

Multiethnic Churches: Challenges and Opportunities¹

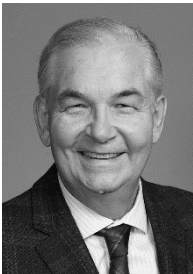
Douglas L. Rutt

Perhaps those who have been around a while will remember this image. It is from an episode of the famous television series *Star Trek*. The title of the episode is “Let That Be Your Last Battlefield.” It had such an impression on me that even today I can remember well when I saw it for the first time in 1969. I was fifteen years old. In that episode, the spaceship *Enterprise* comes upon two survivors of a war-torn planet. It turns out that the two men are the only remaining of their race. The two hate each other, so much so that they are constantly disposed to violent fights. They have to be restrained by Captain Kirk and the crew. In one scene, one of the men erupts in to such a fury that he demands Captain Kirk kill the other right then and there.



What is the reason for the hatred between them? The crew, and even Spock, cannot understand what is happening between these two enemies. During almost the entire episode, they try to comprehend the cause. Can you see it? Finally, it is revealed that one of the two men is black on the right side and white on the left, and the other man is white

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on the right side and black on the left. The purpose of the episode is to demonstrate the absurdity of our prejudices against others who happen to be different in some way.

Last week I was talking with one of my grandsons about how he thought his high school baseball team would fare in the coming year. It would be his senior year. He is very interested in sports, especially baseball. During our conversation, he commented on the other teams in his school's league and the rivalries that exist. There was one team in particular that he called out as their biggest adversary in the league. I asked him, "Why do you say they are your most antagonistic opponent?" He exclaimed, "Because we hate them!" I asked, "Why do you hate them?" He responded, "Because they are our rivals, and we hate them, and they hate us!" What I find humorous about this—or maybe a little sad—has to do with the names of the two teams. My grandson's team is the "Fairfield *Christian* Academy Knights," and the name of the other team is the "Grove City *Christian* School Eagles"!

The Challenge of Ethnic Identity

I was assigned the topic "Multiethnic Churches: Challenges and Opportunities" for the LCMS National Hispanic Convention" under the general theme, "We Are One in Jesus Christ." I knew the challenges and obstacles to overcome are great and many, and that we could easily spend the entire time describing, analyzing, and lamenting them. This might leave no time to speak of the many and various opportunities and benefits of being a multiethnic church. However, taking time to analyze the challenges that hinder harmony in the church will help us understand more fully the benefits.

Since the fall into sin, human beings are disposed to find something negative in others, or find some reason to become self-righteous or see themselves as morally superior. In fact, scientists have discovered that self-righteous indignation toward others because one feels superior releases endorphins in the body. They say that this feeling can become addictive, causing a dependency. The person who believes he or she is superior to others can acquire an urge to continue in that thought pattern in order to satisfy his or her need for more endorphins. This happens not only at the personal level, but also at the level of the various groups around which we organize ourselves, be it language, skin color, gender, ethnicity, culture, location, club team, etc.²

What is of interest to us today, however, is the matter of how ethnicity and culture affect human relationships and interactions, even between Christians. How does ethnicity influence our life together in the Communion of Saints? As the Apostle Paul affirms, we are one in Christ Jesus— "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). In the eyes of God, it is true, but putting this unity in practice in our daily lives, as they say, "is easier said than done."³ There are countless things that cause divisions among people, even in the church!

Ethnicity as a Cause for Conflict

During the last academic year in chapel at Concordia Seminary, we have been meditating on First and Second Samuel. I had the privilege of preaching two times on Samuel. I had read First and Second Samuel before to be sure, but this time it occurred to me that those two books in large part seem to be a narrative of one raiding party assaulting another tribe or ethnic group, back and forth, again and again. They are continuously in conflict. Each ethnicity considered the others to be mortal enemies—reflecting in many ways the human condition.

The word that is used to describe a source of tension and intercultural conflict in which we human beings incessantly find ourselves is *ethnocentrism*. The first part of this word, *ethno*, comes from the Greek word *ἔθνος*, which is commonly translated as “Gentiles” in the Bible, but also as “nation,” “people,” or “pagan.”⁴ Scholars have investigated at length how this term should be translated in Scripture, especially in the context of Matthew 28:19, where Christ commands, “Go therefore and make disciples of *all nations*.” The fundamental meaning of *ἔθνος*, according to the *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (BDAG), is “A body of persons united by kinship, culture, and common traditions, nation, people.”⁵ Such is the use, for example, in Acts 8:9, where it says that Simon had amazed τὸ ἔθνος τῆς Σαμαρείας, that is, the Samaritan people (or ethnic group). For our purposes, we can say that *ethnicity* refers to a group of people who are united based on shared experiences, shared traditions, shared history, shared religion, shared language, or whatever other symbol around which members of a group identify and to which they maintain loyalty.⁶ Sometimes an ethnic group shares a genetic heredity, but not necessarily.

