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## OUR MULTICULTURAL STORY

Westgate Baptist Community, 17 October 2004  
Galatians 3:23-28

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Well, this week it's twenty two years since three small local churches came together and formed Westgate Baptist Community. Because it's your birthday, I'd like to read you a chapter from a really interesting story. So sit back and relax. It's story time.

Once upon a time deep in the Western Suburbs of Melbourne there lived a group of Anglos. Anglos thought they were they were God's own race of people. They trace their ancestors back to England and think that there was no-one living in Australia until they came by boat two hundred years ago. Now Anglos used to be a strange sort of creature, though they are changing these days. Back then, Anglos didn't eat tasty food like the Chinese or the Karen do. They would boil potatoes and three vegetables until the taste and the goodness was almost gone, and then eat them alongside a bit of meat.

Then a terrible thing happened — at least the Anglos thought so. Some different creatures began to move into the Western Suburbs. These non-Anglos were called Migrants, though the Anglos called them "Wogs", "Dagos", "Chinks" and other, worse, names. One Anglo was heard to say that this area used to have a lot of people in it but now the migrants were moving in! I guess that, to her, they were non-people because they came here later than her grandfather did.

Then a wonderful thing happened. A bunch of Anglos who saw things differently got together to form a church. Because they dunked people in water they were called Baptists. Because they wanted to love those around them they were called LessHate Baptist Community. Someone suggested that they should be called the MoreLove community, but that sounded too arrogant, so they settled for LessHate. They didn't form a totally new church but built on the story of the older Baptists in the area.

They first of all set out to hate the poor less. Well, they actually did lots of good things for the poor. They opened their houses to them, set up programs for them, marched in the streets for them. As time went on, LessHate became more and more welcoming of the poor, the uneducated, the mentally ill, the indigenous and those of different sexual orientations.

But it was still mainly Anglo. There was one Persian man from Iran, but he looked pretty much like an Anglo and then he went and married one.

It was food that turned things upside down.

One of the members at LessHate Baptist Community wrote a report called *How Things Are and What We Can Do About It*. He found out that more than 40% of people in the Western Suburbs were born overseas. He found out that for more than 40% of people in the Western Suburbs English was not their first language. He found out that in his suburb alone there were five thousand countries represented, ten thousand languages spoken, twenty thousand ethnic dancing groups — and fifty thousand great restaurants where real food was served!

At the theological level, more wonderful things were happening. The LessHate Baptist Community discovered that Jesus didn't mix only with Anglos. In fact they were shocked to find that there were no Anglos in the Bible at all! They discovered that within weeks of the early church starting up it had worship services with hundreds of languages spoken, and everyone could understand what was said. They discovered in Galatians 3 that in God's new community there is no difference between Jews and Greeks, Serbians and Croatians, Karen and Chin, Anglos and migrants. They began to dream of a multicultural community where they would be enriched by many cultures — by the sounds, colours, smells, words, songs, tastes and ways of seeing things that others bring. They dreamt of a multicultural kingdom of God, a gathering of the nations.

But a terrible thing happened. Well, nothing happened. The LessHate community looked for ways to become multicultural but it didn't happen. They prayed about it and left their door open. Why didn't lots of Sudanese or Filipinos come rushing through the door? They didn't know how to start being a multicultural community. They knew from experience that things generally started in God's way and in God's time, so they waited expectantly. Some LessHaters made personal friends with non-Anglos. One or two non-Anglos came and joined the community. But it was still mainly an Anglo community in a suburb largely of migrants.

Then a wonderful thing happened. Ten years ago one of the pastors had long service leave and visited a Karen Burmese refugee camp on the Thai border. His life as a pastor had become so boring that he wanted to spend his holidays where he could hear the bullets whistle past him as he lay around in the sun. He went with two others from LessHate. They returned the next year, and then others started to go too, helping in the Bible School or with setting up computers. About fifteen different LessHaters went in the next few years.

Then more wonderful things kept happening. Some of the Karen managed to get here as refugees and some began coming to LessHate. A Karen Support Group was formed to help the refugee camps and to help the new arrivals in Melbourne. The Anglos at LessHate were deeply blessed by their new Karen friends. One thing that deeply blessed them was Karen food. The road to multiculturalism goes via the stomach!

There were now about thirty or forty Karen people around. They began worshipping in homes and then in the LessHate church building on a Sunday afternoon.

Just when LessHate looked like becoming bi-cultural, other groups became represented. An Ethiopian family arrived and the children were just beautiful, almost as beautiful as their parents. They'd been through a lot, and the community learnt of their sadness at being cut off from home. A quiet Vietnamese Chinese woman came too. She had arrived in Australia years before in a leaky boat after nearly drowning on a terrible trip.

