

CREATING AN INTERCULTURAL SPACE

By Rev Dev Anandarajan

Walking into an intercultural space is like walking into a land laid with landmines. I wonder how many have had that experience?

Having come from a war-torn area where landmines were used extensively to deter the movement of troops, I am able to not only imagine but have real experience with it.

In 1990, when the war intensified between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Sri Lankan military, travel between the north and south became very dangerous. Most travelled by night so their movement would be more difficult to detect.

One night I was travelling with my wife, Dushy, and my sister and her husband. We had crossed a lagoon by boat with our Indian-made Bajaj scooters. We were riding along the main road to a place called Paranthan when we came across a big crater created by a land mine explosion. We had a choice to either go around it or find another route. Being unfamiliar with the territory we didn't know another road to take so I decided to walk around the crater to check if it was safe to ride our scooters.

So in the dark with the scooter lights providing visibility, I stepped cautiously as the others looked on anxiously. After each step I would pause and sigh with relief. A distance that would have taken a few minutes took so much longer as I walked around the crater hoping I would not step on a landmine. It was scary.

Living in an intercultural space is not as scary as walking into a minefield, but there are similar dynamics.

- The unexpected. It is easy to travel on a familiar path, but choosing to travel with an adventurous spirit to navigate through the unknown path is the challenge of entering into the intercultural space. You will never know the safe path unless you are willing to step on the way. If we do not attempt it we will never begin the journey.

Many cultures are comfortable in their own little corner. We must learn from the early Christian communities, who were nudged by the Spirit to choose an unfamiliar path of crossing cultures to embrace the other. It was not an easy journey. There was vicious opposition from within. They were comfortable in their familiar Jewish settings until the Spirit shoved some of them to step on the unfamiliar path to reach out to the gentiles to share the good news.

What a turn the movement took from then on, one that made all the difference. They thought they would be safe in their comfortable zone, but the adventurous path the Spirit took them on revived and renewed their spirits and created such an impact.

- Be bold to sin. Sound familiar? No adventure is going to be picture perfect. The journey is not for those who want to get it all right at the first go. It is not for those who do not want to feel embarrassed. It is not for those who do not want to make mistakes. It is not for those who do not want to be disturbed.

It is for those who are not only open, but are also intentional about walking into that space. It is for those who are willing to make mistakes and learn from it. It is for those who are willing to explore the uncomfortable space.

No theoretical knowledge, however sound it may be, can prepare you for a perfect encounter in the intercultural space. Experience enables you to test your knowledge and improve your understanding in navigating that space.

- It is not the finish but the journey. It is natural for people to want to know the end/goal of the journey. They would not embark on it without certainty of the intended place of arrival.

In the gospel of John, the disciples of John the Baptist followed Jesus without knowing where he was going. When the disciples asked Jesus where he was staying, his response was, "Come and see". It was the beginning of a journey not knowing the end. The only thing they hoped for was a journey with a purposeful end. They stuck through with him and found a higher purpose, totally different to what they had hoped for.

Becoming an intercultural congregation is a journey. We will never arrive there. However, if we embark upon this journey we will build a community of God where new life will be found.

The following are some practical suggestions to help your congregation on its journey. They have been adapted from a list compiled by the United Church of Canada.

Worship

Regularly let different cultural groups influence your style of worship. Many cultures do not respond to a general invitation, so offer a personal invitation. It's not enough to do this once a year, or for a special occasion - make it part of your worship the DNA.

Suggestions to consider:

- Learn a song from another language.
- Learn symbolic gestures from the cultures in your congregation.
- Display cultural symbols in the worship space.
- Have the Bible read in a cultural language.
- Do whatever is possible to ensure everyone has a chance to use their own language.
- Try to express yourself in plain English, not academic English.
- Consider providing simultaneous interpretation and written translations.
- Invite people to pray in their own language—God does not require English!
- Preach about anti-racism.
- Talk about our call to be an intercultural congregation/Church.
- Use diverse imagery to describe God. In the Bible, God is described as being like an eagle, a mother hen, a rock, a roaring lion, a jealous husband, a woman giving birth and many more.

Leadership

Share leadership among racial, ethnic and cultural groups. But be careful, Don't assume any one person speaks for their whole group.

In meetings and decision-making, ask: Who is present? Who speaks? Does everyone feel included?

Make sure leaders learn how to work with different racial, ethnic and cultural groups:

- Provide opportunities for meaningful encounters with other cultural communities.
- Ask leaders to attend workshops to increase their understanding of other cultures.
- Hire a consultant to teach cross-cultural communication.
- Organise exposure trips to other countries.
- Provide leaders with anti-racism training.

Create opportunities for different cultural groups to mix as equals. Don't let any one culture dominate. Everyone contributes and everyone's cultural traditions are celebrated.

Look at the ways the community interacts. Whose voices are heard? Whose voices are not? Keep working at it.

Learn what languages people are most comfortable with. Can everyone understand what is being said? Is everyone able to contribute?

In intercultural interaction, no one is left unchanged. By examining our own cultures, biases and prejudices, we begin to change to create a new community.

Becoming an intercultural congregation is not about survival, it is the nature of a Christlike community.

It is a journey and a process. We will not arrive, but it is important to start the journey.

For many white or Anglo-centric congregations, the question that is often asked is why should we worry about becoming an intercultural congregation? We are all white. We do not need to think about being intercultural.

However, the question that needs to be asked is: Why is the congregation all white? Saying we are all white is not an excuse to not embarking on the journey.

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