

## The Building Blocks of Multi-Ethnic Church

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### Introduction:

This paper is born out of a discussion that was had with some leaders in San Francisco in the late summer of 2010, where I was prompted to document my thoughts on what is essential in constructing a multi-ethnic church, for the express purpose of helping to provide a transferrable model for present and future leaders to use. The title of this paper uses the term “Multi-Ethnic” and not “Multi-Cultural” for a very specific reason. While these terms have been used interchangeably by some, it’s important to note from the outset that I see a distinct difference in them. I will use multi-ethnic to refer to people of different races and ethnicities. At the same time I do acknowledge that while there can be different ethnicities, there can be a uniformity of culture (i.e., same class, preferred ways of learning, educational experiences, etc.). The emphasis of this paper will be towards building a church where there are different races and ethnicities.

### The Case for Multi-Ethnic Churches:

The information age has spawned a seismic thrust towards globalization, where to steal from a well known author, the world has become flat. Dr. King put it best in his era when he remarked that a person can wake up in the morning and shower with soap made from the Pacific, drink coffee from Colombia and wear clothes that were made in China. Now we can talk to, text or skype people from all of these places and beyond. My children even are being affected by globalization. In their schools they learn Mandarin, and engage in math contests with kids from Ireland and across the world via the internet.

While globalization does present such challenges to us as outsourcing, it does offer an incredible upside to the church of Jesus Christ. One of the things that globalization has spawned is both an awareness and an appreciation for people of different cultures. Because of this the face of the world is no longer an Anglo one, but a multi-ethnic one. In politics the leader of the free world, Barak Obama, is multi-ethnic. In sports, what many would consider to be the greatest golfer to have ever played- Tiger Woods- is multi-ethnic. And in entertainment people like Mariah Carey, Dwayne, “The Rock” Johnson and Halle Berry are all multi-ethnic leaders in their industry.

In their seminal book, *United by Faith*, the authors point out that there were 35 million more people of color in the year 2000, than in 1980 (*United by Faith*, 2). In other words, the face of our country (and the world) is changing. The new multi-ethnic face of the world is going to create a new norm. Couple this with an increase in our country in the minority and multi-ethnic population where it is estimated that by 2020 the minority will now be the majority, we are standing on the threshold of a major new reality in our country- where people who check literally “other” on their standardized tests, or mark another race besides Anglo, will be in the majority.

These shifts in our culture are beginning to be felt in our churches. Naturally, with communities changing from Anglo to minority, churches are either falling victim to white flight, or they are dying out. Add to this a growing hunger for diversity among young adults, and we can see that it’s not beyond a stretch to begin preparing the funeral for the homogenous church. As a pastor of a multi-ethnic church I can tell from firsthand experience in talking to both blacks and whites that they are hungry for diversity. The multi-ethnic church is God’s answer.

The Biblical Case for the Multi-Ethnic Church:

I won’t labor long here, because it’s beyond clear that this was God’s plan for the church from the beginning. Even in the Old Testament we see God’s heart for the

whole world. In Genesis 12:1-3, a passage known as the Abrahamic Covenant, God comes to Abraham (then known as Abram), and says that he is going to use Abram to be the father of a great many people (the Jews). Yet God's heart was not going to just be for the Jews, but for the whole world. God says to Abraham that through the Jews the *whole world* would be blessed. So here we see God's heart not just for one group of people, but for the multi-ethnic community of humanity.

What follows now in the Old Testament is example upon example of the Abrahamic Covenant being fulfilled. A Jew named Joseph would bless the Egyptian peoples, helping them through famine. A Jew named Daniel would bless the Gentile nations of Babylon and Persia. A Jew named Jonah would be used as an instrument of blessing on the Gentile nation of Assyria (likewise we see Gentiles blessing the Jews). All of this and more expresses God's heart for the world.

Acts 2 is another key passage on the multi-ethnic church in the Bible. It's the Day of Pentecost, and people of different ethnicities, who are Jews religiously have come to Jerusalem to worship. Three thousand people repent of their sins, embrace Jesus Christ and the church is spawned. So that from day one, the church was multi-ethnic.

