

A Case for Multicultural Church Plant

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This article compares North America to the Samaritans. Our people have come from almost every ethnolinguistic background to settle in North America, and we can never be like any other nation or people on earth. Arguing from this perspective, the writer makes a case for a multicultural church plant.

Samaritan Nation

In the New Testament era, “Samaritans” were a people of mixed race. Their history of becoming a mixed race is very interesting and may apply to what North America is becoming today. Samaria used to be the capital city of Israel. According to the biblical records of the Old Testament, Israel (Northern Kingdom) after the death of Solomon was separated from the Southern Kingdom, Judah. Later, Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom (2 Kings 17:24-29) and scattered the inhabitants of Samaria all over the vast kingdom. According to Donald R. Potts, about 27,290 of the Israelites were exiled, and in their place, Assyria resettled captives from other conquered lands in Samaria.²

When Assyria deported their captives, however, they left some remnants, mostly the poor. There were also some Israelites who escaped the war and later returned to Samaria. With the captives from other lands resettled in the city of Samaria, and the Israeli remnants left behind, intermarriage became a common practice. Through the course of time, the inhabitants of Samaria were no longer a pure Jewish race but a mixed group. They were descendants of non-Jewish people from other nations whom the Assyrian king had resettled and the remnant Jews. Hence, in

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²Donald R. Potts, “Samaria, Samaritans” In Holman Bible Dictionary (Nashville, Tenn.: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 1224-1225.

the time of Jesus, the “relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans was greatly strained (Luke 9:52-54; 10:25-37; 17:11-19).”³ The Samaritans, in the course of time, developed their own culture, traditions, worship places, and considered themselves distinct from the Jews. However, they still believed in the God of Israel, acknowledged Moses as his prophet, the Pentateuch as his word, and looked forward to the appearance of the Messiah (John 4).

It is interesting to note that while the traditional Jews despised the Samaritans, and would not travel through their territory, the attitude of Jesus was different. He loved them, defended them, “rebuked the disciples” for their hostility to the Samaritans (Luke 17:16), honored a Samaritan for his neighborliness (Luke 10:30-37), praised a Samaritan for his gratitude (Luke 17:11-18), asked a drink of a Samaritan woman (John 4:7), and preached to the Samaritans. (John 4:40-42).”⁴ After his resurrection, Jesus mentioned Samaria as one of the places the Gospel of the kingdom must be preached. (Acts 1:8).

North America: The New Samaria

To a greater degree, North America has and will continue to be a people like the Samaritans. Our people have come from every ethnolinguistic background to settle in North America, and we can never be like any other nation or people on earth. Michael Lind, in his book, *The Next American Nation*, insists that the United States as a nation has been in the state of flux from its founding period. According to him, there have been three American nations since it was founded as a nation-state. The first is the Anglo-America, which lasted from the Revolutionary War until the Civil War. In this first republic of the United States of America, “Anglo-America, the national community was identified with the Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Germanic element of the population; the civic religion, Protestant Christianity; and the political creed, federal republicanism. There was considerable doubt as to whether Irish-American Catholics—to say nothing of Jews or black Americans—could ever be ‘real Americans.’”⁵

³Ibid., 1225.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Michael Lind, *The Next American Nation* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 11.

The second nation was Euro-America, which developed after the Civil War and lasted until the Civil Rights Movement. “The Euro-American national formula, redefined to accommodate the European immigrants of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, was somewhat more inclusive than the Anglo-American. To be a ‘genuine American,’ according to the popular consensus in the Second Republic, was to be European descent and to be Christian (Protestant or Catholic) in religion.”⁶ Lind observed that “The antebellum elimination of most restrictions on white male suffrage and the post-Civil War nationalization of basic civil rights turned the Anglo-American political creed of federal republicanism into a creed of federal democracy.”⁷

The third American Republic the author noted, started in the 1950s-1970s with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement and ushered in the multicultural America, the period in which we live today. Lind’s book hopes to replace multicultural America with what he called “American liberal nationalism.” According to the author the US social system will be a “color-blind, gender-neutral regime of individual rights ...combined with government activism promoting a high degree of substantive social and economic equality.”⁸ But, the reality is that America is still changing; not necessarily in the direction that Lind hopes for, but something more fundamentally different. It will dramatically change the American peoples and cultures into a “Samaritan nation.”

