

POSTINGS

articles for missions mobilizers



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The Nations Inside Your Church

Don't underestimate your church's diversity potential

Many churches in the West are becoming proactive about expanding their ethnic diversity. While everyone benefits when a local body becomes more multiethnic and multicultural, it's important to remind ourselves that almost every church has amazing potential *in the diversity already present* in their congregation. So regardless of how diverse your church looks when it meets, please keep reading! This *Postings* issue is designed to help you better engage those God has already placed in your body who represent nations around the globe.

HIDDEN DIVERSITY POTENTIAL

1. **Immigrants or refugees.** Those who have recently relocated to a new country and church may be the most obvious representatives of ethnic diversity, yet their unique value for the missions program often goes undetected. Reasons vary: Newcomers may be totally absorbed in trying to survive in a new land. There may be a real or perceived barrier due to lack of fluency in the majority-culture language. New immigrants' missions interest often is focused exclusively on helping those back in their home country. Or they may see themselves as having little to offer in missions or even to your church in general.
2. **Second- or third-generation children of immigrants.** Children and grandchildren of immigrants often blend comfortably into the majority culture, but many retain a worldview in common with prior generations. Some will be fully or partially bilingual. Almost all have grown up navigating cultural differences as they interact with their parents or grandparents.
3. **International students and businesspeople.** Because these ethnically diverse believers are usually transient, many churches fail to see them as a key resource for missions, even though they have the potential to enrich global engagement in multiple ways even during their relatively brief stay.
4. **An ethnic congregation sharing building space.** A significant number of churches generously provide meeting space for an ethnic congregation that may meet at a different time and worship in a different language. Because of these factors, their missions potential may be underestimated.

5. **Ethnic diversity in a church's circle of affiliation or fellowship.** Non-diverse, majority-culture churches frequently belong to a denomination or regional fellowship that includes ethnic congregations. Unfortunately, because these immigrant fellowships are often economically poorer, they may be perceived only as needing help. In reality, they have so much to give because they are rich in cross-cultural experience and relationships that their dominant-culture brothers and sisters may lack.

Immigrants or other internationals bring unique perspectives that are a valuable contribution to a missions leadership team.

INVENTORY ETHNIC RESOURCES

How can a church begin to discover all of the types of ethnic diversity listed above (and perhaps more) that God has put within their reach? Here are a few ideas.

Ask newcomers or those in your new members class the country of their birth, what languages they speak/understand, and what connections they may have to relatives in their family's country of origin. Consider including similar questions on your next all-church survey.

In a worship service, pray for those who do not know Christ in the countries of origin represented in your congregation. You can provide a QR code or text address for the congregation to send the name of the country/countries of their heritage, noting, where applicable, how recently they or their

parents/grandparents immigrated. After the results are compiled, you can take the project a step further by posting a list of heritage nations alongside a world map. For several weeks, invite people to stop a moment at the map to pray for the lost in the country from which they or their forebears came and write their name beside the country on the map or the list. It will be a challenge for global prayer and provide some useful information.

WAYS TO POWER UP YOUR DIVERSITY POTENTIAL

1. Recruit multiethnic, short-term missions teams.

Willingdon Church in Burnaby, BC, Canada, is a highly diverse church that is very intentional about making their short-term teams multicultural. One recent team included 10 people representing eight different countries of origin. Pastor of Global Ministries John Best reports, “The team functioned really well. Sure there were challenges, like there is on any team, but the Lord provided wonderful unity. We use resources such as *Foreign to Familiar* and *The 3-D Gospel* to prepare people for crossing cultures within their team as well as at their ministry location.”

Park Street Church in Boston, MA, urges international students at their church to join teams going overseas. Some have language skills that are useful even if the team isn’t serving in the student’s home country. For instance, East Asian students taught Chinese classes in Central Asia. Others, especially graduate students, were able to offer professional development courses. International students on the team not only resonated culturally with Central Asians but also challenged the stereotypes that many held. These students, from elite universities in

Boston, were the cream of the cream, and yet they testified that there was something even more important than conducting research or earning a graduate degree at a prestigious American university—and that was knowing Christ.

Recognize the gifting of people of other ethnicities for training cross-cultural teams. They have very valuable first-hand experience in navigating various kinds of cultural differences. Their illustrations of how to identify subtle cultural clues will sensitize those heading overseas with limited experience.

