

# Revisiting the Homogeneous Unit Principle

## The Church: An Intercultural Poem

by Ruth Padilla DeBorst

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Ruth Padilla DeBorst, PhD, is a wife of one and mother of many. A theologian, missiologist, educator, and storyteller, she has been involved in leadership development and theological education for integral mission in her native Latin America for several decades. She is Associate Professor of World Christianity at Western Theological Seminary, dean of certificate programs at the Comunidad de Estudios Teológicos Interdisciplinarios (CETIcontinental.org), and coordinator of the Networking Team of INFEMIT (INFEMIT.org). She lives with her husband, James, in Costa Rica as a member of Casa Adobe, an intentional Christian Community with deep concern for right living in relation to the whole of creation.

### The Poem of God

I tried to write  
the best poem,  
but you had already done so,  
Lord.

I tried to find  
the best word,  
but you are  
the best Word  
by far.

We are your poem,  
written with pain  
and blood  
of your Son  
of your very heart.

The world is your  
childbirth of words;  
we are the syllables  
of your Great Song.

(by Dominican, César Abreu-Volmar)

**F**or we are God's poem, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." These are familiar words we find in Ephesians 2:10.

A poem. What makes a poem a poem? Artistry, beauty, the blending or clashing of diverse evocative images, the multiple meanings behind the words, the varied emotions awakened by the words. And the source: the creator, the maker, the artist, the one who fashions the few or the many words, the disparate parts, into a cohesive work of art. In this text of Ephesians Bible translators have rendered the original "poiema" alternately as "work," "handiwork," "workmanship," terms which point to the creative act but lose the evocative power of "poem."

### *An Appointment I Could Not Miss*

This paper, entitled, “The Church: An Intercultural Poem,” was sparked by the invitation to contribute to the conversation on *Homogeneity and Hybridity: Revisiting the Homogeneous Unit Principle* for the 2022 Ralph Winter Lectureship. This was an appointment I could not miss. Allow me first to share the story behind my acceptance which plunged me head on into the topic that had brought us together during those days. After that, I will offer an explanation of what I mean by the church being—or called to be—an intercultural poem.

A 41-year-old, dark skinned Latin American stood on the stage of the Lausanne 1974 Congress on World Evangelization. He did not mince words when he addressed the global audience in Spanish, although he was fluent in English. He confronted head on the uncritical assimilation of US-American pragmatism in church and mission:

When the church lets itself be squeezed into the mold of the world, it loses the capacity to see and, even more, to denounce, the social evils in its own situation. Like the colorblind person who is able to distinguish certain colors but not others, the worldly church recognizes the personal vices traditionally condemned within its ranks but is unable to see the evil features of its surrounding culture. In my understanding, this is the only way one can explain, for example, how it is possible for American culture Christianity to integrate racial and class segregation into its strategy for world evangelization.<sup>1</sup>

He criticized the homogeneous unit principle of the church growth movement as one captive to US-American culture, driven by technology and unfaithful to the radical and transformational ethical demands of the gospel.

The Gospel of culture-Christianity today is a message of conformism, a message that, if not accepted, can at least be easily tolerated because it doesn't disturb anybody. The racist can continue to be a racist, the exploiter can continue to be an exploiter, Christianity will be something that runs along life, but will not cut through it.<sup>2</sup>

His was a call for a more “biblical gospel and a more faithful church,” one that was delivered from “anything and everything in its culture that would prevent it from being faithful to the Lord in the fulfilment of its mission within and beyond its own culture.”<sup>3</sup> His was not a wholesale rejection of culture but an acute warning against the uncritical absorption of all its values without holding them up against the values of God's kingdom and God's justice as laid out in Scripture, incarnated by Jesus Christ, and revealed by the Holy Spirit.

And how did he propose stepping beyond the bounds of the worldly ideologies imbedded in particular cultures, and the blind spots inherent to them? He called for humility, for a theological renewal in submission to the Lordship of Christ

and nourished by Scripture, and, finally, for unity in the church globally, a renunciation of ethnocentrism, and a constant search for theological cross-fertilization.

