

BOOK REVIEW

Richmond H & Myong Duk Yang (eds), *Crossing Borders: Shaping Faith, Ministry and Identity in Multicultural Australia*, Sydney: UCA Assembly and NSW Board of Mission 2006

The fourth Assembly of the Uniting Church held in Sydney in May 1985 constituted a watershed for multicultural ministry. At this Assembly, the national church adopted a statement affirming that 'The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church'.

Twenty years later, this publication of selected articles seeks to recognise the journey upon which the Uniting Church has been since that Assembly; it seeks also to open up a wider ecumenical dialogue between the churches about the common challenges and opportunities of ministry and mission in a multicultural context.

The editors themselves have lived the journey in their own family lives, each marrying across cultures, and each passionately involved in cross-cultural ministries.

The result of their work is an impressive compilation of resources which are of value to anyone involved in communities of multicultural character (and if we are to take to heart the articles which form this book, then that includes us all).

The articles fall into various distinctive categories. The most prominent are those which trace the history and experience of particular cultural groups who have come into Australia in significant enough numbers to establish Christian communities among their own ethnic groups. Most are from Asia or the Pacific, and include communities of people from China, Sri Lanka (Tamil and Sinhalese), Korea, Cambodia and Laos, Indonesia, Philippines, Niue, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa. Contributions also come from Southern Sudan, the Netherlands and Chile.

Each of these culture-specific articles is valuable in its own right, written by people who have shared the journey, at one level or another, with the groups about whom they write. They provide well researched historical information and useful personal insight into the experience of these communities in their struggle to give expression to the Christian faith in a cultural context very different from their original homeland. A wide range of themes is addressed and perspectives from both older and younger people are included. These articles make a valuable collection of case studies and could be used as such with considerable benefit by any group or congregation.

A second category of articles are those of more general content.

The editors themselves provide an introduction which notes a helpful distinction between the terms 'multicultural' and 'cross cultural'; they identify some of the important elements of effective multicultural ministry; they note some of the challenges which face multicultural congregations (e.g. leadership, decision making, property use, worship, mission) and they seek to re-affirm the link between the church as multicultural and the church as indigenous. A helpful series of questions for discussion concludes this introduction.

An article by Eric Law focuses on the importance of naming our fears when we take up the challenge of embracing a multicultural reality. Seongja and Colville Crowe document the important recent development of INFORM, the International Forum on Multicultural Ministry (its first meeting was held in Sydney in 1999) which links the Australian context with various contexts across the world. Gary Bouma focuses on Australia's changing landscape, providing detailed statistics of Australia's religious profile from 1947 to 2001, concluding that

Australian churches, by virtue of the changing religious landscape, must take seriously the rapidly evolving multicultural and multi-faith nature of the society in which they live. Clive Pearson's article on '*The Face of Theology*' invites us to recognise that to speak of a multicultural church brings its own imperative to take seriously the culture-specific nature of theology and to accept very different forms of theology from the dominant western theology which has been considered normative in the past. Jione Havea's article on '*Reading the Bible Across Cultures*' is a useful complement to the article from Pearson, focusing as it does on culture-specific ways of approaching the Scriptures and the cross-cultural nature of interpreting texts. He concludes, helpfully, with an exercise which provides a summary of how to go about a cross-cultural study of texts.

Two articles of historical character are of particular interest, one by Malcolm Prentis on the multicultural heritage of the Uniting Church and one by Margaret Reeson on the multicultural links of the three churches which formed the Uniting Church in Australia. Together these two authors disavow any claim that the churches which came into the Uniting Church, or any of the churches in Australia for that matter, from their beginnings were ever homogeneous or mono-cultural. The value of these contributions is to affirm that all Christian communities, whether they realise it or not, are multicultural, that is, formed of people who represent a range of culture-specific backgrounds and experiences.

The book is significantly enriched by contributions from other church traditions, each of them insightful in their own right. It is frequently the case that particular church traditions get entangled in their own distinctive challenges and tasks in multicultural ministry. The value of the ecumenical input in this volume is that it provides a window into the challenges and approaches of other churches. It is evident that a stronger ecumenical approach to the challenges of our multicultural reality would be of great benefit to all.

Ross Langmead with Korean Meewon Yang provide valuable perspectives on the Baptist response and document some enterprising innovations at Whitley College; Andy Hamilton, teacher at the Jesuit Theological College in Melbourne offers a sympathetic and realistic summary of his own personal involvement with the communities from Cambodia and Laos; Irene Donohoue Clyne and Shanthikumar Hettiarachchi offer Anglican perspectives on very different communities, the Southern Sudanese and Sinhalese respectively.

One remaining chapter of the volume requires specific mention as it does not easily fall into any of the above categories. It is William Emilson's article on *The Interdependence of Indigenous and Multicultural Christian Perspectives*. This article notes that at the Sydney Assembly of the Uniting Church in 1985, the statement on the multicultural nature of the church was partnered by an equally significant 'Charter of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress', and there was a commitment from the beginning that these two groups with their common issues of justice and identity would be connected. Emilson documents interesting examples of the ways in which indigenous Australians and people from other ethnic specific groups have intersected or have contributed to each other's activities, as well as noting some of the areas of tension between the two. He records that of the two community groups, multicultural and indigenous, the indigenous have fared less well in the years since the 1985 declarations. He concludes with an appeal to take equally seriously not only the common issues of these two groups but also their distinctive and contrasting issues. The fact that the May 2006 national consultation on Cross-cultural ministry deliberately gave attention to indigenous issues is a sign that the 1985 vision is being re-awakened, but because their contexts and issues are as contrasting as they are similar, it is likely that connections between them will be limited. The absence from this volume of an indigenous voice is notable.

The book suitably concludes with the statement '*Multicultural Vision for The Church: A Theological Statement*' which was issued by the Uniting Church Multicultural Network in 2005.

Neither romantic nor ideological, this volume of articles offers a resource for individuals and congregations across church traditions as they seek to engage effectively with the multicultural realities with which all Christian communities, in one form or another, live (for it is true that all communities, no matter how apparently mono-cultural, comprise a diversity of cultures and sub-cultures.)

The book doesn't pretend to offer answers to the ongoing issues nor to provide a serious theological foundation for the multicultural imperative and vocation of the church. What it does do, and effectively so, is to document the journey of the Uniting Church since 1985, to provide valuable insight into the history and experience of several ethnic-specific groups, and to open up possibilities of ongoing ecumenical dialogue.

It is a minor matter only, but on the down side, it is the view of this reader that the presentation of the volume would have been assisted if the articles were grouped together in a systematic way and if the pages themselves were printed with a more spaced format. That aside, the volume will become a valuable reference book and working manual.

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