

**BUILDING
UNITY
IN THE CHURCH
OF THE
NEW
MILLENNIUM**

DWIGHT PERRY
General Editor

Forewords by **JOHN PERKINS**
and **MICHAEL EMERSON**

CHAPTER SIX

THE ALTERNATIVE TO ETHNIC-FOCUSED CHURCH PLANTING:

*How Can We
Build Diversity
As We
Build Churches?*

RALEIGH B. WASHINGTON

And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." (Revelation 5:9 NASB)

Diversity is an undeniable desire in the very heart of almighty God. John tells us in chapter 5 of Revelation that Jesus was slain to purchase for God with His very blood people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. The Cross did not simply represent the redemption of believers in a general or generic sense. Rather, God's Word makes it unmistakable that the Cross was designed to redeem a kingdom of people for God that would be incomplete if this kingdom did not include an appropriate, representative group of people consistent with His creation. This group of people would be a thoroughly diverse representation of mankind.

The axiom for church growth and development of homogeneity

that has been used for many years, while it predicts success, is not consistent with Scripture, and I believe it has grave consequences for the global body of Christ. We must be careful with human knowledge and understanding of church development that produces the desired effect, but sidesteps the issue of consistency with Scripture. Clearly, as Peter Wagner suggests, homogeneity does produce rapid growth and stability within church structures. At the same time, though, we must ask the question: Is this at the heart of God for the physical manifestation of His body and bride?

Homogeneity: Problems and Pitfalls

Many theoreticians of church growth over the last decade have made the observation that churches grow in proportion to the sameness of their members. The simple adage “birds of a feather flock together” applies. As a matter of fact, the conclusion is that churches grow when people feel the most comfortable with the people in the church. Quite naturally, then, the more the church reflects them—values, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, etc.—the more likely they are to attend.

In spite of this, homogeneity has its own set of problems and pitfalls. One of the most compelling of these problems is the simple fact that we do not exist in a homogeneous world. An incredible diversity is part of our everyday experience. From the lowest forms of life to God’s crowning glory of man himself, we see diversity. Therefore, when homogeneity is sought, it is done so on the basis of something other than growth alone. Perhaps this principle of homogeneity is profound more because it simply allows (or should I say gives permission to) people to be comfortable.

I don’t think anyone would argue that we all like comfort and ease. As a matter of fact, many of the choices we make during our lives, from the people with whom we associate (including our spouses) to the career toward which we gravitate, are powerfully influenced by comfort. This is not to say that comfort is wrong. It is important, though, that we not deny its power in shaping our decisions even when it comes to the church we choose. The power (and the problem) of homogeneity lies in the fact that it creates an artificially “safe” environment in the church. We unwittingly provide a sanctuary for the people in the pews in which they never confront the reality they

see as they leave the front door of the church. Even more so, we could well be co-conspirators to a subtle form of racism. To be sure, it is not purposeful, intentional racism, but a passive acquiescence for the “great divide” to exist between the races on Sunday.

A second problem that must be considered when denominations or parachurch organizations apply this principle in their efforts to plant ministries and churches is the contribution it makes to the already firmly entrenched racial separation that exists in the church on any given Sunday morning. I realize that there is often no conscious effort to create local church bodies that are uniform and homogeneous. Yet it appears that in our effort to reach people for Christ, we have missed the very heart of God for diversity. The effort needed to reach into various ethnic communities, whether they be Hispanic, African American, Caucasian, or Asian, seems to outweigh the importance of those intentional decisions that have to be made in order to plant churches that reflect the glory of diversity. Of course, that is not to say that these efforts are in vain because they create communities of believers that are the same ethnically. On the other hand, though, are we to sacrifice our efforts to address this “great divide” that exists in the church simply because it is *easier* to avoid it?

