

Multicultural Ministries Helen Locklear



“Living the Vision; Dancing to a New Song” is an appropriate theme for this conference, for this is your charge to start a journey which will enable you to begin the process of understanding the elements of cultural proficiency. That journey will move you toward developing a sense of commonality and a sense of healing as you walk together seeking to become the Beloved Community of Faith. Join me now as I share my reflections on your theme.

Our world, our nation and our communities are rapidly changing around us. In his book *FaithQuakes*, Leonard Sweet says:

“Americans now are eating more tortillas for breakfast than bagels or biscuits or pita bread; more salsa is sold now than ketchup. The year 2056 is the magic date cited by the sociologists as the moment when the majority of the US American population will be non-European, nonwhite. As it is now, Asian, Africans and Hispanics make up one-fourth of the population.” (1 – Where Nations Meet, p. 12)

If this is so, this upcoming fifty years will witness a transition from a white majority to a far more diverse society than any church has known in the USA context. The norm will be that of different legacies and languages, perspectives and gifts forming a beautiful mosaic of human exchange and intersection. This “browning of America” will offer tremendous opportunities as well as alter everything in society, from politics and education, to industry, values and culture. (*TIME Magazine*, April 1990, p. 28) And yes, even religion.

The success of this nation and one of the most valued attributes of the United States is its diversity. It is built upon the unique contributions every racial and ethnic group has and continues to make in this country. From the far reaches of the earth throughout history, people have come to America, joining its original inhabitants, and have played a vital role in shaping it into what it is today.

In the midst of such tremendous demographic shift, the church now finds itself as the bewildered cultural bystander in this multicultural change, this Pentecostal moment, asking, “What does this mean?” Now should be a time of rejoicing. Instead we find ourselves threatened and defensive, rather than embracing the blessing of a world to which God is giving birth. Many of our churches must question themselves as to whether they are merely maintaining the status quo down to the last member, or do they have the willingness to adapt for the missionary ministry being offered in this postmodern setting? (Rhodes, p.12)

Any massive social change is bound to bring uncertainty, even fear. But the worst crisis we face today is not in our cities or neighborhoods, but rather, in our minds. We have grown up with a fixed idea of what and who America is, and how race relations in this nation work. We live by the two assumptions:

1. that “race” is a black and white issue, and,
2. that America is a “white society.”

Neither has ever been strictly true, and today these ideals are rapidly becoming obsolete (Farai Chideya, *A Nation of Minorities: America in 2050*, p.1- Civil Rights Journal, Fall 1999).

What does it mean for the church of JC to live and make it witness in a multicultural world, where historically race has played such vital part in shaping the values of both church and society?

As the leaders and members of multicultural congregations, you are to be commended for your efforts. Although we may welcome such a wide diversity, we must be aware that difference also brings challenges, conflict, and tension, as it did in the early church, as it has throughout the centuries and has it continues to do so in our day. The history of the church in the United States leads one to believe that sustaining multicultural congregations is a near impossibility due to racism. Christianity in the US became a principal divider of people by race. The authors of *Untied by Faith* state, “although there are positive efforts on the part of churches seeking to become multicultural, there are still persistent racial insensitivity as well as continuing de facto segregation by race and ethnic groups within some technically “multiracial” congregations” (p.76).

Race, as it always has, plays significant part in the lives of people living in the United States.

- It shapes where people live and whom they live with,
- where people send their children to school,
- with whom they can most easily become friends,
- their likelihood of having access to wealth and health,
- with whom they marry,
- how they think about themselves, and their cultural tastes.

Race also shapes:

- how people value others,
- how much they trust others,
- race provides quick stereotypes by which to classify people and
- shapes fears of crime.

As Cornel West succinctly puts it, *Race Matters*. (3, *United by Faith*. p.2)

For many of these same reasons, race matters in where one worships. The nation’s religious congregations have long been highly racially segregated. 11:00 on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America. The question is how did it get this way?

Asians and Mexicans immigrated to America searching for freedom, but they found themselves facing barriers because of race. On the eve of World War II, Asians immigrants were still excluded from citizenship; in many states, they were not allowed to own land. Mexicans immigrants found themselves being pushed from welfare rolls and targeted for deportation. Native Americans were restricted to reservations where they were governed by federal regulations and bureaucrats. In the North, Africans Americans were restricted to reservations called ghettos, and in the South, they were trapped in a system of peonage, euphemistically called sharecropping. But in their struggle for freedom – their resistance against racial borders and distances – all of these groups have been appropriating America’s principle that “all men (and women) are created equal,” endowed with “unalienable rights” of life and liberty (p.375, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*. Ronald Takaki.)

