Church Models for Ministry Across Cultures[1]

All churches, whether deliberately or unconsciously, have ordered church life that in one way or another represents their approach to handling issues of culture, language and ethnicity. Churches do this in different ways. Broadly, we can identify the following models of church: (1) Dominant Host; (2) Bridging; (3) Multiethnic. These categories are broad enough to describe any church. Some churches, especially those that are quite sizeable, may incorporate more than one of these models.

Dominant host models of church are those churches which, in various ways, treat those of differing cultural-ethnic-linguistic background as either guests or tenants. Bridging model churches are those that seek some common platform that will enable Christians, while retaining a distinctive ethnic (and usually linguistic) group identity, to fellowship together. Multiethnic model churches are those that go beyond this in seeking to incorporate individuals representing a significant range of ethnic, cultural (and possibly linguistic) backgrounds into a single church community.

There are fully autonomous churches which may develop either of these models or some mix of them. In other cases we are dealing with the interaction between what begin as distinct entities, differentiated by some mix of culture, language and ethnicity.

There are denominational and non-denominational churches and fellowships which have developed along lines of ethnicity and operate in a fully autonomous fashion. Although the definition of denomination may be debated, many would include in the non-denominational category so-called Independent Churches such as the Christian Alliance Chinese churches.

Some of these churches and fellowships are essentially mono-ethnic, for example, Korean. The members of others represent a narrow range of ethnicity, for example, many large Chinese churches where Christians are from many different ethnic backgrounds. But the range of ethnicity is still basically Chinese. Yet others are multi-ethnic and this includes, for example, many large Arabic-speaking churches. The members of such churches would object to being called Arabs, because typically many of them are not in fact ethnically Arab at all. In this case it is language that draws together people from often a very wide range of ethnic backgrounds. Such churches or fellowships are simultaneously multi-ethnic (see under Uniformity Models) and fully autonomous.

Whether denominational or non-denominational, whether mono-ethnic, narrowly ethnic or multi-ethnic, fully autonomous churches and fellowships normally meet on premises they own or rent. Some ethnic fellowships (e.g., Tamil-speaking fellowships) meet periodically but never become church congregations. Members may attend majority culture churches, yet draw their main spiritual input from the fellowship group (cf. para-church fellowships such as Navigators). Even if an autonomous church or fellowship is part of a denomination such a church, by and large, is free to order its own life, make its own decisions without interference and do as it pleases with money received (through the offering plate and other sources). The leaders of such a church may participate in denominational structures, meetings and occasions and church members may attend

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[1] Much of my initial thinking on this whole area was triggered by (1) exposure to the framework set out by Charles Wilcox. *Ethnic and Cross Cultural Ministries Handbook*. Hawthorn: Baptist Union of Victoria, 1994, and (2) the influence of the late Graham Nicholls, Coordinator of Cross-Cultural Ministry for Baptist Churches in NSW.

denominational or inter-denominational events and conferences, but the church to which they belong is to all intents and purposes an independent one.

In many denominations individual congregations are often substantially autonomous. Often such autonomy is intensified with respect to mono-ethnic congregations or fellowships that have more lately affiliated with an established denomination. Christians from substantially Anglo-Celtic churches may or may not have any participation in denominational activities, committees and functions, and often, members of more recently affiliated mono-ethnic congregations are even less involved. The leaders of such churches sometimes have very limited inter-relationships with not only their Anglo-Celtic peers bit even with those of their own ethnic background. There is often little to distinguish such churches from independent, non-denominational churches.

It must not, however, be concluded that all such churches are ghetto churches which cut themselves off from fellowship with Christians from other cultural backgrounds. For example, many Chinese churches operate in a very independent fashion and yet their youth will be involved with other Christians in inter-denominational Christian conferences, beach missions, etc.

One of the basic problems faced by many, but by no means all, mono-ethnic churches is their insularity. There can be a lack of vision and commitment to win people from other cultural backgrounds to Christ. Sometimes there is not even a commitment to winning people from their own cultural background. Rather the church operates much as a club or cultural centre for its people, especially for those who consider themselves to be "Christian" already. However, it needs to be quickly added that many largely Anglo-Celtic churches are already of this nature.

