

ONE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A MULTICULTURAL APPROACH TO MINISTRY

Mandy was about as different from me as a child could be. Blond hair. Blue eyes. Skin that looked like strawberry milk. Her mommy looked exactly the same. I looked like my mommy, too, only we had skin the color of fresh almonds, big, brown eyes, and hair that didn't move in the wind. Nevertheless, Mandy was my best friend—at least as much as I knew about friendship at three years old. She was most likely my second friend ever. My first was another brown child who lived next door and with whom I rode Big Wheels on Saturday afternoons. No, Mandy was my school friend—the one I shared my three-year-old soul with during the hours between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. at our day care.

Mandy and I held hands at the playground and played tag with the others. We made sure our cots were next to each other during nap time so we could whisper our little girl secrets until our cheese and crackers finally settled in our bellies.

We didn't know that according to the world in which we lived, we weren't supposed to be friends. We didn't know that our mommies would probably never be friends . . . except maybe at work where they had to be. We just bonded, drawn to each other by something

altogether different, something higher and more special than the differences that, in 1978, should have kept us far apart.

I would not know Mandy in middle school, high school, or college. Too much would separate us. Our music. Our loves. Our church. All of it would fill the distance that would grow between her world and mine. Thankfully, I only knew her when I was three, and at three, she was my friend.

I wrote this when I found myself trying to remember a time when race didn't matter. I searched my memories for a period in my life when the true spirit of a person was the only factor that determined how I would relate to him or her and whether or not he or she would be a part of my world. Sadly, I had to reach back to three, and even then there was, however slight, this acute awareness of the cultural differences between my friend and me that would inevitably only magnify as we got older.

I wish I could say that things were different at the church of my childhood, that there was some great spiritual equalizer that took effect as soon as one stepped into the vestibule of the house we said belonged to God. Yet, even there, I was inadvertently taught that God had different houses for the different kinds of people he created and that I just belonged to his black, Baptist house.

The issue of diversity as it relates to the body of Christ is one that is often met with either subtle skepticism or total denial. On the one hand, you have those who believe that because people are naturally more likely to gather in places with people who look, talk, and walk like them, churches will inherently follow suit. This leads to an almost Darwinist justification (as in the theory of natural selection) for the labels such as black church, white church, Hispanic church, and so

on. We have succumbed to an “only the strong survive” reasoning for the self-imposed segregation of our worship experiences. Juxtaposed with this belief are those who are totally blind to the segregated nature of the body of Christ, claiming that color is most certainly not a factor while continuing to attend places of worship that are one-dimensional at best. This color-blind approach denies fully the awesomely powerful traditions of various cultures and how these can add to the work of the kingdom.

Unfortunately, both sides ignore the truth of what is happening during our services on Sunday morning, often quoted as the most segregated hours of the week, and what *can* happen if the church would relinquish the mistakes of its past and overcome the spirit of fear that seems to be at the root of many of our divisions. Simply put, we must align ourselves fully with the will of God. Christ is returning for a church that is without spot, wrinkle, or blemish (Eph. 5:27), and that church is dynamically multicultural, multiracial, and subsequently, multidimensional. It will take a church that looks this way to accomplish the will of God on the earth.

**So in Christ Jesus you are all children of
God through faith, for all of you who were
baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves
with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile,
neither slave nor free, nor is there male and
female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
(Gal. 3:26-28)**

The Notion of Culture

I admit to having a bit of a chip on my shoulder when I hear a speaker or topic raise questions around the church's efforts to integrate. Multiculturalism is so subjective, and sometimes I feel like everyone polarizes around the subject. There are more cultural barriers out there other than race. If you were to pan the audience at our church, the question of whether we are a multicultural congregation would depend on whose eyes were looking through the lens. I think we are very multicultural. We have members who are 80 years old and those who are 17 years old. We have that group in the middle that is 35-55 years old and we are all finding common ground in our worship experience. However, we don't have much diversity when it comes to race. And that, I think, is a function of the demographics of where we are located. I just don't think we should judge an environment as pass or fail based on just race.¹

—Kem Meyer, Granger Community Church

Kem Meyer is correct. I would be remiss to imply that the issue of a lack of diversity is solely an issue of race. Culture is generally defined as a set of behaviors, ways of thinking and being, and social cues that are associated or affiliated with one particular group. The definition offered by *Merriam-Webster's* is only slightly more detailed: “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.”²

For example, studies show that men and women communicate differently. The traits that result from these differences can be considered a cultural aspect of the gender it is aligned with. You can often identify a culture by specific characteristics or behavior that is dominant within that group, despite

deviations or outliers. This also means that a Christian's definition of diversity would have to encompass the inclusion of various lifestyles, the needs of multiple generations, all parts of the spectrum as it relates to socioeconomic status, and biblically sound perspectives relating to gender, to name a few. While race tends to be the issue that gets the most attention, the discussion of multiculturalism in the church absolutely extends to many other, often marginalized, groups (i.e., punk rockers, bikers, etc.) and requires an examination of society and culture as a whole. However, I would also submit that the area of multiculturalism that is most explosive and divisive in the church relates to race and, more specifically, our lack of comfort in addressing it. I would also suggest that dealing with the hard problems first is always the best way to diffuse some of the other issues. That's why this book focuses on race as a primary starting point for healing some of the issues that challenge multicultural ministry. I believe we must be willing to challenge ourselves in the areas we are most uncomfortable in order to address the source of that discomfort and make room for the church as a whole to grow freely.

