

What Makes a School Multicultural?

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The growing worldwide membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church with its increasing diversity is giving rise to a new model of education K-through graduate school for the 21st century. With over 90% of the church's nine million members residing outside North America, and only 11% of church's membership being White, a paradigm shift in education is needed.

Such institutional presence in over 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, perspective, 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 sociocultural situations that local Adventist constituents have to face in order to more effectively communicate the Gospel? If this is true, then such a situation calls for change. Yet the old ways of doing things, even if successful, are a continual threat to the very survival of schools. 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 that's working."¹ This is because as long as an action, policy or structured situation satisfies our needs, we will not change. Thus, most persons and organizations will not change unless forced to. As an Arab Proverb that states: "The dog barks but the

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caravan moves on.” Those opposed to change may “woof, woof” all they want, but the caravan of change moves on, bringing with it the valued commodities of multiculturalism, diversity, and multicultural education to the marketplace of global education for the 21st century.

How do these valued goods work out in actual practice in terms of school structure? The answer to this question lies in examining what is meant by diversity, multiculturalism, and what makes a school multicultural. Understanding multiculturalism, valuing diversity, and gaining intercultural competence in a global economy is not just an American necessity, nor is it solely a concern to meet the needs of the non-dominant group. It is a value that when embraced, respected, and implemented by all – white, black, brown, yellow; male and female; education in developed and in less developed societies; in simple and in complex cultures – will result in success in the third millennium. Cross-cultural understanding and respect for diversity are no longer an options today in education, in curriculum design, and in program planning. They mean the difference between success and failure in preparing students for the worlds to come – the global village of next millennium and the divine that will replace even this one at the second coming.

There is much talk today about diversity. What is it?

Diversity has two dimensions. the *primary* (mainly biological and usually visible: age, gender, race, ethnicity, social class, disabilities), and the *secondary* (sociocultural and usually invisible: language, education, values, occupation, culture, learning styles, etc.), that

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people bring to an organization, which have the potential of giving rise to conflicts, but if managed well can result in a synergetic unity, where the effect of *all working together* is greater than the sum total of all the parts working independently.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is comprised of a racially diverse and multiethnic body of believers. *This is an observable given, an empirical reality, and an accepted fact.* What is not readily accepted, however, but is also an empirical reality, is that because of this rich multicultural diversity within Adventism, views of God, nuances of doctrine, expressions of worship, and attitudes toward structure, differ within the church. Because human experience differs from group to group, each must readdress the question of God out of the context within which each is found.

The Debate Over Cultural Relativism:

Failure to understand the danger of ethnocentrism leads many to reject the value of diversity. Ethnocentrism always emerges in the face of cultural differences. When these differences are perceived to be a threat to one's values, status or beliefs, ethnocentrism emerges. It is the position that one's way of understanding the world is the correct one and is to serve as the norm, with all other positions rated with reference to it. Much of the problem surrounding ethnocentrism has to do with a misunderstanding of cultural relativism.² Cultural relativism is not the same as *ethical relativism*. It does not mean that there are no moral or other forms of absolutes in society. Cultural

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relativism does not advocate individual or ethical relativism.

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

Cultural relativism is the idea that each culture or ethnic group is to be evaluated on the basis of its own values and norms of behavior and not on the basis of those of another culture or ethnic group. The basic principle out of which cultural relativism emerges is a simple one: “Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his or her own enculturation.”³ It is simply the process by which a culture is learned. This is because human knowledge tends to be socially conditioned. In other words, our thinking is largely influenced by our social position. For this reason, people in different social positions and cultural settings think differently.

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

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One of the main problems that leads to a misunderstanding of cultural relativism is *the failure of understanding the difference between absolutes and universals*. Absolutes are fixed values which are not admitted to have variation, but which differ from culture to culture, and from epoch to epoch. While universals are those values which transcend cultures.⁶ Absolutes derive from universals. While universals transcend cultures, absolutes are the way specific cultures implement universals in their particular societies. Take modesty, for example. Every society has 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 and apparent emerging conflict between absolutes and universals? In this manner. Whenever absolute values violate universal values, normally regarded as “human rights,” or within a Christian context as “divine principles,” universals always take precedence. These are determined by a proper reading of Scripture. But even here the Scriptures reflect the way God speaks to humankind within their own specific cultural context. Thus the Word, both living and written, takes on flesh – socioculturally conditioned flesh – in order

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to meet the needs of humankind. Let me share right here a most eye-opening concept: *The Bible does not necessarily reflect the thinking of God.* The Bible is written from a perspective that is not completely reflective of God. 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 depict how *human beings* understood God, as God spoke to them. They in turn wrote about God within their cultural styles of thought and habitual patterns of thinking reflective of their time. Some might ask: "If that is the case, how can we really know what God is actually like?" I suggest that this is why Jesus Christ came. Jesus knew that even though some forty "men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:21), that was not sufficient. Though they had been "moved by the Holy Spirit," they were nevertheless men, influenced by their culturally conditioned patterns of thought and social organization.

