

Move Your Church Beyond the Color Barrier

How a white church in a racist area of Northern California became one of the most racially diverse congregations in the country

Monesha Taylor understood the routines of her childhood. So come Saturday night, she knew she was headed straight for her “Sunday school” bath. She figured being clean and being with God must go together.

But instead of the usual splashing in the bubbles until the warm water got cold and her fingers got wrinkled, 5-year-old Monesha just needed her mommy to hurry up, check the water temperature, close the bathroom door and go watch television.

This would be her only chance.

With Mommy safely folding laundry in the living room, little Monesha got busy. Being as quiet as possible, she slowly stood up in the tub, trying her best not to slip. Then, reaching her right hand up toward the windowsill, she began feeling around for the “big people’s” brush, located somewhere on the ledge where she could not see.

Little Monesha was terrified of the mahogany-colored, plastic-handled hairbrush her parents kept near the bathtub. It once fell into the tub and disappeared below the suds. Monesha accidentally sat on it and felt the sharp, horrible pains from the spiky bristles. From that moment on, she never wanted the brush anywhere near the bathtub for fear it would fall in again.

But Monesha knew if she had any hopes of rubbing the black color off of her skin before Mommy got back, it would take the big brush with sharp teeth to do it. Even if it made her cry, she was determined. She would do anything to stop the little boys at school from calling her “muddy Monesha” during recess.

Taking a deep breath, the little 5-year-old princess of Carla and Sidney Taylor began scrubbing as hard as she could. She had to squeeze her eyelids shut to keep from screaming. She would start with her left arm, and then when all the black color was gone, she’d rub just as hard and fast on her right arm. Then she would do her legs.

She had to be white before Mommy got back. Maybe her mommy and daddy would want to do it, too.

“Oh, my God, Monesha!” Carla Taylor fell to her knees next to the tub. “You’re cut!”

She immediately feared that one of her husband’s razors had fallen into the bathtub. She could see blood trickling down her little girl’s arm, mixing with the white bubbles.

The sight of Mommy and the sound of her voice was all Monesha needed. She screamed loud enough to make the neighbors jump. Two huge lines of tears raced down her cheeks and neck. Her mother was confused as she examined her forearm. Instead of being cut by a blade, it looked shredded and torn.

She couldn’t believe her eyes as she looked at Monesha’s self-inflicted injury. Even more, she couldn’t believe her ears as she heard Monesha’s explanation.

Carla Taylor, a proud African American, knew the wound in the bathtub would heal. The wound on the playground would be a different story.

Stories like this one about little Monesha reflect the very real world we live in. She is just one of a hundred different ways to illustrate the pain and differences that still exist in America—and, sadly, in the house of God.

A Miracle of the Heart

A wonderful and long-awaited miracle is about to happen in America. It's about to happen because pastors, churches and believers are finally awakening to the "incompleteness" of a racially divided church.

There is an eerie similarity between the local church we see today and what Nehemiah beheld as he surveyed the fallen walls of Jerusalem some 444 years before the birth of Christ. Ninety-four years after the Jews had started rearranging the rubble, Nehemiah saw the stony disarray of the once mighty walls of Jerusalem and said, "Enough is enough."

King Cyrus granted Israel their freedom after seven decades of captivity so they could return and rebuild. But as the years passed, there was no discernable improvement. The broken walls remained broken. And over time those in Jerusalem forgot about God's dream and just accepted the incompleteness as a way of life.

That is, until Nehemiah arrived. Nehemiah was consumed with holy despair and a burning desire for change. The Lord

responded by filling his mind with new ideas on how to finally rebuild the wall—new paradigms that would produce progress after nearly a century of stagnation.

Those broken walls that unnecessarily laid in waste for nearly a century can be compared to God's ever-present dream of His church walking in racial unity—a dream that is still, for all intents and purposes, broken and buried beneath the ruins of denial, bias and bigotry in the church. But standing boldly in the midst of those ruins is a new generation who, like Nehemiah, is saying, "Enough is enough."

The Azusa Street Revival proved that it's possible to celebrate, not just tolerate, diversity. For a brief season in history, Azusa Street became the glorious contrast between God's inclusive kingdom and a failed social order ruled by ignorance and hatred.

In 1990, my wife, Karen, and I began an endeavor that would forever change our lives. What began as a church-plant—Harvest Church in Elk Grove, California—soon turned into the radical reordering of our personal priorities and approach to ministry. Karen and I became painfully aware during our early days as church-planting pastors that we were far off course from God's heart toward people of color.

As white middle-class Americans, we slowly realized our ignorance of the daily issues that affected people of color. We also became aware that our day-to-day lives were void of any genuine friendships with nonwhites. We, of course, "loved everybody." The problem was you couldn't tell it by our lifestyle or our personal relationships.

As I prayed earnestly during the early days of Harvest Church, Revelation 7:9 continued to resurface over and over in my spirit. "After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (NKJV).