As the church spreads, the man at the forefront is Paul. While he acknowledges that he's been specifically called to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, they're not his soul audience (Romans 1:16). In fact, whenever Paul comes to town to plant a church he will always go to where the Jews hang out first (the synagogue), and then to where the Gentiles are (Hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus, Mars Hill in Athens, the *agora*, or marketplace, in others). Some Jews and Gentiles get saved, and Paul doesn't start two churches, one for each group. Instead he starts one church, and puts these two distinct people groups together in them. So that almost all of Paul's churches were multi-ethnic one's. The point is clear- the norm from day one in the church was a multi-ethnic community of believers.

Derailed:

It doesn't take a historian to figure out that there is a tremendous chasm between the first century church and the church of today. Nowhere has this divide been felt more drastically than in America. The great sin of our country has been the sin of racism, and this has profoundly affected the bride of Christ, the church. Study any historic African American denomination and what you will discover is that almost without exception they began as a reaction to the racism and rejection by the white church. Add to this the reality that for the most part, African American's view church as an ethnic/cultural release where they can exhale and be completely themselves (as opposed to the other days of the week where they are having to constantly accommodate culturally), this has led to a great reluctance among blacks to give up their traditional church experience in exchange for multi-ethnic one's (understandably so). Now in no way does this excuse the African American's reluctance to sacrifice their comfort for the multi-ethnic church, but it still gives us a bit of a framework for today's dilemma.

What exacerbated the problem was the institution of segregation where, among other things, neighborhoods were divided along racial lines. Given the community nature of the church, it is little wonder why the homogenous church thrived for she was merely a reflection of the segregated times. But now, with people pushing especially back into the city, and both urban and suburban neighborhoods are trending in more of a diverse trajectory (though we've hardly arrived), the situation is ripe for the rebirth of the multi-ethnic church. How will this happen?

### **Steps to Constructing a Multi-Ethnic Church:**

#### *A Sincere Calling and Passion for Multi-Ethnic Ministry*

Just as Paul was called to the Gentiles, so I believe that one is called to multi-ethnic ministry. We'll come back to this in a few moments and look at specific skill sets that

make up a person who is in this area of ministry, but for now, I think one of the primary ways we determine a call is through something called passion. My father has an odd expression that gets at the point being made here. He can often be heard asking, “What makes you pound the table and weep?” What is in you that would die if you couldn’t do this? We’re not getting at idols here, what we’re trying to identify is calling, how God has wired an individual.

In the early 2000’s, there was an unrest that was growing in my soul. As my itinerate ministry was growing I found that I was either speaking to all white audiences or all black one’s. Soon, the question would begin to surface within me, “When are we going to come together?” Little did I know it, but God was beginning to birth within me a dream to see specifically whites and blacks come together for the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is passion. This is what makes me pound the table and weep.

Multi-ethnic ministry cannot be a church growth technique. The recent history of the American church, is to jump on the latest fads and trends, ride those waves, in the hope of growing a church bigger numerically. If multi-ethnic ministry is a church growth technique to you then you must stop right now and repent. There must be a humble authenticity about you if you’re going to pursue this, or you’ll end up doing incredible damage.

I think one more thing should be said here, and that is if the Bible presents to us the idea that God’s church is to be a place of all people (Galatians 3), and a part of this means people of different ethnicities, then what we are really saying is that everyone called to lead God’s church has at the same time been called to multi-ethnic ministry on some level. So if your heart isn’t there yet, you should confess this to God, and ask him to birth within you a passion for multi-ethnic ministry.

The passion to experience a multi-ethnic church must never be limited to, or begin, with the organism of the church. It must be evidenced and worked out in the personal life of the leader. Just as I should never preach generosity to the people of God if I am not personally generous, so I should not preach the God-glorifying value of diversity, if

I am not experiencing diversity in my life as well. To have this disconnect between the organism and the person is to be inauthentic. This calling must work itself out on every level in the life of the leader.

