

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPLEXITIES AND CUES IN NIGERIAN MULTICULTURAL CHURCH CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Arguments in scholarship and practice about models and methods of church planting and administration have been sharply divided along monocultural and multicultural perspectives. Most importantly, inevitable conflicts due to intercultural communication barriers have been suggested as grounds for strictly monocultural churches. However, in an increasingly globalised world, due to migration issues, among others, the global church is predisposed to 21st-century compatible multicultural contexts. This paper uses a literature research method to explore the concept of intercultural communication, its complexities, and cues in multicultural contexts to address communication barriers in multicultural churches. It analyses selected empirical case studies (secondary data) to propose an intercultural communicative framework on how Nigerian churches can handle intercultural communication barriers to foster truly cohesive multiethnic church communities. This paper argues that cross-cultural understanding through intercultural education and awareness prevents miscommunication that arises due to intercultural communication barriers in multicultural church contexts.

KEYWORDS: Barriers, Cues, Complexities, Multicultural church, and Intercultural communication.

INTRODUCTION

Communication occurs when information, knowledge, or ideas are transmitted or exchanged through speech, writing, mechanical or electronic media (OED, 2019). Communication is transactional among people who have consensually agreed on symbols associated with socially constructed and defined meanings. Such symbols encode information shared between a receiver and sender when communication takes place. Orbe and Harris (2022) determined that such meanings are dynamic, from earlier usages, in perceptions and meta-perceptions, suggesting that encoded messages from a sender pass through a mutually discernible channel to be decoded by a receiver.

Neuliep (2012) summarises communication as processual, dynamic, interactive, transactive, symbolic, intentional, contextual, ubiquitous, and always cultural. As a result, communication among individuals of differing groups, orientations, and backgrounds requires diverse communication approaches. Therefore, Kapur (2020) suggests formal, informal, oral, written, non-verbal, grapevine, feedback, visual, and active listening approaches to intergroup communication processes. However, because communication occurs across various forms, modes, gestures, expressions, gateways, and channels, miscommunication may occur. Hence, barriers such as intercultural differences in multicultural contexts may negatively impact the intended message in an unintended way.

Consequently, communication may be from person to person (intrapersonal or interpersonal) or from culture to culture (intra-cultural, cross-cultural, or intercultural). Therefore, this paper explores such ideas, viewpoints, worldviews, or perspectives, acting as sociocultural barriers along intercultural contacts within multicultural societies. It aims to highlight mechanisms and methodologies for enhancing intercultural communication and analyse its complexities while identifying cues that enhance mutual perception and understanding. Such leads to social harmony and cohesion within multicultural church contexts in Nigerian churches.

OVERVIEW OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND MULTICULTURALISM IN CHURCH CONTEXTS

Intercultural communication exists among differing people groups whose cultural perceptions and symbols of communication systems are distinct enough that they can significantly alter communications (Ideström, 2019). It occurs in multicultural contexts where exchanged information crosses barriers of cultural perceptions, acting as filters through which messages are encoded or decoded. Thus, intercultural communication is complex; individuals navigate in perceiving, interpreting, and understanding shared information within diversified sociocultural groups.

Subsequently, intercultural communication competence and education are the appropriate responses in any emerging multicultural context of the modern world. Intercultural competence refers to how individuals or communities understand how spoken and written words vary in the sociocultural worldviews of the speaker and receiver through developing sensitivity to cultures other than their own, especially in a specific multicultural context (Szkudladek et al 2020). The negative impacts of multiculturalism in local church contexts include ineffective communication due to intercultural miscommunication.

Therefore, intercultural competence is required to minimise friction along the lines of intercultural contacts within the local church. This is necessary for developing effective leadership and ministry that better serve a culturally diverse context, thereby promoting social cohesion that cuts across cultural, traditional, societal, ethnic, and racial bias or barriers. Recent approaches in the study of intercultural communication emphasise the context's role in interpreting communication (Nema, 2020).

Adeyeye and Afolabi (2024) highlight intercultural communication issues within multicultural church systems. Firstly is communicational friction due to cultural differences experienced because of each cultural group's preset values formed over a long period and transferred from one generation to another regarding life and their adaptations to existential issues. Secondly is the problem of misinformed perception or stereotypes due to cultural biases within a group whose cultural assertions are correctness or otherwise based on their social and mind programming. Such biases regulate cultural norms, leading to stereotypes consequent to perceptual differences among ethnically different groups of people within the same community.