Anthropologists say that to identify with an ethnicity is beneficial for people because it gives them a sense of belonging and security. We understand how to behave and get along with others because we are of the same group. Our ethnic identity provides for our protection and well-being. In this sense, it is important to point out also that there is a strong psychological and emotional component to ethnicity.⁷ If someone insults our ethnicity, it can provoke a painful psychological wound and intense emotions, and, as we have seen, even violent reaction. Ethnic groups divide the world between “us” and “them.”

Seeing it from a more positive perspective, we can say that ethnicity provides a psychological and spiritual connection with the other members of our group. In a complex and dangerous world, ethnicity provides a “family,” which is a powerful metaphor for protection and a sense of belonging. As Eloise Meneses said, “Ethnicity is family writ large. . . . And family is the most powerful form of association that exists between human beings. Hence, ethnic associations carry with them all the strength of both real and metaphorical blood ties. For the world-wide Christian church, this simple fact is both a rich treasure and a dangerous trap.”⁸

Ethnic diversity can be a blessing for the global church, helping us to enjoy the richness of the kingdom of God, as we will see later, but it can also be a motive for human beings to become enemies and even cause tragic violence. Meneses sums it up this way: “The blessing of ethnicity, like the blessing of family, is indeed a mixed one!”⁹ I would say that belonging and being loyal to an ethnic group in itself is neither good nor bad. It is

simply a fact because each one of us belongs to an ethnic group. We all need to belong to a group. However, unrestrained loyalty can lead to negative actions and consequences.

The Problem of Ethnocentrism

The problem begins with what anthropologists and sociologists call *ethnocentrism*. *Ethnocentrism* is a term that describes the belief that one's group is superior to others that one's way of doing things is better, and that one's values are superior to those of the rest. Ethnocentric people impose a *moral force* to their judgments against others. I can love my ethnicity and even be proud of it. For example, my ancestry on my mother's side is German, but on my father's side my ancestry is Czech. For some reason I have always had more interest and pride in the Czech side. I don't know why, but I am proud of my Czech lineage. I find it more fascinating and perhaps mysterious. There is nothing wrong with that. However, if I begin to believe that the Czech culture is superior to all the rest that is ethnocentrism. As the word indicates, *ethnocentrism* is the conviction that your ethnicity is the center of the universe, is superior, and that all other groups are inferior when it comes to their values, knowledge, traditions, likes, dislikes, etc.

Sherwood Lingenfelter, in his book *Ministering Cross-Culturally*, identifies six points of tension in cultural values. Each culture tends to emphasize one side or the other on a continuum for each of these tension points:

- Tensions over the concept of time (Time vs. Event)
- Tensions over the concept of judgment (Dichotomist vs. Holistic)
- Tensions over how to deal with crises (Crisis vs. Non-crisis)
- Tensions over goals (Task vs. Person)
- Tensions over self-esteem (Status vs. Achievement)
- Tensions over vulnerability (Concealment vs. Exposure)¹⁰

Lingenfelter's objective is to show how different groups or cultures have distinctive attitudes regarding these six categories of cultural values, and the differences can cause a multitude of misunderstandings and conflicts. One common example is the tension over the concept of time. An African student once told me that our Anglo-Saxon obsession with the clock causes us to squander time away—that our incessant worry about time actually causes our time to move faster. He said to me, “We believe that personal relationships are more important than the clock. You have it the other way around.”

Another example is the tension over how to deal with crises. People from an Anglo-Saxon, Northern European culture, in general, want to be prepared for any eventuality that might occur. We believe that we can control everything, and with extensive and meticulous planning it is possible to face and overcome any crisis or emergency. Thus, it is necessary to have a “contingency plan” for every possibility. We have confidence in our ability to control events. Such a culture is classified as an “anxious” culture, which such an obsession will surely produce.

On the other hand, other cultures put more emphasis on actual experience, which normally does not include the event of a crisis. They might say, “Why invest so much time and so many resources planning for something that probably is not going to happen? And

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besides, doesn't God govern what happens in this world? Why shouldn't we trust in His protection and help? There are things that are out of our control anyway." This kind of culture would be classified as "non-anxious."

