

# **Towards a Pedagogy of Grace: Multiculturalism as Opportunity for Vital Encounters and Transformation**

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## **Introduction**

This paper aims at assisting local parish ministers, educators and popular educators with the task of creating spaces and communities where multiculturalism is experienced as a place of encounters that challenge people with transformational moments both individually and systemically.

Multiculturalism came to me as a pastoral necessity and a pedagogical reflection. Paulo Freire believed that education was truly a theory of knowledge put into practice, thus literacy was in reality an application of his views and pedagogy. Multiculturalism in this paper was pastorally and pedagogically, hence, praxiologically, a moment of application of insights of what I have called, “pedagogy of grace.” (Braga, 2003)

Any local pastor working in New York City would agree that multiculturalism is a pastoral necessity. In my case I, had the specific task at hand of helping a mainstream Presbyterian Church in New York to reinvent itself from a bilingual setting into a Multicultural congregation. Despite the fact of being for many a progressive congregation on the upper west side of Manhattan. This congregation had struggled with a dual congregational model, in which the Spanish speaking congregation met in parallel with the English speaking congregation at 11am. Despite the official discourse being of the congregation being multicultural, the opportunities of encounters between the two congregations were stressful. Either in extensively translated combined services or in coffee hours after each individual service, both congregations remained isolated. The reality though was that the Spanish congregation met for the past 30 years worshiped in a windowless chapel in the back of the church, its members would use the side door of the church to gain access, whereas the English congregation would use the main sanctuary, and enter through the main doors of the church. Perceiving themselves as a progressive and hence multicultural congregation, we initially noticed that multiculturalism was confused with diversity, or as I used to say, much emphasis on the “multi” would obscure the “culturalism”. Reacting as a pastor and reflecting on our work on Freire I proposed to the session a change of self understanding, and a change of mentality: first, from a language-based church into a culture based church; and then from a program-based church into a community-based church. The years that followed represented the attempts to apply the proposal in practical terms and to lead the congregation into its

transformation. This paper brings to life some of the learning lessons and propositions of the process.

Diverging from the dominant preference of seeing multiculturalism as mere plurality, I argue that multiculturalism is a privileged opportunity for what I will call vital encounters, in a free space aimed at transcendence. That said, assumes that we take Paulo Freire's view of culture in the anthropological approach, that is the human activity towards his and her own overcoming, or in Freire's terms, the movement of the human being to become more human (Freire, 1987) In this free space of the fundamental human challenge to transcendence, the gratuity of the encounter happens, actually going beyond merely stating that which hinders each individual's or community's transcendence, but towards what I believe to be the challenge of a Freirean education: a graced approach to life, relationships and society.

Multiculturalism then in this paper is not only a matter of diversity but rather a matter of collectively negotiated liberations of various selves. We rely on the insight that, from a reformed perspective, it is not the perfection of the realities, social and individual, that we aim for, but rather the ability to exist in our realities in a praxis of transcendence; transcending always from the good and evil that surrounds and permeates all of us; but yet keeping them in check. It is in this sense that I aim to share insights of the praxis of multiculturalism in the church as an instance of what I have called a; "pedagogy of grace."

## I

### **Taking Account of the Challenge**

Considering a rapid changing reality that engulfs us is not a simple task either pastorally or educationally. Naming the challenges was helpful to me while considering the task of engendering an approach that would develop multiculturalism as a momentum for encounters and transformations. I would propose four sets of challenges that are interconnected and can be looked separately for the purposes of this paper. I would like to visit the challenges and then offer a critical pastoral incident that triggered much of my own reflection on the issue.

