

WHAT MAKES A SCHOOL MULTICULTURAL?

The increasingly diverse and rapidly growing worldwide membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church calls for a new model of education to prepare young Christians for the 21st century. With more than 90 percent of the church's nine million members residing outside North America, and only 11 percent of church's membership being white, the church needs a paradigm shift in education.

Its institutional presence in more than 200 countries makes the Seventh-day Adventist Church the most ethnically diverse religious body in the world today. Is this diversity reflected in the curriculum, course content, perspectives, and school structure worldwide, or is it still largely Euro-American in design and implementation? If it is still the latter, should not this change to reflect the needs of the specific countries and socio-cultural situations that local Adventist constituents have to face, in order to more effectively communicate the gospel? Steve Wilstein reminds us that, "It's dangerous to believe

you will remain successful simply by doing the same things that once brought success. That will be true only if the world doesn't change. To be successful over the long haul, you need to change before it stops working. It's hard because nobody wants to change something

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BY CALEB ROSADO

that's working."¹

As long as an action, policy, or structured situation satisfies our needs, we will not change unless forced to do so. There is an Arab proverb that states: "The dog barks, but the caravan moves on." Those opposed to change may "woof, woof" all they want, but the caravan of change moves on, bringing with it the valuable commodities of multiculturalism, diversity, and multicultural education to the marketplace of global education for the 21st century.

How do these valuable goods actually function in terms of school structure? To answer this, we must define diversity and multiculturalism, and what makes a school multicultural. Understanding these issues is not just an American necessity, nor is it solely concerned with meeting the needs of non-dominant groups. It is a value that when embraced and implemented by all—white, black, brown, yellow; old and young; male and female; educators in developed and in less-developed societies; in simple and in complex cultures—will produce

educational success in the third millennium.

Cross-cultural understanding and respect for diversity are no longer optional in the classroom, in curriculum design, or in program planning. They mean the difference between success and failure in

preparing students for the worlds to come—the global village of the next millennium, and the divine world that will replace this one at the Second Coming.

Diversity

Diversity is a term heard often nowadays. What is it? Diversity has two dimensions: (1) the primary (mainly biological and usually visible—age, gender, race, ethnicity, social class, disabilities); and (2) the secondary (sociocultural and usually invisible—language, education, values, occupation, culture, learning styles, etc.), that people bring to a group. These have the potential for causing conflicts, but if managed well can produce a synergistic unity. As all work together, the effect is greater than the sum of the parts functioning independently.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church embraces a racially diverse and multiethnic body of believers. As a result of this rich multicultural diversity, we hold differing views about God, nuances of doctrine, expressions of worship, and attitudes toward structure. Because human experience differs from group to group, cultures must each address questions about God within the context of their experience.

The Debate Over Cultural Relativism

Failure to understand the danger of ethnocentrism leads many to reject the value of diversity. Ethnocentrism means believing that the way one understands the world is the correct one and therefore serves as the measuring rod for all other views. This form of bias always emerges when cultural differences seem to threaten one's values, status, or beliefs. One reason why cultural relativism is misunderstood is because it is often confused with ethical relativism.²

Cultural relativism means that each culture or ethnic group must be evaluated on the basis of its own values and norms of behavior, not on those of another culture or ethnic group. The basic principle out of which cultural relativism emerges is simple: "Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his or her own enculturation."³

Cultural relativism does not mean that there are no absolutes—moral or otherwise—in society. Nor does it imply or ad-

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vocate individual or ethical relativism. Anthropological and sociological studies show that no society tolerates moral or ethical anarchy.

Culture is largely acquired in socially constructed ways. Each person's thinking is influenced by his or her social position. For this reason, people in different social positions and cultural settings think differently.

Culture deals with much more than morals, ethics, and values; it is also concerned with judgments about time and space, differences in perception and cognition, as well as ways of understanding the world and perceiving God.⁴ We must recognize that while all of us come to God's Word as sincere seekers, we do not come alone. We bring all the sociocultural baggage and social maps that give direction to our beliefs, guide our behavior, and influence what we see in the world, in each other, the opposite gender, and even in the Word of God. Thus, where we stand determines what we see!⁵

Absolutes and Universals

People often misunderstand cultural relativism because they fail to differentiate between absolutes and universals. Absolutes are fixed values that differ from culture to culture, and from epoch to epoch, while universals are values that transcend cultures.⁶ Universals transcend cultures, while absolutes are the way specific cultures implement universals in their society. Take modesty, for example. Every society embraces the universal principle of modesty. But what passes for modesty in one society, say for example in Arab societies, is not what passes for modesty in Brazil or in California. Thus, "every society. . . has its moral code, which carries unquestioned sanctions for its members. But once we move into another society, we find a series of values differently conceptualized, differently phrased, but having sanctions of equal force."⁷

How does one determine what is Christian in diverse cultural manifestations? In other words, how does one solve the dilemma of apparent conflicts between absolutes and universals? Whenever absolute values violate universal ones, universals always take precedence. Such values, often known as "human rights," or—within a Christian context—as "divine principles," can be determined by a proper reading of Scripture.

