A Response to Chuck Van Engen's "Is the Church for Everyone?"

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Van Engen's article "Is the Church for Everyone?" depicts what other scholars have come to expect from him: comprehensiveness of the topic, a strong theological base, in-depth analyses, humbleness, and a long document. My friend has not disappointed us in any of these areas. I will attempt to respond in kind (except length), reflecting briefly on the homogenous unit, North American church planting, and some possible implications for the American Church Growth Movement.

Homogeneous Unit

"Because God's mission seeks careful and balanced complementarity between universality and particularity," argues Van Engen, "churches in North America should strive to be as multi-ethnic as their surrounding contexts." His thesis places the crosshairs squarely and steadily on the homogenous unit principle (HUP). According to Scripture, should the HUP be the startpoint? The goal? Something in-between? What role does the local context play in all this? Van Engen believes that Christ is in the business of bringing unity out of diversity, yet respecting both. Being a visual person, I've designed Figures 1 and 2 as an attempt to capture this:

Positive

Unity
Inclusiveness

Culture blindness
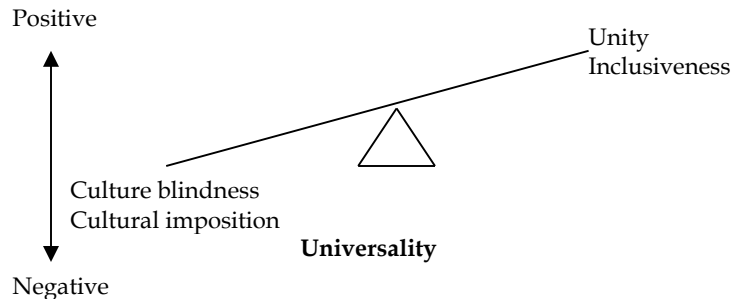Cultural imposition

Universality

Negative

Figure 1: Bringing balance to universality

Figure 1 shows that when universality is too highly regard-ed, cultural blindness tends to prevail, leading to the imposition of cultural dominance (including that coming from North Amer-ican church planters), minimizing unity and inclusiveness. Fig-ure 2 shows that when particularly reigns, fragmentation and individual particularities take preference, minimizing receptor orientation and critical contextualization.

Positive

Receptor oriented
Contextualization

Fragmentation
Individual particularities

Particularity

Negative
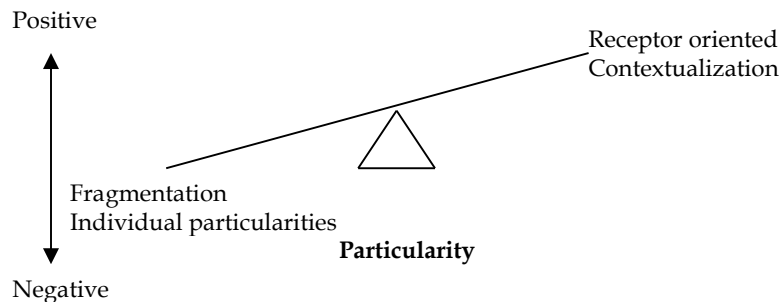
Figure 2: Bringing balance to particularity

Since "**we are all immigrants** . . . all Christianity in America has been ethnic Christianity." Van Engen is quick to note, how-ever, that Nineteenth Century immigrants shared a common world view: Western-European-Enlightenment roots. Today it is a very different story. Global immigration brings missions not only to our back door, but our front door and side doors as well. Van Engen's solution? Plant multi-ethnic churches!

But does planting multi-ethnic churches always bring bal-

ance to the HUP? What cultures and subcultures comprise those who attend such churches? Which language becomes the medium of communication? Is a particular socio-economic level evident? Educational level? Which worship style reigns? Leadership style? Decision-making patterns? Conflict resolution models? Finding that critical balance between universality and particularity may be more elusive than one thinks, particularly if the church reflects the dominate culture within the multi-ethnic church. One wonders if there are different levels of cultural purity within multi-ethnic churches. To what extent has universalism blinded us from identifying these?

Van Engen wisely notes that not every context is ready for or requires a multi-ethnic church. George Reitz [nycreitz@aol.com] cogently comments:

> Sympathies often lie with this [multi-ethnic] model. It reflects the idealism of our spirituality. The Heavenly Jerusalem will one day contain every tongue, tribe and nation, in a united way worship our God of heaven and earth!
>
> Reality says that there is a power of culture. That people respond best in the forms and language they feel most comfortable with. Then there is the financial strains of urban ministry which force the church to take pragmatic approaches. A *Multi-congregational Church Planting Model* addresses this reality. (Steps to Developing an Urban Strategy: A Workbook, 2000:23)

But if choreographing replaces cloning in multi-congregational or multi-ethnic churches, if a common vision surrounded by servanthood by all participants prevails, a strong message is sent to the greater community about this person called Jesus Christ (Jn 13:35).