#### **Identity and Change**

I am relatively new to the struggles and stories of the African Diaspora in the USA. However, Martin Luther King Jr. Harold Dean Trulear, Peter Paris, James Cone, bell hooks, Cornel West, among other people of the African American struggle have all posed that the search for identity, visibility and justice in the face of dehumanization, invisibility and evil is a cause that has united oppressed peoples at different times, in different stories. Yet, that is what precisely unites us, our struggle for identity, visibility and justice can be construed in ways that not only isolates us, but unfortunately alienates us, ultimately defeating the struggle for liberation. Trulear for example, says, "I believe that the church has experienced some loss of memory with respect to its historic function in nurturing alternative black identity, and has become increasingly captive to the middle-class ethos of consumerism, careerism, and materialism." (Wilkerson 1997, 170). Hence

for him the church is charged with redefining its educational ministry in face of “1) the nihilation of the black Christian identity and the need for identity formation, 2) black alienation and the need for the restoration of holistic relationships, and 3) black oppression and the need for spiritual and social empowerment in the present social context.” Trulear argues that the bulk of black middle-class alienation from the black heritage accounts to four historical moments: 1) an uncritical integration into the American mainstream, forgetting that it is the transformation of society, not merely participation in it that is at the root of African-American spirituality; 2) the lack of a clear socially defined mandate; 3) the stratification of the black community, which depicts the underclass as “other”; and 4) an unfortunate acceptance of a definition that ties human “being” to certain forms of accomplishment rather than to quality of life.” As a remedy, he suggests 1) a biblical anthropology faithful to the black church’s tradition in quality relationships with God and other human beings; 2) an intentional partnership between middle-class and underclass congregations; and 3) a deliberate networking with third world churches so to place the Black American Christians in the posture of learner. The point is that the possibility of stalling the emancipation project is quite real not only in the context of Latin America, but also for African American communities. Several of problems of the African American experience presented by Trulear are in fact common struggles. The logic of functionalism, as Leonardo Boff used to say, is simply making the system work, thus conceding merely to inclusion rather than social transformation; the unresolved internalized oppressor that Paulo Freire used to remind us of, put in action by the stratification of our emerging communities; the alienation of our communities from other emerging communities, in a localist logic; these are also real problems for our churches in Latin America, and specially in the US, as immigrant churches.

Our communities meet, Anglos, African Americans, Caribbean’s, Chileans, and Puerto Ricans, Chinese immigrants from Cuba, Brazilians, and so on. Our communities also meet as sexually straight, homosexuals; or as it is said, physically “standard”, able-bodied or disabled; choir lovers or rap lovers! How are we going to support encounters that, escaping the mere logic of inclusion, allow a true validation, formation and recognition of our identities, while in the presence of the other? Furthermore, how are we to move a step further, beyond our identity politics and provide for encounters that prompt change as safe change, that is, change that is not perceived as a threat to one’s identity or as a betrayal to one’s traditions and struggles?

### **The story of the hospital**

Please allow me to share with you a critical incident that happened to me as a chaplain. During my second year in this country, newly immigrant from Brazil, I was doing my residency as a chaplain. One of my on call nights, I was sleeping in the cozy sofa of the office when someone knocked at the door. No pager or phone call, so this could not be an official call, which made me really angry. I said, at this time? Who would that be? Opening the door, before I could even open my eyes, I had a little saint in front of my face and a voice in a somehow broken English saying, ‘chaplain, please bless the saint’! As a good Reformed Brazilian minister, I jumped opened my eyes and I said, ‘Sorry, I am not a Priest, I am a Presbyterian pastor!’ They returned back to me with disarming simplicity, ‘That is okay Chaplain, you are a man of God aren’t you?’ By this

time, I realized that I still had them at the door, my body was blocking the entrance and my arm was somehow protecting the two thirds opened door. I moved out of the way, and welcomed them into the office and to my cozy sofa! Only then I realized that the heavy accent was actually of a Spanish speaking family. Their mother had been in a car accident and they traveled several hours to get there and arrived past the visiting hour at the Trauma ICU. Despite the fact that the mother could die at any moment that night, they could not see her. Now they asked me to bless an icon that the nurse would put at their mother's bedside.

This incident encapsulates for me the challenge of our everyday communities in their daily encounters. How to respond to the request of the other? Can we respond without betraying who we really are or what we believe in? Is it a solution to just respond to its face value, or is there a deeper request begging for a true encounter and a vital response? Let us explore these questions as we examine some of the theoretical insights brought in from reformed theology, liberation theology, Paulo Freire and Brazilian popular culture.

