The Church and Multiculturalism: the role of immigrant churches in Amsterdam

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The world’s population is on the move as individuals and families traverse continents and cross oceans: in search of better economic opportunities, to escape from political or religious oppression, and, sometimes, just to change the scenery. As they have traveled, they carry their cultures with them and add their cultural riches to host nations and cultures. The results are highly dynamic, diverse cultural scenes that are being created and continually modified across the world. In the midst of these rich, complex cultural settings we find churches of all types attempting to minister and serve. How does the Church deal with such high levels of diversity and change? Are local churches reflecting the diversity in which they are immersed through the inclusion of immigrants in their congregations and the acceptance and celebration of diverse ways of worship and living out the gospel together? Are there rich networks of interaction and sharing among local churches, many of whom might be fairly homogenous in terms of cultures represented in their own congregation? Or do churches tend to be cultural silos with little internal diversity or a lack of rich interaction or sharing between churches?

We argue that these are important questions that get to the heart of what it means to minister authentically in today’s highly connected world. To explore these questions we turn to the case of the Church in Amsterdam. Amsterdam is exceedingly diverse with 180 different nationalities being represented in the population; and 45 percent of the population of Amsterdam is now non-Dutch, in terms of ethnicity.1 The Netherlands has long been a nation to which immigrants have been welcome. Many of these were and are Christians who have brought their own churches with them: churches of the ‘old’ migrants and refugees, such as the Walloon Church, originally the church of the Huguenots; churches for foreigners, who are temporarily living in or visiting the Netherlands; and newer churches and religious communities comprised mostly of immigrants and refugees from Africa, Asia and Latin America (Kippenberg, 2009: 75-76). It is these latter two groups that will be the focus in this paper, particularly their individual relationships with the native Dutch churches and with each other.

We will examine the kinds of interactions between these immigrant fellowships and Dutch churches by making use of Putnam’s theories about how ethnic diversity affects the two kinds of relationships that make up social capital: ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ relationships. Putnam has defined social capital as: ‘social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness’ (Putnam 2007: 137; 2000: 18-19). Social capital is a powerful concept that has been linked to many positive social attributes, such as enhanced economic life, stronger patterns of support for

the vulnerable, and, in general, more efficient and beneficial flow of resources and information. Based on shared norms of reciprocity and trust, social capital is a social fact shared between individuals and groups. Individuals can enjoy and benefit from social capital but they do not possess it. They participate in it.

Bonding relationships are ‘ties to people who are like you in some important way’, while bridging relationships are ‘ties to people who are unlike you in some important way’ (Putnam 2007:143). Bonding relationships are generally thought to intensify feelings of belonging and commitment to common action. Bridging relationships are those ties that are built between groups. This is generally thought to be valuable for access to extended resources or building alliances. Since expectations of reciprocity and trustworthiness are connected to shared cultural norms, the building of social capital through bonding relationships would seem to be less difficult than doing so through relationships with people from different cultures. Bonding relationships are often seen as positive but they can also be of the kind that excludes outsiders from access to resources, and can take the form of racism or sexism. Furthermore, bonding relationships can result in heavy-handed control and onerous responsibilities for those persons who are part of a closely linked, highly controlled group. Thus, while such groups may provide rich social capital for members of the in-group, the effects could be quite negative both for those who are ‘smothered’ by the demands of the group, and for those alienated through being excluded by the group.

It could be assumed that where bonding relationships are rich, bridging relationships would be sparse, and that increased diversity enhances the in-group, out-group distinction. However, Putnam argues, based on research in the United States, that with increased social diversity, trust in both bonding and bridging relationships suffers as people tend to ‘withdraw from collective life’ on all levels—at least in the short term (Putnam 2007:144-151). However, his data also leads him to conclude that in the medium to long term both immigrants and the ‘native-born’ are able to reconstruct their group identities based on some new shared identity without forsaking previous group loyalties (Putnam 2007:160-61). Thus, ‘high bonding might be compatible with high-bridging’ as was ‘low bonding with low bridging’ in the short term (Putnam 2007:144).

In the first part of the paper we are concerned with the shape of bonding and bridging social capital that can be found currently among churches in Amsterdam in the face of increasing diversity due to the presence of foreign Christians. In particular, does bonding social capital have any effect, positive or negative, on the growth of bridging social capital between ‘expat’, ‘immigrant’ and ‘native’ churches, such that ideas and other resources flow across this larger field? Are there emerging patterns of bridging networks that connect immigrant, expat and Dutch churches? If so, have these helped build rich understandings and effective partnerships between these churches? Have multicultural churches and communities emerged? And if so, what is the relationship between bonding social capital within these churches and bridging social capital between these and other churches? And

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2 Immigrant churches refer to those more recently established by persons from the Global South. Expat churches refer to those that largely serve international sojourners. Native churches refer to those made up predominantly of persons of Dutch descent in which the principle language used is Dutch.
finally, has the diversity brought by expat and immigrant churches been a force for a renewal of Christianity in the Netherlands and a return to spirituality among the Dutch?

