‘Living Together under the Same Roof’: What Makes a Cross-Cultural Ministry Workable?

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Abstract
This paper describes how a Korean immigrant church in Melbourne is seeking to integrate its activities in close connection with the European-Australian churches. The cross-cultural ministry under consideration is a culmination of the Korean churches in Australia with thirty five years’ history. How Korean immigrants’ individual identities are expressed through multicultural or transnational ministries at an institutional level is an important dimension of maturing identities. The movement to establish such cross-cultural churches seems inevitable in the twenty-first century when increasing numbers of Anglo-Celtic churches experience shrinking membership and greater and closer collaboration between different ethnic groups is required more than ever before in this globalising world. Importantly, it is anticipated that cross-cultural ministry will greatly promote transnational or cosmopolitan identities of immigrants in Australia.

Key words: cross-cultural ministry; multiculturalism; religion; ethnicity; immigrant churches

INTRODUCTION
The Korean immigrant church in Australia, New Zealand and North America has been a critical institution to facilitate the processes of Korean immigrants’ transition into their new life as well as adjusting to the requirements of a foreign country. Many Korean immigrants find themselves captured in that ‘time capsule’ or ‘transitional capsule’ rather than moving well beyond the transitional period. This makes the role of the Korean church problematic since it appears to rather impede the dialogical relationship between Korean immigrant church members and the broader Australian community (Han 2004). This supposedly less than productive nature of the functions of the Korean immigrant church has in part given birth to the need for Korean immigrant churches to pursue cross-cultural ministries. Cross-cultural ministry has been desired at least for the last couple of decades within the Korean-Australian community (Han 1994). For example, the Uniting Church in Australia’s 1985 Assembly adopted and declared the important Statement: ‘We are a multicultural church – We are a church whose membership comprises people of many races and cultures and languages’ (cited in Richmond 2004: 454). However, ‘cross-cultural ministry’ at a
congregational level has not been pursued as actively as anticipated although some Korean churches in Sydney and Melbourne have successfully established English ministries within Korean churches and are equipped to accommodate anybody who speaks English.

An increasing interest in multicultural ministry seems to have coincided with the broad trend of church decline due to secularisation or conflicts within individual churches (Becker 1998: 460). Also related is the limited and finite supply of ethnic immigrants from the viewpoints of immigrant churches. That is, Anglo-Celtic Christian communities in Australia have significantly declined in the last few decades and many have either sold off their church buildings to commercial enterprises and/or merged with migrant churches such as Korean immigrant congregations. These mergers have revitalised some Anglo-Australian churches.

Construction and modification of individual identities is of course a task of an individual agent. However, how individual agents form an ethnic group with particular characteristics, under the influence of a social institution such as the immigrant church and interactions with the members of other ethnic groups, is of particular interest since such interactions can have a significant influence in the formation and modification of identities of those individual agents. That is, there are mutual influences between the formation of individual identities and group identities when there are ethnically diverse individual church-goers within a cross-cultural church. Thus, in this paper I explore the ways in which Korean immigrants in Australia have been constructing their group identities, through the observation of a cross-cultural church which has a significant number and proportion of Korean immigrants including sojourners. It is also a sociological sketch of the level of maturity of cross-cultural ministries with reference to the Korean immigrant church in Melbourne.

