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Study guide:

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Embracing diversity

Multicultural congregations share their successes, struggles

By Robert C. Blezard

North America is becoming more diverse and multicultural all the time, and yet many of our congregations continue to embody only one culture—and usually it's white. What keeps the ELCA homogeneous? What are the barriers to becoming a multicultural church, and how can we overcome them?

Exercise 1: One in Christ

In Galatians 3:26-28, Paul speaks of the unity that we have as Christians. Read the passage and discuss.

- What is it that makes us one?
- Why do divisions of race, ethnicity, income and gender fade away?
- In what ways is Paul's message as bold and countercultural today as it was 2,000 years ago?
- As Lutherans, how seriously do we take this idea? Explain.
- In what ways would our communities and congregations change if we took this principle to heart?
- What are some practical ways we could celebrate and live into this idea in our faith communities?

Exercise 2: Strength in diversity

- What would your town or community be like if only retirees lived there? Only families with preschoolers? Only rich people? Only high-school drop-outs? People of only one race or national heritage?
- What makes communities stronger when there is a diversity of ages, interests and backgrounds?
- For what reasons are congregations stronger with a diversity of people?
- What are the signs of health or unhealth in your congregation?

Exercise 3: Your neighbors

How in touch with its neighborhood is your congregation? What groups of neighbors are not represented in membership or weekly worship? What's your best estimation?

Look up information for your congregation's community and compare it with your congregation's makeup (try www.factfinder.census.gov or search for the



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“Demographic Reports” tool on www.elca.org). What do you see? Who does your congregation need to reach? Why are they left out?

Exercise 4: Segregation

“Unintentional apartheid” is Harlan Johnson’s term for how some congregations remain segregated by race even as their communities may have grown multicultural. Research and discuss the etymology of the word “apartheid” and its meaning in South Africa. Discuss:

- What would “unintentional apartheid” mean as Johnson invokes it?
- In what ways does the term fit the reality of many ELCA congregations? Your congregation?
- Is there a plus side to the term’s provocative nature?
- How does the term encourage us to action?

Exercise 5: Barriers

- Do you or your family members have friends who are not of your race or ethnic background? Can you explain why or why not?
- Why do people naturally associate most easily with people who are similar to themselves?
- What factors can keep people of different backgrounds isolated in their own ethnic and racial communities?
- What role might the following cultural influences play: language, food, music, dress, mores, common history and experience?
- What role might these influences have: income level, education, housing, school district?
- How can we overcome these barriers?

Exercise 6: Comfort zone

- What is a comfort zone?
- In what ways does a comfort zone protect and serve us?
- How can a comfort zone limit our experiences and hinder us from taking chances?
- Can you share an experience when you went outside your comfort zone and learned something or grew?
- How can our personal and congregational comfort zones deter us from welcoming different kinds of people into our lives and our congregations?
- How can we work on that?



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Exercise 7: Fear

- It's been said that we fear what we don't know. In what ways is that a truism? How have you experienced it?
- In what ways is it true when it comes to interacting closely with people who are different from us in race, language, religion, income, sexuality and education?
- How does fear of the unknown keep our congregations from reaching out to others?
- It's also said that love conquers fear. Is that true? How can love for God and neighbor conquer fear of others? How can we make it happen in our congregations?

Exercise 8: Cultural attraction

Consider this hypothetical:


- Would you feel comfortable going to a church where you were the only person there of your race or nationality; where they worshiped with prayers, music and liturgies that were unfamiliar and much different from what you knew? Why or why not? Would you be likely to join that church?
- With your answer in mind, as well as your congregation's worship style, why would you expect a visitor who belonged to another race or nationality to join your congregation?
- What could the hypothetical church do to make you more comfortable and likely to join?
- What can your congregation do to be more welcoming to people of different cultures?

Exercise 9: Missing in action

Race is only one factor when looking at diversity. Others are income, family makeup, gender, age range and sexual orientation. As a study group examine closely your average worshipping community for signs of diversity in each of these factors.

Exercise 10: Racial justice

Explore issues of individual and systemic prejudice with the study guide for *The Lutheran's* July 2015 article, "Responding to racial justice." It's online at thelutheran.org/doc/studyguides/1507-racism.pdf.



Mary Barry receives an anointing of oil from Victoria Hamilton, a pastor of St. John Lutheran Church in Jacksonville, Fla., during Sunday morning worship. The congregation represents diversity in ethnicity, age and income.

