

Leading in a Changing Cultural Context

In 1979 I had the privilege of being part of a core group of six people that planted Kentwood Community Church (KCC) in a suburb of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Over the thirty years I served that church the community changed from being 98% Anglo (mostly Dutch) to being wonderfully diverse. There are currently 50 nationalities on the birth certificates of children in our local school system, and 58 languages spoken in their households of origin. We were experiencing locally what many are experiencing nationally. In the words of Soong-Chan Rah, “The American church needs to face the inevitable and prepare for the next stage of her history – we are looking at a nonwhite majority, multiethnic American Christianity in the immediate future.” (The Next Evangelicalism)

Unfortunately, I was slow to “face the inevitable.” While the community around us was about one-third ethnic minority, our church was still 98% Anglo. In August 2005, while sitting in a Leadership Summit, Bill Hybels challenged us to identify our “holy discontent.” The Holy Spirit of God broke in at that moment with an inescapable question – “Wayne, are you seeking to reach this whole community for Christ, or only the portion that looks and acts like you?” I was broken by the current reality but buoyed by the possibility that our future could be different.

I began by researching the biblical foundation and developing an overarching vision for a multi-ethnic missional church permeating our community with the good news of Jesus Christ. I agree with Mark DeYmaz who details in his book *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church* how Jesus prayed for this, the book of Acts records it, Paul proclaimed the mystery of it, and a glimpse of heaven gives us a picture of it (Revelation 7:9). I took to heart more fully the command of Christ to “Go and make disciples of all nations...” (ta ethne, from which we get our word “ethnic,” speaking of “people groups”).

The intensity of my “holy discontent” had to be accompanied by an intentionality of action. “The principle of intentionality conceptualizes the work necessary to overcome the inclination most of us have to stick with our own race. This work may involve the efforts to develop an inclusive worship style, to diversify leadership racially...or to prepare a congregation for the changes that will occur as a church transitions from being mono-racial to being multi-racial.” (George Yancey, *One Body One Spirit*).

I embraced the challenge of learning by developing relationships with “safe” people who would explore my unsettling and sometimes naïve questions about what is needed to lead in a changing cultural context. We began with little things, taking to heart that being faithful in small ways would prepare us to be trusted with more (Luke 16:10). When I completed my ministry at KCC in 2009 the congregation was approximately 14% ethnic minority – a significant gain, but much of the journey lay ahead as we sought to reflect our community...and heaven!

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