

Leadership in a Multicultural Congregational Context

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I teach a course in the Unification Theological Interfaith Seminary's Doctor of Ministry Program entitled "Cultural Diversity and Conflict Transformation." One of the postulates I have in teaching it is that the multicultural congregation is now at or approaching a "critical mass" in Christendom in this the tenth year of the 21st century. This is a relatively new phenomenon for many churches, which see movement away from the previous missional thrust of the Ethnic Minority Local Church with its focus on the strengthening of the Black Church and the development of the Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Native American, and Korean congregations. Yet it is still an open question as to whether this is just a new initiative, a venture in the wake and impact of this era of Globalization, or whether we are seeing the development of a "critical mass" of people congregating in a multicultural environment.

In this course, I often use actual case studies to reflect theologically and culturally on issues and relationships in a given multicultural context involving cultural differences, conflict, personal choices, mediation and decision-making. Sometimes I have the students make up case studies and present them for reflection and discussion. As I observe the origin and present thrust of developing multicultural congregations in the Church to address this notion of leadership, I can visualize different case study models for consideration—some drawn from personal experience and observation.

Models of Multicultural Congregations

Let me identify briefly four such models:

1. An Anglo congregation that transitioned into a multicultural congregation including African-Americans, Africans, Asians and Caribbeans.
2. An African-American congregation that transitioned into a multicultural congregation that includes Caribbeans, Indians and Africans.
3. A mono-cultural congregation in a multicultural environment that seeks to embrace multiculturalism. This is a congregation whose leader is willing to reach out to the community without necessarily incorporating the cultural groups in its membership and structure and as a worshipping community. In other words, it is a congregation in a multicultural environment embracing the diversity of cultures from a distance. It may even have a few from the community attending sporadically its worship celebration and special events.
4. A new multicultural congregation that develops starting from ground zero as an intentional group of charter members from diverse cultures with an appointed leader or team of leaders to address the multi-lingual aspect of a multi-cultural context. Here, Team Leadership may be the pre-eminent model in Congregational Development.

Such case study models involving the meeting of different cultures in the context of the Community of Faith can bring a richness of values to all as we foster a spirit of positive acceptance of cultural differences and affirm commonalities and differences. This calls for a dynamic interaction on the part of leadership with the various cultures from a position of cultural confidence that is open to positive adjustment attained through self respect, affirmation and validation. The congregation will take on a different texture as well. No longer just individuals of a mono-culture, they become members of a kingdom community which is beginning to welcome the different other.

It is from these contexts that we begin to examine what the multicultural congregation looks like and, in particular, the leadership that can develop and shape such congregations in the 21st century. What kind of leader recognizes, accepts, shapes and welcomes cultural diversity? What should be the characteristics, traits and principles of such leadership to serve in these multi-cultural congregations?

Leadership in Multicultural Congregations

It is against this backdrop that I would now like to address leadership in a multicultural congregational context, and will therefore hone in on an individual strategy—the efficacy of leadership.

In characterizing leadership as "multicultural," it is not my intention to define the multicultural leader in terms of his/her family origin or particular ethnicity. Rather a multicultural leader, whether as one person or a team of individuals, has oversight or responsibility for the ministry and mission of a multicultural congregation. Leadership is influence, the ability of one person to influence others. A leader is one who indirectly influences the thoughts, behavior, attributes, attitudes and spiritual walk of his or her

congregants, as well as directly engages them and others in developing empowering skills and capacities to make a difference in their communities, nation and world. The challenge facing such leaders is to envision, enlist, exhort, embrace, enrich, enhance, embed, embody, engage, excite, encourage and empower—not give them power but rather enable them to recognize their own power—for the kingdom building process. These concepts, all beginning with the letter "e," can in themselves later serve as a rubric to formulate strategies for skill development, creativity and empowerment—the How's of Leadership.

I am proposing a template for such leadership in the form of an acrostic: A.S.A.P. – bearing in mind the urgency of identifying and appointing such Leaders to these congregations as soon as possible – A.S.A.P. However, in this context this acrostic represents leadership characteristics, traits and principles, namely, leadership that is:

A. Authoritative

S. Spiritual

A. Authentic

P. Pastoral

Authoritative Leadership

First, Leadership that is Authoritative: The real need of the church in this the 21st century, if it is to make disciples for the transformation of the world, is for leadership that is authoritative, because a congregation desires to be led by one who knows where he or she is going and who inspires confidence. An authoritative leader is one who is steeped in the scriptures as a source of authority and is willing upon that authority to engage and stimulate the congregants in the Worship Celebration, Bible Study and Spiritual Formation Groups as an interpreter of the biblical stories and message. Preaching and teaching are therefore pivotal vehicles for communication in a multicultural congregation. However, context is as important as content. For example, in a multicultural context contextualized answers to who Jesus Christ is for each culture conjures up the issue of cultural self-identity. The perspective of Christ as a Native American, a Hispanic/Latino, an African-American, an African, a Asian, a Haitian, a Pacific Islander, a European—along with the specific theologies that are developed out of concrete experiences of these cultural groups in relation to their meaning and value—must be part of the Preacher's and Teacher's exposition as story-teller and interpreter of the oral and written tradition. Even as emphasis is placed on these particular theological and cultural perspectives, radical cultural and spiritual transformation can take place in the multicultural congregation under leadership that is authoritative as he or she seeks to interpret the scriptures contextually, enfleshing the Word through reflection and praxis.