Pew Research Center on February 16, 2012, released a report on intermarriage across racial and ethnic lines in the United States, and compared the traits of those who “marry out” with those who “marry in.” The research indicated that: “About 15% of all new marriages in the United States in 2010 were between spouses of a different race or ethnicity from one another, more than double the share in 1980 (6.7%). Among all newlyweds in 2010, 9% of whites, 17% of blacks, 26% of Hispanics and 28% of Asians married out. Looking at all married couples in

⁶Ibid., 11-12.

⁷Ibid., 12.

⁸Ibid., 15. See also Stephen A. Rhodes, *Where the Nations Meet: the Church in a Multicultural World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 31.

2010, regardless of when they married, the share of intermarriages reached an all-time high of 8.4%. In 1980, that share was just 3.2%.”⁹

Similar research carried out in 2006 revealed that “more than one-fifth of all American adults (22%) say that they have a close relative who is married to someone of a different race, according to a new Pew Research Center survey. That degree of familiarity with — and proximity to — interracial marriage is the latest milestone in what has been a sweeping change in behaviors and attitudes concerning interracial relationships over the past several decades.”¹⁰ The research indicated that “Until 1967, when a U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Loving v. Virginia* struck down the last of the anti-miscegenation laws in this country, interracial marriage had been illegal in 16 states and was widely considered a social taboo.”¹¹ In the 2010 United States Census, more than 9 million Americans indicated that they are of mixed race. Moreover, according to Gregory Rodriguez, a columnist with *Los Angeles Times*, “The number of people who identified as both white and black jumped an astounding 134%. And nearly 50% more children were identified as multiracial on this census, making that category the fastest-growing youth demographic in the country.”¹²

This growing cultural shift over the last several decades, along with a number of other trends — “the civil rights movement; the softening of racial lines; the abolishment of anti-miscegenation laws; the growth in the Mexican-origin population, which has its own long history of racial mixing; and the Census Bureau's check-all-races-that-apply decision — have led to a growing acceptance of multiracialism in the U.S.,”¹³ Rodriguez concluded. Related to the changes in marriage is the issue of raising a family or having children. According to an NPR report on May 11, 2001, “approximately 40 percent of adoptions in America are transracial —

⁹Wendy Wang, “The Rise of Intermarriage: Rates, Characteristics Vary by Race and Gender”
<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/02/16/the-rise-of-intermarriage/>

¹⁰“Guess Who's Coming to Dinner” <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2006/03/14/guess-whos-coming-to-dinner/>

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Gregory Rodriguez, “President Obama: At odds with clear demographic trends toward multiracial pride”
<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-rodriguez-column-obama-race-20110404,0,3716973.column>

¹³Ibid.

and that number is growing.”¹⁴ It is not only the marriage institution that is changing, but the understanding of it is also changing; and of course, not all the changes are in the positive.

For example, many Christians, especially evangelicals will object to the same-sex marriage that is becoming not only culturally acceptable but legal in many states. Same-sex marriage in the United States is not recognized by the United States federal government, but it is recognized by some individual states including: Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont, plus Washington, D.C. and Oregon's Coquille and Washington state's Suquamish Indian tribes. The state of Washington had planned granting same-sex marriage licenses on June 7, 2012, but was forced into a November 2012 voter referendum which same-sex marriage won. “Same-sex marriages could be legally performed in California between June 16, 2008 and November 4, 2008 after which voters passed Proposition 8, prohibiting same-sex marriages. California also recognizes any same-sex marriage from around the world that took place before that end date. Maryland also recognizes same-sex marriages but does not grant marriage licenses to same-sex couples.”¹⁵

What do these changes in the most sacred of all institutions tell us about the United States future culture and lifestyle? The changes point to a much more multicultural and tolerant society. When the changes in marriage are added to the demographic changes and pluralistic religious adherence by the immigrants from non-Western countries, it is beyond dispute that the future of the United States in particular, and North America in general, is destined to be multicultural and religiously pluralistic. Then, the question is this: imagine you are married to a person of a different cultural background, whether race, ethnicity, or socio-economic background, and you have just placed your faith in Christ as a Christian, what kind of church will you likely attend? The church will probably be one that will welcome and love your family.

What about a young boy or girl who attended a diverse elementary, middle and high school where her friends cut across different racial, ethnic, and socio-cultural backgrounds? She

¹⁴“The Parenting Dilemmas Of Transracial Adoption” <http://www.npr.org/2011/05/11/136208967/transracial-adoptions-raise-parenting-dilemmas>

¹⁵“Same-Sex Marriage in the United States” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samesex_marriage_in_the_United_States

is now becoming an adult and has maintained close contact and relationships with all her friends through Facebook, Twitter, and other social networks. She is now in college and still meets her friends for social events. Recently someone witnessed to her of the need to become a disciple of Jesus Christ, and she agreed and trusted Jesus as her Lord and Savior. What kind of church would you like her to join? It is most likely a church that resembles her social network, high school and college.