## II Key Conceptual Insights

### **Encounter, an old anew insight**

Latin American Liberation theology became known to argue solidarity as a crucial category to mediate redemption and thus transformation. We were to meet the Christ not only in the other, but the other as a social category, the poor. Various criticisms have been made to this reductionism. I here suggest that drawing from LALT's earlier streams, like Paulo Freire and, his sources like Buber's *Ich und Du* (1958), we can construe an old insight anew as encounter, vital encounter.

Listening to the family at the hospital, away from the comfort zone of my cozy sofa, I had the choice of hearing the words 'bless the saint,' 'cure my mother,' or I could also hear, and actually, see in their eyes something else; something that I too could empathize with, the connection. I could hear the need of connection with their mother in a way to guarantee that she would not die alone!

Paulo Freire used to teach us that in every epoch, people are challenged with a task, recognizing the epoch-task places us in the position of either letting ourselves be carried by the task or taking charge of the task, or as bell hooks states "we cannot enter the struggle as objects to later become subjects" (Hooks 1994, 46). This happens though not only at the collective, but also in the individual level, since reality in a constructivist approach is like an onion with several layers thus connecting the individual and the collective. In the daily experiences of life we are constantly encountering and negotiating individually what constitutes the collective of our existential tasks. Our sense of connection, continuity, love, redemption, forgiveness and so forth happen structured in our constructions of culture, traditions and practices, but they ultimately are what they are: in Freirean flavor, our attempts to transcend all that negates our very being, our very becoming.

All appropriateness of the hospital procedures, all of my sense of entitlement to a night of sleep conflicted with the concrete need of these human beings for connection. Obviously, I do not mean the mere communication space that Jurgen Habermas suggests; to me a chaplain within the structure of the hospital, as another human being, it was given the chance to force the “public” to honor the “private”. This mimics a strange social figure in Brazil, the so-called “jeitinho”, a social institution at times confused with corruption, because of a positivistic way of thinking, fixing options in either/or. For Brazilian Sociologist Roberto DaMata, it can also be taken as a figure of irruption of the individual into the public, correcting the forgetfulness of being endemic of the positivist structures of the public. This is possible because I, as an agent, recognize the invitation to hear the family, choose to hear their need not their culture, tradition or practices, but their need itself; and then relate to it, placing myself in the moral position of acting accordingly. In short, I could take offense at the saint, spend time explaining the reformed view on idolatry and so on, but that would further distance me from the family, and that could throw myself in the forgetfulness of being or, in the Freirean spin that I suggested, throwing us further into oppression.

Re-reading Buber was helpful to me. “The Thou meets me through grace—which it is not found by seeking. However my speaking of the primary word to it is an act of my being, is indeed the act of my being” (1958, 11). “All real living is meeting” thus, the relation “the relation means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one; just as any action of the whole being, which means the suspension of all partial actions and consequently of all sensations of actions grounded only in their particular limitation, is bound to resemble suffering. ... I become through my relation to the Thou; as I become I, and I say Thou.” (Buber 1958, 11). This line of thought is paramount in Paulo Freire’s work and creates perplexing concepts such as that no one can liberate the oppressed, rather than themselves, however, they in their turn liberate their own oppressors! The radicality of the relationality in Freire was always difficult to Western audiences to grasp. In a vital encounter, the I and the Thou are both challenged with the fundamental human challenge, that of transcending all that precludes our becoming more human and therefore recognizing each other in a direct relation of love, or in a relation of becoming responsible for each other’s transcendence and hence our own. (Buber 1958, 15) In practical terms, in a vital encounter if I am not able to break through just feelings for the other as Buber reminds us, or seeing the other only through the cultural, traditional or stereotypical surroundings of him or her, I am not meeting. The concept of solidarity is valid, insofar as it points to actively engaging with the other in their process of becoming, but only if by doing, I am able to perceive the other in that mirroring effect of facing his/her challenge to transcend and recognized in that my own. That places us in a dynamic system rather than in an ideologically static program.

However, in order to meet the family at the hospital, I had to accept my own vulnerability, and the exercise of actively listening to their story. Vital encounters are encounters that bring us to the vital existential needs that are negotiated on a daily basis. There is no vital encountering without vulnerability and no vulnerability without active listening. However this will be discussed later on in this paper.

