

PROBLEMS WITH ABRAHAM'S CHILDREN

I am a child of the 60s. I grew up in the midst of Civil Rights activism. I grew up in a time when everyone around me was working for justice. I grew up with protests, sit-ins, bra burnings and the Viet Nam War. I was influenced by the messages of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X. My parents, my teachers and my friends engaged with me in conversations about integration vs. desegregation, assimilation vs. acculturation, the melting pot theory, the American Dream. I spent most of my college years getting ready for the revolution. I knew society would change because it was changing around me.



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In my 20s and 30s, whatever your ethnicity, gender or social class, if you were not white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant or middle class, you could legitimately claim to be a victim of some social injustice. And if you were a WASP, particularly if you were a straight white male, you could either complain that no one had given you any special privileges or you could weep with guilt about what your ancestors had done --or what you, through institutionalized oppression, had done to those who were less fortunate.

Churches are slow to change

People who were in positions of power worked to change the thinking of those who protested or to change the behavior of others who shared their power. By the 1980s, those of us who were still clamoring for justice found that people were less tolerant of our harangues. So by the end of the 1980s, Kum Bah Yah had become a cliché for elderly hippies, old integrationists, and aging women's libbers. We had worked hard and won a number of significant battles. Some people thought that we had won the revolution. Most people thought we had been given enough and that we ought to be thankful and go back to wherever we came from. We all thought that we actually had overcome the challenges of apartheid in America. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, it is clear that we have not overcome.

Let me give you a couple of examples:

- As an intern in a predominantly white, upper-middle class community, I was approached by one of the parish associates on the patio after the service. "Well, he said, apparently assuming that I had come from a poor and uneducated background, "I guess you'll be glad when you can go back to be with your own people."

- I pastored a church, which makes hundreds of dolls every year for children in the surgical wards of hospitals in the city. I wondered why all of the dolls were white—especially since none of the children was white. Therefore, I suggested that the church ladies use beige, brown and ivory fabric for the faces of the dolls to reflect the diversity of the children who received them. They resisted at first, saying things like, "The make-up we use won't show on darker faces." I gently rebutted each of their arguments, and ultimately, they were delighted at

the results and puzzled that they hadn't thought of it themselves.

- The leaders of a suburban seeker church, which draws people from all over the city, sponsor several events each month that cost participants from \$50 to \$200 for each activity. They do not see this as an impediment to involvement in church.
- It is still very unusual for a church to call a pastor who is not of the same ethnic group as the majority of the congregation's members. It is so unusual, that when it does happen, they point to it as a source of pride and evidence of their advanced development.
- This conference is further evidence that bringing people together of different classes, cultures, ethnicities and national origins is an unusual event.

In the 60s and 70s, civil disobedience was the catalyst for making social change. In the 80s and 90s, litigation was the primary tool. Schools changed because they were forced to. Business began to change once they realized they could make more money if they acknowledged the diversity of their employees and their clients. Churches, for the most part didn't change.

As an OD consultant, by the 90s I had learned a lot:

- I had learned that organizations only change when the leaders change.
- I also had learned that systems—like institutionalized racism and sexism—were perpetuated within organizations without the consent and often without the awareness of well-intentioned people in those organizations.
- I learned that many activists, once they win concessions for social change, don't know how to work collaboratively with the people against whom they had protested and fought.

Because of all I had learned, I knew that I needed a different approach if I was going to continue to work as an advocate and catalyst for social justice. I found it in an approach called cultural competence.

Cultural Competence

In 1989, Terry Cross, a First Nation clinical social worker, was running a clinic in Oregon. Most of the clinicians were European American, while most of the clients were Eskimo or First Nation. Terry noticed that the clinicians were describing the client families as pathological because they didn't conform to the European American norms. He observed, "We are not giving culturally competent care." As a result of his work in that clinic, Dr. Cross published a monograph, "Toward a Culturally Competent System of Care," in which he presents a definition of cultural competence and provides for tools for helping individuals and organizations to increase their cultural competence.

Cultural competence is an inside-out approach. It starts with self-awareness in individuals and with an understanding of the corporate culture in organizations. It is an approach that focuses on changing behaviors. It's about clarifying house rules. Any of you who play cards or board games know that there are basic rules that everyone follows, but the host may impose some idiosyncratic rules that the other players will follow if they are announced before the game begins. Cultural competence is about learning your house rules and communicating them effectively to others. To be culturally competent also means you are willing to re-negotiate your house rules when you realize that they are an impediment to hospitality or they deny the other players the possibility of ever winning.

Cultural competency is based on values that can be easily aligned with the core values of an organization that wants to foster healthy relationships among people who differ from one another. Cultural proficiency is a process that results in positive, effective interactions among the people and the systems of a diverse environment.

My colleagues and I like this approach for several reasons: it is proactive; it provides tools that can be used in any setting, rather than techniques that are applicable in only one environment; the focus is behavioral not emotional; and it can be applied to both organizational practices and individual behavior. Most diversity programs are used to explain the nature of diversity or the process of learning about or acquiring new cultures. Many diversity programs are mandated "punishments" for inappropriate behavior. Cultural proficiency is for any organization or person that simply wants to improve. It is an approach for responding to the environment shaped by its diversity or the absence of diversity.

