

Stephen Dudek

Building a Home for a Multicultural Parish: Lessons Learned

A FIRE AND A NEW SET OF QUESTIONS

On December 12, 1995, St. Francis de Sales Parish in Holland, Michigan, faced the task of building a new home for God's people. A fire accidentally destroyed the church, which this community of English, Spanish, and Vietnamese speakers called "home." Two years later a new church emerged, designed to sustain the faith life of three unique communities and to promote among them cross-cultural understanding and dialogue. The new home rises as a prophetic voice against a culture of standardization. Designed specifically for a culturally diverse context, it promotes unity without uniformity. Both ambiguity and clarity are held up as values within and beyond its walls as it speaks of the mystery of God in whose image all have been fashioned.

How do you build a home for the Church when it is a culturally diverse community? What should this home look like and what sort of a process should be utilized? How do you incorporate into this process a wide array of approaches to being Church by its members, immigrants from across the globe? These and similar questions are being asked by parishes as they prepare to build or renovate in culturally diverse contexts. The story of one culturally diverse parish's reconstruction in the midst of tragedy may prove helpful for other communities.

CULTURE, FAITH AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

Reflection on the critical issue of identity in multicultural communities is essential to achieving appropriateness in church design and effectiveness in ministry. Critical reflection on a community's identity as a multicultural parish is a necessary first step for both building a community of faith and constructing a home in which that community will be housed. The interplay between culture and faith involves four critical relationships. Each must be taken into account when building or renovating a church in a culturally diverse context. Comprehending each relationship helps a multicultural community arrive at a clear understanding of its purpose and identity.

The Transcultural Dimension

The first relationship involves exploring the nature of what goes beyond any one culture. We call this *transcultural*. Many aspects of Chris-

tianity such as initiation, sharing meals and forgiveness transcend the experiences of any one culture. This transcultural dimension makes worship possible in “heterogeneous” settings and even within what is perceived as the most “homogenous” of contexts.

Building or renovating a church for a multicultural community requires a deep appreciation for the transcultural dimensions of liturgy and faith and an astute awareness of their limitations. This appreciation makes the design and placement of primary elements such as the altar, ambo, and font possible. Multicultural parishes by their very nature are communities of faith centered upon transcultural experiences that bind the world’s people together as the body of Christ.

Contextualization or Inculturation

A second relationship which needs to be taken into account involves adopting specific cultural values into the practice of faith. We call this adoption of values and patterns *contextualization* or *inculturation*. Where inculturation is lacking, identity is neither respected nor is its promotion encouraged. In building or renovating, reverence must be shown for all cultural groups within the parish, as well as for what is proving to be a new culture, the multicultural context itself.

Reverence is exhibited for self and others as a mutually enriching two-way process. For example, a plaza, suggested by our Hispanic community, was incorporated into our church’s design as a way to interact with and come to know people who are unable or unwilling to enter the church itself. For some it serves as a space for transition and welcome while for others as a culturally appropriate place to engage in evangelization. An important design element of our new home is that it has touched and enriched the lives of all parishioners.

Found carved into the altar, ambo, and ambry are the fruits, flowers, and plants significant to the peoples who gather for worship at St. Francis de Sales. Parishioners were given the opportunity to write down elements of God’s creation which were significant to them for a wide variety of cultural and historic reasons. People in culturally diverse parish contexts need to be able to say, “I am at home here in this church” as well as “This place helps me be all I can be.” All groups long to make sacred space their own while at the same time benefit from the faith-stories and values of others. The goal is to find appropriate ways for the gospel to become contextualized. Parishes in multicultural contexts are prophetic voices which speak against a culture of standardization as they promote unity without uniformity.

The Counter-cultural Dimension

A third critical relationship between faith and culture has to do with the ethical imperative of being *counter-cultural* and usually has to do

with standing apart from an accepted practice or belief. Here faith challenges un-Christian cultural patterns. These undesirable patterns are acknowledged and clarity of identity results from the establishment of new boundaries which set us apart from common practice.

A home for a multicultural community of faith tells the story of how all people are drawn into the circle of God's love. How and where people are seated, the design of the furnishings, acoustics as well as the selection of honest materials, all invite people to stand apart from many accepted practices and beliefs in accordance with gospel principles. Churches designed for multicultural faith communities are uniquely and prophetically positioned to be counter-cultural voices through which the Spirit keeps alive the promise of Pentecost.