Thirdly is associated with dominance syndrome due to cultural hegemony, a superiority complex that considers others outside their group as inferior. In such instances, the dominant culture attempts to assimilate the other cultures into theirs by seeking to enforce their communication signs, symbols, and modes as the norm. Fourthly, any attempt to unify rather than unite usually leads to cultural segregation. Cultural segregation is premised on division due to diversity, which presents the problem of conflicting worldviews.

Succinctly, cultural heterogeneity negatively impacts the cohesiveness of differing groups in multicultural contexts due to its complexities, which may lead to sedition and schisms if left unchecked. The difference is that the concept of uniformity adopts a model that assimilates individual cultural units into a foreign culture considered superior. Thus, they lose their uniqueness. For equity's sake, cultures must remain distinctively unique in multicultural contexts, while compromise may be required to blend each unit into a corporately shared and negotiated identity.

REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL CASES

Ed Volte (2019) investigated a multicultural congregation with a majority Filipino membership at Christ Redeemer United Methodist Church, Townspeople, Texas, USA, averaging 200 members. Its membership includes Africans, African Americans, Caucasians, Hispanics, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Brazilians, and

Filipinos. He reported a constant experience of conflict, and his study examined how pastoral leadership resolves conflicts in a cross-cultural, multicultural church context.

His study highlights that Filipino immigrants tend to have strong English proficiency, high education levels, and strong family ties. They exhibit cultural traits such as hospitality, adaptability, and ethnocentrism that shape their interactions and community-building efforts. His findings uncover sources of conflicts, including religious identity crisis, where members' diverse socio-religious backgrounds shape their differing expectations about church governance and practices. In addition, the dynamics of socio-familial affinity, emphasising and prioritising strong family ties, negatively influence church relationships, often leading to factionalism. Lastly are differing cultural expectations stemming from hierarchical worldviews of authority and respect, impacting communal interactions.

Consequently, he noted that the dominant Filipino culture influences church dynamics despite its multicultural membership, leading to challenges in pastoral leadership and difficulties in managing diverse sociocultural expressions of faith. He posits that conflicts at Christ Redeemer UMC were often rooted in Filipino cultural and interpersonal dynamics, consequently limiting growth and corporate faith expressions. He avows that pastoral leadership is more effective when fostering solidarity rather than attempting to mediate disputes directly.

Furthermore, he asserts that since there is no standard template for interpersonal and intercultural conflict resolution, pastoral leaders should allow members to resolve their differences. At the same time, they mobilise the church for collective Christian service. However, this author disagrees with such a conclusion. Suppose Volte rightly opined that the Filipinos' ethnocentric attitudes predispose them to form close-knit groups, unintentionally marginalising members of other ethnicities. How would a cohesive and harmonious church be formed in such circumstances? Therefore, I argue that even if superficially they seem to focus on corporate worship and collective being in services, would that not be hypocritical and 'Pharisaic'?

More importantly, his empirical deductions suggest that intercultural communication skills were not deployed in his case study. Firstly, he observed and concluded that conflict persisted regardless of leadership changes in the church, suggesting that systemic intercultural tensions were embedded within church dynamics. Secondly, Filipino expectations about communal decision-making clashed with Western models of hierarchical leadership, resulting in ongoing disputes over church governance. Lastly, many conflicts were rooted in personal relationships

rather than theological differences, making resolution difficult through formal mediation alone. This indicates an underlying intercultural communication gap.

The study concludes that understanding dominant cultural values is essential for pastoral leaders working in multicultural churches and suggests that leadership strategies should emphasise solidarity and shared ministry rather than rigid conflict resolution frameworks. Unfortunately, the research failed to determine the role of intercultural intelligence and communication skills in negotiating the complex nature of intercultural conflict and navigating ethnic identity conflicts complicated by interpersonal dynamics with sensitivity and adaptability.

Additionally, Abioye and Oderinde (2024) explored intercultural competence and diversity management within religious institutions, focusing on the challenges faced by pastoral leadership in culturally diverse congregations. Their study argues that cultural consciousness among church leaders is essential for managing diversity and fostering interculturality in multicultural congregations, using the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Shekinah Zone, Oyo Province 16, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria, comprising nine parishes, as a case study. The paper highlights RCCG Shekinah zone's intercultural issues, language barriers in communication, cultural identity, and diverse worship practices.

