Leading a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church: Seven Common Challenges and How to Overcome Them

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Leading a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church

Seven Common Challenges and How to Overcome Them

Mark DeYmaz and Harry Li

Previously titled Ethnic Blends
their continued faith in me and in the work I so passionately pursue. And to Paul Engle, Ryan Pazdur, and Chris Fann at Zondervan; it was great to work with you on this project! Thanks for a job well done and for making it fun.

(HL): Thanks to the people of Mosaic; you have been wonderful ambassadors for Christ throughout the past nine years. Your willingness to be patient, prayerful, and hopeful together in Christ has encouraged me more than you will ever know, especially as God has transformed me from major geek into a shepherd of his people! You are the most special group of people I have ever known.

Mark, thanks for taking a chance on a guy with no full-time ministry experience, no formal training, and no clue what it would take to become a pastor of this unique church. Your faith and discernment in leading us never ceases to amaze me. And thanks for asking me to contribute to this project. It’s been bubbling up for quite a while, and it felt so good to formalize some of these thoughts on paper.

Acquiring the Taste
An Introduction

If the kingdom of heaven is not segregated, why on earth is the church?

It’s 5:30 a.m. on a Saturday morning, and I (Mark) can’t sleep. Once again Linda and I are readying a house to sell, something we seem to do every five years or so, given the changing dynamics of our family and a shared love for design. In fact, we’ve only recently completed the renovation of an old farmhouse from the 1920s—an extreme home-makeover that’s taken us almost four years to complete. So yesterday I spent nearly nine hours power washing the siding, the decks, and the white fencing that surrounds the two-acre property, and I’ll be at it again today. I could use a good cup of coffee to get me going.

The problem is, I don’t drink coffee ... and wouldn’t know how to make a cup if I tried!

Somewhere I once read that the secret to a good coffee blend is high-quality beans, brewed with just the right mix of fresh grounds and boiled water over a specific length of time. And while I do not have personal knowledge or experience in pursuit of the perfect blend, I do know that once achieved, its aroma is refreshingly attractive—even to non-coffee-drinkers like me.

When it comes to mixing diversity into the local church, however, I do have knowledge and a good bit of personal experience. Together with my colleague of eight years, Harry Li, I have led our congregation in pursuit of what we sometimes refer to as *ethnic blends*—the intentional mixing of diversity into the local church. With a desire to inspire, guide, and encourage ministry leaders who long to see local churches reflect the unity and diversity of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven, we are writing
this book to promote the further development of multi-ethnic churches throughout North America and beyond. For we have seen that the multi-ethnic church, like a good cup of coffee, produces an aroma that is refreshingly attractive—especially to those without Christ in an increasingly diverse and cynical society.

Why This Book?
Since the publication of my book *Building a Healthy Multi-ethnic Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Leadership Network, 2007), and following other foundational works on the subject at the start of the twenty-first century, including *Divided by Faith* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), *United by Faith* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), *Multicultural Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004), and *One Body, One Spirit* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005), increasing numbers of pastors, professors, reformers, and researchers alike are recognizing that the multi-ethnic church is not only biblical but also critical to the advance of the gospel in the twenty-first century. Yet the passion for such a church must be driven not so much by the pursuit of racial reconciliation as by the need for men and women to be reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ. For this reason, I wrote my first book to ensure quality exegesis, sound theology, and principally correct thinking on the matter.

Now, however, with growing numbers embracing the biblical mandate, the seven core commitments, and the evangelistic intentions of a diverse congregation, I am often asked to address roadblocks and barriers to its success. In other words, what are the obstacles and how can they be overcome if church planters, pastors, and reformers are to establish healthy multi-ethnic churches?

Mapping the Movement
Have you ever found yourself in an unfamiliar environment, one in which you needed a map just to figure out exactly where you were or where next you needed to go? In such times, it takes a special kind of map to point us in the right direction. You know the kind—those large displays centrally located in airports and malls (even in some churches!), marked with an X alongside three very helpful words: “You Are Here!” Clear understanding of where we are and where we’ve come from provides the context to discern the way forward. Before moving on, then, let me provide such a map, a context for understanding the multi-ethnic church movement—where it is, where it’s come from, and where I believe the future lies.

