

SLIDE 1

PRESENTATION FOR UCANZ HUI IN WELLINGTON FRIDAY 16th OCTOBER 2015

Greetings:

Kia ora tatou katoa. Talofa lava, Malo e lelei, Ni Sa Bula vinaka, Greetings and salutations to each and every one of you, the delegates of this Hui, who come from various parts of this motu of Aotearoa New Zealand. I am very grateful for the opportunity to be amongst you this evening, and share this session with you. I also sincerely appreciate your kind welcome.

I bring warm greetings and best wishes from the Methodist Church of New Zealand Te Hahi Weteriana o Aoteroa, to this gathering here in Lower Hutt this weekend, where you meet to engage and participate in discussion and making decisions on matters concerning the mission and ministry of the Uniting Congregations of Aotearoa New Zealand. On that note, let me also acknowledge the invitation sent to me by Rev Peter MacKenzie, which I consider an honour and privilege, to be here and join you this evening.

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Introduction:

Peter MacKenzie's Invitation included a request to speak on the topic of **"How smaller churches could deal with the multicultural society we live in."**

When I received the invitation my initial reaction was: I have no expertise in this topic, except that I have some experience of having been involved and having been part of a Multicultural Congregation, where I was candidate for the ministry - that was the Petone Multicultural Congregation, which is currently part of this local Parish of Hutt City Uniting Congregations.

Having said that, I would like to share some background history of my experiences with a multicultural church. I arrived in New Zealand from Samoa on October 14th 1974; that is 41 years ago. I was brought up in a

Congregational Christian Church in Samoa. So having a palagi, a Fijian or a Tonga in a Church in Samoa was very rare or unusual at the time.

After arrival in New Zealand, it took me two years to shop around and look for a church that I would feel comfortable with, and one that would make me feel not only welcomed, but was also likely to invite me to take part and feel that I really **belonged** to it.

Not only that, I was looking for a church that reflected the reality of this society - being a multicultural one, and also that reflected God's Vision for the whole world as recorded in the book of Revelation 7:9 &10, where it says:

"After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and people and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying:

Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb... And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders ...and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing:

**Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving
And honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever...**

In 1976, I was introduced to Petone Multicultural Congregation, which I believed at that time reflected the nature of this society, and God's vision for the world that I have just referred to.

So, based on my experiences of Petone, and then later on my involvement in the wider diverse make up of the Methodist Church and the community we are part of, here are a few practical lessons for me to share:

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1. CELEBRATE AND RECOGNISE THE DIVERSITY WITHIN THE CHURCH AND THE SOCIETY.

No one can deny the reality of the multicultural nature of the Church that we belong to and the society we now live in. The Church and the society of today

is totally different from the church of the 1950's and 1960's. During those years, it was mainly monocultural compared with the faces of today. Thus, we must accept, acknowledge, recognise and celebrate the changes we face today knowing that we cannot revert to the years of the fifties and sixties, as since then our society has become more and more diverse.

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For a multicultural congregation or church, to celebrate its diversity, it needs to look for meaningful ways to celebrate the church's diversity. For example, a combined dinner might be held every three or four months, or an outdoor picnic lunch that can focus on a particular part of the world by having people from various nations organise and lead it.

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Musical and dramatic presentations can portray a particular ethnic/national group within the congregation. In terms of worship services, invite and have someone from various languages represented: read the Scriptures, or various ethnic groups to sing a hymn in their own language. These are just a few ways of celebrating a church's diversity without making it appear contrived. The more often a church holds combined activities to celebrate and acknowledge their diversity, the more appeal for the people in the society to participate.

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2. A PLACE WHERE ALL ARE WELCOMED: CREATE AND INCLUSIVE CULTURE

The leader or leaders of the multicultural church should not allow any one cultural, ethnic, or racial group to dominate the church's style of ministry e.g. music, structure, or forms of prayer, let alone the use of the properties (church building, church hall, etc.) I remember my first appointment was to a multicultural parish of six congregations who worshipped in four different centres. I was appointed to minister to a Samoan congregation which was part of the parish who use the same property with an English speaking

congregation. After my first two months I received a letter from the morning congregation leaders' meeting with a list of the **Rules** for the use of the properties including the church kitchen etc. These appeared to be rules specifically for the Samoan congregation.

As you can imagine my reaction to that letter! I was so furious! Then I informed the Samoan leaders and they said, this has been happening for years, but the previous presbyters and the congregation leaders had taken it as a norm.

I phoned the presbyter of the morning congregation who also happened to be the Parish superintendent and requested a meeting, which we had. I expressed my concerns and disappointment for allowing this kind of insensitive and unchristian behaviour to happen. The question that came to my mind at the time was; who would want to be a member of this kind of church?

As an outcome of the meeting, a Joint property committee of equal number of representatives from the two congregations was established, whose task was to make plans and decisions in matters relating to the properties, knowing that no one Methodist congregation is superior to the other.

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The church's style of ministry needs to remain broad enough to minister to all people and groups regardless of their colour, ethnicity, gender, theology, sexuality, culture and many more aspects. However, some individuals may leave the church in favour of a place of worship that is more connected to their culture or language.

The majority of people who are part of a multicultural church are there because they appreciate being part of something wider than their single culture, that reflects the reality of the society they live in. (that's why I decided to join the Petone Multicultural congregation) Families in a multicultural church are interested in their children learning and appreciating what it means to be part of a wider culture. Having said that, the multicultural church locally

and nationally must do all it can to create an inclusive culture - i.e one in which every cultural group feels welcome.