**CROSS-CULTURAL MINISTRY: CURRENT TRENDS**

Dhingra (2004) makes an insightful analysis of three congregations of English ministries, in Dallas, Texas, whereby Korean-American members make up the majority but no particular privilege is given to Korean culture. However, diverse cultural heritages are valued and promoted. Unlike English ministries of Korean ethnic churches in Melbourne and Sydney, the ones in Dallas are established as multicultural ministries. Those congregations in Dallas have invoked multiculturalism as practised in the broader ethnic policy in the nation and encouraged various ethnic groups to maintain their own cultures. Dhingra (2004: 376) notes that multiculturalism pays attention to cultural differences within a congregation and then advocates the maintenance of diverse cultures on the one hand, but that the colour blindness rhetoric tends to ignore diverse cultural heritages. Consequently, multiculturalism and colour
blindness rhetoric within the multicultural ministries described by Dhingra (2004: 376) downplay ‘systemic inequalities in political and economic power between groups’ that may be prevalent not only in the broader society but also within the very congregations. Despite Dhingra’s apt and agreeable critiques of those multicultural ministries, I am inclined to argue that any movements to initiate dialogical relationships between different ethnic groups working together are necessary and highly recommended. Indeed, such movement should be an essential part of what the twenty first century Christianity ought to engage in (Garces-Foley 2007).

There appear to be legitimate reasons to promote cross-cultural ministry. Similar to the above mentioned Korean congregations in Dallas, ‘City Baptist’ and Good Shepherd Lutheran churches in Oak Park, Illinois, have engaged in ‘culture work’ in the words of Becker (1998). The village of Oak Park has developed to be a much more ethnically tolerant and progressive community since the 1970s, approving free flowing interactions between African-Americans, Hispanics and Anglo-Americans. Although both congregations differ from each other in terms of their theology and doctrine, they interpreted ‘race’ in similar terms and similar strategies in their ways to adapt to racial integration. Interesting consequences have been observed: (1) ‘their strong local orientation’ as a result of embracing racial integration within the local community; and (2) becoming more ‘church-like’ than ‘sect-like’ on a church-sect continuum (Becker 1998: 452; cf. Stark & Bainbridge 1985). The congregations have become closely engaged in the local community rather than having their own separate identities or taking a critical position towards the local community (cf. Wuthnow 1994). Other intrinsic values of adopting a multicultural ministry include the opportunity to ‘institutionalize members’ deeply held values’ such as ‘closeness, fellowship, support, and caring’ (Becker 1998: 452; Becker, Ellingson et al. 1993; Roof 1993; Warner 1988).

Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary published a series of three monographs under the titles of Family Ministry through Cross-Cultural Education (1980, 1986, 1990). Taylor and June McConnell, the authors of the monographs point to the five crucial factors that may lead to successful cross-cultural ministries: (1) ‘attitudes of respect, humility, and love’; (2) appropriate design of ministry specific for individual cultures and of ‘the essence of the Christian gospel’; (3) cross-cultural friendship accompanied by cross-cultural understanding; (4) ‘cooperative leadership of lay and clergy’; and (5) long-term effort (McConnell & McConnell 1991: 594-5). These factors appear to be indisputable and are almost universally applicable principles that may be useful for any congregation that wishes to pursue a gainful
multicultural ministry. This paper explores the ways in which these important principles apply to the cross-cultural ministry whereby Korean ethnic church-goers make up a majority and take a significant role in the life of the congregation. Related issues to explore in the paper include (1) how individual church members have been able to embrace different ethnic groups other than Korean and (2) how these changes of attitudes have influenced the inter-ethnic relations at the institutional/organisational level.

METHODS

I have carried out interviews with Rev Jacob Yang, four individual interviews and one interview with an ‘Australian’ couple. Those four individuals consist of one ‘Korean’ male, one ‘Korean’ female, and two ‘Australian’ female members. I was a participant observer of worship services of the congregation twice. Interview data have been thematically analysed. The study has obtained a formal approval from Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (CF10/1511 – 2010000812).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Deepdene Uniting Church

