

Multi-cultural churches—moving beyond landlord-tenant

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

South Florida's multi-cultural milieu combined with a shortage of suitable land for building new churches has long led local congregations to make space available on a rental basis to groups of diverse ethnic backgrounds and languages.

But now, several churches are moving beyond a landlord-tenant relationship into a multi-cultural form of ministry that seeks to bring people together around their common faith.

Such is the philosophy of Dr. Matthew Smith, the new pastor at Miramar Evangelical Free Church. "We have one church in three languages," explained Smith. "Our mission is to reflect our multi-ethnic community in fulfillment of the verse in the book of Revelation, chapter seven, verse nine." That verse speaks about people from every nation, tribe, people and language.

Smith's multi-language church includes an English-language congregation, made up primarily of people from the English-speaking Caribbean, a Spanish-language group and a Creole, Haitian background church.

On Palm Sunday, however, the three groups met together for worship in all three languages. During that service, the three pastors preached their own sermon in their own language for no longer than ten minutes each.

Smith said that to respect the cultural identity and background of each group, the sermons were developed individually, and were not just mere translations of each other. In addition a number of common hymns were sung together, with the same melody but each person singing in their own language.

The concept that three different language groups would be considered part of one church is intentional, Smith explained. "Before I came here, the church made a firm commitment to that concept. That's what brought me here,"

The unity of the three congregations is also helped in that they are all developing in the tradition of the Evangelical Free Church as opposed to several congregations from different theological and ecclesiastical perspectives sharing space under a common roof.

Smith vehemently denies any suggestion that his church's unusual arrangement is anything more than an old English-speaking, Anglo congregation sponsoring the formation of new churches in other languages. In fact, he said that the English church reflects more of the Caribbean culture than the congregation's historic "stoic Anglo service with an organ and a piano."

Instead, the Sunday morning English service uses drums, guitars and percussion and carries a distinctive Caribbean sound and ambience.

To demonstrate the church's intentionality at becoming multicultural, Smith pointed to the governing board which, he said, is made up of members of all three language groups. "We work by symbiosis, trying to achieve a cohesive unity in government," he said. "Governing this church is something like a luge—we are trying to keep the sled in the center of three courses."

In nearby Davie, the First Baptist Church of Davie-Cooper City is also moving to more fully integrate their English, Spanish and Creole congregations into a united group. As with the Miramar church, all three are ministries of the church and are of the same denominational tradition—in this case, they are part of the Southern Baptist Convention.

However, Pastor Jimmy Cox points out that in addition to the church-sponsored Spanish group, his congregation also rents space to a traditional Cuban Spanish-speaking church that is under his "watch care." The church-sponsored Spanish group is primarily non-Cuban, with members from such far-flung countries as Puerto Rico and Ecuador.

Cox said that he foresees having separate language services for some time, but he pointed out that as second generation immigrants grow up they will most likely end up in the English-language service. "For example, the children all go to the children's service together," he said.

Children's ministries are often where multi-ethnic churches can combine. "All of our children's and youth ministries are combined," said Stephanie Goode, the receptionist at Hollywood's Sheridan Hills Baptist Church.

The Sheridan Hills church provides services in Spanish, Portuguese, Creole and Zomi (a Burmese language) in addition to their English services. In addition, the congregation's 8:15 a.m. service on Sunday is translated into Spanish and the 10:45 service is translated into Portuguese.

"All of our Baptisms are held during the English 10:45 service," she explained. "For example, the Haitian congregation will come into the English service for the Baptism and then return to their own service in Creole."

In Weston, Father Paul Edwards of Saint Katharine Drexel Roman Catholic church easily combines English and Spanish ministries because he speaks both languages. The parish offers several services in both languages each week.

Edwards said that he views his parish as one church with people who speak several languages. "We have separate services for reasons on space and time convenience," he said, explaining that most Catholic churches hold several masses each weekend because they can't fit everyone in at one time.

The multiple language challenge is typical throughout south Florida, but Cox said that in the next ten years churches throughout the country will be facing similar situations.

Already, states such as North Carolina and Georgia are experiencing large influxes of Spanish-speaking residents and churches are seeking ways to respond.

Cox said that ethnically homogeneous churches in south Florida and across the country will become rare, “unless they are a mega church that draws people from across a wide geographical area, and thus can attract enough people of one group.”

Both pastors believe that the practice of simply renting space to congregations of different languages without any attempt at cross-cultural contact is a thing of the past even though Cox said that there is a crisis in finding building space in south Florida.

“This facility belongs to God, not to us,” Cox said. “We don’t ask any of the groups to pay rent, though they make a contribution to cover expenses.

Smith is even stronger in his criticism of multiple rentals. “I’m opposed to warehousing churches,” he said. “That’s not in my heart. If we are willing to help you get established, we feel that you are equal to us. We want to stay away from a paternalistic concept.”

Smith said that the concept of 11 a.m. on Sunday morning being the most segregated hour in America has haunted him for twenty years. “I have dedicated the last 20 years of my life to creating a rainbow church,” he said.

Smith said that there are two keys to his work, the great commandment (to love God and others as we love ourselves) and the great commission (to carry the Gospel to all people).

“When Matthew 28:19 says to go and make disciples of all nations, the word used for nations means ethnicities,” Smith said. “I see my ministry as helping people develop a relationship with God through Jesus Christ so that they will love Him with their heart and soul and mind and strength and to take that message to all ethnicities.”

Smith said that his ministry is difficult, but “I’m having the time of my life. I was built for this type of ministry and I’m willing to give the next 20 years to this place,” he said.

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