The Forerunner Stage
Charting the Movement

In their book *United by Faith*, authors Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim present a concise history of the emergence of “multiracial” congregations in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century (the Forerunner Stage). Despite the wonderful leadership of the individuals and churches they cite, church growth and development in those years was primarily governed by something called the *homogeneous unit principle*. In short, this principle suggests that churches grow fastest when they’re homogeneous—made up of people from the same ethnic, economic, and educational background. For the most part, the principle is true and can be used...
Acquiring the Taste

quite effectively to build a large church. In other words, target a specific group of people, appeal to their collective wants and wishes, and your church will grow.

The problem with the homogeneous unit principle is that despite the good intentions of those interested in rapidly reaching the world with the gospel (and consequently growing churches quickly), the principle has had the unintended effect of justifying the segregation of local congregations along ethnic and economic lines. The fact is, it has led us even further away from principles and practices that defined New Testament churches such as existed at Antioch and Ephesus—churches in which the love of God for all people was clearly on display, churches in which diverse believers learned to walk, work, and worship together as one so the world would know God’s love and believe (see John 17:20–23ff.; Acts 11:19–26; 13:1ff; Eph. 2:11–3:6).

Charting the Movement

1960

Forerunner Stage

1990s

Promise Keepers

Figure 2

Toward the end of the Forerunner Stage, a new movement called Promise Keepers burst onto the evangelical scene. Among other things, this inspirational effort had the effect of presenting the ideals of “racial reconciliation” in a more palatable way to the conservative evangelical masses. At weekend events, black and white men stood side by side with Latinos and Asians, filling entire stadiums, to sing, study, pray, and even weep together, united by a common faith and their love for Jesus Christ. Yet despite the good feelings that were generated and the well-intentioned efforts of organizers, those who attended would quickly return to the segregated status quo of the congregations from which they came. And the question still remained: Why is such a wonderful expression of unity and diversity not more commonly found within our own local churches and weekly gatherings?

Charting the Movement

1960

Forerunner Stage

1990s

Promise Keepers

Divided by Faith

2000

Published

Figure 3

At the start of the twenty-first century, a truly groundbreaking work titled *Divided by Faith* was published. In my mind, this marked the end of the Forerunner Stage and ushered in what I call the Pioneer Stage of the multi-ethnic church movement. Let me tell you why.

For more than one hundred years, it has been widely said that eleven o’clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week. However, until *Divided by Faith* was published, the observation remained largely unaddressed. In their book, sociologists Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith provided statistical data detailing the systemic segregation of the local church throughout the United States. Studying both Catholic
and Protestant churches throughout the country at the turn of the century, they showed that 92.5 percent of churches could be classified as “monoracial.” This term, they said, describes a church in which 80 percent or more of the individuals who attend are of the same ethnicity or race. The remaining churches (7.5 percent) they described as “multiracial”—churches in which there exists a nonmajority, collective population of at least 20 percent. Using this definition, they determined that approximately 12 percent of Catholic churches, less than 5 percent of evangelical churches, and about 2.5 percent of mainline Protestant churches could be described as multiracial.1

Behind the numbers, though, they discovered something far more troubling. Their statistical research confirmed that when compared with other social institutions, the church, far from representing the diversity and unity of the kingdom of God, was actually the primary institution perpetuating systemic (institutional) racism in our society. How, you might ask, is this possible?

Emerson and Smith found that evangelicals spend more than 70 percent of their social time with people from their own congregation. In other words, when people from evangelical churches invite others into their homes, to go out for dinner, or to enjoy a weekend away, most often they invite people who attend their own local church. Since the vast majority of evangelicals attend churches composed of individuals who are similar to them in race and social class, it is unlikely that they (we) have well-developed relationships of transparency and trust with individuals from a different culture. Consequently, most of us in the evangelical church do not really know, nor do we experientially understand the unique challenges faced by the diverse individuals with whom we work, go to school, or share our neighborhood. And since we lack these personal relationships, we are not often motivated to personally involve ourselves in helping to resolve unique challenges associated with their race or culture. Sure, we may be willing to send an occasional check or pray that things will improve, but we are not often willing to commit ourselves to the pursuit of long-term relational development or to invest ourselves in solutions. In light of these findings, the authors suggest that the church continues (unintentionally) to perpetuate systemic racial inequities within society.

