

Multicultural Congregations: A Baptist Perspective

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A Baptist perspective

Nobody speaks for all Baptists. Indeed, where there are three Baptists it is often said that there are four opinions! So this is not 'the Baptist perspective', but 'a Baptist perspective'. The Baptist tradition, however, does carry some emphases which are found in most Baptist churches and which affect how they approach multicultural ministry.

The insistence that churches are gatherings of those who have chosen as adults to belong (through 'believers' baptism') generally goes with a high level of attendance and commitment. Some would say that this probably accounts for Baptists being a noisier bunch in the Australian church than their numbers might suggest. But it also explains why many Baptist migrants are enthusiastic about starting fellowships which express their faith in ways similar to those in their country of origin.

Furthermore, the emphasis on mission and evangelism, common to all Evangelicals, makes Baptist migrants keen to reach fellow migrants from their culture.

Thirdly, Baptist congregations are independent and run by members' meetings. There are no bishops or synods, only associations and unions of churches. The shortcomings of this emphasis are obvious: Baptist churches can be short on co-operation, good leadership and connections with the wider church. As an example, this chapter is necessarily a Victorian perspective because Baptists in Australia are organised according to state-based unions, with a small national body (the Baptist Union of Australia). The freedom of Baptist churches, however, is also a strength, and it spills over into multicultural ministry. They belong to the 'chapel' tradition, rather than the 'parish' tradition. They are not organised solely by geographical area, but are free to form according to need and enthusiasm.

Like most denominations, Australian Baptists have moved through several stages in their understanding of multicultural ministry. We might label the three main perspectives as those of the 'melting pot' (assimilation), the 'mosaic' (separatist multiculturalism) and 'minestrone soup' (multicultural interaction at the congregational level).

Assimilation and the ‘melting pot’

The first Baptists in Australia came from England and began meeting in the 1830s in Sydney and Melbourne, spreading to other states by the 1860s.¹ Until the Second World War, Australian Baptists were a monocultural group, mostly British in origin. They simply reflected the dominance of British settlers in wider Australian society, a dominance guaranteed in Australia by the restrictive White Australia immigration policy.

The first specific efforts to assist immigrants were directed towards English migrants with assisted passage in the years before the Second World War. Australians, Baptists among them, were generous in giving practical help to the new migrants, many of whom joined local churches. For these people, ‘assimilation’ – helping people to become ‘like us’ – was the right term to describe their process of settling and adapting to an Australian climate and an Australian-British culture.

As an example of these efforts, in the 1950s the Victorian Baptists set up a committee to nominate British Baptists to receive an assisted passage and sponsorship. When these British Baptists arrived they were housed in a Baptist migrant centre at Seaford, on the bay in Melbourne, and looked after until they were well settled and had made friends. At this stage, immigration ministry was still hardly a cross-cultural ministry. Later, migrants from continental Europe also stayed at Seaford, opening the ministry to different cultures.²

Post-war immigration opened up, first to those from Northern Europe and then to those from Southern Europe. There are many Baptists in European countries, so they were to be found amongst the Estonians, Hungarians, Italians, Macedonians, Polish, Romanians, Russians, Slavs, Slovaks, Spanish, Ukrainians and Yugoslavs who arrived in numbers between the late 1940s and the 1970s.³

Until about the 1960s migrant ministry followed the model of assimilation, expecting migrants to take on Anglo-Australian ways and ‘become Aussies’, leaving behind their cultures of origin. In this view, the church was seen as part of Australia’s ‘melting pot’ (a term widely used in the United States of the early twentieth century). As European cultures and languages became more common, ministry to the newest migrants would often begin as cross-cultural, but its aim was to melt the different cultures into one culture, the dominant Australian culture of British heritage.

In its secular version, assimilation was government policy towards migrants from 1788 until 1972, when the policy of multiculturalism was adopted.

Assimilation was government policy towards Australia's Indigenous people, too, until about the 1960s – children were forcibly removed from their parents in order to sever them from their culture, and attempts were even made to 'breed out' their dark colour and encourage light-coloured Indigenous people to feel a part of European Australia. Disappointingly in hindsight, churches mostly reflected the times and helped to implement this policy in its welfare and evangelism among Indigenous people.⁴

Assimilation also has a theological version, alive today, where unity in Christ is emphasised so much that cultural diversity is ignored. There are some churches, particularly very large Charismatic churches, where the congregation contains people from many cultures. But worship is in English, services follow globalised Western patterns, music is not culturally-rooted and there are no smaller groups reflecting members' cultural backgrounds. Unity in Christ is often mentioned, but the variety of ways in which the Gospel can be expressed is not featured. Sometimes visitors can hardly tell whether they are in middle-Australia or middle-America.

