

Multicultural Teams in Church Planting

In the last few years, the evangelical world has become enamored with the idea of multicultural church planting teams. This approach yields great promise but also many problems,¹ particularly in the area of relationships. The greatest problem among many mission entities is getting missionaries to get along,² and the multicultural element makes the situation even more challenging.

I recently accepted a position at the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention to serve as director of a national church planting training program. This role shift from a predominantly white, southern seminary to a heavily multicultural work environment has encouraged me to pursue the issues contained in this paper. As I work on a multicultural church planting team with a Filipino leader, partnering with an African-American team leader, and working with a dozen ethnic national missionaries, I see more clearly my need to function as a multicultural team member. Furthermore, having recently taught on the subject at the request of the Malaysian Baptist Theological Seminary, it is obvious that there is a substantial interest in the topic among church planting missionaries around the world. This article is intended to provide some introductory thoughts on the subject. Two follow-up articles will address "Team Development in a Multicultural Church Planting Team" and "Task Alignment in a Multicultural Church Planting Team."

When working in a multicultural team, the team member must not just focus on adjusting to the host culture—she or he must simultaneously adjust to the multiple cultures

¹Lianne Roembke, *Building Credible Multicultural Teams* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), ix.

²Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 33.

represented on the team. Without such adjustment, conflicts will arise among the team members that will hinder the work.³

However, there are obvious benefits to the idea of multicultural teams. When God created the world, He pronounced it good. This proclamation allows us to celebrate the diversity of God's creation in cultures.⁴ This paper will analyze the purpose and function of multicultural teams

Definitions

A multicultural team is “a group of missionaries from different cultural backgrounds working together in one location.”⁵ Teams tend to “work best in and bring a lot of value to fast moving, uncertain, non-routine environments in which interdependent people must perform at exceptional levels.”⁶ Thus, church planting would seem a strong candidate for teams-- particularly multicultural teams.

Though there is much written on secular teams and much on cross-cultural ministry, there is little on cross-cultural (multicultural) ministry teams. Roembke has written the most thorough treatise on the topic, and she recommends a team consisting of a majority of nationals (plus one), a maximum of two expatriate cultures, and five to eight persons in size.⁷ Too many

³Sandra L. Mackin, “Multinational teas: smooth as silk or rough as rawhide?” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 28 no. 2 (1992): 134.

⁴Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Conflict*, 13.

⁵Roembke, *Building Credible Multicultural Teams*, 3.

⁶Pat MacMillan, *The Performance Factor* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 23.

⁷Roembke, *Building Credible Multicultural Teams*, 211.

expatriates from one culture often will lead to a concentration of power in the hands of that group.⁸

Advantages

Decreased suspicion

Multicultural church planting teams have the obvious advantage that they are not viewed as cultural imperialists. For example, a group of West African Ashanti missionaries seeking to reach the predominantly Muslim Wala in northwest Ghana will be viewed with suspicion. The Wala may be suspicious since the Ashanti have historically dominated the area. However, if an Ashanti missionary is teamed with a West African Fanti, a Korean, and, even better, a Wala, the team's reception will tend to be much more positive.

The obvious, but often overstated, parallel is the United States missionary. The Western missionary is often saddled with many stereotypes that can be countered in a multicultural team, particularly if that team is led by the nationals or the non-westerner. However, this is not strictly a Western phenomenon. A group of Japanese nationals may be distrusted in Korea, Russians in Kazakhstan, and even a New Yorker in Alabama.

Experience

Another value is the experience of the team members. Persons from different cultures bring different experiences to the task. However, they also bring different interpretations of their experience to the context-- presenting new and unique views of ministry opportunities.

For example, my own mission agency seeks to partner with state conventions to plant churches in the United States. The majority of these churches are ethnic or African-American. Mark, our National Missionary for European Ministries, obviously knows more than I do about

⁸Ibid., 212.

planting churches among Romanians. However, in a recent meeting I discovered he has tremendous insights on cross-cultural ministry in other settings as well. Because his church planting experience is different than my own, he brings different problem solving skills to the task that produces unique insights my brain is unable to produce. His worldview enables him to exercise wisdom I do not have-- and vice versa.

Chalke expresses it well:

The best kind of team is one that represents a diversity of opinion. If you surround yourself with others who are guaranteed always to agree with you, the inevitable result will be mediocrity.⁹

Modeling

If the team is to exhibit true community, it needs to promote this value from the beginning. Thus, even its training should be in a multi-cultural setting.¹⁰ Its processes must promote unity so that the multicultural team models the New Testament community and then invites the host culture to participate. The ability to function as a harmonious team is more than just an idealistic goal—it is a function of biblical theology.¹¹ It must be emphasized at every step.

Most cultures place great value on community. If we cannot find effective community among Christians, there is no human reason for others to be attracted to Christ.¹² Jesus taught that our faith would be evidenced by our love for one another (1 John 4:7-8; John 13:34-35). This is best evidenced when a team is modeling Christ-like unity in a multicultural setting.

⁹Steve Chalke, *Making a Team Work* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1998), 13.

¹⁰Roembke, *Building Credible Multicultural Teams*, 205.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 234.