I began to ask myself, and those around me, "Why don't our churches look like heaven?" Out of that question rose a powerful new quest in my life.

During my 11 years as pastor of Harvest Church, two key things emerged that took our good intentions for diversity and transformed them into real-life results. Let me say before I share these two fundamental emerging values that I do not consider the majority of people in the body of Christ racist; they are simply uneducated and uninspired when it comes to the higher things of God. They have not been taught the truth about personal prejudice or shown the kind of joy and freedom that comes only when the church becomes "complete."

Breaking the color barrier first requires a "miracle of the heart"—that inner awakening that changes a person's core attitude and thinking about themselves and about those who are culturally different. The miracle of the heart moves a person from the valleys of isolation and ignorance to the plateaus of openness, dialogue and acceptance, then finally upward toward the peaks of genuine joy, where they experience ongoing side-by-side friendships with people of color.

During the journey, the person will discover that the primary need of every human being is to "belong," not just to "have." Long ago white America intellectually realized they could no longer refuse a person of color to "have"—to have a job, a

car, a house or a church. But “having” has nothing to do with “belonging.”

The predominant white culture in this nation still holds people of color at an emotional distance and does not welcome them to “belong” to what is rightfully theirs to experience. Discrimination forbids someone the right to have; segregation forbids someone the right to belong. The miracle of the heart heals a person of that ignorant perspective and shifts their attitude from, “This is right” (diversity), to, “This is wonderful.”

Peter and Cornelius were the first in the early church to experience this miracle of the heart (see Acts 10:34-11:18). It had been 10 years since the day of Pentecost, yet the church was still oddly exclusive. Having never captured that spirit of Jesus, which made “whosoever will” feel as though they “belonged,” the church after 10 years was primarily all about converting Jews and few others.

But the Holy Spirit revealed to these two men that something was desperately missing in their lives and in the church. The chasm between the Jew and the Gentile needed healing, and it needed to happen now.

The overlooked part of this miracle between Peter and Cornelius was that God chose a house—not a synagogue, temple or Promise Keepers stadium—to do His work. A bond formed between two men who never would have chosen friendship because their paths were institutionally separated.

For the church to break down the color barrier, the pastor must model his own personal necessity for friendships with

nonwhites. Otherwise, his congregation will see his attempts as mere token experiments to grow a struggling church. Church members, too, need to ask themselves, “When was the last time I had a person of color in my home for dinner?”

Unless the Holy Spirit is allowed to perform a personal miracle of love in your heart, then both you and your church will be pulled back toward your comfort zones—zones that include only people just like you. Acts 11:19 is a sad commentary about some members of the early church. “Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen the word to no one but the Jews only.”

Even after the miracle of the heart that occurred in the house of Cornelius, many in the church went right back to their comfort zones. Today, many churches are doing the same, convinced they are best equipped to reach only people like them. But, thankfully, the next verse declares, “But some of to the Hellenists [or Greeks], preaching the Lord Jesus” (Acts 11:20).

The Color of Friendship

The three most important words during the journey to break the color barrier are, “Help me understand.” Friendship is the only place these words can work with any true sense of honesty.

I recall during the O.J. Simpson trial a few years ago feeling personally disgusted when I saw a large gathering of African Americans in a downtown church in Los Angeles awaiting the verdict. Certainly, I was not offended that they were black, only that a church had been chosen to host an event I

considered “secular.”

Because I had two very close African American friends, Greg Williams and Richard Moore, I was able to share my feelings and ask them questions. I said to them: “I’m confused and a little upset. I don’t understand why a church would host a meeting like that. Please, help me understand.”

My close buddies were able to educate me in a loving, nonjudgmental way because they knew I had a sincere heart to understand something my upbringing couldn’t interpret. Greg and Richard told me that the church building was historically the only place many African Americans could go to get accurate information, that during slavery the preacher was the only one allowed to read.

So in order for African Americans to get accurate information about politics, news and life in general, they were forced to gather in churches so the preacher could pass on the information.

When Greg and Richard gave me a correct understanding of history, I felt the tension inside me disappear as knowledge dispelled my ignorance. But without friends such as Greg and Richard, I would once again have interpreted an event through my narrow Archie Bunker paradigm instilled in me during childhood.

The first key to breaking the color barrier is to cultivate a friendship with a person of color in the same setting God chose for His first miracle of the heart: a house. The next step is for believers to see color as a blessing, not a burden.

Before many ministries take their first baby steps toward diversity, they immediately focus on the cultural struggles they see over hatred and bigotry and automatically assume that being a person of color is a burden all by itself. I found that nothing could be further from the truth.

It's a wonderful joy to be black, brown, white or whatever color you are because it was God who fashioned each of us uniquely diverse in color and culture. Yes, there are real issues that can affect anyone who has faced institutional avoidance and prejudice, but people of color do not need pity. They simply need to be valued as equal in God's kingdom.