Three years later, this very same Ecuadorean contributed to the Pasadena Consultation on the Homogeneous Unit Principle. About his involvement, John Stott, who was moderating the Consultation, wrote:

I was surprised how threatened the School of World Mission team obviously felt and, in consequence, how defensive they were in their presentations and contributions. I did not feel they were really “open,” and it saddened me that when René Padilla got up to speak, they (quite unconsciously, no doubt) put down their pads and pens, folded their arms, sat back and appeared to pull down the shutter of their minds.<sup>4</sup>

The Fuller group that hosted the consultation rather obviously constituted a homogeneous unit in itself: middle-aged, white, middle-class academics and mission practitioners of US-American families who shared a passion for evangelism and church growth. Might their apparent disregard for what this radical Latin American had to say have been at all related to his outsider status, to the color of his skin, to his less-than-perfect pronunciation of the English language? One must wonder.

**Like the colorblind person who is able to distinguish certain colors, the worldly church recognizes the personal vices traditionally condemned within its ranks but is unable to see the evil features of its surrounding culture. —Padilla**

### *A Radical Latin American's Resistance to the HUP A Concrete Lived Experience*

Now, you might have caught the name of this “outsider,” who on both occasions and many others confronted the *status quo* of the evangelical establishment of his day. Yes: it was René Padilla, my father, who used to share openly around our dinner table the struggles he was experiencing on the global evangelical scene. And I, as an inquisitive teenager, not only soaked in the stories of controversies but also critically evaluated how consistent my parents' life was with their teaching and speaking. Happily, for my own faith journey, both matched up! Beyond his provocative call at Lausanne '74 and Pasadena '77, René and Cathy Padilla's life and ministry were dedicated to working out the radical implications of the

gospel in relation to the ethical challenges of the day, constantly parsing out the contextual cultural pulls and tugs that threatened the whole life commitment of the church to God's kingdom and God's justice.

**When dozens of young people, most of them addicted to drugs, suddenly flooded in, the decision was taken to be radically hospitable, even if that meant that purses might be pilfered.**

What did the church René pastored look like on the ground in Buenos Aires, Argentina? Two cross-cultural encounters had awakened a rather traditional, homogeneous, middle-class congregation into full-fledged discipleship. First, members had learned to step over class barriers when the youth of the church had begun befriending children in a slum, offering after-school support and including them and their parents in regular church life. Second, the small Baptist church was converted to the fullness of the gospel when dozens of young people, most of them addicted to drugs, suddenly flooded in. In a congregational meeting, not without much debate, the decision was taken to be radically hospitable to the young people, even if that meant that purses might be pilfered. Two families left, out of fear that the “outsiders” would be a bad influence on their teenagers. The rest of us remained, and friendship with peers struggling to free themselves from addiction became the best antidote to drug use we could possibly have had!<sup>5</sup> Poor and middle class, street dwellers and career people, illiterate and highly educated people, local people, and immigrants: regular church services became a colorful and variegated picture. Was it easy? Definitely not. Was life instantly harmonious? Clearly not. But it was precisely the openness to the creative work of the Spirit in the midst of difference and to the reconciling work of the Lord we were all seeking to follow that created a richly diverse community which attracted people and allowed the church to burst out of its original building and plant two new congregations. This concrete lived experience was one of three sources of René Padilla's consistent resistance to the homogeneous unit principle.

### IFES Involvement

Another source was his engagement as a staff member of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, an organization composed of women and men of very distinct cultures

and professional fields unified by their commitment to follow and witness to Jesus in the university world. The cross-fertilization and mutual challenge, only possible because of their differences, deepened their understanding of what it means to be a Christian community centered not on their particularities but on the Lordship of Christ and so to be fashioned by the Spirit into a welcoming fellowship to people of diverse social and cultural backgrounds without any one of them losing their identity nor taking precedence over the others.

