

## **SUMMARY OF A STUDY OF GROWTH & VITALITY FACTORS OF FIVE MULTICULTURAL CHURCHES IN PERTH**

### **1) INTRODUCTION**

This comparative case study of five churches is limited to a demarcated cohort of Charismatic/ Pentecostal churches in Perth, whose main language of public worship is English.

Key research and existing literature were examined, including: a) Biblically mandated outreach, b) NCLS Core Values of *Belonging, Inclusion, Faith-Sharing, Leadership, Vision, and Innovation*, c) the role of small groups, d) ethnic/ cultural religious identity, generational issues, and e) some real issues currently affecting the growth & vitality of these five churches (which, for convenience, are labelled Church A to E).

The potential significance to stakeholders comes through identifying matters relevant to their own context, and opening up possibilities to consider for increasing their multicultural church's vitality.

### **2) FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS**

According to Dr Philip Hughes (1998, p. 23)<sup>1</sup>:

*Health and vitality is seen as people engage in authentic worship and as they find God's values which give structure and direction for life, when people have compassion for each other and give practical and prayerful support to each other. It is seen when whole communities change, as trust develops, as people create a more just society, caring for one another and for the whole environment in the name of the Creator.*

It is not simply about increased numbers of attenders. A reliance on *discovering patterns* implying factors that promote or hinder the growth and vitality of these five multicultural churches in Perth was intrinsic to the case study method employed in this project.

A primary source of data for this project was *an anonymous online survey*. Given the relatively small sample from each church, (totalling 75 in all) one acknowledges that they were not painting the full picture for each congregation. However, complementing this survey were *in-depth interviews, follow up conversations, and emails with pastors, other available information online and from church handouts, as well as many impromptu, informal, and enlightening conversations with attenders*.

When all taken together, this additional qualitative data provided another layer of helpful information and comprehensive insights. From all this input, *interesting patterns have emerged and some meaningful factors have been highlighted* in the process of considering what promotes or hinders the growth and vitality of these multicultural churches.

#### **i) Biblically Mandated Outreach**

From the findings, the five churches surveyed clearly illustrated the premise that:

a) *not all multicultural churches fit neatly into proposed models due to their complexity* (Duncum et al. (2014, p.5)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes, P., (1998) Report on Congregational Health and Vitality in the Anglican Archdiocese of Melbourne (Part II). Nunawading, VIC: CRA. Retrieved from <http://www.cra.org.au/file/Healthy%20Churches.pdf> (15<sup>th</sup> September, 2016)

<sup>2</sup> Duncum, I., Pepper, M., Hancock, N. and Powell, R. (2014). A Comparison of the Vitality of Monocultural and Multicultural churches, Occasional Paper 24 in Powell, R., Pepper, M., and Hancock, N. (2016). *2011 NCLS Research Collection – Revised edition, March 2016*. Sydney, NSW: NCLS Research. Retrieved from <http://www.ncls.org.au/download/doc5566/2011%20NCLS%20Research%20Collection%20-%20March%202016.pdf> (6<sup>th</sup> October, 2016)

b) Their ministry practices indicated a *large degree of flexibility and adaptability* on the part of the pastoral teams and leadership, especially when some opportunities suddenly arose or even evolved.

c) However, as *charismatic/ pentecostal, mission-minded churches*, they regarded themselves as *biblically mandated for multiethnic outreach*. For example, with *Churches C & D*, it was largely Ephesians 2 that revealed their mission for churches to be a multiethnic foretaste of Heaven, reflecting 'something of the mystery and majesty of God and how His family gathered is from all tribes, nations, and tongues'. Similarly, *Pastor E2* has understood that the churches mirror what Heaven is going to be like: 'no boundaries and every tribe and tongue and nation represented and united in worship'.

d) At the same time, there was support of the related concept of 'unity in diversity' and tolerance (Osborn 2002, p.46)<sup>3</sup> which was strongly reflected in the sampling of both attenders and pastors.

e) Nor were they adverse to Patten's (2016)<sup>4</sup> multicultural, hermeneutical approach to interpreting the Scriptures that endorses living out the gospel in a more inclusive, loving, community of diverse cultures as they worship, care, lead and do mission together. This too, is akin to the supportive community advocated by Hughes (1998, pp.16-17)<sup>5</sup>.

