

INTERCULTURAL MINISTRIES: LIVING INTO TRANSFORMATION**To: The 41st General Council****Origin: The Executive of the General Council****Permanent Committee on Programs for Ministry and Mission****Task Group on Intercultural Ministries****Executive Summary**

Our commitment to becoming an intercultural church is grounded in commitments that the United Church has already made; it is another step in the continuing journey to be a transformative, justice-seeking, equitable church where there is the full participation of all. Our intercultural commitment is also rooted theologically and biblically in what it means to be the church – to be the church is to be an intercultural community that honours difference.

Today, we would describe becoming an intercultural church as this: the call to live together in intentional ways where there is the mutual recognition and understanding of difference through intentional self-examination, relationship building, and equitable access to power; it is also our attempt to respond faithfully to such a call.

Reports to the 39th and 40th General Council offered descriptions of this type of transformation, and related proposals; they also offered considerable biblical and theological background on the call to become intercultural. This report also offers a vision of becoming an intercultural church as one that is welcoming, relational, adaptive, justice-seeking, intentional, and missional. Further biblical reflections on a theology of “inclusion”, theological touchstones, and on intercultural theologizing are included in the appendix.

The Task Group on Intercultural Ministries thought that it would be helpful to use some lines of “A New Creed” as a framework for this report. Specifically, the group focused on what it means to be called to be the church, and structured the report around these lines from the creed:

*We are called to be the Church:
to celebrate God’s presence,
to live with respect in Creation,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil.*

Introduction and overview

What does it mean to be the church? As the Task Group on Intercultural Ministries reflected on this question, it became clear that to be the church is to be intercultural. After all, the Bible was written in a context of religious, cultural, and linguistic diversity; God created a diverse creation and declared it was very good. The Spirit is often most aligned with people who have been marginalized. Jesus continually engaged with people who were not fully embraced in society and sought their restoration to community. One of the places where differences can be honoured is in the church, and that God calls us to create a community where all are welcome and can participate fully.

Becoming intercultural means effectively engaging with difference and shifting the power dynamics to create an equitable community. Our desire to become an intercultural church is not

just because of a changing Canadian context, nor because of migration. Instead, becoming an intercultural church is a faithful response to being the church that moves us back to the very beginning of our faith. We strive to become an intercultural church to deepen our understandings and experiences of God and of one another. Part of the intercultural vision is to create a space where we can sustain our own cultural identities while also affirming those of one another.

And, it is our prayer that becoming an intercultural church is one process through which God works in us to bring about transformation for us all. It is a call to be the church.

We are called to celebrate God's presence

Celebrating God's presence is an activity of humbling ourselves to be able to God's presence in our midst, our lives, and our ministries, and of rejecting a focus primarily on our own sense of superiority. We celebrate is the God of covenant – therefore we want to celebrate some of the marks of covenant, such as equality, mutuality, respect, empowerment, reciprocity, and love.

In terms of the methods of celebrating God's presence, we affirm the circle as one process that highlights equity.¹ In light of these affirmations, we believe that in an intercultural church, leadership is not based on power differentials but is reciprocal, and highlights the mutual gifts of all, and empowers all. We affirm what in the church's tradition is called the priesthood of all believers – the notion that everyone has gifts and can participate fully in ministry.

A. IN AREAS OF LEADERSHIP

As we envision ministry in an intercultural church, leadership is not a one-way hierarchal. It does not reside in one individual but is a process of empowering and enabling the whole community to live in a way that is open, accepting, and in coexistence with others. We are created by God to live with others, not alone. The reciprocity that marks God's covenant with all creation is mirrored in leadership that recognizes every gift brought to the community by every member.

Few racialized people are in leadership positions or decision-making positions in the church's courts; many have shared that they do not feel they can influence or change the church's ways of being together. Some have limited participation, often based primarily on reserved "special" spaces on committees, rather than a full commitment to actively involve racialized people in all areas of leadership. Similar patterns are repeated with other minoritized communities. A "leader" generally implies someone given authority over a group; this is different from *leadership*. New models of leadership need to be sought. Succession planning, and offering new and dynamic opportunities for leadership development, orientation, experiences, and further training – for new and emerging leaders, would help strengthen and diversify the leadership pool for the church.

