

The Changing “Colour” of the Church.

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A few weeks ago when I was taking a Sunday Service at St Johns Buckland’s Beach I realised how our church has changed over the last 27 years since we joined St Johns. We have a Children’s Church that joins the rest of us when the collection is blessed and as they came into the church and sat in the front row I realised that only one of the children was a Pakeha, the rest were Chinese, Korean, Pilipino, Thai, Sri Lankan and Malaysian.

I should not have been surprised as our church has a mission statement “Being the Gospel to All People” and our local community has changed very significantly over the last 27 years and possibly the makeup of our Children’s Church is more representative of our local community than the adult English speaking fellowship – we also have a Mandarin speaking fellowship.

But what does this mean for our local church and the wider church? We have tried to diversify the leadership of our church and we do have Mandarin speakers on our Leadership Team, we also have Sri Lankan, Thai and Filipinos on the Team but if we are honest it is the grey haired mainly male pakeha members of the Leadership Team who are the most vocal and probably have the most influence.

But what about the future? In twenty years most of the pakeha members of the Leadership team will be either dead or in their dotage – including the writer of this article. Our church structures from the parish level to the national churches were very much formed by the then prevailing culture – Anglo Saxon pakeha.

The challenge of how to work cross culturally is not new for the New Zealand Churches. The origins of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa was very much influenced by Maori, at least until the pushback from the “settler” church in the 1860s and the side-lining of Maori in the leadership of the Anglican Church until the late 1980s when the move to the three tikanga structure – Pakeha, Māori and Pacifica changed at least the governance structures. Our other partners – Presbyterian and Methodist – have also set up structures to address the multi-ethnic nature of the churches with specialist sections – Maori, Pacific island, Asian etc. But how soon will it be before pakeha will be in the minority?

Not long I suspect. However it may well be longer before the leadership of the churches reflects the changing ethnic makeup and perhaps more significantly before the control of denominational resources – finance and land- is no longer in pakeha hands.

I am on various denominational committees including the Presbyterian Resource Sub Committee and the Standing Committee of UCANZ but as I look round those committees I do not see the ethnic diversity I see in my own church. We need to start planning now how we transform our churches so that this diversity is reflected in our structures, including finance and property, and leadership.