

Identity in a Multicultural Church: An Experience of Indonesian Christian Church

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Indonesian Christian Church

I am an ordained minister of the Indonesian Christian Church (Gereja Kristen Indonesia or GKI), which originally was a Chinese church in Indonesia. Like other ethnic churches in Indonesia, the GKI developed from the work of missionaries who spread the gospel to people based on ethnic groupings. Since the very beginning, the Chinese themselves had played an important role. Their motto was "evangelization to the Chinese should be done by Chinese evangelists."² Evangelization among the Chinese Indonesians started in the nineteenth century. Some Chinese Indonesian churches grew. After a long ecumenical struggle to unite all Chinese Indonesian churches, in 1962 only three synods were willing to become one church: West Java Indonesian Christian Church, Central Java Indonesian Christian Church, and East Java Indonesian Christian Church. This was possible because of the following reasons:

1. All three synods changed their names from the Chinese Indonesian Christian Church to Indonesian Christian Church (1956-1958), as a sign of openness to all people, not only Chinese.
2. The reason for uniting was not based on ethnicity, but the ecumenical movement - in accordance with the founding of the national council of churches, *Dewan Gereja-gereja Indonesia*, in 1950.³

Identity in a Plural Church

Since the very beginning, the GKI members have been aware of their identity as Indonesian. They speak *bahasa* Indonesia and hold Indonesian citizenship. Moreover, they realize that their very existence is to be an integral part of the nation, and that their mission is in Indonesia. Therefore, the name of the church is "Indonesian Christian Church," not "Christian Church in Indonesia."

Based on this Indonesian identity, the GKI is open to all ethnic groups. Now, there are more than 20 different ethnic groups among its members. Becoming Indonesian means becoming plural, since there is no single "Indonesian culture." As a culturally plural church, more and more congregations of the GKI celebrate the plurality by performing ethnic worship services. For example, they perform worship services in Javanese, Batak,

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² Chris Hartono, *Dari Cipaku Sampai Jakarta* (Yogyakarta: Duta Wacana University Press, 2006), 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 55.

Ambonese, Balinese, Timorese, etc. as well as Chinese worship service around the Lunar New Year. In each ethnic worship service, they use musical instruments, dances, languages, and songs from their respective ethnic groups.

The question is, "Are these celebrations adequate to indicate GKI's identity as a plural church?" To answer this question, I would like to use James Banks' theory of multicultural education. Even though Banks wrote for American schools, his understanding of multiculturalism is helpful for this purpose.

Understanding of Multicultural Education in James Bank's Theory

Multicultural education starts with an idea that "all students, regardless of the groups to which they belong, such as those related to gender, ethnicity, race, culture, social class, religion, or exceptionality, should experience educational equality in the schools."⁴ From this definition we can see that by *multicultural* Banks does not only mean the ethnic, race, and cultural symbols, as people usually connote this word. Rather, he also includes some social construction of categories, namely gender, social-class, religion, as well as exceptionality, as in the case of the physically and mentally retarded or gifted people. By *culture* Banks means the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another, based on those categories of social construction. For Banks culture does not mean only as artifact, food, or music as people usually understand it.

Furthermore, Banks proposes levels of multicultural content integration in a multicultural curriculum. Banks promotes four levels of integration of multicultural content, each of which could contribute in its own way to promote equality in education.

Level 1: The Contributions Approach. In this level "discrete cultural elements such as the food, dances, music, and artifacts of ethnic groups are studied, but little attention is given to their meanings and importance within ethnic communities."⁵ This level is a kind of integration on the surface. Students may see those discrete cultural elements as foreign experiences that are separate from their own life.

Level 2: The Additive Approach. In this level teachers add "content, concepts, themes, and perspectives to the curriculum without changing its basic structure, purposes, and characteristics."⁶ For example they add a book, a unit, or a course to the curriculum. This addition is deeper than that of level 1, but both do not restructure the main curriculum that has many biases.

Level 3: The Transformation Approach. This level is different from the first two levels. In this

⁴ James A. Banks, "Multicultural Education: Characteristics and Goal," in *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives*, edited by James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks (New York: John Willey & Sons, Inc., 2001), p. 25.

⁵ James A. Banks, "Approaches to Multicultural Curriculum Reform," in *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives*, edited by James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks (New York: John Willey & Sons, Inc., 2001), p. 232.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

level the basic assumptions of the curriculum are changed, in order to enable students to view concepts, issues, themes, and problems from several ethnic perspectives and points of view.⁷ This level is much deeper than level 1 and 2, and it has consequences of changing the philosophy of education.

Level 4: The Social Action Approach. This level is deeper than level 3. It aims at empowering students and helping them acquire political efficacy. So the school must help them become reflective social critics and skilled participants in social change.⁸

Banks contends that all four levels are useful in their own way. Realistically he sees that it is impossible for a school to have a radical change from a highly mainstream—centric curriculum to level 4: the social action approach. Rather, he proposes that those four levels are “mixed and blended in actual teaching situations” and integrated into the curriculum gradually and cumulatively.⁹

Banks believes that knowledge is not neutral, objective, and universal, as has been the assumption within the Western empirical paradigm. Rather, knowledge is constructed on certain assumptions, frames of references, and perspectives. From this understanding, Banks promotes knowledge construction that is multicultural. For example, teachers help students analyze the knowledge construction process in various subjects that perpetuates racism, gender discrimination, or colonialism.