B. IN AREAS OF GOVERNANCE

As we envision ministry in an intercultural church, structures of governance in a covenantal arrangement do not necessarily require specific kinds of expertise. For example, the main requirements for being part of the Task Group on Intercultural Ministries were life experience, and connection to one's own cultural community. Because of this, new people identified themselves to be part of the task group – some of whom had never been part of a national committee or task group before.

¹ The circle process is described fully in the appendix.

This requires a different order, namely that of the circle where all are equal and valued, where decisions are arrived at by consensus, where our different senses of time are honoured and we continue to persevere together in a common framework and vision.

The national Identity Survey conducted in 2011 concluded that “there is work to do if a complete sense of belonging requires full involvement in guiding the direction of the church – not everyone feels comfortable or is active in decision-making.”

Minoritized communities do not participate in governance in significant numbers. This might mean that when making decisions that affect the life of the church the national body hears the voices of some much more loudly than others. In particular, the voices of people from cultural and racial majority communities are more present than many minority voices; thus, racialized and minority groups are under-represented in decision-making spaces.

The circle process (described in the appendix) is offered as one process for creating intercultural spaces at meetings. In addition, we have realized that offering extensive anti-oppression training for people serving on national committees and task groups would be very helpful.

We need to explore: How are racialized minority ministry personnel and other leaders to be mentored and supported? How can meeting schedules be made more accessible to volunteers who must take time off and lose wages? Is transportation taken into account when locations are set for church meetings or events? Is the church ready to receive ministry personnel with disabilities, to enter church and community ministries? How do minoritized people with potential self-identify and build appropriate leadership skills? The church needs to put into place the means for all interested people to self-identify, to bring what they have and are willing to share.

C. IN COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIPS

Our experience as a task group showed the necessity of developing a covenant as an agreement on how we will work together; ours was created to enable us to honour our many differences and work together toward our common purpose and vision. Similar such covenants have been developed and used at national gatherings (such as the Behold intercultural conferences), and at the 39th and 40th General Council. These types of covenants have been helpful to ground the community in the diverse reality in which we find ourselves, to remind ourselves of how we want to be together in a group, and to offer promises to one another.

D. IN RURAL CHURCH REALITIES

Rural churches are a key point for consideration in becoming an intercultural church. With a large portion of the United Church in rural areas, the rural church is an important space for dialogue about what intercultural means. From the very beginning, intercultural ministries named the need to be grounded in one's local context and community. What intercultural ministries looks like will not necessarily be the same across the country; it will be contextual.

The intercultural reality of many rural churches is that they are predominantly made up of people who are from White communities. Some such churches have questioned – what does interculturalism have to do with us, since we are primarily White? “Intercultural”, however, is much broader than race or ethnicity alone; it is about effectively engaging with difference. A deeper question would be: what is the degree of difference in this community? And how can we effectively engage it to create a different kind of intercultural community together?

The culture, identity, and spirit of a rural pastoral charge can differ from the culture, identity, and spirit of an urban pastoral charge; this has implications for placement of ministry personnel. The perception of a pastoral charge as being of one identity and spirit is erroneous, as diverse cultures of different forms (i.e., education, profession, worldviews) exist in all charges.

E. IN THEOLOGICAL TRAINING AND EDUCATION

Through theological training, we develop people for leadership in paid accountable ministry, and through which, they offer ways in which all of us can continue to celebrate God's presence.

As we envision ministry in the intercultural church, education for leadership (instead of training a leader)² is not a process of preparing one for professionalism, expertise, or expertness, but rather to enable and nurture the gifts that each of us brings into the community. Such an educational process fosters safety to express oneself freely, to be critical, to be affirmative, and to celebrate the views and wisdom of others. The circle provides rich potential for the process of education and training. In our understanding of the intercultural church, this process applies not only to training in centres of theological education but also to pastoral charges and other courts.