No matter what our effort to win the world for Christ, the heart of God must guide us as we reach out in His name rather than with pragmatic concerns. The efforts that are driven by homogeneity are indeed productive and successful. Perhaps that is part of the problem. They are so successful that we begin to believe that we have the ability in ourselves to grow a church. The wonder and beauty of pursuing diversity in our communities is that there is a miracle in it that reflects the heart of the Almighty. There is no human way that such communities could grow or even exist without God’s hand on them because they reflect His desire articulated in Revelation 5—people from every tongue, nation, tribe, and people.

A last problem I would like to highlight is related to our definitions of “success.” We must all grapple with how we define success as we pursue church-planting efforts. On the surface, the definition of success rests in the increase of churches and the number of souls won to Christ. That measure can, indeed, be used with powerful validity. After all, why are we planting churches? Yet the key issue is *how* are we planting churches, not simply *that* we are planting churches. It is far easier to plant a church with the intentionality of reflecting

the diversity of God's people than it is to change it midstream. To call upon the horticultural metaphor, it is far easier to plant with the intention of growing a particular kind of plant than it is to attempt to prune that same plant into shape after it has been left to grow its own way.

People, like plants, tend to follow their nature even in churches. It is because of this tendency that the homogeneity principle of church growth is so powerful. Therefore, when the plant begins to grow and blossom into its full nature, it is difficult to attempt to coax it into some other kind of plant or even to make it look like one. God seems to be far more effective in grafting into an original plant and making it blossom than humans are. In various settings, including churches, the effort it takes is beyond humans and their ability to transform into something more diverse than they were originally. One of the reasons that churches are not more diverse in this country is that diversity is a supernatural work. It cannot be done on a human level but takes divine intervention. But we have a God who is supernatural, and our churches can be too.

It is truly the calling of the church to "go and make disciples of all nations." It is also true that the vision of Revelation 5 is the calling of the church. That vision is to be a true representation of the fullness of the body of Christ with "all nations" being represented—every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. Perhaps our measure of success should rest not only on the people being won to Christ but the diversity of the group they are being won into.

An Alternative to Ethnic-Focused Church Planting

One might object to the assertion that churches should reflect the diversity of the body of Christ reflected in Revelation 5. It seems unfair to expect a church to have diversity when it isn't even in an environment that has diversity. For example, the question can be posed: Can churches that are in ethnically homogeneous communities be expected to have a diverse body of believers? The answer to this question is both yes and no.

The "no" part of our answer reflects the fact that we should be circumspect about condemning a church when its immediate surroundings do not offer a viable opportunity to reach out to people of different ethnicities. Such a church could have a true heart of di-

versity, but have no chance to express such a desire. An example of this would be a church that is in a county in which there is no (or very little) ethnic diversity.

On the other hand, it will fall far short of meeting the desire of God's heart if there are no intentional efforts made by a church body to include diverse people in the context of worshiping God and serving man. Every church can include initiatives that would provide this diversity. Such initiatives would include mission efforts within the urban centers and Native American reservations, short-term mission initiatives to nations around the world, international exchange programs, and local church-sponsored mission teams. The opportunity to become diverse is virtually unlimited where there is intentionality on the part of the pastor and his pastoral team, whether they are paid or volunteer. Other specific suggestions will be provided later in this chapter, including a living, breathing example that continues today in Minnesota.

Commitment

Diverse and truly reconciled church bodies are built upon the foundation of committed relationships. Time alone doesn't heal. It never has, and it never will. Racial alienation in this country goes back for centuries and affects everyone. Effort is needed to bridge the pain of past experiences. We who are Christians need a *deep commitment* to cross the chasm and build significant relationships across racial lines.

Committed personal relationships are the foundation of racial understanding and acceptance. They are the essential catalyst for setting the miracle of unity into motion. To begin the process of reconciliation, each of us must get involved personally in a friendship. Many folks would welcome friendships with people of other races if those relationships happened easily and were automatically filled with joy, peace, and success. But the fact is that cross-cultural relationships require effort; they often break down over misunderstandings, disappointments, and defensive attacks. Misunderstandings are hard enough to settle with people who are like us. But in this country, every disappointment between blacks and whites reminds people of darker hue of centuries of bad history. It's normal to want to avoid pain, so most people, both black and white, walk away from interracial relationships, saying, "I don't need this hassle."

