

Douglas W. Ruffle

Building Blocks for a Multicultural Congregation

A friend of mine once worked for an organization that oriented South African Blacks who had come to the United States for study. With each new group, the standard introduction included the statement that “the last bastions of segregation in the U.S. are visible in funeral parlors and the church.”

I cannot speak for funeral parlors. But what a sad commentary on the church of Jesus Christ! In John 17:20-21, Jesus prays to God for the community of believers: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.” In too many churches across this land, the church is *not* one. Racial and ethnic segregation remains. In too many communities the church reflects the divisions existing in society. Yet there *are* churches where the barriers of racial enmity and mistrust have come tumbling down. There *are* churches that transcend the difference of color, national origin, even language.

Over the past five years I have had the honor and privilege to serve as pastor of a church that includes people from five continents—thirty nations in all. I have experienced the excitement and joy of worshipping with people from many different cultures. Drawing upon my experience at Teaneck United Methodist Church and

Douglas Ruffle is Pastor of Teaneck United Methodist Church. A Ph.D. candidate in Theology and Religious Studies at Drew University, he is a member of the Northern New Jersey Annual Conference.

talks with others participating in multicultural churches, I have attempted to identify some building blocks of a multicultural congregation.

What is Multiculturalism?

Fifteen years ago a congregation with mixed races and nationalities was "a church in transition." The assumption was that because of demographic changes in the community, the church would undergo changes as well, from say, an all-white to an all-black church. While this change was taking place, it was considered a church in transition. Today a multicultural church means something quite different. In November, 1992, The New Jersey Council of Churches sponsored the first in a series of gatherings of "multicultural churches" in an attempt to understand better their characteristics. Of the seven churches represented, all showed a desire to be diverse congregations. Moreover, each church was consciously striving to maintain that diversity.¹

What we have in the United States today is the convergence of many cultures living in proximity with each other. Some churches are celebrating that fact as they intentionally seek to represent the populace of their communities. When we talk of "multiculturalism" we refer to venues where differing cultures interact and interrelate. "Multiculturalism" contrasts the idea of cultural assimilation. Assimilation assumes the predominance of one culture over others. It is the basis of the "melting pot" theory where U.S. culture boils out the distinctive features of foreign cultures. A culture is a shared way of life for a people. Birth, language, shared ideas, and habits give that culture distinctiveness. Multiculturalism is the mutual respect for the gifts of differing cultures as these cultures interact.

Multiculturalism carries with it an assumption that no one culture stands over another. Cultural and ethnic diversity brings a variety of gifts in the interaction of peoples in society. As Douglas E. Wingeier writes, "Increased cultural and ethnic diversity demand that we attend to and respect the gifts of the various groups now represented in our society, church, and institutions. It also requires us to develop inter-cultural sensitivity and skill."²

A popular analogy seeks to counter the old notion of the melting pot. In a multicultural world, we are in a stew pot together. The carrots, potatoes, vegetables, and meat do not lose their distinctive characteristics in the stew. They give flavor to the total brew.

There is a danger, of course, whenever we celebrate a new "ism" such as multiculturalism. Lest we over-empower the phenomenon, the church must continually keep before it the central focus of what God is doing in our midst. We must be wary of being "politically correct" at the expense of the gospel. The churches gathered under the auspices of the New Jersey Council of Churches identified spiritual richness, not "multiculturalism," as the primary indicator of congregational health. Because they were alive spiritually, these churches attracted persons of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

My faith journey has informed my understanding of multiculturalism and what it means to build a church of many cultures seeking unity in Christ. From 1978 to 1986 I had the opportunity to live in a foreign country. My experience as an immigrant helped me understand many people who have joined our church.

A Personal Journey

Through my sojourn in Argentina, I gained important insight into what it means to immigrate to a new country. The new experience, the intensity of learning to speak another language fluently, new sights, sounds, and tastes enthralled me. Eventually, though, I experienced culture shock. I experienced the anxious yearning to return to familiarity. Afterwards, I began to appreciate my new adopted country and its culture, language, customs, and quirks.