Cultures value different approaches to the possibility of a crisis. Is one approach morally superior to the other? I would say, no. Different approaches have their positive and negative points. Ethnocentrism, however, will put great moral force in favor of the preferred way of its culture, and the differences, which have nothing to do with morality, will be used to criticize, insult, or make the other feel small or insufficient.

There is a principle called the "negative attribution bias." It suggests that if we human beings see or observe a behavior or action that we do not understand, we will attempt to explain it cognitively to fill the void in our knowledge, and, in most cases, we will arrive at an interpretation that judges the action of others in a negative light. For example, there was a member of my congregation who suffered from multiple sclerosis. He could walk, but with irregular and uneven movements. His doctor advised him, therefore, to carry a cane when going for a walk so that those who observed him would not think he was inebriated. The point is that people observing him would be more likely to think something negative rather than to give him the benefit of the doubt.

I bring this up only to show the dynamic of how human beings judge others continually, and we are predisposed to believe that our values, actions, and commitments are superior. Even morally neutral matters such as colors can be a motive for criticism. I have heard people who have ridiculed the brilliant colors that some cultures like to use to paint their homes and churches. Yet, what difference do the colors we like make? It is merely a preference.

The Destructive Power of Ethnocentrism

It is tragic that ethnocentrism can increase in intensity easily until it gets out of control, with sometimes horrible results. A few weeks before writing this paper, I was in Ethiopia to participate in a theological symposium and the commencement of the Mekane Yesus Seminary. The keynote presentation of the symposium was "Christian Mission in an Ethnically Polarized Nation." Ethiopia is a nation where Christians are in the majority. About 70 percent of the population is Christian, with about 22 percent being protestant, mainly from the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY).

However, Ethiopia has experienced and is experiencing ethnic violence and atrocities of frightening proportions. Currently, the affected ethnic groups are the Tigray, the Amhara, and the Oromo, among others. The church knows it must confront this situation. On the day of the symposium, the president of the seminary, Dr. Bruk Asala, testified before the assembly that on that same day members of the Mekane Yesus church body of different ethnic groups were killing each other. "Today," he emphasized. Later that night, I learned upon seeing the news that on that day some 300 men, women and children were massacred in a village in the Oromia province about 200 miles west of Addis Ababa. It is sad to see such hostility and violence, especially in a nation that is predominantly Christian.

We are all aware of the ethnic cleansing that occurred in Rwanda in 1994, when the two groups in conflict were the Tutsi and the Hutu peoples. Again, it is sad it happened in

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a nation that is predominantly Christian, yet it found itself amid a horrific atrocity. The cause was ethnic conflict. A Jesuit priest lamented the horror that Rwanda suffered, commenting,

My faith as a Christian has been affected seriously, in the sense that I cannot realize that such evil could happen in a country where so many people are Christians and where there are so many Catholics (over 65 percent) with such influence in education. What have we been doing as Christians and as priests? How can we preach the love of God, the compassion of God, in this situation? All these questions rise from an experience of the deep mystery of evil, evil that is so consistent and so strong that its power is prevailing.¹¹

East African theologian, Aquiline Tarimo, in his article, “Ethnicity, Common Good, and the Church in Contemporary Africa,” concludes, “The blood of ethnicity is thicker than the water of baptism.”¹²

In his keynote address at Mekane Yesus Seminary, Dr. Wolde-Kidan reflected at length on the interaction between Christian identity and ethnic identity. He asked, “Who are we, ethnics or Christians or both?”¹³ The question had to do with the debates within the EECMY concerning which language should be used and the place of ethnic customs in the church. Some argued that the church should not emphasize or observe ethnic differences. To put so much emphasis on the differences only weakens the collective identity as Christians. It would be better that everyone used the same language and followed the same customs and rituals. According to this opinion, the attempts to create a multicultural institution would result in failure because of the reality of the sinful condition of humanity. Wolde-Kidan expressed this opinion (not necessarily his opinion, but his characterization of the opinion held):

Likewise, though the church is a place for great teachings of love, peace, tolerance, and self-control, it is also an institution of human beings predisposed to exhibit ethnocentrism and/or racism; the church is prone to conflicts just as the rest of society is. At times, the grip of ethnicity becomes irresistible, and many people choose to follow the crowd and commit atrocities.¹⁴

On the other hand, there are those in EECMY who desire to recognize, celebrate, and make space for ethnic diversity. They believe that their ethnicity is a gift from God—it is part of their identity—and they do not want to disparage something that was not their decision but was given to them by God. Those holding to this position recognize that the new birth has made them part of the family of God and has united them in the fellowship of believers, but that they are still members of their ethnic group. They have a “double identity,” one might say, and the two identities should be recognized and celebrated.

