

Challenges and prospects of Christian missions in a multicultural context

**Author:**Akinyemi O. Alawode¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Akinyemi Alawode,
akinalawode@gmail.com

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Christianity faced different phenomenal situations during its propagation. The world faces a multicultural phenomenon where cultures are crossing geographical boundaries, intermingling and being overtaken by globalisation, which Christian missions must respond to. The article examines the functionality of Christian missions in multicultural contexts by establishing the place, principles and practices of multicultural missions. Urban missions allow multicultural missions because they are intercultural and practicable among people of different backgrounds. Multicultural missions are biblical because we have it in both testaments of the Bible. Moreover, multicultural missions have their challenges, such as contextualisation issues, ethnocentrism, cultural segregation and insensitivity. Nevertheless, its advantages include inclusiveness, mission partnership, tribal interactions and Christ-centred sermons.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article concludes that multicultural missions are more appropriate for reaching the present multicultural generation.

Keywords: Christian missions; cross-cultural; urban missions; incarnational; globalisation.

Introduction

Christian missions have been faced with many existential situations since the beginning of its spread. It has experienced persecutions, the rise and fall of empires and kingdoms, the evolution of civilisation, internal reorganisations through Reformation, political and industrial revolutions and cross-continental missions that eventually led to the movement of representative Christianity from the global North to the South. Christian missions have shown resilience in the face of all these situations and have responded with ingenious approaches that kept the spread of Christianity going, like monasticism, national conversions, missionary orders, trade expeditions and modern missionary movements that led to indigenous and/or contextual missions.

The world faces a multicultural phenomenon where cultures cross-geographical boundaries, intermingling and being overtaken by globalisation. Christian missions cannot afford to lose initiative in responding to the new trend, but must be proactive in moving from contextual missions to multicultural missions if they should reap souls for Christ in this dispensation. This article examines how Christian missions can function in multicultural contexts by looking at the overview of multicultural missions, their biblical foundations and the challenges and prospects of making them multicultural.

Overview of multicultural missions

Multicultural missions are a response to the reality of multiculturalism in the contemporary world, which has recently seen cultural diversification in a given geographical entity, unlike when cultures were localised in a particular location. Crane (2015:2) notes that the time when culture is limited by geography has changed, and it is high time the Church embraced this reality. Prince (2017:245–246), reviewing Marvin J. Newell's *Crossing Cultures in Scripture: Biblical Principles for Mission Practice*, notes his definition of culture as 'the distinct beliefs, values, and customs of a particular group of people that control how they think, feel and behave'. The world currently does not have localised cultures like before, where geographical boundaries separate cultural identities and beliefs, and one culture is regarded as superior to others in value systems and civilisation. With globalisation, people and places can no longer be isolated or separated according to cultural backgrounds because there are increasing intercultural interactions among people, giving birth to multiculturalism.

Bennet-Martinez (2015:1–3) acknowledges that multiculturalism describes mixed-race, mixed-ethnic, dual or more cultural interactions and those in intercultural relationships.

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Multiculturalism is on the increase on a global scale due to colonisation, migrations and globalisation. The global increase in intercultural contact due to immigration, speed of travel and interaction and international corporate presence is responsible for multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is used for individuals exposed to and integrated with two or more cultures. The term is also used for societal and intergroup entities or institutions with more than two cultural interactions. Multiculturalism is an ideology that recognises and celebrates equality in differences, approves of and accommodates cultural diversity and emphasises equality (Soegianto & Putri 2023:50–51). This ideology makes people, agencies and institutions more sensitive to accommodating other cultures in their diversities, as peoples' identities need to be treated with respect and equality. It is an ideological response against cultural hegemony, racism and xenophobia that have been plaguing the world.