I realize now that my experience in Argentina is similar to many of my parishioners in New Jersey who have come from India, Ghana, Nigeria, Colombia, and other parts of the world. Whatever the reason for immigrating, be it economic, political, or because one's family was here, most people go through a stage where they yearn for "home." There is conflict between embracing the new (country) and letting go of the old.

Feelings of nostalgia for my home country attuned me to such feelings in others. I also learned to be critical of my home culture when

I was away from it. The distance helped me discern better what was American about my faith and what was Christian. When we enter honest and open dialogue with persons from other cultures, we can begin to be critical of those cultures. The notion of "multiculturalism" in the church should not equate with cultural acceptance at any cost. Openness and hospitality to various cultures do not mean that we refrain from questioning practices that conflict with our idea of Christianity. There are many aspects of U.S. culture that I know are incompatible with the Christian faith. For instance, I think we must be critical of our heavy emphasis on individualism and our proclivity for violence. And, there might be cultural traditions from other parts of the world that need to be questioned. The point is, such honest discussion can only occur when we have built a basis of trust with one another.

I arrived at Teaneck United Methodist one year after returning from Argentina. It was a church known for its diversity. Through the years it had kept up with changes in the community. As Teaneck became more diverse, so did the United Methodist Church. An historically White-Anglo congregation, Teaneck United Methodist actively sought integration in the 1950s.

Churches tend to mark their progress by buildings erected or membership increases. The 1950s, however, proved to be a decisive time in terms of an intangible "building of the kingdom" at Teaneck UMC. In October of 1955, Wilma and Lamar Jones moved into a predominantly white neighborhood in the northeast quadrant of town. It was a time of transition. Many African-Americans were moving into previously white areas within the northeast section.

Wilma had grown up in the Methodist Church. Lamar had been an Episcopalian. Upon moving to Teaneck, they wanted a church nearby, instead of commuting to New York City as so many others had been doing. A member of the Teaneck Methodist Church, Dorothy Ling, learned of the Jones' arrival and their link with Methodism. She urged the Rev. Dr. Joseph Blessing, pastor since 1953, to call on them. Over the first year of the Jones' residence in Teaneck, Dr. Blessing called on them four times before they ever attended a service. He persistently wooed the Joneses and simultaneously prepared the church for their arrival.

Bill Moore, who joined the church in 1939, recalls that integrating the church proceeded well. One member recalls a few white

families leaving, but none who had been in the leadership of the church. At first the Joneses came only to worship on Sunday. Before long, however, the Couples Club asked them to join. Wilma joined the Women's Society of Christian Service and Lamar took a position on the Missions Committee. Eventually both Wilma and Lamar began teaching in the Sunday school.³

The Joneses were the only African-American family in the church for over seven years. It wasn't until Teaneck itself became more integrated that other African-Americans became members. The seeds of a fully integrated church had been sown. The Jones family paved the way for others. The sixties and seventies would be decades when other ethnic minority families would join the church.

Increasing numbers of African-Americans joined the Teaneck United Methodist Church in the sixties and seventies. In the seventies a new wave of families originally from India came to live in Teaneck via New York City. Five of these families joined Teaneck United Methodist Church.

The seeds of integration that had been sown in the fifties and sixties and had taken root in the seventies began to grow in the eighties and nineties. Membership figures remained constant during the sixties but declined during the seventies. At the end of 1985, there was an increase in net membership and average Sunday attendance for the first time since membership began to decline. The eighties saw integration in the church expand to include Caribbeans, Africans, Filipinos, East Asians, and Latin Americans. By the end of 1990, 25 nationalities were represented among the 266 members of Teaneck United Methodist Church (52.6 percent white, 25.5 percent African-American, 18.7 percent Asian, 2.6 percent Hispanic). Average Sunday attendance, which began to increase during the pastorate of the Rev. John Painter, continued its rise. Over the past two years five more nationalities united, so that today Teaneck United Methodist includes persons born in thirty different countries.

We are also experiencing unprecedented growth as a congregation. I say *unprecedented* particularly in light of what so-called church growth experts say about the "homogeneous unit principle," which insists that church growth can happen only when parishioners are alike racially, culturally, or economically. Since 1987, Teaneck UMC has gone from an average Sunday worship attendance of 101 to 158 today. Membership has increased from 232 to 291.