Then the first of several Chin Burmese families arrived, bringing more flavour and more awareness of how so many non-Anglos are suffering all over the world.

Then even more wonderful things happened. The Anglos actually started learning a phrase or two in other languages, usually Karen. The Anglos are not very good at learning languages, so this was a miracle. The Karen didn't seem to mind if the Anglos kept saying, "The peace of the Lord be with you!" in Karen all the time, even if they were trying to say, "Please pass the sugar", or "How is your family today?", because the Karen knew that was the only phrase the Anglos knew.

In services Bible readings were often done in other languages. Non-English prayers were said. Wonderful songs from other cultures were sometimes heard. The non-Anglo young people loved being with the Anglo young people. Special multicultural services were held. They went well, even if the Anglos sometimes went home after the first two hours.

The Karen Support Group did six wonderful things before breakfast each day. They raised money and had fun while they did it. They found airfares for refugees. They found beds, blankets and fridges for new arrivals. They supported a New Testament lecturer right through the three years of his Masters degree.

The non-Anglos were also doing wonderful things, returning the love that they felt. The stories of the wonderful things that happened would fill a big book. Jesus was really present in this community, and the LessHate Baptist Community was beginning to experience Paul's prediction that in God's new community there would be no Jew or Greek, no Anglo or non-Anglo.

Then a non-Anglo pastor was even appointed to the pastoral team. It looked really good to have three pastors, including a woman and a non-Anglo, even if the church didn't actually pay the woman or the non-Anglo. LessHate had arrived as a multicultural church!

But then a terrible thing happened. Someone realised that LessHate had not arrived. Oh no, there might be more to do! “But it’s hard enough already!”, they were thinking.

Both Anglos and non-Anglos could see that living together as different people is actually hard work and some people got tired of it. Some Anglos tried and tried to learn Burmese names but were not very good at it and eventually they gave up. The Karen people, understandably wanted to worship in their own language, and so they now met separately and weren’t worshipping with the Anglos as much they used to.

For a while there had been a natural flow of non-Anglos arriving, enriching the community, but now it was slowing down.

Some LessHaters pushed the multicultural vision and said that a really multicultural church would have a multicultural diaconate but it’s all Anglo. Others said that they wouldn’t put their best friend on a diaconate so why would they want to do it to non-Anglos?

Some said that the services had retreated to the bland Anglo taste of meat and three veges, except that the Anglo services were going nearly as long as the non-Anglo ones did.

So now, the story of the LessHate Baptist Community stands perilously poised. Will wonderful things happen or terrible things?

Will LessHate worship continue to retreat or grow again to express different cultures?

Will the voice of non-Anglos be heard clearly in the decision making of the community?

Will LessHate remain known for its welcome of refugees and migrants, and will it continue to roll up its sleeves in practical ways?

There are real needs for migrants to learn English and to make friends in English conversation classes. Will the Anglos amongst the LessHaters take up this challenge, or find it too hard to actually become real friends to those who are different in their midst?

Not as many LessHaters are travelling to the Karen refugee camps these days. Will the young people at LessHate, perhaps, take up the challenge and visit the camps?

What will happen to the migrants’ kids, who are growing up as Ethiopian Australians or Karen Australians? Will they be able to belong both to their own culture and to the larger LessHate community?

Will the Anglos take up the call to teach the migrants Aussie Rules football? How will they ever learn if the Anglos don't coach them in the finer points of God's own game? Or perhaps they will find other fun games and sports that bring the groups together. Will the various types of LessHaters find ways to relax and have fun together, or will they mainly mix in their own circles? Maybe the Vietnamese lady plays table tennis and can't wait to get out her bat and ball.

Some say that LessHate still does things the Anglo way most of the time. Will the Anglos learn to say less and listen more? Will all groups take care to learn as much as they can about each other's cultures? Will worship and Bible study be able to reflect different ways of doing things, reflecting the fact that God made us all different and loves diversity?

So will the multicultural dream come true? Will terrible things happen, like losing the links and sinking back into separate ways? Or will wonderful, unpredictable things happen, like more cultures being found at LessHate and even more tasty food and interesting friends and different ways of being followers of Jesus?

You're on the edge of your seats now, aren't you? You want to know how the story goes next, don't you. Well, because you've been such good listeners to my story, I promise to read you the next chapter, but not today. Which way will it go? Will things be wonderful or terrible, or perhaps both?

Listen to the next instalment of this intriguing and important story and you'll find out.

*Ross Langmead, 17-10-04*