Disadvantages

There are some obvious disadvantages to multi-cultural teams. The challenge of relating to a host culture causes such discomfort it is called culture *shock*. Many missionaries are unable to bridge the bi-cultural divide. A multicultural team inserts an added dimension beyond the host culture. Multicultural teams “add stress to an already stressful situation.”¹³ These challenges tend to focus on area of financial inequity, delayed strategizing, and cross-cultural conflict.

Financial Inequities

The inequity of finances is always a challenge. This is a high visibility issue and can often be a stumbling block to team formation.¹⁴ Depending on the county of origin, the missionaries tend to be funded at different levels. Assuming the multicultural team is funded at different levels, the standard of living of the country of origin tends to determine the salary of each missionary. Each missionary is sacrificing by his or her own frame of reference, but the income of the Indian missionary still seems astronomical to the Nigerian missionary. Financial inequities cannot be ignored. They must be acknowledged and discussed if *teamship* is to be engendered.

Delayed Strategizing

Moving into a new culture requires a sequence of observing, understanding, assimilating, and appreciating.¹⁵ This process often involves culture shock or, at the least,

¹²Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Conflict*, 32.

¹³Roembke, *Building Credible Multicultural Teams*, 105.

¹⁴Ibid., 167.

¹⁵Ibid., 81.

cultural fatigue. However, this process is multiplied for each close relationship with a team member from a distinct culture. Thus, the team made up of an Tamil, Westerner, and Malaysian Chinese seeking to reach indigenous Malaysian tribal Iban would need not one cultural adjustment, but four. The Malaysian Chinese may still be adjusting to the autocratic leadership style of the Westerner while not addressing the indigenous dance style of the Iban. Thus, the process of strategizing and relating to the host culture will be slowed.

Obviously, if the team does not interact frequently, this issue is less pronounced. However, the assumption of multicultural teams is that they will function as a team—with group decision making and team consensus. Thus, in the example above, there are four cultural bridges needing simultaneous construction. So, while learning the culture of the host peoples, there is the added burden of adjusting to one's teammates. Clearly, this will prolong the process of preparation and strategizing.

Cross Cultural Conflict

The most common problem is that of cross-cultural conflict. Typically, this is conflict between the sending culture and the host culture. However, in a cross-cultural team the conflicts are between the sending *cultures* and the host culture.

These conflicts are inevitable but these conflicts do not necessarily have to breach trust. Paul and Barnabas, though certainly mature missionaries, had differences so extreme they parted ways.¹⁶ However, as fallen creatures, the natural reaction we have is to assume a negative motivation on the part of the other person.¹⁷ Thus, multicultural teams must be proactive in

¹⁶Ibid., 29.

¹⁷Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Conflict*, 21.

dealing with conflict. The inevitable must be intentionally overcome if the multicultural team is to be effective.

When dealing with conflict, the American on the team will expect a clear expression of ideas and identification of points of conflict while the Asian will value the feelings and reputation of those involved—not wanting anyone to lose face. Asians often do not separate the person from the problem-- thus, there is no way to "attack" the problem without attacking the person.¹⁸ A more circular approach is needed. Americans tend to view this as duplicitous, not helpful. Even the solutions to conflict are fraught with more conflict!

Generally, cultural values can be seen in four ways: some are clearly right (hospitality, etc.); some are clearly wrong (child sacrifice); some fall into a gray area (alcoholic beverages); and some are neutral (the "personal space" in a culture).¹⁹ In the vast majority of instances, conflicts are not theological (right, wrong, or even gray areas) but relational.²⁰ Thus, the mark of the efficacy of our faith is if we can minister in a New Testament team as we proclaim the hope of such to others.

Cross-cultural sensitivity is essential, because each represented culture will naturally assume that its rules for conflict management are the best.²¹ This brief paper cannot address the issue, but a strategy for dealing with cross-cultural conflict must be identified and consistently followed.

¹⁸Ibid., 49.

¹⁹Mackin, "Multinational teas: smooth as silk or rough as rawhide?" 135.

²⁰Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Conflict*, 24.

²¹Ibid., 21.

Team Development

One author described the team development process as “forming, storming, norming, and performing.” In the forming state the expectations are not yet clear, and there is a tentative approach to interaction. The storming state tends to be evidenced by conflict, differences, and antagonism among group members. The norming state is when group cohesion begins to develop as conflicts are resolved and members accept the team. Finally, the performing stage is when relationships are truly established; the team has a clear purpose; and its goals begin to be accomplished.²² These goals should be clear (I see it.), relevant (I want it.), significant (It's worth it.), achievable (I believe it.), and urgent (I want it... now!).²³

Team Selection

The first step in team development is team selection. Management theorists believe that teams should be selected on the basis of competence, ability to function on a team, and personal attributes.²⁴ Other issues include national representation, cultural appropriateness, sex, and others that are determined by the host culture.

There is no more important issue in multicultural church planting team development than that of common vision. The International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a team concept in the mid-1990s (though not usually a multicultural approach). The approach was sound, but many team members, who signed on as theological educators or community developers, were not committed to the new goal of the team-- planting churches. It is not possible to unify a team that is committed to different objectives. The leader

²²International Mission Board, “KSTeams&StagesofTeamDev,” [CD-ROM].

