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Multicultural Realities: A Call to Diversify the ‘Unity’ of the Church

Simone Mulieri Twibell

With the advent of modernization and globalization, the social landscape of our world has been rapidly changing. Urbanization and new patterns of migration have contributed to the formation of a complex tapestry of cultural plurality. As a result, the social fabric of society has undergone a swift transformation, challenging Christians to continually think about their faith in new ways. Perhaps like never before, in the last few decades America has seen large new multicultural populations emerge. It does not take a social scientist to recognize that our world is diverse, our cities and towns are changing, and our schools and workplaces are very different than they used to be. As David Livermore wisely states, all across our country, “neighborhoods are experiencing the shift from a largely monocultural populace to an increasingly diverse one.”¹

In light of this emerging phenomenon, a question naturally arises. If all these places are as diverse as they appear to be, why aren’t our churches better reflecting this reality? Nearly half a century ago, Martin Luther King, Jr. called 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning the “most segregated hour in America.”² Half a century later, many are still wondering if it is possible to have a truly multi-ethnic and multicultural³ church that reflects our changing realities and the ultimate reality of the eschaton. Given the history of racial tension in our country, are multi-ethnic churches even desirable? Are multicultural churches a viable possibility? After all, doesn’t the Church grow faster if it’s homogenous? Is it feasible to be committed to the unity of the church and seek out more effective ways to embrace the diversity of cultures represented in our midst? This article seeks to address these questions.

Church Growth or Kingdom Work?

During the 1970s and 1980s the writings of Donald McGavran and Peter Wagner provided a major impetus for embracing homogeneous worship as a model for congregations. The central principle of the church growth movement centered around the Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP), which affirms that people are naturally inclined to be with others like themselves and, therefore, in the desire to reach others for Christ, racial, linguistic or class barriers should be eliminated.⁴ The principle also holds that the gospel should be contextualized so that the people we are trying to reach feel *at home* in the church we are inviting them to

join. Regrettably, in the attempt to focus on growth strategies, the importance of intentionally forming multi-cultural congregations that appropriately reflect the changing landscape of our neighborhoods has been largely neglected. Fear of the unknown and lack of cultural intelligence have too often driven church leaders to dismiss the importance of diversifying their fellowship with believers of other ethnicities, languages, and races. What is required is a continual effort to mobilize leaders with a greater appreciation for this type of kingdom work.

Andrew Walls, in a monumental essay, highlights two key principles of the gospel as it intersects culture. First, Walls discusses the *Indigenizing Principle*, which emphasizes the impossibility of separating an individual from his or her social context as well as the desire “to make the Church . . . a place to feel at home.”⁵ Without a doubt, the gospel accepts people as they are, irrespective of their cultural background or geographical location. However, it goes a step further, inviting them to transcend their own cultural milieu to embrace kingdom values in which God’s creative action is fully expressed. Walls’s second principle, the *Pilgrim Principle*, must be held in tandem. Here, Walls argues that in this world we will never be completely at home since to be “faithful to Christ will put [a Christian] out of step with his society.”⁶ Thus, the *particulars* of an individual’s culture are associated with the *universal* aspects of the new creation, and both need to be present in our effort to reach the lost.

These principles ought to remain in creative tension. After all, the church is not only the visible gathering of believers here

on earth, but it is also an eschatological community. As such, it is the new society in the present age which has tasted the powers of the age to come. Not only has the church been blessed with the great promise of the Holy Spirit being poured out upon all men and women, but it has also been called to anticipate on earth the life of heaven. Therefore, developing cultural richness and heterogeneous fellowship in the midst of a world full of racial tension, xenophobia, and bigotry is the task ahead. In this anticipation, shouldn’t we begin to think anew what it means to be the church in a globalized world and racialized country?

The Racial Problem

In their seminal book, *Divided by Faith*, sociologists Michael Emerson and Christian Smith set out to show how theology, history, and the structures of religious institutions combine in powerful ways to divide Christians along racial lines. The team of researchers conducted extensive research around the country to assess the current situation of racial tension in America. They were awestruck by how racially homogeneous the social world of most evangelicals tends to be.⁷ This perception is informed by an individualized theological worldview that blinds many evangelicals to the social realities and injustices experienced by minority groups. This should alert us to the difficulty that traditional and conservative churches experience where members not only have limited contact with individuals from other cultural groups, but who make little effort to bridge these gaps. As a result of the research conducted by Emerson and Smith, a second



volume was released, *United by Faith*, where the writers argue that multiracial churches can offer a unique opportunity for Christians to unlock the doors of racial reconciliation, which will require great intentionality and humility.⁸

Intergroup Contact Theory

The truth is that when mixing culturally and ethnically diverse groups, the potential for misunderstanding may naturally arise. Thus, we must first consider the attitudes that will lead to positive intergroup relationships between different cultures or races. Social psychologists have long understood that intergroup contact has the potential to reduce prejudice and discrimination as well as alleviate tension between culturally diverse groups. In fact, Intergroup Contact Theory, formulated by Allport in 1954, states that direct intergroup contact can have positive effects for intergroup relations, especially when the following four conditions are present: equal status between the groups in the situation, common goals, intergroup

cooperation, and the support of authorities.⁹

Recent research, however, has expanded Allport's original idea. At first, theorists thought that moving people out of their original groups (e.g., ethnicity) and placing them as members of a new group (e.g., Christians) would contribute to reduced prejudice between the groups. However, Pettigrew affirms that such "recategorization" is not enough to extend positive attitudes beyond the group situation. That is, members of the group might not display discriminatory attitudes towards those they have come in contact with, but this initial contact is not enough to extend their positive attitudes towards members of the opposite race outside of the group. Instead, Pettigrew states that what is needed is "salient recategorization."¹⁰ By that he means that in order for the perception of the larger group to be altered, we have to see the cultural "other" both as a member of the new group (church) and as a member of their original group (ethnicity/race).¹¹ That is, when considering a multicultural church setting, in order to enhance

intergroup relations, it becomes necessary to seek to not only place culturally diverse individuals together in the same setting, but to strive to provide opportunities for meaningful interaction among the members in which differences and similarities are both addressed for positive outcomes to emerge.