Some questions about theological training for reflection: What might intercultural theological education look like? How can we effectively train for leadership in today's culturally diverse world? How can leaders do the important work of self-examination of power, privilege, and cultural dominance in order to effectively minister with communities of difference?

F. IN INTERGENERATIONAL REALITIES

As we envision the ministry of the intercultural church, it celebrates intergenerational realities. The narrative of Jesus in the temple and the presence of Elders in Aboriginal communities remind and instruct us that wisdom is present in all ages of human life. Intergenerationality in the intercultural church seeks to bridge gaps between people created by technology, cultural differences, educational level, economic power, region of origin, race, ethnicity, ethos, language, and age, to name but a few. In referencing generations, it is important to also name some of the unique challenges faced by racialized youth within the church.

In 2009, The United Church of Canada held a national Consultation for Racialized Youth. The report that emerged from the gathering reflected that some participants had attended Conference and national gatherings before, and some expressed feelings of isolation at these gatherings because of their racial and cultural identities. Several young people shared that it was rare to find a space where they could be their "full self" and express their culture without feeling rejected. This Consultation for Racialized Youth was one of the first youth gatherings where these participants really felt "safe."

Focusing on the leadership potential of youth as it relates to becoming an intercultural church can be a helpful direction moving forward. "Youth are also particularly interested in a church that is diverse and intercultural" (Identity Survey, 2011).

"Youth's significant commitment to openness around diversity puts them at the vanguard of the church and suggests that they will play a vital role in propelling the church to realize its intercultural vision. However, youth may need to be encouraged to voice their opinions within

² This is a reference to the task group experience at the Centre for Black Culture in Nova Scotia.

their congregations as they currently express lower than average comfort doing so” (Identity Survey, 2011).

G. IN INTERFAITH RELATIONSHIPS

The present, and projected future, situation in Canada validates the call for a deepening understanding with respect to culture, ethnicity, race, and religion. While The United Church of Canada has a particular history as a “national” institution, it lies more broadly under the umbrella of Reformed Christianity, when understood from the global perspective of the major religious traditions of the world and their diverse expressions. In the Canadian context there is a tremendous diversity within all major world religions – creating an intersecting link between interfaith and intercultural directions.

Interfaith/intercultural dialogue is profoundly personal and profoundly communal. While religion and culture are inextricably interlinked, it is the process of dialogue that helps deconstruct monolithic and simplistic definitions – thereby giving birth to a new, more fluid and fully Canadian mode of self-understanding that combines origins, the present lived reality, and international/intercultural traditions relevant in the 21st century.

Mission/Partnerships: As the former World Council of Church's Theologian, Stanley J. Samartha wrote: “Christians should also consider responsibly what kind of ‘mission’ it is to which they are committed in a pluralist society. Does Christian mission mean the extension of the Christian community and the extinction of all other religious communities? What if Hindus and Muslims also decided on the same procedure? The fact that not just Christians but Muslims and Hindus too have their ‘missions’ demands that the whole matter of the context and practice of mission has to be reconsidered, maybe with all three coming together in dialogue.”

H. IN OUR UNDERSTANDING OF IDENTITY/AUTHENTICITY VS. ASSIMILATION

An intercultural church would reject assimilation as a means of gaining authentic identity. As envisaged in the covenant, shaping our identity is a work of active co-creation with God and our fellow human beings. In the church, authenticity is understood in terms of the intentionality of creation. To become authentic means that you have the freedom to express your culture, to know your culture, and to become who you are: an individual is becoming their best self. What needs to be highlighted is the link between the authentic self and the intentionality. It is not a passive self; it needs to be an intentional repositioning to its authentic self and its members.

All of the above enables the church, and us as individuals, to make room for the other/Other and to enable each person to be free to be their authentic self within God’s covenant. Being freed up to be our authentic selves will mean that we will listen – really listen – to one another.