This paper is guided by ethnographic observations and interviews that were carried out in Amsterdam by the two authors. Mellis, an American by birth has lived and worked in Amsterdam for 40 years. He is fluent in Dutch, carries dual Dutch/American citizenship, and has carried out ethnographic research in a multicultural expat church in Amsterdam and literature research on Ghanaian churches in the Netherlands, resulting in the completion of a Masters in cultural anthropology at the VU University. Schreck is an anthropologist who has taught classes focused on the Church in Amsterdam ten times since 1990. In addition to the years of participatory observation in Amsterdam, Mellis and Schreck carried out eleven in-depth interviews with church leaders and scholars in the spring of 2012.

After presenting some observations drawn from our analysis of the data, using Putnam’s theoretical concepts, the paper then concludes with some observations from the Christian Scriptures. Are there biblical resources on which all Christians can draw concerning ethnic diversity in urban societies like Amsterdam, and which interact in a useful way with Putnam’s ideas about bonding and bridging relationships that contribute to social capital?

**Immigrant and Dutch churches**

This exploration of the issues of immigrant churches and multiculturalism in Amsterdam begins with the observation that, in general, the initial reaction to the arrival of Christian immigrants, and immigrants in general, has been positive throughout Amsterdam’s history. They were seen as enriching diversity in the Netherlands and enjoyed a positive reception. This generally conforms to the oft-stated tolerant Dutch attitudes toward immigrants (Focus Migration).

This continues despite a growing backlash against immigrants to the Netherlands (Uyl & Brouwer, 2009). Although much of this backlash is directed against Muslims, Christians often get lumped into the category of unwanted immigrants as well. Some of this comes from those who are followers of Geert Wilders, a right wing politician, who has criticized what he calls, ‘the leftist church,’ which he labels as ‘ideological left-wing politicians’ who ignore the dangers of immigration. (Noort, 2011). Wilders has a rather small following among Dutch Christians, but many Dutch Christians are still leery of these new immigrants and ‘...African Christian communities are not generally embraced by established Dutch Christian churches’ (Vinnik, 2007: 184-185). One informant, who carries out research on the church and multiculturalism in the Netherlands, argued that as anti-immigrant attitudes have grown in the Netherlands, immigrant Christians have become increasingly marginalized. The extent to which this is occurring or the direction it will take in the future is certainly troubling but lies beyond the scope of this paper and must be left for others to research. At this point, it was found that there is still a generally positive reception for immigrant Christians in Amsterdam.

**Bonding social capital in Amsterdam church**

Historically, Dutch society was largely organized through religious ‘pillarization’—a kind of ‘state-sponsored habit of religious communalism’. Especially during 'the
formative years of industrialization and nation building (ca. 1850-1950), the national society became systematically organized along the lines of three ‘pillars’: Catholic, Orthodox Protestant, and a secular grouping of ‘neither-nors’ (Baumann 1999: 12). These helped shape the way people voted, the channels in which education was provided, the offering of social services, and many other areas of life. By definition, religious communities were arenas in which substantial interaction occurred and in which there was a largely homogenous way of looking at the world. One would expect to find strong patterns of bonding relationships that define communities under this system. Indeed, interviewees who had personally experienced a ‘pillarized’ society, or who have heard elders talk about it, often spoke of strong patterns of bonding that characterized this time. However, they also spoke of the negative aspects of this and of churches that exerted heavy handed, often judgmental, control over the lives of their members. Indeed, some interviewees argued that for those who have experienced this time period the very word ‘community’ has strongly negative connotations.

Today in Dutch churches there is a view that churches and Christianity should be about spiritual matters or issues of social justice. Churches should not be concerned with the manner in which modern persons live or act outside of this. Certainly, churches should not speak to issues of sexuality or morality. This view results in weaker patterns of bonding as the sphere of life to which churches can speak is truncated and limited. Interaction with others in the church is rather optional and limited in scope. As one informant stated, one might be forced to sit next to someone that one might not like or with whom one might not have much in common. The depth and extent of relationship can be fairly shallow. As such, weak bonding results.

Immigrant churches differ substantially from Dutch churches along these lines. Indeed, many immigrant churches offer a huge range of services and types of support for their members. This certainly includes worship, religious instruction, but it also includes things such as help with job preparation or placement, family counseling, AIDS education, programs for ex-prisoners, and many other services. Immigrant churches also offer multiple services throughout the week and expect a high degree of participation in fairly long and exuberant worship services. There is a much higher degree of interaction among members of immigrant churches than is found in Dutch churches.

A key figure in the typical immigrant church is the pastor. Immigrant pastors play a very strong role in the leadership and administration of their churches. Furthermore, their roles are not limited to spiritual matters but also include close attention to many areas in the lives of their members, including family life, sexual morality, and work. Pastors encourage and facilitate rich interaction between themselves and their members and among the members of their churches. The results of the rich interactive life of the church and close involvement of the pastor in the lives of the members are rich bonding relationships and substantial social capital in immigrant churches.

