

What a witness!

“I don’t want to go back to that white church.”

I can’t tell you how those words stung me. It was Monday night outreach. The team had returned and was reporting on their visit to 10-year-old Taneesha’s house.

I had this crazy notion that we should be Jesus’ church not “that white church.”

Called to preach at ten years old during the third verse of “Footsteps of Jesus,” and through my teen years, a vision of church made up of different kinds of people was formed in me.

In my universe, Chicago’s south side, there were just two kinds of people: black and white. They lived over there. We lived over here. They kept moving closer. We kept moving away. I say “we.” Not me personally but the white population. Dr. King marched through my neighborhood. My ethnic, hardcore Roman Catholic neighbors threw bricks at nuns marching with King. Yes, feelings ran deep.

So, where did I get this notion that different colors and cultures could worship together?

Looking back, I see how God used my father. He exposed me to a different world, taking me to visit a large black church occasionally. This was my first cross-cultural encounter. I marvel at how God used these early childhood experiences to shape my heart and direct my life.

Then, everything was black and white. Now, a rainbow of hues, colors, and cultures from all over the world calls America home. To do effective ministry in the 21st century is to do cross-cultural ministry.

God introduces quite the radical idea. Even a Canaanite harlot can be made part of the household of faith. Radical because of who she was and radical because it was so early in the story of redemption.

Moabite Ruth was made part of the Messianic line. Again, this must be seen as an early pronouncement of God’s intentions.

I love the line of praise “And let them say

among the nations “The Lord reigns,” on the occasion of David bringing the ark of God to place inside the prepared tent. Who knew the nations would be our neighbors?

Throughout the Old Testament the divine idea that God crosses lines, breaks down barriers, brings different people together under His name, is dramatically apparent.

Can we overstate the rancor and hostility between Jews and Samaritans? Not only did Jesus not go around Samaria, He said “I must go through Samaria.” A Samaritan woman was the first proclaimer of Good News as a result of Jesus’ public ministry. It’s almost impossible for us to appreciate the enormity of that incident.

Ancient society seemed to rest on three pillars. First, Jews were not like Gentiles. They were chosen by God, favored by God, and to hear many of them tell it, superior to all other human beings. Gentiles were dogs, heathen.

Next, the ancient world was built on a slave economy. Slaves were living implements. They had no legal standing and nowhere to appeal their condition.

Also, men believed themselves to be superior to women. This was more than lacking rights. They were not seen as equal.

In one blow, Paul shatters all three pillars. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

It’s difficult for us to understand the absolute revolutionary nature of that declaration.

Many ancient cities were not just walled, but divided by walls. We get a feel for this in present-day Old Jerusalem with the Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and Armenian quarters.

In Antioch (Act 13), Luke’s listing of church leaders suggests that Antioch’s accepted walls of division had been overwhelmed by the Gospel.

Nor should we think the cross-cultural idea is confined to ethnicity and

language. What about generational bridges, socioeconomic connections, outreach to various subcultures be they bikers, boarders, the deaf, LGBTQ youth, or the very rich?

Multicultural on purpose! Not by accident. Not because people who don’t look like us wandered in to the church closest to them. Multicultural because we welcome the stranger and embrace the alien. Multicultural because we have gone into the highways, byways, and hedges. Multicultural because we deliberately go to Samaria. We deliberately eliminate things we say or do that may be less than welcoming to people not like us. We reach out to serve those not part of our demographic. What a witness to our world!

A few questions:

1. What people distinct from your congregational majority are in your area?
2. What might make people from other cultures more welcome in your church?
3. What can you do to reach out to people unlike the majority in your church?
4. What church changes are you willing to make to welcome those from other cultures?

Recently, immediately after a young woman told me she would be on an evening flight to her homeland, Ukraine, an Indian was introducing me to an Uzbek. I turned from that conversation into another with a young man from Curacao who had just returned from Christmas holidays with his family, missionaries in the Dominican Republic.

Steps away, a Muslim man was engaged in passionate conversation with two church members.

Ahh ... this feels right.



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