## **ii) Multicultural Church Models**

Despite the complexities of individual churches, it is still very helpful to acknowledge and utilise Hughes' four basic labels for church models, namely: i) *inclusive congregations*, ii) *ethnic churches*, iii) *ethnic congregations within a multi-congregational church*, and iv) *multicultural congregations*. However, for further distinction, one may add a qualifier of *international multicultural congregations*, for those where English is the primary language for public worship.

A brief review of the history of the five examined churches reveals that:

*Church A* transitioned from being an 'inclusive congregation' of mainly Anglo-Celtic background to one with a growing mix of other differing cultures.

*Church B* is an *international multicultural congregation* with a majority Asian flavour and with a deliberate strategy not to venture into Languages Other Than English (LOTE) ministries.

*Church C* has transitioned from an Italian speaking, *ethnic congregation* into an *international multicultural, multi-congregational church* that maintains an Italian speaking congregation with a service mid-week, and has added a Tamil speaking congregation and service.

With hindsight, *Church D* could still be described as an evolving 'inclusive congregation' of mainly Anglo-Celtic background but with a fluctuating mix of other cultures. Or one may describe this church in DeYmaz & Li's (2010, pp.127-128)<sup>6</sup> terms, as one that reflects Revelation 7:9 and John 17:20-23, and that is very slowly moving along the continuum from homogeneity through a gradual process of maturity (like sanctification) toward unity and diversity. All the pastors consulted agreed with DeYmaz & Li's<sup>7</sup> understanding.

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<sup>3</sup> Osborn, L. C. (2002). *Cross-Cultural Communication in a Multicultural Church: A Model for Progressive Change*. Tulsa, OK: Osborn Publishers.

<sup>4</sup> Patten, M. (2016). *Leading a Multicultural Church*. London: SPCK.

<sup>5</sup> See Footnote #1.

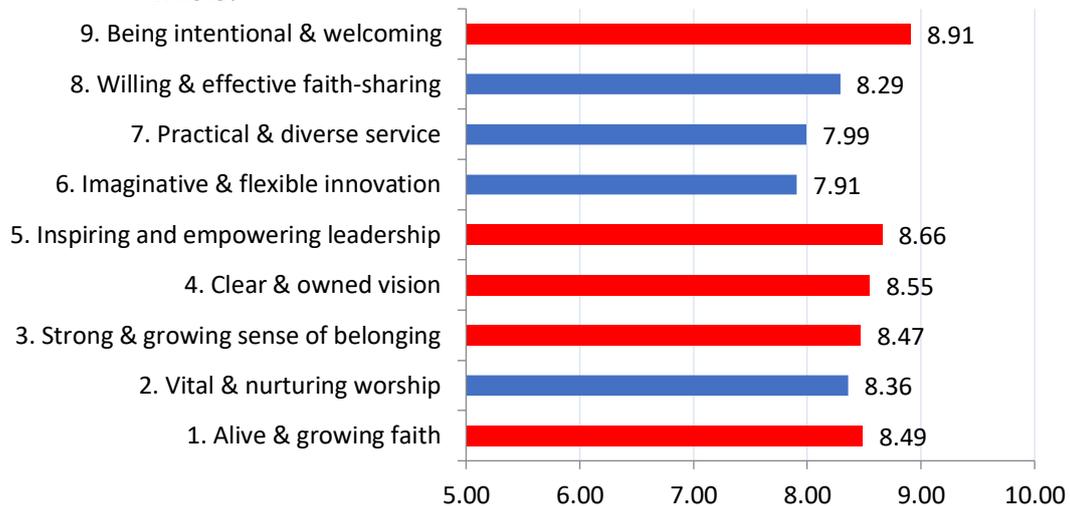
<sup>6</sup> DeYmaz, M., and Li, H. (2010). *Leading a Healthy Multi-ethnic Church: Seven Common Challenges and How to Overcome Them*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>7</sup> See Footnote #6.

