

UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN DIALOGUE  
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*Introduction*

The local and global church has a similar task in facing the challenges of communication in a globalized world. The reality of the compression of the world<sup>1</sup> has not solved the problems inherent in communication and dialogue among differing individuals and people groups. The church universal has a unique challenge in the globally-expanding world to communicate and incarnate the language of Jesus Christ, the essence of the church.<sup>2</sup> The simple message of the gospel does not seem linguistically complicated, yet its interface and guidance into how Christians are called to live in the world proves a difficult journey of faith seeking understanding and incarnation. In a world filled with much violence and suffering, humanity is in dire need of the church to communicate the gospel message of love. A Mennonite poster puts this reality so simply and eloquently, “A modest proposal for peace: let the Christians of the world agree that they will not kill each other.”<sup>3</sup> If churches were known for nothing more than love for one another what a witness to the love of God in Christ this might be.<sup>4</sup> In fact, this is that by which Christ said his disciples will be known in the world.<sup>5</sup> Sadly, sin in the church and in the world is real, but by God’s grace we walk forward in hope. This task of loving one another amidst much

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<sup>1</sup> Robertson, Roland, “Globalization and the future of ‘traditional religion,” Eds. Max L. Stackhouse with Peter J. Paris, *Religion and the powers of the common life* volume one in *God and globalization: theological ethics and the spheres of life* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 53.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, reprint 1969), see Introduction: “The Task of Dogmatics.”

<sup>3</sup> Text of poster by John Stoner. Mennonite Central Committee, 21 South 12<sup>th</sup> Street, Box M, Akron, PA 17501.

<sup>4</sup> See John 13:34-35; I John 3:11, 23.

<sup>5</sup> John 13:35.

difference is fundamentally important in a globalized world. This love is the task of the church in neighborhoods and congregations, as well as the task of the Church universal and global.

This paper explores the universal and global church's mission to promote love, peace, justice, and compassion into the often harsh realities of the twenty-first century world. While there are many aspects of the church that help her fulfill her mission, the majority tend to revolve around the necessity of communication, relationships, dialogue, and love expressed between humans. Fellowship, community, and gathering together are central to what it means to be the Body of Christ. This unity asks us to live together and love one another, which has been a challenge for all centuries of the church. The difficulty of life together has resulted in much conflict, brokenness, and fragmentation. There is hope in the church's commitment to practices of confession, forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation. Healing is nurtured in this commitment through dialogue and relationship with one another.

The universal and global church's life together is of increasing importance in the twenty-first century globalized world. The church of Jesus Christ is multicultural, interdependent, and marked by unity in diversity.<sup>6</sup> The reality of globalization has brought the body of the church that is physically separated by oceans, borders, and land mass into increasing communication and presence with its members. While the history of the church is not always unified or glorious, marked by human finiteness and sinfulness, the church in the twenty-first century is offered a unique lens into remembering and mourning the past mistakes of colonization, abuse of power, and failure to listen. In the grace-filled presence of the Holy Spirit the church has the opportunity to hope toward the future in journeying together in the love, suffering, and reconciliation of Jesus Christ. Cultivating mutual listening and learning through dialogue in the multicultural body is

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<sup>6</sup> Reference to Church of the Nazarene, Global Theology Conference II. To see papers visit: [http://didache.nts.edu/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=27&Itemid=38](http://didache.nts.edu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=27&Itemid=38).

necessary for this communal journey of remembrance and hope. First, this paper will explore the need for intentionally formed dialogue in the multicultural church. Secondly, it will explore how this dialogue is fostered in reshaping the time and space, posture, and structure of dialogue. Finally this study will look forward to how this dialogue can be cultivated in hopeful imagination for the church in embodying ancient practices and faithfulness that help us discern life together in the twenty-first century.