Embracing diversity

Multicultural congregations share their successes, struggles

ROBERT SELF

By Karris Golden

Don King believes that if a church is working right, it's multicultural.

His congregation, Hope Lutheran, fits the bill, reflecting the diversity of its Cleveland Heights, Ohio, neighborhood. King doesn't take credit—Hope was already a mix of European and African-American members when he was called as pastor in 1999.

Hope started to transition from all-white to multicultural in the 1970s following the integration of its neighborhood in the 1960s. "I inherited a congregation that looked a lot like the community," King said.

Over the years, King has taken

care to sustain Hope's traditions of multicultural fellowship and outreach. Hope houses an independent preschool and opens its space for a variety of community functions, including election polling. At those times, members are on hand to offer coffee, treats and a warm welcome.

"We want to be seen as an inviting place," King said. Hope's glass entryway, for example, is covered with pictures from congregational events to "show what we do with our ministry.

'We want to be seen as an inviting place.'

Anyone coming toward us sees the kind of congregation we are," he said.

Congregations like Hope contribute to the ELCA's number of members who identify as African/black descent, Asian/Pacific Islander, Latino/Hispanic, Arab/Middle Eastern and American Indian/Alaska Native. Together these groups comprise 4 percent of the denomination's overall membership. An analysis of the Pew Research Center's 2014 Religious Landscape Study ranked the ELCA as the second least racially diverse denomination out of 30 selected religious groups.

ELCA leaders have expressed the

desire to see more congregations reflect the demographics of the communities they serve, but examples remain relatively rare.

In addition to underrepresented ethnic groups, ELCA membership lags in a variety of other areas, such as diversity of age, income, education and immigration status.

According to the Pew study, more than 60 percent of ELCA members are 50 or older. Those younger than 30 represent 12 percent of members. Fewer than one-quarter are parents of young children. Most ELCA members earn at least \$50,000 annually, and nearly 90 percent can trace their roots back more than three generations in the United States.

Hope is among congregations that skew such statistics. Approximately 42 percent of active members identify as African-American or black. Income levels run the gamut. Few white members have young children, but Hope's programs draw neighborhood youth.

King strives to ensure Hope is "working right" by being intentional in embracing diversity. Worship is distinctly Lutheran and inclusive of many cultures through use of all 10 worship settings in Evangelical Lutheran Worship. Likewise, King strives to ensure assisting ministers and acolytes reflect the church's diversity.

"When you enter this congregation, you're seeing a congregation that's multicultural," he said.

Rooted in outreach

The same is true of Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in St. Paul, Minn.

Prior to the late 1940s, it was a white congregation nestled in the city's African-American business district. The area, the "Rondo Community," was racially mixed from the beginning, said James Erlandson, Redeemer's pastor. But the congregation didn't reflect this diversity in its earlier years.

After World War II, more African-

'There are several generations that have been here because of relationships, children growing up together here, being confirmed, being in the youth group.'

Americans migrated to the Twin Cities, many settling in the Rondo Community. Some joined Redeemer, and by the late 1950s, 25 percent of its members were African-American.

"There are several generations that have been here because of relationships, children growing up together here, being confirmed, being in the youth group," said Erlandson, who is of European descent.

Today the congregation and neighborhood remain multicultural. While Erlandson said Redeemer doesn't have a multicultural strategy, he believes members consciously embrace diversity and support an authentic, inclusive worship experience. The congregation uses traditional liturgy and, like Hope, worships with music from a variety of cultures.

Redeemer emphasizes community outreach and offers space and programming for neighborhood residents, including young people from Hmong, African-American, Somali and other groups. Erlandson said their hope is that when people attend group meetings or a youth program at Redeemer, they are more likely to return for worship.

That's what brought Raymond Hayes to Redeemer in the 1950s.

Then 5 years old, Hayes' interest was sparked by a sign advertising Redeemer's vacation Bible school. Although his family belonged to a nearby African-American congregation, his parents allowed him to try Redeemer's program.

"I went there and liked it. I liked the kids," he recalled.

While he appreciated his original

James Erlandson, pastor, gives out candy during the children's homily at the beginning of the Sunday service at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in St. Paul, Minn. The congregation embraces diversity and inclusive worship services.



STEPHEN GEFFRE

congregation, Hayes said he felt drawn to the friends he made at Redeemer. His parents let him go there for worship services and then join its youth choir. Eventually his parents followed him to Redeemer, where they quickly became respected members.

