

# ENGAGING WITH THE MARGINS TO BE TRULY INCLUSIVE

By Rev Dev Anandarajan

*“Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the 12 called together the whole community of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.’ What they said pleased the whole community and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.”*

**Acts 6: 1-6**

The Commission for Mission's Intercultural Unit engages with the Church at its various organisational levels to resource the Church in becoming an intercultural Church. Among many things, being an intercultural Church means a church with “mutually respectful diversity and full and equitable participation of First Peoples and Second Peoples in the total life, mission and practices of the whole Church”.

In introducing the work of the intercultural unit, I have been saying one of the unit's roles is to help, support and advocate for CALD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse) ministers and congregations.

In my engagements with Church members, I have been asked why the Anglo-Celtic are not included in the CALD community. The reality is that the experience of the minority cultures says the UCA is still predominantly Anglo-Celtic and Western - that means the Church has a dominant culture.

Our diversity is not often reflected in our being and doing. Our worship, our ordering and decision-making processes are predominantly Western. But, more importantly, what is troubling the minority cultures is they feel their voices are not heard, their experiences not valued, their cultural needs are not understood and the spirituality they bring is not being recognised and shared.

While a significant number of members from minority cultures have adapted to the Anglo-Celtic ways of doing things, there are many who have formed their own cultural communities to worship and order their lives.

The gospel takes shape within a culture and is expressed through the culture. The culture gives shape to the piety that evolves within that particular cultural community. It is that expression that gives meaning.

The UCA has been welcoming of diverse cultures, but that alone is inadequate. Many of these cultures are in silos within the Church. Although they have found a place within the Church, that place is limited and, in most situations, it is only a physical place. The spirit and culture they bring are not evident in the UCA's ethos. There is not an active engagement with the diversity of cultures and the faith practices and piety they bring.

From the story of the Apostles in Acts, we find a similar situation in the early days of the Church, where new members from the minority Hellenistic background felt they were being neglected. Their widows were overlooked in the daily distribution of food. The complaint was against the Hebrew members, who were not only large in number but made up the Church leadership. The leadership appointed a group from among those who felt neglected to look after the welfare of the minority group that was feeling disenfranchised.

The role of the Intercultural Leadership Development and Community Development Coordinators, along with the Synod Intercultural Forum, is a similar role, but it also goes beyond it. Even though they are primary advocates for an intercultural Church, as God's loving community the call is to all people of God to make it a reality.

In our church, we want people from all different cultures to listen to each other and be heard. We want everyone to participate fully. We want our leaders to be as diverse as our population and membership. We don't want one dominant culture to decide how we do things. We need to have a process of consultation where diverse voices can come together and find meaningful ways to build community and be the Church.

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