QUESTION: *What reasons might there be to explain why such insularity occurs in mainly fully autonomous ethnic churches?*

Dominant host models are of three types: (1) Assimilationist; (2) Benefactor-Beneficiary; or (3) Landlord-Tenant. There are some that we may describe as assimilationist churches. Such churches have an established church culture and will not change in any appreciable manner to accommodate newcomers whose cultural, ethnic or linguistic background may be very different. Not only many mainstream culture churches but many language-specific churches or churches with a narrow range of ethnicity are also of this nature. The members of such a church may or may not be friendly towards outsiders. But it is quite possible that newcomers who don't 'fit' the culture will still receive a warm welcome and be encouraged to become part of the church. For example, from time to time one does come across first generation migrants with very poor English who become part of an English-speaking mainstream church that is mainly Anglo-Celtic, even though they understand very little and are unable to participate in church life to any significant degree. Sometimes, newcomers who don't fit may even be helped by church members to find another church where they will feel much more at home.

The dominant host model may also function at a group and not merely individual level. It is very common in multicultural metropolitan centres for non-English speaking background congregations and fellowships to request that they might share the use of existing church property. If the church that already has rights to the property or its use responds positively to this request it can either treat the other group as a guest (Benefactor-Beneficiary model) or as a tenant (Landlord-Tenant model). The latter model is very common and the user pays the host church a rental for its use of the church property. But there are occasions when the host church simply permits another group to share use

of the property and may only ask that a basic contribution be made to cover the cost of such expenses as electricity and cleaning.

CASE STUDY #1

You are a member of the leadership team of a church in the Inner West of Sydney. It is announced in the decision-making meeting that your church has been approached by a group of Cantonese-speaking Christians who do not belong to your denomination. They request use of the church building, hall, and other facilities at a time convenient to the existing congregation. They are prepared to pay rent if so required. You are asked along with the other church leaders to decide how the church should respond to this request.

QUESTIONS:
1. *What would you ask?*
2. *What advice would you give?*
3. *On what basis might you be prepared to give the answer 'Yes'?*
4. *Under what circumstances might you advocate the answer 'No'?*

A Need for Good Communication

If a church decides to adopt a Landlord-Tenant or Benefactor-Beneficiary model then whether the host and guest churches will enjoy harmonious or conflicted relationships will much depend on the relationships between the leaders of these distinct entities. The leaders of the respective churches must meet regularly to (1) pray and encourage each other and (2) provide opportunity for problems to be aired and discussed. Problems can then be managed while still small.

The Need to Avoid Impulsive Action

Increasingly existing congregations will receive requests from ethnic Christian churches or groups to use church facilities. It is at this point that the existing congregation needs to do some very hard thinking about its total approach to cross-cultural ministry. Otherwise it runs the danger of 'painting itself into a corner.'

The Opportunity for Creative Ministry

On the other hand, such models, if entered into with proper forethought, can be very useful in developing the commitment and experience of members of the host congregation in cross-cultural ministry.

The Crucial Importance of a Written Agreement

A written agreement allows both parties to face cultural differences at the outset. A written agreement must be written in both languages and cover such things as:

- The shared doctrinal position
- Financial arrangements
- Stating that the selling of buildings or the adding of new rooms is a decision which can only be made by the mother church.
- Responsibility for damaged property.
- Use of facilities, e.g., to clean kitchen after use and leave it as it was found; turn off Air-Conditioner when leave, etc.
- Meetings between the two pastors.
- Times for combined services, e.g., Easter.

- Responsibility of congregations to inform each other in advance of any big plans for major programs
- Parking arrangements
- Contribution of labour for maintenance of property

Denominational churches that are considering the adoption of such models should check to see what denominational regulations might apply to the use of church property. Many denominations have templates to use for such written agreements, though they may need to be extended to cover some of the matters indicated above.

Bridging models are also concerned with enabling fellowship between churches or Christian groupings distinguished by some combination of culture, ethnicity and language. If they share the same property, which may not necessarily be the case, then this model might overlap, at least to some degree, with either the Benefactor-Beneficiary or Landlord-Tenant models. There are two main ways in which bridging can be achieved. One way is to have a bilingual or multilingual service. This might apply to a weekly or an occasional church service. For example, where congregations distinguished by language meet separately each week there may be occasional combined services.