Using the focus group discussion (FGD) method, the study's findings underscore the importance of leadership training in intercultural education to reduce cultural dissonances towards enhancing cohesive congregation. The study identifies gift-sharing practice among members as a unifying strategy to promote inclusivity and engagement among multicultural congregants. Importantly, the study identifies problems of communication with non-English-speaking congregants among the predominantly Yoruba-speaking congregation. In these congregations, the unifying language is English, the country's lingua franca. Nigerian ethnic groups identified within the profiled churches include Yoruba (Southwest), Igbo (Southeast), Hausa (North), Edo (Southsouth), Ikwere (Southsouth), and Egede (Northcentral), with others who are of West-African Togolese extraction.

Consequently, with language barriers remaining a core challenge, the pastors adopted interpreter services and bilingual communication strategies to address the intercultural communication gaps. Like in the case study previously discussed, the study recommends strengthening healthy interpersonal interactions as a panacea to tensions among diverse congregants. Furthermore, they recommended the implementation of structured language adaptation policies, which can improve engagement with non-English-speaking members. The intercultural communication model employed by the parishes includes third-party interpretation of sermons and

the adoption of mixed languages in song renditions during services, particularly to accommodate the interests of minority groups among the members.

Assiduously, the research identified cross-cultural bridge-building mechanisms adopted by the churches to include special cultural Sunday services in which cultural groups perform songs, dance, drama and poetry renditions in their native languages. Moreover, the study established a positive correlation between intercultural communication strategies among the congregations and their behavioural manifestations. The cues adopted include the management of linguistic differences among the congregations, a show of empathy and respect to others, with warm, welcoming, open arms of brotherliness and fellowship to others. Nevertheless, the study fails to discuss the nuances involved in the transmission of the message preached, such as semantic distortion, translation loss/gain, equivalence issues, and interpretation bias.

Drawing from different examples and relying on an extensive literature review, Olabode and Akande (2023) discussed barriers and effective measures against intercultural communication in multiethnic churches. Arguing that communication occurs in a context of culture, they advance the Latin expression that says *aedificare non potes aliquid nihil*, which translates to "you cannot build something on nothing" by positing that cultural, linguistic, and behavioural differences are contingent on intercultural communication dilemmas.

The barriers they identified include anxiety as a response to contact with others, significantly different when expectations are undefined or standardised, and the fear of being stigmatised, rejected, or ostracised as an outsider. Also, there is the problem of an assumption that symbolic cues in one culture are equivalent to or correspond to others, leading to offences. Likewise, ethnocentrism complicates intercultural communication in that it seeks to impose one culture over the other with a presupposition that one is superior to the other. In addition, stereotypes and prejudice contribute as barriers to intercultural communication, situations where people are judged based on their affiliated group's shared values.

Specifically, the authors attribute language as one of the barriers to intercultural communication. Language is codified within a community's corpus of learning and interaction, acquired through socialisation and enculturation to communicate meaning and shared experience. While language is a verbal communication, nonverbal cues may also transmit undesired communication in an intercultural context. Although nonverbal cues also stand the risk of misinterpretation or confusion due to the ambiguity of meaning, they remain a better form within a mixed congregation.

Besides, the study suggests approaches to improving intercultural communication competence in multiethnic communities. They are the identification, management, and mitigation of root causes of intercultural miscommunication; deploying dynamic, clear, and unambiguous needs or context-based communication styles, devices, and mechanisms; open channels for feedback; structured system that promotes functioning communication processes; avoiding uncertainty through well-defined roles and duties captured in organisational workflow and organogram with a cohesive teamwork and bonding attitude.

Others are the collaborative integration of constituent units towards executing joint projects and fostering interpersonal connections, including the subgroup levels, in a way that individual belonging is reinforced towards a shared but diversified common identity; interpersonal connectivity leads to an overall improvement of cultural sensitivity indices, which include respect and appreciation for others' cultures, intentional cross-cultural exchanges of cultural markers, identifying redlines, understanding distinctive historical backgrounds, displaying empathy, and accommodation for other cultures.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MULTICULTURAL NIGERIAN CHURCHES

From the preceding discourse, this section makes deductions aimed at helping Nigerian churches shape their multicultural congregations into polities that strengthen diversity amidst the complexities of intercultural communication problems. Theologically and pragmatically, multicultural Nigerian churches are obliged to extend God's frontier of the Kingdom through evangelisation to all people (NBC, n.d.). As Hiebert (1976) argues, they are expected to identify classical and contextual cultural differences that may significantly impact the communication, transmission, and reception of the Gospel.

