

A Tale of TWO CHURCHES

SOME LESSONS—AND PITFALLS—FROM THE ROAD TO BUILDING A MULTIETHNIC CHURCH

CHURCH: *a community of faith where there is “neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.”*

—Colossians 3:11, NKJV

Most church leaders recognize that Jesus’s mission was not only to bring all people to God, but also to connect them—in himself—to one another in a worldwide communion. This communion of diverse nations, cultures, colors, genders, and classes would serve as a living picture of Jesus to the world.

The apostles began to make this vision a reality in Acts 15. When the Gentiles began following Jesus, Jewish apostles easily could have told these non-Jewish converts, “O.K., you have the Holy Spirit, but it just isn’t practical for you to worship with us. The cultural differences and the history of us hating each other—the barriers are too great!”

Instead, the Jerusalem church leaders did the impractical, ridiculous opposite—they invited the Gentiles into their local Jewish fellowship and said, “We’ll work it out.” There is no record in the New Testament of intentionally separate Jewish and Gentile congregations of believers. From the beginning, church was about people coming together in Jesus.

So, the goal is clear. Yet the strategy is not. How do we come together in Jesus’s name, in a world where racial, cultural, and ethnic wounds run deep and wide? During the past eighteen years I have served two churches in Detroit, which has been described as the most racially polarized city in the U.S. The first church failed in its attempt to bring people together in Jesus. The second church has been successful. The following is what I think I have learned from both churches about the process of coming together in Christ.

LESSON NO. 1: Preach the truth—don’t hammer it.

Coming back from a Promise Keepers conference for pastors in February 1996, I was challenged, inspired, and ready to rock and roll. Bill McCartney and a multicultural leadership team at the conference had passionately and articulately encouraged the 40,000 pastors at the conference to go back to our churches and lead them to embrace all people in Jesus’s name.

Like McCartney, I’m a football coach at heart. Upon returning home, I began a fervent, eight-week sermon series “commanding” our church to embrace—right now—the New Testament’s vision of diversity. In eight weeks we lost 200 people. So I let the issue rest for a few months and then came back preaching the

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same vision, only harder. I believed that sooner or later people would embrace the truth—simply because it was the truth. Five years later our church split, largely over racial issues.

These days I understand that people believe what they believe for many different reasons—some emotional, some psychological, and some experiential. Sometimes an experience in someone’s personal story has hurt them or made them afraid to embrace a particular truth, even biblical truth. Hammering that truth will not make them believe what they are not ready to believe—no matter how articulate and passionate the argument.

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In the Covenant church I now serve—Hope Community Church—I continue to preach what I believe about reconciliation with deep passion. But I realize now more than ever it is not my job to convince anyone of anything. That is God’s job. I try to create an atmosphere with my preaching that will challenge—but also give people a chance to work through their own barriers to a true acceptance of what I am trying to share. Some still leave, but it is amazing how many more make the choice to come along.

LESSON NO. 2: Focus on Jesus Christ but don’t ignore racial realities.

In my naïve passion to right 300 years of racial injustice, in my first Detroit church I tended to lead as if racial righteousness was the whole gospel instead of a result of the gospel lived out. The difference in emphasis is subtle but crucial. If race is your focal point, you are committed to a lost cause because your attention is centered on an endless sea of pain—old, new, and incredibly

complex—that is impossible to navigate. In fact, the journey will be so discouraging that even the most adamant will either abandon ship or resort to mutinous anger and hostility—producing yet more division.

Paul never told the early church to attempt to unravel the intricate history of Jewish-Gentile conflict. Instead he called them to pursue Jesus Christ—and then watch Jesus level the racial playing field with his power, mercy, and grace.

One the reason that my first church gave up the intentional quest for “all people coming together” is that I relegated Jesus to cheerleader status—instead of making him our chief pursuit on the road to racial healing. We were constantly frustrated. Neither black nor white members of the congregation felt encouraged to continue the journey.

In response, I could have taken the “just preach Jesus and whoever is supposed to be here will be here” approach. That approach ignores the social realities that divide us. In my first Detroit church, many assumed that the civil rights movement had eradicated racism—not realizing that racism had simply scampered underground. Many white members became uncomfortable at any mention of the pain of black American history. The phrases “It’s not my problem” or “I don’t want to hear about it” were commonplace. Many African American attendees felt this lack of sensitivity and thus were skeptical about committing to an intimate relationship with the church.