North American Church Planting

I found Van Engen's critique of the various books on North American church planting sad, but not surprising. The false idea of universality remains way too high among the authors mentioned. But what can one expect when much of the religious training received probably was devoid of the behavior sciences that have a way of challenging ethnocentrism. I think back to the late 50s when anthropology hit the mission world. Missionaries

finally realized that those they sought to reach had a specific culture, not to mention subcultures. One-size-fits-all strategies (evangelism, church planting, community development, counseling, theology, leadership development, and so forth), they discovered, do not work well in most cross-cultural contexts.

The above insight soon led some to realize that not only does the target audience have a culture and subcultures, *so does the messenger!* They realized missionaries must know just as much about *themselves* as they do about the host culture, maybe even more (Steffen, *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry,* 1996:17)! This led to a major paradigm shift for many. A new principle arose: *earn the right to be heard; become a learner* before *becoming a communicator.*

If the above principle is followed the overemphasis on universalism would be modified. The messengers would begin to realize that their interpretation of the gospel is more culturally influenced than previously thought. For example, the decision-making pattern may need to be expanded to include groups as well as individuals; rituals, such as raise your hand, walk the isle, pray this prayer, etc., designed to communicate when a person is saved may be driven more by time orientation than Scriptural precedence, as may a quick presentation of a few spiritual laws; providing little Old Testament foundation for the gospel may reflect an anti-history bias; providing little connection between the gospel presentation and on-going follow-up may reflect a pedagogical preference for emphasizing the parts over providing a more holistic big picture.

Every theology, including Western theology, also reflects cultural bias. This does not necessarily mean that these theologies are inadequate for salvation, but it does point out that it is biased to address issues considered important by its designers. While some may want to critique the ethnotheologies of others (liberation theology, water buffalo theology, Pentecostalism, etc), we often forget that our own theologies are *also* ethnotheologies. I find it very interesting that in a certain seminary with over fifty percent of the student body being foreign, the majority being Asian, topics such as dreams, barrenness, corporate sin and salvation, polygamy, and ancestor veneration go virtually overlooked, even though these are issues many students must constantly face.

Maybe *critical theology*, rather than ethnotheology, would

help trainers and practitioners bring equilibrium to this overbalanced universal mentality. Critical theology recognizes that *all* theology is culturally biased and stands in constant need of reflection and refinement. Critical theology recognizes inquisitors can discover sufficient understanding of Scripture ("t") to gain a relationship with God, but cannot discover everything there is to know about God ("T"). Critical theology recognizes that the historical development of theology cannot be overlooked, yet remains responsive to local concerns as well. This global-local perspective of theology would expand, rather than constrict, our understanding of God. Critical theology has the potential to bring balance to *all* theologies, whether developed in the West, East, North or South.

Some Implications for the Church Growth Movement

Van Engen's article raises a number of questions for the American Church Growth Movement (ACGM) to consider; maybe even make agenda items for an annual meeting. First, how is American Church Growth defined? Is it basically limited to WASPS? The critiques of the various books by Church Growth authors would argue that little more than lip service is truly given to ethnicity. A too high view of universalism remains. McGravran words ring true even though I take them out of the context, substituting an organizational movement for society: "Until sharp definition has been made of each segment of a given society, precise thinking about it is impossible" *(Understanding Church Growth,* 1990:197). Going a step further, another question could be raised: What ethnicities are represented in the various offices held in the ACGM?

A second area for reflection surrounds multi-ethnic churches. What is an accurate profile of those who wish to plant such churches? For those who wish pastor them? How much energy does it require to keep multi-ethnic churches going in a voluntary organization due to all the cultural diversity represented? What kind of character, commitment, competencies, and training is necessary? What would the curricula look like? How does the multi-ethnic church differ from the following?

- M mono-culture church
- M mono-culture church extending crossculturally abroad
- M mono-culture church extending crossculturally at

home and abroad
- M mono-culture church rents to ethnics
- M multi-congregational church
- M bi/multi-lingual /bi/multi-cultural church

Lastly, how could the ACGM facilitate partnerships between experienced cross-cultural church planters with those who wish to plant multi-ethnic churches in North America, yet lack cross-cultural background and/or training? Why has this option been overlooked in many cases? I certainly admire those who have launched out into the choppy waters of uncertainty, maneuvering through uncharted seas to plant and pastor multiethnic churches, but it seems that wise stewardship would demand that not all the cultural mistakes made previously should have to be repeated again. Thanks Chuck for challenging us to keep peeling the ethnocentric onion even though it may be a tearful experience. Only then will balance between universalism and particularism be truly realized by all parties, and God be more fully understood.

Writer

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