

THE ALL NATIONS STORY

How a Multicultural Church Was Founded

By Caleb Rosado, Founding Pastor
[1979-1987]

In this article the human story of the development of the All Nations Church will be presented. What led to the need for such a church? What were the difficulties in establishing it? What mistakes were made? What lessons were learned? What has been the impact on the broader community, both local and worldwide? The value of relating this story is to enable others who are desirous of engaging in multicultural ministry, to learn how one church did it.

It all began with a request from black college students for the establishment of a black church in the small town where they were attending a university. The students felt that the prevailing religious structures were not sensitive to their needs and styles of worship. Since the denomination to which the students belonged operated (and still does) a segregated conference system, one in which there are white conferences which serve whites, and black conferences which serve blacks, the students approached the president of the black conference with the request. The president decided to do a feasibility study to determine whether or not it was possible to establish a Black church in the community. The result of the study was that there were not sufficient black families in the community, outside of the mobile student population, to warrant the establishment of a Black church.

However, the president felt that instead of a Black church, a multicultural church should be established. After all, what would the establishment of a Black church say to Africans and other ethnic groups? That in order for their needs to be met they too would need to have their own homogeneous unit church? The president felt "no," the time had come for another approach to be modeled, one reflective of the power of the Gospel to bring down walls of hostility and separatism.

At the time, I was planning to do graduate work in sociology at Northwestern University, having taken a leave of absence ten years into my pastoral ministry. One of those ten years had been spent in a successful ministry in the very town where the president was considering establishing the church. During the leave of absence I took up employment as coordinator of organization development for a Latino think-tank organization in the city of Chicago, working with grass root, community-based organizations. On the weekends I pastored part-time a Puerto Rican church in the city, which was under the administration of the Black conference. During the mean time, my family was still living in the above mentioned university town, while I was working and studying in Chicago. We attempted to sell our house to move to the city, but were unable to do so. Thus, I commuted to Chicago, even on weekends.

In the fall of 1978, the conference president invited me to his office and told me of the concern of the students. He felt the solution would be a multicultural church. However, he wanted to give it further study, but was strongly leaning to establishing a multicultural congregation. If he went that route he wanted me to serve as the founding pastor. His reason for bringing me in was that, if he were to bring a black pastor, the church would be identified as a black church; if he were to bring in a white pastor, it would alienate blacks. Thus, he wanted someone who was neither white nor black, but understood both, as well as the sociological implications of such a ministry. The fact that I was a sociology student, made his choice that much easier. I accepted the challenge, and suggested that he meet with whites and not just with blacks, to ascertain their desire for a multicultural church.

After meeting with both black and white laity separately, a general meeting was held with members of the same faith in the community to see if there was any interest in establishing such a church. Over 150 persons from different ethnic groups showed up at the meeting early in 1979, and the unanimous consensus was a positive one. I immediately made arrangements with the local United Methodist Church to rent their facilities, since our days of worship would not conflict, and they had the only church building large enough to house the group that I felt would be in attendance. (It needs to be said right here, that the warm generosity of the Methodists made it possible for the All Nations Church to have a place to meet for worship on a weekly basis. The fact that at this time, the United Methodist Church was promoting the establishment of ethnic churches, made it all the more possible for our being granted usage of their building.) Having obtained a place of worship, we were set to have our opening day of worship on January 7, 1979. But that's when the problems began.

When the Union Conference President became aware that the local black conference president was planning on establishing a multicultural church in the area, and bringing me in as pastor, he immediately and most forcefully objected to the decision. The reasons were several, but they all reduced to one—power. The area wherein this multicultural church was to be established was a white, middle class community, though the students attending the private university were from all over the world. The black conference had churches in the surrounding towns, but not in this specific town. It was felt by the leaders of the Union Conference, the leaders of the university church and of the community church, and the university itself, that black churches could be established in the surrounding communities, but *not* in this area. This community was for whites. (This idea was never explicitly expressed, just made known by the actions and objections to the proposed plan.) The reason behind such objections was that with the establishment of such a church, funds that would normally be going to the white conference would now be sent to the black conference. This also was the primary objection to my being the pastor. Since I had pastored before in the community, I already had a strong following, and many who were dissatisfied with conditions in the other churches would be drawn to this new church. When the black president met with the white laity, they had told him that if he brought in any other pastor, he would have a church, but if he brought in Caleb Rosado he would have a strong church right from the very outset, as many whites would join. All of which would mean a new source of funds for the black conference. (The objections were partially justified, as in the first year the All Nations Church netted for the conference \$250,000 in tithe alone, not counting local offerings.)

