

# Multiculturalism and the WELS

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## I. Situations of Change

Multiculturalism is not something one would normally connect with the Wisconsin Synod. We come out of a rather homogeneous, monocultural background. Besides our Lutheran identity our other defining feature has been our German heritage background. But in the space of only 50 years—less than a lifetime—the Wisconsin Synod has gone from a largely German speaking regional church body to a widespread nationwide church. And especially in the last thirty years we have grown out of our ethnic isolation and into contact with a variety of people from very different ethnic and racial backgrounds.

At least three types of situations of ethnic change can be found to affect our churches.

First, the white flight out of the inner cities brought blacks and Hispanics into the neighborhood around many of our churches in cities such as Milwaukee, Detroit, Minneapolis, and Benton Harbor, Michigan.

Second, long-established churches in many of our midwestern mid-sized cities such as Manitowoc, Oshkosh and Wausau have seen an influx of minority communities such as Hispanics and Asians.

And thirdly, and most important in terms of the future identity of our church, there is a trend of continued migration to the Sunbelt by many of our members. This, combined with the immigration of Hispanics and Asians into these same areas, is resulting in a diversity of ethnicity in the South and Southwest of the country. This is probably the key trend when talking about where our future pastors, teachers and laypeople will live and work.

To give a little history of how recent the change has been, let's look at Synod history in the south and west of the country. The number of congregations in the Arizona-California district of the Synod went from 21 in 1955 to 105 now. The South Atlantic district had one congregation in 1955 and now there are 54. The South Central had none in 1964 and now there are 37.

Time Magazine recently did a cover story on multiculturalism. Sometime in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they reported, whites will no longer be in the majority in the US. In California, white pupils are already a minority in the school system.

Another trend is that people were moving to the city in 1980s, whereas in the 1970s there was a move back to the country. A fast changing economy will continue to dictate the migrations of people. Both Midwesterners and immigrants will continue to go where jobs are most available. Neighborhoods will continue to change fast as different areas deteriorate and regentrify. Also, many minorities are moving to the suburbs and out of the city. In the Chicago area, Koreans, Indians and Hispanics can be found in significant numbers in suburban areas where we also have a number of churches.

Our Pastors and teachers, our outreach and evangelism committees are now often operating in areas where members rub shoulders in grocery stores and parks with neighbors from various backgrounds. Our churches may be widespread throughout the country, but they are also unconcentrated enough so that they are serving rather big areas. Their membership is usually drawn from a wide area, so that even if most members live in white neighborhoods, there are significant numbers of minorities in surrounding areas. A 1986 survey of WELS congregations for Hispanic presence indicated that there were at least 86 congregations with significant Hispanic presence. Non-WELS children, many from minority ethnic groups, are attending WELS Christian day schools in greater numbers.

One may argue that our actual *membership* is still relatively homogeneous, probably over 90% white. The ethnic composition of our neighborhoods, however is much more diverse. This indicates that we haven't been reaching out to them. And even though the areas that mission churches tend to be set up in are wealthier, white areas, the continued immigration and mobility of Americans will ensure that neighborhoods will change

rapidly, so the kind of situation that we have in the inner city of Milwaukee will be more common in future years in many areas throughout the country where we have WELS churches. And, unless our answer to this will be fleeing the changing neighborhoods along with our white members, we need to be ready to minister to people from many different backgrounds, with different values and preferences in worship.

We must also realize the degree of mobility of people. Americans move every 4 or 5 years. The result is that communities contain many cultures. Homogeneous communities are much rarer than they used to be.

## II. What Does This Mean?

What does all this mean? Putting people into color categories doesn't really tell us much about them, about their lives, their values, their goals, what influences them. We need to get deeper into a cultural analysis, into questions of assimilation, of traditionalism, of adaptation. We also need to know who *we* are, and much of this essay will focus on our particular Lutheran culture. And I think this will fit in with this morning's presentation. There now seems to be a real recognition that we need to examine ourselves critically, to be "self-reflexive." This will enable us to see our weaknesses and where we need to be if we are serious about a multicultural ministry. This kind of analysis is something we have neglected in the past, not only as it relates to cultures, in the plural, but to culture or society as a whole. This, of course, I can't do very well in one shot, nor do I feel particularly qualified to take on that task. But there are some things to point out.