But even here, the Scriptures reflect the way God speaks to human beings within their own specific cultural context. Thus the Word, both living and written, takes on flesh—socioculturally conditioned flesh—in order to meet the needs of humankind. Ellen G. White makes this very clear:

*The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen.*⁸

The Scriptures tell us how human beings understood God, as Deity spoke to them. They in turn wrote about God within their cultural styles of thought and the patterns of thinking common to their time. Some might ask: "If that is the case, how can we really know what God is actually like? Or what is His will for us?" I suggest that this is why Jesus Christ came. Jesus knew that even though some 40 "men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:21, RSV), that was not sufficient. They were nevertheless human, influenced by their culturally conditioned patterns of thought and social organization.

Jesus came as the incarnate Word of God and took on human flesh, culturally conditioned and socially situated by time and place, in order to reveal by His actions the thinking and nature of God. This is why John calls Him the Word of God—the One who makes audible the thoughts of God (John 1:1). The author of Hebrews agrees: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son" (Hebrews 1:1, 2, RSV). Or as John said (in light of the best manuscripts):

“No one has ever seen God; [no one knows what God is like, except] the Unique One, God, the Eternally Existing One in the bosom of the Father, [and] he has made him known” (John 1:18). In Jesus, then, we have the ultimate revelation of God, who communicates effectively with humankind across all social and cultural barriers.

What Is Multiculturalism?

Here is where an understanding of multiculturalism comes in. Multiculturalism means recognizing and respecting all diverse groups in an organization or society, valuing their socio-cultural differences, and encouraging and enabling their continued contribution to society. What are the implications of multiculturalism for effective schools?

Merely having an ethnically or racially diverse student population, due to location or moral and social imperatives, does not make a school multicultural. It may mean only that the school is concerned about “looking good,” or with affirmative action, the policy of social equity.⁹ This was the main emphasis in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s—giving people access to the system. In the 1980s, the concern was with “valuing differences.” In the 1990s, it is “managing diversity.” But in the 21st century, schools and organizations will focus on “living diversity.” (See graphic, *The Process of Change*.) These four dynamics are important for effecting change, since they build on each other.

Many schools in the U.S. are stuck on the first dynamic—indeed, they may have even begun to retreat from affirmative action instead of going on to living diversity. Just because a variety of students have gained access to the school doesn’t mean that they feel comfortable there or that the school addresses their needs. If all a school does is give access, then students may leave just as quickly out the back door. The ever-increasing dropout rate among students from socially disadvantaged environments such as African-Americans and Latinos in the United States is evidence that access is not enough. For many such students, schools are increasingly regarded as hostile environments with which they disidentify.¹⁰

Nor is multiculturalism merely a con-

cern for understanding, respecting, valuing, and celebrating the differences among the various groups in the school. Valuing diversity is important, as it may encourage an awareness of and a sensitivity to differences, but it does not necessarily translate into structural changes.

What makes a school multicultural is the Five P’s Model. In this model, the objective is to have all of the school’s five P’s, *Perspectives, Policies, Programs, Personnel*, and *Practices* implement four imperatives:

(1) Reflect the heterogeneity of the school—the dynamic of *Affirmative Action*;

(2) Relate sensitively to the needs of the various groups comprising the student population—the dynamic of *Valuing Differences*;

(3) Incorporate their contributions to the overall mission of the school—the dynamic of *Managing Diversity*;

(4) Create a cultural and social ambience that is inclusive and empowers all groups in the school—the dynamic of *Living Diversity*.

These four imperatives form the basis of multicultural education, an intrinsic approach to education and curriculum construction that acknowledges and respects the contributions that all groups, regardless of race, culture, gender, or class, have made to society. It incorporates these contributions in an overall program of instruction that meets the needs of an ever-changing society and is sensitive to the personal and social development of everyone concerned.

Helping the Lion Speak

There is an African proverb that declares: “Until the lion has its own historian, tales of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.” What do academic “tales of the hunt” tell us about the contribution of persons of color in history? Of women? Of indigenous people? About certain groups who reconstruct the world, and even the understanding of God, in their own image?

Multicultural education helps correct for this. However, its purpose is not just to meet the needs of underprivileged groups. It is education for all students, since it celebrates the contributions of all groups while addressing the dynamic changes needed for success in the global society and church of the 21st century. It does this most effectively when it examines presuppositions about power.

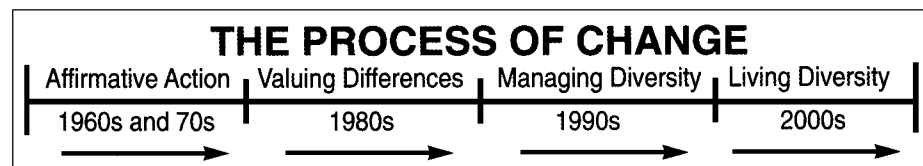
Managing diversity by empowering all groups is central to making a school multicultural. This means changing mindsets as well as the underlying school culture so that the school lives diversity in ways that more effectively accomplishes its mission. This is what makes a school multicultural. Unity in diversity needs to be the basic principle of all that is done in education and in the church.