By the end of their book, Emerson and Smith effectively argue that the church is a sleeping giant in the effort to dismantle institutional racism in the United States. They propose that one of the best ways to address this systemic problem is to establish multiracial, multi-ethnic churches in which all people are welcome, loved, and cross-culturally engaged. These are churches in which relationships are based upon a genuine love for Christ, in whom members find ways to overcome earthly divides of race and social status. Relationships like these lead to a genuine understanding between people and help us cultivate compassion for others who are not like us. Eventually they lead to a changed society and further the advance of the gospel.

Despite the glowing endorsement the authors give to multi-ethnic congregations, sadly they conclude that we should probably not expect to see many churches like this develop anytime soon, given the all-too-common, more prevalent homogeneous approach to church growth and development.

While some readers were likely discouraged at the bleak prospects for change, many church planters and reformers, like myself and others contributing to this book, were attracted to the challenge and already embracing a new vision for the local church. It was then, I believe, that the multi-ethnic church movement entered the Pioneer Stage.

The Pioneer Stage

Pioneers are usually not the first people to discover things. More typically, they are the first to recognize the intrinsic value and significance of something that others have only stumbled upon or taken for granted. Pioneers are the people who risk themselves and their families in pursuit of a dream. They are willing
to journey great distances and brave the unknown, endure hardships, persevere in spite of opposition. In time they are the ones who create new realities and change society. Indeed, not only do pioneers see what could and should be; they are blessed with a gift of discernment, seeing what will be. Consequently, they devote their time and energy to establish initial forms and functions so that others can more easily follow their lead. In this stage of any movement, pioneers must exercise great faith and courage, and willingly sacrifice themselves to build solid bridges to the future—a future that is not always as clear to others as it is to them.

Charting the Movement

There are several factors that have led me to believe that the multi-ethnic church movement has entered a Pioneer Stage in this first decade of the twenty-first century. One of the initial signs is that an increasing number of books are being published on the subject with each passing year. In addition, multi-ethnic churches (and their leaders) are increasingly the subject of magazine and newspaper articles and are receiving attention on the internet. Indeed, the internet has been a great asset to the movement, fanning the flame through online blogs and newsletters such as The New Culture, produced by Chad Brennan of ReNew Partnerships. You may have also noticed that a growing number of churches are now describing themselves as “multi-ethnic,” “multiracial,” or “multicultural” on their homepages.

Beyond the emerging signs in print and electronic media, there are now a number of large and well-respected conferences that devote entire tracks of study to the multi-ethnic church and feature plenary speakers who advance the vision. In 2007, 2008, and 2009, for example, the National New Church Conference (now known as Exponential) in Orlando, Florida, hosted both preconference and main conference tracks on the subject, and I expect they will continue to do so well into the future. Likewise, the Ethnic America Network has scheduled similar tracks at their national conferences since 2005. Dave Gibbons, a leading speaker on third-culture leadership and pastor of a multi-ethnic church in Irvine, California, was a main stage speaker in 2008 at Rick Warren’s Purpose Driven Network Summit. Also that year, Efrem Smith was featured at Willow Creek’s Leadership Summit, and David Anderson was a plenary speaker at the National Outreach Convention—both of them leaders in the multi-ethnic church movement. These friends and fellow pioneers, together with many others, are clearing a trail that will literally change the face of the local church throughout the United States in this century!