First, The U.S. is not a Christian society. Though technically we might agree with that, we still tend to hold notions of a Christian America, of pretensions to a Jerry Falwell-like moral majority, and the resultant fruitless efforts to remake society more to our liking. Whenever we are dealing with people, we are dealing with an often rebellious human nature that finds outlets in the myriad of attractions and activities of popular culture, with its mix of good and bad elements. The bad elements are often more popular and it is these elements that we must be aware of. We, like anybody else, are often sucked into culture. We need to understand the tremendous forces, media, peers, style, etc. acting upon all of us and we must teach a way of understanding and critiquing culture. It is the popular culture that now ties America together, not any notions of a Christian or civil religion. Belief in choice and freedom as seen in consumerism and moral relativism are what defines mainstream American society. When working with others who do not come from a WELS background, we need to realize that we are a minority ourselves, and therefore must differentiate us from the rest of society and not claim that by becoming Christian you are becoming "American," entering the mainstream of society.

Christians are, or at least ought to be, a kind of sub-culture. We've not put much emphasis on this in the past because we've not been as exposed to a wider culture. Mobility and communication technologies were primitive in the past and we were thus pretty isolated from a wider culture. Now we are influenced by many cultures and in this sense I am not just talking about ethnic cultures but the various practices, values, and lifestyle of all society, much of which is not Christian. We can no longer rely on insulated WELS communities to guard against the pressures of society. It is the mass media and urban environment that increasingly sets the trends, the fads, the lifestyle for all of the country, rural and urban areas alike. The influence of the popular media, TV, movies, music, etc. cannot be overemphasized. They play a major role in setting role models for our young. One nationwide poll of high school juniors and seniors reported that three black men Bill Cosby, Eddie Murphy and Michael Jordan are their most admired individuals (Steinfels 1990). All three of these people are creations of the media, and are not even politicians or other civic leaders. Only 1/2 of 1% named religious figures.

What does this have to do with multiculturalism? Even if we live in ethnically homogeneous areas, this does not mean we do not have contact with other ethnic groups. Because of technology, the media, mobility and other trends, we are increasingly borrowing from other cultures. We are living in a "global village." Other ethnic groups are subject to the same forces of society that we are. In other words, we are more alike in what we are influenced by than in the past. Families used to be the chief mode by which traditional cultural mores were transmitted. Now, the family is often not the guide, providing the values and role models for our children. This applies as much to WELS families as to others. We have abdicated our responsibility toward our children, often

preferring the wealth of the workplace over the nurturing of the home as our place of activity, and I am talking just as much about men as I am about women here. Family change was talked about in this morning's session and is something I am continually struck by.

Because of this "global village" we are subject to the same cultural influences. Yet newer ethnic groups are showing an amazing resiliency. They keep many of their customs and contact with fellow nationals and take pride in their identity. The ethnic situation in America avoids easy generalization.

### **III. Dealing With Other Ethnic Groups**

#### **A. Who THEY Are**

There are several points to be made from the above analysis. First, we need to realize that another culture is not this static, unchanging group of people who stick to their own ways and are not affected by events and forces outside their group. We need to treat individuals inside another culture as individuals. There are many differences between them, in their values, their personalities, their degrees of assimilation. They must not be approached as this monolithic, stereotyped group. Just because we put them into another grouping doesn't mean they subscribe to all its generalized features.

