

Signposts on the journey toward an antiracist, multicultural church

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Since its inception the Christian church has struggled with diversity. First-century Christianity was varied in its worship and religious practices, and the early church faced conflict related to that diversity.¹ Jewish Christians weren't sure whether to include Gentiles at all. And if they were to be included, should Gentile

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Christians be expected to follow Jewish dietary laws and be circumcised? Subsequent church history has been filled with many such conflicts around issues of diversity.

A racist past, an antiracist future?

The church in the United States is no exception. Shaped by the particularities of the nation's history, politics, and sociology, American Christianity displays the racism that has permeated every segment of the

society since colonial times. Before the Civil War, African slaves could convert to Christianity, but they were not allowed to worship with whites. This segregation continues, and the pattern has come to apply to other groups. Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour of our week, and churchgoing Native Americans, as well as Hispanics, Asians, and other immigrant groups, tend to worship in separate congregations. These divisions are ingrained in the fabric of our society and of our congregations and denominations.

But division around racial and ethnic diversity need not define our future. In 1994 I got involved in the General Conference Mennonite Church's quest to become an antiracist church. The intent was to become more inclusive of people of color. In the past fifteen years we have made many steps forward and some steps backward. The journey has not always been smooth.

For years now I have worked on the issue of racism, sometimes as an activist, sometimes in other roles. Here I will focus on the past five years, in which I have worked as an educator, bridge builder, and translator. These four roles—activist, educator, bridge builder, translator—are all vital if we are to become an antiracist multicultural church.

Why do I add the qualifier *antiracist*? A lifetime of experience, including twenty-five years of work in addressing racism, has convinced me that some multicultural settings remain racist. Is there less racism in the U.S. now than in the 1950s, when the Ku Klux Klan was active and segregation was enshrined in law? Yes, in some respects. But racism continues to manifest itself in the twenty-first century, and it is still operative in congregations and church institutions when decisions about church life and ways of worshiping reflect only the dominant culture's patterns.

Finding a way forward

I wish I could say I have found the magic formula for transforming a congregation or church institution into an antiracist multicultural organization. What I can do is lay out some things that need to happen to begin the journey of transformation.

Acknowledge that we have a problem. If our church is situated in a multicultural setting and the majority of members are white, we have a problem. If our institution knows the growing edge of the church is first-generation immigrant churches but such congregations have little or no voice in shaping the organization's future, we have a problem.

Agree that we want to change. The journey will require that people in our congregation or institution agree that we want to change. The decision must be intentional, because it will mean commitment and work for all of us, not just a few of us. The process will entail both individual and corporate transformation.

Proceed to teach, practice, follow through, and monitor. Begin by teaching about why inclusion is important to our faith formation. What does the Bible say about inclusion? Why does it matter to the body of Christ?

Then schedule a basic antiracism workshop. Such workshops are available through many groups and agencies in Canada and the United States. A workshop can help people understand

racism and recognize it when it crops up (it can be subtle!). A workshop can also provide a common language, a shared set of terms that will help us talk together about racism.

We'll need to keep doing social analysis of racism and keep working at spiritual formation, in order to further our understanding and to help in our transformation as the body of Christ. Acts 20 reports Peter's vision and his realization that "God shows no

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partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (34–35). In Paul's letter to the Galatians (2:11–14), though, he scolds Peter for his inconsistency and expresses his dismay that others are being led astray by Peter's hypocrisy in "not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel" (v. 14). At Antioch Peter had apparently yielded to the prejudices of the Judaizers—"the circumcision faction"

(v. 12)—and pulled back from his inclusive vision: he had stopped eating with converted Gentiles. Like Peter, if we are not diligent about our teaching, not attentive to our spiritual formation, we are apt to revert to our old ways of doing things. It's human nature.

Becoming antiracist congregations and institutions will require that we practice new ways of thinking and doing things. Practice will be crucial in moving from understanding to implementation. We may be tempted to jump right away to the doing, but if our doing is not rooted in our spiritual formation, in a connection between head and heart, it will be meaningless and will not result in lasting change.

We will need to follow through on, monitor, and evaluate whatever changes and practices we agree on. Lasting change requires all three steps. Change can't be sustained without agreement by the whole, commitment to spiritual formation and learning, follow through, monitoring, and evaluation. These, in my experience, are essential elements of the process.