Furthermore, Choi (2015:112) describes multiculturalism as both an ideal and a reality, recognising the world as multicultural, which has a goal to recognise the rights of people regardless of race, ethnicity, social roots or language; rectify economic and political injustices by championing policies that guarantee freedom and opportunity for all people and foster genuine respect for diverse cultural expression with everyday existential needs. Jagessar (2011:1) aligns with Sivanandan's definition of multiculturalism as cultural diversity, which may lead to integration or separation determined by the socio-political context. He further notes that many nation-states and most of the world have a long multicultural history. Multiculturalism is not a recent phenomenon, but there were cultural boundaries in intercultural interactions in the past, and much was being done to preserve cultural identities. However, in modern times, due to pop culture and many other fallouts of globalisation, preserving cultural identities gives way to embracing a universal cultural value that does not denigrate any cultural background.

Moe (2019:19) observes that multiculturalism and interculturalism are different but related. While multiculturalism describes cultural diversity, inter-culturalism prescribes how cultures interact. Davis (2010:1–2) notes that in the USA alone, over 500 ethnic groups are speaking more than 630 languages and dialects and asserts that in the 21st century, the United States will need a variety of multicultural and interracial churches to reach the full spectrum of people living in the country, particularly in urban centres. The world is radically embracing multiculturalism and sees it as a way of limiting segregation among people. However, the Church is reluctant to accept this reality, particularly in missions. The concept of people groups in missions is still limiting the exploration of multicultural missions, with few churches with multi-ethnic populations struggling to overcome tensions from cultural identities. There is a need to develop a mission consciousness that factors multiculturalism if the Church does not become obsolete in the years to come.

Furthermore, a mission is generally defined as a task that a person or group of people takes as their duty to perform involving interactions with other persons or groups. Mission in a political context is noted to involve power play between at least two cultures. However, mission in religion is described as the propagation of beliefs and practices from the group that believes it has the truth others do not possess. (Ntreh 2016:xi). This definition showcases the fact that the Christian missions are multicultural in practice. Multicultural missions then require cross-cultural and intercultural understanding and preparations of the missionaries. Prill (2023:27) notes that the development of cultural intelligence of cross-cultural competence (CQ) is crucial for equipping missionaries. Citing David Livermore, CQ is 'both a measurement and a coherent framework for enhancing the ability to cross the chasm of cultural difference, effectively, lovingly and respectfully'. It involves measuring the extent to which missionaries understand cross-cultural differences, become aware of existential issues in interacting with other cultures, develop interest and are motivated to adjust to different cultures and imbibe the ability to adapt their verbal and non-verbal actions to new cultural contexts. In multicultural missions, missionaries should be prepared to shed their cultural attachments and meet people with Christ without imposing their cultural context on the people of other cultures they minister to.

John (n.d:4) notes that the Gospel in contemporary times is presented to a world of culturally diverse languages and cultures than before. Some see diversity as a blessing for the Church. In contrast, others consider it unsettling because of the fear of disunity and syncretism, which makes multicultural missions a topic that requires serious attention. To navigate the intricacies of multicultural missions, Aruan (2023:4,13) notes that the Bible presents Christianity as a way of life rather than a religion and developed the concept of culture-friendly Christology, stating that Christ was presented in culture and interacted with other cultures in his mission. Thus, he is culture friendly. His intercultural encounters aimed to share the good news, heal the sick and liberate humanity regardless of cultural background. It connotes that culture should no longer be treated as restrictive to the Gospel but as a connecting point to a relationship with God and his mission on earth. A culture-friendly Christology in the Gospel preaching will prevent its hearers from viewing Christianity as a tool to destroy their cultural identities while not limiting the Gospel to their cultural contexts but presenting Christ as ready to meet them as humans in need of salvation regardless of their cultural exposures.