Additional evidence that we’re in the Pioneer Stage of the movement can be seen in the fact that entire denominations like the Evangelical Covenant Church, the Evangelical Free Church of America, and the Reformed Church in America are now pursuing this vision by hiring staff and creating departments devoted to establishing multi-ethnic churches and pastoral teams. And a growing number of church planters, pastors, reformers, and educators across multiple denominations are now connecting through Mosaix, a network relaunched in 2010 by Erwin McManus and myself, dedicated to catalyzing the multi-ethnic church movement by casting vision, connecting individuals of like mind, conferencing, and coaching.
The Early Adopter Stage
Charting the Movement

At some point, I believe, the movement will transition from a Pioneer Stage to an Early Adopter Stage. But no one can say for sure when this will happen. My personal hope, and the goal of many of my colleagues within the movement, is that 20 percent of churches throughout the United States will achieve 20 percent diversity by the year 2020. If we are successful in both encouraging and achieving that goal, I believe the movement will be well into the Early Adopter Stage. Following this stage, our belief is that multi-ethnic vision will be embraced by the majority of North American congregations and soon go mainstream. Indeed, our hope and prayer is that we will see 50 percent of churches achieve 50 percent diversity by the year 2050!

This book, then, is being written to help advance these aims and to make it easier for others to get involved in what I believe will be one day viewed as the single greatest movement of God concerning his church in the twenty-first century — namely, its integration for the sake of the gospel.

As I have already noted, I am pleased to partner in this project with my good friend and colleague Harry Li. Harry holds a PhD in electrical engineering, and in 2002 he left a tenured professorship at the University of Idaho to join me and a handful of others (squeezing into four hundred square feet of rented office space) in hopes of building a healthy multi-ethnic church we called the Mosaic Church of Central Arkansas. Believe me, it was quite the step of faith for both him and his family, and I’ve asked Harry, here, to share more of his story.

Introducing Harry Li

“Harry, it’s unanimous. We’re formally inviting you to move your family to Little Rock and join the staff of Mosaic.” Though eight years have passed, I (Harry) still remember the moment Mark invited me to join him at Mosaic. I was standing in the front yard of my four-acre property overlooking some of the most beautiful scenery Idaho has to offer. We had a wonderful home and were quite comfortable where we were at the time. So you can understand why I found Mark’s next words to be incredibly challenging and frightening: “You need to understand that we don’t have a lot of money, but we think we can pay you at least two thousand dollars a month from the offerings. Beyond that, you’ll have to raise support or somehow bring the rest with you.”

And that was it! No contract. No job description. No fringe benefits. Nothing but a simple phone call placed and received in naive faith. I remember telling Mark that my wife, Melanie, and I would need some time to talk things over, but somehow, deep inside, I knew what my answer would be. We had already sensed that the Lord was calling us to become part of this unique church, and when the offer came, it was clear to both of us what we had to do. We were more afraid of saying no to God than we were of saying yes to him, despite our apprehensions.

I had met Mark just six months earlier while on a business trip to Arkansas. I was only visiting Little Rock for a day, and looking back over the past years, I can now see that this was one of those God-ordained appointments! At that time in my life, I was teaching at a university, but I had been considering
the possibility of leaving the academic world to serve in full-time ministry. Mark and I met at a local coffee shop, and for the next few hours he painted a picture for me: a vision of a diverse church — on earth as it is in heaven — the very church he was hoping Mosaic would become. I had never heard of a multi-ethnic church, nor had I ever entertained the thought of joining such a ministry. But the vision of Mosaic instantly captured my heart.

At the time, I was also in discussion with several other churches about possible ministry positions. These were well-established churches offering real salaries with real benefits! But there was just something about the vision of Mosaic that kept tugging at my heart. My wife and I would make two more trips to Little Rock before that fateful day on which I called Mark to accept the official "offer." Looking back on that time, I now laugh out loud. It felt like we were taking such a big step of faith leaving the security of the academic world and the personal comforts of our scenic home. But now I realize that it was just a tiny step compared with the leaps and bounds of faith that have been required of us to help establish this church over the past eight years.

Like the expedition of those pioneers in the United States who once headed west, pursuit of a healthy multi-ethnic church is a journey fraught with difficulty, uncertainty, and personal peril. Yet every ounce of energy expended, every tear I’ve shed, every cry of desperation has been so richly rewarded in seeing God’s impressive glory displayed in the unity and diversity of our people. Indeed, what a privilege it’s been to witness his merciful work in the lives of those who have chosen to journey with us in becoming part of something so much bigger than ourselves.

