 'After this, I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb' (Rev 7:9; see also Rev 22:1-2).

Summary:

The plan of salvation in Christ is not limited to the people of one nation or culture. It is for all people. God unites us all in Christ but this union will only become visible reality in eternity. We accept in faith that all people who are baptised and believe, are in Christ and this is all that is necessary. People of all nations must therefore be witnessed to. We are not required to change a people's culture, only to be obedient to the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20). God as the Father is creator of all people; Jesus Christ the Saviour died for all people and the Holy Spirit builds the church in order to bring all people to the Father and the Son.

To this end, we must seek to make contact with people of other nationalities and encourage them to express their Christian faith according to their own culture.

Pastoral Implications

The following issues will need to be addressed by the LCA, by pastors and in congregations:

1. *Prejudice and racism*

Human nature being what it is, we will see prejudice and racism manifested within congregations and between sub-groups. Such attitudes arise mostly from past experiences (however isolated), ignorance of the unknown and fear. They often come from both parties. These attitudes can be subtle or openly expressed. People are often unaware of their own prejudices and racial fears

and need to be guided to recognise and confront these on the basis of God's word.

2. *Cultural insensitivity*

One of the joys of multiculturalism is the richness provided by exposure to different cultural beliefs and practices. We need to be culturally aware and sensitive to other people's cultural practices and beliefs in order to build friendships with people of other cultures and to seek to share the gospel with them in homes and worship.

3. *Preparation and education*

The way in which we prepare congregations and pastors to be inclusive of people, regardless of cultural background, is a major issue. Both pastors and congregations need to be made aware of the features outlined in this paper and have opportunities to develop caring, inclusive ways of ministry with people of other cultures. Ongoing education in these areas needs to become a priority. This is a task for the LCA, our educational institutions and our congregations to tackle.

4. *Worship*

Different cultures involve different languages and expressions of worship. The challenge is to be inclusive of people through using various languages and expressions of Christian faith without compromising the essential elements of worship. When reaching out to people of certain cultures, it may be necessary to decrease the role of aural language (hearing) and increase the use of other senses, namely vision (art) and movement (drama).

5. *Segregation and inclusion*

Some cultural groups have chosen to establish their own Lutheran congregations, such as Australian Aborigines, Latvian and German congregations. How do we acknowledge these congregations and encourage exchange with them as the one Body of Christ? These congregations must be included as one Body without ignoring their validity or undermining their own strengths.

6. *Recruiting pastors*

The education of pastors, as previously mentioned, needs emphasis. This point is raised here also in the context of the education of new pastors, including those of various, possibly non-English speaking, backgrounds. Recruitment of suitable pastors from a broader cultural base ought to be encouraged.

In multicultural societies there is the increased possibility of misunderstanding and offence if cultural practices are rejected or opposed. Any action which does speak out against specific cultural practices must be carefully thought through, applied with sensitivity, love and guidance from God.

7. *Interfaith issues*

We recognise that non-Christian faiths are evident in Australian society. Acceptance of multiculturalism does not mean acceptance of pluralism. All races are judged by the word of God. This paper deliberately avoids entering

into discussions about inter-faith dialogue or worship and seeks guidance from the LCA's Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations (CTICR) on these issues.

Practical Suggestions

This list of suggestions should not be seen as exhaustive, nor is it intended just for pastors. The suggestions are offered in the hope that they may encourage discussion and enthusiasm for further possibilities of ministry with people of various cultures. These are:

- * hold informal language groups (similar to home groups) to assist in cultural exchange, acquisition of English language, etc
- * organise one-to-one sponsors (eg with refugees)
- * extend personal invitations to newcomers to host cultural events to break down barriers and to show we value their practices; reciprocate with other events.
- * be available to newcomers and learn from them what their needs are; invite newcomers to take a role in services
- * recognise and build on leadership
- * visit people (eg use Every Member Visit opportunities)
- * have specific Bible studies aimed at understanding prejudice, discrimination etc
- * ensure that materials (eg the Sunday bulletin) are available in different languages
- * print membership kits in other languages
- * hold a special event (eg visits to and from congregations of people from other cultures, Sunday School visits/exchanges); ensure that translators/mediators/interpreters are available for worship and weekday services
- * become aware of other resources (eg Migrant Resource Centre in Adelaide)
- * learn another language
- * organise specific multicultural task groups within congregations
- * hold basic workshops on cross-cultural issues such as migration issues (Rosemary Winderlich has one programme called 'Windows')
- * plan ministry strategies to involve youth of other cultures
- * employ someone with experience in this area of work with congregations
- * make our schools and colleges more accessible to people of other cultures who are on low incomes.