Multiculturalism is a recognition that there are many different cultures, some assimilating more than others. We have a responsibility to understand both their culture and the culture they may be assimilating to. We can't assume that they will or they should enter into our middle-class American culture. It took a long time for our own churches to be assimilated into American culture. We were still mainly German speaking 50 years after the founding of the Synod and if it hadn't been for WWI, assimilation would have taken even longer. In our case it was mainly language. We were already pretty adapted to the predominantly European-oriented culture. In the case of non-European groups, there are broader differences, which I won't go into deeply here, since that will be part of the mini-presentations later.

#### **B. Who WE Are**

Secondly, we need to be aware of our own flaws, our own weaknesses, both for purposes of improving our own community life, but also so that we may approach others with an attitude of humility, that we indeed do have something to learn from them, that we are not perfect, that we don't have all the answers. Yes, we do have the essential message of reconciliation with God, and this should form the basis of all we say and do. But, given our sinful nature, our application and understanding of it often lacks or is not consistent. Syncretism, the illegitimate mixing of paganism and Christianity, is often used to describe what occurs when people convert to Christianity. Yet we have just as much a problem with nominalism among our long-time members, particularly in families where being WELS is simply a cultural inheritance or adherence rather than a living, active faith.

We (white Westerners) have a tendency toward dualism, dividing life into religious and secular, public and private, etc. This is opposed to how most peoples view the world. A recent major study of six mainline denominations attempted to measure the maturity of faith among members of the denomination. While "measuring faith," of course can't be done accurately, the study does reveal some interesting insights (Search Institute, see appendix). Among them was that minority groups have a more integrated faith, combining what they call a vertical dimension, a relationship with God, with a horizontal dimension, service to others, a division that correlates somewhat with the summary of the commandments—love the Lord and love your neighbor. We—meaning whites, "tend to love the Lord," at least as indicated by what we say, but the "love your neighbor" aspects are often lacking. We are battling societal trends toward individualism, a career and success orientation that gives priority to "getting ahead" and leeches the church and society of a feeling of community (Bellah 1985). We often do not rely on each other, viewing ourselves as independent and self-sufficient. A spirit of interdependence and community, on the other hand, is attractive to others who are not simply the inherited of the church. They are not going to join a church just because it claims to have the most pure doctrine. They, like most people, are also going to look more at aspects of church life—to what extent the church is a community, a

welcoming place. And this isn't something most people coldly analyze. They feel it, they sense it. No this isn't what we primarily base our faith on, but a sense of community ought to be a dimension of our Christian lives.

Another way to put this might be in the Biblical and Lutheran distinction of letter and spirit. We pride ourselves on our doctrine, our theology. Catechism learning has an honored place in our spiritual growth. However, its internalization, the continual task of understanding, appreciating and living the Word is harder to teach. The spirit needs to be continually renewed, something we've recognized with our "Spiritual Renewal" project. Some may resist, fearing that we might succumb to the extreme enthusiasm of charismatic or pietistic movements, some of which are found among minority groups. This is something to be aware of but I don't think in our church body that is going to be too much of a problem. An added emphasis on the spirit is something we've recognized as a need in our church today. It is also what will help us to better reach out and serve other ethnic groups.

The privatization of our American Christian faith to only a personal sphere has been a common topic in the sociological literature. We are more prone to this than other Christian groups. We are not vocal, outgoing—we don't often use God in our vocabulary, except when we go into a "religious mode" at solemn occasions. This is not understandable to many people who integrate their faith with their life, who speak of God in their daily lives, who can't understand the privatization of our faith and our concomitant valuing of the sphere of work so much as to make it a "god," and which often seems so separate from our Christianity.

"Our kind" tend to be influenced heavily by a "professional" culture, one that is orderly-goal-oriented, toward an efficient use of resources and successful completion of projects. While this is certainly beneficial in many areas inside the church, it tends to give the impression of a bureaucratic organization, rather than a family or a body, the proper Biblical metaphors. Studies of development projects in the third world have shown that many minorities tend to see human relationships as key, not any goal orientation involved. What is important to them is the maintenance of proper relationships like unity, sponsorship, respect, or alliance, not the efficient attainment of goals.

