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MULTILINGUAL CHURCH

Strategies for Making Disciples in All Languages

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Multilingual Church: Strategies for Making Disciples in All Languages

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CHAPTER 1

Why Multilingual Church Matters

If we want to know why churches should consider becoming multilingual, we can start with one simple fact. Every modern city is multilingual.

One of the barbers in town moved here from Poland. My sister-in-law is from the Philippines. One of my Romanian colleagues recently gave birth in a hospital in Glasgow. Even in smaller towns in the UK, it is normal to meet people who have moved from South Africa, the US, or Ukraine. This pattern repeats across Europe and much of the world.

Every modern city is multilingual, but how many churches are? Why does that even matter? Let's start with a very simple example.

A Personal Example of Why Multilingual Church Matters

While working abroad as part of my undergraduate degree, I spent an academic year in Dunkirk, in the far north of France. This was challenging enough for me, with three years of undergraduate-level French classes under my belt. It was much more challenging for my girlfriend, now my wife, when she visited. She had almost no French and stayed with an older lady in the church who had almost no English.

Church services were held in French only, with me offering a bit of whispered interpreting. (We will talk more about that kind of interpreting in chapters 7 and 12.) While she might have known the tunes of some songs, the words were completely meaningless. If I tired during the service, she lost the ability to participate. If I had to deal gently with someone asking me to be quiet, she missed what was being said.

> ***Every modern city is multilingual, but how many churches are?***

True, she was one person without French in an overwhelmingly French-speaking church, but her experience is repeated over and over again by refugees, students, visiting workers, those fleeing persecution, travelers, and holidaymakers. Imagine fleeing war, persecution, or poverty, only to find yourself in a strange church in a strange country where you have no idea what is happening. How powerful would it be to hear or see your language being spoken or signed?

Contrast my wife's experience in France with the one we had when visiting a church in Vienna, Austria. I was due to speak at an academic conference and, since I don't leave home for more than a couple of nights

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without my family, we extended our stay to make it a family holiday. Since my wife speaks fluent German, the situation was even better.

While my wife speaks German, I do not. For the moment, my German just about extends to ordering a hot chocolate. We were pleased to find that Vienna has a church that styled itself as an "international church." I was even more pleased to find that, not only did the church sing worship in German and English (more on that approach in chapters 5, 11, and 12), but interpreting was provided during the entire sermon. My wife could enjoy the sermon in German while I heard English from the interpreter, who did an excellent job.

After the service, we attended a church meal where people happily spoke to us in English. One little decision—to make the service bilingual—made a big difference. Having people who spoke my language in the church made me feel that I belonged and could get to know people. Never mind that we were only there on holiday; we felt like people were genuinely happy that we were there.

Which kind of church is yours? Is yours the church that goes on in one language and isn't yet ready to welcome people who speak different ones? Is yours the church that welcomes people in diverse languages?

Notice that I asked if your church was the one that isn't *yet* ready to welcome people in different languages. I know from my own experience that the church in France was full of caring, warm, friendly, and approachable people. It is there that I had my first experience of interpreting for an entire conference. I owe a lot to that church. But when my wife visited, the church wasn't yet set up to welcome people who didn't speak French. With time and growth in capacity, any church can get there. But why should they even consider it?

Some Basic Facts and Figures

Stories like these are playing out in communities across the world right now. The reasons why people move countries are as varied as the people themselves, but the need to think seriously about multilingual church is surprisingly consistent. People arrive in a new place looking for a welcome and a way to fit in.

England and Wales are a case in point. According to the 2021 census, one in every six people living there was born outside the country.[1] A full 8.9 percent of the population of England and Wales does not use English (and/or Welsh in Wales) as their primary language.[2] In London alone, three

1 Office of National Statistics, "Transcript of Census 2021."

2 Office of National Statistics, "People, Population, and Community."

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hundred different languages are spoken. Even outside of the largest cities, there are towns like Gateshead in the north of England, with a population of just under two hundred thousand, where ninety languages are spoken by school pupils and 7 percent of those pupils do not use English at home.[3]

In some cases, these people have arrived from countries where the gospel cannot be preached openly or where Christians are persecuted. For example, while Somalia is the second most dangerous country in the world to be a Christian,[4] 110,000 Somalis live in the UK.[5]

Of course, not all language differences are due to migration. My home country of Scotland has three national languages. Besides the 92.6 percent of the population who use English, there are 57,000 speakers of Gaelic and 13,000 users of British Sign Language.[6]

That pattern repeats across the world. In Chicago an estimated 30 percent of the population speak a language other than English at home.[7] In Perth, Australia, that figure is over 37 percent.[8]

You can find similar figures for France, the United States, Germany, and many other countries. Wherever you live, there will be a growing population of people who do not use your national languages or, what I will now call, the "locally dominant language" at home. This becomes even more complex in officially bilingual or multilingual countries such as Canada, Switzerland, or South Africa where the "locally dominant language" can and does change from area to area within the same country.