Almost 60 years later, Hayes is president of the council.

Like Hayes, Kayla Wright, 17, grew up in an ELCA congregation. Today she is counted among her congregation's leaders: she belongs to the youth group, mentors others, works in the community garden and assists with campaigns for justice.

Because she's African-American, Wright said she has encountered

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William Hamilton (right), a pastor of St. John in Jacksonville, talks with member Jim Dennis before the start of Sunday morning worship.

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people outside her congregation who have questioned her right to call herself “Lutheran.”

She’s received the same reaction about her congregation, All Peoples Gathering Lutheran, Milwaukee, where African-Americans comprise the largest population. People have asked her: “How can All Peoples be Lutheran if only 35 percent of members are white?”

Wright understands a broader definition of Lutheran: “[All Peoples] is the only church home I know. It’s not difficult for me belonging to a multicultural congregation, but for others, it might be. I don’t like that people categorize me as not being a ‘true Lutheran’ because I’m not ‘the right skin [color].’”

Dianne Breitmoser of Jacksonville, Fla., didn’t necessarily believe Lutherans were supposed to be white like her. But she did find a sort of comfort in sharing a cultural background with fellow parishioners. For 40 years she belonged to a large, affluent Lutheran congregation with a predominantly white membership.

But at some point, Breitmoser began to feel something wasn’t right. “I was needing to be fed, and I wasn’t getting it at my former church,” she said. “I had to get out of that comfort spot—step out of the box and see if I was really going to the church that

fulfilled all my needs.”

She became intrigued by St. John Lutheran, a small congregation in Jacksonville’s historic Springfield neighborhood. The congregation was involved in community revitalization and boasted a garden labyrinth. St. John also had become known for its fundraising efforts and outreach programs.

The multicultural membership was somewhat new to Breitmoser. So, too, were the pastors, who are of African-American descent. Victoria L. and William C. Hamilton Jr., then lay mission developers, were charged in January 2000 with renewing the congregation.

At the time, St. John’s membership was European American and the average age was 74. “The surrounding area is 86 percent African-American,” William Hamilton said. “[St. John] was like a white island in the midst of a black community.”

In their first year of ministry, worship services averaged 12 attendees. Another 17 were on the sick/homebound list. Seven attended Easter worship.

‘I leave saying to my husband, “I know I’ve been to church.” I feel it. I didn’t have that before.’

Some 16 years later, St. John has grown to 113 members who represent diversity of ethnicity, age and income.

As a result, Breitmoser encountered a lively multicultural congregation. African-Americans comprise nearly half the membership, European Americans a third, and others who identify themselves as African, African Caribbean, Asian, multiracial, Latino and American Indian.

“There was a lot of diversity; that just goes with the neighborhood,” she said. “My husband and I went there a few times, and we just loved it.”

Although Breitmoser lives nearby, she said many white members drive in from the suburbs out of love for the congregation.

“I leave saying to my husband, ‘I know I’ve been to church.’ I feel it. I didn’t have that before; I wasn’t feeling it,” she said.

People find a home at the revitalized St. John because the congregation is realizing its potential, Hamilton said. Despite its small size and smaller bank account, the congregation offers comfort to those who frequently encounter hardships.

“The median income in this neighborhood is \$15,000 to \$20,000,” he said. “It’s Jacksonville’s highest at-risk community in every way imaginable. ... St. John is a safe, healing place for life transitions.”

Welcoming the stranger

Providing such pastoral care requires patience and the willingness to learn from failure. King reminds himself of this when his efforts at Hope don’t yield the results he hopes. He believes more emphasis on innovation related to growing multicultural congregations would be helpful.

“It seems the ELCA knows more about what to do with monochromatic congregations than it does with multicultural ones,” he said.

The problem may lie in conflict-

ing definitions of “multicultural.” For example, ethnic specific ministries are often characterized as “multicultural,” King noted, perhaps because they add to the ELCA’s overall diversity.

“The ELCA knows how to plant an African-American congregation, but what about a multicultural congregation? I don’t even know how to plant a multicultural congregation,” King said.

Being truly multicultural opens people to a deeper understanding of many situations and contexts, said Erlandson of Redeemer.

“We’ve had to be welcoming and accepting and be able to relate to people who come from no church background, are low income, coming out of domestic violence and so on,” he said.

