Rodney Woo is pastor of a church he has led through a whole change process to become a vibrant multicultural church. Its mission statement became: ‘Wrocław Baptist Church is God’s multiracial bridge that draws all people to Jesus Christ, who transforms them from unbelievers to missionaries.’ Most churches in America (93%) are monoethnic with 80% or more worshipers from one ethnic group. Woo longed for greater diversity, and over the last 17 years, Wooc has changed from a congregation that was 98% Anglo to one that now embraces 44 nationalities and no one ethnic group is more than 48%. His definition of a multicultural church is inspired by Revelation’s picture of heaven of ‘every nation, tribe, people, and language worshiping together, and wanting to start that earlier.

The book extensively treats the biblical basis for multicultural church interspersed with the process Woo used for introducing change. Biblical and Woo traverses Genesis to Revelation and from Isaiah to Pentecost, celebrating how God brings people together from all people groups to worship. He celebrates Christ connecting with the Samaritan woman and dismantling the walls and well between God and different people groups. He outlines the early church’s journey in embracing Gentiles and crossing geographic and cultural barriers. His theology affirms the multicultural church as one church, one family, the body of Christ and as a powerful expression of unity in diversity.

He also tackles racism and prejudice head-on with a call to repentance and reconciliation. Racism is perhaps more explicitly an issue in the American context of racial conflict and lingering segregation on Sunday mornings, but there are lessons to learn for Australian churches where racism can still rear its head.

Interpreted with the biblical and theological reflection, the book is an inspiring case study of Woo’s transformation. Woo came with a clear vision for a multicultural expression of church. To introduce change, he used Henry Blackaby’s Experiencing God to suggest God has the right to interrupt and change us. He took leaders away on a weekend retreat, formed a collaborative vision and communicated the mandate for multicultural ministry to the congregation. And he particularly leveraged change through introducing new leaders, cultivating worship that connects with different cultures and championing mission trips.

Some of Woo’s turning points for change were:

* Appointing leaders and staff from different cultural backgrounds.
* James Darcy, the first black minister to students, led the church in a reclaim-the-streets march that opened the eyes of the church to the city and the church to the city.
* Accepting that if anyone enjoys more than 75% of worship then they are probably not trying to integrate diverse cultures — and inviting people to be content with less than initial satisfaction.
* Starting a second distinctive service but not running separate ethnic services.
* Reassuring different cultures value different music, length of service and noise levels.
* “If people’s worship style preferences are like fingers on a hand, expecting people to change only one finger over at a time (Alvin Reid’s ‘hand model’ for change).
* Sending people on mission trips that connect with members’ home countries, and not just to help and lead but to partner and serve alongside and under nationals.

People are usually more comfortable with homogeneous church but Woo challenges churches to at least reflect the ethnic diversity of their community and at best project ahead to God’s hospitality for all people. Woo’s experience shows people who compromise to worship preferences, release prejudice, move outside comfort zones and relinquish control. But, broadening the cultural colour spectrum of church cultivates acceptance, global perspective and learning about God from diverse cultures. One young adult said sharing meals with people of different cultures was significant. This has helped me become a more complete and mature person as my eyes have opened to the cultures around me, which has allowed me to develop a better sense of who God is and how to interact with other people” (p. 107).

This is a book for students and teachers of mission and multicultural ministry, and local church pastors and leaders interested in multicultural ministry. It is also a helpful case study for anyone interested in change management. What I loved most was hearing the story of this one church’s transformation, the costs and benefits, and the passionate heart of the pastor that led the process. In Melbourne where we are in three people were born overseas and one in four speak a language other than English at home, it leaves me wondering where is God calling us to cross over? How will we step out and reach all nations in Australia and beyond?

This was originally reviewed in Australian Journal of Mission Studies, Vol. 4, No. 1 (June 2010), 59, 67.