### *The Need for Dialogue*

Globalization has indeed forced humans, structures, and institutions to recognize the immediate reality of cultural and lingual barriers between cultural groups. In his book, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb*, Eric Law recognizes this tension within multicultural churches.<sup>7</sup> Differences in culture make communication not only difficult, but potentially harmful if not handled with proper care, understanding, and patience. Communication dynamics between cultural groups often center on cultural perceptions of power, which can be understood quite differently from culture to culture. To describe this reality for local multicultural churches, Law draws upon Geert Hofstede's description of High and Low Power Distance Cultures.<sup>8</sup> Lower Power Distance cultures' populations are concentrated in a dominant middle class that tends to believe in the power and possibility to change social inequality. These cultures are not afraid to challenge voices of authority in society, and they tend to work toward power redistribution.<sup>9</sup> High Power Distance cultures, on the other hand, tend to be more hierarchically governed resulting in a small minority of people controlling the majority of power. The large majority of

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<sup>7</sup> Eric H. F. Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Described in further detail in his book, Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in World-Related Values*, abridged edition (Beverly Hills, London, New Delhi: Sage Publication, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Law, 22.

people has less access to education, wealth, and power and tends to accept its position in society. As a result, these cultures tend to accept inequalities because they are not empowered to change systems.<sup>10</sup> Low Power Distance cultures tend to be English-speaking and Germanic language-based countries, many of these are based in Northern Europe, while High Power Distance cultures tend toward Latin American or Asian countries.<sup>11</sup>

Law's study particularly focuses on the multicultural situation in the United States in which many High and Low Power Distance Cultures live in the same cities, neighborhoods, and churches. This creates an interesting dichotomy between these cultures in their perception of power.<sup>12</sup> Law investigates how multicultural churches might be better served by a Pentecostal model of dialogue, which particularly addresses this dichotomy. Intentionality in dialogue form can help to imagine and realize a true community in which the power dynamics are shifted to welcome the high power distance cultures that are often voiceless, silent, and neglected. While this model speaks specifically to local multicultural congregations in the United States, it is also extremely relevant to how global church polity, structures and denominations, such as the Church of the Nazarene, can foster this same community and intentionality amidst the many power dynamics at play within a global church body.

The reality of a truly global church body in the Church of the Nazarene was first officially recognized in the year 2000, when the international membership population exceeded that within the borders of the United States and Canada. Just 20 years earlier, members from the US and Canada made up 73% of the entire denomination.<sup>13</sup> This shift in membership is causing a

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 23

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See Dean G. Blevins, "Global Pedagogy: A Table Conversation" *Christian Education Journal* Series 3, Vol. 1, No. 2, 140-51. "In 1980 seventy-three percent of the members of the denomination resided within the borders of the United States and Canada. Twenty years later more Nazarenes reside

reverberation of shifts in the denomination's structure and leadership that continues now in 2007. The Church of the Nazarene is not alone in this shift. This is becoming a global reality in many parts of the world.

Phillip Jenkins, in his book *The Next Christendom*, challenges Christians in the United States to imagine the shape of the Christian world in the next 25 to 50 years.<sup>14</sup> The explosion of Christianity is now occurring in many countries in the southern hemisphere, while membership in churches in Northern Europe and the United States are declining rapidly. Not only are the statistics and demographics changing, but the shape of Christian theology and worship is changing as well. Jenkins recognizes that Western dominance in Christianity brought faith to many countries through missionary efforts, while also often enculturating the gospel with a sense of Western culture, traditions, and interpretation.<sup>15</sup> With Southern Christianity's growth, the enculturation of Christianity has begun to shift. Jenkins notes that the explosion of Southern Christianity tends to be more fundamentalist and charismatic by nature, as well as theologically conservative.<sup>16</sup> There is also powerful belief in the spiritual dimension of faith, in visions, and in spiritual healing.<sup>17</sup> New appropriations of faith will continue to stretch the Christian church in maintaining unity in diversity. It will also continue to change the shape of the church in the coming years. This raises many thoughts and concerns for the church in the present century. Lurking behind this reality is the question—will it bend or will it break? Multicultural

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globally in international settings than within those same western borders; almost all primarily through new membership. The challenge to disciple new converts became daunting, so new strategies emerged to bring the full educational resources of the denomination to bear on international settings.”