Bridging relationships among Amsterdam churches

The immigrant Christian community in Amsterdam is quite diverse, with churches formed by immigrants from many parts of the world. Attempts have been made to form bridging relationships among the immigrant churches with some success:
Among the immigrant churches we have cooperation in some areas. Last year, 40 immigrant churches came together to organize a three-day conference to address the social needs in Amsterdam southeast. Another one is taking place this year in the last weekend in May. We did one about HIV five years ago. About 17 churches came together.

In times of crisis, the immigrant churches have come together. When the El Al jet crashed into a portion of the Bijlmer neighborhood in 1992, there was a general coalescing of support for the victims. This included many churches. More recently, in 2011, the wife of a prominent pastor of an African immigrant church died unexpectedly. The outpouring of support was substantial, and this promises to have more long-term effects:

…the wife of our chairman of the [network of] 70 African Pentecostal churches died last December... Before that time 16 churches used to come to meeting. During the burial all the churches turned out. We had 68 pastors. Since then the number of churches coming to our monthly meeting has doubled. That brought us together.

Building a network among immigrant churches has been a difficult process, however. The pastor quoted above pointed to the challenge of building relationships among immigrant churches that might come from cultural differences or clashes among leaders with strong personalities:

I can't say the [immigrant] church is really growing. There are more churches because most of the churches have been splitting. For many reasons—personality clashes, differences in opinion, lack of training. Everyone wants to start his own church. This has negative effects. We are so fragmented that we are not powerful anymore.

Turning to bridging relationships between Dutch and immigrant churches, it is seen that the process has been even more difficult. There have been and continue to be attempts to build bridging relationships between Dutch and immigrant churches, but challenges have often arisen:

I happen to be involved with an organization we call GATE (Gift from Africa to Europe). It used to be Gospel from Africa to Europe, but the Dutch church objected to that, ‘What kind of Gospel do you bring from Africa? We take the Gospel to you.’ … Some of them, when they visit our churches, they say it is too loud and too noisy for them. They like to look at us and watch us. They are curious; ‘how are you so joyful?’ But working together has been very difficult... Even some of the African churches are getting suspicious that most of these churches are only using them to get subsidies.

One area of misunderstanding that repeatedly came up in interviews with both Dutch and immigrant Christian leaders was that of building relationships. One Dutch pastor said, ‘Four years ago I set up a pastor prayer meeting every month. Several times I invited migrant pastors from the north. Not a single one ever came.’
same story was told many times by Dutch Christian leaders who attempted to invite immigrant Christian leaders to meetings to build relationships. From the perspectives of the Dutch pastors, immigrant pastors are either disinterested or too irresponsible to participate in such meetings and gatherings. From the perspective of the immigrant pastors, these meetings, they explain, do not build relationships. They complained that the meetings they attended had a fixed agenda, which was interpreted such that Dutch pastors were only interested in their agenda and not in building relationships.

There was one notable exception to this. Every informant mentioned a yearly dinner that is organized by a Malaysian-Dutch woman. This is held at the YWAM (Youth With A Mission) facility, De Poort, and is attended by a wide range of pastors and Christian leaders, Dutch and non-Dutch (although it tends to draw more pastors from Pentecostal, Charismatic, English-speaking, and Evangelical churches than pastors from mainline Dutch Reformed and Catholic churches). This meeting might be the exception that proves the point about different cultural views in building relationships between Dutch and immigrant pastors and churches. It happens only once a year and involves no follow-up or continued interaction throughout the rest of the year. Furthermore, it requires multiple invitations and much personal contact to encourage pastors to attend. While Dutch pastors saw this as an extraordinary meeting, they also commented in particular that it involves an exceptional amount of work, beyond the normal formal invitation, to get immigrant pastors to come.

As immigrant churches and Dutch churches continue to interact and learn how to theologize together, many issues, such as the role of miracles, styles of worship, and cultural contextualization, need to be faced and negotiated. This requires rich bridging relationships that are undergirded by mutual respect and an equal partnership. Issues of power, resources, and many other cultural and contextual details need to be recognized and addressed. Bridging is an essential step to creating a culturally diverse Church in Amsterdam. However, this can still result in islands of difference that—in spite of a rich network of diverse churches across Amsterdam—still falls short of the image in the book of Revelation of a multicultural, multilingual body worshipping before the throne.

Possible obstacles
Besides bridging and bonding relationships, an essential element of social capital is the issue of trust. Trust is built upon the acceptance of shared social norms and a commonly accepted way of doing things. When exploring the issue of shared trust between churches, in general, and between Dutch and immigrant churches, in particular, the results were less than positive. There is a striking difference in perspectives between immigrant pastors and church leaders and Dutch pastors and church leaders. Immigrant pastors argue that their churches offer new forms of worship or theological perspectives that could encourage or enhance the work of the Dutch churches. They suggested that there are two types of contributions they could offer Dutch churches. First, they argue that their churches are evangelizing the Dutch and are helping to bring about revival in the Netherlands. Immigrant pastors point to many signs of secularization that define Dutch society. Most frequently mentioned is the acceptance of homosexuality and gay marriage, but they also point to restrictions on prayer and worship in public institutions and, from their perspectives, generally lax attitudes toward a range of moral issues. Immigrant
pastors argue that their roles are to address these issues as sin and to call the Dutch to a place of repentance.