This authoritative style of leadership does not solely rely on preaching, teaching and exhortation. It includes process which involves allowing congregants to share testimonies through songs, poetry, stories, rituals, cultural artistic displays and symbols during Worship Celebration, Bible Study, Spiritual Formation Sessions, forums and celebrative events/festivals from the traditions and unique heritage of others.

This approach of text, context, reflection and praxis provides a vantage point for fresh interpretation of the biblical stories and message, and spawns and underscores the authoritative position of leadership in a multicultural congregation. When a leader adopts this multi-disciplinary approach, he or she signals room for harmony between the innate being and outer knowledge which allows God to do God's "new thing" in a multicultural setting.

As a United Methodist, I am committed to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, reason and experience. I recall that in the 1988 Book of Discipline scripture is valued above the other points of the quadrilateral. In a multicultural congregation scripture plays an important part, as the leader takes on this authoritative role.

We need leadership that is authoritative; leaders who can weave text and context in such a way as to address the complexities, ambiguities and challenges facing the multicultural congregation. We need leadership that is grounded in a Source and sources that all can partake of. We need leadership that can bring wisdom, faith and hope, and the vision of a new heaven and a new earth for all fellow journeyers.

Spiritual Leadership

Second, Leadership that is Spiritual speaks to the leader who exemplifies and touches experiences of the supernatural in his or her service. Leadership is often viewed as one who is endowed with intellectual capacity, certain talents and skills, the force of will, and enthusiasm. Such characteristics and qualities are beyond question greatly admired. However, these are not paramount in a spiritual leader for a

multicultural congregational context. The real characteristics and traits of leadership in such a setting are to be found in those who are willing to accept and value the multi-faceted existence which God has created. It is those who embrace the culture of each person that is created by God with all the ambiguities and foibles, whose acceptance and valuation can be translated into a community of faith. The Spiritual Leader is one who manifests and witnesses to a God who dwells and transcends over all cultures, while at the same time identifying through his or her spiritual walk that regard for congregants within their own specific cultural contexts.

A Spiritual Leader is one who seeks, not to profess his or her culture as the major or only source of his or her well-being and blessed by God, rather, he/she is one who is in search of the spiritual in a dynamic and ongoing process, growing and nurturing in the faith. For an identity based on cultural and racial origin alone will never be sufficient to make a spiritually mature or whole person. Living in community with others calls for interaction, reflection, flexibility, give and take, and being open to change, falling and rising again—death and resurrection along one's spiritual walk.

Leadership for a multicultural congregation requires those who are in search of spirituality, and who will enable others to join in that search which is between, across and beyond human beings who make up such a congregation—diversity in unity, and unity in diversity. It is in this complex context that the Spiritual Leader seeks not to lift up one culture over the other but rather to engage in the effort to bring about transformation in the human community. In the words of the prayer of Jesus, "that all may become one."

Leadership that is spiritual engages the congregation in the spiritual disciplines drawn from the various religious and cultural traditions, including the teachings, and witness of saints and sages. One who incorporates the spiritual traditions of the various cultures and at the same time demonstrates growing maturity will be respected and continue to be a qualified leader. Such a one leads his or her congregants in search of spirituality, which I would contend is the nourishing symbol of the cultural traditions involved in a multicultural congregational context. As the leader exemplifies this in his or her spiritual walk, he or she is in a position to enable the congregants to move closer to the Spiritual, God, the Ground of our being.

Through this process of spiritual development and transformation, the multicultural congregation under spiritual leadership can begin to reflect on their assumptions, their relationships, their spiritual health and well-being, their political power, their goals and values. This process invoked by the leadership enables congregants to be stewards of all their resources, inner and outer. This touches and brings forth the commonalities and differences of their religious and cultural traditions and stories, and at the same time enables them to experience that they have a unique place in the multicultural congregation.

Authentic Leadership

Third, Leadership that is Authentic describes the leader who exemplifies, exhibits, and embodies extraordinary courage in the face of complexity and adversity. Such leaders experience sacrifice and suffering not as a badge to be worn, but rather as a form of cultural resistance to further oppression and an act of determination to rise above their condition. Authentic Leadership is demonstrated by one who is transparent, genuine and sincere in relating to the hurts, frustrations, hopes and aspirations of the congregants, as he or she ministers to them on the individual, family and communal levels.