We need to understand that many of our traits are not the norm by which all people should operate. We need to rid ourselves of the idea that we are the norm. This of course involves a separation of cultural traits from authentically biblical ones—not an easy thing to do. One of the most common criticisms of early missionaries is that they were ethnocentric. They often forced their converts to adapt the dress, music, culture and style of the West. Confusing Christianity with culture is one of the oldest faults of all churches and is indeed part of our sinful human nature. Seeing that we are not always right, that there is more than one way to do things, does not come easy to most people, especially European Americans who view themselves as the model for the rest of the world.

One of the most frequent criticisms of our German-rooted church body, which has been spoken of before by Pastor Fred Toppe and others, is that we are "cold" (Toppe). But there is a contrast between Midwest and Southern WELS churches that my parents—inveterate winter travelers to the South—have mentioned. The southern churches tend to be much more open to visitors, more friendly. It's probably the fact that most members of those churches are migrants themselves, and can empathize and feel a unity with other WELS travelers. Also those churches are generally smaller. Anyway, that's the model we need to follow rather than many Midwestern churches where most members go right out the door after the service and don't know really know too many others in the congregation.

People can be turned off by our reserve and formality, goal orientation, by our excessive attention to order, our workaholicism. Germans have not been known for being particularly empathetic or open to other cultures. German-Americans do tend to be less mobile and closer-knit than other ethnic groups, partly because of their occupations and cultural conservatism. Negative, prejudicial, and stereotypical attitudes are what our church leaders and members need to be aware of and be actively working to erase. Many of us unfortunately probably have relatives like the Archie Bunker-type figure who sits back and shoots off his mouth about the characteristics of various minorities.

No, multicultural awareness and toleration can't always be taught—those attitudes often are transmitted through family and peer groups and are rooted in our sinful nature that likes to raise us above other people. But

the teaching and preaching of the unity of mankind is essential to get a start equipping the future of WELS to “Lift High The Cross” in many ways.

#### **IV. Communication With Other Ethnic Groups**

Our pluralistic and relativistic society makes apologetics and preaching the truth harder. People are less convinced by statements such as “the Bible says”. Demonstrating and living the truth through lifestyle, relationship, and giving is and can be more effective as a way of preaching Christ, allowing the Holy Spirit to do His work.

We influence each other in various ways: The most direct way we know is an argument using language—one that is based on logic and syllogisms—Western deductive reasoning. A second way is figurative—an argument of images and metaphors (Fernandez 1986). The use of oral history and tradition, along with ritual and symbolism forms a social cohesion, a “dynamic of belonging” within a community that relates their religion to social roles, theology to practice. Ethnic minorities are often more communally and kin based—they are not necessarily as individualistic as whites are, and are more influenced by visual, active arguments, arguments of life, of relationship—not abstract reasoning that tends to separate theology from practice.

Lest you think they are totally different from us, many now say that through technology, TV, electronics, etc. we are returning to an image-based culture (Postman 1985). Presidential campaigns now are made up of “sound bites” that are more image-oriented than content based. Voting decisions are based on elements of style and not ideology. Advertising is more often an argument of images that plays to style and status, to a need for “belonging” and attractiveness. Most of advertising is not a presentation of information upon which one makes a rational decision (Leiss 1985).

This move back to symbolic thinking may not be something we always like, but it is something that Christians, particularly Lutherans can deal with. As you all know we Lutherans tend to put less emphasis on rational arguments, and more on the, “foolishness of God” to cite Paul and the title of the late Dr. Becker’s book (1982). Yet we have tended to be influenced by Reformed rationalism more than we think, or would admit to.

This comment leads into a section in which I examine our practice and relate it to our Lutheran theology. Before I get into this I want to qualify what I am going to say by admitting that you are the experts in this area, not me. I simply want to bring out some things I have noticed in my 27 years in the Wisconsin Synod.