Second, they argue that immigrant churches have given Dutch Christians more confidence to publicly declare their faith in a society where church attendance has fallen off significantly since the 1960s. One immigrant pastor explained:

The immigrant churches give the Dutch confidence to declare their faith publicly. I met this guy at Call-to-All conference. The guy came to me from Belgium. He said, ‘Ten years ago we had only 300 Belgian Christians in Antwerp. Today the churches are confident. It is because of immigrants.’ He could declare his faith everywhere he goes.

However, none of the Dutch pastors or scholars that were interviewed agreed with these statements. Nor could they see any evidence of renewal or revival in Dutch churches or among Dutch Christians that could be linked to the contributions or examples presented by immigrant Christians or their churches. Indeed, the general consensus was that immigrant churches were either invisible or too exotic to be taken seriously by most Dutch people, Christians or non-Christians.

In addition, there is also substantial criticism of immigrant churches based upon theological differences. ‘Christian migrants have become suspect as well, for instance, in relation to their views on homosexuality and healing of HIV/AIDS. As a result their mission—often understood as fundamentalist because of references to Dutch society as a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah and the emphasis on conversion—is also suspect’ (Noort, 2011: 11).

The criticism often seems to focus on the inappropriateness of such theological expressions in the Dutch context. It is all right if these styles of worship and theological statements are made in Africa or some other part of the world, but when they are found in the Netherlands many Dutch Christians find them inappropriate. For example a large evangelical church hosted a fund-raising concert by an ‘African Children’s Choir’. This included loud drumming and energetic dancing which was enthusiastically received. But if this had occurred in the context of a Dutch church worship service, the response would likely have been quite different.

One of the Dutch informants explained that it is okay to be exotic as long as it is ‘over there’. He went on to say, ‘We had this service where twelve old Dutch ladies were singing Kumbayah and also some old spirituals from colored churches. We like that connection in the sense that the world is bigger than Holland. ‘Yet, he went on to say, African immigrant churches are seen as strange with their emphasis on driving out demons, opposition to homosexuality, and focus on a prosperity gospel. The latter seems particularly strange in a rich country where one enjoys luxuries and does not feel the need for ‘victory’ in one’s life.

Another common complaint is that African church worship services, in particular, are much too loud and much too long. One church that primarily attracts African immigrants from Ghana has even received complaints from neighbors and the police about the loudness of their services. From the perspective of the pastor of this church, there is a hidden agenda in these complaints. He argued that these
complaints were being used to increase pressure on them to pay overdue rents—a situation that threatened the church with the loss of its current worship and office spaces.

The issue of suitable spaces for immigrant churches in which to worship and carry out their programs is a common flashpoint that illustrates the lack of trust between immigrant and Dutch Christians. One pastor from Nigeria lamented the fact that after a number of years of very active involvement in the Bijlmer neighborhood, including not only church services but also working with local authorities on issues of cultural competence, crime, HIV prevention, empowerment and training of women for employment, and the development of programs to involve the youth of the neighborhood in positive activities, his church has still not been able to locate suitable space. It continues to be located in a small and inadequate set of rooms in a parking garage. He says:

I am beginning to realize that we are just tolerated, especially from the perspective of the local government. Because there are a lot of churches that are looking for a place of worship that are not being assisted by the local government...we have been to them to show them our activities to society, that we are not just teaching Bible. We are also involved in empowering people and taking care of youths and making sure they are out of the streets and out of crime...the growing opposition is very deceptive. They say, oh yes we love you guys, but on the ground they are not cooperating with us at all in getting the facilities that we want.

This pastor found it particularly grievous that Dutch churches and, in particular, church leaders have not been more vocal and helpful in locating more suitable spaces for their churches.

Finally, the role of the pastor in immigrant churches has come under criticism from Dutch Christians. Dutch Christian leaders often said that immigrant pastors are poorly trained, try to assume too much power over the lives of their congregants, and use the role of a pastor for financial gain. Some of this demonstrates a lack of awareness of the role of pastors in African churches, where it is usually the case that pastors have very strong leadership roles with less oversight and control from church elders as compared with Dutch churches.

It is clear that there is a general lack of trust shared between Dutch and immigrant churches. Given that, it is not surprising that there is a general lack of bridging relationships that tie these church networks together. There are many cultural differences between Dutch and immigrant churches that preclude deep understanding and close interaction.

Returning to Putnam’s arguments regarding bonding and bridging relationships in diverse settings, these findings should not surprise the reader. Putnam argued that both bonding and bridging relationships seem to decline as diversity rises, but he argued that as a new, reconstructed understanding of common identity is formed, then both bonding and bridging relationships can be strengthened (Putnam 2007). The challenge is to build this new common identity. Possible common identities could be: the solidarity of social class; the trap of xenophobia, which has diverse
cultures unite against a common, perceived enemy; or a conscious creation of a sense of citizenship. The first two possibilities can have dire consequences. The third is being tried in the Netherlands and other areas of the world and is a long, difficult process. A fourth possibility for the churches in Amsterdam is to return to the core of their existence—to the fundamentals of Christian faith and explore what guidance scriptural resources can provide.