I made a participant observation on 15 August 2010. Both ministers, Revs Yang and Creed, stood on the front stage and led the worship service. Rev Creed spoke first in English and then Rev Yang translated what was said in Korean. Like other Sundays, about 100-120 people (‘Koreans’ make up 50 per cent) were attending the service in the ‘main’ auditorium which may be able to hold up to 300 people. Hymns were projected in English and Korean and the members were singing in either English or Korean. Children’s time was run by an ‘Australian’ lady who spoke to a dozen ‘Korean’ children up to primary school age. A hymn was presented by the choir consisting of six ‘Australians’ (three female and three male) and three ‘Koreans’, one ‘Australian’ female conductor and one ‘Australian’ male organist, singing verses alternately in Korean and English. Then the offering was collected by two ‘Australian’ and two ‘Korean’ members. After the offering, ‘Korean’ members (about thirty adults and twenty children) moved to another auditorium (the church hall) which is big enough to be able to hold about one hundred people. Despite their merger one thing both parties agreed is that sermons should be listened to in their ‘own’ language. The ‘Korean’ group started with some contemporary hymns, led by a guitarist and two singers at the front. August 15 is the Independence Day and Koreans sang their national anthem. Then Yang
delivered a sermon in Korean. Before the start of the sermon three ‘Australian’ leaders who joined in the Korean group left for a biblical discussion for several Korean youth who are more comfortable using English as their medium but who prefer discussion rather than a sermon in English.

**The members’ and institutional motives to engage in a multicultural congregation**

Both ‘Australian’ and ‘Korean’ members of the two separate churches in the process of merger desired it to pursue something new. Secondly, the idea of a potential merger with an immigrant church has not grown out of an overnight thought, but through prior exposure to diverse cultures and immigrants over a long period. The interviewees generally had affiliations with people in/from different cultures through their parents or themselves or have been engaged in interacting with overseas students or NESB immigrants.

Thirdly, visionary leadership and commitment is an essential part of the start and success of a cross-cultural ministry so far. Rev Yang had long thought about negative consequences of church individualism in Korea (see Han et al. 2009; Noh 1986) while he was working as a cleric for nine years, which raised many theological concerns and eventually brought him to Australia to observe Australian churches. Fourthly, similar to the leaders’ visions for cross-cultural ministry, both ‘Australian’ and ‘Korean’ members have a commitment to ‘living together in harmony’ in the broader Australian society as well as translating this commitment into the life of the church to start with.

**Key achievements so far**

Some of the main achievements, according to the interviewees, are as follows. Firstly, unlike some other churches that may have attempted to pursue cross-cultural ministry or maintain close relationships, the Deepdene Uniting Church has merged and formed one congregation. Importantly, there is only one budget for the congregation and this is what both parties agreed when discussing a possible merger. Rev Yang contends that forming one congregation is like *living together* under the same roof. Current appointments of ‘Korean’ and ‘Australian’ ministers are not ‘ethnic appointments’ for each group, but for the whole congregation. Further, there is a deliberate effort to create an environment whereby neither ethnic group dominates over any of the congregational activities.

Secondly, ‘getting to know each other’ as people from different backgrounds is rightly recognised as an important achievement of the cross-cultural congregation, without which many would have continued their life without such encounters. Most ‘Australian’ members are used to dealing with and embracing NESB immigrants. Others are genuinely surprised by
their own discriminatory attitudes towards immigrants despite their wish to belong to a cross-cultural congregation and they are willing to change their approaches. Such changes would not have occurred had there been no opportunities for diverse ethnic groups to interact with each other in this congregation: e.g., monthly meetings of senior ‘Australian’ and ‘Korean’ members with the help of an interpreter; one grandma for one Korean family scheme whereby every Korean family is matched with one ‘Australian’ grandma or great auntie (*the Halmonie Scheme*). Eight to twenty ‘Australian’ members join the Korean lunch after the Sunday worship service. These efforts have broken down barriers in many ways and would have direct impact upon the continuing modification of individual identities, e.g., gradually overcoming discriminatory attitudes against ‘others’; ‘Koreans’ gradually embracing equal relations between different generations. The members of the congregation now feel that they have significantly grown together. The moment of splitting the congregation at the time of sermons into English and Korean speaking groups, has for some become a sad moment.

