

Is Racial Reconciliation a Top Priority for Your Church?

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The black church has a rich history. It stoked a covert revival on plantations across the South, inspiring slaves with visions of freedom and a passion to pray for better days. It educated newly emancipated African-Americans in the years following the Civil War, building colleges and universities that helped form the beginning of the black middle class. It mobilized communities to march during the turbulent civil rights era, challenging both black and white Americans to model the biblical values of equality and justice that the nation was founded upon.

Today in churches nationwide African-American ministers continue to espouse the virtues of freedom, education and fairness. But black Americans aren't the only ones hindered from achieving those goals. At a time when the United States has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world, when roughly a third of high school students aren't graduating on time and when immigration is changing the complexion of U.S. cities, the black church is being called to a new level of leadership.

This month we asked several African-American Christian leaders to discuss the challenges facing the black church and to cast a vision for the future. Although the messages are tailored toward a specific segment of the body of Christ, the truth in their words transcends ethnic barriers.

The influence of homosexuality on the church, the call to Christian unity and the need for spiritual renewal are issues that all believers must grapple with. We believe the voices

highlighted here represent fresh leadership not only in the black church but also in the body of Christ at large. As the nation looks back in celebration of Black History Month, we want to look forward to the new day God is bringing to the church.

The Ministry of Reconciliation

By Edward Gilbreath

A recent poll by the Pew Research Center found that 40 percent of blacks believe African-Americans should no longer be viewed as a single community. The poll put scientific heft behind what many African-Americans have known forever: Black America is as culturally diverse and ideologically sophisticated as the rest of the nation.

How else can you explain a racial group that comprises both Spike Lee and Condoleezza Rice, T.D. Jakes and Jimmie "J.J." Walker? We're not all Democrats. We're not all fans of hip-hop. Many of us can't jump.

In that Pew poll, 53 percent of African-Americans agreed with the statement that "blacks who can't get ahead are mostly responsible for their own condition." As recently as 1994, 60 percent of African-Americans believed racial prejudice was the main obstacle to blacks' economic success. What's more, 61 percent of blacks said class, not race, accounts for the greatest social differences in our nation. Yet the specter of race continues to haunt us.

For the last year, I've traveled around the nation speaking to Christian groups about the importance of diversity and racial reconciliation in the body of Christ. I speak primarily about the church's black-white divide, which typically has meant addressing white audiences about the things they fail to see about our relationships across racial lines. But everyone knows the issue is much bigger than black and white, and we do the kingdom of God a disservice when we freeze the discussion

there.

The reality is that we live in desperately polarized times. Everybody's fed up. And everybody goes on the Internet or talk radio to let you hear about it.

White folks are tired of black folks playing the race card. Black folks are tired of waiting for white folks to "get it." American-born Latinos are tired of being judged and treated as if they were illegal. And illegal immigrants are tired of being exploited for their labor and then told, "We don't want you in this country!"

These are complex issues that we shouldn't take lightly. But as a church we need to be willing to move beyond conventional wisdom and take the time to apply kingdom wisdom. For many African-Americans, this may mean abandoning a victim mentality. It may mean extending more grace to whites and people of other races. It may mean searching our own hearts for those pockets of prejudice, hatred and unforgiveness. It may mean seeing beyond color.

Jesus didn't operate using labels or stereotypes or broad generalizations. He took the time to see people for who they really were. He loved them.

Too often, it's easy for us to write folks off because they live in "that" neighborhood or belong to "that" political party or attend a church in "that" denomination. It's easy to brand folks a certain way and then excuse ourselves from any obligation to connect with them.

But love requires more. Love requires intentionality. It requires preferring others over ourselves. It requires taking the time to get to know someone beyond the labels and stereotypes that we—or our group—have placed upon them.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "So from now on we do not regard anyone according to the flesh" (2 Cor. 5:16). As Christ's

diverse body, we must allow that spiritual truth to become a lived reality for us today. Our racial, gender, denominational and cultural unity represents a tangible expression of the power of Christ's love (see John 17:20-23). When the world sees it in action, it is so much more compelling than anything we could ever preach at them.

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