During the symposium, the conversation became quite emotional at times, with some of the pastors and leaders expressing their experiences and opinions with shouts and tears, demonstrating how significant a topic this was for the participants. It should be noted, however, that while there were differences of opinion, both sides agreed that in the church

there is no place for ethnocentrism, that is, that one ethnic group would believe itself to be superior to another.

All that we have said so far is to demonstrate that the issue of ethnicity, and its relationship to the life of the church, is something that must be taken seriously. Ethnic tensions and the reaction that ethnic identity can produce is serious. It has been the experience of the human race since the fall into sin. I came away from Ethiopia convinced that not to address it in a healthy way, using all of our theological and human resources, would be dangerous, not only because it damages the witness of the church of Christ, but also because it can be dangerous to our souls, emotions, and even our physical well-being.

The Benefits and Opportunities of a Multiethnic Church

It is not necessary to prove biblically that our God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is a God who loves the whole world and desires that we be united in this love. It is a spiritual reality that all believers are united in Christ: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). Of course, these distinctions still exist, but they should not divide us in Christ’s church. One can see that the categories mentioned here by Paul speak of matters such as race, nationality, ethnicity, social class, and gender. When speaking about the love and salvation that God provides, however, there is no distinction—that is, these distinctions lose their importance in the eyes of God. Yet, obviously the distinctions continue, and they are taken seriously in Holy Scripture.

One of the most impactful passages found in the Bible is the description of the vision of the Apostle John in Revelation chapter 7, when John sees the celestial multitude worshiping God—a multitude made up of “every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (7:9). John leaves no room for doubt: Salvation is for all human beings, no matter how they are distinguished. All are included.

The first Christians, even the apostles, knew intellectually that the saving work of their Lord Jesus Christ was for all. But they needed to learn the practical implications of this truth, which would only be learned through experience. Putting this reality in practice is a challenge because of the previously described reasons.

Biblical Understanding—The Seven “Deacons”

The book of Acts is instructive because it presents us with case studies of how the early church, little by little, learned to overcome its prejudices. Normally, when studying Acts, we think of the expansion of the church in terms of the geographical boundaries that were crossed. However, Acts also tells the story of how the church crossed cultural borders. One interesting case, which I believe is often misinterpreted, is the narrative of the “seven deacons” (Acts 6:1–7).

As the church grew and many people were added to the number of the followers of Christ, the church began to experience “growing pains.” Soon, a kind of culture clash erupted between two ethnic groups: The Jews who spoke Greek and the Jews who spoke Aramaic and Hebrew. Acts reports that a complaint arose concerning the treatment of the

widows of the Greek-speaking Jews: “Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because (ὄτι) their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution” (Acts 6:1).

When there is rapid growth within any social group, inevitably there will be tensions.¹⁵ When more and more people are added, the needs of the group expand exponentially in proportion to the growth in numbers. When other factors are included, such as linguistic and/or cultural differences, the situation can become even more acute. In the case of the selection of the so-called seven deacons, a deeper analysis of the “complaint” that Luke describes and how it was dealt with indicates that it more likely was a matter of disenfranchisement than anything else.

Part of the problem is how we interpret the little Greek word *ὄτι*, which can be understood in English as either “that” or “because.” Almost every English Bible translation that I consulted interpreted the “complaint” of negligence as an absolute fact and thus use the word “because.” According to this interpretation, they complained legitimately *because* their widows were not fairly attended to. However, if we were to translate *ὄτι* as “that,” the sense changes a bit. If we say that the Hellenistic Jews complained *that* their widows were unfairly attended to, the content of the complaint is stated without judging if the complaint is valid or legitimate. Consider this small change in translation: “Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews *that* (*ὄτι*) their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.” Seeing the case from the dynamics of a human relations perspective, which teaches us that the “problem” is not always the problem but is often what psychologists call the “designated problem,” opens up a slightly different interpretation. That is, the “complaint” is a marker or indication that there is a matter to resolve, but one needs to dig more deeply into the surrounding dynamics to discover the true problem behind the designated problem.¹⁶

When one examines the solution that the twelve proposed to deal with the “problem,” other possibilities present themselves. For example, the twelve could have said, “It’s not true! Look at the distribution records!” Or, they could have declared, “We will take your concern under advisement and be more careful so that it doesn’t happen again.” However, the twelve said to the Hellenists, “It is not right that we should give up preaching (sic)¹⁷ the word of God to serve tables” (6:2). In other words, they did not enter into a debate over a matter that probably was not the fundamental question at any rate. Rather, they responded, “Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty” (6:3).