The celebration of diversity is about joyfully embracing the beautiful "completeness" of God at every level of life and church. As a pastor, I have determined that color will never be a limitation to a person's destiny. In that context, I am color-blind. But apart from that context alone, I am always looking for color.

I would never choose to promote someone solely because of his or her color. Nor would I want that to happen to me. Achievement should be the result of character and maturity. The fact that an individual who achieves is also a person of color is simply the bow, not the actual gift. The gift is the qualifications of their life that fill the box.

The Road Through Samaria

Because I now seek to experience God's completeness for the church, I want next-door neighbors and working relationships with friends of color. Without those kinds of relationships, I would again feel incomplete, and that is a condition now

totally unacceptable.

As long as we remain insensitive and steadfast in our denial as the church and continue to “walk around Samaria,” instead of being like Jesus who “walked through” Samaria (see John 4:1-26), then nothing will change. The dream for racial unity will remain as rubble as shackled churches continue to subsist in the heart of dying cities.

By avoiding Samaria, it took the Jews three extra days on foot to get from Judea to Galilee. Jesus would have had to go out of His way to not reach the Samaritan woman. It took more effort to avoid than to love. By connecting He gave the Samaritan woman and the Samaritan city a renewed dignity because He carefully chose His road.

May the church also choose its road carefully in the days ahead and lift this nation to new heights of grace and well-being. By the way, the Taylors are fixing their eyes on Jesus, and little Monesha is going to be just fine. How do I know? They told me so last week at church.

They are good friends of mine.

A Miracle in Elk Grove

When Scott Hagan and nine other adults started Harvest Church in Elk Grove, California, located just south of Sacramento, the town had a strong reputation among African Americans as racially exclusive. Some of the church’s early converts had just left racist groups headquartered in neighboring communities, and when the church hired an African American

receptionist she received threatening phone calls.

Ten years later, Harvest is a diverse church of 2,500 people that has defied the odds. Roughly half the congregation is white, 30 percent are African American, and the rest are Hispanic and Asian.

“It is inconceivable for that church to be there,” says Hagan, now senior pastor at First Assembly of God in Grand Rapids, Michigan. “I am convinced that God is using it to set the spiritual tone of the city.”

The church’s success in diversity sprung in part from the close personal relationships developed in small-group meetings in people’s homes. Julia and David Reyes, who are from different ethnic backgrounds, have been active in the church for 10 years. They say the potluck dinners with people in their small group are like a smorgasbord of world cuisine.

“Everyone brings new foods,” Julia says. “Grits, menudo, brains. People are from all over the world.”

But more important are the deep friendships that are forged. “It’s beautiful to see our kids intermingle,” Julia says. “Every skin color loves on each other.”

Many of the couples at Harvest are from different cultures. On Sunday mornings the foyer is filled with families in which one parent is African American and the other white, or in which one parent is Filipino and the other African American. The combinations are many—but skin color and cultural heritage are usually the last things on people’s minds when the lively and intense worship begins.

“There really is no way to build diversity other than letting it flow from the heart of the leadership,” Hagan says. “The miracle of the heart comes first. People can see through phoniness.”

One way of demonstrating the church’s commitment to racial reconciliation is by making sure it is reflected on the pastoral staff. Richard Moore came to the church when Harvest was 9 months old. His was the second black family at the church. He now serves on the pastoral staff.

“Diversity is dear to my heart,” Moore says. “Scott brought a genuine love for people with him. We were valued for who we were. I know it’s a God thing because Scott grew into it. The differences people brought didn’t scare him.” Moore said Hagan also trusted him enough to ask tough questions about culture.

“He could ask us things because we have a relationship,” Moore added.

Moore has seen “wonderful” relationships develop among blacks, Hispanics and whites. They vacation together and are godparents to one another’s children.

“I like inviting people to our church because they wonder how we get so many black, white and Hispanic people in the same place,” he says. “It’s real. When blacks or Hispanics visit, they see the staff, and they know it’s real.”

Harvest is launching a program they hope will become a flagship for training people in cultural diversity ministry. Moore and his Hispanic assistant will direct the effort.

In the city at large, the racial chill is thawing. Elk Grove recently elected the city's first African American mayor—a sign, Hagan believes, of a new openness. And recently when an African American congregation from across town was displaced, they joined with Harvest for Sunday morning worship for several months until a permanent solution was found.

“Our churches need to look like heaven,” Hagan says. “There is diversity in heaven. In Revelation chapter seven, John saw every tribe and tongue. It’s startling to think that tears and sorrow won’t make it to heaven, but diversity will. It was God’s idea, and such a good one that He decided to take it into eternity.”

—Joel Kilpatrick

Scott A. Hagan is senior pastor of Grand Rapids First Assembly of God in Michigan.