<sup>14</sup> Phillip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 89.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

relationships, partnerships, communication, and dialogue covered with the love of God in Christ will become increasingly important in response to this question of unity in diversity.

### *Space, Structure, and Posture of Dialogue*

As the church is reconciled to God in love, believers are called to be reconciled to one another.<sup>18</sup> The love and community fostered in local congregational bodies must be carried into the structures and levels of global bodies and denominations. Learning to love one another and fostering mutual listening on a global level can help to overcome barriers of miscommunication, misunderstanding, and injustice. Global church structures have at times fallen prey to structural models condoning abuse of power, money, and control, assimilation to culture, colonization, tribalism, and commodification. Often the majority voices have drowned out those in the minority. This history of the church calls for confession, repentance, and forgiveness, and reconciliation. Ecclesial and theology-centered dialogue, communication, and community can help direct and re-direct the church in this journey of faith. In a world that is quickly being compressed, the need for unity in diversity in the church requires a posture of mutual embrace, listening, and learning.

Dialogue is already fostered in many ancient practices of the church, yet it can also be appropriated anew for living the gospel incarnationally within the global reality of a multicultural church. A word of caution is necessary, however, as dialogue and words in and of themselves are not always helpful or clear. Miroslav Volf, in his book *Exclusion and Embrace*, notes the ambiguity in the Barmen Declaration against the Nazi regime, which called for churches to give allegiance to Jesus Christ alone. Volf notes that this declaration underestimated human ability to bend the “one Word of God” to serve its own communal ideologies and national

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<sup>18</sup> See Matthew 5:24; 2 Corinthians 5:16-20; Galatians 5:13-15; Ephesians 5:21; I John 3:11-24.

strategies.<sup>19</sup> He challenges churches in a new commitment that reaches across national loyalties and conflict toward the church as a reconciled community,

In order to keep our allegiance to Jesus Christ pure, we need to nurture commitment to the multicultural community of Christian churches. We need to see ourselves and our own understanding of God's future with the eyes of Christians from other cultures, listen to voices of Christians from other cultures so as to make sure that the voice of our own culture has not drowned out the voice of Jesus Christ, 'the one Word of God.'<sup>20</sup>

The posture, space, and time surrounding dialogue and community must be developed in order for mutual learning and listening to take place. Even within cultures, many factors of personalities allow some people to communicate much more openly and verbally than others. When many personalities from many different cultures enter the equation, along with possible hurt, pain and conflict, the dynamic is magnified. A space of openness, welcome, and trust must be nurtured over time and conversation. The posture of each of the participants is crucial to how this dynamic will play out. A commitment to acceptance and eagerness to learn from the other is necessary. This openness must be coupled with love and humility.<sup>21</sup> As this dialogue begins, one should expect to be uncomfortable. This discomfort comes from one's lack of control in this

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<sup>19</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 53.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 53-54.

<sup>21</sup> \*The Prayer of St. Francis (<http://www.dlshq.org/saints/francis.htm>) can help cultivate the posture and spirit of Christ-centered dialogue:

"O Lord, make me an instrument of Thy Peace!  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is discord, harmony;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light, and  
Where there is sorrow, joy.  
Oh Divine Master, grant that I may not  
so much seek to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood as to understand; to be loved  
as to love; for it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life."

situation. Perhaps solidarity in a willingness to set control aside can help unify the group in needing and relying upon one another.

A structure for dialogue that intentionally considers cultural power dynamics is essential in order to guide discussion. If the table is left too open, often those from Low Power Distance cultures tend to dominate, while those from High Power Distance cultures remain silent.<sup>22</sup> Law offers a unique dialogue structure, entitled “Mutual Invitation,” which can help de-center power in the conversation.<sup>23</sup> Rather than having a typical leader guide discussion, he suggests having each person speak and then choose the next person to continue the discussion after they have finished. This allows for equal representation of voices, while also allowing the power to be re-distributed to each person. At the same time each person experiences powerlessness in having to rely on another in order to speak. This structure takes time and patience to develop.<sup>24</sup> It often leaves gaps of silence which make some uncomfortable. This silence, however, is necessary for leaving room for those who often do not participate verbally. At first, the dialogue may feel unnatural, contrived, or disjointed. Initially it may not allow the conversation to build on specific themes. With time and patience, however, more natural conversation building will occur allowing each participant to be blessed and challenged by one another.