The early church made its first momentous step toward diversity when the elders of the church of Jerusalem opened the Christian movement to the Gentiles. In the tenth chapter of Acts, we read that Peter learned in a vision that God doesn’t make distinctions in the creation between clean and unclean. Then, in an encounter with the gentile centurion Cornelius, Peter realizes that the meaning of his vision was that all people, including those considered by the Jews to be unclean, were to be included in the new church. Soon after, at the first church council meeting in

Jerusalem, a decision was made that set the stage for the swift missionary expansion of the church.

This one issue, however, did not end the controversy; more trouble was brewing on the horizon. The question of inclusiveness escalated into a second and far more complicated matter. Once the decision was made that God does not exclude anyone from the Church, conflict evolved into a power struggle for control of the church, a battle by the church's charter members to maintain power and control over the newcomers. They insisted that the Gentiles become Jews in order to become Christians.

The leaders in the early church resolved this second issue with the same indisputable clarity as they did the first. After lengthy discussion and debate, it was ruled that the Gentiles need not first become Jews in order to become Christians. The theological basis for the first decision had been the radical, unconditionally acceptance of God of all humankind. No one was to be excluded from the church because of race, culture, gender, or nationality. The second decision added a crucial corollary: Within the church, no race, culture, gender, or nationality was to have superiority or dominance, nor could one group determine the behavior for any other group.

Today, this question of power and control is still a determining factor in the church for many people of color and immigrants seeking to join the Presbyterian Church (USA), or immigrant pastors or lay leaders from other countries, who wish to provide leadership to their people in this country. Far too often they face scores of policies and procedures which prohibit membership in a congregation or presbytery. We must be aware and seek to eliminate tendencies of maintaining "power and control" as our church officials make decisions about membership and pastor leadership within our denomination.

These issues can be directed to a congregation in the first stage of opening its doors, waiting for the first person of color to walk into the church. Or they can be directed to a congregation that already has a significantly number of people of color in its membership and is being challenged to reflect its racial and cultural diversity in worship and other areas of congregational life. The same issues must be taken into consideration at the Middle Governing Bodies, and the General Assembly, as they are being challenged to develop new culturally relevant educational resources and models of ministry for to prepare people of color and immigrants as they seeking leadership in the church.

The challenge to all Christians is to undergo a paradigm shift, a change of mind-set, a radical change of heart and mentality, of theologies, liturgies and organizational structures. Without such changes, old systems might live on in our actions. Although our denomination offers the anti-racism training, this is only the first step. Understanding the dynamics of racism is imperative in this changing society, otherwise, the myth of superiority will continue to operate not only in how those of white European ancestry relate to people of color, but also the immigrants migrating to the USA from Asian, Africa, Central and South America.

Applying racial justice in structures and institutions of both church and society means redressing the deeply rooted inequalities expressed in the poverty of racially and ethnically oppressed people. The church has the responsibility and obligation to commit herself to rectify the injustices, and to work to redefine power systems and relationships, which should cease to be racist and paternalistic in the ever growing pluralistic society. Only then, can we together learn how to share the gospel to an

increasingly diverse culture, a culture that features a rich variety of languages, music, styles, and modes of worship, ministries, and witness.

Diversity is a gift of God that holds out a promise to us: that when we build relationships across cultures, get to know our neighbor, build alliances, work cooperatively, we can make a difference through our actions and behaviors to make the world a more peaceful, more just, less violent, more joyous place.

The development a church tradition beyond racism depends on a multiple-strategy approach to change in congregations. The challenge is to promote personal and structural change at the level of individual believers, congregations, middle governing bodies, and General Assembly. We must push beyond seeing racial justice as a “program” to seeing it as an integral part of ministry and mission throughout the Church. In order to build multiracial communities, both white people and people of color must grow more cultural competent and aware of how the history of racism in the US has impacted our faith communities.

As a time when racism and race relations are a major national concern, how can congregations, institutions with clear moral authority, be catalysts for religious and social change? How can congregations actively build multiracial community?

To become the beloved, inclusive community of faith, the Church must increase its efforts to exhibit tendencies:

- that respects, values, celebrates, and empowers cultural diversity in mission, ministry, and governance, honoring the distinctive gifts of all people;
- that understand differences are not seen as inequalities or evidences on inferiority, but elements of equal partnerships;
- that sees evangelism as a reflection of personal and corporate faith, as well as a sacred witness for justice and peace;
- that has a global vision which inspires its local activity, involving itself in peacemaking and reconciliation efforts, both locally and globally.
- which every one can exercise his or her gifts as moved by the Holy Spirit in faith, hope and love.
- Has learned to recognize signs of elitism within the congregation. Where individuals and groups operate with assumptions that their beliefs, processes, and opinions are the only right ones, racism isn't far behind.