Those who were chosen were to be men of “good repute” and they were to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. In other words, they were to demonstrate spiritual maturity. And it is notable that all of the names of those chosen are Greek and thus were Hellenists themselves. Based on the qualifications to serve in this office, and the powerful preaching that immediately follows by some of the seven, such as Stephen and Philip, we can conclude that their calling was not only to serve tables, but to preach the Word. I am convinced that the problem that caused the complaint from the Hellenistic Jews was *not* that their widows were being neglected. That complaint was simply a symptom of another problem, which was disenfranchisement, a feeling of marginalization or lack of inclusion, on the part of the Hellenists. The way in which the twelve dispensed with the conflictive situation was very astute, but what is even more significant and instructive for our purposes is the affirmation of ethnic differences and that the installation of representatives with a Greek background in the ministry of the Word, in turn, resulted in the growth and expansion of the Christian movement. Luke concludes his account of this episode with these words: “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (6:7). The solution to the ethnic tensions by selecting and installing these men from the Hellenist-Jewish ethnic group was related directly to the mission of extending the kingdom of Christ.

That complaint was simply a symptom of another problem, which was disenfranchisement, a feeling of marginalization or lack of inclusion, on the part of the Hellenists.

This case is encouraging because it demonstrates that there are biblical models and patterns for overcoming ethnic tensions; however, one must approach such situations with sagacity, wisdom, and profound, not superficial, attention in order to analyze well and formulate a response that is adequate and God-pleasing.

Biblical Understanding—Peter at Cornelius’ House

Obviously, the events of Acts 6 do not resolve all the challenges of how to incorporate more and more people from different ethnic backgrounds. As I mentioned earlier, I believe that the apostles recognized intellectually that the gospel is for all and that the church should incorporate people from all nations, or ethnicities, given this was the commission that Jesus had given them. However, the practical implications had to be confronted, and the disciples would need to think theologically to advance the mission. I am convinced that mission is the mother of theology,¹⁸ because it requires that we think about questions that previously we did not have to answer.

I want to summarize two other episodes from Acts where the believers were challenged and had to analyze situations that they had not experienced before. In addition, they had to overcome their own prejudices and cultural inclinations. In Acts 10:1 to 11:28, we see the well-known story where God challenged Peter to go to the home of the Roman centurion, Cornelius. It may not seem so strange to us, but it was hard for Peter. He had to

overcome powerful prejudices within his very being in order to enter Cornelius' house, who, despite being "a devout man who feared God with all his household" (10:2), was a Gentile. Peter had learned his entire life that he was not to enter the house of a Gentile, much less sit down to eat with one.

God had to intervene in a powerful way to induce Peter to go to the house of Cornelius. The scene of Peter's vision of the sheet that descended three times from the heavens with animals that were classified as impure, and the voice from heaven that told him to take and eat, is dramatic. This happened to teach Peter that it was necessary to get out of his comfort zone to preach the message of salvation also to Gentiles. In the case of Cornelius, Peter had to experience a worldview transformation, when in one decisive moment after spending time in Cornelius' home, he finally declared, "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but *in every nation* anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (10:34–35). One must understand that Peter arrived at this conclusion by a drastic and jolting change in his worldview.

When Peter returned to what some call the first "synodical headquarters" in Jerusalem to report concerning the conversion of Cornelius and his household, what was the initial reaction? Did they all rejoice over his report? Actually, no. The initial reaction was to criticize Peter for having entered the house of Gentiles and having eaten with them. Thanks be to God, after hearing more of what happened in Cornelius' house, the disciples became convinced and glorified God. I believe that the episode of Peter in the house of Cornelius is one of the most important accounts in the book of Acts, mainly because of the space in Acts that is dedicated to the story, and because of the account of the sheet that descended from heaven, which is repeated three times. Luke must have considered that history to be highly significant to dedicate so much space to it.

Biblical Learning—Antioch

But not everything was thereby resolved either, because immediately they had to confront the entry of other people from different and diverse ethnicities in the city of Antioch. Antioch was a cosmopolitan city with a population composed of a variety of cultures, languages, and religions. By the end of the first century after Christ, Antioch would become the center of the Christian movement.¹⁹ We remember that the followers of Jesus were first called "Christians" in Antioch (Acts 11:26). But the church would have to go through difficulties that threatened the gospel itself at the conversion of so many Gentiles. Some Jews from Jerusalem arrived at Antioch, and upon seeing so many and such a diversity of ethnicities being incorporated into the church, they became alarmed and insisted that the new converts would need to observe Jewish customs as a requirement for membership in the church.