Practical Considerations

What follows is a few implications for developing and sustaining multicultural congregations. First, we must remember we are cultural beings, and, therefore, *cultural differences matter*. A lack of shared culture will naturally lead to misunderstandings and unnecessary barriers in interpersonal relationships across racial and ethnic lines. Good intentions are not sufficient to foster and nourish a vital and successful multicultural congregation. As Priest and Priest once noted, "one must not treat complex cultural and structural dynamics in purely moralistic and spiritual terms."¹² Appreciation for culture will only be acquired as people come into intentional contact with

the “cultural Other,” learn their customs, and experience the beauty of human diversity and God’s creativity. In the attempt to reconcile disagreements within church circles, I have often heard the phrase, “We just need to focus on what unites us rather than on what divides us.” However, we cannot simply ignore our differences. We will never learn to love “the cultural other” in their totality – with their history, traditions, sets of values, beliefs, and customs – if we don’t learn what they are in the first place.

Second, *leadership style matters*. Leaders must model what unity looks like in the midst of diversity. Leaders must be the first to get out of their comfort zone and cultivate a spirit of humility, patience, and grace towards others. Furthermore, leaders must be well prepared to equip their members so that they will, in turn, be able to better understand cultural dynamics appropriately. In-depth relationships across racial lines must be embraced and modeled for the congregation. Leaders cannot expect their congregation to become multiracial if they are themselves living segregated lives. Therefore, it is important for leaders to cultivate relationships with other leaders across racial, ethnic, and denominational lines for the fellowship to be enriched and for the example to be set.

Third, *every person matters*. Seeking to empower the minority culture while intentionally providing them a seat at the table is key to develop leaders across racial, ethnic, and gender lines. However, members of the majority group also matter, and their voice is just as important. Preparation and representation of all congregational members is fundamental at every level.

Finally, *we must place reconciliation at the forefront of our efforts*. The path towards unity must begin with reconciling racial

differences and allowing the love of Christ to be deeply rooted in one’s heart. In this way, forgiveness must be extended when a person is hurt, and grace should be offered when one makes a mistake. As McNeil and Richardson have wisely noted, “Reconciliation is above all the work of God and happens best in the presence and power of God.”¹³ Reconciliation is rooted in the work of Christ on the Cross. Therefore, it allows us to embrace the *new creation* with open arms.

Conclusion

In a diverse and fragmented world in which what is *different* can often be perceived as a *threat*, we must do whatever it takes to become a *healing* church. Our call is no longer just to be at home in the church, but to become pilgrims on the journey toward the realization of the kingdom. As a result, we must seek to continually love and care for every neighbor. The fact that human beings have been created in the image of God poses serious implications for loving and honoring one another. Christians must make the most of every opportunity to dispel any possible rumor of hostility embedded in assumptions about the “Other” as we stand in the gap through prayer and intentional relationships across ethnic and racial lines for the world to find the hope and peace offered in Jesus Christ. ☰

Simone Mulieri Twibell, PhD (Trinity International University) currently serves as Assistant Professor of Intercultural Studies at Olivet Nazarene University. Prior to this assignment she served as senior pastor at churches in Kentucky and Illinois and volunteered as a short-term missionary in Central America.

Notes

1. David Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence: Improving your CQ to Engage our Multicultural World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 26.
2. Brett Buckner, “Color Blind: Is Sunday morning still the most segregated hour in America?” *The Anniston Star*, http://www.annistonstar.com/features/color-blind-is-sunday-morning-still-the-most-segregated-hour/article_cacfc8b9-6829-51db-92a6-ee4dff267c82.html.
3. I use the term *multicultural* as an inclusive category to be representative of ethnicities within a race and different age groups. However, in this article I use the term *multicultural* and *multi-ethnic* interchangeably.
4. “The Pasadena Consultation: Homogeneous Unity Principle,” *Lausanne Occasional Paper 1*, <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-1#3>.
5. Andrew Walls, “The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 7, No. 2 (October, 1983): 225.
6. Walls, “The Gospel,” 226.
7. Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical religion and the problem of race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 89.
8. Curtiss Paul DeYoung, et. al., *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 128–9.
9. Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp, “A Meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, No. 5 (2006): 751.
10. Thomas F. Pettigrew, “Intergroup Contact Theory,” *Annual Review Psychology* Vol. 49 (1998): 74.
11. Pettigrew, “Intergroup,” 75.
12. Kersten B. Priest and Robert J. Priest, “Divergent worship practices in the Sunday morning hour: Analysis of an ‘interracial’ church merger attempt,” *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity and Christian Faith*, eds. Robert Priest and Alvaro Nieves (2007), 288.
13. Brenda Salter McNeil and Rick Richardson, *The Heart of Racial Justice: How Soul Change Leads to Social Change* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 52.