Abraham's Children

Churches are the last intentionally segregated institutions in our country. Although churches in the United States tend to be segregated ethnically, you who are living the challenge of multicultural church know that issues of diversity in church are broader and deeper than ethnic culture.

Examples:

- I am in a covenant group of spiritual teachers and leaders. As a circle of seven people, we met for five years. The organization we are part of grew, and the time came to end the circle. Unfortunately, we did not end in love and gratitude, but with hurt feelings and the belief that some of us did not keep our covenant of communication with one another. We really could have done better.
- One of the churches I serve as a consultant has a large and lively adult Sunday school class. Two thirds refuse to attend worship because they do not like the style of worship.
- I work with PNCs that are unhappy with their new pastor because he or she is changing the "wrong" things. The new pastor has violated many of the cultural norms because the PNC failed to articulate clearly the cultural expectations of their church.

The Apostle Paul writes:

You are all sons and daughters of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.
Galatians 3:26-29

We may all be children of Abraham, but something happened to us when we were scattered after trying to build the Tower of Babel. And, it is clear to me, my friends, that there are still many problems among Abraham's children. Why do we have such trouble getting along in church? As a category, churches are the most toxic of organizations I have ever worked in. As a category of organizations, churches are not safe places for human beings. There are lots of reasons why. There is a theological term that describes the most common reason: When we go to church, most of us just get *stuck on stupid*. Most pastors are not trained to be managers, mediators, conflict resolution, or diversity consultants. If you are lucky, we learn on the job. Those congregants who are trained in these fields, tend to leave their smarts at the door

Some people feel they are forced to work by other peoples' rules through the week. They choose Church for very personal reasons. Consequently, we go to church with an attitude: *This is my church – let me worship God in my way*. We extend an invitation to others, but they have to become like us to fit in.

The Barriers to Cultural Competence

One of the tools of Cultural Proficiency is The Barriers. The barriers to cultural proficiency are the unawareness of the need to adapt, the presumption of entitlement, and institutionalized systems of oppression. **Unawareness of the need to adapt** means not recognizing the need to change because *we've always done it that way*. It is clinging to traditions that no longer serve the people or their ministries in spite of changes such as increased economic diversity and aging members. **The presumption of entitlement** results in not recognizing that not everyone has the same access to privilege and power. We see this in churches that welcome people from other groups only if they assimilate to your cultural norms and values. It is also evidenced when a congregation does not see how their values may serve them, but not others.

- Core families hold most of the power
- Newcomers and youth have to pay their dues before taking on positions of leadership
- Groups are given voice but no vote on sessions or other powerful committees
- Entitlement is evidenced in whose programs get the most attention, the greater budget, best publicity, and the pastor's support.

Systems of oppression. Throughout most organizations are systems of *institutionalized* racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, and ableism. These systems are often supported and sustained without the permission of, and at times without the knowledge of, the people they benefit. These systems perpetuate domination and victimization of individuals and groups. For example:

- Historically, the intentional exclusion of people of color, Women, Gay men and lesbians
- If the only way you can get funding for a project is to be a member of an historically oppressed group, there is little incentive to not have “victim” as your primary identity
- You have to be a member to participate fully at church
- Ethnic specific churches—provides for self-determination, but also marginalizes and reduces access to power
- At the national church level,
 - We separate programs for immigrants and Arab Americans from other non-white groups.
 - We put all programs for racial-ethnic concerns in one department—ghettoizing them and in that process implying that no one else has to think about them or their issues.

As a tool of Cultural Proficiency, the Barriers help us to name, and to examine oppressive systems—which you have to do if you want to change them.

Community Building Sessions

I think that the tools of cultural proficiency can help us to name and resolve some of the other problems that we, as the children of Abraham have as we seek to live and worship together. During the community building sessions of this conference, we are going to introduce you to the remaining three tools for developing cultural proficiency. Using these tools does not supplant, but rather, supplements and supports programs and tools like antiracism training that may already be in place in your church.

The Continuum – Session One

The Continuum provides language for describing both healthy and nonproductive policies, practices and individual behaviors.

The Guiding Principles – Session Two

The Guiding Principles are the core values, the foundation on which the approach is built. These are aligned or integrated with the core values of the organization or the personal beliefs of an individual.

The Essential Elements – Session Three

The Essential Elements provide five standards for individual behavior and organizational practices

We live in a multicultural, multi-ethnic country. We work in diverse environments and we have learned new skills and new behaviors to do so effectively. Organizations have learned that in a committed relationship both partners change. We, who seek to worship in a multicultural environment, are hearing a new song. It is the song of God’s call to us:

- We are called by God to walk humbly as we do justice and love kindness.
- We are called to model business practices that reflect the values of our faith.

- We are called to reinterpret and refocus successful business models for use in the church.
- We are called to help congregations grow and respond to the call of a diverse world.

This is the new song that is being played for us. Cultural proficiency provides us with tools for dancing to this song. Let us learn the new dance together.

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This speech was given by The Rev. Dr. Kikanza Nuri Robins on April 22, 2004 at the Fifth Annual PCUSA Multicultural Conference in Irving, Texas. For more information, contact her at www.KikanzaNuriRobins.com.