### Understanding of Scripture

The third source for Padilla's resistance to the HU principle and, actually, the first in importance, was Scripture. He conceded that, as McGavran stated, “It may be true that men like to become Christians without crossing racial linguistic or class barriers.”<sup>6</sup> But he judged such preference as “irrelevant” in light of biblical teaching. He cited many New Testament passages that reveal the teaching and practice of the early church as grounds for his claim that:

Membership in the body of Christ is not a question of likes or dislikes, but a question of incorporation into a new humanity under the lordship of Christ. Whether a person likes it or not the same act that reconciles him to God simultaneously introduces him into a community where people find their identity in Jesus Christ rather than in their age, culture, social class or sex and are consequently reconciled to one another.<sup>7</sup>

In Padilla's view, the church is that community which visibly embodies that reconciliation, and this is at the core of the good news of God's reign. For him, in the NT church,

The breaking down of the barriers that separate people in the world was regarded as an essential aspect of the Gospel, not merely as a result of it. Evangelism would therefore involve a call to be incorporated into a new humanity that included all kinds of people.<sup>8</sup>

Padilla was not alone in his critique of the HU principle in the '77 Pasadena Consultation. Other “outsiders” to the Fuller group concurred with him. Mennonite anthropologist, Robert Ramsayer referred to the Ephesians 2 text:

Aside from the question of what human beings like to do, the teaching on what happens when people become Christians is quite clear. In the second chapter of Ephesians where Paul speaks of the relations between Christians of Jewish background and Christians of Gentile background, he states clearly that neither is expected to join the group of the other, but instead Christ has formed one new people out of what were formerly two (verse 15).<sup>9</sup>

Mennonite ethicist John Howard Yoder posed the question of “whether the Gospel is the Gospel if it is deprived of its moral dimension.”<sup>10</sup> He further elaborated:

According to the witness of Luke in Acts, and that of Paul in Ephesians . . . it is the fundamental definition—and by

no means merely one accessory definition or a derivative description—of the Gospel that it creates one new humanity where previously there had been two hostile social communities.<sup>11</sup>

For these men, biblically grounded ethics demanded the crossing of barriers and trumped personal preferences and comfort.

### *The Significance of this Debate Today*

Now, here we are, wars raging in Gaza, Ukraine, Myanmar, Yemen, Ethiopia, and the DRC, among other places. We must ask: What is the significance today of this debate from forty-five years ago? Why draw up this historical survey of the contestations surrounding the HUP now? I believe the issue is even more crucial in our current reality than it was in the 70s. The social, political, and religious landscape is profoundly polarized in the US and around the world. Positions and practices surrounding race, gender, climate change, migration, personal freedom, social responsibility, even COVID mask use, all are being weaponized. People are lining up, by choice or by force, in extremes and building higher walls and deeper trenches. Christians are not immune but, instead, often seem to be fueling the flames of animosity and justifying their positions theologically. In this scene, the Pauline description of the church as an intercultural poem is prophetically relevant.

**Christian mission involves  
inviting people to embark on a  
journey of radical discipleship in which  
every loyalty is put into question  
next to the loyalty owed  
to the one and only Lord Jesus.**

The inhabitants of Asia Minor, recipients of the letter we know as Ephesians, could hardly have been any more diverse. Original Anatolians had been joined through war, trade, and forced migration by Persians, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, and Jews. A mix of these, gathered in household churches, received the Pauline letter with the following teaching. Though the inheritors of Abraham, “the wandering Aramean,” might have preferred to keep comfortably to themselves, isolating from their Gentile neighbors, the mystery revealed by Jesus Christ is that by his reconciling life and ministry, they are brought together into one body (Eph. 3:6). By his peace being, peace-making, and peace proclaiming, Jesus broke the

dividing wall of hostility between people groups. And it is not in any temple but in the new humanity, woven together from different ethnic and cultural strands, that God chooses to live by the Spirit (Eph. 2:22).