There appear to be close human relationships being formed within the congregation. ‘Australian’ members generally see Korean members as their own children and grandchildren. The quilting group of ‘Australians’ sews a patched quilt for every new-born Korean infant. There are regular celebrations of birthdays of all the members of the congregation. Everyone tries to remember the names of the congregational members. ‘Australian’ members have set up a few English classes to teach ‘Korean’ members English. These social interactions certainly help this multilingual and multicultural congregation to achieve unity within the congregation (Garces-Foley 2007: 213). The Deepdene church has been a positive case that a cross-cultural congregation is possible and the synod is aware of this ‘success story.’

**Key influential factors that have made the cross-cultural ministry successful**

There are a few intrinsic qualities that have been influential in the successful making of the cross-cultural congregation. Firstly, willingness to make it work and perseverance from both parties, and resolving the issues together have sustained the congregation. There appears to be little in common between ‘Australian’ and ‘Korean’ members within the congregation with regard to their language, culture, age, theology. Most ‘Australian’ members are in their 60s, 70s and 80s, and many are starting to lose their hearing capacity. They have difficulty conversing to most ‘Koreans’ with their strong accents, but they willingly persevere, said the ‘Australian’ interviewees. Nearly all Korean adults make a consistent effort to learn English as they are also determined to improve their communication with the ‘Australian’ members.
There have been no immediate resolutions on this major difficulty, but the determination of both parties to stay as one congregation clearly outweighs any inconveniences they are experiencing. It is ironical that this inconvenience seems to work as a catalyst for both parties to stay together. Any potential problem becomes compounded when it gets intertwined with cultural differences and inefficient communication between the groups. For example, the South Hawthorn church prior to its merger with the Deepdene Uniting Church made a commitment to employ a Korean youth worker before drawing up a Memorandum of Understanding regarding the upcoming merger between the South Hawthorn and Deepdene churches. Completing the merger, the commitment to employ the youth worker needed to be honoured especially from the viewpoints of ‘Koreans.’ However, this commitment appeared to be ‘illegal’ to some ‘Australian’ members of the newly formed Deepdene church since it was beyond the MOU and seemed to downplay the need for outreaching to the older people in the region as stipulated in the MOU. There was a clear tension between the Western culture of honouring the principles and contracts and the Korean culture of being willing to improvise as required in a changing context. The effort to resolve this particular case lasted for nearly twelve months of 2009. At the end, there was a congregational vote, which was considered to be ‘legal’ without breaching the integrity of the MOU, revealing 120 members supporting and five ‘Australians’ against the employment of the youth worker.

Secondly, much of the success so far is attributed to Rev Jacob Yang’s leadership and vision for the cross-cultural ministry and patience. I have learned that Rev Yang pursues a bottom up approach and perseverance rather than a top down approach in haste. Yang has been frustrated with the congregational effort trying to ‘make it work’ just as ‘Australian’ members would have. However, he argues that prioritising his own positions is of little help, but listening to ‘Australians’ in particular and a patient approach have been helpful for the sake of the organisation. According to Joan Cooper, ‘Jacob’s dream to have all of us together all the time has been particularly important.’ He is also known to speak from his heart and this is what many members admire him about.

Thirdly, a high degree of understanding between the different cultural groups has been paramount. Through a few mergers, ‘Australians’ have come to better understand the difficulties that the migrants go through with their employment and language barrier. Prior to the merger between the South Hawthorn church and the Korean church, some members of the Korean church were concerned that the young children might run around and make noise in the church. However, this caused no concern to the older ‘Australian’ members, the latter rather responding with the question: ‘Why should the children be a problem?’ After the
merger, one day, a ‘Korean’ boy kicked a soccer ball in the worship hall and broke a window. A dominant ‘Australian’ view was: ‘Aren’t we lucky to have a young child who can kick a soccer ball through the window?’ Undoubtedly, there is an issue with people’s safety, but their deliberate attempt to understand and to make the merger work is astonishing. At South Hawthorn a few ‘Australian’ members redesigned some doors around the church premises, replacing the bottom glass parts of the doors with wood for the sake of children’s safety. In fact, there is strong consensus from both ‘Australian’ and ‘Korean’ members that children are the future of the church.