The Cross-Cultural Dimension

A final and key critical relationship between faith, culture and subsequently, "identity" involves sharing between cultures. The term "cross-cultural" is used to describe this sharing across cultural boundaries resulting in mutual enrichment and change. The church building itself becomes the text for telling stories and the sharing of beliefs and values across cultures. An image of Our Lady of Guadalupe or the Vietnamese Martyrs can become a familiar point of connection to the past and a bridge to the future for some, while for others, it becomes a window into another culture. Recognition that knowledge is partial and all understanding of the gospel is culturally bounded opens people to the immensity of God's love and the complexity of divine wisdom.

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

Five strategies were found to be particularly helpful for designing, building, and remodeling in a culturally diverse context. These strategies when integrated into planning processes, even where cultural diversity is not readily apparent, encourage healthy dialogue, facilitate participation and ownership, and promote a spirit of reverence toward sacred space. Implementation of these strategies helps parish leadership effectively move theory into the realm of practice. As strategies they also encourage a parish to move from identity-centered reflection to evangelization and mission.

Acknowledge Grief and Loss

Grief is apparent in most culturally diverse parishes. Economic factors, demographic change, immigration, prejudice, and perceived insecurity push and pull people into and from neighborhoods in an ever more globalized world. New immigrants grieve the loss of their birth land with its language and comfortable customs. Long-time residents in established neighborhoods grieve the loss of what was formerly a familiar

and stable environment. Add to these factors additional grief-producing realities which often accompany building and renovation efforts in multicultural contexts. Fires and natural disasters, the consolidation of parishes, shortages of priests, and other pastoral ministers and economic woes all contribute to and intensify grief. Quickly it becomes apparent why it is essential to acknowledge both grief and loss in a culturally diverse context.

Taking time to ritualize congregational grief helps encourage healing and acceptance while promoting a healthy environment for building and planning. St. Francis de Sales parishioners felt the need to ritualize their loss, especially since it involved intense and unexpected grief, piled upon a layer of long-term, low-intensity grief, the unacknowledged reality of many a culturally diverse context. Early in the planning process parishioners were asked to express their hopes and fears regarding our rebuilding efforts. Intense grief was clearly evident especially among minorities and the poor. Not only were people grieving the loss of their church but also one more loss was added to the crucible of grief, which for them was life itself.

Prior to the demolition of our church, an all-night vigil and multilingual sung evening prayer was held in its burnt out shell. People were invited to stop by the church site after each of the weekend Masses and were encouraged to light a candle or leave a few flowers as a prayer gesture. A wooden carved crucifix rescued from the blaze was placed in a central location. Positioned on either side of it were candelabras grotesquely twisted from the heat of the blaze, as well as large shattered earthen vessels blown apart by frozen water, complements of fire hoses and mother nature's chill. The prayer service took the form of a funeral wake. Time was provided for people to share some of their memories of the Paschal Mystery celebrated in the church and adjacent facilities. Many memories were humorous like those which involved toddlers collecting bingo chips; while others provoked tears like the ten-year-old girl who shared with us the experience of her mother's funeral. When time is taken to ritualize grief and loss, bridges are built which help people connect the events of the past with the present and their hopes and dreams for the future.

Discover Ways to Tell a Shared Story

Common stories unite families and communities and provide them with resources with which to name and construct reality. In a multicultural context common stories are particularly important as a way of providing stability in an environment where ambiguity reigns. A high tolerance for ambiguity is an important attribute in the culturally diverse context. Equally as important are common stories which help people discover shared meaning and common values.

Incorporated into the outside prayer garden, which leads to the Blessed Sacrament Chapel of our newly rebuilt church, is an archway designed by a well-known sculptor. The steel from which it was fashioned was rescued from the church's roof structure during its demolition. Both oxidized and charred, the garishly twisted beams speak of the intensity of the inferno to which they were exposed and the baths of water which followed. The archway acknowledges both past and present grief which often lingers and periodically bursts into our lives. The sculpture is entitled STELE-ELATION. It is a monument made of iron, born in the crucible of grief, transformed into a joyful expression in the curves of its new found body. It communicates a common story lived and experienced by a very diverse group of people. It is both an acknowledgment of grief and a clear recognition of our need for shared stories. Our unique stories are important but so too are shared experiences which in a most mysterious way help us overcome the limitations that language, race, gender, and age frequently place in our path.