It seems to me that there is a certain lack of congruence between our theology and our practice. We have tended to overly rationalize, systematize our practice into a set of propositions that must be affirmed. That is, we’ve relied on the arguments of words, using both the paradoxes of law and Gospel and to a certain extent deductive reasoning. The truths in these propositions, of course, are indisputable, but we have de-emphasized the “living” aspect of being a Christian—what it means to be involved in daily giving and receiving, of loving and correcting, of living in community. Some of our traditional churches tend to be more like clubs than communities. We have tended to ignore the more active, physical, ritualistic elements of Christianity, those connected with the taking of the Sacrament, for instance. We have not done this consciously. This may be due to our upbringing, our pedagogy, which places us more in opposition to the Roman Catholic traditions than the Reformed. We have played down what we have in common, the sacramentalism, the symbolic and liturgical tradition and we have been hesitant to talk about action, and Christian living, thinking we will fall into the trap of salvation by works. We all learned about Martin Luther and his life and death battle with the Roman Church, and we still see that opposition today, which is, of course still relevant in many areas. But not I believe, to the extent we have seemed to indicate.

What does this have to do with multiculturalism? Reformed rationalism comes out of a particularly Western tradition that places emphasis on non-contradiction, on logic. The Anglo-Catholic tradition and its similarities with Lutheranism retains an element of participation, of paradox, of community, of ritual that is pre-Western—“an argument of images.” This tradition is closer to that of the Hispanic, Asian, African-American, and Old Testament cultures. We, of course, need to keep our strong academic emphasis on biblical studies and

theology, but more attention paid to these other aspects, of living and participation, integrating faith and life, would help us in reaching out to other ethnic groups. And not only to other groups, but also overall in our general approach to society, even among our traditional members, where arguments of image have been more important than we usually think.

In other words, the church as community needs more emphasis. And not an inward-looking community, but one that seeks to incorporate others into its community. The study mentioned above reported on what features of congregation life were most important in retaining a sense of community. Among them were an atmosphere of hospitality and acceptance, and a pervasive spirit of service.

This “living” Christianity requires openness to other cultures, and the ability to empathize with them, to see things from their point of view. Indeed, this is the proper attitude to be taken toward any other individual, so we really aren’t talking about special operations for other ethnic groups, but basic human interaction. The further we get from others like ourselves, however, the harder it becomes. Making “others” familiar to us and real to us requires knowledge and experiences of these other cultures.

Communication styles are often different between groups. Missionary anthropology almost a discipline itself goes extensively into modes of communication and contextualization that I will only touch on here. We European-Americans tend to be very direct in our approach to issues and problems. We tend to express ourselves through our thoughts and ideas, much like this essay. To take a contrasting example, many Latin Americans express themselves through emotions. Their style of communication places much more emphasis on entering into a relationship with a person and expressing thoughts and feelings in a nonthreatening way. There are also intercultural differences in conceptions of time, goals, and other elements of culture.

Patience is something that is needed when we deal with these differences. We need to know what is cultural and what is not. We should also remember that Europeans have retained many pagan features—it took centuries for the Christian conversion of Europe to really take hold, and pagan elements still remain in our cultural practices.

Flexibility in church practice, the ability to adjust and work with other ethnic groups, is also key. From the free-spirited singing of the black church to the fiestas and processions of Hispanic culture, we need to be more conversant with other practices. We shouldn’t necessarily flinch when we hear a few “amens” exclaimed in church. Hand-clapping, drama, and other modes are part of the services in our African mission churches. We shouldn’t resist it here either, if appropriate. Again, this kind of flexibility and empathy can not always be taught—the best way is through direct experience, which is usually the best motivation. Simply being a part of others lives provides inspiration to preach the Gospel.

Good teaching does not only involve transferring information. It also allows, to quote from the education study, “insight to emerge from the crucible of experience.” Or, quoting Professor Eichmann yesterday, “Beyond creating and nourishing faith by his Word, God’s own curriculum to educate human beings is the life-experience he provides in the world, especially through other people (Eickmann 1990:3).