The black president decided that he would have to take a different tactic in order to bring the idea to fruition. The two issues, a multicultural church and who was to serve as pastor, would have to be dealt with separately. Over a period of five months, the two matters were wrestled with in various committees, from the local conference level, to the Union, Division, and finally the General Conference. The fight was most intense at times. But finally, in late April the decision was made by the local conference committee to establish a multicultural church and to have me serve as the founding pastor.

On Tuesday May 8, 1979, the officers of the black conference met with a group of believers and organized the group as a “company” of believers [the pre-stage before becoming an official church], and as members of the Lake Region Conference, the black conference. On Saturday May 12, the church opened its doors for the first Sabbath of worship. Only fifty people were present for the Sabbath School service, the early service. But by the time the worship service began an hour and a half later, there were over 400 in attendance. The sermon given by

the pastor was, "The Stone the Builders Rejected." The church was organized officially as a church on July 24, 1979 with 153 charter members. In 1984 the membership reached 300, with the attendance was usually the double.

On the afternoon of the first worship day, the pastor led out in a discussion on the question, "What are your desires for our new church?" The following Tuesday evening the pastor presented to the church a de-centralized model of church organization for consideration and possible adoption by the congregation. The plan was adopted unanimously at the next business meeting, one week later. From the very beginning of the church, the plan made clear that the leadership of the church would reflect the heterogeneity of the body in terms of age, gender, ethnic, and socioeconomic divisions. Thus, people knew that with its establishment this church would be different in terms of its ethnic makeup, leadership, and structure.

At that first Tuesday business session, on May 15, the members gave serious thought to the selection of an appropriate name for their new church. Our concern as a congregation was to select a name that was reflective of the purpose and mission of our multicultural congregation. Before the church had its beginning, while reading Matthew 28:19-20 one day while still working in downtown Chicago, the phrase, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations," struck me. There it was, *All Nations!* No other name conveyed to me the idea of what church should be all about. The question was, how to get the church members to "buy" into this idea, all the while thinking it was theirs and not mine? Using newsprint, I had the members brainstorm suggestions for a name. Several were offered, such "A People's Temple" (this one sounded too much like Jim Jones who had committed suicide with his followers a year earlier in Guyana and was soon rejected), the "Rainbow Church," the "Cornerstone Church," "Fellowship Church," "One People," "United, Brethren," etc.

While the people were deliberating in small groups on the name, I on put on the board the name, "All Nations." At first no one noticed it. My strategy was to throw the idea out to the members and relinquish ownership of it. The strategy worked. Soon it was noticed. For some it was too short, and they tried to work it into the other names suggested, for example, All Nations Fellowship. But it was simply too long. A Naming Committee was then selected to work with the suggestions. I developed some guidelines to help people to come up with a name, which guidelines were put in the church bulletin as an insert. The Naming Committee took the suggestions of the church members and came up with the name "All Nations Seventh-day Adventist Fellowship Church." At the following worship service, another insert was put in the bulletin explaining the name and asking people for their reaction. At that worship service, the third Sabbath, the pastor spoke on the subject, "The Fellowship of All Nations," on our purpose for existence and the significance of an appropriate name. Based on the reaction, the next Tuesday the church met in business session and officially voted the name. The name adopted was, "All Nations Seventh-day Adventist Church." A certain sense of positive "pride" was felt in the members around the name, as they believed it expressed fully the mission, not only of the newly established church, but of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a world body.

A similar procedure was followed with regard to our logo, except that for the final process, a design firm was asked to develop the final product. The reaction of the other sister-churches from the same denomination, but in the white conference, was a most negative one. The pastor of one the churches expressed publicly to his congregation that our church had no right taking on the name "All Nations," for they too were an "all nations" church. Another said that we were not part of the "sisterhood of churches," thus, giving the impression that the church was an off-shoot, independent movement. With the passing of time, and the success of the church,

relations have vastly improved and normalized with the other churches. As for the churches from others denominations, not once was a single objection raised by them or by members of the broader community to the establishment of a multicultural congregation. In fact, many welcomed the idea as a refreshing approach, one long overdue.

From the very beginning of the establishment of the church, a rich, cross-cultural mix predominated, with over sixty-five different countries represented. Some groups had greater representation than others, but over all, no one ethnic group dominated; rather, there was a rich cultural blend.