Overcome Ethnocentrism and Promote Intercultural Dialogue

The world we live in, interpret, and create comes to us by way of a culture, which surrounds us but is difficult to describe. It has been said that culture is like the water that fish swim in, only when it is absent do they realize it is not there! The same is true for us. All people see the world from their cultural perspective. But rarely do we acknowledge that fact unless we are truly intentional about it or are forced to step outside our culture and into another. This is important in the building and planning process since blindness in the area of ethnocentricity easily results in distortion, domination, and disintegration when it comes to others' input and their taking ownership of the process and its results.

Whenever possible, intercultural dialogue is to be encouraged and designed into the planning and building process. The natural tendency in multicultural parishes is to minister using a parallel-tracks approach where each ethnic group worships, catechizes, and functions as Church in a way that affirms individual group identity but rarely promotes true dialogue across cultural boundaries. The richness of the multicultural context is lost, to a large degree, by such an approach. While acknowledging the necessity of providing culturally and linguistically relevant worship, catechesis, and outreach, intercultural dialogue is equally important if we are to navigate an increasingly globalized world while taking seriously the Pentecost imperative.

Conflicts arise within multicultural parishes when unfamiliar values, experiences, styles, and tastes as well as differing approaches to popular religiosity, combine with economic realities in a parallel-tracks environment. A natural tendency might be to avoid or overlook conflict, yet by doing so opportunities are lost for understanding and true

intercultural dialogue. The goal of intercultural dialogue in the building and planning process is not to create an ethno-relative or ethno-neutral environment, but rather to create an environment where ethnocentricity yields and dialogue is encouraged with new and equally valid cultural perspectives.

Provide Opportunities for Silenced Voices to Speak

In every parish community there are silenced voices longing to speak. Within multicultural contexts certain ethno-linguistic or socio-economic groups can find themselves silenced by the dominant majority. It can also come to pass that long-standing groups within a parish begin to feel as if their voice is slowly being silenced with changing demographics or the arrival of new immigrants. Creating systems that encourage the voiceless to speak out is important when building or renovating a church.

The acceptance by our parish's Euroamerican community of an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe as the only depiction of Mary within the church is an acknowledgment that silenced voices are being offered a chance to sing anew. Previously, our church possessed three different statues of Mary. The last to arrive some thirty years ago, the one depicting our Lady of Guadalupe, barely made it in the back door of the church. Located in the farthest corner high above the assembly in almost total darkness it spoke of abandonment and exile. While annually it was brought down and placed in a position of prominence from December 3 to 12, after her feast it was banished once again to almost total darkness! The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in our new church has a place of prominence near the entrance and is approachable. Now on their wedding day brides and grooms of Euro-American descent readily place flowers before her along side those previously presented by their Hispanic and Asian counterparts!

While criticizing the proposed image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, our parish's Mexican-American community acknowledged, for the first time in a public way, the presence of new Latino groups. A number of well-intentioned people asked whether the tricolor Mexican flag could be present in the artist's next rendition. But with that a small previously voiceless group of Latinos from other countries began to ask if Our Lady of Guadalupe was not the patroness of all the Americas? Would not Chileans, Nicaraguans, Colombians, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans want to see her as one of their own? It did not take long for the parish's Mexican community to acknowledge it would not be appropriate to include their beloved flag in this sacred image.

Silent voices, when attended to, help confront ethnocentricity. After much research and input from our Vietnamese-speaking community, a talented artist presented her color rendition of the Vietnamese Martyrs

for their reaction. Immediately she was told it reminded them of another Asian country of which their memories were not so pleasant! She was also instructed to remove a number of offensive elements which were not fully understood by most Westerners! The final rendition has been met with broad support including that of the Vietnamese community. Prayers and offerings are reverently presented before the lamb on the throne (Rev 5:1-14) and representatives of the 117 martyrs depicted in striking color. New immigrants from Vietnam, along side their sponsors who arrived a generation ago can regularly be seen in prayer before their palm-embraced ancestors, in what is perceived by all, as a culturally relevant work of art.

Make It the Work of People's Hands

In an age of specialization it is increasingly difficult for parishioners to build their own church. Issues of liability and safety as well as time constraints and the complex nature of modern construction all impede a local building effort. But when a home for the Church becomes the work of someone's hands, it becomes his or her own and the process helps promote intercultural dialogue and build community. When building a church for a multicultural community of faith, opportunities should be sought out to involve large numbers of people in clearly defined aspects of the project. For some people it may be the only way they can contribute to the effort due to limited financial resources. For all involved, the process is an effective method of bridging cultural boundaries.