Was this coming together easy for the early believers? Definitely not. The Empire of the day would rather keep people apart from one another, each in their proper corner so that they could not join forces and subvert its precarious *Pax Romana*. The Temple would rather maintain the ethnic purity and allegiance of the Jewish people. The Greco-Roman temples would rather maintain the ethnic-cultural hold on Gentiles for their business loyalty. But God’s intervention in history breaks those holds and inaugurates a new community, marked not by ethnic, racial, or class loyalties but by submission to a new Lord and by the unity of the Spirit. A deep dive into the greetings of Paul to different sets of house churches spread across the Roman Empire reveals the diversity in that new community. See, for example, Romans 16, where Roman, Greek, and Jewish names of free people mingle with those of slaves and freed slaves, men, and women.

### *Radical Discipleship: Where Every Other Loyalty is Called into Question*

Was life as a diverse community instantly harmonious? Clearly not. Patterns of prejudice, classism, hierarchy, exclusion, and racism are hard to break, and the book of Acts and the various NT epistles give evidence of the struggles of the early communities of the Way in that regard and seek to nourish alternative postures and actions. It is striking, in that context, that, although the Gospel of Matthew was written to strengthen the identity of Jewish Christians after the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem, in the first chapter the author breaks with tradition to include in Jesus’ genealogy four women who are foreigners, two Canaanites, Tamar and Rahab, a Moabite, Ruth, and a Hittite, Bathsheba. I can only imagine that such a daring move could have been a barrier for many a Jewish person to accept Jesus as the Messiah! Why, then, would Matthew include that information if not to challenge the comfortable homogeneity of the Jewish majority? The same Gospel account ends with Jesus’ reaffirmation of his ultimate authority and his call that his followers make disciples, other followers, who will be brought from many nations, through teaching and baptism, into the new community that embodies the integration evident in Jesus’ own genealogy. I believe we, as well as the scattered Jews and the Gentile newcomers, need to understand that Christian mission is not simply about ushering people across the line between non-faith and faith, but instead it involves inviting them, from the very beginning, to embark on a journey of radical discipleship in which every loyalty is put into question next to the loyalty

owed to the one and only Lord Jesus. And this highest allegiance is made visible in the nature of values, commitments, and actions in the world as well as in all relationships, and particularly ones with those who are different.

### *The Faith Community: An Intercultural Poem*

I propose that the faith community today, as in those days, is called to live as an intercultural poem. What do we mean by intercultural? In contrast to “cross-cultural,” which focuses on the barriers overcome, or “multi-cultural,” which simply stresses the coexistence of diversity, the term “intercultural” points to the interstices, the places between different actors. An intercultural posture recognizes the natural hybridity of culture, ethnic, religious, and social identities and seeks to detect the points of intersection as a means to move beyond discrimination, stigmatization, racism, sexism and classism. In this stance, situatedness and power-relations are acknowledged, negotiated, and transformed. It is this liminal space, the one between people who are different, that requires nurture in our broken world if, as a church, we are to be part of the solution to so much divisiveness rather than part of the problem.

In Pauline words: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). It is only God’s Spirit who makes unity possible in the midst of the many differences that threaten to keep us apart. God’s Spirit breathes Christ’s reconciliation into everyday relationships. It was God’s Spirit who enabled the first disciples to communicate across language barriers at Pentecost. It was God’s Spirit who opened the hearts of middle-class professionals to the poorer drug dependent young people in my local church in Buenos Aires and wove a body out of this heterogeneous mix. Our church did not simply become the sum of people sitting next to each other for a Sunday service but an intercultural community in which all members were converted into deeper understanding of God’s love and claim on our lives.

It is also God’s Spirit who is at work in Casa Adobe, the intentional Christian community my husband and I are a part of in Costa Rica. Members of our community differ in culture and nationality—we are Argentine, Venezuelan, US-American and Costa Rican. We differ in church tradition—we are Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist and Pentecostal. We differ in socioeconomic status—we are refugees, political asylees, and middle-class professionals. Yet, we live as one faith community, sharing everything from morning prayer to dirty dishes, from a common purse and shared property to Sunday worship, neighborhood organizing and riverside reforestation.

