

IMMERSE

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One Big Melting Pot

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Ever since Bruce Springsteen, Michael Jackson, Cyndi Lauper, and Darryl Hall (and his sidekick) joined other well-known celebrities singing “We are the world” to raise support for the famine in Ethiopia, pop culture has been in overdrive trying to engage the “oneness” of the human race.

The '80s saw the Berlin wall come down, the end of the cold war and the fall of communism; not coincidentally we saw a surge in the short-term missions movement, and a change in what “short” meant (previously, short-term typically meant one or two years, the concept was recast to one or two weeks).

The result? Years later a generation of students has emerged with a different mind map of the world than any generation prior. While the generation shows little significant knowledge of global geography (and geopolitics), there's much more awareness of how close we are to the others in the world and a higher frequency of contact with those much different from themselves. While the nature of diversity is getting better by some narrow metrics, it seems we're more separate than ever before.

A host of other movies and pop culture contributions have attempted to show that we are more the same than we are different, emphasizing that it's our socially-constructed stereotypes that keep us from truly connecting with one another. But is this true? Is the only thing that keeps us from connecting some misinformed stereotypes about culture, socioeconomic status, gender, or skin color?

We should be concerned about the oversimplification of the diversity issue as we help today's young people find their place in the world. This false dream has allowed many to forget the reality that we are not truly living in a global village; we're not really on our way to becoming a global culture; the world is not coming together as one. The issue of cultural diversity goes much deeper than some trite stereotypes that we face in our daily lives. To oversimplify the depth of what keeps us from unity is a larger detriment that leads to even greater cultural clashes.

Our national culture runs deep in our identities and produces powerful opinions, emotions, values, and behaviors. Our ability to communicate verbally and, more importantly, nonverbally is all a matter of culture. Our cognitive patterns and relationships, the way we view property, and the things we create are all shaped by the learned patterns of our culture.

Our culture is what makes us more than "people," but it's also what identifies and separates us as peoples. Diverse peoples were the result of the confusion of languages that occurred at the Tower of Babel. Reading the Bible one is struck with the amazing presence of the concept of peoples (or ethnic groups) from Genesis to Revelation, God seems to desire cultural diversity.

In fact, it was the people's desire to avoid scattering and diversifying that led to the Tower of Babel incident. Our desire to identify and want singular unity and identity is ingrained in our flesh, while our desire to value and celebrate diversity is not.

In the early days of the Internet people remarked how this medium would avoid discrimination because Web surfers were invisible and thus couldn't be identified with stereotypes; yet within months of AOL's introduction to the wide world of the Web, discrimination began. People with AOL addresses were pooh-poohed as second-class netizens. Quickly the term "newbie" was no longer used simply to identify someone new to a community, but also an annoying nuisance to that community.

I know racism and prejudice abounds in our world, and we seem to have no trouble identifying what is annoyingly different about people from other cultural heritages. However, as an American ideal, we're beginning to believe that we really are more similar than dissimilar; the implications of that self-deception impacts our ability to experience the richness of other people and the greater kingdom of God.

Here are a few directions we may want to consider in response to the "simple small world" conception.

As the church we must not give in to popular culture's oversimplification of cultural diversity.

The world is smaller, which will lead to more cultural clashes in our future. The lasting effect of these clashes can be minimized if we take seriously the

depth of the issue rather than settling for simple solutions and trite oversimplifications.

Many evangelistic programs have toured through other nations and afterwards boasted great outcomes based on culturally loaded norms. But based on an informed understanding of the culture of these peoples, I wonder how much lasting impact these crusades have really wrought.

If we believe the act of intercultural communication is a simple hurdle to overcome, we're crippling our chance at lasting impact. If we believe world missions can effectively occur with two weeks of interaction, we will not be effective.

The church should be intentional about valuing diverse points of view from a position of complexity.

Most of our drive for diversity is motivated by our self-centered desires to "do something for others" (i.e. short-term missions or service projects) rather than a sincere longing to learn from what others have to share with us. Particularly when it comes to the gospel, we're more interested in the good news we have to share, than celebrating the people with whom we're sharing—which is not Jesus' model at all.

I've spoken with Caucasian, African-American, Korean, and Chinese church leaders who have all struggled with the issues of diversity. We can't hope to bridge our difference simply by inviting preachers from other races to attend or putting people of diverse ethnic groups on our brochures. The issues go deeper than that. After years of attempting to bring diversity to audiences of conference attendees, many youth events are still conspicuously white. Is this a problem with the program elements, or is the concept and structure of an "event" what doesn't translate into other ethnic groups?

Too often we see Christians from other countries as our "little buddies," which is unfortunate. They are the very people we need to invite into our lives from the unique depth of difference they possess. We need them in our lives, but it's hard to see the world beyond our own lens of comprehension. This is why we must be intentional about seeking out diverse points of view.

The real cultural clash is not one caused by simple stereotypes, but a lack of understanding for the depth of our differences. As the next five years will reveal, we're closer to further cultural isolation than cultural "oneness." If we truly wish to reverse this trend, we must responsibly deal with the complexity of cultural diversity.