## **Culture as humanizing experience and liberation as transcending**

Paulo Freire is normally accounted for creating a wonderful method of transformation, Jack Mezirow would say that. Thomas Groome has built a whole pedagogy on the notion of shared praxis. The list goes on and on. However few people have noticed that Freire was adamant in suggesting that he did not create a methodology for teaching, but that his pedagogy is a theory of knowledge put to practice. This was possible because for Freire, culture was not taken in its sociological approach, but rather in its anthropological approach, thus seeing culture as what humans create over time in order to “humanize the world”. (Freire, 1984) Adding the critiques of Ecologists and Feminists alike, I have argued here that if Freire was about a theory of knowing, then “consentization” can be taken as “transcending” because it is the human task to be more human in each of our contexts (Braga, 2003). I cherish here the wisdom of the Practices of Faith approach that reminds us that practices are what people do over time, together to preserve and pass on life (Dykstra, 1999). Beyond Christian education, this wisdom is clear to challenge us to observe the ways in which human groups and individuals have developed or try to develop patterns of securing their most embedded existential needs.

A crucial task of a multicultural education that is Freirean is to teach the movement between the needs and what can be seen as strategies to secure them. At this level, we can argue across traditions and experiences about the appropriateness of the different strategies to secure one common need. This then can be done safely, without the fear of betraying our own communities or traditions, because now we would own the culture and not the culture own us as Robert Kegan would say. (Kegan, 1996)

In my critical encounter with the family at the hospital, one notices the importance of in a Roman Catholic based family, and relating to that, not to the saint, for me a strategy to secure the need for connection, but to God’s presence, and the need itself. At this time, I can share with you my response. Deciding to speak to their need, and not to the strategies, culture, traditions and practices; I was free to return to my own strategies of securing the same need and propose a response that would meet them and still preserve my integrity. I said to the family, ‘what about if I take the saint with all the family and we go to your mom’s room and I will bless the family with an intercessory prayer?’ Tears rolled from their eyes. Beyond the saint there was the need for connection, or the need for God’s presence; and that had been responded, an encounter had happened.

## **Grace in a Reformed Brazilian Accent**

A final conceptual insight is that of Grace in a reformed and yet very Brazilian way. Here the issue is the attempt to go beyond of what can be construed as our processes of transcendence; or better, relating them in a way in which the point is neither the paradox, nor the perfecting of the realities, but the relating to reality in a reconciliation of opposites.

Grace has a very profound and complex meaning for Christians, and yet it can be simply put as the very economy of God’s dealings with human kind and the whole creation in love. In this paper, I use a particular sense of Grace, that of responding to the liberation Theology notion of social sin, with social grace. Moltmann reminded us that

since incarnation, the history of human kind became the history of God, and since the cross, human suffering entered the divine. (Moltmann, 1984) In this sense we cannot maintain a separation between a so-called secular history and the sphere of the operation of God's grace. Within Roman Catholic Theology, Karl Rahner, responds to the Scholastic divide of nature and grace, proposes the "supernatural existential," paving the way for the notion that God's salvific will is universal, and grace is God's offering of Godself and God's presence to all people throughout history. As a consequence grace is operating generally and universally outside the boundaries of Christianity in a concrete existential way as well as in a public and social way in other religions. (Haight 1979, 148).