Jesus had to come as the incarnate Word of God and take 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). In concurrence Hebrews declares: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to

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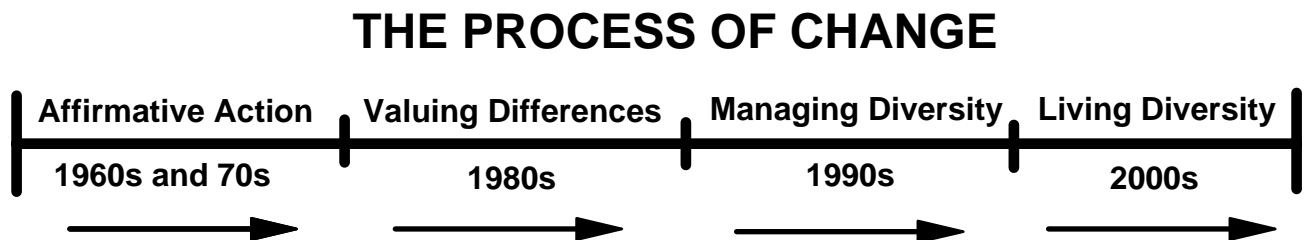
our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Hebrews 1:1-2). Or as John said (in light of the best manuscripts): “No one has ever seen God; [no one knows what God is like, except] the Unique One, God, the Eternally Existent One in the bosom of the Father, [and] he 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 understanding multiculturalism comes in. *Multiculturalism is a system of beliefs and behaviors that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society, acknowledges and values their socio-cultural differences, and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context which empowers all within the organization or society.* What are the implications of multiculturalism for effective schools?

The mere presence of an ethnically, racially diverse student population, due to location, or moral and social imperatives, does not make a school multicultural. This is merely being concerned with affirmative action, the policy of social equity.⁹ This was the main accomplishment in the United States during the 1960s and 70s, giving people access to the system. In the 1980s the concern was with “valuing differences.” In the 1990s the push is for “managing diversity.” But in the 21st century the focus of schools and

organizations globally will be 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 and have begun to retreat from affirmative action instead of going on to living diversity. Even if efforts to create a more ethnically, racially, and socioeconomically diverse campus are expended, this by itself is not sufficient to make a school multicultural. What this means is that the number of ethnically diverse students sitting in classrooms does not make a school multicultural. All that this may simply represent is that students have gained access to the school – they’ve gotten through the front door. But if all a school does is to give access, then students may leave just as quickly out the back door. The ever increasing dropout rate among students from socially disadvantaged environments is evidence that access is not enough. For many such students, for example African American and Latino students in the U.S., schools are increasingly regarded as hostile environments with which they *disidentify*.¹⁰

Neither is it merely a concern for understanding, respecting, valuing and celebrating the differences among the various groups

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represented in the school. Valuing diversity is important, as it may engender an awareness of and a sensitivity to differences, but it does not necessarily translate into structural changes.

What makes a school multicultural is a Five Ps Model. In this model the objective is whether or not the school's five Ps, its:

- Perspectives
- Policies
- Programs
- Personnel
- Practices

implement Four Imperatives:

- (1) Reflect the heterogeneity of the school – the dynamic of Affirmative Action;
- (2) Are sensitive 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 ambiance that is inclusive and empowers all groups in the school – the dynamic of Living Diversity.

These four imperatives form the basis of multicultural education. *Multicultural education is an intrinsic approach to education and curriculum construction that acknowledges and respects the contributions which all groups, irrespective of race, culture, gender, or class, have made to society, and incorporates these contributions in an overall program of instruction which meets the needs of an ever-changing society*

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and is sensitive to the personal and social development of all persons concerned. 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? About the contribution of women? About the achievements of indigenous people? **About one group reconstructing the world, and even an understanding of God, in its own image?** Multicultural education corrects for this.

However, its purpose is not just to meet the needs of disprivileged groups. It is education for *all* students, since its purpose is to reflect the contribution 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 power presuppositions.**

In other words, at the heart of what makes a school multicultural lies managing diversity – the proper management of the diversity in a school for the empowerment of all groups, which includes changing mindsets as well as the underlying culture of a school, especially if this culture is what is impeding change, in order for the school to begin *living diversity* so as to more effectively accomplish its mission. This is what makes a school multicultural. The point behind this is that unity in diversity needs to be the basic premise of *all* that is done in education and in the church.