To realize the dream of a multi-ethnic church requires that church pastors, planters, and lay leaders know the certainty of their calling and demands steady faith, personal courage, and a willingness to sacrifice. Yet make no mistake: the success of a church like Mosaic is a testimony to the grace of God. More often than not, I believe, he works in spite of our failures and shortcomings as we faithfully respond to his vision for the church.

Like Mark, I believe that the unity of diverse believers walking, working, and worshipping God together as one is at the very heart and center of God’s desire for the local church. And we are convinced that believers should and must come together as one in the local church despite personal preferences, challenges, and obstacles. As Jesus recognizes in John 17:20–23, such unity becomes a living demonstration to the world of the gospel’s power to transform lives. This unity testifies to the power of the gospel to break through the dividing walls of ethnic segregation, hatred, and animosity that are still so evident in our world today. It is a daily witness to God’s love for all people, a love displayed through our own genuine love for others different from ourselves. Indeed, in the multi-ethnic church, the power and pleasure of God resides in a most unique way!

Revelation 7:9–12 gives us an astounding vision of the future: men and women from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue will one day gather before the throne and worship God with one voice for all eternity. If this is the future of the church, can there be any doubt that God is pleased to see us pursuing such a vision here on earth? We often ask ourselves, "If the kingdom of heaven is not segregated, why on earth is the church?"

Our church is truly a mosaic of broken individuals, yet united together, we form one beautiful picture in Christ. I’m so thankful that God has blessed our work in ways no person could ever take credit for. Thankfully, his supernatural provisions and awesome displays of power remain as evident today as they were in the beginning, when I first arrived in Little Rock to help blaze a trail. Both Mark and I hope that after reading this book, you too will join us on this road less traveled. And we hope your own efforts, and contributions to the multi-ethnic
church movement, will someday make the road even wider for the masses soon heading our way.

Let Us Pour Your Cup

Now that we've provided some context and personal introductions, let me (Mark) outline the rest of the book.

For the convenience of those who have not read my book *Building a Healthy Multi-ethnic Church*, I will summarize the biblical mandate and core commitments of a multi-ethnic church in chapter 1. In chapters 2 through 8, we will address seven common challenges or obstacles that must be overcome by multi-ethnic church planters, pastors, and ministry leaders in pursuit of the vision. Following this, I will provide a brief conclusion.

Throughout these pages, we will also offer real-time insights and chronicle lessons learned through the story of Mosaic. In so doing, we'll take you beyond needs to the more practical challenges and ramifications of day-to-day leadership within a multi-ethnic church. In addition, each chapter (2–8) will provide the voice and insights of multi-ethnic church leaders from around the country, friends and fellow pioneers who are experienced and accomplished in the field. For further information and demographic data concerning their ministries, see appendix 1. And at the end of each chapter, you will find discussion questions for use by leadership teams, in small groups throughout the church, or simply to guide your own private reflection.

Oh, and by the way, whenever the first person is used throughout the book, you can assume it is me talking, unless otherwise indicated by use of Harry's name in parentheses. (Sometimes I'll indicate my own name, just to be clear.)

So grab a cup of coffee (if you like), and let's get going! There's a lot for us to talk about as we seek to establish local churches that reflect, in more than mere words, the love of God for all people on earth as it is in heaven, as we seek to brew ethnic blends!

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. When was the first time you recognized that local churches are largely segregated along ethnic and economic lines? Where or how old were you at the time? What, if anything, bothered you about what you observed? Why do you think you had such feelings?

2. Why did you purchase this book? What has shaped your interest in the multi-ethnic church at this time?

3. How diverse is the church you attend, serve, or lead? If 20 percent or more of the people attending your church on a Sunday morning are of different ethnic origin than that of the majority of people who attend, why do you think this is so? If not, what factors or barriers can you identify that may be keeping diverse others from getting involved?

4. Are you aware of a healthy multi-ethnic church in your area? What do you know about the church? Can you see yourself ever attending or serving as a pastor in such a church? What excites you about the possibilities; what fears or concerns might you have when you imagine yourself involved?

5. What key thought, revelation, or insight will you take away from this chapter? What is God asking you to do in response?