My involvement at Teaneck United Methodist Church over the past six years has introduced me to a variety of cultures. One way that we have attempted to celebrate our diversity has been through special evenings of ethnic culture and cuisine. Last year we began the series with an evening of U.S. culture entitled "Pizzazz." For the price of admission, one received a piece of pizza, a soda, a salad, and a jazz concert. Our second event was "Caribbean Night" in which our members born in the Caribbean prepared food and arranged for entertainment. Posters decorated the walls. Recorded music played on a stereo system. After the dinner, participants danced to the rhythms of reggae. Last April we held "India Night" along a similar format, though instead of participatory dancing, Indian entertainers performed the singing and traditional dance.

As part of our World Communion celebration four years ago, we encouraged folk to come to church dressed in the traditional garb of their place of birth. Since then, many of the women from India and Africa who attend our church dress in native garb every Sunday. In November of 1992, our African members presented "Africa Night." These events have afforded an opportunity for everyone to taste the cuisine and to hear the music of the different cultures. Future events include "Southern Comfort," presented by those from our church who come from southern states; "East Asian Night," to be presented by our Philippine, Korean, and Japanese members; "Western Night" that will feature square dancing; and "Latino Night," to be presented by our Spanish-speaking members and friends.

How do we cultivate the sensitivity and skill to minister in a multicultural context? What training should a pastor or lay leader have to help foster a ministry that invites persons of differing backgrounds into the congregation? When I was appointed to Teaneck United Methodist Church, I had no idea what to expect. The bishop appointed me there because of my overseas experience in mission. There is no question that my experience in Argentina helped me understand immigrant peoples. Yet I think it would have been helpful to receive an orientation to ministry in the multicultural church. I have identified a few "building blocks" toward that end.

Building Blocks for a Multicultural Church

1. *Understand clearly your primary task.* All churches, whether homogeneous or multicultural, should work at clarifying their primary task. We at Teaneck United Methodist have been working and praying to discern what primary task God holds for us. It is a project in progress as we seek to improve on our mission and ministry.⁴ So far we have articulated that our primary task is to create, empower, and energize disciples of Jesus Christ—people who tirelessly minister to every soul they encounter and continually seek to deepen their own relationships with God. This primary task includes five components. To fulfill our primary task, TUMC and its members will:

- a. *Foster Spiritual Development.* Help each individual, guest, and child deepen his or her relationship with God through well-informed Christian ministry.
- b. *Nurture.* Assure that every part of the church family is nourished and empowered physically, emotionally, and spiritually, so that we are fully equipped to do God's will.
- c. *Reach.* Work tirelessly in carrying out God's will in our own families, places of work, communities, nations, and world.
- d. *Include.* Assure that every member of our unusually diverse congregation feels a deep sense of belonging at TUMC.
- e. *Tell.* Share widely our experience in building a Christian community that transcends ethnic divisions.

These five strategies are components to the primary task. Without any one of these, our task at Teaneck United Methodist is incomplete. The language you use will surely be different. The process of identifying a *primary task*, however, is vital to the health of your church. The components of that task should reflect intentionality in reaching across cultural lines.

2. *Seek racial harmony.* To be a truly inclusive church, it is important to examine and recognize racism in our midst. We need to identify the demons and then work on strategies to cast them out. Bert Affleck, writing in the *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism*, says that "racial harmony means that each of us will be aware that none

of us is free of racist tendencies, whether overt or covert."⁵ Affleck goes on to say that racial harmony means that we begin to see each other as children of God regardless of color or national background. Racial harmony finds its basis in the belief that all persons are created in God's image. We must be intolerant of racial prejudice and protest any form that we see or hear.