This is where the Five Ps Model comes into play, because 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 refers to the vision without which schools as systems will perish. Vision is the most essential quality a school needs to have, for from it proceed its values, mission and goals. These three elements without vision will find themselves being formulated in a social vacuum, divorced from social reality. A school can have a good *internal climate*: clear goals, well shaped programs, and skilled teachers and staff who relate and communicate well, and still cease to function properly if it has not taken into account 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.

This calls for vision. The problem is we don't always know what is meant by "vision." *Vision is the bifocal ability to see what lies ahead (farsightedness), as well as the various impediments in the present (nearsightedness), and how to avoid them in order to arrive at the future.* If a school is not aware nor has an understanding of the social forces impacting 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 and in a detour in the mission of the school.

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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 what the type of education that is an outgrowth of perspective based policies. But effective programs cannot be run without the right *Personnel*, reflective of the diversity in the school and the constituent churches. The last one is *Practices*, the actual conduct of the school, its faculty/staff and administration.

Of these five Ps, the most important one is the last one, “practices,” even above vision. A school may have the best perspectives, policies, programs, and personnel, but these are only cosmetic until practiced. And it only takes a small number of personnel who in their practice refuse to go along with a program or fail to implement policy, or fail to buy into 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.”

I would suggest that the Five Ps Model is one way to go about the process of school restructuring, altering 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 structural change for a new paradigm of inclusion is necessary.

What is at issue in multiculturalism is not just sensitivity to other cultures and racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups that are marginal to the dominant culture, nor a transference of power, but an entire *paradigm shift*—a change in the integrated whole of our human perceptions, values, and actions. **At the heart of multiculturalism lies not only respect for the contribution of the Other, but more importantly, a close scrutiny and examination of the basic presuppositions, assumptions, values, and worldviews that the dominating group holds about itself. Thus, multiculturalism enables whites, for example, to understand the meaning of “whiteness” in a world that is not predominately white, but one where whites dominate. What are the social and theological implications of this reality? Multiculturalism address these power relations, and their implications for effective schooling in the third millennium, through its the two-prong values – respect for the Other and a self-critical awareness of one's power position in the world.** This will create a whole new way of seeing the world, as inclusive; and brings a change in institutional structures, so as to create an environment which is inclusive of all groups, is safe for differences and where everyone benefits. A basic measure of how well we are managing 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 threatened by this inclusive process. Why? Because they see multiculturalism as having to give up 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 all students to develop what Troy Duster calls, “bicultural competence.”

Competence in the context of actual pluralism will mean being able to participate effectively in a multicultural world. It will mean being “*bicultural*” as well as bilingual. It will mean knowing how to operate as a competent actor in more than one cultural world; knowing what’s appropriate and what’s inappropriate, what’s acceptable and unacceptable in behavior and speech in cultures that differ quite radically from one’s own. Competence in a pluralist world will mean being able to function effectively in contexts people had previously only read about, or seen on television. It will mean knowing how to be ‘different’ and feeling comfortable about it; being able to be the ‘insider’ in one situation and the ‘outsider’ in another.¹³

Such intercultural competence will enable participating persons to become *world citizens* – persons who are able to transcend their own racial/ethnic, gender, cultural and socio-political reality and identify with humankind throughout the world, at all levels of human need. The need here is for *transcending* people who know no boundaries, and whose operating life-principle is compassion – taking the role of the other to create a more caring society. This is the principle that needs to be modeled in the church and in schools by

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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¹Steve Wilstein, "Getting What It Takes To Win," *Hemispheres*, June 1994.

²Caleb Rosado, "The Concept of Cultural Relativism in a Multicultural World, unpublished paper.

³Melville J. Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism: Perspectives in Cultural Pluralism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1973, p. 15.

⁴Caleb Rosado, "How Culture Affects Views of Scripture," *Spectrum*, 25:2, December 1995: 11-15.

⁵Space prohibits elaboration of these points. For further discussion see Caleb Rosado, "Pluralism and Adventism: How Much Can Be Healthy? How Much Can Be Tolerated?" Paper presented at the 5th National Conference of the Association of Adventist Forums. "Adventism on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century," March 14-17, 1996, San Diego, CA.

⁶ Herskovits, p. 32.

⁷ Herskovits, p. 89.

⁸Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, Vol. 1, Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1958, p. 21.

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¹⁰Claude Steele, "Race and the Schooling of Black Americans," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 269:4, April, 1992. pp. 68-78.

¹¹ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology & Utopias*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1936, p. 195.

¹² Betances, Samuel. "Harness the Rainbow: Diversity and the Bottom Line," 1992 video lecture presentation. Distributed by United Training Media, 6633 W. Howard Street, P. O. Box 48718, Niles, IL 60714-0718.

¹³ Troy Duster, cited in Estela Mara Bensimon & Marta Soto. "Can We Rebuild Civic Life Without a Multiracial University?" *Change*, January/February 1997. p. 44.