The Malaysian Dilemma
Where is the Racially Reconciled Community?

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The Situation

This is arguably one of the most consistently discussed topics in Malaysian public life -- explored by academics, filmmakers, politicians and newspaper editors alike. Here is an issue that is always current and potentially explosive but which is only occasionally discussed in theological circles, and rarely addressed in the congregational setting of many Malaysian protestant churches: racial integration.

The diversity of Malaysian society is well known: a majority Muslim country with significant Chinese, Indian and indigenous communities. On the verge of celebrating 50 years of independence, Malaysia has much to be proud of. But substantial racial integration remains illusive.

Significant complexities surround this issue and these brief comments will barely skim the surface. But by way of approach, consider the following questions: What role do churches have in a divided society in search of racial integration? And is our approach to such an issue more a matter of strategy when it ought be a matter of spirituality?

Since Malaysia's independence, many have pinned their hopes on the education system to provide the necessary foundations for racial integration, and on the local school as a place where such integration can be seen in action, preparing each generation for the reality of Bangsa Malaysia. [1] But recent research has shown that in this aspect at least, the education system may have failed. [2] Of course, it continues to be a worthy goal for schools to pursue. We need to provide contexts in which our children learn to interact with their peers from other ethnic groups and to appreciate from an early age the diversity of Malaysia's multicultural life. Research has shown that people who have experienced significant "prior interracial contact in schools and neighbourhoods [are] more likely, as adults, to have more racially diverse general social groups and friendship circles." [3] But if schools (and neighbourhoods) are providing only superficial rather than significant prior contact, where can the latter occur and where can a racially reconciled community be seen in action? One answer, surely, is the local church. But are Malaysian churches functioning as models to the wider society of what reconciled communities look like, or are they just as racially segregated as the world around them?

I would want to argue that since reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel, and since the gospel transcends the barriers of race, ethnicity and culture, and since the church is the most inclusive community on earth, the local church is a community of hope in a fragmented world. In Malaysia, the church has the task of not only proclaiming the message of reconciliation to all Malaysians, but of embodying the concrete implications of that message in its community life, so that Malaysians of all races can look at a local church community and see the gospel fleshed out in a racially reconciled group of people who can work, worship and witness together. But several objections, or at least concerns, may be raised. Let me offer a response to three, followed by several modest recommendations.

Objections

1. Surely Malaysian society is too diverse for us to expect any sort of multiracial, multiethnic local church to take root and realistically function? We might ask if such a phenomenon has happened elsewhere and can solid examples be provided? In response we would do well to remind ourselves that the first century Mediterranean world in which the church took root was arguably a more complex and diverse place than 21st century Malaysia. We often think of that ancient world as comprising of just two distinct groups, Jew and Gentile, forgetting the great diversity not just of the Gentile world but of Judaism itself. And yet, in such a diverse world, multiracial and multilingual Christian congregations were planted and grew.

A study of the NT churches would show that the overwhelming evidence supports the view that early Christian congregations were indeed multiracial and multilingual and that this diversity was intentional rather than accidental. [4] In terms of its multicultural inclusiveness, Pentecost was no ecclesiastical blip. The Holy Spirit propelled the church in the direction already set in the OT concerning the ingathering of all nations into the people of God (Gen. 12:1-3; Isaiah 19:16-25; 60; Jer. 12:14-16; Zeph. 3:9; Zech. 14:6). What Abraham saw by faith, was now reality – the multicultural, multiracial church of God. John Stott says of Pentecost: "Nothing could have demonstrated more clearly than this the multiracial, multinational, multilingual nature of the kingdom of Christ." Pentecost therefore "symbolized a new unity in the Spirit transcending racial, national and linguistic barriers." [5] Indeed, the two-volume work of Luke-Acts speaks powerfully to the issue of race within the church. Luke provides examples of how the gospel challenges us to abandon culturally driven worldviews about racial prejudice. "As a pattern of true discipleship, Luke reminds the Church today that the gospel demands that we forsake our inherited culturally driven racial prejudices, and accept all people – especially those different from us – as integral parts of the church." [6] The early Christian churches of the NT were marked by cultural diversity. There was an intentional strategy to build racially inclusive communities that were united by faith. In their wonderfully stimulating and thought-provoking book, the authors of United by Faith underline how, "Together these congregations produced a movement for social unity across the great divide of culture, tradition, class and race. Ultimately, the unity of the first-century church was the result of the miracle of reconciliation…" [7] You may think he puts it rather strongly, but in Tom Wright's view, "If our churches are still divided in any way along racial or cultural lines, [Paul] would say that our gospel, our very grasp of the meaning of Jesus' death, is called into question." [8]

