

Ch 8

A New Cultural Experience

One Heart and Soul

Christian Community for the 21st Century

A MULTIPLY
'Let's talk' book
for those wanting
to experience
living Christianity

One Heart and Soul

Trevor Saxby



6 Multicultural community can not be sustained apart from empathy, biblical submission, listening skills, vulnerability, compassion and love. Such virtues must be personalised as well as institutionalised if a community is to reflect the ethnic diversity of the Kingdom of God. God loves diversity in all His created order: fish, birds, animals, planets, stars and peoples. The Lord of Hosts seems to be bored with sameness. He sanctions diversity, for it reflects His character. Thus, multicultural community is the corporate reflection of God's image. 9

Hank Allen

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David & Belinda Guadagnino's Story

8

David left his home in south-west France at fifteen. In 1993, when he was homeless in Amsterdam, someone told him about Jesus. A little later he visited one of the Jesus Fellowship's community houses in London, became a Christian, and moved in. Belinda had a comfortable, churchgoing upbringing in Malaysia. In 1990, while studying in Britain, she visited a Jesus Fellowship community house in Coventry, and loved what she found. A year later, doing her law finals in London, she felt God leading her to community. David and Belinda married in 1998 and have two children. They live at Battlecentre, a Jesus Fellowship community house in London's West End.



'I have always valued friendships,' says Belinda, 'and I enjoyed my time in shared digs as a student. When I visited the Jesus Fellowship's community houses, it was the love that hit me. They welcomed me for who I was. I felt special. They had clearly learned how to love each other, and they lived a lifestyle that was simple and totally committed. It reminded me of a soap-opera about one big, crazy family! It was life, and I wanted that, so I stuck around.'

David had known 'street' community: sharing squats, drugs, the day's small change donations. Now he had found Jesus and moved into community at the same time, and he loved it all from day one. 'It was incredible! Living all-out for Jesus, 24 hours a day. Being together all the time strengthens you amazingly. I didn't want to do my own thing any more. Life at home was such an adventure, you didn't need to go out looking for it!'

Battlecentre was becoming a multicultural household. They already had people from Zimbabwe, Australia, Romania and Spain living in the house. 'I didn't think: "Oh, they're mainly whites",' Belinda comments. 'I saw them all as loving people, who didn't care where you came from.' David remembers people mimicking his French accent, but in a loving way. 'Jesus has torn down all the barriers between cultures, like Ephesians 2 says, and we can love everyone because His love fills our hearts. An African friend told me

how he feared losing his black roots, but he hasn't. When he's out in London, he notices the way people look at him, but when he's at home in the community, he doesn't even think colour. For me it's a bit like that. We form a new "Jesus culture", where everyone belongs but still has the distinctive characteristics which make them unique. People here don't treat me as French, but as a brother and a friend.'

Anyone moving into a shared lifestyle has to make sacrifices. Take food, for instance. 'I mean, after years of good French dressing on your salad, what was this revolting salad cream?', sighs David. Belinda hated boiled vegetables, but at Battlecentre they ate loads of them! 'Also, in my culture you are very relaxed about food. You have your main meal when you feel like it. So I happily go to the fridge at 7 a.m. and tuck into some fish and rice, but other people look at me in disgust and say: "How can you eat that for breakfast!"'

Then there's language. David and Belinda know this only too well. Misunderstandings happen all the time. Two people can be arguing and suddenly realise they're defending the same corner! The caricature of the English approach to foreigners ('If they don't understand, say it louder') really does happen. It's easy to feel patronised, even when you know the other person didn't mean it.

David had to drop the French custom of kissing women on both cheeks to say hello. It didn't go down too well in a Christian community that tries to avoid over-familiarity between the sexes! 'I liked female company,' laments David, 'but now I was expected to spend my time with the other men in the house. I found this segregation hard, but I gradually learned that it was healthier that way. The pressure to flirt was taken away. I could start enjoying a wide circle of "safe" friendships based on respect and affection, like between brothers and sisters. I could also grow as a man through constant interaction with men. I became more responsible. It must have worked, because five years later I got married!'

Belinda found similar problems adjusting to UK customs. 'I couldn't understand the British love of privacy. Back home we are a more communal society. It's quite normal for sisters or cousins of the same sex to sleep in a big bed together, maybe three at a time. But over here, if you tried that, people would think you were gay. Also, people went to bed so early! Before I was married, I found myself sharing a room with a girl who wanted the light off as soon as possible, so she could sleep, but I wanted to read or talk. One night I stormed off

to read my bible in the bathroom! She came looking for me, we had a blazing row, but in the end we talked it through and came to understand each other better.

‘People couldn’t grasp my sense of humour,’ she adds. ‘In Malaysia we laugh at anything and everything! One day one of the men in the house tripped over and hurt himself, and I burst out laughing. People were scandalised! But I wasn’t laughing because someone got hurt - I was just, well..., laughing. I came to the conclusion that the Anglo-Saxons needed to learn to relax!’

