

Becoming an Intercultural Church: Some Practical Steps



What is an intercultural church?

When we speak of “intercultural church,” it’s important to define some terms. “Culture” refers to all the ways of thinking and living that bind a particular group of people together. These include everything from distinctive food or clothing, to shared stories, symbols, and practices, to deep-seated beliefs or attitudes that characterize the group and its members. Culture is most often associated with ethnicity or nationality (e.g. Canadian culture), but it can also be associated with distinctive groups within a society (e.g. queer culture).

A “monocultural church” is a church that is predominantly made up of people from a single culture (e.g. Russian Mennonite). A “multicultural church” is made up of people from multiple cultures, with no single culture predominating. An “intercultural church” is a multicultural church in which people from all representative cultures engage equally (e.g. in decision-making processes).

Why is it important to become more intercultural as a church?

There are at least two reasons why it’s important to become more intercultural as a church.

First, Canadian society is becoming increasingly multicultural—even in our rural areas. If we want to bear witness to Jesus in our society and invite people to walk with us in discipleship to Jesus within our churches, we need to be prepared to become not only multicultural as churches but truly intercultural.

Second, God’s vision for the church—and God’s kingdom, to which the church bears witness—is intercultural. Both God’s reign and Christ’s church know no national borders and encompass people from all ethnic backgrounds. In God’s reign and Christ’s church no single culture—ethnic, national, or subculture—dominates. We are to follow Jesus in reaching across social boundaries of all kinds—breaking down “the dividing wall of hostility” between cultures (Eph 2:14)—in anticipation of the day when people “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” will stand before God together (Rev 7:9).

How can we become a more intercultural church?

At the 2025 Mennonite Church Canada Gathering, several presentations focused on becoming an intercultural church. Here are ten practical steps suggested from those presentations and from members of Mennonite Church Canada’s Intercultural Church Steering Committee. See also the further resources listed below.

- 1) Work at simply becoming a healthy church, even as a monocultural church. A healthy church is vibrant and life-giving in three dimensions: in its internal life (worship, learning, hospitality, etc.), in its outward life (witness, service, partnerships, etc.), and in its organizational ethos (identity, vision, decision-making processes, etc.).
- 2) Pay attention to the differences already present within your church and community, often hidden under the myth that “we’re all the same.” If you’re open to seeing them, you’ll spot differences in theology, worship preferences, daily Christian practices, political views, views

on social issues, and probably even in age, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnic background, socio-economic circumstances, and more.

- 3) Do some serious reflection on these differences. To what extent does the demographic diversity of your church reflect the diversity of your community? If it doesn't reflect your community's diversity, why not? What are the barriers keeping people of different cultures from participating fully in your church's life? What practically can you do to lower or eliminate those barriers?
- 4) Learn how to reach across these differences to have healthy conversations with each other about our differences. Develop a curious mindset toward others, genuinely interested in how others think and live. Practice active listening with others: nonjudgmental, respectful, encouraging, paying close attention, able to paraphrase what they've said back to them.
- 5) Do the hard work of discerning what the centre is around which you gather as a church—those beliefs and practices which are truly most important to you collectively—and what matters are secondary and thus open to change. This may be as simple as “our centre is Jesus as presented in the Gospels.” It may include other specific beliefs or practices.
- 6) Learn to tell your own stories of migration in ways that help us see ourselves as simply one story in the midst of many stories of migration. If you are not Indigenous, you have a migration story in your relatively recent family history. Learn it, and learn how to tell it with truth and humility. If you are Indigenous, your story of migration is an ancient one, though it likely also includes more recent experiences of forced migration and assimilation.
- 7) As a church, become curious about other cultures and churches which reflect those cultures. Regularly invite people from these cultures and churches to share their gifts with you—their food, their stories, their beliefs, their friendship. Be open to sharing your gifts with others.
- 8) Regularly, intentionally celebrate the diverse cultures represented in your church. Find ways to share food across cultures, honour special holidays, tell cultural stories, and more.
- 9) Share Jesus with diverse people in your community, inviting them to your church. This isn't a coercive thing; it's simply about being attentive to those who express interest in your faith or your church and are possibly open to finding out more.
- 10) As you become more multicultural as a church, work to decolonize the ways you “do church.” Notice the ways you worship, learn, make decisions, and so on as a church which are reflective of the dominant culture in the church. Then listen to people of other cultures in the church who would do these things differently in their culture—and begin incorporating what you hear. Work to ensure multiple cultures are represented in various roles throughout the church, and that power—the ability to make change—is distributed equitably among people from different cultures.

Becoming an Intercultural Church: Some Resources



See the collection of resources at CommonWord on Intercultural Church:

<https://www.commonword.ca/go/2214>.

A few specific recommended resources (available through CommonWord):

- [*Intercultural Ministry: Hope for a Changing World*](#), edited by Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Jann D. Aldredge-Clanton: a collection of essays exploring what intercultural church is and how we can move toward this ideal.
- [*Building Mennonite Belonging: Toward an Intercultural Church*](#), by Pablo Hyung Jin Kim Sun, Korean-Paraguayan Mennonite pastor: a book exploring Mennonite teachings and traditions which can equip us to become an intercultural church.
- [*Intercultural Church: A Biblical Vision for an Age of Migration*](#), by Safwat Marzouk, former professor at AMBS: a book offering a biblical vision for what it means to be an intercultural church.
- [*"Spirit Acts: A Monologue Based on Acts 1-12,"*](#) by Arlyn Friesen Epp, director of CommonWord: a video of a dramatic monologue following the life of the Apostle Peter as he comes to terms with God's intercultural vision for the church.
- [*"Breaking Down, Gathering Up: Intercultural Church,"*](#) by Joon Park, Mennonite pastor and intercultural consultant: a series of three presentations given at Mennonite Church Alberta's 2024 AGM, describing intercultural church and providing insight into becoming a more intercultural church.
- [*"Diversity: God's Design,"*](#) by Hyacinth Stevens, executive director of Mennonite Central Committee East Coast: a four-week study that serves as a basic introduction to the celebration and acknowledgment of difference.