The body of Christ is confronted with two options as it relates to dealing with culture in general. Either we can completely denounce a society that is becoming progressively more rife with sin and un-Christlike in many ways or we can decide to become relevant to that culture in order to present the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Aha! Relevancy. That does seem to be the buzzword for most of our postmodern ministries today, doesn't it? It's important to note, though, that relevancy should only be viewed as a tool for reconciliation, not an end itself.

Yet, even then, the answer is not as obvious as it may seem. Yes, the body of Christ must stand against sin in any form. However, we also must show compassion to those who commit those sins in order to lovingly but urgently bring them into the body of Christ. We therefore have to walk that fine line between not condoning the wrongs of society and not being irrelevant to those we are trying to reach.

The how of ministry is in some ways determined by the who, when, and where of the culture in which that ministry operates. Churches must be committed to understanding the people they are called to reach and the struggles, challenges, and opportunities of the culture in which those people reside.

Separate but Equal

“Separate but equal” may remind us of that dark period of time in the history of the United States when that phrase was used to justify and legalize segregation. It allowed for public facilities and the education of children to be separate based on race under the guise of claiming that the conditions of those facilities and the educational system would be equal. Yet, as we found out in 1955 during *Brown v. Board of Education*, in nearly all cases, conditions were not equal, and the separation itself had a profound impact on the way African-Americans were perceived, not just by whites, but by African-Americans themselves.

Ironically, the similarities between how the body of Christ justifies its own segregation and how society once justified legal segregation are astounding. Just like in legal segregation, some churches boast about being predominately white or black and glorify their perspectives on worship styles and the doctrines associated with those distinctions, all while in the

same proverbial breath declaring, “We are all God’s children.” And similarly, these churches are spiritually unbalanced, causing a huge crisis of identity within the body of Christ.

Pastor Stephen Rhodes, a leader in multicultural ministry for the United Methodist Church, drives home the inconsistency between what many churches advocated for during the civil rights movement and how we currently function: “We said to culture that it was a moral imperative to integrate our schools, workplaces and neighborhoods while simultaneously preserving the segregation that we practice in services of worship. By refusing to embody the truth claims of the gospel that we preached to our culture, we lost our credibility. . . . Before the church can ask our culture to believe the gospel, we must show our culture that we believe it by how we live together.”³

Whenever a debate about multiculturalism ensues, there is often a faction that questions whether there is even a need for such an emphasis. Do churches really need to “market” the gospel to a diverse audience and if so, why? It is easier to believe that if you live in a primarily urban community or in a rural one, you can silo your ministry and center its goals on only those in your immediate reach. However, that is not only unbiblical, barring any specific assignment or mandate from God, but also increasingly impossible to accomplish. The media, through television, radio, and the Internet, has exposed everyone to all cultures. Hip-hop, a phenomenon birthed in the African-American and Hispanic community, now counts suburban white kids as its primary consumers. Country music, a genre that thirty years ago rarely reached past Nashville and the Grand Ole Opry, now has *American Idol* and pop artists to thank for its popularity.

The growth of the Hispanic, African-American, and Asian-American communities in America has made what is still deemed a minority in the public sector a physical and economic majority for the population and gross consumer buying power.

Even if, to some extent, the images of these groups are still skewed and often stereotypical, there is no denying that this global exposure along with God's global mandate makes rethinking the church's position and relevance to the culture as a whole a necessity.

"Our Church Is Color-Blind"

Before embarking on my own assignment to become a writer and educator, I spent two years working as an account consultant for a Fortune 500 company in New Jersey. During my time there, I established a wonderful working relationship with one of my colleagues and we often took business trips together to visit our shared clients. Wendy was a beautiful, white woman with long brown hair, a distinctively North Jersey style and attitude, and an outstanding outlook on life. I truly enjoyed knowing her. Yet out of all of the conversations we had about men and food and clothes and even faith, there is one that stood out among the rest. One day on the way to meet a client our conversation turned to race. Wendy explained to me that the reason she felt she could get along with almost anyone, including me, was that she didn't allow herself to see race. She didn't see me as a woman of color. She only saw me as a woman. A good woman with whom she'd developed a great working relationship.