This includes being mindful of how language can serve to exclude, Hamilton said. He has witnessed situations where prospective members with jobs deemed “suitable” were frequently introduced as “an asset to our church.” He believes congregations must constantly ask, “How do we reach out to people who are different from us?”

The answer thus far, Erlandson said, has been social events that reach people who simply won’t

attend worship services.

For Hope, Redeemer and some others, it was also important to become Reconciling in Christ (RIC) congregations that actively welcome lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender seekers and believers. “RIC designation is a facet of multiculturalism,” King said. “It says we really are embracing diversity as a congregation.”

Marie Failing (left), Kim Tann and Lisa Erlandson share a laugh during the sharing of the peace at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in St. Paul.



Resources

- “Talking Together as Christians Cross-culturally: A Field Guide” (revised edition) and “Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues” facilitate cross-cultural conversations in congregations (search for the “Ethnic Specific and Multicultural Ministries” page at www.elca.org; call 800-638-3522 for Spanish-language editions).

Available at www.elca.org/resources/racial-justice:

- “One Body Many Members” (three parts) equips congregations to reach out and fully welcome people whose race, culture and class is different from their own.
- “Breaking the Bonds” assists individuals dealing with the negative messages of internalized racial oppression.
- “Lazarus at the Gate” is an analysis of the construct that maintains wealth and poverty in America.
- “Understanding and Dismantling Racism: The 21st Century Challenge to White America.”
- “Even the Stones will Cry Out for Justice,” a congregational resource for reaching out to people of different races, cultures and ethnic backgrounds.
- “Troubling the Waters for Healing of the Church” assists members of European descent in understanding the role of white privilege and internalized white superiority.
- “Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity and Culture,” is an ELCA social statement that offers a theological reflection on the church’s commitment to undoing racism and moving toward reconciliation, healing and embracing all people.

Being truly multicultural opens people to a deeper understanding of many situations and contexts.

‘Unintentional apartheid’

In terms of demographics, the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod would seem poised for nurturing multicultural congregations. After all, it boasts the diverse cities of New Orleans and Houston.

Houston is particularly noteworthy. According to a Rice University study, the city tops a list of U.S. metropolitan areas with the most equitable distribution of America’s four major racial and ethnic groups: whites, Hispanics, African-Americans and Asians.

Since the 1960s, Houston’s population has grown an average of 20 percent per decade. It’s now the nation’s fourth largest city. At 41 percent, Latinos comprise the city’s largest demographic. The overall white population is 33 percent, down

STEPHEN GEFRE

from 63 percent in 1960.

But congregations there tend to remain ethnically segmented, said Michael Rinehart, synod bishop.

“Frankly, I don’t know that we [have a] multicultural congregation,” he said. “A multicultural congregation is one where multiple ethnicities worship in their space. It’s one where we have opened our minds, and decisions are based on who’s already there and who’s not there yet. It’s engaging your surrounding community—even if it feels a little uncomfortable.”

Gulf Coast churches tend to have predominantly white membership and adhere to traditionally European cultures, Rinehart said. Congregations sometimes draw members from

other ethnic groups. In addition, some predominantly white congregations share space with those of other cultures but refrain from worshipping together.

“If I have an African-American family visiting my congregation, that doesn’t make me African-American and it doesn’t necessarily make me multicultural,” said Rinehart, who is white. “If I have a white theology, white style of worship [and] white organizational structure, it’s very hard for me to think my way out of that.”

Such homogeneity extends to the synod’s ethnic-specific ministries, Rinehart said.

“One of the biggest challenges is

‘A multicultural congregation is one where we have opened our minds, and decisions are based on who’s already there and who’s not there yet. It’s engaging your surrounding community—even if it feels a little uncomfortable.’

that Lutheran—primarily European—congregations were organized using northern European ways of organizing,” he said. “Theology tends toward the northern European Christendom mentality, so worship, architecture of buildings, spaces and so on are of a

Truly inclusive membership requires intention, support

In 1990 people of color comprised 2 percent of the ELCA’s total membership. Since then a perennial goal has been to increase members of color to at least 10 percent. In 2016 the ELCA has yet to reach the goal’s halfway mark.

To determine why and develop a strategy will require “hard analysis,” said Albert Starr, ELCA director for ethnic specific ministries and program director for African descent ministries.

“In a lot of ways we’ve been wrestling with a notion of multicultural as defined by the dominant culture,” he said. “The concept of ‘multicultural’ breaks down when it does not take a look at the depth of relationship and call for real equity—when it becomes a question of power and authority and who has it.”

