

Being Intentionally Missional in a Multi-Cultural Setting: a case study



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Background of Elmfield Church

Elmfield church used to be a Brethren church but due to the fact that numbers were beginning to drop they felt the need to employ a Pastor in 2000. Krish Kandiah was appointed and he helped turn around the church and bring in a large number of younger people. He was also able to initiate a 20s and 30s group that provided opportunity for Bible study and social gatherings for that age group. Part of the idea of appointing Krish was the fact that North Harrow is a very multi-cultural area and it was intended that this would help address the local needs of building a multi-cultural church. When Krish moved on in 2005, Elmfield appointed me, Peter Oyugi to take up the position of Pastor. This I believe was a very bold step as it involved bringing in someone from a completely different culture to lead the church. I come from Kenya and spent my previous eleven and a half years doing student work. This was mostly with the Kenyan IFES movement but also with UCCF in the UK for 3 years.

Elmfield today has a regular Sunday attendance of over 100 people and is actively involved in the local community. Notable amongst the ways in which it serves the local community is running an Art Competition in local schools. Each year we go into local schools and tell one of the parables of Jesus and invite the children to draw their impression of the parable. Those who submit entries are then invited to a Prize giving ceremony which this year was held in our church building but has previously been held elsewhere. During this ceremony we have the opportunity to tell the parable to the parents. After the prize giving we again go back into the schools to present certificates to all entrants. This is just one of the many ways we try and engage with the local community in creative ways. Just by doing the assemblies in the schools you begin to appreciate how multi-cultural the area is.

My observations of why these changes were necessary

1. Someone had a clear vision for change. There was both a lack of younger people as well as the need to engage with a multi-cultural neighbourhood.
2. The church had to undergo a paradigm shift in mission thinking. Things could not always be done the way they had been done before.
3. There was intentionality in all actions carried out by the church Leadership Team.

What does being intentionally multi-cultural entail?

In my estimation, I see the following aspects as being key:

1. Courage – The need to take a bold step. E.g., invite a Kenyan to pastor what is a predominantly white church in a very multi-cultural area. The emphasis here isn't that it was a Kenyan chosen but that the commitment to a multi-cultural church is reflected by the leadership in word and practice.

Being intentional is perhaps the only legitimate way forward as there is otherwise no common ground or reason to meet.

2. Patience – Hard work because the Christian faith quickly creates a culture. The challenge

remains how to integrate people from different cultures in a multi-cultural church. Slow progress, but worth it. Cultural boundaries are certainly not easy to cross as homogenous churches are perhaps a lot easier to promote, but the question is whether we want to remain true to what God's family should be – people gathered from every nation, tribe, people and language.

3. Listening – to the needs of people, and especially the minority is particularly important. There is nothing worse than the feeling of alienation.

Elmfield recently carried out a survey amongst its members. This was a risky step to take in a church context as you can never know what comes out of such surveys. However, it was amazing how constructive all the comments given were even though I have to admit some were coming from opposing ends of the spectrum meaning that it would be impossible to satisfy everyone's needs.

4. Context – Clear understanding of the sub-cultures, e.g., postmodernists; language groups; classes of people both in the church and the local community, in order to engage relevantly.

5. Focus - The Word, prayer and room for the Holy Spirit to work in the church must remain central to the church's life and service. We can only move by God's strength and help.

6. Team Work – it may be tempting to build the church around a strong individual; however, in a multi-cultural setting it is important to encourage leadership that has team work at its core since no one individual can effectively address the diversity of needs around.

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