3. *Understand the changes happening in your environment.* The demographics of our world are rapidly changing. A major factor in New Jersey's growth is the increasing presence of immigrant people along the eastern part of Northern New Jersey. The Center for the Study of Pluralism at Ramapo College in a newsletter entitled *New People-New Cultures in Bergen County, N.J.* says that "the current increasing presence of immigrant people in Bergen County is a suburban phenomenon." It is not restricted to Bergen County. Similar trends are occurring in Hudson, Passaic, Essex, and Union counties in New Jersey and Rockland County in New York. The trend is due in large part to changes in the immigration practices after 1965 legislation. While immigration has opened to almost all countries, preference is given to persons with skills and education. In a county like Bergen, white communities have experienced a population decrease because of a low birth rate and retired persons moving out of the area. Filling the void have been immigrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Another factor in this phenomenon is the increase of jobs on the corporate, professional, and service levels in suburbia.

There is every indication that this trend will continue in other counties in the northern half of the state. We miss opportunities when we are not aware of changes. I have discovered that many West Africans and Caribbeans grew up Methodist in their native lands. We need to keep abreast of demographic changes.

4. *Cultivate an attitude of humility concerning other cultures: celebrate the stew; avoid the melting pot.* This building block underscores the notion that we are in the stew pot together. There is no room for cultural superiority in a church that is trying to build a multicultural congregation. Exciting things happen when we are open to the way people have done things in other lands.

A church needs to employ cultural sensitivity and skill in such a way that makes it open. In building a multicultural congregation, each culture must have a say in its style and direction. If the church is historically white, European-American, must another culture as-

similate to its style (the melting pot), or can a new identity emerge from the mix of peoples (stew pot)? Examine how certain traditional practices are received by new cultures. Can stewardship be handled differently? Are there ideas regarding the church's involvement in mission, stewardship, evangelism that come from another country that can be tried? Each new culture added to the congregational stew can add flavor to the total brew.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that "the first service that one owes another in a community is *listening*."⁶ The church that seeks to bring unity amid diversity requires careful listening across cultural and language barriers. For a pastor serving a multicultural congregation, customs surrounding death and burial or weddings tend to be particularly culture bound. It is wise to talk about expectations and customs before a funeral or a wedding service.

5. *Sow seeds for tomorrow's church today.* Are there ethnic or racial groups represented in your geographical area that are not present in your church? How can you approach these groups winsomely? What must you learn about the different cultures? Can you strategize to reach out intentionally to a specific ethnic or racial group? Teaneck United Methodist sowed seeds for its present multicultural mix in the 1950s. Yet there are newer ethnic and racial groups living in our area that are not now represented in our church. How can we sow seeds for the day when folk of Korean heritage no longer speak Korean and no longer have such a strong need to congregate exclusively with other Koreans? How can we better serve the needs of the fast growing Spanish-speaking population in our area?

In a world so torn and divided across racial and ethnic lines, I believe the church *can* provide the space where peoples of differing cultures can come to know one another, appreciate one another's gifts and establish enduring friendships. In spite of the sin of racism and our human imperfections, we can experience racial harmony in the church. We can discover the unity that comes with faith in Jesus Christ. The gospel challenges us to "make all things new" (Rev. 21:5). The multicultural church *understands clearly its primary task*; it squarely addresses the sins of racism and prejudice as it *seeks racial harmony*; it *understands the demographic changes happening in its environment*; it *cultivates an attitude of humility about other cultures, celebrating the stew and avoiding the melting pot*; and it *sows the seeds for tomorrow's church today*.

Notes

1. "Mosaic Congregations Confer," *Common Ground: An Ecumenical Voice for the Churches of New Jersey*, 2/2 (Midwinter, 1992-1993): 3, 8.
2. Douglas E. Wingeier, "Emptying-for-Filling: An Approach to Cross-Cultural Ministry," *Quarterly Review* (Spring, 1992): 35.
3. Interviews with Bill Moore (7 May 1991) and Wilma Jones (7 May 1991), Teaneck, New Jersey.
4. Teaneck United Methodist Church *Goals and Objectives*, presented at the Administrative Council meeting, December 21, 1992, by Lynne Loomis-Price, chairperson.
5. Bert Affleck, "Cross-Cultural Evangelism: A Case Study in New Mexico," *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education (1986-1987)*: 70.
6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Vida en Comunidad* (Buenos Aires: Methopress, 1966), 96 (translation of quote by author).