### *Hopeful Imagination*

Perhaps more importantly, the space and structure for dialogue allows the voiceless room to express their hurt and hope. This new environment can provide the space necessary for healing through confession, repentance, suffering, struggle, and prophetic witness. The de-centering of power is designed to leave room for the other. In sharing the life of another, one can begin to enter into communion with this person. This is a large part of the life of the church in

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<sup>22</sup> See Law, Chapter 3, pp. 29-36.

<sup>23</sup> Law, pp. 82-88.

<sup>24</sup> See Law, Chapter 7, pp. 63-69 and Chapter 9, pp. 79-88.

community. The body of Christ is called to rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15, NRSV). Similarly the church calendar calls the body both to suffer with in the cycle of the cross (Lent), and celebrate with in the resurrection (Easter).<sup>25</sup> This solidarity in the community is part of the natural rhythm of church's embodiment of Christ. Often, however, the church may not provide enough space to allow different cultures and people to express themselves and share in this communion together. Culture and language barriers can often isolate and fragment the body. Time and intentionality of practice must be devoted to welcoming one another within a globalized world. "Mutual Invitation" in dialogue can help cultivate life together in a multicultural church. This is a life together where all cultures are reshaped into the rhythm of the cross and resurrection of Christ.

Larry Rasmussen in his chapter on "Shaping Communities" in *Practicing our Faith*, notes how imagination and commitment can help shape the church to live in the adaptive challenges of this historical moment, "as part of a certain steady rhythm that gathers people to tell stories and break bread together."<sup>26</sup> The gathering of the church in worship, the communal hearing of the public praise of God, the listening to the spoken word and proclamation, the passing of the peace, and the celebration of the Eucharist is imaginative rhythm that shapes the life of the church in unity in the name of Christ. This is an imaginative rhythm that both shapes the life of the church in present and as the Kingdom of God yet to come. John Zizioulas, in *Being as Communion*, reminds the church that the practice of Eucharist together is the "revelation of the eschatological unity of all in Christ."<sup>27</sup> In this unity there is no mutual exclusion between the local and the universal. Rather, the breaking of the bread together is a

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<sup>25</sup> See Law, 74; see also Chapter 8, pp. 71-77.

<sup>26</sup> Larry Rasmussen, "Shaping Communities," *Practicing our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, Ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 132.

<sup>27</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 155.

source of forgiveness and reconciliation. Similarly, William Cavanaugh reminds the church that the kiss of peace is a sign that the Eucharist requires reconciliation and forgiveness in the body. For, “the Lamb of God has already taken away the sins of the world in His sacrifice. The task of the Christians is to live now as if that is in fact the case, to embody redemption by living a reconciled life, and thereby bring the Kingdom, however incompletely, into the present.”<sup>28</sup> Through this means of grace and sacrament the Lord brings forth reconciliation in the present church, which has been reconciled to God, while at the same time reflecting the reality of God’s Kingdom to come. In this confession and embodiment, the multicultural church is called to live out this reconciliation in the present and eschatological reality of God’s Kingdom.

Imaginative, unifying dialogue helps prepare and invite the multicultural church of the twenty-first century to the table of celebrating the Body of Christ in his death and resurrection. This reconciliation is ongoing and the life of the church is continually reshaped in celebration of the Eucharist together. Dialogue with one another in love helps the church continue to discern and embody her mission to the world through practices of peacekeeping and making, hospitality, solidarity, and sharing in the Body of Christ together. In this journey and conversation together, the church is offered the ongoing gift to embody the suffering of the crucified and resurrected Christ and the life-giving, unifying power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in life with one another.

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<sup>28</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 238-239.

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