This is not a discarding of the history of the theology of grace. Indeed as Roger Haight suggests, taken historically, the classical formulations of grace present recurring themes and shifts of focal points. In Augustine's view, grace is identified with the immanent working of God's Spirit within human personality and thus within history. While Augustine did not extend the activity of Grace beyond the Christian order of things, one can argue that wherever there is authentic self-transcending love, there God's saving grace is at work. (Haight, 1979). Scholastic Theology, more so with Aquinas, moved to incorporate Augustine's theology on grace into an Aristotelian structure of being. This moved the focus to grace as relating to a finite and limited nature as opposed to God's being. Grace is then a new power and nature, elevating and supernatural, in fact it is divinizing because through habitual grace, the individual participates in God's being. Grace is then necessary because finite beings are incapable of reaching the supernatural and revealed goal of communion with God. The dynamics is of transformation, and elevation by infusion of a new quality and a new being, grace. (Haight, 1979) A radical break from Scholastic thought came with the reformers, precisely in refusing the attempt to solve the ontological gap between nature and grace. Luther's approach privileged the interpersonal relationship between God and human beings mediated by the Word of God. Grace is then forgiveness to human sinfulness. Despite that forgiveness is also present in Augustine and Aquinas, the reformers placed this principle as paramount. Grace is God's mercy, forgiveness, and love for the fallen human sinner. In and through this personal relationship, warranted by the Word of God and received by faith, the fallen sinner is transformed even though sin or concupiscence remains. Historically, grace shows four aspects, a) God's love for human beings, b) love that affects, converts and transforms human freedom and loving, c) love that raises the person up to a new kind of existence, and, d) love that is universally at work transforming history.

The task though is relating the concept of grace as a paradigm for the purposes of a pedagogical approach aimed at facilitating multiculturalism as a momentum for encounters and transformation. I believe that a sort of reformed Brazilian accented notion of grace can be helpful to inspire a pedagogy that while promoting liberation as transcendence both individual as collective, does so while allowing for an integrative view of life that goes beyond merely naming or externalizing.

Moltmann's book *The Crucified God* impacted profoundly all liberationists and for sure posed for the Reformed world, that the consequence of the cross is that human history was taken within God's history as well as our condition of suffering; for all eternity the cross, and its suffering, stands between the persons of the trinity. Human history and suffering are now God's history and suffering. This already helps us to escape

from any reductionism of grace to the realms of Christianity, rather seen that God's grace is at work throughout all history and all human life. The permanence of evil, or the apparent failure of the emancipation process would question the notion of this all operative grace. Here a quick recovery of the reformed contribution helps, in the simple fact that it is not the perfection of the being that is primarily aimed, but through forgiveness and acceptance, the Reformed view points to a qualitative difference based on the juxtaposition of the sin and good, in grace. The point is the creation of a community of transcendence. Let me offer some illustration and then show how this is also peculiarly found in Brazilian popular culture.

A friend with CP (Cerebral Palsy) once told me that she would never allow herself to be carried by someone else. Last year, in the middle of an outing to a natural swimming pool 20 miles away from the coast of Maragogy, Pernambuco, Brazil, she said that it felt so logical to be carried by members of our team into the little boat that had taken us. In the middle of the ocean for the first time in her life she told me that all her life she had struggled to get people to understand that disability is just a different body, thus a different experience of life. Only by allowing herself to be carried by others out of her culture, was she able to fully allow the very definition of difference to be true. Only when restoring the relationality of it, she felt that it was naturally logical that others could carry her. Trulear reminds us that the notion of humanity that is tied to achievement, independence and self-sufficiency is ultimately voided of relationality. The tyranny and irony here is that the "world" would say to her that she has only two choices in an "either or" approach. She would be either able-bodied or disabled. Most of her life she intuitively struggled to show her parents on one hand that trying to surgically "restore" her body would actually be a bigger violence, and on the other hand, not succumbing to the "poor disabled" discourse. I believe that in the difference of Brazil she discovered the challenge of Grace, her choices did not need to be either or, she could actually be both! Neither the perfection of her body nor succumbing to the evil of "crippleness" makes sense. It is by holding the two together in the difficult place of vulnerability, of wide awakening that makes us more human, and transcending both pointers of good and evil.

All of this is not to say that we should not commit to a praxis of objectively changing the structures of discrimination that society places on people with different bodies. But if the praxis of socially opening the space is not accompanied by the construction of a graced individual and community, then the transformation is merely functional because it is just inclusion, not liberation.