CASE STUDY #2

Fred has been appointed pastor of a church where there is a mid-morning English service and a separate, late morning service in Mandarin for folk who come from mainland China and who have affiliated themselves with the same denomination. Fred has resolved to do what he can to bind all these Christians together. You are one of the leaders of the church and you are now in your regular decision-making meeting. At this meeting Fred tells you all that he intends to replace the existing services with a new bi-lingual service so as to enable all Christians to fellowship and worship together.

QUESTIONS:
1. *What theological issues are involved?*
2. *What questions would you ask?*
3. *What advice would you give?*
4. *From a simply pragmatic perspective what advantages and disadvantages do you see in pursuing a bilingual model?*

Some very large churches are able to present a bi-lingual service as one among many options. Some churches in which people are bound together by a narrow range of ethnicity, for example, Chinese churches, may find that the use of two or even more languages in a church service is almost unavoidable. With the exception of such cases, Bilingual Models do not usually last the distance. However, they may be worth considering as a first step or as a temporary measure. If it should be decided to adopt such a model, prior thought needs to be given as to what to do if the model does not work. Otherwise there is a real danger of ending up with frustrated believers.

Advantages
The bilingual model may provide a setting in which parents feel happier to worship with their children. It may also be favoured by some second or third-generation adults for whom English has become their first language. Occasional bilingual services are often a cause of great encouragement

to Christians from all ethnic backgrounds and may even seem to them like a foretaste of heaven (Rev 7:9). And so they may well be.

Hard Work
However, an immense amount of work is involved in getting everything ready for such a service. In addition to the added weekly load on the shoulders of the leaders of this service, there is also the fact that such services are often long and cumbersome. Translation is difficult and everyone needs to be patient.

But the positive aspects of this model should not be ignored (especially drawing Christians together) and, at the very least, these warrant the holding of occasional combined bi-lingual or multi-lingual services.

The other bridging model functions in a manner not unlike the way many churches handle Sunday School children. We might call it the Overlap model. It usually operates in the following manner. The two groups come together for the first part of a church service – the overlap – which may well require translation, and then split into separate locations on the church property for the rest of the service, especially the sermon.

Multiethnic models assume two forms. There is the uni-congregational multiethnic church, that is, one which incorporates everyone into one congregation with all worshiping in the same place in the same language (though perhaps, but not usually, with some degree of simultaneous translation) at the same time. Alternatively, a multiethnic church might be multi-congregational. In this case we have one ethnically diverse church community composed of separate, but integrated congregations.

The fact that many churches have multiple services and have church property that can be shared makes it possible for at least some churches to combine models. For example, a uni-congregational multiethnic church may also have language specific Bible study groups, fellowships or even host one or more ethno-specific or language-specific congregations. A multi-congregational multiethnic church may well seek to incorporate a uni-congregational multiethnic congregation for some of its constituency for whom English is their first language. An assimilationist church may deliberately plant a distinct church or congregation that aims at reaching a specific ethnic or language group not represented in the mainstream congregation.

CASE STUDY #3
A church known as International Christian Fellowship is surrounded by suburbs that are very cosmopolitan, with no one ethnic group predominating. The pastor is Indian. During services, he stresses repeatedly that this church is an Australian church for all Australians. There are 36 different nationalities represented in the church (some coming to the morning service, some to the evening and a few to both) and some wear their national dress in church. The entirety of the service is in English. Visitors are asked to stand and are either introduced by others who brought them or else are asked to introduce themselves. The congregation claps to express their welcome. A lot of emphasis is placed on music, with there being a number of musical contributions from different ethnic groupings (these may be sung in another language). A meal follows the late morning service.

QUESTIONS:
1. *What people would you expect to come to such a church?*
2. *Which people would be unlikely to become members of such a church?*
3. *Should all churches aspire to be multiethnic churches?*
4. *How important do you think it is that the pastor is non Anglo-Celtic?*
5. *In what areas of church life is there potential for cross-cultural conflict?*
6. *What compromises might need to be made to have a harmonious church?*
7. *What areas of church life would pose a particular challenge for the pastor of such a church?*

Enriching

There are many reasons for adopting this model. It is enriching for Christians to develop strong healthy relationships with Christians from other ethnic backgrounds. God's people become more aware that much of the Christianity we inherit is more cultural than biblical. Once we recognise this, two important consequences follow: First, we are able to share the unchanging gospel in a more flexible and culture-sensitive manner. Second, we are more prepared to adapt our own methods and lifestyle in order to effectively minister to people.