True diversity in our churches won't happen among Christians unless we commit ourselves to developing relationships across racial lines. Of course, this flies in the face of the homogeneity principle of church growth. We can't stop with a commitment to diversity; it must be put into action. Genuine reconciliation happens only between people who make a commitment to relationships and who consider the relationships so important that they won't let them go, even when the going gets tough. Where can we find this kind of courage to make such a commitment?

Jesus once described the quality of lasting commitment using the image of a farmer plowing a field. Jesus had called people to follow Him. Sometimes they responded in the first flush of enthusiasm with "I'll follow You wherever You go, Master!" But when He challenged them to put their enthusiasm into action, He heard a lot of excuses: "After my elderly parents die, then I'll follow You"; "I've got a lot of family responsibilities. Let me wrap up the family business; then I'll follow You."

To this second excuse Jesus responded simply, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). Jesus was saying, "If you want to follow Me, you can't stand on the sidelines. It's going to take effort and hard work to plow up this field. Be sure you count the cost, because once you grab the plow, you have to keep going. Anyone who looks back when the going gets tough isn't worthy of the kingdom of God." Jesus was very clear that the way of the Cross isn't easy; it takes commitment.

This is the kind of commitment needed for all serious relationships: husband/wife, business partners, deacons in the church, and cross-cultural church plants. It's like plowing virgin sod—four feet deep and never opened up; conflicts are inevitable. But when you keep your hand on the plow, the end result is a deeply enriched relationship. This is the first step you must take to accomplish true diversity in a church body: Be committed to any relationship you begin to develop.

Intentionality

Intentionality is the purposeful, positive, and planned activity that facilitates reconciliation and true diversity in the church body. Diversity and racial reconciliation don't happen spontaneously. Blacks

and whites can work side by side, live side by side, even go to church together, and still not be in a meaningful relationship with each other. The reality as we begin the twenty-first century is that most blacks and whites are still separated and alienated from each other, and eleven o'clock Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour of the week.

We may agree that God has given Christians the ministry of reconciliation. We may recognize that developing relationships across racial lines is the key to true reconciliation. But all too often our beliefs and good intentions lie dormant and unheeded. That is where intentionality comes in. Intentionality gives priority to purposeful, positive, and planned activity that facilitates reconciliation and a true appreciation for the wonderful diversity God has ordained.

Intentionality is the locomotive that drives racial reconciliation and our desire to plant churches that are truly multi- and cross-cultural. We must want to know the other race, to contribute to the other person's spiritual, social, and emotional growth, and to allow him to contribute to ours. Our attitude must be *I will be intentional in pursuing a relationship with this person*. That is as true in our efforts in planting churches. We must be equally intentional to reach across racial differences and facilitate local church bodies that pursue reconciliation on the most basic level of their operations and functioning.

Paul wrote, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). What attitude? That of humility. Christ, who was "in very nature God" and equal with God, nonetheless humbled Himself, took on the nature of a servant, and was obedient even to the point of death. Not just any death, but death on the cross! *That* took intentionality. He intended to be involved with sinful, inconvenient people. So He entered their lives by coming to earth.

In many ways, that model lays the framework for our modern-day efforts to plant churches in a variety of communities that are diversity-focused. We must pursue the same kind of intentionality that Christ did by entering into others' world and inviting them into ours.

Sensitivity

Separation from people who are different develops and even encourages distrust. Human beings have a tendency not to trust across ethnic, social, national, and denominational lines. We don't trust

people or situations we don't know or understand. We've heard from others everything we know about these different people. The lack of authentic, meaningful relationships means we talk mainly with others like us, who reinforce our negative preconceptions and limited understanding.

We tend to interpret the actions of others based on our own life experiences. Without knowledge of the other person's life, we may jump to incorrect or unfair conclusions. Prejudice can develop and be encouraged by this lack of truth. If we base our opinions of others only on the statements of those who are like us, we're liable to get a biased viewpoint.