We are called to live with respect in Creation

Throughout our discussions, we as a task group have lifted up God's call to be in right relationship with God, with creation, with each other.

Our circle conversations about being together and in respectful relationship have been broad and expansive. Creation is a web of relationships. God is in Creation. We are one in God and all have equal worth. To live with respect in creation is to honour this. It is to acknowledge respectfully and joyfully what we have in common and what makes us different.

For example, in our task group living as a relational community has included a commitment to listen, to understand, and to seek out good in one another; encouragement of a diversity of languages, symbols, and expressions (including the languages of compassion and justice); looking at our own individual power and privilege; and dealing with the uncomfortable with respect. For us, a commitment to the circle process and storytelling has revealed places of connection and identification. It has also allowed for a revealing and correcting of assumptions, which has been transforming.

A. THROUGH A COMMITMENT TO RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS

We are called to live with respect in creation through a commitment to right relationships. Within our conversations, the Aboriginal concept of “All My Relations” has offered insights into the interconnection between past, present, and future. “All My Relations” expresses an understanding that all living creatures – humanity, plants, animals, indeed all creation – are related. In essence, it communicates that there is relationship between all living things.

The manner in which the land is respected and honoured as a nurturing life-partner in much of Aboriginal theologies has opened us to a different and life-affirming perspective.

In a holistic view of respectful relationship, the United Church affirms that difference is good and beautiful. We affirm that we are changed by each other. Yet there are attitudes and practices in our United Church that serve to keep us from living what we affirm. If we are to truly live into our commitment to be an intercultural church, we must correct imbalances that currently exist and we must continually re-educate ourselves.

B. THROUGH A COMMITMENT TO LINGUISTIC AND MINORITY LEADERSHIP

We are called to live with respect in creation through a commitment to linguistic and minority leadership. When the gifts of all are uplifted and respected, then the diversity of God’s creation can truly be honoured.

How can theological training and education include transformative cross-cultural exposure? In what ways can various cultural realities inform the curriculum content for ministry candidates? How do minoritized clergy receive training in the language of their choice including sign language if that is appropriate? How is theological formation made equitable and accessible?

C. THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY MINISTRIES

We are called to live with respect in creation through partnerships with community ministries.

How can a traditional congregational church learn from community ministries who serve immigrant or street-involved or mentally ill populations? Can we acknowledge our biases, fears, and defensiveness as a church that has long been part of the dominant culture in this country? What tools might be appropriate for a continual spiritual practice of self-awareness, self-analysis, and faithfulness to the call to live with respect in creation, in mutually enriching and respectful relationships? Can we develop programs that foster intercultural exchange among neighbouring ministries? Can we work alongside and learn from immigrant communities?

Can there really be authentic existence if the understanding of “All My Relations” is restricted? Can we really live an authentic existence in the midst of climate change? Are we living an authentic existence, respecting creation, in a world that’s being strangled with pollution?

We are called to love and serve others

The work of active identity co-creation with God and our fellow human beings is a way in which we love and serve others. Becoming an intercultural church involves us being in deep relationship with one another, becoming humble, looking at our power structures, and enabling different kinds of spaces together.

A. THROUGH OUR PUBLIC/COMMUNITY WORSHIP AND LITURGY

We can love and serve others through our public/community worship and liturgy. Worship is central to who we are as a church. “Liturgy” is the “work of the people.” This work doesn’t have to happen in a church building. Authentic worship happens wherever God’s people gather to celebrate God’s presence.

Creating intercultural inclusive spaces includes worshipping in different languages, but this is not about doing it “right.” (For example, it is not as simple as saying, “Have I heard the right number of verses in a variety of languages?”) Instead, it’s doing what allows people to feel free to worship in ways that feel authentic for them. In some cultures, it feels “right” to openly express emotion in worship – exclaiming “Hallelujah,” for example, or clapping or dancing. Other groups prefer silence. Intercultural worship may not be the same thing for every group of people in every context. Becoming an intercultural church will mean embracing many different expressions of worship.