### *Location*

I do not believe that every church needs to be multi-ethnic. I do, however, believe that every church must reflect its community. Given today's demographics a church in Bel Air, California has as much hope for being multi-ethnic, as a church in Orange Mound, Memphis (the oldest black community west of Harlem). The church has the greater call to impact its specific community for the glory of God. If the community is not diverse we should not expect the church to be diverse.

Because of this location is a huge factor in constructing a multi-ethnic church. Some specific communities are multi-ethnic, making it incredibly easy to address the location issue- just plant the church in that community. Other places, the norm is to have homogenous neighborhoods. In this case you want to find a location that can serve as the fringe, ideally, to both. In Memphis, one of the best decisions we ever made was to stay close to an impoverished African American community (Binghampton), and to a suburban community with white pockets called East Memphis. While we've had to move recently, we've still maintained close proximity to East Memphis, and African American communities.

In the mind of the minority location is a huge issue. For most minorities, their whole lives (especially if they are professionally successful) has been spent accommodating to white culture. It's a way of survival. What we as the church want to try to avoid as much as possible is having the minority feel like on Sunday's they have to accommodate once again by going onto another person's turf. Is there a middle ground we can meet on-literally- where both sides feel like they're having to stretch a little bit? This is the ideal.

## *Leadership*

Absolutely critical to establishing a multi-ethnic church is multi-ethnic leadership that specifically represents the demographic being pursued by the particular congregation. While this is a given, it does need to be stated, that merely having a multi-ethnic leadership team is not enough, there must also come with it the appropriate power to lead the church at the highest levels. In other words, if it is an elder lead church, the elders need to be multi-ethnic. The executive staff needs to be multi-ethnic and so on. It amazes me how many people think that merely having minority representation on staff is enough to make a church multi-ethnic. To have a minority on the team, but to not be empowered to help lead at the highest levels is not only to render the person impotent, but it is patronizing all at once. If the majority constituency is not willing to share power with the minority, then multi-ethnic ministry will not happen.

It's at this point that we must move beyond ethnicity/race to culture. One of the problems majority culture makes in selecting minority leadership is that they do so without considering culture. Every race has within it subcultures. If these subcultures do not match the demographic one is trying to win, the ministry will be ineffective. In other words, if you are trying to reach people in the projects, and you hire an African American who is the cultural equivalent of a Colin Powell, or Barak Obama you won't be that effective. Race is not just a factor, but it is the ability to find a person who can culturally reach the desired demographic within that race.

Obviously, I've just presented you with a problem, so here's a recommended solution: Assemble a team made up of individuals (inside or outside your church) who are representative of that particular culture you're pursuing. Let them guide you in the hiring process.

However, on the other side it's not enough to merely find a person who matches the demographic you're pursuing, but who can also navigate and minister to majority culture in the church. In other words, we're looking for people whom Dave Gibbons

defines as third culture individuals. Or to use a basketball analogy, we are going after individuals who have cross-over skills. If it seems like we're asking for a lot we are. But consider this- if you merely hire someone who can relate to the minority culture, but cannot navigate majority culture, you are setting yourself up for not only a frustrating experience, but also for a very short tenure with the individual. You need both.

There are two questions (among a host of others) that can help guide you in looking for this third culture person: 1) Where did you grow up, along with the conditions of their upbringing; and 2) Where did you do your formal education? What's ideal is to find an individual who grew up in similar conditions as the demographic you're trying to reach, and who has formal education in majority institutions. What this shows is that they're not only able to navigate "the hood" (as an example), but can also successfully engage our white brothers and sisters, having navigated the educational landscape either at the undergraduate or graduate level.

An example of this is a gentleman in our church by the name of Chris Davis. Chris grew up in an all African-American, impoverished community (okay, the hood), yet he's finishing up his Masters of Divinity from a majority white, Southern Baptist institution. The residual effects of this is that Chris has learned, as a matter of survival, to become bilingual. He can naturally relate to poorer demographics, while at the same time having cultivated the skill of relating well to our white brothers and sisters. It is the Chris Davis' of the world who are absolutely essential in establishing multi-ethnic church leadership teams.