There will also be a significant population of people who, for whatever reason, do not use any of the locally dominant languages at all. If churches only present the gospel in a single language, those people cannot hear it. As the Bible reminds us:

> But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? (Rom 10:14, NLT)

Elsewhere, in a debate about the use of tongues in church, Paul points out an obvious fact that should resonate with churches today.

3 Glickman, "January 2018 School Census."
4 Open Doors, "World Watch List 2023."
5 Connor and Krogstad, "5 Facts."
6 National Records of Scotland, "Scotland's Census."
7 Riggio, "Map: The Languages."
8 City of Perth, "Languages Spoken at Home."

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> There are many different languages in the world, and every language has meaning. But if I don't understand a language, I will be a foreigner to someone who speaks it, and the one who speaks it will be a foreigner to me. (1 Cor 14:10–11, NLT)

Whatever one's theological view about the meaning of "tongues," this fact is important. Indeed, in this book, I take no particular position as to what Paul means by tongues here or elsewhere. Paul's particular point at this stage in his argument works equally well no matter which view we take. He simply states that if people do not have a shared language, they cannot understand each other. If our churches only speak one language, we make the gospel foreign and incomprehensible to anyone in our city who does not speak our language. Intentionally or not, we lock them out of our church and erect a barrier between them and us. Every modern city and many modern towns are multilingual, but how many churches are?

If we live in multilingual cities and have monolingual churches, our practice does not line up with our confession.

Every church I know would say that they are open to "whosoever will." Yet, if we live in multilingual cities and have monolingual churches, our practice does not line up with our confession. We leave it for someone else to reach and disciple these people with the gospel. We make linguistic difference a reason to exclude someone.

Every modern city and many modern towns are multilingual, but how many churches are?

Responding to Our Diverse Communities

How do churches respond to the growing multilingualism around them? In many cases, they don't. Go into many churches in Europe and North America and you will find a congregation full of people with the same skin color, the same language and most likely, the same kind of background. In fact, for a long time, this kind of homogenous church was the recommended strategy.

Experts in church growth used to talk about the "homogenous unit principle," which says that people "like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers."[9] This makes sense. Most people naturally feel comfortable around those speaking the same language they do. We feel at home with people with whom we have shared experiences, stories, and identity.

9 Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, "Pasadena Consultation," sec. 3.

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If we are looking for churches to grow quickly, the homogenous unit principle can be a useful strategy. It has a lot in common with the secular field of marketing. But this strategy is destined to hit a wall.

Imagine a church that is built around the homogenous unit principle and aims to reach lawyers or university-educated people or young families. While this will work for a while, the reality of any major city is that, even if a church reached everyone in this group, it would eventually run out of people to reach. Even a large city can only have so many lawyers, university graduates, or even young families. What would happen when these lawyers turn into retired lawyers or when the young families become older families or grandparents?

Homogenous units are inherently limited. The people in these groups today will one day end up part of a different unit. Quite apart from the theological implications of sticking to our own little group (which we'll examine in the next chapter), the increasingly complex demographics of modern towns and cities make anything approaching the homogenous unit principle unsustainable.

No responsible church leader deliberately builds a church that keeps the gospel to their own little group. I do not believe for a minute that either church leaders or those who developed the homogenous unit principle used this tactic for malevolent reasons. It makes sense for churches to grow by adding people who are like those who already attend. Likewise, it makes sense that the first people added to a church will be those who share a background or a common interest with those already in the church. Yet, at some point, churches have to reach beyond these limits.

The demographic limitations of the homogenous unit principle might not be immediately apparent. After all, if a church is based in a particular community, it might feel normal for that community to be the immediate target. And, if that community happens to be relatively homogenous, then growth through homogeneity is going to look like it is working.

It is only when and if the community around us changes that we start to see why homogeneity is so limited. When that church in Wishaw (mentioned in the introduction) was first planted, it seemed that pretty much everyone spoke English as their first language and the biggest problems had to do with poverty. It seemed to make sense that a church there would grow primarily by being planted in a particular area and attracting the kinds of people who lived there. That meant that English was the language that mattered.

Yet, when I examined information on Wishaw now, I found out that more than 8 percent of school children in that town use a language other

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