

A Multiethnic Church for the Sake of Our Children, Our Grandchildren, and the World

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Introduction

“Do you love your traditions more than your children?” This was the surprising, startling, unsettling question with which David Kinnaman, CEO of Barna Group and author of the bestselling books *Faith For Exiles*, *Good Faith*, *You Lost Me*, and *unChristian*, concluded his presentation at a joint pastors’ conference for the Minnesota North and Minnesota South Districts back in 2014. He left the crowd of clergy pretty much speechless because, I imagine, they had never been asked this question before, nor had they ever been asked to ponder its validity. Or, maybe they were instantly scandalized by the inference that there might be a legitimate distinction between what they rightly believed, taught, and confessed on the one hand and the way they lived out and corporately practiced that faith on the other. The conference planning committee never invited David Kinnaman to come back to present at another gathering of our pastors.

I have heard it said, and from some personal experience have to believe, that one of the primary reasons we don’t have more young people in our Lutheran congregations is because our congregations don’t look like the high schools that these young people attended and graduated from.¹ What do I mean by that? Well, Martin Luther King Jr. frequently called the Sunday morning worship hour “the most segregated hour” in America. Over the years, religious demographers have echoed King’s sentiment, arguing that in our country, more often than not, the people in our churches don’t look like those in our communities. We’re a pretty homogenous group. That is, we’re birds of a feather who have flocked together in our local congregations.

Meanwhile, our public schools reflect all the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity that’s going on out there, and our kids have come to not only like diversity but to expect it. So, it is argued, that a primary reason we don’t have more young people in our Lutheran congregations is because our congregations, in many instances, have stopped looking like



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our young people's communities. Our children see, experience, get to know, and get comfortable with ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity, and then they look at us, and we all kind of look the same, and they know that something about that is not right—that something about that is broken.

When the people in church no longer reflect their local communities in terms of culture, race, and ethnicity, it indicates to people that the church is not for everyone—that it's only for people who look and live a certain way. But we all know, of course, that nothing could be further from the truth. We know that Jesus died for *all* people so that all people might believe in Him and all might be saved. We know that the Great Commission Christ has given to us is to “make disciple of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19).

Our Church Today

Eight years after David Kinnaman's presentation mentioned above, it appears that his words were at least semi-prophetic in that the numbers of young people who are intentionally engaged in the mission and ministry of our LCMS congregations remains embarrassingly low.

In 2013, the largest segment of the district's 245 congregations (89 of them, or 36 percent) had an average weekly attendance between 100 and 249 people. Meanwhile, 112 congregations (46 percent of MNS congregations) had an average weekly attendance of 99 people or fewer. This is significant because it is generally accepted and understood that it takes, on average, approximately 100 or more people in church every week for a congregation to be able to afford the salary and benefits of one full-time, traditionally trained pastor. In other words, back in 2013, nearly half of the congregations (46 percent) in the MNS District were beginning to experience a crisis of leadership.

Fast forward eight years and the trends have only worsened. In 2021, for example, the largest segment of MNS congregations (93 congregations) was the group that averaged fewer than 50 people in worship per week. Add that group to the next largest segment that averaged between 50 and 99 people per week (75 congregations), and we see that by 2021, 71 percent of MNS congregations were no longer able, by themselves, to afford the services of one full-time, traditionally trained pastor.

These realities have weighed heavily on the hearts and minds of God's people throughout the district. Indeed, several years ago, when MNS District staff spent quality time listening to congregational leaders (both clergy and lay) from each of the twenty-four circuits that comprise the district, three major congregational concerns were enumerated time and time again: (1) aging membership, (2) declining worship attendance, and (3) the financial stresses that come with the first two concerns. These realities/concerns caused the laypeople running and supporting their congregations to express to us that they felt too old and too tired to keep their churches open. And indeed, since that time, the district has seen a pronounced increase in church closings.

I am confident the Minnesota South District is not the only LCMS district to have these concerns/problems/anxieties. Long-time Lutherans throughout our Church body are wondering what's going to happen to their congregations and their church buildings in the

not-so-distant future. Additionally, in terms of their own time, energy, and financial resources, they know that their local churches are “on the bubble,” meaning they are on the precipice of failure. Thus, most established LCMS congregations (especially those located in metro areas and places where good entry-level jobs are prevalent) need to start paying attention to the new immigrant churches that are popping up in their communities.