**A new biblical paradigm for bonding and bridging relationships in the Church**

If Putnam is correct that a higher value might eventually be given to both bonding and bridging relationships between immigrants and indigenous social groups where there is the development of a new shared group identity, then how might common membership in the kingdom of God lead to greater trust, both in bonding relationships within immigrant and indigenous churches in cities like Amsterdam, and between these churches? What perspectives and resources does the New Testament give to help us grow in these relationships, and to inform us about any obstacles that will impede such growth?

We know from the New Testament that there were serious intercultural tensions in the churches in a number of multi-ethnic cities in the first century. And in some churches, reciprocal bridging relationships were made difficult by the tendency for bonding relationships within a particular ethnic or social group to take precedence, like in the church in Antioch (Gal.2:11-14). Yet in Paul’s letters to such churches (in Galatia, Asia, Corinth and Rome), his admonitions suggest that his readers need more than just practical advice for preserving unity in the church. They also need a revelation of some new things God has begun to do in the world with all nations and ethnic groups [ta ethne] through the gospel—through what God has done in Jesus Christ.

Paul gives a name to the new things God is doing which involve intercultural relationships: ‘the mystery’ [musterion] (Eph.3:1-9; Col.1:26-27; Rom.16:25-26; 1 Cor.1:23 2:1, 7). Paul gives it this name because these new things in God’s ‘eternal purpose’ (Eph.1:9; 3:11) involve things ‘kept hidden’ from all humanity in previous generations, even from those in Israel to whom he had given the scriptures. This is why Paul himself needed a special revelation in order to see it (Eph.3:3). And Paul’s language suggests that even Christians do not automatically comprehend ‘the mystery’ and what it has to do with ‘the nations’ (Eph.3:8-9; 1:15-19; Col.2:2; 1 Cor.2:6-7; Rom.16:25).

The story of Peter and Cornelius suggests this applies to Spirit-filled church leaders as well. Peter had received the best discipleship training and even a calling to the nations—from Jesus himself! He even ‘moved’ in signs and wonders. Yet he indicates to this Italian officer (Acts 10:1, 28, 34-35), that without a special roof-top revelation he would not have been able to go against his Israel-Gentiles paradigm and spend two days in Cornelius’ home (10:48). If church leaders today are like Peter—who still had difficulty grasping the revelation of ‘the mystery’ as articulated

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3 The similarity of ideas in 1 Cor.2:6-10 to the references in Ephesians, Colossians and Romans supports the manuscript choice of Aland, et.al. (1983:581) for musterion over marturion (‘testimony’) in 1 Cor.2:1, as is reflected in the NRSV.
by Paul even after his vision (Gal.2:12-14; 2 Pet.3:15-16)—it is important to look again at what Paul wrote.

Most of Paul’s information about ‘the mystery’ is found in Eph.3:1-11, since the apostle has deliberately interrupted his train of thought4 to expand on this revelation. Thus the ‘administration’ [oikonomia] of ‘the mystery’ given to him—about the nations [ta ethne] now being ‘of one Body-together [su-soma]…through the gospel’ (3:2, 6, 9)—refers back to his statement that God is ‘administering’ a new time wherein he is uniting all things ‘on earth’ in Christ (1:9-10). The Creator who made ‘every human nation’ [ethnos] from one ‘blood’ by spreading them out into separate territories (Acts 17:26; Deut.32:8), is now bringing them all back together as one Body according to God’s eternal purpose (Eph.3:6, 11). When God first formed diverse nations, clans and languages in their respective territories (Gen.10:5, 20, 31), he already had in mind that he would bring nations, tribes and languages back together in a city. Besides these three original forms of group diversity, John also saw diverse ‘peoples’ in this city, but no longer any separate territories (Rev.7:9)! In the new thing God is doing, ethnic, tribal and language groups retain distinct identities independent of territories and boundaries.

Paul saw the Church as an expression of humanity’s urban [polis] future in the ‘Jerusalem above’ (Gal.4:26)—to which we ‘have (already) come’ (Heb.12:22). As a multi-ethnic gathering of ‘fellow-citizens’ [sum-politia] (Eph.2:11, 19), the Church is intended to begin making known the ‘many and varied’ [polu-poikilos] wisdom of God to the powers that now govern separate human groupings (Eph.3:10-11). God’s original purpose—for creating so much corporate human diversity in two phases—is to receive multiple levels of multi-cultural worship (Rom.15:8-11; Rev.7:9-10). What John saw in his revelation—‘The glory and the honor of the nations will be brought into it [the city]’ (21:26 NIV)—shows the completion of the second phase in the two-phase plan David prophesied about. ‘All the nations you have made [phase 1] will come and worship before you [phase 2]; they will bring glory to your name’ (Ps.86:9 NIV).