Many churches are trying to discern what intercultural worship means, and what it might look like in their local contexts. Our task group has discerned that intercultural worship does not have a prescribed formula (such as a “correct” number of non-English components of a service). Instead, intercultural worship will emerge out of the cultural community itself and be developed out of a process of consultation. As such, there is no formula for intercultural worship.

B. THROUGH NEW MINISTRY DEVELOPMENT

We can love and serve others through new ministry development.

We affirm that the church is not a building but a community of disciples, the body of Christ. As with any body, when we stop giving birth and growing, we die. It is easier to give birth than to resurrect. If the church doesn’t plant new ministries, it will only continue to decline and eventually die.

We recognize that not everyone in the church sees the future of the church in the same way. We do not have to wait for everyone to come to a common understanding to start planting in some places now. If we wait for everyone to catch the same vision, we may do nothing and it may be too late. Our governance structures need to be flexible enough to allow new expressions of ministry to take root. They need to support growth, and not stifle it.

C. THROUGH LANGUAGE ACCESS

We can love and serve others through language access. In the task group, we realized that even in this intercultural space where many differences were honoured, people still needed to use at least English to some degree (spoken or written). We did our best to use English, French, and American Sign Language, and yet, English still tended to dominate. We recognize that because of the dominant use of English throughout the life of the church, many people from diverse cultural communities cannot participate fully beyond their local congregations.

It would be helpful if written documents were in plain language so that everybody could fully participate at every level of church life.

Translation can be a financial issue. It takes money to provide translation and interpretation and it is often stated that there are too few congregations to justify spending the money. This focuses on those who are part of the church now rather than focusing on the broader context we are called to serve. Translation needs will change over time so policy will need to be developed and maintained in dialogue with those being served.

There also need to be opportunities, from time to time, for people to be able to be within their own linguistic group to work in their own preferred language. Furthermore, we have come to an awareness that translation isn't just about language. Cultural references and symbols also carry varied meanings.

Translation and interpretation are not the same thing. Translation deals with written communication, while interpreting is about the spoken/signed word. Translators work on written documents, while interpreters are involved in projects that require live translation, like conferences, meetings, medical appointments, and legal proceedings. Both translation and interpretation are needed in the church.

Language can be a significant barrier, but it can be overcome. A more serious issue might be the lack of engagement between linguistic minority churches and the rest of the churches. More dialogue is needed more frequently, not just when there is a conflict. It isn't about who is right or wrong, but about understanding one another more deeply. This issue of engagement is a question for continued conversation.

D. THROUGH CAPABLE AND COMPASSIONATE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

We can love and serve others through capable and compassionate intercultural communication and conflict resolution.

As we become an intercultural church, conflict will be a normal part of the process – because we are human beings. At the same time, we need to recognize that not all conflicts are due to cultural differences. There are healthy and constructive ways of dealing with conflict.

Sometimes there is conflict between presbyteries and “Ethnic Ministries” congregations. This can actually be helpful, because sometimes engagement with racialized and linguistic minority congregations only takes place when there is a conflict to be resolved. While intercultural conflict is important in these situations, it is also important to find a way to effectively engage with “Ethnic Ministries” congregations when there is no conflict. There must be a way to move beyond discrepancies and distance and to engage one another deeply.

We are called to seek justice and resist evil

In the struggle for authentic identity, evils such as racism, antisemitism, ageism, and sexism have to be resisted, and resistance is the work of justice.

The intercultural mandate requires the church to live justly. The call to seek justice is a call to actively live in right relations with all peoples and communities, recognizing that all cultures have values that can be shared and received. The church is invited to “resist evil” by intentionally avoiding and preventing all appearances of injustice.

As the church seeks to be a prophetic voice in the midst of empire, calling its community to live counterculturally, it must ensure that it is not using the principles of empire in living out its life. The church needs, therefore, to examine its practices especially in the areas of social class, racial and gender equity, decision making, systemic oppression, privilege, and resistance to change.