Paul was so deeply concerned by this demand of the Jews from Jerusalem that he immediately traveled with other leaders to Jerusalem to resolve the matter. For Paul, the gospel itself was under attack because the pharisaical, legalistic Jews wanted to impose traditions and customs outside of the gospel as requirements to be a Christian. The disagreement was so divisive and delicate that a council of "all the apostles and elders" was called to deliberate concerning the matter (Acts 15:6). Fortunately, the council

determined in favor of the gospel and did not impose Jewish traditions and legal requirements, except some things that were advised more than anything to avoid offence to the weaker Jewish brothers.

For me, these episodes and the experience of the primitive church are instructive and edifying for us today considering our theme of the challenges and opportunities of a multiethnic church. First, we see that, concerning customs, likes, traditions, prejudices, etc., it is essential to maintain the supremacy of the gospel. In my forty years of cross-cultural ministry, I have learned that it is not always easy to discern between what are likes and human cultural traditions and what goes against the gospel. We should evaluate seriously the elements of a culture that can be contrary to the gospel, but we must do so carefully.

Approaches to Cultural Differences

There are two ways to look at how we might evaluate cultures. One approach is called “cultural relativity.” This is the idea, affirmed by many contemporary anthropologists and sociologists, that each culture should be evaluated and judged according to its own internal criteria. I believe this approach is inadequate because we have the Word of God that teaches us the difference between right and wrong, good and bad. It is possible that a given culture has elements that do not concur with what God’s Word teaches us.

A more adequate approach is called “cultural validity.” This approach recognizes that all cultures have both good and bad elements, but that finally they will be judged by God. The point is that this approach recognizes the validity of a culture.²⁰ Before judging, we should try to understand, and that is not always an easy matter. As I mentioned earlier, human beings have a proclivity, according to the “negative attribution principle,” to judge those things we do not understand in a negative way. I believe that there is much to learn from the early church on this subject.

Another important insight from the examples of the Book of Acts is that the only way to develop cultural sensitivity and understanding is by experience. We can read innumerable books on the topic, and we can review all the Bible passages that teach us that God is a God of all, including all ethnicities; however, the only way to achieve and assimilate into your being a cross-cultural sensitivity and understanding is through the experience of it. Let me illustrate. In a previous life I was a flight instructor. My first career was to teach people how to fly airplanes. A person can study in detail, reading all the books and manuals about how to fly an airplane; however, the only way to be able to fly an airplane in a safe way is to do it. You must get into the airplane and practice with an instructor. It is like riding a bicycle: you must do it to learn it.

We see something similar at play with the early Christians. The way to grow in their capacity to accept the different ethnic groups was to have the experience of living with others, to live together with others, to personally experience the life of others, to enter their homes, to sit down and eat with them. Therefore, if we are going to overcome the challenges of a multiethnic church, we must be intentional in looking for opportunities to live in community with people who are different from us.

Benefits of Multiethnic Experience

The benefits of having and experiencing a multiethnic church are many and great. The goal should be integration, not assimilation. There is a difference. “Assimilation” is to require that all become similar or the same—usually the same as the dominant culture. Integration, on the other hand, means that all are at liberty to maintain their ethnic or cultural identity. It is to live with the differences, recognizing the unity that we have in Christ, but also the variety of cultural expressions. A phrase that has a long history is “unity in diversity.” It expresses the idea of harmony but does not seek a unity based only on tolerance for differences. It presupposes that the different cultural expressions enrich our human interactions. Eloise Meneses comments that if we were able to erase ethnic differences,

the loss of multiple perspectives on Christian experience and on the Bible would be inestimable. The treasure of ethnicity permits us to unlock the full riches of Christian understanding that are only available through the entire Body of Christ. We must discern God’s truth together, not apart.²¹

This is something I have learned during my mission and ministry experience around the world, especially in the classes I have taught with students from different backgrounds. When studying a particular Bible passage, for example, it has been wonderful to see the perspectives and profound perceptions of students who see things that, because of my background, I may not have seen. In addition, to learn more of the world and of the diversity of peoples, ethnicities, and cultures that inhabit planet Earth has been an enriching experience.