Because the current season is characterized by an overlap for Christians—where we already live in this new multi-ethnic urban reality, yet still need to respect territorial authorities (Rom.13:1-7)—Paul refers both to nations [ta ethne] inside the Church (Eph.3:1, 6) and to nations outside the Church (4:17). And his understanding of ‘the mystery’ is that this applies to Israel too (Rom.11:25). There are ‘remnants’ of Israel and all other nations inside the Church (9:24, 27; 11:5; Acts 15:16-17) as well as ‘remainders’ [loipoi] of Israel and the nations outside the Church (Rom.11:7; 1:13). The ‘remnants’ inside the Church are the ‘first fruits’ that ‘God has chosen’ (2 Thes.2:13 ESV) in his plan to ‘have mercy on all’, so that an even greater ‘fullness’ [pleeroma] of Israel and of the nations (Rom.11:12, 25, 32) will be saved and come in to his eternal, multi-ethnic city.

Paul’s revelation of ‘the mystery’, however, is about more than just all the nations coming together. It is also about God’s hidden purpose that in the fullness of time,

4 In the Greek, Paul stops in the middle of his sentence about the nations [ta ethne] in Eph.3:1 to say more about his revelation of ‘the mystery’ (1:9) that he ‘already wrote about briefly’ (3:4).
the nations would become ‘heirs-together’ in Christ, through the gospel (Eph.3:6). From before the creation of the world, God, our Father, had pre-destined us for this ‘placement as sons’ [huio-thesia] (1:2, 4-5). When Paul uses this Greek word, he is not using it to mean ‘adoption’ in the usual English sense of that word—the placing of a non-family member into the family. When speaking into the intercultural tensions in the Galatian churches between ‘we Jews’ (Gal.2:15; 3:24) and ‘YOU’ non-Jews (3:29; 4:9, 21; 5:2), Paul uses huio-thesia (4:5) to refer to a ‘pre-(planned) placing’ [pro-thesimia] of an underage child within the family as an adult heir of the Father by the Spirit (4:1-2, 5-7). Following our ‘justification’ by the blood of Jesus, and restoration to our true family, believers of all nations receive ‘the blessing’, the ‘inheritance’ promised to Abraham in the form of the Spirit (3:8, 13-14, 18). The Spirit is the deposit of the full inheritance for all, including the nation that was the first to ‘hope in Christ’ (Eph.1:11-14). Israel had first received the huio-thesia as a promise (Rom.9:4) while still a minor (Gal.4:2-3; 3:24). Then, along with believers of other nations they received it as a coming of age in the Spirit (Rom.8:15), who is the ‘first fruits’ of the huio-thesia which we all will receive when our bodies are transformed (8:23). This final transformation Paul also considers an aspect of ‘the mystery’ (1 Cor.15:50-53).

For Paul, this picture of coming of age—of nations now being ‘co-heirs’ in Christ—changes the social power relationships both within and between cultural groups. Yet neither Jewish believers nor those of the nations in the churches of Galatia and Antioch have understood this mystery, even though they ‘began’ well together in the Spirit (Gal.3:3) and by sharing meals together (2:11-12a). As a result, social power hierarchies—of ‘free’ over ‘slave’ and ‘men’ over ‘women’, ‘Jew’ over ‘Greek’ (3:28) and over all non-Jews (3:29; 2:12b-13, 14b)—have been brought into these churches. Why? Because everyone has learned that to be a part of a group, you need to adapt yourself to those with more social power. Every individual learned his or her own culture as a child under parents, teachers, and other social authorities; for in every culture—whether a biblical Jewish one or an idolatrous one without the scriptures—we all are ‘no better than slaves’ to the ‘elemental powers’ [stoikheia] of our respective family, ethnic, national groups until Christ comes into our lives (4:3, 7-9).

Paul believed that God appointed these social ‘authorities’ over groups as his ‘officials’ for our good (Rom.13:1, 4), but only as temporary ‘guardians and trustees’ to ‘lead us to Christ’ (Gal.3:24-25). His death on the cross not only justifies those who have faith, but it also ‘disarms’ the power of these group social authorities over our lives (Col.2:13-23)\(^7\), so that we can become adult ‘heirs’ of our Father with the

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\(^5\) When ‘YOU’ appears in capital letters it is to indicate that the Greek 2nd person is plural in Gal.3:29, etc. These are non-Jewish believers who used to be ‘enslaved to gods’, and who feel they will not be accepted as real believers unless they please the dominant Jewish culture by becoming circumsiced and keeping the Law.

\(^6\) As we will see in the case of the Roman church (below), it is also possible that some educated ‘Greeks’ in the Galatian and Antioch churches also saw themselves as superior to Jews and other foreign ‘barbarians’.

\(^7\) When Paul speaks of the ‘primal rulers [arkee] and authorities [exousia]’ in Colossians, he does so in conjunction with the ‘elemental powers’ [stoikheia] (2:8-10, 15 & 20); and he speaks of them: as having been created by Christ and for him, and as able to be reconciled to God through him (1:16-20). Thus both Berkhoft (1977:20) and Newbiggin (1989:203) identify these primal rulers and authorities as
same ‘fullness’ of the Spirit in our bodies as Christ enjoyed (2:8-10)—as ‘co-heirs with Christ’, and co-heirs with all believers, regardless of ethnicity, gender, social class (Rom.8:17; 12:16; Gal.3:26-29; Eph.3:6; 1 Cor.12:12-13) or any label that might be put on us by others (Col.3:11).