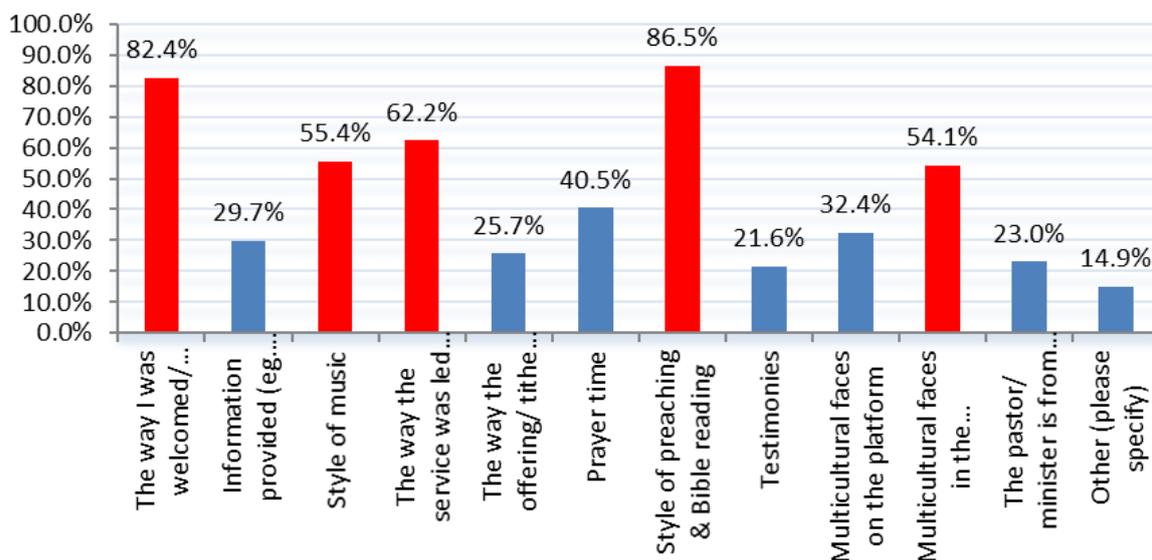
Church E1 began as a multi-congregational church with an international-style, English-speaking and predominantly Asian-flavoured congregation, with an adjunct Mandarin-speaking ethnic congregation for mainly older attenders, which it still maintains. Unlike Church B, they were willing to develop two ethnic churches and release them to full independent status within a few years.

**iii) Core Values**

**Q40) How do you rate the following aspects of your church as a whole?**



**Q7) Which of the following aspects of the church worship service helped you to feel included? (choose all answers that apply)**



**a) Inclusion (Welcoming)**

Inclusion had the highest rating of importance, implying that churches would hinder their growth and vitality if they were to neglect being intentionally welcoming (Inclusion). The application of this was evidenced in an array of inclusive, social activities such as ethnic meals, dance, and entertainment as well as other celebrations and cultural displays.

**b) Belonging**

In the five churches examined the following important factors assisted attenders to feel a growing sense of *Belonging*: i) *Preaching*, ii) *Communion*, iii) *Prayer*, iv) *Small Groups*, v) *Reaching the Unchurched (Faith-Sharing)* and vi) *Meeting/ Welcoming New People*.

**c) Leadership, Vision, and Innovation**

Pearson Correlations conducted arguably implied that *Leadership*, *Vision*, and *Innovation* are intrinsic to the promotion of a 'circular discipleship process' that Duncum et. al (2014)<sup>8</sup> alluded to in their hypothesis.

## Church Growth & Vitality Factors



So, one wonders if they could be highlighting the vital role that the 'Inspirational' values play in keeping the church advancing in its mission. This is to say that through *Vision*, *Innovation* and *Leadership*, the church is inspired and encouraged to intentionally *Welcome* newcomers (*Inclusion*), and as they *Worship* together, integrating them by loving and helping them (*Service*) to nurture their *Faith* and a growing sense of *Belonging*, so they in turn may reach out (*Faith-Sharing*) and start the process again by *Welcoming* more newcomers. Of course, this would also apply to all types of churches.