This is where the Five P’s Model comes into play. The rapid changes taking place in society, coupled with rapid church growth among population groups of color, are forcing schools to move away from a lethargic business-as-usual, reactive mindset to a proactive one that anticipates and implements change.

Perspectives and Vision

Perspectives refers to the vision without which school systems will perish. From *Vision* proceeds the institution’s values, mission, and goals. Without vision, these elements will be formulated in a social vacuum, disconnected from reality. A school can have a good internal climate: clear goals, well-shaped programs, and skilled teachers and staff who relate and communicate well, but still not function properly if it ignores its external climate, the ways in which it is being influenced, not only by the larger society of which it is a part, but also by the demographic changes in Adventism.

Unfortunately, we don’t always understand what is meant by “vision.” Vision is the bifocal ability to see what lies ahead (farsightedness), as well as the impediments of the present (nearsightedness). We must learn to avoid these im-



pediments in order to arrive at the future.

If a school fails to understand and adapt to the social forces causing change, such as the political climate, economic conditions, demographic changes, and the social environment, it can quickly become a historical, social, and academic anachronism. Vision must be bifocal, for focus on the future at the expense of the present, or vice versa, will result in loss of vision and in a crisis in the mission of the school.

Policies and Programs

A sense of vision will lead to appropriate *Policies*, the guarantees that make known the intents of the school. Policies give rise to *Programs* that put in action the kinds of education that grow out of perspective-based policies. But effective programs cannot work without the right *Personnel* who reflect the diversity in the school and the constituent churches. The last area is *Practices*, the actual conduct of the faculty/staff and administration.

Of these five P's, the most important is the last one, *Practices*, ranking even above vision. A school may have the best perspectives, policies, programs, and personnel, but these are only cosmetic until they are put into practice. And it only takes a small number of people who refuse to go along with a program, fail to implement policy, or don't commit to the vision for an otherwise well-designed plan to be sabotaged. As the saying goes in Spanish, *Podemos destruir con nuestros pies lo que construimos con nuestras manos*; "We can destroy with our feet what we build with our hands."

The Five P's Model can effectively alter present school structures and cultures, especially if these are exclusive and do not benefit everyone in the school. This is because, as Karl Mannheim says, "To live consistently, in the light of Christian brotherly love, in a society which is not organized on the same principle is impossible. The individual in his personal conduct is always compelled—in so far as he does not resort to breaking up the existing social structure—to fall short of his own nobler motives."¹¹

This is why we need structural change to achieve a new paradigm of inclusion.

Needed—A Paradigm Shift

What is at issue in multiculturalism is

not just sensitivity to other cultures and marginal racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups, nor a transference of power, but an entire *paradigm shift*—a change in human perceptions, values, and actions. At the heart of multiculturalism lies not only respect for the contribution of the "Other," but also, and more importantly, a close scrutiny of the basic presuppositions, assumptions, values, and world-views that the dominating group holds about itself. Thus, multiculturalism enables whites, for example, to understand "whiteness" in a world that is not predominately white, but where whites dominate. It asks, What are the social and theological implications of this reality?

Multiculturalism addresses power relationships and their implications for effective schooling in the third millennium. It does this through the two-pronged values of respect for the Other and a self-critical awareness of one's power position in the world. Thus, it creates a whole new way of seeing the world and changes and stimulates institutional structures. The result is an inclusive environment that is safe for differences and benefits everyone. A basic measure of how well a school manages diversity is this: "If when all is said and done, you look around and notice that everyone looks like you, you have done it wrong."¹²

Some, however, are uncomfortable with the inclusion process. Why? Because multiculturalism threatens cherished privilege and power in order to make room on the stage of life for new characters in the play. Yes, privilege and power will have to be shared. But in exchange, multiculturalism will empower administrators, teachers, staff, and students to develop what Troy Duster calls "bicultural competence."

To be able to participate effectively in a multicultural world, one must be "bicultural" as well as bilingual. This means knowing how to operate in more than one milieu; being aware of what's appropriate and inappropriate, acceptable and unacceptable in cultures radically different from one's own. Competence in a pluralistic world means being able to function effectively in contexts one has only read about or seen on television. It means knowing how to be "different" and feel comfortable about it; how to be the "insider" in

one situation, the "outsider" in another.¹³

Such intercultural competence will create citizens of the world who can transcend the realities of their own racial/ethnic, gender, cultural, and socio-political reality to identify with all humankind, at all levels of human need. They will know no boundaries, and their core motivation—compassion—will enable them to create a more caring society. This principle needs to be modeled in the church and in schools by everyone—the faculty, students, staff, and administrators—in the process of living diversity. The challenge is great, but so is the reward. ✍

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