



Nurturing an Educationally Diverse Congregation

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. famously stated, “The most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning.” Over the years, I have reflected on how that statement is true on so many levels. While most congregations seem to include small numbers of racially “other” congregants, churches remain essentially racially monolithic. But our divisions are not strictly racial in nature. The church is also segregated along socioeconomic lines and correspondingly by levels of education. It is perhaps this last division that is most difficult to bridge.

I hold a strong conviction that the church needs educational diversity. The uneducated and the highly educated need each other, and both groups have great gifts to provide each other. The church is malformed and undernourished whenever such diversity is not dynamically present. But, how does one build a church where high school dropouts and academic scholars can enjoy deep Christian fellowship with each other and serve God in unity?

I was blessed for 27 years to serve as pastor of the New Covenant Church of God in Cleveland, Tennessee—a congregation my

wife and I founded through a small group meeting in our home. One of our core values from the very beginning was diversity. We desired to be a church that was diverse racially, ethnically, generationally, economically, and educationally. God graciously allowed this vision to become a reality. I am confident we had one of the highest concentrations of Ph.D.'s of any congregation in the Church of God, about fifteen to twenty percent. At the same time we had about the same number of GEDs and high school dropouts, and everyone in between.

There are a few core values that I believe helped us to achieve this.

- We cherished diversity, all types of diversity in Christ. Diversity enlarges a congregation's pool of knowledge, skills, and spiritual gifts for the edification of the Body. We learn much more from those who differ from us than from those who merely echo back to us our own way of reading reality.

- We treated all people as equals in Christ and looked for and honored each person's unique set of gifts. We gave special attention to helping each person discover God's callings on his or her life. We accepted it as our shared responsibility to provide opportunities for Christian service that were consistent with the person's callings. For each person we stressed that ongoing training is an essential component of effective ministry.

- We sought to elevate persons into the offices of the church on biblical grounds rather than cultural preferences. Elders were never chosen on the basis of popular-

ity, or level of education, or success in business, or social standing. Instead, we asked simple questions about union with the body of Christ, biblical standards for moral/spiritual character, and demonstrated ministry functions.

- We recognized that one's level of education, whether high or low, was not an indicator of spiritual maturity or of calling or ability to serve. Education does not qualify someone for Christian service; it equips and empowers the called to serve more effectively.

- We valued education in all of its forms and honored all levels of academic achievement. We celebrated the completion of a GED with the same enthusiasm as the completion of a Ph.D. For each of the educational milestones, we held church-wide events that were times for members of the church to speak spiritual blessings and words of appreciation over the graduates.

One of the highest compliments I ever received came from a homebound elderly member of my church. He always introduced me to his various attendants in the same manner. "This is my pastor; I love my pastor. Do you want to know why I love my pastor and his wife? They are both highly educated and you can't tell it." I knew exactly what he meant. The pastor is the key to bringing diverse groups together. I believe effective pastoral ministry begins with listening to people and giving them a voice to be heard regardless of their educational background. Everybody deserves to be understood and loved. People know you love them if you talk with them and not at

them as the highly educated are tempted to do. People know they are loved when our conversations make them aware you hold them in high esteem without ever making them feel inferior.

Another of my cherished compliments came from a twelve-year-old. One Sunday following my absence she ran to me and threw her arms around my neck, exclaiming, "I am so glad you are back." When I inquired as to her reasons, she said: "My father preached last Sunday, and I couldn't understand a word he said. I can understand you." I have a deep personal commitment to preach with theological depth and childlike clarity. I don't always succeed on either point, but I constantly try. The meat of the Word of God is chewable without being tough or grainy. As pastor, in every sermon I had two goals for my delivery. First, I wanted to get a chuckle out of Dr. R. Hollis Gause. I knew I couldn't impress him with the depth of my theology, but if I could get him to laugh, or even smile, I knew the rest of my sermon was on solid ground. Second, I sought to have eye contact, especially with the children and poorly educated. If they were following me, I knew everyone was capable of understanding my message.

There are many obstacles to the development of an educationally diverse congregation. One's level of education influences the curriculum one wants to study, the songs one wants to sing, and the liturgy one finds meaningful. But I am convinced there are a few things that when held together will overcome all of the obstacles. First, people

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need to know each other's testimonies of life in Christ; by our testimonies, we overcome, and by our testimonies, we come to know we are one in Christ. The life we share in Christ transcends all of our social and educational differences. Second, people need to share the joys and sorrows of their lives; in this we discover our shared humanity. Regardless of our level of education, we all experience the same core challenges in life: sicknesses and health, births and deaths, breakups and unions. Third, people need opportunities to receive spiritual gifts from persons of differing socio/economic and educational backgrounds. Fourth, the church needs to have a culture that honors its members for their growth in Christ and faithfulness to him, rather than honoring the social elite alone. Finally, the presence and work of the Holy Spirit is the great equalizer within the church. The Spirit is no respecter of persons; the Spirit uses whomever the Spirit wills to use. The church must live with a constant hunger for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit, one that releases all of its members for Spirit-empowered living and ministry. ■

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