**iv) Small Groups**

Small groups are invaluable for creating supportive communities and social networks, for promoting unity and a growing sense of belonging, for discipleship, prayer, pastoral-care, visitation, the assimilation process of newcomers, and for the identification of gifts for ministry for volunteer service and leadership.

**v) Ethnic/ Cultural and Religious Identity and Generational Factors**

These factors can also affect church vitality and growth. (This includes transfers out of monolingual/ monocultural churches into multicultural ones). Understanding the effects of this process on subsequent generations and their cultural and religious identities is crucial for developing multicultural churches and the role they can play. For example, this was certainly the case for Italian immigrants of *Church C*. Of course, the men out in the workforce managed better than their wives, who were often isolated at home raising children. Meanwhile, for the second generation, Italo-Australians, there tended to be a profound identity crisis, with a duality of worlds (of parents and peers). They learned to compartmentalise their lives almost living as "cultural schizophrenics" (Hiebert & Hertig 1993, p.18)<sup>9</sup>. Many times, this tension led to conflict with the parents, their language, their culture, and their ethnic

<sup>8</sup> See Footnote #4

<sup>9</sup> Hiebert, P. G. and Hertig, Y. (1993). Asian Immigrants in American Cities. *Urban Mission* 16 (March), 15-24. Retrieved from <http://hiebertglobalcenter.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/1993.-Asian-Immigrants-in-American-Cities.pdf> (16<sup>th</sup> February, 2017)

identity. Meanwhile, the parents grieved over their failure to communicate with them and felt their rejection (Hiebert & Hertig 1993, pp.15-18; pp.20-21)<sup>10</sup>.

As Hiebert & Hertig (1993, p.23)<sup>11</sup> advised: "This calls for pastors who are aware of the dynamics of cultural assimilation." Practically, this means ministers who honour and respect the first generation while encouraging and helping them to accept the new life and hope of the new host culture. This could be strengthened by strategically assigning elders/ pastors and teachers/ leaders who are bi-lingual/ bi-cultural, who also comprehend the pain of the identity crises of the second and subsequent generations.

### **3) CONCLUSIONS**

Sadly, there is no definitive list containing every ministry factor that one can universally avoid or apply to any multicultural church. But there are certainly areas of overlap between church models, as there are connections between different vitality factors. One ought not to ignore useful data from NCLS Research, especially with their provision of the nine core values of churches. They have offered much wisdom from many years of examining churches in our changing Australian context.

**Of major significance to our case studies were:** *Biblically Mandated Outreach (Faith Sharing), Welcoming (Inclusion) and Belonging and the Discipleship Process.* The important factors influencing a strong sense of *Belonging* included: i) *Preaching*, ii) *Communion*, iii) *Prayer*, iv) *Small Groups*, v) *Reaching the Unchurched (Faith-Sharing)* and vi) *Meeting/ Welcoming New People*.

In addition to the factors listed above, the following **SIX key factors that promoted overall growth and vitality in these multicultural churches** are worthy of further consideration and research in multicultural contexts:

- i) Developing a friendly, welcoming culture that encourages acceptance, unity in diversity, and a strong sense of belonging.
- ii) Maintaining a strong family-oriented, respect/ honour culture.
- iii) Having a pastor or members, from or who understand other cultures (a fellow-migrant experience).
- iv) Having cross-cultural small groups offering hospitality.
- v) Having transparency and openness in talking about different approaches to fellowship.
- vi) Holding events that embrace cultural diversity that involve food, sport, music, or social outings.

**FOUR key inhibiting factors** deserving further consideration are:

- i) Cultural differences: fear, misunderstandings & lack of acceptance.
- ii) Past religious teachings and practices from country of origin.
- iii) Identity and generational misunderstandings and tensions (old culture versus new host culture).
- iv) Lack of fluency in English especially for deeper spiritual understanding.

These case studies have provided five diverse and complex snapshots of very real, pentecostal/ charismatic multicultural churches in Perth, who are seeking to make a difference in reaching the nations for Christ. At very least, I pray that the contents of this paper may help some readers avoid a pitfall that they otherwise would not have seen coming.

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<sup>10</sup> See Footnote #9.

<sup>11</sup> See Footnote #9.