Recently, Arthur Satterwhite expressed it like this in *Christianity Today*:

God knows something we don’t know (shocker): The differences that we look down upon in others are a reminder of how outrageously intentional, creative, beautiful, openhanded, and openhearted our God is. Sameness is not a virtue in God’s economy. On the contrary, sameness actually limits our ability to see and appreciate the full beauty of the diverse mosaic that is God’s creation.²²

Hope for the Church—Hope for the Future

Now how do we implement the experience of true integration in order to benefit from the richness of human and Christian experience? Twenty-five years ago, Dr. Alvin Barry, then president of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, asked me to give the keynote presentation to the Council on Mission and Ministry on the theme “Opportunities and Challenges in Ethnic Ministries.”²³ In that study I delineated several steps that could be taken to promote ministry toward people of other ethnicities in our Synod. Thinking of this twenty-five years later, I can say that there surely have been efforts in that direction, and we should never disparage the attempts and achievements of anyone. For example, the Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology and the Center for Hispanic Studies operated by Concordia Seminary have been a positive contribution, making theological education and

leadership opportunities available to many pastors and deaconesses from various immigrant communities.

Yet, I regret that there has not been more progress. For example, our two seminaries have not advanced much in terms of the diversity in the ethnic makeup of their faculties.

However, God surely can do great things so that we become a church like the one we see in Revelation 7, and perhaps He is already doing it. A bright light can be with younger generations. I have observed many times that younger people appreciate and want to participate in multiethnic groups and activities. It has been their experience in school, the university, and in the workplace, and they have appreciated the richness of those experiences. So, why not also in the church? That is the way it is for my own children and their spouses. Their desire is to participate in an ethnically diverse Christian community.

Another opportunity on the horizon has to do with the children of the multitude of immigrants who are arriving to our nation. During my time as the supervisor of the PhD program in Missiology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, several of my immigrant students, from places such as Ethiopia, Korea, Latvia and Latin America, were quite concerned for what is called the 1.5 and second generation of immigrants and their spiritual well-being. These students struggled with what it means to bring up their children in the United States. One of them, Dr. Tesfai Tesema, has written an excellent book entitled *Hope for the Second Generation: How Children of Immigrants Can Rekindle Christianity in the West*.²⁴ His book does not merely describe the challenges for immigrants and refugees in bringing up their children in a culture that is drastically different from their own; rather, the book is an *optimistic* book. Dr. Tesema demonstrates how, in spite of the challenges, being brought up as a bicultural young woman or man is a marvelous gift from God. It raises a new generation of people who will be exceptionally equipped to bring understanding, aid, healing, and the gospel to a world that is torn apart by contention, racism, ethnocentrism, anger, hatred, and confusion. The affirmation of Dr. Tesema's book gives me hope that things can change, because God is great, and He works in mysterious but effective ways.

The most significant and real unity and connection with our brothers and sisters is the unity that Christ has given us by His saving work. It is a true unity—it exists. Our first allegiance is to Christ, who has given us this unity. This reality is more important than the culture or ethnicity to which we belong. We must never allow ethnic differences to separate us from Christ. However, recognizing and respecting differences between people does not need to damage our unity in Christ; rather, it should make it even stronger. I agree with Eloise Meneses, who affirms that, according to her experience, which is considerable, Christ is *more central* in multiethnic churches.

In segregated churches, other agendas can predominate. Culture takes over, as the church becomes an increasingly useful association for ulterior purposes. But multi-ethnic, or multi-cultural, churches have nothing but Jesus to hold them together. The very struggle associated with crossing cultural boundaries necessitates a strong commonality, causing Christians to remember the center of their faith. And best of all, the diversity of backgrounds and experiences

contributes to a richer view of who Christ is, as songs, sermons, and Bible studies provide the variety of perspectives that are lacking in mono-cultural churches.²⁵

I mentioned that it is necessary to be intentional about looking for ethnic diversity in the church, but, as we have seen, the challenges and complexities are many. We should be intentional and do all that we can to be open to all nations, and we should be intentional in seeking opportunities to live together with others, especially in the church. Moreover, while we commit ourselves and work to put into practice the celestial vision, things will change, finally, by God's action, who works in mysterious ways. I have hope that God, perhaps using new generations, will teach us the beauty and richness of attaining that unity in diversity in our churches. What we need is a change of heart, and God can change hearts.

ENDNOTES

¹ This paper is a translation and adaptation of the keynote lecture at the VII LCMS National Hispanic Convention in Orlando, Florida, August 3, 2022.

² Author David Brin has popularized this idea and brought it to my attention. "Addicted to Self-Righteousness?" Accessed July 10, 2022, <http://www.davidbrin.com/nonfiction/addiction.html>.

