

Multicultural adventure

I hadn't been to Albert Lea for several years but it was family reunion time. I pulled off the interstate and headed to Walmart to pick up some supplies. I was blown away.

The town of just over 18,000, a county seat in south central Minnesota, is surrounded by cornfields. I've been visiting this area all my life. A veritable tribe of relatives on my mother's side inhabit the region. Fair skinned, blond, and blue-eyed Scandinavians and Germans have been all one could see in any direction.

Within five minutes at Walmart I encountered any number of African-Americans, Asians, Hispanics, and Africans. "Here? Here in Albert Lea?" I thought. This experience dramatically underscored the truth of my own proclamation: "My reality today will be yours tomorrow."

I have preached *ad nauseum*, "My urban reality will soon be yours." Of course this includes the multicultural reality that only a couple short decades ago was found primarily in urban centers. This wonderful wave of multicultural humanity has swept the land.

One of the most striking demographic trends of the past couple decades has been a dispersal of America's immigrant population. Immigrants are settling in small towns as well as big cities, suburbs as well as inner-city neighborhoods, rural areas as well as metropolitan ones.

For the first time, racial and ethnic minorities make up more than half the children born in the U.S. In 1980, the five most commonly spoken languages in the U.S. other than English were Spanish, Italian, German, French, and Polish. By 2011, Spanish was still the most widely spoken language after English but Chinese, French, Tagalog, and Vietnamese followed it. The U.S. Census calculates that by 2043 Americans who identify themselves as Hispanic, Black, Asian, American Indian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander will together outnumber non-Hispanic whites. Four

years ago officials had projected the shift would come in 2050. Minorities, now 37 percent of the U.S. population, are projected to comprise 57 percent of the population by 2060. Children of interracial marriages have soared into the millions in the last generation.

Mind you, when we speak of things "multi-cultural," it's not just about skin color. There may be elements related to nationality, ethnicity, tribal identity, social class, political affiliation, or other designations. I just saw a new book title the other day *The Suburbanization of Poverty*. Single mothers have been one of the fastest-growing poverty groups in America. This is a unique mission field in everybody's backyard. You may live in a small town off an interstate. Who is reaching the Indians who own the motel or the people who live in a rickety mobile home outside of town on a county road?

We exist to engage our world with the gospel. It's not a mystery. The gospel is supra-cultural. Our outreach is cross-cultural. The result: Our church is multicultural. If our church is not multicultural, where do you think the problem lies? Is it the gospel or is it our outreach?

There was no greater animosity, bias, prejudice, or hatred as that between Jew and Samaritan. Yet in Acts 1:8 Jesus makes it quite clear that under the power of the Holy Spirit, witnesses would go to Samaria, not by accident but on purpose and by design. Jesus commanded His followers to make disciples among those who were quite near but very different. People who had been despised, avoided, and marginalized were to be loved, sacrificed for, and disciplined. John 4 unfolds the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

If we refuse to reach out to those who are close but different, it seems to call into question our efforts to reach those far away. I'm not ready to start a new organization over this but in Jesus' last orders, Samaria comes before the

"uttermost parts."

In Acts 2, Pentecost is the occasion for a religious celebration providing commonality. However, a quick read of all of the ethnicities and nationalities represented would dare anybody to posit the idea that there were no cultural differences.

You may say, "There is no one around here but people like us." Maybe, but that would be rare. Most three- or four-square-mile pieces of any town, city, or county will have a representation of other cultures. Do we have eyes to see? The failure to reach beyond our cultural bounds is biblically indefensible.

As I was thinking about this multicultural presence, the phrase "It's a multicultural world after all" came to mind to the tune of "It's a Small World After All." This song is forever burned into my memory from a trip to Disneyworld. (The line was so long and the song looped endlessly.) Of course the world is multicultural — I mean our personal environments, where you live and serve, where I live and serve, our culture.

The problem is, that phrase has too many syllables to fit that old song title. That's the point. The new reality won't fit into the old song. The new reality doesn't fit into an old mindset. Our minds, our hearts, our vision must be biblically informed, enlarged, and supernaturally enabled.

Your adventure lies straight ahead.

by Charles Lyons, Pastor
Armitage Baptist Church,
Chicago, Illinois
charles.lyons@armitagechurch.org