In contrast, the second church embraces the truth that we *are* our brother’s and sister’s keepers. We know that if we are going to fulfill the law of Christ, we must bear one another’s burdens. While our focus is on Christ, equality and justice are two of our church’s core values. We regularly talk about how to respond to inequality and injustice we

see perpetrated on any marginalized individual or group in culture. Not surprisingly, our church is growing with people from different races and cultures in search of that equality and justice through Jesus.

LESSON NO. 3: Focus on personal relationships but do not ignore institutional structure.

In Acts 10:48, after Peter had shared the gospel with Cornelius and his family, Cornelius, a Gentile, asked Peter, a Jew, to “stay a few days” with him. In my first church, the most success we experienced in coming together was a direct result of “staying a few days”—building intentional personal relationships across all dividing lines.

When believers from different racial and cultural backgrounds “stay a few days” with one another, we begin to share our hearts, listen to one another’s stories, grow in understanding, and even begin to work through areas of conflict and difference that surface. We may even begin to develop a sense of personal commitment to one another that encourages us to fight more tenaciously for our equality in Christ.

In Acts 15, Peter champions the cause of Gentiles’ rights before the Jerusalem Council. It’s a remarkable change, because at first Peter was reluctant to go to Cornelius’s house. God had to kick him out of bed to get him to go. But after staying a few days with Cornelius, Peter saw him as a friend, not an outsider.

The Peter/Cornelius model has shaped my life. My efforts to bring people together in Christ began with a theological conviction. Now that theological conviction has become a personal one—fueled by several intimate relationships.

Pastor Lawrence Glass of El Bethel Baptist Church in Redford, Michigan, and Pastor Carlton Harris of Bethel Church in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, have become like brothers to me. These men of God have graced me by

spending hours with me, sharing their journey as men of color growing up in America. They have patiently answered my questions and taught me with their words and their lives. We share a common passion to bring all people together in Jesus. “Staying a few days” with one another has led the way.

But personal relationships are not enough. In my second church, we purposefully structured ourselves in a way that reaches out to all. For example, our infrastructure—mission, values, programming, chain of command—was developed by a diverse group of qualified leaders who were intentional about ensuring that our church was equally available to everyone.

For example, when we order Sunday-school curriculum, we are careful to think about how the material ministers to children from various backgrounds and cultures. When our church decided to join a denomination, we chose the Covenant because of its commitment to being a multiethnic family.

LESSON NO. 4: Intentionally diversify the leadership but avoid quotas.

Acts 6 makes it clear that diverse churches need diverse leadership. When the Greek-speaking Jewish widows in the early church felt neglected in the food distribution—they believed Hebrew-speaking widows were getting more—the Jewish apostles appointed seven leaders to address the problem. Each was spiritually qualified—“full of faith and the Holy Spirit” (v. 3). But each also had a Greek name! Some commentators note that this story may be an intentional step by the apostles to ensure leadership that represented all people in the community of Jesus.

My experience tells me that almost no one wants quotas in leadership. I remember one new elder saying, “Please tell me I wasn’t chosen primarily because I am Asian!” I also had many discussions with our first African American elder before he was convinced

he wasn’t a token choice. Both men understood the need for all people to feel represented. Both were proud to be from a minority culture serving as an elder. But both adamantly desired to be known more for their spiritual maturity than race or ethnicity. Anything else would be demeaning and counterproductive.

Intentional diversity is not about “affirmative action” or political correctness. It is about making sure that



all the people groups in the body feel, to a reasonable extent, represented in the leadership.

How did we accomplish that? In the first church, not very well. We were a large church, 95 percent white, and always playing catch up. No matter how many qualified minority leaders we appointed or hired, it seemed like it was never enough to truly communicate that we wanted our church to be a safe place for all people. On the other hand, every time we appointed or hired a well-qualified minority leader, the “quota” accusation surfaced.

In contrast, the believers who formed the second church started with a shared passion for having all groups represented in leadership. We built a statement into our constitution—for succeeding generations to read and follow—that it was “the intent of the

founders of the church for the church leadership to always reflect the race, gender, and socioeconomic background of the membership.”