Moreover, Ngaaje (2023) notes that the new frontier of mission for the Church is the multicultural missions, which he defined as the:

[D]evelopment and implementation of heterogeneous models of communicating the Gospel, through beliefs and actions that are sensitive to the need of the culturally diverse population within a church's field service, creating a community which celebrates unity in diversity in Christ. (pp. 170–171, 178)

He further notes a difference between a multi-ethnic and multicultural church: a multi-ethnic church still maintains its differences, while the multicultural church incorporates the differences into a holistic programme sensitive to the experiences and differences of the people. This conception has led to the development of intercultural theology from around the 1970s, which seeks a cultural framework that does not assume that the theologian's background is universal and searches for a Church that contributes to Christ's body without believing it is the most important of the most academic, escaping the Western hegemony, but a theology that people of diverse backgrounds can relate with. Multicultural missions require careful attention to preaching that makes every hearer of the Gospel understand it regardless of their particular cultural identities and contexts.

It should be noted that cultural baggage stands in the way of many people engaging the Gospel in this contemporary multicultural and multi-faith context, which many missionaries and Christians take for granted. However, some pieces of advice were suggested to missionaries in multicultural settings: avoid making Christianity an elitist faith, be bold enough to be realistic about the errors in other religions and engage in dialogue in interaction with cultures and different faiths (Gidoomal 2010:1–3). The Bible, the handbook of missions, has many instances and references that give credence to multicultural missions, which will be discussed further.

Biblical foundation for multicultural missions

Davis (2010:5–7) observes that the biblical foundation for multicultural missions or ministry could be traced to the Old Testament in Genesis' creation story (Genesis 1), which affirms that humankind, regardless of race or ethnicity, is one and gives no room for racial superiority or inferiority for one to be preferred above others, as all races have one origin. He also notes that God laid the foundation for the diversification of peoples in his blessing on Adam: 'Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth' (Gn 1:28), which indicates the diversity of creation at the human level. Thus, it is God's idea. This diversification became pronounced in the narration and descriptions of the three sons of Noah who survived the flood, from whom nations emerged. Psalms 86:9 notes that those nations are made by God. Another OT principle about multiculturalism proposed by Davis (2010:7–10) was the destiny of nations under God's sovereign control as people rise and fall under his providence (Deuteronomy 32:8). Also, God's purpose is to bless all nations through the concept of universal salvation (Gn 3:15, 12:3, Is 42–54). Likewise, God desires to be worshipped and glorified by all people groups (Is 43:6–7). The Old Testament reveals God as God of all nations that still regards humankind as belonging to him and needing salvation and redemption.

In the New Testament (NT), the multicultural mission is rooted in God as the nations' creator (Ac 17:26). He has been involved in human affairs in a global context and wants the

whole world to see his salvation. Aruan (2023:14–15) and Ngaaje (2023:175, 177) observe that the NT has a universal culturally inclusive intent as Christianity is founded on the assertion that in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek (Gl 3:28) and a promised future that all tribes and tongues will be together in Christ's Kingdom of justice and peace. The Bible also advocates for cooperation with cultural norms if they do not conflict with the Gospel and God's commands. The NT is more conscious and consistent in projecting salvation for all nations/peoples, beginning with believers in Israel who must interact with other cultures and bring them to Christ without discriminating against their cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, in the Gospels, references are made to the Gentiles as part of God's plan of salvation (Lk 2:30–32), and Jesus' encounters with non-Jews show that he is passionate towards their acknowledgement of God as their Maker and Redeemer through cross-cultural and multi-ethnic missions. His prayer in John 17 also reveals unity in diversity of all who will come to believe him. The Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20, Mark 16:15–16 and Luke 24:47 reveals that the Gospel of Salvation must be preached in all nations (Davis 2010:11–15). Peter acknowledged in Acts 10:34–35 that God is no respecter of persons and accepts those who seek him among all cultures. Moreover, Paul pioneered the mission to the Gentiles, particularly in metropolitan areas where people of many cultures are aggregated and preached to them in a way that they will acknowledge Christ and fellow believers as brethren regardless of their cultural affiliations.