Volunteer labor was utilized by our parish in many aspects of the rebuilding process. Selective demolition took place in areas deemed safe by the general contractor. Volunteers hauled out rubble by the ton from areas of the building's lower level which were to be incorporated into the design of the new plan. Over fifteen-thousand bricks were salvaged, and by hand were individually cleaned of mortar to ensure an appropriate brick match in sensitive areas of the reconstructed church. On a weekly basis large numbers of volunteers were involved in cleaning the work-site. They were also involved in landscaping, the installation of cabinets, and the crafting of liturgical furnishings and vestments. Migrant farm workers labored alongside college professors with doctorates while senior citizens engaged in tasks with teens on work-release from the local jail. In the end and probably well before the completion of the building, it became the church of all the above because it represents the work of many human hands.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

Our parish learned many practical lessons from this experience. The following suggestions may prove helpful to others in similar situations.

The advice given, while by no means peculiar to multicultural environments, is especially helpful where diversity is the norm.

Attentiveness to practical realities contributes greatly to the success of all endeavors, especially in complex parish contexts. Practical matters such as organizational structure, living with financial constraints, finding qualified professional support, and issues relating to spiritual and mental health are by no means secondary elements to the building process. A parishioner stated it most eloquently when she said: "When we finish this process we should be better off not only because we have a new home for the church but because we have grown through the process." What follows is practical advice shared for the purpose of creating healthy systems and structures that in turn contribute to healthy processes.

Specialists Are the Best Surgeons

Hire a liturgical consultant who has cross-cultural experience and understands the four previously mentioned critical relationships involving culture and faith. While many parish priests are knowledgeable when it comes to liturgical theory and may actually have considerable building experience, designing a church, particularly in a multicultural context requires the expertise of an experienced liturgical consultant. What takes place at the time of building or renovating a church can be likened to major surgery. As parish priests we are good at what we do, but most of us are general practitioners. When surgery is called for, find a specialist! Only a well-trained liturgical consultant who understands both liturgical theory and group process is qualified to perform surgery on sacred space. Pastors in a culturally diverse context play a key role in ensuring that all voices are heard and that intercultural dialogue takes place. This is a massive undertaking in and of itself and does not allow for additional responsibilities better left to trained specialists.

Decision-Making: Broad-based, Quick and Nimble

Develop a multi-tiered process for decision making, which allows for both broad input from large numbers of people and at the same time is nimble and practical for making everyday decisions. We used a three-tiered system which included English, Spanish, and Vietnamese reactor groups, a culturally diverse building committee, and a smaller executive committee. The reactor groups were open to anyone who was willing to learn and who was committed to attending five or six meetings. They provided a safe context where members of each linguistic group felt comfortable speaking up to offer suggestions. The twelve-member building committee was comprised of individuals selected for their expertise in business, engineering, law, construction,

and communication. It provided a forum for cross-cultural dialogue and in-depth analysis of key considerations. The executive committee was comprised of three members of the building committee. All had considerable control over their schedule and were willing to donate significant time to the process and to meet at short notice. This committee engaged in the day-to-day follow up needed to ensure timely completion of the church.

Good Stewardship Involves Limits

Multicultural parishes tend to exist on the margins of life. Financial resources are usually limited and often scarce in multicultural contexts. Every effort must be made both to establish a realistic budget, which stretches people beyond what is comfortable, and then to ensure that all parties live within it. Since time is money, care must be shown to make effective use of time spent in dialogue and deliberation. Discussions can continue endlessly where knowledge is lacking on liturgical principles and where clarity is absent with regards to the previously mentioned four critical relationships. Good stewardship of resources involves knowing when and how to educate and promote dialogue and when to put an end to debate.

Celebrate What You Have Accomplished

Find ways to share your newly constructed or renovated church with the greater community. Well-designed churches and the communities they sustain boldly speak, better than any mission statement, to a parish's priorities and values. Celebrate your newly found identity which results from building or renovating a church in a culturally diverse context. The Rite of Dedication provides a wonderful opportunity to engage a multicultural community in a boldly prophetic ritual act of celebration. Creating unity without uniformity, upholding clarity as well as ambiguity, speaking out against a culture of standardization and in favor of authenticity is nothing short of a new Pentecost. Once Pentecost was celebrated in Jerusalem; now Pentecost is celebrated wherever and whenever the Church becomes a home for all people.

Stephen Dudek is a presbyter of the Diocese of Grand Rapids, Michigan. He is pastor of St. Francis de Sales Parish in Holland and the associate director of the Hispanic Ministry Office for his diocese.