Not for everyone

A multi-ethnic church will not draw in all ethnic types. Many will not feel at home in such a church. Indeed, although such a church may draw in people from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds it is very unlikely that it will penetrate any particular ethnic community to any substantial degree.

Reasons might include:
1. *Language difficulties.* In Australia such a model presupposes all church members speak English well, though headphones used in conjunction with simultaneous translation can help here. Among those with limited English some confident young people may join but older folk seldom will. An English-speaking church that does not centre around biblical teaching may succeed in drawing and holding people with limited English-speaking ability. In this case comprehension of biblical truth is not crucial to church life and this raises questions as to the real health of such a church.
2. *Strength of culture*. Many find fellowship and worship more fulfilling in their own cultural setting.
3. *Particular convictions*. For some it is important to have a church that is able to be effective in reaching a particular people group, e.g. an ABC (Australian Born Chinese) church to reach ABCs. While some proponents of the multiethnic church contend that this is the only authentic biblical model of church there is no shortage of Christians who would take issue with this on biblical and theological grounds. Further, matters of church practice and government make it nearly impossible for many to become part of any particular multi-ethnic church model.

Strong leadership needed

In multiethnic churches the pastor in charge will often be from a non Anglo-Celtic background, though there are exceptions. Such churches typically depend on a strong leader to hold them together. If a multi-ethnic model is pursued, thought needs to be given as to how to ensure effective leadership training, the mobilisation of church members and the use of spiritual gifts in ministry and church planting.

Discipleship

Discipling Christians is also problematic in multi-ethnic churches. For some church members the church is not the place they come to for their most significant fellowship and spiritual input. It can be difficult for multi-ethnic churches to secure high levels of commitment from church members and to involve them in church life and ministry beyond participation in Sunday services.

I have sought to provide an overview of the range of models which all churches adopt in dealing with the realities of culture, ethnicity and language. Churches that are seeking to be more effective in ministering across cultures consider such options and make their own decisions as to which model or combination of models they will implement or develop.

If I leave the matter here then I am open to the criticism that I am only concerned with 'what works', rather than with what the Bible teaches us to encourage and pursue. Of course, if any particular model is biblically and theologically valid, then it is quite proper to make sure the model does operate effectively. True, the policy of doing "what works" is a dangerous one and must be approached with caution. Yet in Ecclesiastes 10:10 we read: "If the axe is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed, but skill will bring success." Provided then that the gospel itself is not compromised it is legitimate to act wisely and ensure that we adopt best practice in our ministry methods.

QUESTIONS:
1. *Consider John 17:20-23:*
    a. *What is the nature of the unity which glorifies God?*
    b. *Why does Jesus pray for such unity?*
2. *Consider Ephesians 4:12-16:*
    a. *What is the nature of the unity urged by Paul?*
    b. *Why is such unity so important?*
3. *Consider 1 Corinthians 12:14-26:*
    a. *Why is disunity an absurdity?*
    b. *What is the relationship of Christians to each other?*
4. *Consider Ephesians 4:3-5:*
    a. *Why is unity something to be maintained and not created?*
    b. *What are the foundations of Christian unity?*
    c. *What can be said about the mono-ethnic church which has virtually no contact or fellowship with the wider Christian community?*
5. *For what reasons do different denominations exist?*
6. *Why is it impossible to do away with denominations?*
7. *Why is it that in many church communities there are quite separate and distinctive congregations which meet at different times?*
8. *In what ways may Christians express their unity across denominations?*
9. *In what ways may Christians express their unity in multi-congregational churches?*

Five Propositions

1. *All Christians are already united in Christ* (1 Cor 12:12-26; Eph 4:3-5).
Paul assumes that Christians are already members of a body created by God himself and as such are already united with each other. It is crucial to stress the unity which all Christians already have in

Christ. It is a mistake to begin by focusing upon the sharpness of cultural differences and thinking in terms of how to overcome the problems in order to express Christ-honouring unity.