The Authentic Leader is willing to prepare for the task through personal devotion, study, contemplation and reflection. The personal engagement in intentional contemplation and robust reflection results in the leader making a conscious effort to create opportunities and take risks in a multicultural congregation. It is a risk for congregants and members of the community to dialog in group encounters, to share and reflect upon their stories, and to relate to the current issues and challenges they face as they work together. Yet the reward of such a conscious bringing together of others from different cultures to share with each other and to experience commonalities and differences is that it creates a context that enhances a genuine concern and relationship as they unleash the innate aspects of their lives. They encounter such a leader as guide and confidante, and as a spiritual mentor

This internal rigor on the part of leadership has universal implications. It is a process that cherishes value for all, regardless of race or ethnicity. It is also an opportunity for theological reflection and grappling with personal and communal issues and experiences by both leaders and congregants. With such an authentic leader there are no limits to what can be accomplished in such a context, recognizing the risks, challenges, and vulnerabilities involved in the encounter.

The call is for authentic leadership to risk failure, setbacks, paradoxes, uncertainties, and yet hope in the value of differences and the potential unity in the lived experiences of the multicultural congregational context.

Pastoral Leadership

Finally, to describe Leadership that is Pastoral, I would draw from St. Paul's take on the potential for a new community of faith—in this case the multi-cultural Congregation. I refer to the fourth case study model described above: an intentional development of a multicultural congregation. Paul uses three images in 1 Corinthians 12 to describe this new humanity:

1. A Kingdom in which we are all fellow citizens, fellow journeyers.
2. A human family in which we are all members of the household of God, the family of God.
3. Individuals reflecting a temple in which we are interdependent, interconnected, and tantamount to the building of a spiritual dwelling place for God.

Paul then states that it is among these centers that God makes God's dwelling-place, God's home on earth. He speaks of the Body of Christ, in which each person, and in our context each culture, has special significance, for we are part of the congregation and the communal family. We are uniquely different, not similar, rather dissimilar, yet we are able to function—Jews and Gentiles, slaves or free—and as Hispanics/Latinos, African-Americans, Caucasians, Asians, Native Americans, Africans, Caribbeans, Haitians, Pacific Islanders. And we are made to drink of the same Spirit, as in this multicultural congregational context we serve the One God and our Lord Jesus Christ.

In Micah 6:8: "God has shown us what is good, and God requires us to show love, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God," we hear these words regardless of our culture and ethnicity. It is with such a biblical and theological framework of God-centeredness and Christ-centeredness that I propose leadership that is Pastoral. To be Pastoral, the leadership has to have a certain spiritual and cultural competence which involves listening to others, being sensitive to the differences of customs, mores, behaviors, attitudes and traditions, and appreciating differences and nuances in the various cultures. This involves acquiring knowledge and understanding of other cultures, especially their beliefs and values and attended meanings. Then it requires applying that knowledge and understanding in a variety of practices which, as I will identify in broad strokes, this Pastoral role takes on a multiplicity of ministries, namely:

- Ministry of hospitality—as leadership reaches out to other and enables congregants to reach out to the stranger, the other in their midst.
- A Ministry of Empowerment—to enable others to realize their own inner power and the resources around them.
- A Ministry of Empathy—only when one is barefoot can one feel the stones underfoot, as well as listening to others without, or suspending our agendas in the process.
- A Ministry of Encouragement—recognizing that we are all in recovery, and need to support one another along life's journey.
- A Ministry of Reconciliation—fixing something that is broken, a relationship, a conflicting situation, a wounded experience that needs healing, remembering that it is possible to be repaired.
- A Ministry of Hope—hope is an excellent stepping stone to faith and growth, a future outlook.
- A Ministry of Shalom—serving to make the world whole again, joining in the Kingdom building that has already begun, as Jeremiah put it, "Seek the welfare of the city, knowing that in its welfare lies our welfare" and well-being as the people of God from all different cultures and walks of life.

Leadership that is Pastoral often requires the leader to take the initiative, as well as to be an enabler, and to be present sometimes visibly, and at other times behind the scenes in needed preparation and prayer.

In conclusion, I believe as the Church moves forward to develop and undergird and support multicultural congregations, and to assign the necessary leadership, a leadership that requires a future-oriented outlook, we must be willing to take risks and be open to new vistas. We are all created by God, and so our obligation is to live up to being worthy of our creation. There is hope for us.

The journey has already begun in the multicultural congregational context, where all are gathered in the same place like a beautiful bouquet of flowers awaiting the coming of Jesus the Christ. "Come, Lord Jesus, come." So might it be.