These are not rhetorical questions but realities with which many Americans are living. It is not only interracial marriages and adoptions that are on the increase; diversity can be seen in most neighborhoods, at shopping malls, restaurants, cinema studios, public parks, in school districts, colleges, and universities. At the same time, “the growth in the number of white youths slowed sharply in the 1990s, up by just 1 percent in the decade, as the number of white women of childbearing age fell, according to Kenneth M. Johnson, a demographer at the University of New Hampshire.”¹⁶ More recently, that population segment has dipped into a decline.

The number of white Americans under the age of 20 fell by 6 percent between 2000 and 2008. “Instead, growth has come from minorities, particularly Hispanics, as more Latino women enter their childbearing years. Blacks, Asians and Hispanics accounted for about 79 percent of the national population growth between 2000 and 2009.”¹⁷ Consequently, “the result has been a changed American landscape, with whites now a minority of the youth population in 10 states.”¹⁸ What kind of church will resemble this new generation of Americans? As a church planter looking at the New Testament and watching where North American culture is going, I would strongly recommend a multicultural church plant.

What Multicultural Church Plant is Not?

Churches Sharing Facilities

¹⁶“In Census, Young Americans Increasingly Diverse” <http://newsone.com/nation/newsonestaff4/in-census-young-americans-increasingly-diverse/>

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

In many cities, immigrant churches and new church plants have difficulty getting a good facility where they can worship and organize many of their activities. Often, the church planter or the strategist will negotiate with an existing (often older Caucasian) congregation for the use of their facilities for a period of time. It could be in the late afternoon after their worship service, or in the evening. If the time coincides with the older church's worship time, the new church plant or the immigrant church is usually relegated to a building in the background, basement, or old structure somewhere within the infrastructures of the benevolent church.

Often in this scenario, the two churches have nothing in common except sharing facilities and sharing bills, while the members of the two congregations have nothing in common. Usually if there is any issue, leaders of the two churches will come together to discuss and settle it. Moreover, the new church plant will remain there until they find a more suitable location and facility, and they will relocate. There may be a few occasions the host congregation would invite the new church plant or immigrant church for a program in the main church, and usually they are treated as visitors and accommodated for that particular day if the new plant honors the invitation.

This is not a multicultural church because the two churches have separate visions, mission statements, and leadership. They are independent of each other and are not accountable to one another. At best, their relationship is contractual, and the new church plant would leave the venue as soon as they discover a more affordable and better facility that is strategically located. In short, the relationship between the churches is simply a business relationship that can be terminated as soon as it is no longer profitable to the parties involved.

Ministry to an ethnic or Socio-economic group

Another ministry often construed to be a multicultural church plant is when a church is serving a community different from their dominant cultural or economic group in an inner city context or multi-housing unit. The church may feed the hungry, conduct regular Bible studies in the complex, and distribute leftover food from chain stores or restaurants, but have no intention of bringing the new converts to their fold. For example, with the increase in Hispanic

immigrants, a good number of churches may have Hispanic ministry to the migrants, but there is no real relationship built, and the recipients are often not treated as equals. This kind of ministry is patronizing and lacks the commitment, sacrifice, and humility necessary in building the Body of Christ.

When the poor and the rich worship together, they learn from each other and grow together. The rich will learn humility, and the presence of the poor will be a constant reminder of what James called a pure religion, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (James 1:27). Stephen Mott and Ronald J. Sider stated, “If we get rich by oppressing the poor, or if we have wealth and do not reach out generously to the needy, the Lord of history moves against us. God judges societies by what they do to the people at the bottom.”¹⁹

In the book of Acts, the Bible recorded the lifestyle of early believers in these words,

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” Acts 2:42-47).

Looking at this passage, it is clear that both rich and poor believers were together in one church and selfishness was eradicated as the haves shared willingly with the have-nots. Craig L. Blomberg observed that “the Pentecostal pilgrims who would have otherwise returned to their homes in the Diaspora may have stayed as part of this fledgling Christian community, creating ‘refugees.’ ...Even those local Jerusalemites who joined the first church and who themselves were already impoverished probably cut themselves off from the standard Jewish sources of charity.”²⁰ Whatever were the circumstances of the early believers in Jerusalem; they lived,

¹⁹Stephen Mott and Ronald J. Sider, “Economic Justice: A Biblical Paradigm” in *Toward A Just and Caring Society*. David P. Gushee ed..(Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 28.