When these social powers attempt to reassert their authority in the Church, we need to stand up to them, or ‘Christ will be of no value’ to us ‘at all’ (Gal.5:2 NIV). While Paul does not directly speak of ‘the mystery’ in Galatians, he does speak of the gospel he received for ‘the nations’ as a ‘revelation’ of ‘God’s son in me’ (1:11-16), and the ‘Spirit of his Son in our hearts’ (4:6). This revelation empowered him to stop trying to please the social powers of his own ethnic group (1:10, 14), even those inside the Church (2:3-5). Peter, however, though he had initially stood on his revelation against such social powers in the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:1-18), failed to do so after he and the other ‘apostles’ had turned over leadership to James and the ‘elders’ (Acts 11:1, 30; Gal.2:9). For on a visit to Syria he gave greater weight to the bonding relationships in the mono-cultural Judean ‘mother’ church, than he did to the bridging relationships between ethnic groups of believers in Antioch (Gal.2:12).

Paul’s letter to the urban church in Rome was also written to deal with inter-ethnic tensions. The ‘belly’ issues that were being used by certain influential teachers to create divisions (Rom.16:17-18 ASV) involved the spiritualization of ethnic practices like circumcision (3:1) and the avoidance of eating meat and drinking wine (14:2-3, 21). This is still ‘territorial’ thinking about group identity. For when geographic boundaries are no longer present, immigrant communities—in their interaction with indigenous and other migrant groups—will use ‘certain cultural features...as emblems of difference’ to maintain a sense of ‘shared culture’ (Barth 1969:14 cited in Jenkins 1997:12). Another issue being used in this way was Sabbath observance (14:5).

The way Paul dealt with this in his letter to the Galatians, was to tell the less socially powerful non-Jewish believers (‘YOU’) to stand in Christ’s authority as adult sons and daughters of the Father. His letter to Rome shows him challenging the divisive individual leaders—much like he did in Antioch. This rather unique approach in Romans is somewhat invisible to the English reader, since modern English makes no distinction between the singular and plural in the second person. The Greek text, however, shows that Paul breaks away several times from addressing everyone in the plural (‘YOU’), to targeting specific individuals (‘you’). When challenging the one using ethnic boundary issues to maintain his group’s sense of shared culture, he writes: ‘You must not let evil be attributed to what for YOU is good’ (14:16). No individual must allow one of his own group’s otherwise good customs to disrupt the peace, joy and unity of the Father’s family kingdom (14:17).

social powers, not demonic ones (see Tit.3:1; also Lk.20:20 and 12:11). Paul understood that both these social powers and the demonic ones [kasmokratoras tou skotous] have a supernatural dimension, and that believers need to stand in their authority in Christ to avoid being intimidated by either kind of power (Eph.6:10-12).

6 Only in 1 Corinthians (4:7; 8:10; 14:14-17), does Paul also target an individual using ‘you’ singular.

7 Paul switches to ‘you’ singular in 14:4, 10, 16, 21-22. He does the same in 12:21-13:4 to confront an immigrant teacher who is teaching that Christians do not need to respect the authorities of the host nation.
Paul also switches to ‘you’ singular to challenge a Jewish teacher ‘(2:17)\(^{10}\) who is assuming that because of his own ‘biblical’ culture and ‘biblical’ education—giving Jews ‘the form of knowledge and the truth’—that he (and other Jews) are the ones to teach, guide, enlighten and discipline the believers of other cultures as if they are ‘blind’, ‘in darkness’, ‘foolish’ and ‘underage children’ (2:18-24). Even as he challenges him for his social arrogance, Paul identifies with this man, as a Jew (‘we’)—yet also with another man who is an educated Greek. ‘How then are we superior? Not in any way! For... both Jews and Greeks are all under sin’ (3:9).

The ‘Greeks’ in the Roman church that Paul is also challenging are probably not\(^{11}\) ethnic Greeks, but rather the social elite in Roman society who have been educated in Greek language and culture. For Paul uses the contrast between ‘Greeks’ who are labeled as ‘wise’, and ‘barbarians’ (uncivilized foreigners) who are labeled as ‘foolish’, in order to say he is equally called to re-proclaim the gospel to all Roman believers since his intercultural calling is for all—even as the power of God in Christ is for all (1:5, 14-16 ESV; 2:9-11). And just as every ethnic and social group, including Israel is under the powers of sin and death before Christ’s liberating death (5:12, 20-21; 8:1-2; Eph.2:1-3), so now Christ alone—not the social power of ethnic and social groups—deserves our supreme allegiance (Rom.10:12; 14:10-11)\(^{12}\). Calling God ‘Father’ is not a return to patriarchal culture, but rather liberation from it (Mellis 2014: #3 and #4). In his multi-cultural family kingdom, not only the nations are ‘co-heirs’, but men and women too (1 Pet.3:7). As Marti found in his study: ‘In most multiracial churches..., women are very visible and integrated at all levels of ministry’ (Huysler-Honig: 2007).