2. Am I suggesting that we relinquish our cultural distinctives? Is not a uniracial congregation the best context for the fullest expression of my God-given culture? Apart from the fact that culture is never static and always changing, we should understand that the reconciling of different racial groups into one congregation does not inevitably have to lead to dull uniformity. Developing a multi-racial congregation is not about excluding diversity or uniqueness from the life of the church. The corporate worship of a racially, ethnically mixed congregation needs to include the cultural elements of more than one group. By using different styles of music, varying the language, liturgy and form of the service, and the degree of participation invited – such inclusiveness and creativity can be enriching and can lead the congregation to a broader understanding of God himself. So then, rather than a dull, lowest-common-denominator type culture dominating the church, a unique hybrid culture can develop that utilizes the best of all the representative cultures in the congregation. And this can bear fruit in the total life of the congregation, not just in its corporate worship. The aim is integration, not assimilation.

3. Is not evangelism and church planting more effective when conducted by a uniracial congregation? There is truth in the oft-quoted observation of Donald McGavran that, "men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers". [9] From this he

developed the Homogeneous Unit Principle which basically says that people should be able to hear the gospel without having to cross a cultural or social barrier in order to become a Christian. The question, however, is not whether such a principle is effective in terms of evangelism, but is it biblical? Of course, humanly speaking, people gravitate towards their 'own kind'. But are we correct to turn a sociological observation into a missiological principle without providing an adequate biblical foundation? Should it be normative in our church practice? And are ethnically united churches essential for evangelism and defensible biblically and theologically? I take the view that they are not. However, I acknowledge that working with one cultural group is a useful starting point in evangelism and in the early stages of church planting. But in the sharing of the good news itself and in the discipleship that follows, new Christians and young congregations need to know that they are part of the multiethnic, multicultural people of God and that they need to be integrated or at least connected in some way, if at all possible, into a more multiethnic church or network of churches.

Ways forward

With racial and ethnic diversity being a hallmark of 21st century Malaysian life, do more to equip Christians to think biblically and theologically about this issue. Make it the focus of a preaching series; give more attention to it in discipleship classes and seminary courses. For example, how do we think Christianly about national unity, the concept of Bangsa Malaysia, race and the education system, interracial marriages and family life, etc?

Given the racially mixed communities in which many local churches are located in Malaysia, aim to develop more racially mixed leadership teams in local churches.

Be more intentional in broadening the fellowship of uniethnic congregations, so that instead of remaining in isolation, they reflect something of the universality and diversity of the body of Christ. Perhaps we can organise worship services and activities that bring these congregations together on a more regular basis to express, celebrate and make visible, their unity in the faith. Practical difficulties such as language differences can be more easily overcome these days with simultaneous translation becoming more accessible and affordable.

Finally, while churches can and should be spearheading initiatives in their local communities that help create contexts for greater racial integration, there must be a commitment to sharing the gospel with all the peoples of Malaysia because ultimately, only in Christ can true reconciliation be found and the multiracial dream come true.

In racially diverse contexts where problems of ethnicity are always present, the local church has the responsibility of demonstrating the social implications of the gospel of reconciliation to the local community; demonstrating what a racially reconciled life really looks like.

Notes

[1] The phrase *Bangsa Malaysia* was used by the former Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahatir Mohammad in 1991 to express the desired goal of national unity. It is the first of nine strategic challenges contained in *Vision 2020* – the vision for Malaysia to reach developed nation status. *Bangsa* is a Malay word meaning 'race, nationality; belonging to a race, or nationality'. *Bangsa Malaysia* means "Malaysian nationality", "Malaysian People" or "United Malaysian People".

[2] See Lee Hock Guan, "Globalisation and Ethnic Integration in Malaysian Education" in *Malaysia: Recent Trends and Challenges* ed. Saw Swee-Hock and K. Kesavapany (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 2006), 230-259.

[3] Michael O. Emerson, Rachel Tolbert Kimbro, George Yancey. "Contact Theory Extended: The Effects of Prior Racial Contact on Current Social Ties". *Social Science Quarterly.* Vol. 83 Issue 3 (September 2002), 745.

[4] See Paul J. Achtemeier, *The Search for Unity in the New Testament Church: a study in Paul and Acts.* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987). Also, Rene Padilla, *Mission Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1985), 142-169.

[5] *The Message of Acts.* The Bible Speaks Today Series. (Leicester: IVP, 1990), 68.

[6] J. Daniel Hays. *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race.* New Studies in Biblical Theology. (Downers Grove / Leicester: IVP / Apollos, 2003), 179.

[7] Curtiss Paul De Young, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, Karen Chai Kim. *United by Faith: The multiracial congregation as an answer to the problem of race.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 37.

[8] Tom Wright. *Paul for Everyone.* (London: SPCK, 2002), 27.

[9] Donald McGavran. *Understanding Church Growth. (*Wm. Eerdmans, 1970), 198.