Again Brazilian popular culture has taught me great deal about that. A famous desert in Brazil combines very sweet guava paste and very salty cheese. It normally puzzles my friends in the US; this very sweet thing should not go with this very salty one. It should be either or. How do you hold the two together as if a surreal sense of taste composition exists? In fact this little desert represents a lot of our common struggle. As Roberto DaMata points reflecting in the movie *Dona Flor and her Two Husbands*, the Brazilian puzzle has been of being modern, but not modern; western, but not western, and in fact rejecting the either or attitude of Modernity in its positivistic tyranny. Flor had not to choose between the company of the spirit of her late husband, a womanizer, irresponsible and immature man, and yet a free spirit, a lover of life, and a wonderful lover; and the company of her living second husband, a Chemist by profession,

predictable, methodic, clear cut and secure, but a domesticated soul, a statistical man, and... a boring lover! She would not settle for either or...she would keep both!

### III

#### **The Application:**

#### **Multiculturalism as an opportunity for encounter and transformation.**

I have been claiming that multiculturalism is a unique opportunity to foster vital encounters and thus transformation both individually as well as collectively. In this sense, helping a local congregation to move into a practice of multiculturalism is a momentum of what I have been interested all along, namely a pedagogy of grace. A pedagogy that while fostering liberation allows for the coming together of the experience in a true gracing.

Such approach would maintain that liberation is more than the mere overcoming of a concrete situation of oppression, because oppression is at core all pointers of dehumanization that prevents individuals and societies to transcend themselves, keeping them locked in horizons of accommodation, fatality, abuse, invisibility and so on. Taking culture as that which overtime human groups have consecrated as strategies, practices and then traditions to preserve and pass on life, such approach can be effective.

What then are the dynamics of such pedagogical approach? The goal is to assist the individual in locating the existential task of the other, differentiating it through culture, traditions, and practices to then discern his or her strategies of responding to the existential need. Such need being historical, moves in the face of its negation, that is, of dehumanization or oppression. Recognizing the other as such, as moving towards transcendence, one is then invited to recognize by empathy his or her own existential need, thus his or her own challenge to transcendence. At this juncture the encounter then elicits a response, that has the ability of by being empathetic, to be true to the respondent as well as to the recipient. Provided that the response privileges the need rather than its cultural make-up, tradition's background or even its strategies. This provides for the preservation of integrity in difference. Finally, the individuals then are given the opportunity of self situating themselves in a qualitatively different understanding of their own culture, tradition, practice and even strategies, thus allowing for a qualitative jump comparable of a graced horizon. Needless to say that such process is both individual as well as collectively unfolded in a permanent dynamic of transcendence.

#### **The Skills**

I believe that the development of certain skills become necessary to facilitate encounter and transformation in grace. None of these skills are totally new for our generation educated in Clinical Pastoral Education, relational psychology and so on. However, these skills combined together with the purpose of facilitating an encounter play a unique role.

- i. Active Listening

A lot has been said on the meaning and development of an active listening. It is commonly associated with the ability of by being present, listening to the whole being of the other, thus discerning the crucial emotion thus crucial task that the other attempts to articulate. Such skill, that rejects the hiding behind words on the part of the listener, requires a enormous amount of energy and determination, as we aim to listen to the Word of the other. In the end it is not active if the word of the other was not yet taken within, to point to the listener's own Word, and thus humanity.

ii. Empathic Responding

As a consequence of actively listening to the other, empathic responding is the seasoned response that evidences presence, listening that ultimately offers the listener to the speaker. Empathic responding opens up a dialogue, rather than closing it, it humanizes, normalizes, reflects back the struggle and need of the other. It allows for individuals to come together.

iii. Teleological discernment

In all of our interactions we are negotiating consciously or unconsciously a need. In each encounter when active listening and empathic responding is involved, one is faced with the question of what really the other is in need of, or is trying to solve. This teleological discernment that comes through our own sense of relating to the other is what is aimed at here.

Using the example of the critical incident at the hospital, I had to discern a need being negotiated in my encounter with the family. In the inferred need for connection, that being theirs, was also mine, both of us met, without betraying our traditions. I had though to discern it through the cultural elements that I was accustomed to, through the practices that I knew of Roman Catholicism and relate it as a strategy to secure the common need of connection.

iv. Relational Accountability

Relational accountability brings to consequence the radical belief that I am in the Thou when Thou is in the I. Here we are faced with a simple and yet complex task, that of being responsible for the need of the other.

v. Graced Reframing or Negotiation

Graced reframing refers to the ability of acting in the relational accountability, thus offering a response to the need of the other that maintains one's integrity while still responding to the other in an active empathetic way. In generally this is a back and forwards until the other is satisfied and we are at peace.