Challenges of multicultural missions

The multicultural mission faces challenges that make it a potentially tricky terrain. Despite the reality of multiculturalism in the world today, it is evident that many church leaders and members are not well equipped with intercultural skills to produce cultural cohesion in the Church, bringing about cultural conflicts in many multi-ethnic churches (Ngaaje 2023:180). Many people in multicultural settings are still culturally sensitive to how their cultural identity is treated and perceived. The very first conflict in the early Church was culture related; people from a particular cultural setting felt segregated and marginalised, and they protested their treatment because they perceived the other culture as dominating the leadership. The Apostles needed to integrate leaders from different cultures into church leadership for peace to reign. Therefore, multicultural missionaries should be prepared for such cultural sensitivities and prepare to incorporate everyone without room for sectionalism.

Furthermore, multicultural missions or churches sometimes long for their cultural attachments and feel lost in multicultural contexts. They tend to be creating or have new theologies created for them in response to existential questions they have no answer to, some of which are disingenuously innovative and used to deceive many through cultural theologies that do not represent Christian missions. Also, they are susceptible to other religions that

deal with the spirit world, like soothsayers and fortune tellers who use them to make money (Kpobi 2016:8). They tend to fill the void of their particular cultural cosmology in their faith with any cultural theologies or mythologies that give a sense of spirituality, which makes them susceptible to syncretism and deception. Paul faced the same in Galatians chapter three and addressed it by affirming that faith should rest on Christ, not cultural affiliations.

Moreover, Kpobi (2016:3–4) also notes that missions in the 21st century are raising many questions that cannot be ignored, challenging their effectiveness and credibility due to the growing trend of urbanisation, which brings cultural, political and religious diversity. Multiculturalism is seen to be bringing challenges of identification and adjustment because many born in the city have lost their traditional attachments to their culture, with worldviews so divergent that it is difficult to understand and interpret biblical messages. Indeed, the Bible messages need context for interpretation because they are relayed initially in a cultural setting. Contextual theologies that missions have been familiar with are difficult in multicultural settings, which has occasioned the need for more emphasis on developing intercultural theologies to present Christ comprehensively to multicultural gatherings.

Another challenge is the impact of multiculturalism on the two social institutions that directly impact the Christian mission: family and marriage. Family life in the city, particularly in Africa, moves from communal to individual, which affects the social cohesion needed to galvanise mission efforts and promote acceptance of the Gospel. Marriages also face the challenge of moral laxity in urban or multicultural contexts. Also, interethnic marriages in urban centres face the challenges of conflicts and disintegration due to differences in cultural understandings. Cities may have surface cultures that may change rapidly from time to time. However, each person's deep-seated cultural convictions are not easily eroded, which urban/multicultural missions must not underestimate. Thus, the Church in the city must be intensely aware of the place of culture in ministry and the potential for clash of worldviews arising from multiple cultural backgrounds (Kpobi 2016:4–6). Multicultural missionaries must be versatile in trying to understudy each culture represented under them and address their issues from their cultural perspectives without allowing it to influence other cultures in the congregation.

In summary, Jagessar (2011:3), citing many scholars, notes multiculturalism's challenges: different ethnic groups living parallel lives, engendering segregation, enabling other groups to self-segregate and weakening collective identity. Therefore, there is a need for multicultural missionaries to study more about cultural backgrounds and contexts represented under them and relate with each of those cultures from their cosmological perspectives while using the Gospel to unite them. The missionaries must be smart enough to focus on Christ alone without making the people feel that their cultural identity is irrelevant.