²³MacMillan, *The Performance Factor*, 48-49.

²⁴Chalke, *Making a Team Work*, 62.

can manage conflict and mollify complaints, but a work team cannot be formed. Team unity requires a common purpose, and this is not as easy as it may appear.

Because of the nature of teamwork, all teams are really made up of volunteers.²⁵ Persons can be assigned to teams and certainly can be fired if they do not perform as desired. However, they must be willing to function on teams if teams are to function effectively. An uncooperative team member placed in a team by a forward thinking denominational agency is a recipe for disaster. Simply put, the most important question to ask a team member is, "Are you deeply committed to this team and its assignment?"

A team needs to hold in common its destination, starting point, and route.²⁶ The destination should be clear before the team is formed. The starting point can be defined in early team discussion. The route will be best be determined through group decision making.

To understand the team, one must see the formation of teams as a progression that will take time. This time will come from the time normally reserved for learning and ministering to the host culture. Thus, the team must see the value of the process or else it will become tired of the journey.

Leadership Style

A second issue that often arises is the role and function of leadership. There are certain universal Biblical truths regarding leadership—obedience is to be required at times (Hebrews 13:17), but leaders are to not “Lord over” (1 Peter 5) but instead are to serve (Matthew 23:11).²⁷

²⁵MacMillan, *The Performance Factor*, 29.

²⁶Chalke, *Making a Team Work*, 67.

²⁷Roembke, *Building Credible Multicultural Teams*, 36.

Outside of some general Biblical teaching, culture determines much of how leadership is practiced in each cultural setting. As mentioned earlier, my new team leader is Filipino. Thus, if I am to be effective in my role, I must both understand his leadership style and determine a way to relate to that style. As an aggressive New Yorker, it is my task to determine how to relate to him-- and his task to relate to me.

It would be much easier if he were a New Yorker (ironically, he lived in New York for many years, but not in my Irish New York neighborhood of the Yankees and hot dogs). So, we have to learn how to function on a team. For example, Filipinos often prefer to provide leadership and direction through a third person. New Yorkers (the Irish kind at least) tend to address leadership through clear and impersonal directions. Both are valid and we must learn to work together to be an effective team operating across cultural boundaries.

At some point, when a multicultural team is involved (particularly in an international setting), a common acceptable leadership style must be chosen. The host culture should be the most important determinant for how the team leadership functions.²⁸ Perhaps the best expression of identification with the host culture is when the missionary can serve under national leadership.²⁹

In any setting, leadership should maximize communication and motivation. Scripture tells us to "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). However, we must learn how to "love" a team member from another culture and how to present the "truth" in a way does not cause offense.³⁰

²⁸Ibid., 153.

²⁹Ibid., 162.

³⁰Mackin, "Multinational teas: smooth as silk or rough as rawhide?" 136.

Effective leaders put people ahead of projects.³¹ They recognize that the team must build its foundation before the task can be accomplished. In a multicultural team, if the leader fails to focus on people, the team will cease to properly function and there will be no project!

Non-Work Relationships

Teams do more than work together. A team can be said to have achieved community when that team wants to spend time together outside of the work setting. I once observed a multicultural team meet to plan a strategy. The meeting went well as each participant went to great lengths to be courteous and respectful of the opinions and cultures of the others. However, when the meeting adjourned, the group broke up for fellowship along cultural lines. The group had not reached a full sense of team. They worked hard for cultural *tolerance* but were unable to experience *teamship*.

Other Issues

There are other issues not mentioned here that are still essential. For example, the role of women on teams (particularly in non-egalitarian cultures), appropriate behavior between the sexes (married and unmarried), appropriate physical contact, concepts of promptness, views of accountability, team language choice, etc. These are thoroughly addressed other places, but their lack of discussion here is not indicative of a lack of importance. However, these issues will be unique to each cultural expression and will only be surfaced in cross-cultural discussion. (A helpful resource to begin conversation is *When Cultures Collide: Managing Successfully Across Cultures*. The book is an encyclopedia type reference of world cultures-- providing a resource for discussion in cross-cultural relationships.)

³¹Chalke, *Making a Team Work*, 21.

Conclusions

Clearly, the process of multicultural team development is difficult. My guess is that the current emphasis on multicultural teams will experience a backlash in the next few years as agencies begin to realize the difficulties of the process. However, if successful models begin to become more common, then others will be encouraged to pursue the endeavor. Currently, most of the literature and training on the subject is about the problems, and there are few successes to imitate.

Nevertheless, there is great value to multicultural church planting teams. They are not the panacea that many have made them to be. Sometimes the work is not worth the return, particularly in short term teams who spend more time adjusting to other sending cultures than ministering to the host culture. However, for teams willing to dedicate themselves to the process, there is no greater witness than God's people from every "tongue, tribe, and nation" functioning to add another tribe to the mosaic that is the Kingdom of God. The *sine qua non* of a faith that claims to be worldwide is a worldwide (multicultural) expression of that faith and its missionary impulse.

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