### *Shared Teaching*

If one of the essentials of a multi-ethnic church is empowering people at the highest levels to lead who represent both the majority and minority constituencies, then a symptom of this is shared leadership in the pulpit that is representative of all desired demographics. This is key, because the pulpit (from a programmatic perspective) is

the most powerful place in the church. The majority must, as a means of multi-ethnic survival, share air time with minorities.

Noted sociologist and what some may consider to be the father of the modern day multi-ethnic church, Howard Thurman is a great example of this. In 1944, Howard Thurman, an African-American, ventured out west to San Francisco to be a part of a new multi-ethnic church along black and white lines. He came at the invitation of Alfred Fisk, a white Presbyterian minister who had the passion to see the races come together. But Fisk also knew that if this was going to happen he needed to partner with an African American, and a part of that partnership was team teaching (Taken from *United by Faith*, chapter 4). The fruit of this was a church that was 60% white and 35% African American.

To be clear there are cases where multi-ethnic churches have flourished without team teaching. In most of these cases they are conservative churches lead by someone of minority culture (i.e., Alex Gee, Fountain of Life), or they are charismatic churches (theologically) lead by a white leader (i.e., Brooklyn Tabernacle's Jim Cymbala). So this is not to say that a multi-ethnic church cannot flourish in the absence of team teaching. However, it is our contention that where the predominant ethnicities in a given church/area are visibly represented from the pulpit on Sunday morning's that this provides the healthiest model. The reason for this is that it is impossible to separate the message from the person. As people we naturally bring our cultural perspectives (right, wrong or indifferent) to the text. So there are things that I'm naturally wired to see and communicate as a black man, that our white brothers may not see and communicate, and vice-versa.

One of the most powerful messages ever presented to our church came from one of our white teaching pastors, Ben Parkinson, during black history month. He was able to challenge, confront and inspire our white members in ways that I would not have been able to, primarily because of his ethnicity. Likewise, there are things that I can say to our black brothers and sisters, that our white teachers just can't say. Multi-

ethnic team teaching, for these and other reasons, is the best way going forward in producing a healthy and flourishing diverse church.

I'm frequently asked by our white brothers, "Where do we find African American preachers who we line up with theologically, and can communicate effectively to a diverse context?" This is no easy question, it's one that I've struggled with, simply because the demand is so high, and yet the supply seems to be low.

Preaching in a multi-ethnic context is exceedingly difficult, because of the vastness of the audience. Again, using black and white as my model, please allow me to stereotype in order to bring about some sort of a solution to the question posed. Historically, the African American church has been marked by emotions. Please don't hear me as saying that's wrong, or to demean anyone. God has created us with emotions, in fact God himself expresses emotions throughout the Scripture. It's a real tragedy that somewhere along the line we've equated maturity with the ability to suppress emotions. Nothing can be further from the truth. Nonetheless, emotional experience has marked the traditional African American church. This is understandable when one sees that historically blacks have been oppressed, and because of this Sunday morning was one of the only times they could gather during the week and celebrate corporately God's protection and guidance of them.

Broadly speaking, our white conservative brothers and sisters have been marked by a much more cerebral approach when it comes to church. In other words, the way to reach them is through the mind, not the emotions. Obviously, one can easily see that bringing blacks and conservative whites together demands speaking both to the emotions and the mind, but this is nothing new.

The Greeks said that great teachers possessed three attributes- logos, ethos and pathos. Logos is the idea of great content. The Greeks said that you always left a great teacher saying, "I learned something." Ethos is the idea of ethics or integrity. In other words, great teachers lived the message they taught. Finally, the Greeks said that all great teachers had pathos, or passion. So that under this Greek construction,

your most effective teachers are those who can speak both to the mind and to the emotions. This is what multi-ethnic preachers must do.