The presupposition that missionaries often experience culture shock upon entering a foreign culture is likewise applicable to constituent cultures in a multicultural context. They all have their fair share of the complexities of differing worldviews, customs, and communication styles. Because cultural dimensions exceed external behavioural attitudes but are a matrix of interwoven beliefs, feelings, and value systems, effective intercultural communication requires an introspective understanding of such in-depth cultural structures. While avoiding cultural imperialism, there are also two extremes to be avoided.

First is the issue of cultural relativism, where moral judgment standards become difficult to delineate in a bid to show intercultural respect for others. In contrast, there is the issue of ethnocentrism. However, the middle ground is a balanced biblical moral code that regulates cultural differences and specifics.

Overall, intercultural communication in multicultural Nigerian churches must be built on a pedagogical, pragmatic, and systematic framework referred to as the intercultural communicative framework (Mahayussnan, 2021).

An intercultural communicative framework entails identifying the unifying language that best fits a specific context. Such language is usually the language of trade, commonly spoken across a wide spectrum of constituent cultural units. While historical dilemmas may interfere and complicate such negotiation, the new identity of believers should be leveraged to invoke unity of faith despite such impeding narratives. The other involves developing intercultural communication modules to teach critical cultural awareness, discovery, and interactive skills. Regular efforts should be made to facilitate common language learning and simple interactive cues among the members of the multicultural churches.

Moreover, this framework advocates that the churches incorporate interpretation into other languages as the situation demands (Abioye and Oderinde, 2024). Skills of interpreting into other spoken languages stimulate positive attitudes towards multiculturalism among every constituent ethnic group and foster a sense of individual uniqueness amidst corporate identity and belonging. While at this, critical knowledge gaps will be discovered, leading to the development of context-specific styles of delivery, including a language corpus of familiar and registered grammar that will be easily relatable to such context. Notably, such complex adaptation will develop over time. Thus, establishing the fact that a dynamic intercultural communicative system develops over time in a multicultural community.

Intercultural communicative framework in multicultural Nigerian churches should simplify language use for constituents, as some might find it challenging to adjust to a central communication style. It may arise out of an identity crisis because of being immersed in a language different from their linguistic background. To resolve such a dilemma, this framework advocates for open, unbiased, non-stereotypical feedback channels through which frustrations may be aired and clarified. Providing constructive feedback channels reinforces constituents' confidence in the motives and mission of the church, leaving no room for dissension (Nisar, 2024). Consequently, idiosyncratic ultranationalistic tendencies are nipped in the bud.

Intercultural communicative framework should be flexible and dynamic in the sense that situations vary from context to context and there is no one-size-fits-all. Therefore, intercultural leadership competence is required to troubleshoot varying conditions and deploy approaches that best suit the situations. Leadership is at the heart of navigating intercultural spaces more effectively. They provide mentorship to members and cultural unit leaders to influence them to develop a flexible, adaptive

mindset that is transmissible within their groups. Key indices of such a mindset are positive attitudes toward other cultures, healthy awareness of other social groups' distinctives, respect for cultural differences, dynamic interaction, intelligent analysis and contextualisation of cultural meanings, integration, and adaptation.

CONCLUSION

The paper discussed intercultural barriers to intercultural communication in multicultural communities through a literature review. It attempted to explore intercultural communication complexities and cues from case studies reviewed and suggested an intercultural communicative framework as a model for multicultural Nigerian churches. In such contexts, the intercultural communicative framework identifies the unifying language for the constituent cultural units and develops intercultural communication modules to teach critical cultural awareness, discovery, and interactive skills. Furthermore, the framework incorporates interpretation into other languages as the situation demands and develops context-specific styles of delivery using a simplifying language for diverse members.

This paper recommends that Nigerian multicultural churches should create open, unbiased, non-stereotypical communication and subsequent feedback channels for ease of evaluating the adoption and implementation of language interpretation schemes towards limiting the negative impact of intercultural miscommunication due to language barriers. Furthermore, it recommends the development and deployment of intercultural leadership and mentorship that influences mindset transformation and adaptation to required changes within a multicultural church complex towards a sense of shared affinity, identity, inclusion, and compromise between all constituent members.

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