One strategy has been to start congregations. In 2001, Patricia Tunches Muran was called to develop a congregation to serve the Hispanic population in Santa Maria, Calif.

Unsure of which segment of the large, diverse population to target, the pastor prayed for guidance. Two families from southern Mexico reached out. They were of Mayan-Indian descent from Oaxaca, and their native language is Mexicano. Some also speak Spanish, especially the men, and the children typically speak English too.

More than 200 people now belong to *Iglesia Luterana Santa Cruz*.

Although a predominantly white congregation provides space for the Spanish-language congregation, Muran said *Santa Cruz* members appreciate the separation. The congregations join for some activities and fellowship, including vacation Bible school and youth programs.

“[*Santa Cruz* members] can relate to each other because they know the common challenges here [in the U.S.],” Muran said. “They know their mother language and that this is a place where they are accepted and welcomed.”

Unlike many ethnic specific congregations, *Santa Cruz* benefits from donations from local ELCA congregations, the Southwest California Synod, the church-wide organization and individuals, Muran said.

“In many cases, the ethnic congregations are in poor communities,” she said. “They get money to keep the mission going for the first few years. They can get the mission church started, but the money goes away too soon.”

Santa Cruz wouldn’t survive without financial assistance—Muran did the math. Members are agricultural workers and make as much as \$25,000 in good years. If all tithed 10 percent, it wouldn’t fund basic expenses.

“The reality is that it doesn’t matter that you’re expecting these congregations to support themselves after a few years,” Muran said. “Yet they need Jesus just as much as you or I need Jesus.”



Dominic Lindqvist (left), and his wife Phyllis give meals to people who are homeless in downtown Jacksonville as part of St. John's outreach program.

northern European influence. ... To imagine doing things differently is very difficult."

When new ideas and methods are introduced, the reaction might be, "That's not Lutheran."

"These are opportunities to stretch our faith," Rinehart said. "We must emphasize grace through faith and not a particular kind of worship."

Erlandson has viewed new cultural influences as opportunities to incorporate diversity in worship. For Thanksgiving worship, he called on Redeemer's American Indian members to share elements from their traditions: burning sage and Four Directions Prayer.

Sometimes people with strong ties to the once dominant culture resist such contributions. Changing that reaction and creating a sense of open and welcome has been Harlan Johnson's mission.

"All my life, I have had a passion for two things: connection and equity," he said. "The idea of connecting and partnering with people, to me, that's what Jesus is all about. We need to be able to talk to each other, listen with our heart and talk with our heart."

Passion led Johnson to travel to Mississippi in 1964 for what became

known as Freedom Summer. He later joined the Peace Corps and spent three years in India.

Eventually he returned to his hometown of Rockford, Ill., and to Emmanuel Lutheran Church. Now in his 70s, he champions many causes, including engaging other white people in dialogue about anti-racism advocacy.

Although he's something of a de facto inside man, he worries his message isn't received. "I haven't figured out how to reach the vast group of white people who don't get it," Johnson said. "There's a fear, I think, about having conversations across the barriers. They're afraid they're going to be seen as racist.

"There's also a lot of discomfort about dealing with the fact that these other citizens in our community are

'The idea of connecting and partnering with people ...that's what Jesus is all about. We need to be able to talk to each other, listen with our heart and talk with our heart.'

receiving so much less than anyone else in terms of opportunities in life."

Johnson coined a term to describe a key problem: "unintentional apartheid." The first word, he explained, takes away some of the shame. The latter is meant to shock people into action.

Breitmoser of St. John now understands that her decision about choosing a new congregation raised eyebrows among others of European descent. Some have even asked why she'd do such a thing. Doesn't she want to go to a white church? Don't African-Americans want to worship with other African-Americans?

Her response is simple: Color isn't a factor in choosing whom she spends time with. She has no interest in limiting her circle to those perceived to be her "kind."

"We all bring something," Breitmoser said. "The diversity means something. We've created a great church. We accomplish things that surprise bigger churches. They want to know how we do that."

Last summer, St. John members took turns delivering the weekly sermon. For Breitmoser, it was an opportunity to explain her appreciation.

"I talked about how loved I felt to be included in this group of people," she said. "With all the problems that have existed in the South over the years ... as a white person, I felt like I didn't deserve to be welcomed as I was. And here I was, standing up in a mostly black congregation, feeling loved and accepted." □



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