Multicultural ministry as a 'mosaic'

Between about the 1950s and 2000, like most denominations, Australian Baptists became heavily involved in supporting fellowships of new migrants who gathered with others 'from home' to worship in their own cultural style and, usually, a language other than English. We will call them 'migrant ethnic churches'. This denominational support has variously been labelled 'new settlers' work', 'ethnic ministry' or, since the word 'multiculturalism' became common in the 1970s, 'multicultural ministry'. In this approach 'the multicultural church' means 'the multicultural denomination'. 'Multicultural ministry' means 'ministry to new migrants'. Christians of different cultures worship in separate fellowships. The multicultural denomination is seen as a mosaic – a colourful picture made up of different little pieces that sit beside each other.

It is worth noting that on this view 'multicultural' has really come to mean 'non-Anglo'. So Anglo-Australians don't feel a part of the mosaic. Similarly, in general use, 'ethnic' has come to mean 'non-Anglo-Australian', as if Anglo-Australians have no ethnicity.

Judging simply by the numbers of migrant ethnic fellowships, Australian Baptists were possibly the most active Protestant denomination in fostering migrant work in the 1950s and 1960s.⁵ Not that they can take the credit for creating these congregations. The impetus came from the variety and numbers of Baptists to be found among European migrants, from their piety

and from their evangelistic fervour towards their own people. All they usually asked from the State Baptist Unions was acceptance as fellow Baptists and help in finding somewhere to worship.⁶

Victoria's experience can serve as an example. The Baptist Union of Victoria (BUV) began work among migrant ethnic churches in 1961 through Revd Jack Manning, the Home Mission Superintendent. In 1968 a New Settlers' Baptist Association of Victoria was formed.⁷ It was the energy behind the formation in 1974 of a similar national association.⁸

For thirty years the Victorian association fostered a network of migrant ethnic churches, mostly of non-English speaking background. As Australia abandoned the White Australia policy and welcomed immigrants from all around the world, especially from Asia, the Middle East and Africa, the range of Baptist migrant ethnic churches widened.

In 2006 the BUV, a union of about 185 churches, has links with about forty migrant ethnic groups from twenty-one cultural backgrounds. Most of these are formally affiliated as churches. There are several fellowships in each of the Burmese, Chinese, Filipino, Indonesian, Korean, Romanian, Samoan, South Sudanese, Spanish and Vietnamese groups.⁹

At a national gathering in late 2005 of Baptist leaders working amongst migrants, work on a similar scale in New South Wales was reported, with about sixty fellowships in a union of about 300 churches, with particular strength amongst the Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Spanish and Vietnamese groups.¹⁰ At the same meeting, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia also reported active links, though more modest in scale, with twenty, ten and six migrant ethnic churches or language groups respectively.¹¹

The relationship of migrant ethnic congregations to the state unions of Baptist churches has varied greatly. Some groups affiliate fully as churches. Some have strong links but remain as fellowships, not formally affiliated. Some operate as a congregation or ministry of an affiliated church and don't appear separately in lists of churches. Others – while baptistic in theology and practice and enjoying some links – have taken the identity of 'free', 'evangelical' or 'independent Baptist' churches.

Even amongst those who affiliate formally, the strength of their links with the Baptist Union has varied. Often this has been due to migrant churches being theologically more conservative than Anglo-Australian churches. For example, the BUV considered joining the Victorian Council of Churches in the late 1980s, but the move was thwarted when the New Settlers'

Association threatened to withdraw from the BUV over the issue. While some migrant ethnic churches had close and warm relationships with the BUV, most were not involved in committees or assemblies between the 1970s and the late 1990s. Language, culture and theology all played their part in this absence.

Multicultural congregations and the ‘minestrone soup’ model

There has been a recent sea-change in the understanding of the multicultural church amongst many who are working in intercultural contexts. We could sum it up by saying that the whole church is called to be multicultural.¹² This multicultural vision not only calls *denominations* to reflect the cultural diversity of Australian society but also *congregations* to develop wider relationships across cultures. Among the various models for multicultural ministry, the multicultural congregation is emerging as an important and central way of being the church in a culturally diverse society.

There is still room for migrant-ethnic churches, especially those who worship in languages other than English. But many congregations are being enriched by including more than one culture in their worship. They are discovering joy and unity in their diversity.