From a church-planting perspective, therefore, we inadvertently perpetuate the ongoing misunderstandings between people within God's church when we choose to pursue an ethnic-focused church planting process. Only through purposeful, planned, and positive activities that are intended to heighten sensitivity (which must be done cross-culturally and cross-ethnically) will we truly avoid this. Accordingly, the outcome will be a church that deepens in its understanding of people different from the prevailing, dominant ethnic group and that deepens in its understanding of God's heart for diversity in His church.

Sincerity

Casual relationships with Christians across racial lines are a good beginning. But members of the body of Christ must move beyond casual relationships to loving, caring, trusting friendships that last.

The principle of sincerity says we must talk to each other and honestly disclose our thoughts. This takes us back to previous principles, because such efforts will not happen without intentionality or outside committed relationships. Talking about those things that divide us, especially racial issues, can be very threatening. We fear even using the "r" words (*racism* or *racist*). We may believe that discussing them would be asking for trouble or conflict. Such fear entraps us in our isolation. Paul told us, "God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7). In practice, the revealing of ourselves brings understanding, which leads to resolution of differences.

Developing this kind of environment in a church takes time and

a lot of energy. Expressing ourselves in sincerity requires us to be humble and risk vulnerability. It also requires an act of faith and trust in God and the principles He has given us for relating to each other (e.g., honesty, truthfulness, sincerity). You may ask yourself, “If I say this, will God take care of me?” Inevitably someone will say, “I revealed myself like that once, and they really hurt me. I won’t do that again.” Such a response to rejection is understandable, but it closes the door on reconciliation in the name of self-protection. When we conform to the likeness of Christ, we can expect to suffer for His sake at times. If you experience rejection or hurt because you took the risk of vulnerability, God can take those experiences and use them to help you grow into maturity:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2–4)

As we enter into a relationship of sincerity, God deepens our dependence on Him and equips us to be ambassadors of reconciliation.

Sacrifice

The final principle I would like to highlight is that of sacrifice. This principle is particularly powerful in terms of church planting. Sacrifice here is defined as the willingness to give up anything to see God’s will in reconciliation and diversity happen.

To one degree or another, all previous principles for an alternative to ethnic-focused church planting might make some practical sense to the world. Sacrifice does not. Human pride and selfishness refuse to give up position, status, security, or personal rights for the sake of someone else. Applying the principle of sacrifice will require that you allow Christ and His Spirit to work in and through you. For the one who has Christ inside, sacrifice is possible—even if it requires your life someday.

As applied to church planting this is especially relevant. The very act of planting a diverse church in an area that is culturally and ethnically diverse, one that is designed to build itself on the principles outlined above, is the embodiment of sacrifice. Without sacrifice,

meaningful change in our patterns of relating is doomed. The tighter we hold on to our own desires, the more we separate ourselves from others. That is the real danger in homogeneity of churches. We are setting up a process that supports, and even gives permission for, this continuance of separateness. Therefore, the true sacrifice that is necessary to see true diversity in the body of Christ is never really achieved. Sacrifice is really giving in to God—yielding everything we have to His use. It will require that we trust God to care for us as we pioneer ways to truly facilitate reconciliation through our efforts in planting churches.

The Journey Toward Diversity: Two Church Models

One church plant of which I have intimate knowledge is that of Rock of Our Salvation Evangelical Free Church on the West Side of Chicago, Illinois. Rock Church was raised up with the intentional strategy of planting a church that would be a culturally diverse church. By the end of its fifteenth year of ministry, the composition of the congregation has moved from being 30 percent diverse to being 35 percent diverse. Over those fifteen years we had an increase of 5 percent in our congregation in which people other than African American came to be involved in the life of our congregation. Because of our intentionality, the diversity not only held during this fifteen-year period, but increased.

At that time, the neighborhood in which Rock Church was planted was 95 percent African American, yet the church was more than 30 percent Caucasian. This means that Anglo people caught the vision of racial reconciliation and diversity and moved into the neighborhood to be part of the bigger vision of Rock Church.

