

New Orleans Church Defies 'Sunday Morning Segregation'

Martin Luther King Jr. called Sunday morning the most segregated time of the week, and in many places that's still the case.

But in New Orleans, one congregation is going against that norm and is showing how diversity makes it stronger.

Sitting in the heart of New Orleans, First Grace Church is known as a beacon of Christ's love. In fact, the pastor said he's surprised if people don't come forward to join the church on Sundays, but getting here has been a journey.

After Hurricane Katrina ravaged the city, pastor Shawn Anglim was put in charge of two United Methodist churches located one mile apart: the black congregation of Grace Church and the white congregation of First Church.

Birth of First Grace Church

It wasn't long before God revealed his plan and Anglim approached two of Grace's longtime members.

"So I asked them, 'Do you believe we can do more for our city as one body of Christ than we can ever do as two bodies of Christ a mile apart?' And they started crying and I knew that I had asked the right people," Anglim recalled.

So in the fall of 2007, two congregations that had worshipped so close to one another, yet so far apart, united to become First Grace.

Margaret Washington, a longtime member of Grace Church, remembered the first day at First Grace well.

"Like children on the first day of school, half of us sat on

one side and the other half sat on the other side,” she said.

“The first worship service was glorious,” Anglim said. “Then it was discombobulating.”

“They were looking for their old usual seat and that wasn’t here,” Washington recalled. “Other people were sitting in those seats.”

Journey Out of Egypt

Anglim likened the experience to the Israelites’ journey out of Egypt.

“It’s all right there in the scripture,” he said. “People are in Egypt, they all leave Egypt – they’re all elated that they’ve left Egypt and they get out in the wilderness and they turn to Moses and they say, ‘Why did you bring us out here? To die?’ It’s like, don’t you remember?”

Washington said, “I really told our members, if we’re going to be a part of First, we have to mingle, we have to mix.”

It took about four months, but then things clicked. Some members credit the music for uniting the church.

“It ties both cultures together kind of,” First Grace member Bob Mangham said.

“In north Louisiana we tried to do southern gospel, but we just didn’t have the soul that this church has,” Mangham added, chuckling.

Crossing the Racial Divide

It’s not always easy though. When things draw the curtain on America’s racial divides, First Grace members choose to lead with love and let Christ work out the differences.

“Those hard conversations – they’re like family meetings where

you sit down and you say things that you felt like you needed to say and they hurt,” Anglim said.

“But guess what? Now your mom’s in the kitchen making dinner,” he continued. “People didn’t go away – this is who you’re going to live with and that changes everything.”

Washington agreed.

“I think that people have learned to appreciate difference and that has been a point of growth for all of us,” she said. “That you don’t have to look like me or live where I live for me to appreciate what you do and what you say, and that is a part of the Christian way.”

Jon and Mary Cospers joined First Grace two years ago.

“If you’re in a box your whole life, it can be difficult to understand what other people think and how other people process things,” Jon said.

No More Excuses

That’s why Anglim believes First Grace is on the front end of what’s coming, a time when there won’t be room for excuses.

“They’re about you feeling comfortable. Well, is that what Jesus was about? You being comfortable about the way you live?” he challenged. “Or about Jesus inviting you into a greater glory if you would open yourself up to that struggle and to take that walk out of Egypt.”

“If you truly want to be Christlike, you have to live like Him,” Cospers said. “And if you segregate yourself from other people—people who don’t believe the same things as you, people who may be different—you’re not living as He lived.”