D.W.B. Robinson reacts against a World Council of Churches statement on unity because "it assumes that 'the unity' (that is, of the church) has been lost or does not yet exist: for why else should we seek it? Whereas, in terms of the biblical and creedal doctrine of 'one church', unity is not something to seek at all, but is the very nature of the church, never absent wherever Christ meets with his people."[2]

Similarly, Packer reasons, "If a visible organization, as such, were or could be the one church of God, then any organizational separation would be a breach of unity, and the only way to reunite a divided Christendom would be to work for a single international super-church. Also, on this hypothesis, it would be open to argue that some institutional feature is of the essence of the church and is therefore a sine qua non of reunion. (Rome, for instance, actually defines the church as the society of the faithful under the Pope's headship; some Anglicans make episcopacy in the apostolic succession similarly essential). But, in fact, the church invisible, the true church, is one already. Its unity is given to it in Christ. The proper ecumenical task is not to create church unity by denominational coalescence, but to recognize the unity that already exists and to give it worthy expression on the local level."[3] I add that we run the same danger to which Packer here averts, if we regard an institutionalised expression of ethnic diversity as of the essence of the church.

2. *Unity is a spiritual not a structural reality* (Eph 4:3; John 17:21; 1 Cor 12:1-14:1). *Oneness in Christ does not dissolve essential gender, ethnic and social distinctions* (Col 3:11 cf. 3:18-4:1; 3:14-15).

In their concern that Christian unity be properly expressed some people strongly promote a model which centrally involves all Christians in a church community meeting together at the same time, in the same place, and doing the same thing. The oneness desired by our Lord is a oneness which is expressed in Christian relationships rather than in uniformity of church practice and government. In the real world, whether we like it or not, we have to live with the fact that oneness in Christ simply *cannot* be expressed in uniformity of church life.

On John 17 Robinson points out that Jesus' prayer 'that they may *all* be one' is a prayer for the unity with the apostles of those who shall believe through their word… It relates to *succession* in true apostolic doctrine and works, and to the continuing effectiveness of the 'giving of the Father's word' from preacher to receiver. *By this means* will the world believe, and *by this means* will it know that *the Father sent the Son* (17:23). **This has no necessary connection at all with the visible relationship of believers to each other laterally, apart from their mutual love**" (my boldfacing).[4]

Bearing in mind what Robinson says and what Frame says below about denominationalism, we can see the validity of Newbigin's criticism of the Reformers' doctrine of the Church: "The Church cannot be defined *simply* as that which is constituted by the event of the preaching of the Gospel and the

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[2] *The Church of God. Its Form and its Unity*. Jordan Books; Viewpoint Series. Sydney: Ambassador Press, 1965, 18-19.

[3] James I. Packer, "The Nature of the Church" in *Basic Christian Doctrines*. Ed. Carl F.H. Henry; Baker Book House, 1971, 246-247.

[4] *The Church of God*, 23.

administering of the sacraments. It belongs to its true nature that it is a continuing historical society, that society which was constituted and sent forth once for all by Jesus Christ."[5]

3. *While unity is not a structural unity it is organizational*. This is well expressed by John Frame: "Jesus (John 17) and Paul do not distinguish between spiritual and organizational. They call us to seek unity in all these respects: to agree with one another, to love one another, to serve one another, and to glorify one another, as Jesus says in John 17:4 that he glorified the Father. The unity of the church is also organizational, for Jesus founded one church, not many denominations. He founded a church to be ruled by apostles (Eph 2:20), elders (1 Tim 3:1-7), and deacons (1 Tim 3:8-13), and his Word tells us to 'obey your leaders' (Heb 13:17). When there are disputes within the church, Jesus gives us in Matthew 18 directions for resolving them. But he never gives us the option of leaving one church and starting another. That is what has happened in the history of denominationalism. I believe that denominationalism is an offense against God and that it has weakened the church's witness. The rise of denominationalism is caused by sin, either sin of those who left the original church or sin of those who forced them to leave – or, most likely, both."[6]

Along similar lines Newbigin asks, "How has it come about that the vast majority of Protestant Christians are content to see the Church of Jesus Christ split up into hundreds of separate sects, feel no sense of shame about such a situation, and sometimes even glory in it and claim the support of the New Testament for it? Where is the theological root of the error which can produce such an astounding blinding of the eyes of good Christian men and women?"[7]

There should only be one church or organization to which we belong in all its geographical locations.[8] But the problem of denominationalism and the unbiblical autonomy and separatism of congregations is not addressed by any one church declaring itself to be the church to which all other Christians are obliged to recognise. This only serves to exacerbate this unfortunate situation.

