

LEAD ON

LEADING INTERCULTURALLY

BY ED DOWN

A NEW FAMILY

In 2023, my wife and I welcomed three children into our family. They had been living with two separate foster carers, with weekly time together. For the first time in their lives, they were all to live together.

Part of the transition process when you are adopting is to spend a week learning routines and observing how their foster carers do key moments of the day – mealtimes, bedtimes and so on. One day, we picked up all three children and brought them home; suddenly, we were a family.

A week of transitions does not prepare anyone for being thrust together as a family of five! We had to somehow merge our own routine as a couple with two different bedtimes, mealtimes, family traditions, and life structure. We had to create something new, something that was how 'The Down Family' was going to share life together, taking elements from all three homes. Little did we know just how demanding that process would be but, in time, we have created something that works for us.



AN INTERCULTURAL JOURNEY

I find our experience a helpful way for me to remember what I am trying to do as a church leader of an intercultural church. Our church has met in a new-build school on the edge of multi-cultural Leicester for the past 20 years. We are a few years into our intercultural journey as a church – trying to create something new out of all the kinds of households and backgrounds that mix and merge in our building on a Sunday.

We are Anglican, and have members from Cameroon, the Caribbean, the Czech Republic, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, Poland, and Romania, as well as UK and British-born Chinese members. We have God's children from so many different places that we cannot simply have a way of doing church that represents one tribe: we long to create something that reflects all of us in some way. Something that is uniquely ours, that works for us, that could only be found in Hope Hamilton Church and nowhere else.

(If you want to find out more about intercultural church, I recommend Ali Taylor's Lead On article '[God has No Favourites](#)' from April 2023.)

When I arrived in 2020 I had next to no knowledge of intercultural church and I have had to learn quickly. I have often found myself asking the question 'What does intercultural leadership look like?' I offer some reflections below, many of which have been drawn out from conversations with colleagues.

LEADING INTERCULTURALLY WILL ... STRETCH YOU

We know the importance of finding leadership tasks that take us out of our comfort zone, that help us develop new skills and qualities. When Lusa Nsenga-Ngoy was leading the Intercultural Worshiping Communities project in Leicester he used the image of

swimming in a sea to describe intercultural church. We cannot isolate this to one part of church life: as leaders we have to get comfortable swimming in a sea that is slightly wild and unpredictable but which encompasses all of church life. We have to think differently and pay attention. To return to my original analogy, children turn everything in your life upside-down.

... QUESTION YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

If I am honest, so much of my leadership can be about my own preferences, my style, my heart. Just as children teach us to see the world differently, so Intercultural church challenges that desire in my leadership and forces me to ask the question: 'Does it have to be this way?' Directive leadership will not be appropriate in most cases: co-creation becomes the default way to approach church life.

One small example is I invite church members to select the songs for the week from a list of songs we created together. I didn't think mixing hymns, African praise songs, and Western modern worship music would work together, nor was it necessarily what I wanted. But together we have discovered that we can make a joyful noise with all sorts of songs in a service that reflects our church make-up.

... MEAN LISTENING INTENTLY

As leaders, God calls us to keep learning and the only way to learn about others is to listen. Intently. I have a long way to go to understand how a West African mind approaches life (for example), but I certainly understand their mindset much more now than when I arrived.

I have heard the stories of what it means to sell up and move to the UK and how often the dreams and ideals are not realised. We must hear these stories because it changes how we approach worship, shared life, pastoral conversations and so on. Children very quickly learn when you are listening and when you are not; our churches similarly know how deep our listening and our love goes.

... MAKE YOU THE GUEST MORE THAN THE HOST

A gift I hope to offer as a leader (and I am sure many do) is hospitality. Anglican vicarages can be a huge blessing here. But for many cultures, the offering of hospitality is more important and honouring than receiving it. Does PCC have to meet in the church building or the vicarage, or can it be in a PCC member's house? Where should the important pastoral conversations happen – in my space or the space of the church member? An ordinand placed with us named



this reality so beautifully early on: 'I understand X better because I have eaten her food'. I would simply add that eating someone's food in their space has been an important discipline in my leadership.

... DRIVE YOU TO PRAYER

When our children arrived, the way I pray had to change: gone were the structured, morning quiet times. Yet, I am so much more aware of my need to pray and spend time with my heavenly Father.

The journey of an intercultural church is a long and hard one, yet it is kingdom work, for in doing so we show the fullness of the kingdom of God. As such, the spiritual battle is real and I have felt the burden to pray as we have continued to walk this path. More, the way I have prayed (with and without others, in Sunday worship and in prayer meetings) has changed. My language and desires have been shaped by our church and our context.

There is much more I could say. I have not 'cracked it' as a leader of an intercultural church and we are by no means a perfect intercultural church. We continue to learn and grow in what it means to create something new together, and my leadership continues to develop.

THE WAY FORWARD

The single thing which has helped me most to develop my leadership is other intercultural leaders. Both in our Community of Practice for Leicester Diocese Intercultural Worshipping Communities and the monthly online huddles with Intercultural Churches UK, being sharpened and supported in prayer has been vital. God has not made us to be isolated individuals and the space to reflect and process with others in similar contexts has made a real difference.

I hope the resources here help you reflect on what it could mean for you to lead interculturally, creating something new in your context.

- **JOIN** a huddle with other intercultural leaders (icuk.network/huddles).
- **READ** The Culture Map, Erin Meyer (Public Affairs), Multicultural Kingdom: Ethnic Diversity, Mission and the Church, Harvey C. Kwiyani (SCM Press), An Intercultural Church for a Multicultural World: Reflections on Gift Exchange, Martyn Snow (CHP).
- **LISTEN** to music from other languages and cultures (songs2serve.eu).
- **DO** a short assessment about your personal cultural tendencies in leadership (hbr.org/2014/08/whats-your-cultural-profile).



REFLECT ON THESE QUESTIONS

- How is your leadership affected by your preferences? What does your church expect from your leadership?
- In what spaces are you a guest?
- What is the dominant culture of your church? What could you co-create with others to help it reflect your church's make-up?