## **Means of Grace, Moments of Encounter and Transformation**

Theologically, means of grace are the special ways in which God's grace is communicated to contrite human beings. However, in the sense that grace is here perceived as the whole economy of God's love for the whole world, then we can intuit rituals, practices and strategies of encounter and transformation where such previously mentioned skills can be fostered intentionally.

A lot could be said in developing this section, let me be brief suggesting only two instances based on our experience in a reformed congregation in Manhattan, New York City. The following then takes into account the most viable instances of education within a Reformed Presbyterian context.

### **i. Worship as mapping projects of spirituality**

One of the most rewarding experiences that we had was that of attempting to foster such skills towards a multicultural community in the practice of worship. Initially the practice of our community had been that of a bilingual congregation, with services translated in crucial points, like Scripture readings and sermons; this model, language-based, tended to see language as the keeper of culture. Moving within the parameters expressed in this paper, we invited our congregation to move from the notion of language based services, into culture based services, insofar as culture pointed to a more or less specific project of spirituality. The result was at least two services that as culturally inspired projects of reformed spirituality were open to all members of the congregation, rather to only the Anglo or Spanish members.

The whole practice of worship then becomes a primary space for the education of multiculturalism, providing space for vital encounters and transformation, from the worship committee to the actual worshipers. A whole new paper could be written on this topic. Given the limits of this paper, let me be brief.

Working with thematic services based on the lectionary, the worship committee has the initial opportunity to develop a profitable conversation on the experience, meaning, and significance of the theme in their lives vis-a-vis the Christian Reformed tradition and Scriptures. The worship committee is then the first circle to experience an opportunity to develop the skills of active listening to each individual cultural experience, meaning and significance of the biblical/theological theme. The dynamic, intentionally led, allow the development of the multicultural skills as suggested before.

The actual planned experience of worship in vital encounters in the worship committee can then be carried to the whole congregation. Thematically envisioned, lectionary based, and yet clearly articulating a culturally based project of spirituality, the service can offer similar opportunities for vital encounters to the whole congregation.

ii. Session Meetings as Relational Accountability and Graced Reframing

The challenge of fostering multiculturalism in a reformed congregation could not happen and certainly could not stop at the worship and congregation only. The biggest challenge in fact is the re-making of the community as functioning institution, and in a Presbyterian community, no other body encapsulates more this experience than the session.

Again working with the objective aspects of the congregational life, a small body of individuals as the session has a wonderful opportunity to develop the skills of active listening, emphatic responding, teleological discernment, and definitely of relational accountability and graced reframing.

So many times a parliamentary procedure can in fact lead to the muting of the voices present, simply allowing the passing of the motion. The challenge of a governing body to support culturally different peoples in their spiritual journeys prompts the crucial need to develop relational accountability. While the session is not only responsible for one service but for the whole worshiping practice of the community, it is accountable to the discerned and empathized needs of all groups. This is a real challenge and a real opportunity for vital encounters.

### **Conclusion**

Multiculturalism has so many times been confused with pluralism, and diversity. In this context, emerging communities can be faced with difficulties while negotiating their normally invisible identities. The logic of mere inclusion, facilitated by the identify politics is a deceptive course, ultimately locking the aimed at liberation.

In this paper we have argued that taking Paulo Freire's anthropological approach to culture allows the recovery of culture as a meeting place, discerning traditions, practices and strategies as human constructions towards securing existential needs. In this sense, liberation as Freire argued, moves from a mere overcoming of a concrete and historical oppression to a continual dynamics of transcending. Transcending all that dehumanizes us, all that locks us in non-transcending dynamics. The Christian concept of Grace, taken in a Brazilian Reformed approach which encapsulates and inspires these dynamics of transcendence beyond mere inclusion, by holding in the tension of good and evil. Multiculturalism is then a crucial opportunity to bring together such dynamics. Multiculturalism is an opportunity for encounters and transformation, aiming at what we could call a graced individual, community and society.

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