The whole congregational life must embrace the spirit of multicultural community by regularly examining it's programs of worship, hospitality, evangelism, Christian Education, pastoral care and community witness and how this reflected in all of church life by:

- Counter myths & Stereotypes; challenge racist attitudes in prayers, sermons, expressing inclusiveness in planning liturgy, participating in pulpit exchange, and community involvement
- Affirm & honor cultural diversity in using diverse music/hymns, choir exchanges, multicultural banners, visuals in bulletin covers
- Be inclusive in decision making, planning, problem solving and evaluation by working to break down old habits that exclude others from church, community and corporate boards,
- Assess policies, procedures, and informal practices that regulate congregational life
- Build multiracial/multicultural and intercultural relationship by offering anti-racism, and cross-cultural educational opportunities.

Instead of fearing the change in American society, we can prepare for it. In her book, *The Color of Our Future*, Farai Chideya, offers simple suggestions:

1. Know the facts about America's Diversity. Evaluate how much you know about race in America. According to an array of surveys, white Americans – who at this moment make up over $\frac{3}{4}$ of the adult population – have an inaccurate view of the racial opportunity gap.

2. Foster coalitions between groups of people of color. Particularly in urban areas, it's becoming increasingly likely than various groups of people of color will share the same community.

3. Foster Coalitions between whites and people of color to discuss their common goals, specific challenges, and how they might press the local government to change their community.

4. Demand "Color Equality" Before "Color Blindness" Segregation is still a pervasive problem in American society, most of all for blacks but for virtually every other race as well. But does that mean we should attempt to overcome segregation and bias by demanding a "color blind" society – one where we talk less, think less, and certainly act without regard for race. The term "color blindness" has become increasingly popular, but it avoids a couple of fundamental truths. If racial inequality is a problem, it's terrible difficult to deal with the problem by simply declaring we're all the same.

5. Become active with school boards to re-desegregation the school system – May 17 will mark the 50th anniversary of the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. The 1954 decision outlawed separate public schools for blacks and whites, stating "separate but equal" schools for blacks and whites were unconstitutional; a year later, it demanded districts desegregate "with all deliberate speed." Yet today, research indicates that in many communities, school districts are becoming more segregated, even as racial ethnic children account for the a larger proportion of students. It would be nothing less than a tragedy if at the precise moment we are becoming a more diverse country, we are steering children and teens into increasingly segregated schools.

It may very well be that the multicultural congregational model can play an important role in reducing racial division and inequality, by developing strategies for making progress on the racial reconciliation so needed in the US.

The changes the next millennium brings will at the very least surpass and quite possibly will shatter our current understanding of race, ethnicity, culture, and community. The real test of our strength will be how willing we are to go beyond the narrowness of our expectations, seek knowledge about the lives of those around us – and move forward with eagerness, not fear. (Civil Rights Journal, p. 7)

Although many of the mainline denominations have made great strides toward living into the dream of becoming the beloved community of faith, there still remains much to be done. For all the talk about racial justice, diversity and inclusiveness, the church continues to lag significantly behind. And yet here you are...members and leaders of our multicultural congregations, seeking to understand what it means to be a inclusive church, while at the same time answering the call of God to welcome the world because it is God's mandate for evangelism: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Mt. 28:19)

Multicultural churches of today will face numerous challenges as they seek to become the beloved community of faith. The challenge will be for the church to engage in mission and ministry in creatively new and exciting ways, engaging all levels of the church in cross-cultural training, removing structural barriers to cross

cultural evangelism, and opening opportunities for members of the church to engage in evangelism and ministry in new and exciting ways. Multicultural churches with a significant number of people of color in its membership will be challenged to reflect its racial/cultural diversity in its worship and other areas of congregational life. While at the same time, the inclusive church must provide education and training for its white members so that they will better understand issues of inclusiveness and diversity in both church and society.

In each case we deal with the exactly the same issues that were faced by the New Testament church: who will define and who will control the church as it seeks to be racially and unconditionally inclusive of all God's people? Just as the solutions to these issues dramatically affected the life of the church in the first century, so also will our solutions significantly influence the Christian church of the 21st Century.

Efforts to overcome racism and to become the beloved, inclusive community of faith to which God has called us must begin in our sanctuaries and continue beyond the church to create a nation and world, in which all races and cultures are included, accepted and enabled to live together in equality and harmony.

In her book *A House of Prayer for all People*, Sheryl A. Holbrook states, "a great variety of people can become a community if they heed the Spirit, which constantly calls for us to expand our boundaries. The story of Pentecost suggests that in our various cultural identities and through our linguistic differences we can understand each other. It is ultimately our resistance to the Spirit that divides us as a people – not race, or ethnicity, or religion, or nationality.

In his book, *Where the Nations Meet*, Stephan Rhodes, states "how the Church of Jesus Christ responds to the complexities of this multicultural, multiracial, postmodern ethos will tell the world whether or not it has a reason to listen to the message it proclaims." *Living the Vision: Dancing to a New Song...* let's continue dreaming and envisioning together the church as God intends: A church that is vital, diverse, united and truly reflects and celebrates the multiplicity of all God's people.