With this shared value, and with a great deal of prayer, our first leadership team was made up of three white women, four black men, three white men, and a Hispanic man from Uruguay. No quotas, but prayerful intentionality. We believe that attitude will be used by the Holy Spirit to take us into the future.

LESSON NO. 5: Work on the music, but make it more about worship than style.

In *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott describes her journey to Christ. She speaks of little St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, a multicultural fellowship in San Francisco, “where the singing pulled me in and split me wide open.” We all know that

psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs are crucial to worship—never more so than in a multicultural setting, probably because cultures are so readily identified by their music.

The trap of doing music in a multicultural environment is trying to provide just the “right” music for all the cultures represented. In our church, we have some members who love Kirk Franklin, others who like Fred Hammond, and still others who appreciate old church gospel. Some love contemporary Christian music and could do without the old hymns, and others like Hosanna praise songs from the 1980s. Another group appreciates hymns and the music of liturgical traditions. Our charismatic believers, black and white, love anything you can lift your hands to. Our teens like everything from contemporary Christian to hip-hop. Some

of our people love choirs. Some don't. Some like loud. Others like soft. You get the point, but trust me, I've barely scratched the surface concerning diversity of taste in our little church.

I'll never forget hearing this story. One night at rehearsal, one choir member was sharing how she thought we should sing more of a certain style that "typically" was more representative of the black church community. One black member of the group chimed in with, "Don't ghetto-ize me" and the discussion was off and running. This conversation begs the question: How

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do you categorize the music of an entire culture? In fact, how do you categorize a culture? What does "black culture" or "white culture" really mean, let alone "black music," "white music," "Latino music," "Asian music," or "urban music"? How does a typical church sing all these styles of music to everyone's satisfaction or at least with enough skill to keep the attempt from being laughable? How does a church not put too much emphasis on style and take away focus from Christ?

The music issue is difficult for churches without any diversity. Add the dynamics of race, and the result could stop churches from reaching out to all people. The thought of trying to provide "the right music" is so intimidating that we often give up before trying.

Yet somehow the early church "made it" and we must find a way to make it now. In my present church, our inspiration is Colossians 3 where

Paul calls "Jew and Greek, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free" to come together in Christ and then several verses later commands them to sing "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs."

Here's how we have lived that out. We encourage everyone in our diverse body of believers to bring their particular musical gift to the table—complete with their particular taste, style, and skill—and use them in worship. As our diverse community brings its diverse music to the table, our music naturally grows in diversity! This approach is more organic and grassroot,

less top-down and less forced. It keeps us from doing musical quotas. If someone has a complaint about "their" music not being represented, this approach allows us to gently encourage them to pray about how they might take responsibility to bring "their" music to our worship.

This strategy also allows us to keep worship a first priority. If our musicians and singers, as diverse as we are, bring a passion to worship God to our rehearsals and service, we believe the "style" issue will slowly but surely take care of itself. In the meanwhile, the people of God are more focused on God than whether their particular "songs" are being sung that morning.

How has this strategy served us? It isn't perfect. Some folks still think our music hasn't become diverse enough, fast enough. We all miss our favorite songs some Sunday mornings. One thing we all seem to agree on: obsessively trying to "get it perfectly right" steals the joy from worship. Our diverse group of leaders believes our present approach allows us to keep our focus on Jesus while intentionally moving in the right direction to provide music for all the people.

LESSON NO. 6: Make emotionally mature relationships the key.

After the first church split, partly over racial issues, and the second church formed, many of us thought the main issues in the new community would be racial. This has not been the case. No doubt the second church has struggled. But race hasn't been the central point of conflict. Instead, relationships between members have been.

Peter Scazzero, pastor of a large multicultural church in Queens, New York, discovered the same thing a few years into his pastorate there. The conflict in his church was not mostly about race or culture but the result of general human emotional immaturity. In his book, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, Scazzero says that unless a church's discipleship program includes an emotional component, it will produce believers who know all the right Bible verses and rules, but in stressful times of conflict will not have the emotional resources to cope. Instead, out of emotional immaturity, they will react, blame, run, get defensive, draw lines in the sand, vilify, accuse, act out, and often divide.