2. Personally learn from the cultural perspectives of those of different ethnicities.

John Jordan, associate lead pastor of Village Church in Beaverton, OR, describes one example of how those with non-Western cultural backgrounds can provide wonderful insights about cross-cultural ministry: “A Korean leader in my church has helped me understand honor and shame culture, Asian thinking, why some ideas work and others don’t, and how to identify the most critical cross-cultural relationship issues. His understanding of my Western learning style is a huge gift. For example, he can tell a pastor in Asia, ‘You have to be very straightforward with John. He wants you to say whether something is working or not. You can be honest.’ This changes the conversation. My Korean colleague has also kept me from making lots of mistakes. Some of the most helpful missions conversations I have had occurred as he and I would debrief a trip on a long flight back from Asia.”

3. Make your missions leadership team ethnically diverse.

Immigrants or other internationals bring unique perspectives that are

a valuable contribution to a missions leadership team. However, churches often fail to recruit them. John Jordan adds the advice to not just use them as part of your team but also invest in them. He explains, “Ask yourself, what do they need to hear or learn? Open doors for them to learn more about the bigger picture of missions and to interact with other missions leaders. I intentionally choose to send them to conferences, underwriting the cost if needed. They bring back their perspective on what was said and presented in a way that is different from someone of my own ethnicity.”

4. **See diversity as a way to mobilize missions globally.** Many churches have

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members whose country of origin is no longer unreached; the percentage of believers there may be higher than in the Western nation to which they have relocated. If that nation is no longer a high-priority mission field, it has great potential for missionary sending. Is God calling you to assist immigrants and internationals He's placed in your church to help mobilize a missions movement from their country of origin? Could you introduce them to key indigenous missions leaders or a sending agency from their global region? Could your internationals guide your church into a

partnership with a church there that would result in a missions impact greater than either of you could accomplish alone?

5. **Create three-way partnerships.**

Third Church of Richmond, VA, has provided meeting space for an Egyptian congregation for years, but it was only recently that they launched a joint effort to partner with a congregation in Egypt. The pastor of the Christian Arabic Church, their sister congregation in Richmond, went on a trip with Mission Pastor LJ Jaworski and other members of Third to discover an appropriate partner church in Egypt. His knowledge of the context was extremely helpful. The three churches are eager for further in-person partnership once COVID travel restrictions allow.

6. **Challenge second-generation immigrants to become Kingdom professionals.**

Village Church has recognized that many immigrants sacrificed everything to bring their children to the West and provide them with an excellent education. Many of these children are now highly skilled young adults under great pressure from parents to be successful. Missions pastor John Jordan explains that “We find that these second-generation professionals resonate with the challenge to use their skills globally for Kingdom impact. We help them see how evangelism and church planting integrate into taking their professional skills overseas for reaching the nations.”

7. **Use your diversity resources in community mapping.**

In order to better understand which nations God has brought to their doorstep, many churches are looking to map their community's ethnic diversity. (*Tradecraft: For Your Church on Mission* provides a great introduction to this concept.) If your

church is launching a mapping project, make sure to take advantage of those representing different nationalities in your congregation. They will “see” things your majority-culture people will miss.

- 8. Co-sponsor short-term teams.** Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church (MDPC) in Houston, TX, discovered that the Portuguese-speaking congregation that met in their building already had a mission partner in Brazil. The Portuguese church is now planning to lead a missions trip to work with their Brazilian partner and will take MDPC folks with them. The Anglo partner will be followers, not leaders!

Meanwhile, the Spanish-speaking church meeting in the building runs a weekly food pantry that involves many MDPC folks as volunteers. Amy Delgado, missions director, explains, “When some of the Anglo volunteers wanted to change the program, they were reminded that their role was to serve, not to impose their ‘improvements’—an important lesson in humility for anyone crossing cultures.”

MDPC also creates service opportunities that integrate teens from both the Portuguese- and the Spanish-speaking sister churches. Working together is a great way to initiate friendships among the youth.

- 9. Invest in transient internationals.** Willingdon Church has recognized the unique opportunity to build into people who have recently immigrated, even those who will be

in their community for only a short time. “We want to invest a Rev. 7:9 every nation/tribe/people/language DNA into them,” John Best explains. “We want to be intentional about helping them to see that God loves the nations. The goal is to see them ready to take that passion with them when their job moves them on somewhere else in the world.”

10. Network with ethnic congregations.

Immigrants in your church are likely to know of ethnic congregations from their homeland in your region. They probably have personal friendships with these believers and can be bridges for fellowship and potential partnership. Ask them to help you get acquainted, guide you in understanding cultural differences, and provide suggestions of how you might serve one another.

More and more churches are getting excited about open doors to share the gospel with the nations God is bringing to their doorstep. Fortunately, at the same time He is also embedding gifted and godly believers from around the world into their congregations. These diverse Christians’ experience and expertise are amazing resources we dare not squander. What steps can your church take to engage their unique gifts? Perhaps you can begin by initiating or deepening a personal friendship with some of these amazing global Christians in your body. God meant us to work together!

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