At first, I was flattered. Theoretically, it sounded great and I believe she thought that what she was saying was true and

good. However, after some thought, I realized that there is a real danger in “not seeing color” or being figuratively color-blind. If a person doesn’t see my color, if he or she doesn’t see my culture, then in essence, that person doesn’t see me. He or she has negated, or at least made inconsequential, a large part of what makes me who I am. While I currently reside in Philadelphia, I’m a native of Kentucky. A large portion of my personality and experiences are directly rooted in being raised as an African-American woman, coming of age in the eighties and early nineties and living in a suburban area of Louisville.

What’s my point? Many churches and ministries, in an attempt to have a more multicultural focus, make the mistake of trying to cancel out, ignore, or deny the background of their congregations as if by homogenizing their audiences they can increase tolerance. Paul Louis Metzger, a professor of Christian theology and theology of culture at Multnomah Biblical Seminary in Portland, Oregon, observes, “It is so easy for us in the church to prejudge and objectify people who seem all so different from us, when we don’t have exposure to them. Homogeneous churches do not help us move beyond objectification of people who are different from us ethnically. Once I enter into a relationship with a Hispanic or African-American person, a [white], First Nations or Asian American person, I can’t label him or her as a statistic or as a demographic datum.”²⁴

The fact remains that people, no matter the race or creed, desire to be celebrated, not tolerated. It’s important for churches to embrace the differences of their changing congregations in their journey down the road toward diversity.

Becoming My Mother: Is There a Biblical Mandate?

When asked why churches should *have* to consider diversifying their ministry efforts along cultural lines, a part of me would like to harken back to my mother's response to my seven-year-old questioning of her command to clean my room. "Because I said so!" she'd often exclaim in frustration. Only in this case, I'd morph into that great woman who birthed me and scream, "Because God said so!" But we're all adults here, so I won't do that.

Yet God does, you know, say so.

I expended great effort to find scriptural support outside of the often recited Gal. 3:26-28 (quoted earlier) and 1 Cor. 9:22 ("I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some"). In my studies, I came across a lesser-known, but particularly fascinating, passage that not only honed in on a biblical mandate for how we treat and minister to those who are different from us but also taught a short history lesson on why:

Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt. (Deut. 10:16-19)

Moses is speaking to the Israelites as they are preparing to enter the Promised Land. He's reminding them that God shows no partiality. He is also warning them that no bribe or anything less than an inward transformation (hence, the circumcision of the heart noted in v. 16) could satisfy "the LORD

[who] . . . is the great God.” God’s treatment of the “foreigner” further illustrates his absolutely just character and highlights his requirement for Israel (and today’s church) to be just.⁵

It wasn’t just about conquering the land. It was also about showing love to those who are foreign. It was about the position and condition of their hearts. And why? Because at one time the Israelites were foreign. This is a remarkable model for us as we set out on this journey together. The fact remains that the body of Christ stands on the cusp of its own promised land, that place where the kingdom of God is full and manifest in the earth. But the earth is filled with foreigners. Not just those who are culturally different from you and your congregation, although that is certainly one aspect of this, but also those who are foreign simply because they don’t yet believe. They are seeking the true God and salvation through Christ, and it is our responsibility to show them that in a loving and an accepting way, just as Christ loved and accepted us.

Another Book?

This book can be a major resource in implementing your multicultural strategy. I will spend a large amount of time discussing how to lead a mental and spiritual shift in your congregation as it relates to the way we think about multicultural worship and ministry in the body of Christ. This is the often-missed critical step that needs to occur well before the implementation of any specific initiatives. I will also explore the various approaches necessary to enact your multicultural strategy gradually and effectively. As urgent as I feel this is, it is not something that can happen overnight. Not only does a congregation and its leadership need to be prepared mentally and spiritually, but also some education on the most effective

approach for your particular situation must happen. Finally, throughout the book I will incorporate the conversations I've had with both leaders and laypeople in the Christian community in order to gain insight into the many perspectives on this subject and to add dimension to the discussion.

But don't be alarmed! This will not be a theological treatise on multicultural ministry. You won't be beat over the head with theories and pontifications by the so-called experts that may or may not realistically apply to your situation. If we are truly honest, we can all admit that most churches, big and small, operate somewhat differently from what they say they believe theologically. This quite possibly results from the day-to-day operating requirements of an organization intersecting with the immediate needs of your own community and then both running smack into the original, God-given vision for the ministry itself. Whew! I'm exhausted just thinking about it. It is this very heaviness of both your practical and spiritual responsibilities as a church leader that convinces me that approaching the subject matter from solely a theological perspective will most likely only perpetuate inaction. Now is some theological examination important? Sure. And I will certainly unravel the theories that most align with the basic scriptural model given to us by Christ.

Very simply, the principles explored in this text boil down to this concept: Heaven is going to look a whole lot different from your church right now. How do we change this for the kingdom's sake?