²⁰Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 162.

shared, and worshiped God together without the rich patronizing the poor, or the natives lording over the diaspora believers. In Acts 6, when there was a complaint by Hellenists against the Hebrews, it was resolved in the spirit of Christ. Therefore, ministry to the poor, or to a socio-economic or cultural group in the same community, with no deliberate intention of bringing them to the fold cannot be said to be a multicultural church plant or ministry.

Adopting People Groups

Another ministry erroneously associated with a multicultural church plant is when a church adopts a people group. Ralph D. Winter defined the concept as “a set of molecules, not atoms, that is an aggregate of peoples, not individuals that make up the population of our planet nor ...geographical territories called countries.”²¹ In other words, ‘People Group’ could be a class, caste, tribe or ethnic unit. Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization also defined “People Group” as “a significantly large ethnic or sociological grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another.”²² Mission organizations like the International Mission Board (IMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention adopted this strategy and insist that “in a world with dissolving borders, global ‘affinity groups’ –large groupings of related peoples that share similar origins, languages and cultures—acts as a lens through which missionaries view lostness and focus strategy to share the Gospel.”²³ Furthermore, the IMB stated that “focusing strategy through affinity groups gives missionaries a more complete picture of the people they are working to reach as well as the freedom to pursue the lost regardless of their location.”²⁴

Currently, the IMB is deploying missionaries in North American cities to reach ‘People Groups.’ This strategy is definitely pragmatic and makes evangelistic sense, but it lacks biblical warrant and cannot be applied in North American church planting. First, the United States and

²¹Ralph D. Winter, “Unreached People: The Development of the Concept” *Reaching the Unreached: The Old—New Challenge*, Harvie M. Conn ed. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1984), 17.

²²“Definition: Key Terms in the Cause of Frontier Missions” *Mission Frontiers: Bulletin of the U.S. Centre for World Mission Vol.16 Number 1-2 Jan/Feb. 1994, 10.*

²³“Peoples Around the World” <http://www.imb.org/main/aroundtheworld.asp>.

²⁴Ibid.

Canada are made of a mosaic of peoples from every ethnic group and background. Employing this strategy means we have to return back to a Homogeneous Principle Unit, which we have argued is not only unbiblical but is a socio-cultural reality which is contrary to the vision of the church as redeemed people of all races, cultures, socio-economic classes of people coming together in faith in Christ.²⁵

Secondly, in the North American context, the culture is moving toward integration and multiculturalism with increased miscegenation (Samaritan Nation). Therefore, the practice amounts to retrogression to the segregation era in the United States, reminiscent of some Jim Crow-era mandates, which leads to the charge that the American church is racist.

Thirdly, people groups or affinity churches are limited in their outreach as the pool of who can join their church is limited to their kind of people. Jesus reminded the Jews of his time, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?’” (Mark 11:17) Consequently, the concept is not only foreign to the New Testament, but unsustainable in regard to a local church becoming self-sufficient to serve her community in the Great Commission and Commandment. This is one of the reasons why immigrant churches have limited growth, because they can only have as many converts as the flow of their type of immigrants to their community.

Fourthly, when churches are constituted of only one ethnicity or affinity group, their leadership often defaults to cultural practices in decision-making rather than the Word of God. For example, an interracial couple was excommunicated on the account of racial purity.²⁶ A church could adopt a group for the purpose of praying and seeing more of that particular population come to faith in Christ, but as they come to Christ in faith, the new converts must be integrated to the local church where they live and work. Creating a separate congregation for a particular affinity group or peoples group is contrary to the New Testament church. Paul prayed

²⁵Damian Emetuche, “Avoiding Racism in Starting New Congregations” In *Racism: Christian Reflection* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2010).

²⁶ “Interracial Couple Banned From Kentucky Church” in http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/30/interracial-couple-banned-from-kentucky-church_n_1121582.html

for the salvation of the Jews (Romans 9-11), but he never planted a church exclusively for the Jews. All his churches were racially, socially, and economically diverse from Antioch to Iconium, Lystra to Derbe, Corinth to Athens.