The Battlecentre house family is quite matter-of-fact about cultural matters. They have found that culture runs deeper than colour or race. It comes down to individual human beings, their response to Jesus, and their readiness to let Him transform them into a new family of love, drawn from all races. At that level everyone is basically the same.

Crucial to it all is what Jean Vanier writes about making the transition from ‘the community for me’ to ‘myself for the community.’¹ Cultural considerations must line up behind that. Take food, for example. Everyone has their own views. You’ll never solve it diplomatically! You have to ask a different question: what principles did Jesus teach that have a bearing on this issue? In this case, simplicity and gratitude. So that’s how Battlecentre tries to operate. Whoever is responsible for the meal that day cooks what they choose, so long as it’s simple, and everybody receives God’s provision with thankful hearts - and learns not to be fussy! That way, they get to try quite a range of dishes: Spanish, Colombian, Uzbeki - and Belinda’s Malaysian stir-fries.

Raising a family in community is a culture shock of a different kind. David and Belinda started off in a single room, but when their son was born, everyone changed rooms so that the most suitable family area could be created. ‘You can’t have everything exactly as you would in your own home, of course,’ says Belinda. ‘There must be give and take. You have to train people not to leave cups of hot tea on the lounge floor, where children can touch them. Now we’ve got two children. We try to keep an eye on them at all times, but it isn’t always possible, and that’s where other sensible residents help out. They can “babysit” while I’m busy in the kitchen.

‘It’s good to have other community families to learn

¹ Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, revised edition, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1989.

she continues. 'We don't always see things the same way, but we try to work it out together. The important thing is to embrace the community vision in your heart and then make quality time for your family within that. We try to make good use of the time before and after David's work, and we go out together as a family some Saturdays. That way you preserve your identity within the larger context.'

'That's important,' adds David, 'because your children are still yours, not community property! We make it clear that we are the parents and do the upbringing. We want our children to benefit from community - and they do. They develop fast. They're stimulated by all the company. But we don't want them fussed over or confused by lots of 'uncles' and 'aunties'. Fortunately, people in the house understand this and support us in it.'

In all the Jesus Fellowship's community houses, Thursday evening is 'friendship evening'. Except for emergencies, everyone stays in for a time of togetherness. Members of the local congregation who don't live in community are invited, as are friends and new people met through street outreach. It offers a good snapshot of life in community, and at Battlecentre the flavour is distinctly multicultural. Some forty people, from up to twenty nations, cram into the dining room at 7pm. Someone starts a praise session - a whirl of clapping hands, stamping feet and waving scarves. Next, visitors are welcomed, after which everyone prays for those sitting near them.

Over the meal people talk about the day's events, about the food, and about what Jesus is doing in their lives. It's also a chance to defuse the tensions of the day, rejoice at other people's blessings, and have a good laugh. After dinner there is the chance to share news that involves everyone. Some people talk about what their cell group did the previous night (at Kings Cross in the red light district; at an asylum seekers' hostel; at home nurturing new Christians). It might be someone's birthday, in which case there is invariably a big cake (it has to be, for so many people!) and a time of prayer and blessing for that person. Domestic details can be shared too, like arrangements for the weekend, or the whereabouts of socks lost in the communal wash!

Long into the evening Battlecentre's two large sitting rooms heave with multi-coloured humanity. There is a 'buzz' of life, and everyone can belong and enjoy it. 'Christians

talk about multicultural churches,' says Belinda, 'and here in London there are plenty of them. Go there and you will see skins of all colours. But after the service they all go back to their particular cultural home. I don't believe that's the fullness of what Jesus wanted. It's much harder - but much more attractive - to actually live together. When you do and it's working well, it becomes an amazing testimony. People can't believe their eyes when they see blacks, browns and whites truly loving each other and committed to staying together.'

'It worked at Pentecost,' says David, 'so why not today? In Acts 2 God supernaturally joined people of many races and languages into one new people. They became "one heart and soul". And they didn't have a safety-barrier of distance between them, either - they shared everything and were always together. That's what made it so radical! This is what we have found from God in our generation, and it does work.

'When it comes down to it,' says David, 'you can't work it out by human methods. You have to embrace what the Bible says, with the help of the Holy Spirit, be ready to "lay down your life" and give up your own selfish attitudes. Then you throw yourself into the pool with everyone else and learn to enjoy the richness that there is in each other.

'There are always going to be difficulties,' he admits. 'It's part of bearing our cross. But they can be worked through with prayer and trust, and maybe a smile. If you really want to be joined in heart with people very different from you, and you know it's God's will, then you get there. Belinda and I always hold on to the promise of Isaiah 60:1-3: "Arise, shine, for your light has come... and nations shall come to your light." It was true for us - God brought us from Malaysia and France! And He does it all the time. London is such a cosmopolitan city. Last week I met a Native American from the Blackfoot tribe, who was over here on a visit. So you don't have to head off to some distant mission field. God has brought the whole world to our doorstep! We can show them something they never dreamed existed on earth: a place where Jesus melts hearts and cultures into a new society of justice and brotherhood. We love it!'