

Wellington Boone in Atlanta

The pastor of The Father's House says black churches need racial diversity if they want to reflect the population of heaven

Many predominantly white churches seek to diversify their congregations by inviting members of other races and cultures, but Bishop Wellington Boone believes diversity works both ways—predominantly black churches need to reach out to gain white members.

Boone, well known for his work with Promise Keepers, is building churches in Atlanta and elsewhere with racial reconciliation in mind. Cultural diversity is good, he said, but there is a higher goal believers must reach.

“There must be somebody who does not have a cultural spirit, but a kingdom spirit,” he said. “It’s all right to be culturally conscious but not culturally controlled.

“As a ministry whose leadership is black, we purposefully are going after suburban, mainline whites,” Boone told Charisma.

Bishop Garland Hunt, an attorney and pastor who along with Boone leads The Father's House in Atlanta, understands the context of race when applied to the church. “It’s definitely more difficult for white America to submit to black leadership. Historically, whites aren’t used to following blacks,” he pointed out.

The churches under Boone's oversight, most of which are predominantly black, are consciously taking steps to create mixed congregations that are marked by unity in the Spirit.

"We really, really want whites, Hispanics and Asians to be there along with blacks," Hunt said, adding that they "seek to generate an atmosphere where every race and culture can feel comfortable."

Boone and Hunt say the church needs to model racial reconciliation so the world can see how the gospel transcends race, culture and nationality.

"If it is clearly, distinctively a black church and culturally proud of that, or a white church and culturally proud of that, then it's not a successful model of what heaven is like," Hunt said. "All the races and cultures are going to be at the feet of the Lord."

Hunt joined Boone in Atlanta last July. Boone came to the city four years ago after God spoke to him about voluntarily taking a lower ministry position. He was pastoring a successful church in Richmond, Va., when he said he felt God leading him to Atlanta. A few months after that, he received a letter from prophetic minister Rick Joyner with a prophecy saying the same thing—go to Atlanta.

From his work with Promise Keepers, Boone was accustomed to addressing huge crowds, but he knew God was calling him to a different place. He said he felt the Lord was saying: "You don't have to be before big crowds to be authentic. Stay low, man."

Boone's observations of other ministers in Promise Keepers triggered his decision to move into a less slick style of ministry. "What I saw was that so many of these guys have it all figured out," he said. "They had strategic planning, public relations experts—they had it all laid wasn't a strong belief in God doing it—they worked this thing. I said: 'Nope. I've got to go the opposite way.'"

As he began reading Scriptures that dealt with humility and lowliness, Boone began to see how those characteristics could be worked out practically in his life, finally resulting in the move deeper into the South.

Boone and several families came to Atlanta to begin The Father's House and to continue another church in an Atlanta suburb. These churches and some 50 others in the United States and hundreds overseas are part of the Fellowship of International Churches, an organization Boone oversees as bishop. Boone has a book due out in the fall titled Worm Training, which takes its title from Psalm 22:6 in which David refers to himself as a worm.

"You can't really find out what a true Christian is like until he's under pressure," he said. A snake strikes back, but a worm just submits, he noted. The qualities of humility and brokenness in the life of Jesus, foreshadowed in the life of David and others, are the key to true spiritual power, he said. Those qualities have implications for evangelism.

"Perhaps if we aren't catching fish, maybe we're using the wrong bait because fish don't eat snakes, they eat worms," he said.

When it comes to racial reconciliation in the church, Boone does not think Pentecostals are leading the way. "We call ourselves Spirit-filled, but we let people who don't claim to have the same expressions we do outpace us in things we ought to be leading in," he said. He noted that Southern Baptists are making great strides in racial harmony.

"I think they are outworking Pentecostals. They have a whole department that focuses on nothing but racial healing," he said.

Boone's work in Atlanta, which he calls a strategic "world-class city," is on the front burner. "I feel like we're launched, but I don't feel like we're established yet," he said. "It's going to explode here."—Richard Daigle in Atlanta