The principles that apply

Each congregation and institution needs to understand the context in which God has placed it, so some pieces of the process are

context specific. In the past five years, though, I have become convinced that some principles apply to all successful efforts to become antiracist multicultural faith communities.

Take responsibility. It is not enough to say that racism exists; we must be able to own the ways we benefit from it. And we must be able to confess our mistakes, our transgressions, in areas that hinder interpersonal and corporate relationships. We need to acknowledge how we have benefited from the oppression of another group. Confession is part of being in community.

Model a learning community. If we saw our communities of faith as places for learning together, we would be able to offer counsel, receive it from others, and extend grace. Unfortunately, people in many faith communities cling to an ideal of perfection and are therefore unlikely to engage in a process in which they will make mistakes. This realization leads me to my next principle:

Take risks. Taking risks is essential in learning communities. It's also essential to taking responsibility. We must be willing to take risks for the sake of God's kingdom.

Create space so that others can exercise their power. Power is something we may feel uncomfortable talking about, but the fact is, people use power in all spheres of life. The issue is not whether we have power but how we use it. Will we use it to make decisions that create space in which others can exercise their power?²

Connect the interpersonal with the systemic. Often the dominant culture is more comfortable working at racism at the interpersonal level, but systemic changes are critical to organizational transformation. We need to resist the impulse to keep things at an interpersonal level, dealing only with our feelings rather than with substantial systemic change that would allow "the other" access to institutional power.

Extend grace. Grace is an integral part of being the body of Christ. Extending grace on all sides is vital to successful transformation of relationships at all levels.

What I have seen in practice

The application of these principles will vary with our contexts and our imaginations. What I share in the following comes out of my attempts and the attempts of others who are working toward

transformation, toward becoming the kind of church in which “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, [stands] before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9). My goal in sharing the following stories is to inspire, not to prescribe particular methods.

The junior partner defers. On a trip to the Middle East I met Jeff Halpner, an Israeli working with Palestinian families whose homes have been demolished. I asked him how he handles the issue of power in his work. He talked about his idea of partnership: he sees his organization as the junior partner and the Palestinian families they work with as the senior partners. The senior partners make all final decisions. Jeff’s approach demonstrates a use of power in unequal relationships that increases the power of the other.

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A first-generation immigrant church symposium. When I agreed to serve as Mennonite Church USA’s director of intercultural relations, I wanted to find a way to create space for first-generation immigrant churches to use their gifts and give voice to their dreams and needs within Mennonite Church USA. Inspired by the idea of a

learning community, I took a risk and contacted several conferences, to see if I could find three that would embark on a journey with me. Southeast, Pacific Southwest, and Western District conferences agreed to partner with me on this project. The project was to plan a first-generation immigrant Mennonite Church symposium that would be owned and led by first-generation immigrant Mennonites from the three conferences. The planning committee was exclusively first-generation immigrants, with me in the role of staff support.

After eighteen months, what the planners unveiled was something I could have never envisioned on my own. They planned three plenary sessions and two workshop times, all led by first-generation immigrants. They also invited church agencies to send observers who would give response at the end of the symposium about what they had heard and learned. No more than a third of the people in attendance would be agency people, so it would be

a safe place for the immigrants to offer their gifts, tell their stories, and share their vision for the church.

I had to give up control and let go of my ideas about how things should happen. We did have a schedule, but at times the Spirit led participants to stop what we were doing and pray. In the end the event was meaningful: new voices were heard and new gifts shared. The church took a risk and created space in which members of first-generation immigrant congregations could exercise power. A learning community formed and took initial steps to connect the interpersonal with the systemic. Whether this event yields systemic transformation will depend on whether church agencies are able to translate what they heard: Will they be inspired to develop resources that are useful for immigrant congregations? Will they value the gifts of people in these congregations and draw on their contributions in churchwide settings?

A People of Color Council. When I started work for Mennonite Church USA, I became aware that three entities were doing similar work, not necessarily overlapping but each in its own sphere, not connecting with the others: (1) the Mennonite Church USA executive board had an antiracism team; (2) there were three recognized constituency groups from people-of-color groups—Hispanic Mennonite Church, African-American Mennonite Assembly, and Native Mennonite Ministries; and (3) an intercultural reference group helped inform my work. I and others raised questions about the results: these disparate voices lacked a way to bring to the forefront common issues of accountability: How do we see proposed changes through to their realization? How do we get from the interpersonal to the systemic, in bringing transformation to the church?