The challenge for multicultural ministry is to hold in tension both unity and diversity. There is a biblical basis for affirming both. The fundamental unity of Christians is clear in Galatians 3:28, which speaks of there being no Jew or Gentile, as we are all one in Christ Jesus. Yet the Pentecost experience and the growth of the early church demonstrates that God speaks to people of different languages and cultures. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul uses the metaphor of the body to speak of both unity and diversity, reminding his readers that the various members of the body need to be genuinely different and yet need to work together in unity. The writer of the Book of Revelation has a vision in which people of all nations, tribes, peoples and languages stand before the Lamb of God (Revd 7:9) – a vision of both unity and diversity.

It is this impulse for unity-in-diversity to be expressed at the local level which is inspiring many churches to experiment with multicultural congregations, despite their many challenges.

One metaphor for this approach is that of minestrone soup, in which the various ingredients keep their shape but all add to the rich flavour of the soup. Our cultures are not lost but expressed, now in a multicultural situation. A new flavour emerges from the variety of ‘old flavours’ without losing the old flavours.

As Australian multiculturalism matures, we find migrants at all stages of settlement, adaptation and – in later generations – integration. Migrants and their descendants should be free to negotiate their own relationship to other cultures and to choose in their own time how their culture of origin interplays with the dominant culture and all the other cultures around them. One will feel a Chinese-Australian while another will identify as Australian-Chinese. (There are many other nuances possible here. For example, a person might identify as a Cantonese speaking South Vietnamese ‘boat-person’, with factors of language, country, politics and refugee-status affecting how they relate to other Chinese-speaking migrants to Australia.)

So the ‘melting pot’ approach to ministry in diverse cultures, in which cultures are lost, has given way to the ‘mosaic’ approach – in which people meet separately in their cultures of origin. But this in turn is giving way, at least partially, to approaches which consciously affirm diversity within a congregation (or at least strong relationships between congregations within one local church or set of buildings). The monoculturalism of the melting pot forced newcomers to shed their past. It was not really multicultural ministry. The multiculturalism of the mosaic approach – each migrant-ethnic fellowship meeting separately – may be multicultural at the denominational level. But at the congregational level it is really a form of monocultural ministry.

Of course, at the same time as migrant-ethnic congregations face the danger of being monocultural in their ministry, so do the great majority of congregations in Australia, those which are Anglo-Australian, neither reflecting the community around them nor tasting the riches of welcoming those who are culturally different. One of the great challenges of multicultural ministry is to convince Anglo-Australian churches that multiculturalism is relevant to them, both because of the Gospel and the nature of Australian society. Multiculturalism is not just about helping recent migrants. It is about embracing cultural diversity, working through the difficulties of life together and enjoying the variety of God’s human creatures.

This deeper and richer view of what it means to be multicultural means that all congregations are called to seek diversity and work to overcome cultural and language barriers. This is a challenge to complacent Anglo-Australian churches, which are often monocultural islands in a multicultural society. But it also challenges migrant-ethnic fellowships to grow beyond a monocultural existence. In particular they need to help their young people to be Australian as well as proud of their parents’ cultural background.

Multiculturalism here means planning for the future by making active links with those of other cultural backgrounds.

Multicultural ministry amongst Victorian Baptists

To illustrate this sea-change in understanding, take as an example the way the Baptist Union of Victoria approaches multicultural ministry. It is the context we know best and we do not presume to speak for Baptist approaches in other states. The recent approach of the BUV is not held up as a model to follow; nor is it beyond its transitional phase. But since 1998 it is taking shape differently from its earlier patterns. We could say that there has been a change from the mosaic model to the minestrone soup model. 'Multicultural church' more and more means 'multicultural congregations'.

The first thing to say is that denominational support for migrant ethnic congregations continues strongly. There is a Multicultural Minister employed to offer leadership and pastoral support. The BUV's theological college (Whitley College) offers a specially tailored training program called TransFormation, leading to ordination for pastors of non-English-speaking background (NESB). The BUV provides specific assistance to migrant ethnic congregations on matters of insurance, duty of care and so on. It raises money to lend for refugee airfares, disbursed through migrant ethnic congregations, particularly the South Sudanese and Burmese.¹³

Nevertheless, multicultural ministry is increasingly seen as involving the whole church, not just congregations for recent migrants. In 1998 the current Multicultural Minister, Revd Meewon Yang, was appointed with a brief to review the way things were being done. There was a desire to connect the different language and cultural groups more closely with the BUV and to involve Anglo-Australian churches more actively in ministering in a multicultural context. A task force consulted the churches in 1999 and a Multicultural Ministry Group was formed in 2001 to guide and support the Multicultural Minister in encouraging new directions.¹⁴ It replaces the former New Settlers Association.

