

Innovation in L.A. Mosaic as a multiniche church: Mosaic as a multiniche church

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Scholars and church growth experts have been paying attention to Mosaic Church in Los Angeles, the subject of Gerardo Marti's book A Mosaic of Believers: Diversity and Innovation in a Multiethnic Church. Marti, professor of sociology at Davidson College in North Carolina, wrote the book after being a participant-observer at Mosaic, a multiethnic church which features innovative, artistic worship. We talked to him about the church and his analysis.

Mosaic seems to diverge from a fundamental rule propounded by the church growth experts: people prefer to go to an ethnically homogeneous church.

Some scholars now say churches succeed if they have a niche, if they fit some type of cultural slot for which people are willing to go out of their way. Mosaic is a multiniche church. There are many little places— “cubby holes,” if you like—that a person can fit into. The more cubby holes people fit, the more deeply involved they'll be in the congregation. These niches are not just for self-gratification. They are meant to be a training ground for cultivating a common identity as dedicated followers of Jesus Christ.

Ethnically, Mosaic appeals to second- and third-generation ethnics who are becoming broadly Americanized. They know American television and pop music. It's possible for a person who's Korean to come to church without having to act “Korean.” Japanese, Vietnamese, Chinese and Korean can all be a part of a common fellowship and not accentuate their differences in language, culture and history. These ethnics don't feel comfortable in the ethnic enclaves of their parents' church, and certainly not in each other's parents' church. People of radically different ethnic heritages can date and marry each other at Mosaic through their common

connection to popular culture.

Because the church intentionally embraces popular culture in its pursuit of relevance, whites also fit into Mosaic. The church is therefore relevant to both whites and assimilated ethnics who have grown up in this culture. Most of our churches, in contrast, are buried in a past that ethnic groups don't share. When people who are not Caucasian come into many of our churches, they experience the worship as a white, European historical remnant that is inherently foreign. A church that advertises itself in its ethos and architecture as being from the 1950s or from the 1850s or even from the 1250s is failing to be relevant to the recently acculturated immigrant population.

Mainline churches have sought for years to be more diverse, without having much success at the congregational level.

Many white churches make the mistake of reaching out to the groups most culturally distant from them. This reflects a paternalistic perspective that doesn't generate the kind of creative, community-building, mission-empowered camaraderie we really want in churches. Instead of taking a leap to people we don't know and don't understand, we should start by seeking out people who are very much like us yet have different ethnic heritages. From there we can begin the process of joining together our differing streams of culture.

When a congregation decides to incorporate a hymn from Africa or a chorus from Mexico City in order to diversify the congregation, it has misstepped already. You could never adequately represent the variety of ancestral backgrounds that already exist in your church. Moreover, by accentuating the ones you feel to be most different and exotic, you contribute to a sense of alienation rather than togetherness.

Can you describe Mosaic's integration of the arts in worship?

One example is when the church brought together artists and told them, "We want you to paint during the services." They said, "You want me to do *what?*" The church said, "Yes, we'll put you right up front. Just draw whatever strikes you as we experience church together." Some artists will work on the same canvas for several weeks, and the members of the congregation will see the development of the image as the church's teaching is developed in their own lives. Eventually the project expanded to include multiple painters and then sculptors.

The most dramatic integration of the arts is found in the re-creation of physical environments. For example, when a Sunday message was based on the metaphor of wind, artists created an authentic breeze both inside and outside of the auditorium. Wisps of fabric were used to suggest clouds or fog. The invisible was made visible through movement as a precursor to understanding the work of the Spirit as the pneuma or the breath of God moving in and through our lives.

On another Sunday, the lights went down and a jungle rhythm beat emerged from the back of the auditorium. The curtain went up, and there were four men, mostly naked, with mud covered all over their bodies, doing a ritualistic dance in a circle. Despite the mud clumped on them, you could see hints of difference. One was white, one black, a third with Asian eyes and another with browner skin. Each one danced in the center while others would approvingly grunt and moan and sway. The clear theological imagery was that Adam, and so all of us, come from the earth. We are different but still have a common core. As they finished their dance and the curtain went down, people roared with enthusiasm.

How does having so many people involved in the entertainment industry affect Mosaic?

The church is aware of the power of Hollywood and the extent of the degradation that occurs there. Nevertheless, it also understands that the entertainment industry successfully uses every form of creative expression—music, dance, acting and so on—and bundles them together to communicate a message.

Mosaic's engagement with Hollywood has parallels with other churches that have made the decision to engage the world rather than hide from it. In this case, the church didn't have to beg people to be creative or to think outside of the box, or to critically examine the power of media in everyday life. Those things are all assumed at Mosaic.

You note that some people have complained about Mosaic's almost exclusive embrace of contemporary culture. One person said she would love to sing a hymn. Can the effort to constantly be new and relevant itself become a kind of routine?

I can understand the emotional and nostalgic resonance that hymns may have for people. I could also say that the Model T was a pretty good car, so why should we bother to make any advances? We could say Shakespeare said it all and said it best,

so why should we bother crafting new literature? Many in the theological realm feel this way. We say Calvin or Luther or whoever said it best, and there's no need to craft new theology. Christianity is a living religion, and I think Mosaic admirably shows how a church can embrace change rather than fear it.

Why has it been difficult for Mosaic to reach out to African Americans with the same degree of success that it's had reaching Hispanics and Asians?

The African-American experience is very complicated. Research suggests that the black/nonblack divide is more important than a white/black divide. Asians, for example, more frequently associate with whites than with African Americans. It appears that in coming years Hispanics and Asians will come much closer to being "white" than will African Americans.

Mosaic, for most of its history, was located in East L.A., which was not a place that was welcoming to African Americans. It was not until 1997, when church services moved one mile west to a neighborhood that was not as exclusively Chicano, that the inclusion of African Americans was even feasible. Their inclusion remains a challenge since studies indicate that if African Americans exist in too few a number, it's very difficult for that number to grow.

I'm in the midst of writing a book about another congregation that is mostly black/white with a growing number of Asians and Hispanics. I deliberately went to that church to learn the distinctive dynamics of diversity involving the African-American experience.

You suggest that future churches are likely to look more like Mosaic.

There are a number of hints that the emerging church will become more diverse and perhaps even more innovative. There's no guarantee of that, but there are a few things working in favor of it: 1) The world is becoming more diverse, and whites will soon no longer be the majority in the U.S. 2) We see higher rates of interethnic and interracial dating and marriages. 3) People are associating themselves with more than one background, making for more bi- and multiracial identities. 4) Blacks raised in the post-civil rights era appear to be more willing to engage in cross-ethnic relationships. 5) We see strong evidence of revival and continued strength in the evangelical subculture. 6) More churches are encouraging the use of creative arts beyond choirs and congregational singing. 7) Emerging church leaders are accommodating the current pace of social change and are integrating technological

and organizational innovations in their ministries.