Prospects of multicultural missions

Diversity is seen as God's gift. The Church needs to learn how to improve in celebrating ethnic, gender, generational, doctrinal and theological diversity and differences if the Kingdom of God needs to be advanced intentionally (Ngaaje 2023:170). Jagessar (2011:3–4) also notes the positive prospects of multiculturalism such as challenging people to embrace inclusiveness and coexist with others, redressing the unequal treatment of cultural and minority groups and creating spaces for 'multi-logues' that allow for views qualifying each other, overlapping, synthesising and reshaping to reach the culturally diverse people, which helps to build a welcoming and inclusive church. To be able to do this, Christian missions need to engage in a more profound, active and critical interaction and develop a mutually reciprocal relationship between diverse groups, moving beyond a dialogical approach to a transformational approach. Christian missions must make Christianity similar to sport and entertainment, which have overcome cultural barriers without denying their identities but have become a melting pot for cultures without tensions or infractions.

Furthermore, multicultural missions, when implemented successfully, give birth to believers who are desensitised to ethno-racial tension, but their focus will only be on the universal intent of salvation. With his position on culturally friendly Christology, Aruan (2023:17) notes that it helps in authentic missions, which make other humans partners rather than objects of missions, with reciprocated learning and support from each other. Multicultural missions from this perspective will reduce the cultural tensions that go with gospel presentation as the focus will not be on cultural confrontations but relational evangelism that plays down cultural attachments in the Great Commission's fulfilment.

Furthermore, Sutherland (1998:5–8) highlights principles of cross and/or intercultural ministry to involve an incarnational approach that is flexible without compromise, studying cultures (ethnography) to understand people and find points of intersection for the Gospel in their cultures and worldviews, building relationships, networking and utilising cross-cultural teaching methods. This approach will rapidly expand the Great Commission's fulfilment and make Christianity universal without engendering racial tensions. Christianity is meant to unite people under God to fulfil his purpose of bringing humanity into his universal salvation plan.

The cry for a multicultural ideal gives an exceptional opportunity to share the Gospel of Christ, relevant to the world with diverse cultures coexisting closely and weary of conflicts occasioned by cultural differences. Missions' practitioners must be aware of the tremendous prospects that await multicultural missions when they engage other cultures for Christ by giving up some of the parts of their culture to accommodate others by creating symbiotic relationships and interactions between diverse cultures and entering into multicultural conversations of the biblical interpretation for the world today rather than the dominant

cultural interpretations of the past (Choi 2015:112–114). Multicultural missions do not destroy cultural identities or subsume them into another preferred culture; instead, they embrace all cultures as the same before God, and humans, regardless of cultural backgrounds, are accepted by God only through faith in Christ. It redirects missions to their original purpose of making humans stand saved equal before God.

Furthermore, multicultural missions involve planting churches where a single language, like a lingua franca, is used for worship and helps the congregants not fixate on their cultural attachments. It engenders unity in the Church despite diversity among the people. It also helps non-Christian migrants from cultural regions that have not been reached with Christianity to try it out. It also helps in networking people for the Gospel as people from diverse nationalities work together towards a common purpose and helps in fulfilling the Great Commission easily and quickly as the nations, the LORD commanded the Church to disciple, are gathered in the cities (Crane 2015:4–5). Multicultural missions play down the cultural emphasis without damaging its identities but help promote Christianity as a faith that engenders unity and recognises all humans as capable of relating with God and responding to him regardless of their preconceived cultural exposures. This position gives Christianity a united front to evangelise the world without segregation.

Conclusion

Multicultural missions are a Christian response to a multicultural world. The world institutions and agencies are championing and promoting a world without identity barriers through globalisation. The world is moving towards a more unified economy, political alliances and social interactions to reduce people's problems. The Church is fundamentally the representative of God's Kingdom and should not be left behind in making the kingdom of this world become the Kingdom of the LORD.

Multicultural missions may have their challenges borne out of human insecurities arising from cultural identities. Still, they are not without the prospects of advancing and fulfilling the Great Commission at a faster pace. Christian missions should be well positioned to respond to the spread of globalised cultures in a world where the modern generation has little or no attachment to their indigenous cultures due to pop cultures, intermarriages and migrations, particularly in urban centres that host most multicultural populations. Multicultural missions will be more appropriate in reaching these generations born into multiculturalism.

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