The BUV articulates its vision in terms of seeing people of different cultures worshipping and participating together in communities of faith, enjoying the diversity of languages and cultures that make up the nation and the church. It is actively promoting openness to others who are different from ourselves. 'It is the expression of our experience of a welcoming, compassionate and loving God.'¹⁵

In a recent five-year strategy plan for multicultural ministry the BUV adopted a long list of goals, with planned actions beside each. As well as many predictable goals such as supporting refugees and encouraging NESB churches to participate in the BUV more, there is an emphasis on strengthening multicultural congregations and on building connections between English-speaking and non-English-speaking congregations.¹⁶

Multicultural churches and congregations

There are several Baptist churches with multicultural congregations. We could define these as having two or more cultures or languages forming a significant proportion of the congregation and being expressed in worship together. In such congregations, worship services are usually in English, but other languages are heard in songs, prayers and Bible readings. Stories from the cultures are heard regularly. Food and music is shared in frequent celebrations. Banners and decorations reflect cultural diversity. There are usually strong connections with refugee communities and there is a global focus grounded in personal relationships. People from diverse backgrounds are represented in leadership. When decisions are to be made, care is taken to explain the issues carefully, consult outside church meetings and slow down the process. Typically they could be labelled 'event-centred' more than 'program oriented'.¹⁷

Brunswick Baptist Church, for example, has twenty-four nationalities represented in its congregation.¹⁸ The Footscray Church is also diverse and intentionally welcomes people from all cultural backgrounds; its four pastors are from four different cultures.¹⁹ Auburn, a small congregation close to Swinburne University, has eight or nine languages represented and fosters the expression of its diversity in its worship together.²⁰ These are just three examples.²¹ Another model which is growing in importance is the multicultural church with more than one congregation and strong relationships between them.

In such churches there is an intentional commitment to becoming a multicultural church and fostering relationships across cultural boundaries. It is much more than sharing a set of buildings. The congregations usually meet separately for reasons of language, but meet together for combined services, meals, youth activities, Sunday school and special events. Friendships exist between congregations. Membership, finances and the leadership team may be combined – the structure varies.

Syndal Baptist Church, for example, is a larger church in middle-class suburbia which has worship services in English, Chinese and Vietnamese

but one pastoral team and a strong commitment to becoming a multicultural church, reflected now in the variety of nationalities represented in the English-language services.²²

Westgate Baptist Community is home to both Chin and Karen communities, both Burmese ethnic minorities who, in Australia, are nearly all refugees. The main Westgate congregation consists of Anglo-Australians, Karen, Chin and a smattering of other nationalities. Friendships cross the group boundaries. The Anglo-Australians are actively involved in refugee and settlement activities, with a strong sense of enrichment as a result of Westgate's diversity. Most of the service is in English, with various parts in Karen and Chin. This tri-lingual approach is more systematic when regular combined services are held. There are also weekly services in Karen and one of the Chin languages. Structurally speaking, there are three fellowships, with separate leadership, but they are slowly and patiently discussing what the next steps are for working more closely together.

These are just two examples of a variety of ways in which multi-congregational churches are experimenting with diversity and partnership.²³

Building relationships between recent migrant and Anglo Baptists

At the denominational level there are several initiatives aimed at building closer connections between Anglo-Australian and recent migrant Baptists. BUV multicultural celebrations are held four times a year, featuring cultural diversity but working hard to include Anglo-Australians who might feel they are not the intended audience. The BUV also holds an annual conference on multicultural ministry and its youth ministry team has a strong multicultural focus.

A leadership training course called TransFormation is run by Whitley College for NESB pastors and leaders, geared for simplicity of language, theological rigour, contextual relevance, convenient times and low cost.²⁴ Interest has been strong and as one result of TransFormation relationships between migrant ethnic churches and the wider BUV have become warmer and stronger. Whitley College offers a degree unit on the multicultural church, encouraging leaders (ministerial and lay) to work toward culturally diverse churches across the board.²⁵ The School of World Mission at Whitley also offers each year a four-evening interactive workshop called 'Exploring the Multicultural Church', available ecumenically and aimed at both migrant ethnic and more traditionally Anglo churches. The annual Whitley School of Ministry, catering to church leaders across the denomination, in 2006, features speakers from Asia and South America and has the theme of multicultural ministry.

Initiatives such as these are steps along the journey into genuine multiculturalism, in which we learn to welcome ‘the other’ with the hospitality of God. On this journey, mistakes have been made and there is still a long way to go. Challenges abound: traditionally Anglo-Australian congregations are often slow to see the potential of multicultural ministry. Migrant ethnic congregations can also suffer from a separatist mentality for fear of losing their distinctiveness. Finding places where young second and third generation migrants can belong is a challenge. Although some migrant ethnic Baptists are involved in effective evangelism, many are not. And finally, building relationships across cultural boundaries takes extra energy, stumbles over misunderstandings and requires the resources of God’s Spirit. Nevertheless, these steps are part of our response to God’s barrier-breaking mission ‘for the healing of the nations’ (Revelation 22:2). The more diverse we are as churches, the easier it will be to reach out to one of the most diverse societies in the world.



