

# MULTICULTURALITY AND FORMATION FOR MISSION

By DONNA MARKHAM

I read somewhere that everybody on this planet is separated by only six other people. Six degrees of separation. Between us and everybody else on this planet . . . A native in a rain forest. A Tierra del Fuegan. An Eskimo. I am bound to everyone else on this planet by a trail of six people. It's a profound thought . . . How every person is a new door, opening up to other worlds.

Ouisa, in John Guare's play  
*Six degrees of separation*, 1990

**A**T A MOMENT IN OUR GLOBAL HISTORY when we have experienced our hopes for a world without walls being shattered by the eruption of war in the Gulf, John Guare's play was in its early months of opening to New York audiences. Ironically, his play poignantly depicts what happens to us when social alienation and cultural isolation and ignorance so permeate our environment that we experience difficulty distinguishing between what is true and what is fraudulent in ourselves and in our world. In a world in which everything is potentially double-sided, two-faced, where the wealthy do not know the poor, where white people do not know black people, where Christians do not know Jews, a world in which no one really knows anyone different from himself or herself, Guare's characters strain to reclaim community and spiritual depth. His hypothetical trail of six people serves as a metaphor for countering the anguish of social estrangement and the loss of self-reflection by establishing connections.

It is in the midst of this pervasive global reality that the religious community serves as a potentially reconciling agent, addressing what is unrealized, lacking or neglected in our world. Religious are called to enter into those situations of alienation, superficiality, hatred, duplicity and ignorance where others cannot or will not go. It is into this world that religious communities are called to place themselves at

risk, to immerse ourselves in those situations of suffering and to assume the difficult task of breaking through barriers and fears which have become buttressed and intensified because people do not know one another. As 'experts in communion' we are 'called to be an ecclesial community in the church and in the world, witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God's design'. (*Religious life and human promotion*, 24, CRIS, April 25-28, 1978).

How, then, do we prepare ourselves to respond to this radical dimension of the pastoral activity of the Church? At a time when over fifty million of the earth's inhabitants are 'on the move', without land or home, and when many others are in the process of migrating, the temptation of those who are 'settled' to defend against the disruption caused by those who are 'unsettled' is great. Desires for security and for the stability of what is familiar entice us toward remaining insular in thought as well as in our rituals of relating and socializing. Formation for ministering in *this* world at *this* time must, from the very outset, act in contradiction to these desires. In countering such a pull toward security and familiarity initial formation must prepare women and men to become agents of peace-building and community development, persons who are enlivened in the wonder of those who are different from self. Religious in today's world must become at home as we immerse ourselves in a cross-cultural, multilingual and fragmented world-on-the-move in which human beings are desperate for meaningful human contact.

What was once the exclusive domain of missionary congregations is rapidly becoming the experience of religious who minister in countries open to receiving literally millions of uprooted peoples. Through the dynamic witness of community and by the persistent promotion of a new communion of the earth's sisters and brothers, religious work to dispel the social alienation which so dangerously pervades western culture. Such prophetic action places us in open defiance of the momentum leading from social isolation to interracial and intercultural violence and, finally, to absurdity expressed in acts of war and murder. When strangers experience tears of mutually understood human suffering hatred becomes far more difficult.

To prepare religious to be agents of transformation toward a new world communion, immediate and first-hand experience of those who are 'other' seems a necessary, albeit complex, component of any initial formation programme. In an effort to examine some of the ramifications for formation programmes in a multicultural context,

over one hundred religious shared reflections on their experiences with such programmes. Their observations indicated that while historically some multicultural programmes developed in response to diminishing numbers of entrants and seemed, at the onset, to duplicate the components of more traditional unicultural programmes, these programmes rapidly developed far beyond these early forms. The richness of the intercultural dimension quickly became apparent as did the need to adapt programmes to prepare religious for ministry in a rapidly changing global reality.

Other programmes were deliberately begun to prepare persons for ministry in a universal, culturally diverse Church. Missionary congregations have made major contributions in this process, as have some international congregations. Consistently, respondents expressed the belief that multiculturality furthers mission. Religious are called to minister 'at the edges' among the marginalized, at the boundaries between peoples. It is here where differences are most intense and reconciliation so desperately needed.