Fifthly, a church plant in modern North America based on ethnic or affinity groups is dead from the start because it has no future. It is dead from the beginning because after the first generation immigrants are reached, second and third generations are no longer interested in the primary culture of their parents. The majority of the second and subsequent generations will speak the majority language, become more bicultural, and ultimately become more main stream Americans than their parents because of the melding and enculturation within the American schools and other institutions. This is already happening among immigrant churches like Hispanic churches in Miami and other cities where the younger generations are more multicultural, speak both English and Spanish, and may not want to worship in a traditional Hispanic church.

What about language churches or ministry?

Another ministry often associated with multicultural church plant is when a local church is having a separate worship service for a group of believers in the same church in a different language. There are two main arguments for this language service within the North American local church context. The first is that many of the immigrants from non-English speaking countries or cultures do not understand or speak English well enough to worship in English speaking congregations. The second is that people would like to hear the gospel in their heart language and there is a need to preserve their culture. While it is true that a good number of immigrants coming to America may not speak English fluently, it is not true that they are not interested in learning and worshiping in English. On the contrary, many non-English speakers, as part of their enculturation, may want to worship in English speaking congregations. A local church may have room for interpreters if the need arises, but the practice of having a little language church ensconced in the basement reduces fellow believers to second class citizens.

Secondly, language and culture can be preserved at home in many ways such as through family, food, clothing, etc. other than simply an hour of worship. Interaction with people of other cultures is part of what heaven is about, and it prevents the church from erecting linguistic, cultural, and racial barriers. A local church may interpret as a temporary measure within a context of all believers in the same building worshipping at the same time but to create a separate worship experience based on language alone does not make a congregation multicultural or multiracial. Again, in the New Testament, local churches worshiped in the language of the majority culture where it was planted. In the Gentile world, believers worshiped in Greek or Latin, and in Jerusalem, they worshiped in the Hebrew language regardless of the converts visiting Jerusalem from over fifteen ethno-linguistic groups. For example, in Acts 2, Peter's message was in Hebrew and not in Greek.

What is a Multicultural Church

Multicultural church in North America must consist of six elements: (1) multiracial; (2) multiethnic; (3) multicultural; (4) multigenerational; (5) multi-socioeconomic; and (6), multi-educational. In one word, a local church must be as diverse as the community it is situated, reflecting the demography found in the area. The church must look like the Wal-Mart or other grocery stores in the neighborhood, the school district, the community college, the neighborhood laundry mart, and the kids in the context it is planted. Any church planting effort targeting a particular segment of its community to the neglect of other population groups of the same community is not representing the church that Jesus died to redeem, and it is definitely preaching a different gospel. Paul writing to the Roman church said, "I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome" (Romans 1:14-15).

Paul's commitment should be the same commitment and conviction of every church planter and pastor in all our communities. God never intended his church to be monocultural, rather multicultural. He never intended his church to find its identity along bloodlines, but through common faith and union in Christ Jesus. The church is, therefore, a new community, a

new Israel called out from all the nations of the world. Craig Van Gelder in his book, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* noted.

The division of the world along racial or ethnic lines, and institutionalized into national, political units, will no longer exist within God's redemptive reign. For the people of God, there will be a new political reality. The people of God will be formed around a different identity, one that transcends race, ethnicity, and nationalism. It will be an identity rooted in a shared faith and fellowship with the living God. This new community will include people of diverse racial, ethnic, national, and political identities."²⁷

Christian faith is countercultural and represents the new humanity in Christ. Peter said of the new community, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Peter 2:9-10). Therefore, a fractured community of faith can never be an instrument in the transformation of a fractured world. "It is the nature of the church to live in reconciled relationship with God and one another as a new 'people of God.' This message greatly challenged the Jewish Christians who had to learn to welcome Gentile Christians as full participants in the emerging community of faith."²⁸ Furthermore, "In the midst of a divided world, the church must find ways to bridge differences as the 'people of God.' This different political reality for the church is implied in the choice of the term *ecclesia* to describe it."²⁹

This *ecclesia* of God is composed of people of all cultural, ethnic, racial, economic, and educational backgrounds. Christians in North America have a choice: to plant a church that will look like heaven as painted in the Scriptures, or continue to plant churches according to our human traditions and personal choices. Revelation 7:9-12 states,

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying,

²⁷Craig Van Gelder, , *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapid: Baker Books, 2000), 108-109.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 109.

²⁹*Ibid.*

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.

If we are willing and obedient, and our answer is yes, to plant a true New Testament church of God that will reflect our Samaritan nation, then, the next question should be, what will it take to plant a true multicultural church in contemporary North America? It will take true and deep biblical and theological convictions and hard work. This will be our next discussion.