Fourthly, study participants have pointed out that their faith has been an important reason that they have patiently been engaged in the cross-cultural ministry and that this is what distinguishes their church from other secular organisations. My question on ‘what makes their church different from other churches’ was responded to by putting a question back to me: ‘If we as a church can’t nurture the immigrants who will?’ They think that it is simply ‘a Christian imperative to engage in the cross-cultural ministry in the context of our congregation and the broader community today.’

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

All these efforts to develop socially inclusive institutions are critical as part of building a religiously strong and embracing organisation, but also of remaining as a cooperative organisation in the broader development of multiculturalism. As Massey and Denton (1993) noted, the broader socio-economic and cultural context of multiculturalism is a structure upon which other forms of inclusive organisations can be established and prosper. It is the prior development of multiculturalism in the broader society on which cross-cultural ministry has modelled. This suggests that there needs to be a continuing dialectic development between cross-cultural ministry within religious organisations and multiculturalism in the broader society. Here the desired goal is, on one hand, to establish Christian churches whereby political and social divisions have no place to endure, where boundaries are blurred and where people get to respect one another irrespective of ethnicity; and on the other to continue to tackle ‘structural inequality and group-based interests’ (Becker 1998: 470). The congregation that has been under examination has made a worthwhile start on the cross-cultural ministry, but could run the risk of settling with an assimilationist model or a pluralist model, which promotes diversity but ‘fails to integrate members in any meaningful way into a genuine community’ (Garces-Foley 2007: 217). DeYoung et al. (2003: 171) suggest that the ideal multicultural church is one that reflects dimensions of the represented cultures, as well
as a newly formed unique culture that transcends worldly divisions (race, language and ethnicity), which Elizondo (1978) calls *mestizaje*. Initiatives for a cross-cultural ministry in a local church may occur around a limited proportion of the members, but its maintenance and further development require more effort from the members of the congregation and the supportive context from the broader society. Whilst a cross-cultural ministry seems unavoidable in the current context it is crucial to be aware of the kinds of issues and tensions possibly arising from forming a multicultural congregation and making it successful. More cases of cross-cultural churches and their depth of development in the Australian context may result in further studies and more insights on how institutional effort contributes to the formation of individual identities.

This paper has revealed that an extraordinarily good will to ‘live together’ exists between the older immigrants and the new immigrants. Indeed, Australia is a fertile ground to cultivate the spirit of tolerance and diversity, thus facilitating the formation of inclusive, cosmopolitan and transnational identities.

REFERENCES


Notes

1. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for valuable comments on previous version of this paper. An extended version of this paper is to appear as a chapter in Gil-Soo Han 2012. *Korean Diaspora and Media in Australia: In Search of Identities*. Lanham: University Press of America.

2. Richmond and Yang (2006a) note that ‘multicultural’ acknowledges the presence of many cultures and ‘cross-cultural’ begs active interaction and that there may be a multicultural church without being cross-cultural. This paper uses multicultural ministry and cross-cultural ministry interchangeably.

3. There are some exceptional cases, see (Richmond & Yang, 2006b).

4. There are half a dozen Korean churches that have established English ministries in the metropolitan Sydney.


6. Although in a different context, Bob Roberts (cited in Galli, 2007, p.42), who promotes the idea of the church’s engaging in the world, says: a local church must be a global church – thus ‘glocal.’

7. The choir often has all the members taking turns in singing in English and Korean.

8. Yang uses the phrase, ‘gachi saneun geot’ (같이 사는 것).


10. Interview, Barbara and Lindsay Herbert, 20 August 2010.