One of Professor Eickmann’s survey respondents mentioned the six weeks spent in the Inner City Vacation Bible School project as a broadening experience. I certainly can say that about my time in Cameroon. Sometimes it was more broadening than I would have preferred. Even my undergraduate years in Madison were a broadening experience. We often got Northwestern College students to help out at our once a semester Invitation Saturday where we visit inactive and fallen away students. Having visited the dorms and apartments of Madison with them, I think they can attest to the dose of reality visits like that bring. We in Madison had always thought it’d be a good idea to set up some kind of formal program where pastoral candidates could spend some “quality time” in Madison to provide some context for their studies.

Related to this issue of learning by experience is the debate over the prep school system. I was at the District convention here two days ago when this issue was discussed. One of the considerations in this debate should be this one of multiculturalism. Many people comment that the prep school environment can be somewhat isolating, and doesn’t always foster an ability to relate to a wide number of people. Keeping students living in typical communities, or locating a school in a more ethnically diverse area might help the situation. I realize there are other considerations in this debate, but multiculturalism should be a consideration.

As far as academic preparation is concerned, I have a soft spot for cultural anthropology. I was pleased this morning when Professor Johne spoke up for it. I don't think there's a better discipline for making "humanity your study" to quote again from one of Professor Eichmann's respondents. I would also like to point out that anthropology can be used as much to take knowledge of other cultures and look at our own culture, to become more objective about it. Properly related to Christianity it can serve as kind of a mirror, showing us our sin. And Anthropology is not just a practical "how-to" of cultures. Another real value of anthropology is in its debates over issues like epistemology and rationality—general liberal arts issues of the kind reaffirmed in Professor Eickmann's presentation.

If we truly want to be nationwide, we need to rise above our still rather limited ethnic outlook. If we are serious about reaching out to other ethnic groups we need to include their preferences about worship and practice and not just consider what will make our own people happy.

The church growth movement has a homogeneous unit principle that keeps different ethnic groups apart to worship and relate their own way. This may be used initially in certain situations where there is a language problem. Or a particularly close-knit group can meet separately to handle common problems or for initial instruction. It may also depend on the degree of assimilation and ability of your congregation to be open and welcome newcomers. Friendship evangelism is the best way to bring people to church and to Christ. This means we get to know them and their families on a personal basis, the hardest thing to do when you are not quite sure who you are dealing with.

Having a "multicultural attitude won't make us entirely into "cosmopolitan" citizens, as conversant with Hispanic mariology or compadre relationships as with Laotian Hmong cosmology and spirit worship—but we can be better—have better attitudes. This is not namby-pamby relativism. We can keep our Christian standards and beliefs rather than diluting them.

We ought to recognize our Christian identity as special and unique and as distinctive from the rest of society—ethnic differences should not prevent us from seeing the unity of Christians.

From its modest origins as a church of German immigrants, the Wisconsin Synod has been transformed into, at least technically, a nationwide church body. This took place largely without planning or even any real intentions. However, making it a truly nationwide church body means that our membership is not exclusive to any ethnic group and its practice and outward forms have the flexibility to appeal to a wide variety of people. If we are serious about approaching others with the Gospel of Christ, this may mean sacrificing some of the comfort and security of our long-held traditions. This opening up to other traditions is not something that will happen naturally, without effort and contention.

In comparison to home missions, foreign missions are "safe." The distances involved, the fact that we don't come into direct contact with them, means that we don't have to worry about changing our own practices. We view our foreign missions from the safe distances of slides shown by returned nurses and furloughed missionaries. Our home missions, however aren't even missions in the classical sense because they are right in our neighborhoods. We begin to rub shoulders with unfamiliar others, and that can pose a threat to the attitudes and comfortable isolation of our lifestyle. This outreach will need planning and conscious action, which I believe is one of the purposes of conferences such as these. It will need to be done with care and empathy of those who may feel forgotten. But above all, it will be done with the motivation of Christ's love and his last command, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."



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