It has been eye-opening to observe firsthand something deeper and more pervasive in church life than even the horrible wounds of 300 years of racism—the wounds of broken human relationships.

These wounds—exacerbated by the ravages of dysfunctional families, which know no racial boundaries—have produced adult believers who are still children inside when it comes to the ability to experience deep relationship and work through conflict. This emotional immaturity affects not just my church, but a whole generation of believers in churches everywhere.

I know. I am one of them. It has been eye opening to realize that my emotionally immature responses to emotionally immature actions from another believer can throw fuel on the divisive fires in the church.

What are we doing about emotional immaturity in our church? For one, we have made emotionally mature relationships a priority. We are not settling for “typical church nonsense” in our life together. In conflict, unhealthy responses with pious spiritual labels are not acceptable. In conflict, we will challenge everyone to “grow up” through the conflict and learn to respond in healthy ways that produce depth and maturity in the body.

Our leadership team has committed to studying and working through the principles found in books like *How Your Church Family Works* by Peter Steinke of the Alban Institute, which teaches church leaders how to respond maturely to church conflict. We recognize that our church will not grow in this area beyond the leadership. We also decided to join a denomination that understands and values the category of emotional maturity—and has pledged support in times of conflict.

When I teach from the Bible, I consciously look for early church examples of conflict handled in emotionally mature, or not so mature, ways. I also make creating emotional maturity in disciples a priority in ministry. This takes away from other responsibilities, but it is a price that must be paid if we are to stay together in true community, and not just wade in the shallows of church life.

Our church is young. We are not perfect. Last year, we lost several people to a conflict we are still trying to unravel. Nevertheless, we continue to take responsibility to “grow ourselves up” emotionally, believing that as we mature, we are more equipped to deal with all conflict, including the racial and cultural issues that will come our way.

LESSON NO. 7: Celebrate the small victories, think “long haul,” and pray.

Benjamin Hayes, former president of Morehouse College, once said: “It

is no shame to die with unfulfilled dreams. But it is a shame to live without dreams.”

The kind of reconciling community modeled in the early church is God’s dream, but it is a difficult dream to live. In the last eight years, I have lost one church and several relationships trying to live this dream. The pain can be great and I along with my leaders have quit many times. So what do we do to “keep our eyes on the prize”?



One thing we do is celebrate the small victories. Last Sunday our children’s choir sang. What a picture of the kingdom of God! As the people stood applauding and whistling after every song, you could sense that the celebration was not just about the beauty of the music but the beauty and wonder of seeing our children—different colors, genders, and sizes—all singing together in one voice in Jesus’s name! It was a vision of Jesus’s kingdom, and it gave us hope that our struggle to come together and stay together was not in vain. It was a moment of victory and we celebrated with shouts of joy!

We also constantly think “long haul.” We remind ourselves that it isn’t about how it is going today, but persevering through the hard times to see what God will produce in twenty years. In times of discouragement, we talk about the

consequences to the kingdom of giving up the dream. The other day I asked my fourteen-year-old daughter whether she could ever go back to an all-white, middle-class, monolithic church, and she said, “Yeech! Never!” I paused and felt God say, “Look at your daughter! She gets it! Hang in there, son. Your perseverance is producing kingdom leaders for tomorrow.”

Third, we try to hang out with those who are about this same dream. Our denomination values coming together. We’ve got to partner. We know we can’t do it alone.

And last but not least, we hit our knees. This kind of community is not done in human strength or wisdom. It demands divine input. It demands the very presence of God. We beg him regularly for his strength and guidance. We beg him to show up because we know that without him, we are lost.

To us, Jesus’s mandate to come together across all lines is quite clear. He died to reconcile us not only to the Father, but also to one another. Most days, however, the strategy seems hidden, shrouded in mystery. There is no manual. So how do more and more churches begin the daunting process of coming together in Jesus—and then keep on in spite of the discouragement? Maybe the answer is, “We help one another along the way.” It is our hope that our journey as a multicultural church might encourage others on the same path—or those interested in beginning the path. We have no intention of lecturing, shaming, or fixing. We appreciate the privilege of being present with others of like mind, to share the journey of coming together in Jesus Christ, to let you know that no matter what, you are not alone. □