In reflecting on the positive elements of multicultural programmes, participants felt these programmes were direct preparation for ministry in an increasingly culturally diverse Church. During their time in the programme, many candidates and novices stated that they experienced confronting their own prejudices and having to break down secretly held stereotypes. For some, this process led to a deep confrontation with the sacred and was expressed as a conversion toward relating more intimately with the rejected and despised Christ figure. Many respondents asserted that any contemporary vision for a religious life must hold hope for the realization of a global community and for a religious life which is interracial and multicultural as it promotes this world communion. Repeatedly, programme participants, formation directors and congregation leaders who have had persons in multicultural programmes attested to the importance of developing understanding and models of partnering among people of diverse cultures. The formation experience should be one which exemplifies this process. As one respondent clearly articulated, 'The deeper our understanding of the peoples of our earth the better able we are to bring about Jesus's mission of reconciliation and the creation of a lasting peace'.

Concerns about multicultural programmes focused on heightened stress within the formative community, increased problems with communication and depth of interaction, fears of losing one's own culture through assimilation into a more dominant culture, anxiety

about prejudices surfacing and anger becoming more openly expressed. Many respondents expressed concern that directors have adequate training and skill to process intercultural group dynamics and assist in theological reflection within a culturally diverse context.

It is interesting to note that these concerns are quite consistent with issues raised by participants in other multicultural groups across a number of disciplines. As any new group forms, members unconsciously repeat or reconstruct something of their own internalized cultural matrices as developed in their families of origin, their primary group experience. That matrix is initially built on the earliest interaction between a child and its parents. It continues to develop in response to extended family interactions which are constitutive of any culture. For example, members within the same cultural group reflect similar patterns of responding to space and time, physical contact, personal boundaries and subtle non-verbal cues. In a similar way family members develop subtle patterns and unspoken strategies for dealing with ordinary family conflicts. Each family develops its own acceptable modes of managing anger, for members getting attention and for receiving affirmation and affection. This 'language', like that of early cultural communication, needs no interpretation nor explanation as long as it is expressed within the familiar environment.

As persons move into new groups they inevitably experience heightened anxiety. Persons entering into the formation community group, whether as candidates or novices, will invariably be apprehensive. In the course of moving from that which has been secure toward that which is untried and unfamiliar, regression to these earlier childhood family patterns and concurrent coping strategies will become apparent and acted out in the formation community. Regression is a predictable way in which human beings attempt to bind the anxiety generated by change. Consequently, we may expect mature women and men entering candidacy and novitiate communities to be confronted with a re-emergence of earlier childhood conflicts. It is important to underscore the fact that this is a normal and predictable group phenomenon and is not indicative of emotional immaturity or of an error in vocational choice. Regression occurs in every new group because anxiety over the loss of individual identity is aroused in each member. Thus, the pull toward the unconscious recreation of family relationships and reenactment of family dynamics offers contact with what is familiar as well as providing an opportunity to address conflicts which were not adequately resolved in the primary family matrix.

For example, it is not unusual in the initial months of the formation community's development for members to engage in numerous behavioural expressions which do not seem consonant with chronological age or with personal and professional maturity. Efforts to assert one's autonomy and individuality by engaging in power struggles, attempting to receive attention through inappropriate non-verbal acting-out behaviours, or reverting to passive-aggressive strategies for expressing feelings are a few examples of forms such group regression may take. Authority conflicts, competition and rivalry with siblings will be readdressed in each successive group into which a person enters until such time as these issues are sufficiently settled.

Contemporary research on personality development and intercultural relationships suggests that these normative group dynamics are more readily apparent in multicultural group settings. Several factors may account for this. The fear of losing one's identity and being subsumed into some unidentifiable and amorphous group entry is a particularly powerful unconscious fantasy within the multicultural group. Normal fears over the loss of one's separateness and autonomy are intensified in the intercultural setting because of the perceived danger of losing the most basic elements of one's personality—*culture* and *language*. It is through the confrontation of the primitive fears associated with loss of individual identity that the way is cleared for members to enter into the process of healthy identification with the group. In the multicultural formation group members are afforded the opportunity to deal with this in a forthright, if not dramatic, manner as they struggle openly with fears of assimilation and loss of boundaries. These fears are activated on several psychic levels. The move toward incorporation into a religious congregation necessarily requires the moving away from sole control over one's individual life and work. Accountability to a group is necessarily anxiety-producing for independent, autonomous adults. On a deeper level, the multicultural experience intensifies these feelings as candidates and novices struggle together to make meaningful emotional contact and establish mutually understood ways of communicating across cultures and languages.

In the initial stages of any multicultural group language becomes the central metaphor for members' desires for connection and closeness. Anger at not being able to use one's own language freely, problems in having to explain ideas, frustration with attempts to relate with others whose language is different, serve as expressions of

the pain of feeling alone and disconnected from others. Further, because language reverts to its most primitive forms of expression—speaking like a small child—multilingual, multicultural group members frequently express feeling infantilized by others in the group. It is to be expected that persons in the formation community will grapple with these emotions. Members defend against the experience of such diversity in a number of ways. Some retreat into silence, others may engage in national stereotyping, some may resort to sarcasm and mimicking, and others may attack the leaders, blaming them for the lack of clarity and the increased confusion and stress in the formation community.