The sailing has not been smooth, however. For one, the long-standing tradition of having done it one way would always rear up its head and it caused some to question the new direction the church was going. For example, the de-centralized organizational structure with which the church began eventually had to be modified, as some felt that this structure put the church at odds with the laid-down organizational procedures of the denomination for local congregations. When we went back to a local church board, as the governing body, the same people now complained that they no longer had a voice. It was precisely for this reason that we had gone with a de-centralized structure in the first place. You can't have it both ways; nor can one please everyone at the same time.

The development of the church's Statement of Mission and Vision Statement gave the church a tremendous forward thrust, as this now became the framework within which the programs of the church were developed. From the very first service, fellowship was structured into the worship service, making the worship experience a joyous, living reality.

Some Negatives:

Because of the kind of high-pressured, academic community the church found itself in, with most of the members being students or faculty, outside of the worship periods there was very little time for group fellowship. Attempts have been made to include social/fellowship activities in the church program, but these were not always successful.

There also was a concerted effort to get people to fellowship cross-culturally on an informal basis on their own, beyond the church program activities, such as at home dinners, evening parties, evenings out together, etc. This has been somewhat successful, but for the most part, people still like to socialize informally with their own homogeneous group.

The question has been raised whether or not the academic setting for the church is what has given rise to its existence and success, and if a non-academic setting, such as an urban or suburban neighborhood, would make such a cross-cultural church difficult to achieve. I must admit that the unique setting of the All Nations Church is what permitted it to come into existence. However, this is not to say that it cannot be done elsewhere. All that it does say is that it is much easier in such a setting. Where the community is different, a different approach has to be utilized. But the different approach itself can be cross-cultural.

Some Positives:

Perhaps the biggest positive result of the All Nations Church is that it has sensitized people toward other groups. The commonality of the human experience, no matter the culture, has been a learning for many. The opportunity of learning from others and viewing the world through the worldview of the other has been an eye-opening experience for the congregation. The cross-cultural experience has enabled members to be sensitive to areas of human need to which they were oblivious before. For example, many members find it difficult now to worship

in an all white or an all black congregation, without sensing that something is missing—that rich, cultural blend, reflective of the social reality of our world, as well as of the social reality of God's Kingdom. This observation is not made in a condemnatory manner, but in a realization that once one has experienced a multicultural worship experience, worship never is the same again.

Sensitivity to an inclusive ministry, one devoid of sexist and racist language and structures, has become a light by which one sees into the darkness of exclusivism. For example, many members found it difficult to listen to guest preachers to the All Nations pulpit who continued to use non-inclusive language. It would grate on their sensitized ears. When members visited other congregations, the "invisibility" of women in leadership roles was also most visible. Though we have not achieved inter-cultural socializing to the degree that we would desire, many members with some decided results are experiencing it. People, who would not have otherwise socially interacted with each other, have made close friendships. On Sabbath morning, during the fellowship period in the worship service, one sees blacks, whites, browns, yellows, embracing and exchanging signs and words of God's peace—an unlikely drama in most congregations. During Holy Communion and the foot-washing service, blacks and whites would serve each other. For most white South Africans, this was the first time they have ever been embraced by a person of a different color. There is no question that a new thing was and still is being experienced: "Behold, how they love one another."

What an inclusive ministry has done to the congregation is that it has given it a new "social optic" by which to view reality, so that what most people regarded as "normal"—homogeneous congregations—the All Nations' members regarded as glaringly "abnormal" and contrary to the Kingdom of God. In other words, their vision has been expanded to include what most people filter out, through selective perception. For example, when one views the congregational services of most electronic churches on television, with their predominantly white audiences, most viewers would not question such homogeneity. But seen through "multicultural eyes," such a homogeneous gathering fails to reflect the true nature of the Body of Christ, His Church, nor does it make manifest the Kingdom of God on earth.

Another learning from the All Nations experience is that it enabled people to understand the social implications of the Gospel. The Gospel deals with more than just personal conversion, but also social and structural conversion. An inclusive ministry is one that makes clear to people that God takes sides in the affairs of humankind; He is not a neutral party. Thus, the Gospel is not concerned merely with the development of faith, but with faith that manifests itself in works of loving action. "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar!" (1 John 4:20).