A. IN AREAS OF RACIAL JUSTICE/INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

We are called to seek justice and resist evil in areas of racial justice and institutional racism.

Questions to be explored might include: How does racism continue to manifest itself in the church today, despite the adoption of an anti-racism policy? How does the concept of White privilege impact power imbalances in diverse racial and cultural communities? How does the church’s focus on equality result in differential treatment for racialized communities?

Continued attention could be given to questions of racial justice and the ways in which living out our commitment to becoming a racially just church forms part of the basis for becoming an intercultural church. What are the ways in which institutional racism and power dynamics prevent us from fully living into our commitments and calls?

B. BY INTEGRATING INTERCULTURAL APPROACHES TO JUSTICE

We are called to seek justice and resist evil by integrating intercultural approaches to justice. One concept that is included in deep culture is our understandings of justice. All of our approaches to justice – and even our understandings of what “justice” is – are culturally nuanced.

Culture is a way of being, or the values, attitudes, and beliefs in a particular society. Culture embodies the ways in which people think and behave and forms the lenses through which people view the world. Analyzing and understanding cultural values as they relate to justice – and considering intercultural approaches to justice – is a new growing edge for consideration.

Some questions for consideration might be: What are some intercultural approaches to justice? What cultural assumptions are currently embedded in our justice practices? If the United Church is a justice-seeking church, what do we understand justice to be, from a variety of different cultural perspectives?

C. IN A COMMITMENT TO INTERCULTURAL STAFFING

The United Church prides itself on being inclusive, but we have observed three areas of need. Firstly, the senior staffing levels in the General Council Office and Conference offices need to always reflect the cultural and racial diversity of the church and society. Secondly, hiring processes within the church at times could potentially do more to incorporate intercultural awareness. Lastly, there is the need for intentionality around racial diversity and honouring cultural difference on hiring and interview committees.

There are also barriers to applicants where the invitation to apply for a position requires prospective applicants to know or be familiar with the ethos of the church. Applicants from

outside the mainstream United Church may not be familiar with the ethos, but might be aware of the basic or core characteristics of the church. Thus often only those who have been in the church longer or have acquaintances in the church or General Council Office are privileged to be hired.

The church is moving gradually into an intercultural space of how to be the people of God together and it will be enriched by increasing the outreach efforts for the composition of applicant pools and removing all barriers.

D. IN OUR GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS

We are called to seek justice and resist evil in our global partnerships. The spirit of becoming an intercultural church enjoins us to listen to the voices from the global South and elsewhere and invoke our prophetic voice to respond to the invitation to journey with our partners.

E. IN AREAS OF DISCRIMINATION BASED ON SOCIAL CLASS

We are called to seek justice and resist evil in areas of discrimination based on social class.

There is a great deal of social inequality in Canadian society and in the church. The church's commitment to equality assumes that there is equal access to employment and elected member opportunities within the church. This has the tendency to insulate the church from the realities of social inequality such as education, different abilities, socio-economic status, and gender roles.

F. IN OUR OWN REFLECTIONS ON CULTURAL DOMINANCE

We are called to seek justice and resist evil in our own reflections on cultural dominance.

From past reports like the Anti-racism Policy "That All May Be One," we note that the United Church is skewed in favour of one dominant culture to the neglect of other constituents within the church. Additionally, as a hearing church, the challenges facing the Deaf community do not often come up in discussions. Also, being a primarily Anglophone church, the church can pay closer attention to issues concerning French language and French-speaking peoples.

Closure

"Pray for openness to hear what God might be calling you to learn...
...that all people's spirits may blossom,
and just and tender relationships may come to life."³

May the lived experience of respectful relationship in this task group, may the findings and questions we have raised, the stories we have shared and proposals recommended all reflect Holy Grace and a faithful response to the call of God. Amen.

³ *Ending Racial Harassment: Creating Healthy Congregations* The United Church of Canada, 2008.