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3. DEMONSTRATE RESPECT FOR EACH AND ALL PEOPLE AND ACCEPT THEM FOR WHO THEY ARE:

I am one hundred percent sure from experience that all people, including ourselves do not want to be stereotyped or looked down on, because of their skin colour or where they come from. Also because of their culture, theology, gender, sexuality and so forth. The church leaders, including the ministers, need to lead the way in showing appropriate respect for each ethnic group and culture represented within the church and society. This means being sensitive to people, never demeaning any particular cultures or making jokes about people who do things differently or speak a different language.

The leaders and church may even want to find ways to communicate that they respect the fact people speak languages other than English. One way to do this is to sing songs or hymns in multiple languages. I believe many multicultural congregations do that nowadays whereas in the past singing was mainly one language. Two weeks ago I attended the funeral or Tangi of one of Te Taha Maori and Methodist leaders by the name of Lana Lazarus (some or many of you knew her). I was accompanied by Vice President Bella and other leaders of the Connexion where we were welcomed to the Marae by a Kaumatua or the Tribe chiefs. Then, following the protocol, I responded to them, and spoke to Lana in Te Reo Maori or the Maori language. Also at the funeral service after delivering a Tribute in English on behalf of the Methodist Church I then concluded by saying goodbye to Lana in Te Reo Maori.

One Maori lady came up to me after the funeral and she said: speaking in Maori in a Marae made her know and appreciate how much I, as the leader of the Methodist Church, loved and respected not only Lana, but members of the whanau or family as well as the Kaumatua or the leaders of the Tribe, which

meant a lot to them. I said to myself: this can be done with other languages as well.

Another way to show respect for different racial and ethnic groups, not only in the church but also in the wider community, is to regularly pray publicly for their native country or respective groups. Periodically, prayer meetings should focus on praying for various parts of the world. People, including those outside the church, are blessed to know that the church members are praying for their nation of origin, or for the diverse groups of people in the community.

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4. GETTING TO KNOW, LEARN AND UNDERSTAND THE CULTURES OF THE PEOPLE, THEIR NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS

I remember, when the New Zealand Warriors Rugby League team reached the final in the 2002 season, the media were quick to interview the new Owner of the club at the time who was Eric Watson. He was asked by the interviewer – How come this current team's performance all of a sudden changed and became so successful compared with the previous team of the past years? What did the management do to the players that made them respond positively and work hard and well as a team this year?

Eric responded that, since this team is made up of players of different cultures, ethnicities, traditions, customs religions and so on, the management had to learn and understand each player's background and roots, their expectations and needs, and they were attending church services as for some of the players are Christians. This was in order for the management to know how to approach, motivate and inspire each player. The result this year speaks for itself. The team set a goal at the beginning of the year to finish at the top eight, and now they've gone beyond that. They have now become one of the finalists.

I believe the churches and the multicultural or uniting congregations in particular need also to apply the same principle to their mission and ministries

in order to be successful and continue to grow cross-culturally. We need to learn and understand each person's upbringing, their needs and expectations.

Talking about expectations, one of my palagi colleagues that I used to work with who looked after a Palagi and Samoan congregations, was often invited to Samoan family celebrations such as birthdays, weddings, anniversaries and other gatherings. An invitation was always just by word of mouth and it went directly to the minister. What happened, every time he was invited he went by himself and did not take his wife. When he got there, on almost every occasion the family asked where his wife was, and his response, she's at home. What he did not realise until he asked me was, that the invitation for him was for both himself and his wife. If the presbyter is invited, he or she and the spouse were also included.

So this is why for it is necessary for all people to understand and to know the various cultures, their needs and expectations, so as to avoid the someone's assumption that the spouse did not come because he/she did not want to.

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5. DIFFERENT STRIPES: SEEK DIVERSITY IN LEADERSHIP

One of the most important aspects of a truly multicultural church is the diversity of those in leadership and platform ministry. This does not happen best by setting quotas. It happens by providing opportunities for all who are part of the church to be involved in every aspect of church life.

As opportunities for leadership are available to all who attend the church, chosen based on gifts and God given talents, rather than the skin colour or racial/ethnic background.

A natural process will bring diversity to the church committee, those who speak from the pulpit, those who participate on worship teams, sing in the choir, and lead the church's ministries. God has gifted people of every shade and colour to administer His gifts to the church.

It is also desirable to have diversity when hiring pastoral and support staff. It is important that those hired, especially pastoral staff, to have not only appropriate pastoral gifts, but also the ability to relate to the diversity represented in the church. Those doing the hiring may need to question potential new staff regarding any personal convictions or attitudes that may hinder their ministry in such a church. For example, when searching for a new pastoral staff member, it must often be asked, "How do you feel about cross-cultural marriage?"

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6. CONCLUSION

The multicultural church is not always the easiest church to be involved in and to lead. It involves a lot of obstacles and challenges to be faced. The coming together of people from different backgrounds means a diversity of expectations and cultural norms. It requires extra thought and work on the part of the leaders and all members. Yet, the gathering of people from every tribe and nation lends excitement and momentum that is well worth the perseverance, sacrifice and effort by all involved.

With the growing diversity of Aotearoa New Zealand society more and more every year, more than ever before, it is the multicultural church that has the greatest potential to represent to the world what God's vision is like as recorded in the book of Revelation 7:9 saying:

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb...They cried out; Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb

The question is: If this is God's Vision, how can we worship together in the life to come, if we cannot respect, accept and work together in this human life?