Practically speaking, a conservatively educated minority who has roots in the traditional African American church poses your best bet for being an effective multi-ethnic preacher. He's naturally wired to speak to the emotions, but has been equipped through school to speak to the mind. Mine the conservative seminaries for these men.

### *Preach the Whole Gospel*

Obviously these steps are not in order, if they were this point would have been at the top. The church of Jesus Christ was never created to solely, or even primarily, revel in diversity. Diversity is merely a symptom of a life that has been radically transformed by Jesus Christ. He is the one I revel in! He is the source of my awe and great joy!

Paul helps us to understand in I Corinthians 15 that the gospel is of first importance. He would go onto define the gospel as the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When I come to the foot of the cross, I am connected vertically to God through the death of His Son Jesus who died in my place and for my sins. Yet as powerful and essential as this is, this is but part of the gospel. The gospel is not just about my relationship with God, but it is also about my relationship with others. If I claim to have Christ in my life this totally revolutionizes how I relate to and see other people in the community of humanity.

For example, Jesus said that the greatest command is both love for God (vertical), and love for neighbor (horizontal). In Acts 2, a passage referred to earlier in this paper, we not only see three thousand people surrendering their lives to Christ, but then we see them selling their possessions and giving to those as there were need, along with them loving one another in the context of ethnic diversity. Paul, the great preacher of the gospel, had two great passions- connecting people to Christ, and

connecting people to one another in diverse communities (churches) made up of Jew and Gentile. John asked in his letter, how can one claim to love God whom he can't see (vertical), but not love his brother whom he does see (horizontal)? All this and more proves that the gospel is first my relationship with God through His Son Jesus, and my relationship with others.

Having this as our framework, we can now understand that the gospel rightly understood in all of its wonderful dimensions demands that I love the world, and pursue racial diversity. It is when we separate the vertical dimensions of the gospel from its horizontal dimensions that such sins as racism can flourish. Racism is killed, and a greenhouse for diversity is constructed by the bold, clear proclamation of the whole gospel.

### *Talk About Diversity*

Building a healthy multi-ethnic church where people genuinely love one another will not happen by accident in the United States of America where we are still dealing with the residue of racism from generations past. Because of this we must be exceedingly intentional to talk about issues of race and diversity on every level in our church, always being careful to connect it with the gospel.

Here's where boldness and courage are going to be needed. Without a doubt, every time I talk about race I will get a negative email. It's at this point where I'm reminded that not only does Satan want me to refrain from such subjects, but that I also need to heed Paul's instructions to Timothy to teach with all patience.

Obviously there can be overkill when it comes to talking about race, so we have to be real strategic as to when to deal with the subject, and how. Also, it's extremely important to root your thoughts in the Word of God. While this may seem obvious, I'm amazed by how many messages I've heard on the subject that were merely story after story, with little emphasis placed on the Bible. In thinking through this, you may want

to talk about this the Sunday before Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday in January, or a Sunday (or the whole month) in the month of February, which is black history month to deal with it.

On one level is talking about diversity from the pulpit, this is the air war. But we should also talk about it in our small groups (or whatever smaller format you have), this is our ground war, and in my opinion the most effective place to talk about issues of race and diversity, because it's a venue where people can talk.

I'm grateful to God for the Promise Keepers movement. I must have attended a dozen or so of these events (my father was a featured speaker). I remember the talks on reconciliation that were a hallmark of each conference, and seeing blacks and whites hug each other, many times weeping. Yet I always remember thinking, what's next? These guys are going to go home and back to their families and lives. Praise God for the event, and as catalytic as it was, I think the next move has to be getting us in a room and talking.

Naturally, in your small groups you want to have some sort of curriculum in place, or a book that will help you launch out into your discussion. W.E.B. DuBois book, *The Souls of Black Folk*,

### *Live Diversity*

Finally, if we want to see diversity in our churches, our leaders must live diversity and inspire the people we lead to do likewise. It is disingenuous to see diversity in the corporate gathering, yet not experience it in our personal lives. If diversity is going to be authentic it must be seen in the "pew" and around the dinner table.