I went to these groups and proposed an experiment. If it didn't work, we could change our approach. I suggested that we create a People of Color Council, with representation of first-generation immigrants as well as the recognized constituency groups and leaders from the reference council. The group would assemble twice a year to identify common concerns and think about how to address them. They would meet once a year with the Mennonite Church USA executive director and board moderator, and once a year with the chairs of the executive board's antiracism team. The first meeting would be an opportunity to articulate their insights

and suggestions about how to move forward. We hoped the council and the church leaders would endorse one or two of these suggestions and agree on a way forward on these fronts. The second meeting of the year would engage the antiracism team, which would monitor and report back to the People of Color Council any progress on the items that had been agreed to.

In October 2009 this group met for the first time in their official role. What resulted was a movement forward. At that meeting the council asked that they be given responsibility to plan at least one worship session for the 2011 convention of Mennonite Church USA, and executive leaders agreed. It will be an opportunity for learning. It means taking some risks and creating some space in which people of color can exercise power as part of a communal worship experience. We don't know exactly where it will lead, but it's a concrete step.

A cross-cultural simulation and our own case studies. In January 2009 Addie Banks (a member of the MC USA executive board) and I led a learning event for the board. We guided a cross-culture simulation exercise called Bafa Bafa, designed for people who need an experiential understanding of another culture, of the other. After the simulation and debriefing, we discussed four case studies, actual incidents related to diversity in Mennonite institutions.

The simulation was fun, but it also generated some deep feelings. The case studies afterward gave us an opportunity to connect mind, soul, and commitment for change. I thought this experiment succeeded: the executive board became a learning community; they took responsibility, connected interpersonal and systemic realities, and extended grace to one another.

A New Humanity covenant. The antiracism task force for the Mennonite Church USA Constituency Leaders Council (CLC) has just ended its work, with hopes that the learning community ethos will continue. Our task force, in existence for two years, was to figure out how to increase the number of people of color who are part of the CLC. This was a daunting task: first, because the CLC meets only twice a year, and second, because each entity represented there picks their representative. Our first piece of work was to put together a covenant we named "A New Humanity"; it spoke of the vision of a new humanity in Christ. This

covenant was also a way to name and take responsibility for places where we as a church have fallen short of being inclusive of people of color. The covenant also outlined goals we want to strive for, as a way to gauge our progress. After much discussion and debate, the covenant was approved. Now we are entering into finding ways to work at becoming a new humanity.

Our first “experiment”—a label we chose intentionally—was to figure out how many people of color should be present if the

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composition of the group were to reflect the church’s demographics. Then we asked for a specific number of white male volunteers (the number in excess of their proportionate representation) to be silent and listen at their tables. We suggested that they think of keeping silent as a spiritual practice, a way to hear what they may have not heard before. We got a lot of response, both positive and negative, to this experiment. What I thought might happen—an increase in the voices of

people of color at the tables—didn’t happen to the degree that I had hoped. At our next meeting our task force reported on the responses and some of the findings.

We tried another experiment, in “circle process” listening. This pattern of conversation is used in some indigenous cultures. People of the dominant culture in North America are geared to debate and respond in discussion. Some other cultures see it as rude to respond directly to what others have said, and they instead value speaking from the heart and directly to the question. The circle process allows people to speak one at a time, and it keeps a few talkative people from dominating. We asked table groups to use the circle process. Some found it difficult, others found it helpful, and still others felt we needed more time to get used to it. This exercise is a way to increase our intercultural skills. It is a learning event and speaks to our desire to create space in which we can listen to voices we don’t usually hear.

Opportunities laced with grace

None of these examples is the key to finding our way on the journey toward becoming an antiracist multicultural church, but

they are all signposts indicating that we are moving forward, finding our way. I offer these ideas, principles, and stories in hopes that they will spark our imaginations about what might be possible in our congregations, conferences, and denominations. These learning opportunities are laced in grace, and we can allow for mistakes, take responsibility, and offer forgiveness that may in the end result in transformative reconciliation. I am grateful to my family and colleagues who have supported me in my own imperfect work on this journey. I have seen glimpses of this new humanity, and I know the vision to be true. May God continue to grant us grace for the way ahead.

Notes

¹James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990).

²For more on this subject, see my contribution on power in Michelle E. Armster and Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz, eds., *Transformation and Restorative Justice Manual*, 5th ed. (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee Office on Justice and Peacebuilding, 2008).

About the author

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