4. *Unity is violated by isolationist churches* (Rom 15:25-27; John 17:20-23; Eph 6:18). Certainly, church models should be discouraged which allow Christians to establish what are essentially isolationist Christian communities. But Christian unity must be expressed in a Christ-honouring way which involves Christian maturity and an effective witness to the world. This occurs

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[5] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God. Lectures on the Nature of Church.* Eugene, Oregon: WIPF and STOCK Publishers, 1953, 59.

[6] John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology. An Introduction to Christian Belief*. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2013, 1022.

[7] *The Household of God,* 54.

[8] Robinson observes that the World Council of Churches New Delhi statement on unity "sees the particular earthly church as the visible centre of unity" and "wishes to make 'place' an essential condition for the manifestation of unity, and by 'place' it means primarily 'local neighbourhood.' But there is a confusion of thought here. When St. Paul speaks of 'all that call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ *in every place*' (1 Corinthians 1:2), he is not defining *church* by *place*, but *place* by *church*. *Place* is a nondescript term. It might mean a building (Acts 6:14), or it might mean a country (Hebrews 11:8). A church must, of course, meet in a *place* (meaning *a given spot*), but is there any ground for asserting that all baptized Christians in a *place* (meaning *local neighbourhood*) must meet in the same church? The real basis of New Testament churches is not *place* but a particular social or political entity. It is natural enough to have 'the church at Corinth', not because Corinth is a place, but because it is a certain close-knit political and social unit which is already the basis of the Corinthians' association. Even so… the form of the church at Corinth was flexible, just as the social structures within Corinthian society were flexible." *The Church of God*, 20.

when, without dissolving them, denominational and group differences are treated as subservient to the truly central, non-negotiable elements which bind all Christians together in fellowship and purpose.

5. *There is no right or ideal model of church on earth*.
Biblical teaching on Christian unity does not require all Christians to meet together at the same time in the same place. It is not realistic to expect all to become part of a church which in one way or another involves uniformity of practice and church life for all involved irrespective of ethnic or cultural background.

Sometimes this will happen. That is good! But to impose a particular model on all Christians is not what it means to express Christ-honouring unity in the real world.

In the Bible the prophet functioned as a covenant mediator who applied the demands of the covenant to concrete historical situations. Postwar migration has created a new historic setting in Australia's major cities and increasingly regional centres. What is needed now is not a legalistic response to the demands thus created, but a profoundly insightful 'prophetic' approach.

There is indeed no one church model which is 'the right one.' Each church must decide which model is most appropriate for its situation. Given the biblical foundations set out above, this must not be understood to be a case of supplanting biblical fidelity with pragmatism or merely conceding to the status quo. When a church chooses its model then it must do so in a biblically faithful manner. As such the model it will choose is one which the church believes will best advance God's kingdom through the upbuilding and witness of the church.

No Right or Ideal Church Model
Nowhere in the NT is it unequivocally taught that a particular model of church is prescribed or normative. It follows that those who insist a particular model of church is biblically normative have to construct a strong logical argument with this as its conclusion. In assessing any such argument, therefore, it is important to identify and assess the underlying premises on which it is based. If the premises are true and the argument is properly developed then the conclusion will be true. If these presuppositions, however, are false then the argument will fail. If the basic assumptions are valid, but it is not clear whether they are true or false, and the argument is properly developed then the argument is valid but the conclusion may or may not be true.

Here is my own position: *A non-discriminatory (including multi-ethnic) mindset IS mandated but the multiethnic church is not mandated as THE right or ideal church model and neither is the homogeneous unit model*.

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