While issues pertaining to communication surface in all groups, they tend to become more prominent in the initial development of a multicultural group. The reasons for this stem from early personality development. As infants, each human being experiences a certain sense of grandiosity as the centre of one's own imaginary world with one's own private language. As we develop, the desire to relate to others necessitates relinquishing that private world and special language. The pain of the loss of those earliest self-possession is reactivated in the presence of a culturally different person whose presence moves us beyond the comfort of our own world and spontaneous language. The pain is experienced in the frustration of limits in our ability to communicate because our language is either not understood or its nuances are unclear. It is felt in the longing for a new and non-dividing language through which deep human contact and understanding can be achieved. It is felt in our discomfort with the 'stranger'.

Working through the struggle with language directly by exploring the underlying meaning it holds for the development of substantive human contact will move the group more quickly toward cohesion and bonding. The distress of differing languages is countered by the gratification of intercultural relating. The wish to be able to belong to all cultures, to cross all boundaries, the desire to be one with all constitute a dimension of this pleasure. Additionally, the experience of multilinguality confers power through the ability to mediate, translate, reconcile, 'go between' and unify those who are strangers to one another.

Multiculturality does not add new elements to a group's process of development. Rather, it serves to intensify and accelerate fundamental group dynamics which must be addressed in order for a group to become a 'community'. Within the multicultural group it is much

more difficult to keep hidden primary group conflicts exemplified in struggles between autonomy and interdependence, control and cooperation, superficiality and depth communication, self-centredness and other-centredness. Nuanced language and common pre-verbal cultural understandings are generally unavailable defences behind which to hide. Similarly, while the multicultural component does not add new elements to the dynamic group process, it does add rich content which members then may explore. Issues of ethnic differences, racism, stereotyping, classism and politics provide stimulating content and enhance the context within which the underlying dynamics are worked through.

As initial formation prepares persons for community life in mission in our world, the addition of the multicultural dynamic is a realistic, if not necessary, component. Clearly, it may seem to complicate the process of formation. It may be envisioned as placing 'too much' on candidates, novices and directors. Nevertheless, religious are agents in a multicultural, complicated and enormously demanding world and need to be realistically prepared to minister effectively within it. To move away from this reality is to give credence to the frequent criticism that our formation programmes perpetuate life in an 'unreal world'.

The formation community is to the formation of the global community what the family group is to an individual's participation in subsequent social groups. That is, it is a critical event which must serve as a foundation and model upon which religious of the future must be able to draw. Insulating persons in formation from the reality of our world is akin to reinforcing Guare's characters who have lived separate lives, lacking in spiritual depth and longing to break from their own rigidified cultural impoverishment.

The responsibility for establishing effective multicultural formation communities must be undertaken with attention to several factors. Clearly, directors must be sufficiently flexible and prepared to manage the intensified dynamics of the multicultural group. In order to do this, they must have resolved, insofar as it is possible, their own cultural and racial biases. Periodic professional consultation will assist directors in assuring that their personal dynamics are not interfering with the development of the formation community. As the multicultural religious community is a microcosm of the Church in the world, the effective resolution of relational tensions serves as a model for conflict resolution in the broader social milieu. Consequently, training in and actually facilitating the productive

management of conflict becomes a means of preparing religious for participating proactively in the creation of the reign of peace in our world—as well as in the local living situation.

Additionally, adequate time must be allotted for participants to reflect on and integrate their multicultural experience in the formation community with their expressed commitment, through public vows, to the continual task of reconciliation and bringing about the communion of strangers in our Church and in the world. Participants who find the multicultural reality unduly disruptive and personally traumatic are likely to be poor prospects for religious life as we are experiencing it evolve.

To the extent that the institution of religious life engages itself in the multicultural reality, encountering the alienated, the poor, the immigrant, the homeless and the stranger, it will be transformed.

The need for continual ongoing formation becomes critical if we are to be open to such conversion and remain instrumental in the process of global transformation and world communion. Persons accepted into religious congregations, as well as those who remain members today, must possess emotional maturity, personal and interpersonal insight and, above all, a willingness to be unsettled and dislodged. Itinerancy becomes a distinctive characteristic of those committed to preaching the good news that communion under the reign of God is possible in a rapidly changing, complex world-on-the-move; that as strangers become companions, the world will edge toward peace; that as differences surface between peoples, wonder at individual uniqueness will take root in the heart; and that as language is stripped to its roots, truth will begin to emerge.