Another positive outgrowth of our cross-cultural ministry is its international and ecumenical extension. Our concern has been to develop "world citizens" out of our members, who will "think globally while acting locally." This has been made possible in several ways. The first is by preaching the social implications of the Gospel, thereby seeking to develop within the congregation a "social consciousness." Much of the church's membership comes from Third World countries. Thus, the needs of the Third World have been made an integral part of the understanding and practice of mission of the church. This has been possible in large measure by the semi-annual All Nations Lectures on Church and Society, a series of presentations on society challenging the mission of the church. The speakers who are invited to give the lectures, for the most part, are non-Seventh-day Adventist Christians. The lectureship has a dual purpose: first, to expand our understanding of the Gospel; and, second, to break down walls of religio-centrism, by means of a positive ecumenism.

The result is that as members from various parts of the nation and world field return to

their parishes or countries, the ideas received and concepts experienced become a means for a new approach to ministry in their respective fields of labor. I received a letter from an Asian couple who were members of our church, and upon completion of their degrees returned to Southern Asia. "Caleb," they wrote, "you will never know how All Nations has sensitized us to the needs of the Third World. Its influence is being felt here in Asia." Throughout States and world field, the influence of All Nations is seen in an expanded ministry. This is why one of logos declares: "From All Nations to All Nations." It is one of a reciprocal relationship.

Building with a Sense of Mission:

One question that every newly established church has to wrestle with is the question, "How shall we build?" The All Nations Church gave serious thought to this question, so much so as to structure an entire worship service, plus several additional sessions to its discussion. At the basis of all this discussion was the fundamental fact that the mission of the church should determine the type of structure to be built; in other words, "form follows function," as Louis Sullivan, the great Chicago architect declared. Very few churches give serious thought to the relationship between architecture and mission. Because of this, much of what is built is the result of eclectic borrowings, based on people's likes and dislikes. Yet, architecture must be seen as the servant of the Gospel, and not the other way around. If the Gospel of Christ is worthy of accurate verbal and lifestyle proclamation week after week, it is also worthy of faithful architectural proclamation, where its message speaks year after year. This is why Jesus spoke of "new wine" in "new wineskins" (Luke 5:37).

Thus, at All Nations Church our concern has been that our church building reflect our Statement of Mission with a strong "visual" statement. We believe that a structural design compatible and consistent with the vision, values, and mission of All Nations Church will be characterized by a facility that:

1. Glorifies God and not diminish humans.
2. Makes a strong theological statement reflective of the mission of All Nations Church.
3. Has as a central an area set aside where the authoritative and enabling Word is preached and heard.
4. Meets pressing community needs.
5. Reflects the many nations and cultural working and fellowshiping within.
6. Does not repel the poor while encouraging the rich by allowing everyone to feel comfortable while working for social transformation.
7. Is ecologically and financially responsive.
8. Is multifunctional in usage and space.
9. Creates a sense of closeness and a spirit and an atmosphere that is warm and colorful.
10. Depicts an attractive, tasteful simplicity.

Another concern of All Nations in our building project was to build with the needs of the community. Churches often build exclusively for themselves, and other people are not always interested in what they are offer. At All Nations our structure is one that serves as an instrument, a means, to serve the needs of the community. Most churches spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in facilities for the exclusive worshipping comfort of church members and then spend additional thousands of dollars trying to get people to come to that building. When all along, what is needed is to build a structure that accomplishes a worship and mission; a structure where the worshipping community can celebrate *all of life*; not just its spiritual needs. It needs to be a place where the non-churched community can also come to celebrate all of life with God's

family. Thus, All Nations Church building needs to be a Christian Community Center.

In essence, this is the story of All Nations Church. It is a church seeking to carry out a twofold purpose: to fulfill an "idea," and to fulfill an "ideal."* The "idea" goes something like this: Since in the earth made new there won't be geographical or cultural boundaries that separate us, a church on earth without cultural or racial or national boundaries might be a foretaste of that new earth. It might *also* prepare us to sustain the "shock" of changed conditions. And such a church would help us experience the joy of learning from one another that we might not get any other way. So All Nations Church was established, with open arms to all to flesh out this idea.

Fulfilling an "ideal" was the means to make our idea work. That took some doing. One definition of an ideal is "something that exists only in the imagination." We were beyond that, for we are a church. Another definition is "the conception of something in its perfection." We had the conception but the perfection part will have to wait for the new earth. We know that. But we are reminded of the conception part by members of our All Nations family who represent all of the world sectors in which our denomination is established. The flags flown at All Nations—some 65 plus—at every anniversary celebration, are not banners that separate, but symbols that enhance the beauty of an idea and an ideal—unity in diversity in Christ.

[*Credit is given to Dr. Elaine Giddings, a charter member of All Nations Church, for first expressing the thoughts on an "idea" and an "ideal."]

[Written in 1983]