It was this new overarching ‘shared identity’ that gave Paul greater scope to both his bonding and his bridging relationships. On the one hand, he could continue to value and practice the treasures of his own Jewish culture (Acts 13:14; 16:3; 18:18; 21:20-26; Rom.3:1-2; 9:4-5). These he affirmed, as long as they were practiced in faith and not just out of social obligation (Rom.2:29; 4:12), or in a way that tore down the new thing God was doing (14:19-22). He could continue to pray for the salvation of ‘all Israel’ and reach out in faith and hope to the unbelieving remainder of his own culture as still his ‘kinsfolk in the flesh’, and still loved by God (9:3; 10:1; 11:28; Acts 28:23). For while God was patient with the unbelieving ‘remainers’ of his own and other nations, he was busy showing his mercy to a new multi-ethnic ‘vessel for valuables’—a new ‘us’ made up of both Jews and other nations (Rom.9:21, 23-24). And he expressed his own cultural identity through bridging relationships in Christ’s multi-cultural Body: by ‘welcoming the other’, by ‘serving’ them and identifying with their pain like Jesus did (15:2-8), and by practicing reciprocity in multi-cultural worship (15:9-11) and in giving and receiving treasures (15:26-27; 1:11-12).

Finally, his bonding and bridging relationships were supported by a three-theme gospel for all nations. Besides proclaiming redemption for all through the blood of a

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\(^{10}\) Paul uses ‘you’ singular with a Jewish individual in 2:1-29; 8:2 ESV; 9:19-20.

\(^{11}\) It is possibly an individual from this ‘Greek’ social elite whom Paul challenges with ‘you’ singular, for teaching that Israel as a nation has now been replaced by the non-Jewish believers (Rom.11:17-24). Division into high and low status social groups was a problem among Roman believers (12:16).

\(^{12}\) In Isaiah 45:23, the text Paul cites in Rom.14:11, people of all ‘nations’ are being gathered (Isa.45:20,22).
crucified Christ (Eph. 1:7-8; 1 Cor. 2:2b), his gospel also included proclamation of two aspects of ‘the mystery’ of God in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 2:1-2a RSV). The time has come for God to ‘place’ believers of all nations as adult ‘fellow-heirs’ (Eph. 3:6a ESV), according to the plan he made at creation when he first chose human beings to be his sons and daughters (Eph. 1:2-6)\(^{13}\); and for him to bring all nations together in one multi-ethnic Body (Eph. 1:9-10; 3:6b). ‘The time (for coming of age) has come, the (planned multi-ethnic) kingdom is at hand, therefore repent (for the forgiveness of sins)’ (Mk. 1:15, 4b).

**Conclusion**

The Church in Amsterdam is wondrously diverse and carries in it great promise toward becoming an expression of the revelations given to the apostles John and Paul—including high levels of bonding and bridging relationships which reflect deep reservoirs of trust through multicultural worship and witness to the city.

Yet it is clear from the ethnographic data presented above that this remains a much anticipated but unrealized reality. The intent is there, for there is a widely shared desire for a multicultural Church and multicultural local churches. It is the actualization of that intent which is more difficult. Cultural differences remain mostly barriers rather than resources. Mutual understanding and appreciation are limited. Cultural competence is insufficient. The shortcomings are not a result of lack of desire or good will. As always, even though the rewards are immense, the actual work of reflecting God’s multicultural purposes is challenging.

The ethnographic data point to the difficulties and the hope for a richer acceptance and celebration of the multicultural Church in Amsterdam. Putnam’s work points to the possibility of achieving this through the formation of a new, shared identity among native Dutch and immigrant churches. God’s intent that this should happen is clearly seen in the scripture. The intent and hope for this exists, but obstacles remain. One of the most challenging has to do with how this will come about and who will do the hard work of creating this new, shared identity in the Church in Amsterdam.

A key factor in this work is the issue of power. As so clearly laid out above, the Scriptures speak directly to this. The releasing of power by the hegemonic cultures into new patterns of genuinely shared power with those who once lacked significant social power is essential to the success of a multicultural Church (or church). This is the challenge facing the churches in Amsterdam, as indeed, it is everywhere. This is not a grudging recognition by the powerful of having to share power with the powerless. It is the celebration of the gifts of all cultures and the calling forth of the adult ‘sonship’ of the Spirit that God intends for people of all cultures in Christ. It is striving toward a richer and more fruitful mutuality among cultures, and, in this case, among churches, both Dutch and immigrant in Amsterdam. It involves things as banal as designing an agenda and style for meetings that makes sense to persons of different cultures. It calls for more trust and acceptance of different styles of leadership. It means accepting many forms of worship. It means advocating for

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\(^{13}\) The Hebrew words for ‘image’ [tsellem] and ‘likeness’ [demuth] describe a family relationship of a son (or daughter) to his (her) father (compare Gen. 1:26-27 with 5:1-3).
suitable buildings for the immigrant church, or it might result in sharing buildings and facilities between Dutch and immigrant churches. Above all, it means standing with one another in each other's pain and joy as brothers and sisters under Christ. Such steps, practical and as non-theological as they might seem, might just fulfill the promise of the multicultural Church in Amsterdam that is so earnestly desired by those persons whom we interviewed in Amsterdam.
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