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- ¹ Philip J Hughes, *The Baptists in Australia* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1996), 12-13.
- ² Basil S Brown, *Members one of another: The Baptist Union of Victoria, 1862-1962* (Melbourne: Baptist Union of Victoria, 1962), 180.
- ³ By 1974 there were Baptist fellowships amongst all these groups, as noted by the newly formed New Settlers Baptist Association of Australia. Geoffrey H Blackburn, 'A strategy for cross-cultural ministry by the Baptist churches of Melbourne, Australia', Thesis (DMin dissertation), Fuller Theological Seminary, 1991, 59.
- ⁴ John Harris, *One blood: 200 years of Aboriginal encounter with Christianity: A story of hope*. (Sutherland, NSW: Albatross, 1990), 633-654.
- ⁵ An extensive survey across denominations was undertaken in Charles E Wilcox, 'The ethnic church in Australia', Thesis (Graduation dissertation), Baptist Theological College of Queensland, 1979. See especially p. 96.
- ⁶ Wilcox, 'The ethnic church in Australia', 96; Blackburn, 'A strategy for cross-cultural ministry', 41.
- ⁷ Blackburn, 'A strategy for cross-cultural ministry', 72.

- ⁸ Brown, *Members one of another*, 54.
- ⁹ Baptist Union of Victoria, *Year Book 2005* (Hawthorn, Vic: Baptist Union of Victoria, 2005), 20-21; Baptist Union of Australia, <www.baptist.org.au>
- ¹⁰ Graham Nicholls, *New South Wales Report [to Multicultural Ministries meeting, 9 November 2005]*, 2005; Baptist Union of Australia, <www.baptist.org.au>.
- ¹¹ In unions consisting of about 145, 100 and 75 churches respectively. Emil Rahimov, *Multicultural ministries report, Queensland [to Baptist Multicultural Ministries meeting, 9 November 2005]*, 2005; Marc Chan, *The non-English-speaking background (NESB) churches in Western Australia [to Baptist Multicultural Ministries meeting, 9 November 2005]*, 2005; Russell Bartlett, *Multicultural ministries in South Australian Baptist churches [Report to Baptist Multicultural Ministries meeting, 9 November 2005]*, 2005; Baptist Union of Australia, <www.baptist.org.au>.
- ¹² Ross Langmead, *The multicultural vision in Christian mission*, *South Pacific Journal of Mission Studies*, No. 23 (April 2000), 1-6.
- ¹³ More than 170 refugees have been able to settle in Australia from refugee camps in Africa and Asia as a result of loans from this revolving fund.
- ¹⁴ Chinh Dinh, *A brief history of the multicultural ministry*, *Witness: The Voice of Victorian Baptists* 113.10 (November 2005): 5.
- ¹⁵ Meewon Yang, *BUV multicultural ministry*, *Witness: The Voice of Victorian Baptists* 113.10 (November 2005): 5. Meewon Yang is a part-time pastor at Brunswick.
- ¹⁶ Baptist Union of Victoria, *Multicultural Ministry: Strategy 2005-2010*, 2005.
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- ¹⁸ Meewon Yang, *Becoming multicultural: Stories from Brunswick*, in *Fair Dinkum ministry: Stories of authentic Australian spirituality and struggle*, ed. Frank Rees (Richmond, Vic.: Spectrum Publications, 1999), 137-144.
- ¹⁹ Kathryn Baxter, *Footscray Baptist Church: Intentional diversity in action*, *Witness: The Voice of Victorian Baptists* 113.10 (November 2005):17.
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- ²¹ For more examples, see the whole issue of *Witness: The Voice of Victorian Baptists* 113.10 (November 2005).
- ²² Wai Kwong Sun, *Syndal Baptist Church: The basic issue: Jewishness or Christianness*, *Witness: The Voice of Victorian Baptists* 113.10 (November 2005): 9
- ²³ For more examples, see the whole issue of *Witness: The Voice of Victorian Baptists* 113.10 (November 2005).
- ²⁴ TransFormation runs for three years, with ten full Saturdays a year, and can carry diploma credit if desired. With some supplementary study it is a tailored NESB ordination track.
- ²⁵ Taught by Dr Ross Langmead and Revd Meewon Yang.