Banks appreciates students’ experience as a starting point for education. But by emphasizing the experience as a multicultural one, he goes beyond experience towards social transformation. Multicultural education can reduce prejudice by helping students develop positive attitudes toward different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Also multicultural education can help teachers develop a curriculum that appreciates the differences in people’s ways of thinking and behaving.

Identity in a Multicultural Church

Using Banks’ concept of multicultural education, I can say that what some GKI congregations have done is not enough. They have only celebrated cultural plurality by using artifacts, music, dances, etc., and this falls under the first level only: the contributions approach. They have not realized that social construction of ethnicity is sometimes unjust to a certain group. There are dominant and inferior ethnic groups, constructed by—for example, —politics. They also have not seriously considered prejudices that may exist among its members and other people around. They need to develop multicultural ministry and solidarity in a deeper level, namely levels 3 and 4.

To help church members acquire levels 3 and 4, GKI needs first of all to introduce critical way of thinking to analyze what has been happening in society and the state. For example, they need to analyze why there has been prejudice among the Chinese towards the

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

indigenous Indonesians, and vice versa; why there were ethnic conflicts between the two groups, especially riots against the Chinese; and how the church can contribute to solve this problem. This problem is complex. We need to trace back to colonial time, when the Dutch divided the people into three groups: the white, the “Asian” (Chinese, Indian, Arab), and the indigenous people. Riots against the Chinese happened during the Japanese occupation, early independence era, as well as under Soeharto regime.

During the Soeharto era, when the main program was to develop economic growth, stability, and distribution of wealth, there was ambiguity in Soeharto’s attitude towards the Chinese-Indonesians. On the one hand, to improve economic growth, they had access to develop their business. Some could even develop conglomerates. On the other hand, there were discriminatory regulations, e.g. regarding credit policy (1976) and determination of who was allowed or not to sell certain goods and services (1980).¹⁰ Another act of discrimination closed almost all political accesses for Chinese-Indonesians. As a result, Chinese-Indonesians work in the business sector and dominate almost 70% of the Indonesian economy. Moreover, by familial businesses based on trust and solidarity among the Chinese in several Asian countries, they could develop their business in an exclusive way.¹¹ This created a gap between Chinese-Indonesians and indigenous people.¹² Actually not all Chinese-Indonesians are wealthy. For example, most of Chinese-Indonesians in Singkawang, West Kalimantan, are poor; the same thing exists in many towns and cities in Indonesia. But this reality *has not been exposed*.¹³

Soeharto also prohibited Chinese celebrations, like Lunar New Year, in public life. He created some laws and government regulations that discriminated against the Chinese-Indonesians. Only in 2003 was the Lunar New Year allowed to be celebrated—it has even become a national holiday. In this spirit, do the GKI congregations perform Chinese worship services?

Multicultural ministry takes as starting point the identities, settings, cultures, religions,

¹⁰ Kian Gie Kwik, *Masalah Pri Dan Non-Pri Dewasa Ini (The Issue of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Today)* (Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 1998), p. 48.

¹¹ Regarding familial business systems among Chinese Indonesians, see Wijaya, Yahya. *Business, Family, Religion: Public Theology in the Context of the Chinese-Indonesian Business Community*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2002.

¹² An ethnographic study shows that even though in Java Island the Chinese-Indonesians tend to integrate more fully into local culture and society, unlike their counterparts in Medan (North Sumatra) and Pontianak (West Kalimantan) who practice Chinese culture, it is still difficult for indigenous Indonesians to accept Chinese-Indonesian business people as community members. It is easier for them to accept Chinese-Indonesians who work outside business sectors, e.g. teaching, research, law, as their community members. See Mas’oed, Mohtar, S. Rizal Panggabean, and Muhammad Najib Azca’s “Social Resources for Civility and Participation: The Case of Yogyakarta, Indonesia,” in *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia*, ed. Robert Hefner. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001, p. 135.

¹³ Only after the Chinese New Year became a national holiday in 2003 were poor Chinese-Indonesians exposed in documentary television films. For example, during Chinese New Year 2004 a film about the struggle of Chinese-Indonesian girls in Singkawang was televised.

and experiences of people—including prejudices and conflicts. Multicultural ministry believes that people are capable of learning and reflecting on their lives. This reflection has to do with learning from history to find the background of the multicultural relationship, prejudices, discrimination, etc. Furthermore, reflection also has to do with the desired future, and its multicultural structures and relationships. But multicultural ministry is not only reflection; reflection results in action that leads to new points for reflection. Therefore, after reflection on history, it is important to start to work for change, to transform the current situation towards a desired future. Level 3, and especially level 4, of multicultural education promote this work for social change.

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