In addition to those who actually moved into our neighborhood, Rock Church has had very close relationships with a number of churches, most of which are Evangelical Free churches. However, its closest and most intimate relationship was, and continues to be, with Wayzata Evangelical Free Church in Wayzata, Minnesota.

Our relationship with the Wayzata church came into being as a result of one man's passionate desire to embrace the vision for reconciliation. I had been invited to speak at a regional conference for the Evangelical Free Church, and Maury Kapsner was in attendance. Maury was a leader in missions at his church in Wayzata. After lis-

tening to my message, Maury caught the vision for the partnering of churches that were culturally and ethnical diverse. He took this same passion and vision back to his church and challenged them to get involved. As a result, Maury and his wife, Linda, invited me to speak to their church about this same message of reconciliation. There was an outpouring of support and, beyond that, a willingness to put action to their enthusiasm.

This church is a wonderful example of a church that thinks beyond its boundaries, both physical and spiritual. In its journey toward diversity, this predominantly white church could have stopped at its borders and concluded that it really couldn't do anything since the community in which it was planted was no more diverse than the church itself. With the help of some passionate people like Maury and Linda Kapsner who had a heart for diversity and reconciliation, this church reached beyond its physical boundaries and enfolded Rock Church with love and tangible support.

As a matter of fact, within the last week of the time in which I am writing this chapter, Linda Kapsner, Judy Craig, and Gretchen Buckmiller are giving leadership to the Wayzata ladies as they host a retreat in Minnesota for the women of Rock Church. The theme of this retreat is a reconciliation theme—"TRUST: True Religion is Urban and Suburban Together." My wife, Paulette, and my sister-in-law, Lisa Washington (wife of Abraham Lincoln Washington, pastor of Rock Church) are the keynote speakers for this retreat.

How does such a thing happen? It happens in response to a heart that is convinced and convicted that we must have intentional and positive activities in order to facilitate diversity in our churches. Linda Kapsner and the Wayzata ladies raised the money and paid for the airfare of the women of Rock Church to attend the weekend retreat so that they could pray, study, and live out the truth of committed relationships. Incidentally, this weekend is not the first time this has happened. It has been an annual event for the past seven or eight years.

The bottom line is that, while Wayzata may not have a significant percentage of diverse families in its church, you'd better believe the church is diverse in its thinking and ministry directly related to what is happening among these ladies.

The pastor of Wayzata, Dr. George Kenworthy, has also caught the vision. In addition to his relationship with me, and now with my brother, Abraham, he has established a committed relationship with

an African-American pastor in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. What is key to notice is the God-inspired “snowball effect” that has been created by these ladies who have a heart for intentional, committed relationships across racial lines.

Wayzata is a study in overcoming the obstacles and barriers that exist in raising up a church with a heart and a vision for reconciliation in spite of its surroundings.

Conclusion

Ethnic-focused church planting, in spite of its allure and apparent success, deviates from the miracle that happens when people pursue the heart of God through diversity. Revelation 5 makes it clear that God’s heart is for the fullness of His body to display the richness of diversity He has created in it.

We can do no less in our efforts to plant churches with a vision for a diverse local body of believers than to reflect what is in God’s heart for His saints. That means we are bargaining for the difficulty and tension that come with working out committed relationships, sacrificing for each other, cultivating sincerity and sensitivity, and moving intentionally into each other’s worlds. Yet that is where the miracle lies in His church blossoming and welcoming even more lost souls into its ranks. It is worth the effort to see such a miracle. No doubt being ethnically focused is easier, but it may well rob us of the opportunity of seeing God’s hand knit the hearts of diverse people together through the blood of His Son.

DISCUSSION STARTER QUESTIONS

1. What has your own church done toward encouraging diversity within its own walls or in outreaches such as missions, church plants, and relationships with other churches?
2. What more is your church able to do with its current resources, location, etc.? What could it plan to do within the next few years?
3. How important is it to you that your church be diverse in various ways (ethnic, class, age, etc.)? What would you personally be willing to sacrifice to see it happen?