Imagining and nurturing local congregations as embodied intercultural poems does not by any means entail melting particularities into one pot or creating what McGavran dismissively called “mongrel congregations.” It may make realistic, common sense, to use McGavran’s words, that people prefer becoming Christians with people like them. But the church is not a social club, or a bubble of likeness tailored to the preferences of its clients. If we believe that God does make all things new, that as followers of Jesus Christ we share in his resurrection power and that God’s Spirit is active today, we cannot be tied to the sort of realism that reifies the *status quo* as the end of the story. We can step against the grain of our self-seeking, sectarian society and affirm that Christian communities, as poems, are all the richer when fashioned out of different colors, tastes, textures, and rhythms. Along with Padilla we can declare, in word and deed, that:

The missiology that the Church needs today is not one that conceives the people of God as a quotation taken from the surrounding society but one that conceives it as “an embodied question mark” that challenges the values of the world.<sup>12</sup>

**Christ’s church is called to be the living, breathing, loving intercultural poem, beautiful in its diversity, evocative in its embodied witness of God’s wide embrace, subversive in its confrontation of all exclusionary powers.**

The church, as an intercultural poem, dances to a tune other than the dominant one. Created in God’s image and redeemed from death by the Community-of-Love, Christ’s church is called to be the living, breathing, loving intercultural poem, beautiful in its diversity, evocative in its embodied witness of God’s wide embrace, subversive in its confrontation of all exclusionary powers. The church as an intercultural poem is empowered, built up, and diversely gifted by the Holy Spirit, a new and unlikely community of equals, with interdependent relationships of mutual respect within, and service far beyond itself. Embodying God’s mission, bending borders and prophetically challenging humanly constructed walls, prejudices, and exclusions does demand sacrifice. But for followers of Jesus, the crucified, risen, and reigning Son of God and son of Jewish men and women from many nations, there is no other Way. **IJFM**

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Rene Padilla, “Evangelism and the World,” Paper presented on July 25, 1974, at Lausanne World Congress on Evangelization, Lausanne Content Library, <https://lausanne.org/content/evangelism-and-the-world>.
- <sup>2</sup> Padilla, “Evangelism and the World,” 1974.
- <sup>3</sup> Padilla, “Evangelism and the World,” 1974.
- <sup>4</sup> John Stott, JRWS diary, “A visit to the Americas: June and July 1977,” cited by Timothy Dudley-Smith in *John Stott: A Global Ministry. A Biography. The Later Years* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 224.
- <sup>5</sup> See Tetsunao Yamamori and René Padilla, *The Local Church, Agent of Transformation: An Ecclesiology for Integral Mission* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairós, 2004).
- <sup>6</sup> Donald McGavran, quoted by René Padilla in “The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle,” in “Consultation on The Homogeneous Unit Principle,” compiled by Greg Parsons (unpublished manuscript 2001, last modified 2022), Microsoft Word file, 138.
- <sup>7</sup> René Padilla, “The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle,” in “Consultation on The Homogeneous Unit Principle,” compiled by Greg Parsons (unpublished manuscript 2001, last modified 2022), Microsoft Word file, 138.
- <sup>8</sup> Padilla, “The Unity of the Church,” 155.
- <sup>9</sup> Robert Ramsayer, “Anthropological Perspectives on the Homogeneous Unit Principle, II,” in “Consultation on The Homogeneous Unit Principle,” compiled by Greg Parsons (unpublished manuscript 2001, last modified 2022), Microsoft Word file, 74.
- <sup>10</sup> John Howard Yoder, “The Homogeneous Unit Concept in Ethical Perspective,” in “Consultation on The Homogeneous Unit Principle,” compiled by Greg Parsons (unpublished manuscript 2001, last modified 2022), Microsoft Word file, 187.
- <sup>11</sup> Yoder, “The Homogeneous Unit Concept in Ethical Perspective,” 193.
- <sup>12</sup> Padilla, “The Unity of the Church,” 157.

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