³ Spanish has a beautifully alliterative way of putting it: *Del dicho al hecho hay mucho trecho*. (From the saying to the doing there is a long stretch.)

⁴ Luis Bush, "The Meaning of *Ethne* in Matthew 28:19," *Mission Frontiers* (September/October 2013): 31–35.

⁵ W. Arndt, Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 276–277.

⁶ Young Yun Kim, *Becoming Intercultural: An Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2001), 83–84. "Ethnicity is an inclusive term that refers to combinations of cultural, racial, linguistic, national, and religious backgrounds, all pertaining to the distinctiveness of a people."

⁷ Paul Heerboth highlighted how "ethnicity" was of value to the early Lutheran immigrants who came to America: "Ethnicity (German, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish) was an important factor for Lutherans in general to preserve their cultural and theological traditions. This became evident during the large immigrations to the United States during the 1800s and early 1900s." Paul Heerboth, "Lutheran Mission Work in the North American Context," in *The Lutherans in Mission: Essays in Honor of Won Yong Ji*, ed. Eugene Bunkowske and Alan D. Scott, (St. Louis: Lutheran Society for Missiology Book Series, 2000), 45. Heerboth also quotes John E. Groh and Robert H. Smith: "Lutherans have exhibited a cohesiveness and maintained a calm, inner strength. While secular storms howl, they have managed to preserve from erosion a rich theological and liturgical heritage. Their rich worship patterns seem to have provided immunity against emotional revivals that have periodically swept over the continent and (against) the fads in celebration that sometimes captured others." John E. Groh and Robert H. Smith, *The Lutheran Church in North American Life* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1979), 8.

⁸ Eloise Heibert Meneses, "If you Belong to Christ: Ethnicity and the Global Church." Paper presented at the International Association of Missionary Studies 12th Assembly, Budapest, Hungary (2008), 1.

⁹ Meneses, 1.

¹⁰ Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Ministering Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016).

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¹¹ Cited in Endalkachew Wolde-Kidan, “Christian Mission in an Ethnically Polarized Nation” (paper, Theological Symposium of Mekane Yesus Seminary, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, June 17, 2022), 12. I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Wolde-Kidan for his helpful keen insights into the matter of ethnicity and ethnic conflict.

¹² Aquiline Tarimo, “Ethnicity, Common Good, and the Church in Contemporary Africa.” *SEDOS Bulletin*, [s. l.], v. 32, n. 8–9, (2000), 227–234.

¹³ Wolde-Kidan, 13.

¹⁴ Wolde-Kidan, 12.

¹⁵ Douglas L. Rutt, “Theological Education and Mission,” *Lutheran Mission Matters* 28, no. 2 (November 2020): 200–212. The interpretation of the “seven deacons” is an adaptation and summary of the argument I make in the article of *Lutheran Mission Matters* of November 2020. The same is also found in Travis Scholl, (ed.), *Let the Gospel Lead: Essays and Sermons in Honor of Dale A. Meyer* (Saint Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 2020), 69–82.

¹⁶ It is interesting that most Spanish translations I consulted take the *ὅτι* as “that” rather than the causal “because.” Could it be that Latinos are more likely to understand the subtleties of human relations than Anglos? In Latin America, whenever someone raises delicate topic, the first question people often ask themselves, rather than simply taking things at face value, is *¿Qué hay detrás?* (What is behind this?).

¹⁷ The word *preaching* does not appear in the Greek text but is added by the *ESV* translators.

¹⁸ German theologian, Martin Kähler is credited with making this assertion in the early twentieth century, as quoted in David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2016), 16.

¹⁹ Douglas L. Rutt, “The City of Antioch as Bridge between Jerusalem and the World,” *Concordia Journal* 48, no. 1 (Winter 2022): 11–23.

²⁰ Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2014), 240–241.

²¹ Eloise Hiebert Meneses, “If you Belong to Christ: Ethnicity and the Global Church” (paper, International Missiological Association 12th Assembly, Budapest Hungary, August 2008), <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/195/545>.

²² Arthur Satterwhite, “Christians Should Lead the Way in Diversity and Equity,” *Christianity Today*, digital edition (May 2022). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/may-web-only/diversity-equity-evangelical-christian-youth-ministry.html> (accessed September 27, 2022).

²³ Douglas L. Rutt, “Opportunities and Challenges in Ethnic Ministries” (unpublished manuscript, August 26, 1997).

²⁴ Tesfai Zeleke Tesema, *Hope for the Second Generation: How Children of Immigrants Can Rekindle Christianity in the West* (Tenth Power Publishing, 2022).

²⁵ Meneses, 12.