Instead of God sending us to the nations, He is bringing the nations to us. In the Twin Cities metro area alone, whole communities are changing. For example, as these words are written, the Twin Cities metro area is currently experiencing the following new realities:

- They have the largest Somali, Hmong, Oromo Ethiopian, Liberian, Karen Burmese, and Anuak populations in the US, as well as the second largest Tibetan concentration. In fact, the only place in the world where there are more Somalis is in Somalia.
- The Brooklyn Center School District is 80 percent non-white.
- The Richfield School District is 72 percent non-white.
- The Fridley School District is 61 percent non-white.
- The Robinsdale School District is 59 percent non-white.
- The Burnsville School District is 57 percent non-white.
- The North St. Paul/Maplewood/Oakdale School District is 57 percent non-white.
- The Osseo School District is 55 percent non-white.
- The Roseville School District is 54 percent non-white.
- The Bloomington School District is 49 percent non-white.
- The Phillips Neighborhood in South Minneapolis is the most diverse neighborhood in the US with over 100 languages spoken there.
- There are more Hmong gangs than Hmong churches.
- Before Covid-19, Eat Street (Nicollet Avenue) in South Minneapolis had over seventy-five ethnic restaurants in a six-block area.
- Eight Muslim mosques, six Hindu temples, three Buddhist temples, one Sikh temple, and one Jain temple are now all located in former church buildings throughout the Twin Cities.²

And as all these new cultural and ethnic realities take place, the Lord is moving the new immigrant Christians that come into our communities to start new ministries and plant new churches that are primarily reaching only their particular ethnic and cultural groups. Unlike most established Anglo churches, however, the immigrant churches do not suffer from a lack of energy, mission zeal, eager volunteers, or youthful exuberance. On the contrary, our immigrant brothers and sisters are “raring to go!” In short, their congregations have what many of our established Anglo congregations lack—children, youth, vibrance, liveliness, large numbers of committed and engaged laypeople, an outward/evangelistic focus, excitement for the present, and hope for the future. What the new immigrant churches lack, however, is familiarity with US culture; brick and mortar places and spaces that can be used for worship, mission, and ministry; financial stability; leadership cultivation and training; appropriate English curriculum for Sunday School and youth classes; and methods for organizing and running their congregations within an American

milieu. Under such circumstances, it only makes sense that Anglo and immigrant congregations should share their strengths and shore up each other's weaknesses.

This is already happening in a few LCMS congregations in the Twin Cities. One of our declining Anglo congregations merged with a Hmong Lutheran congregation pastored by two Hmong graduates of Concordia Seminary's Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology (EIIT). Today, Pastor Johnny Vang and Pastor Yia Lor are bi-vocational pastors who lead The Gathering Place in suburban St. Paul. Pastor Lor preaches every week in Hmong for the first-generation immigrant Hmong members, and Pastor Vang preaches every week in English for the second and third-generation Hmong, and for all the Anglo members of the church. Because both pastors are bi-vocational, the fledgling congregation can afford to have two pastors.

Likewise, when Pastor Matthew Cephus immigrated to America from Liberia, it wasn't long before he had planted Royal Family, a multiethnic congregation made up of immigrants from Liberia and Cameroon, as well as some Black Americans. Pastor Cephus, desiring to have a connection with and accountability to the larger Church, reached out to the MNS District, and, in time, became an EIIT student himself. Partnering with the district and one of the district's larger suburban Anglo congregations, it was decided that what the Twin Cities really needed was a multiethnic Lutheran church within the City of Minneapolis to give clear witness, at a time of great social and racial unrest, that the Gospel for Jesus Christ is for anyone and everyone, regardless of race or nationality, and to show that people from anywhere and everywhere can be brothers and sisters in Christ in one multiethnic congregation.

The problem, of course, was finding a site in Minneapolis where such a multiethnic congregation could be planted. Thank God that one of the district's Minneapolis Anglo congregations was still open! Gloria Dei, in Northeast Minneapolis, had a long and illustrious history, but over the past two or three decades, had encountered all of the problems and challenges facing established urban churches. So, despite some fear and trepidation, the Gloria Dei congregation bravely voted to open up their building to the Royal Family congregation and is even cooperating with Pastor Cephus and his people to evangelize the surrounding community. This is the kind of teamwork and partnering that the congregations in our Church body need to engage in now more than ever.

The homogeneous unit principle (HUP) tells us that "birds of a feather flock together," and it is very often on the basis of this sociological principle that local congregations come into being. The HUP was at work when German Lutherans came to the upper Midwest and settled there. German speakers naturally gravitated toward other German speakers who spoke, sang, worshiped, and communicated the Gospel in their first language, also called their "heart language." This is also happening among the new immigrants moving into the upper Midwest. They naturally gravitate toward "safe" spaces where they can communicate and commune with familiar forms and familiar people, and where they can hear the Good News about the person and work of Jesus in their heart language.

And this is what *needs* to happen for first-generation immigrants. They need to be able to think and talk and sing and hear and worship and receive all of God's Word-gifts in their heart language. Therefore, our existing Anglo congregational leaders do great work when

and where, if at all possible, they make space and time available for first-generation immigrant congregational gatherings. The HUP is working for the good of the Church in such instances.

But by the time the second generation comes around, the language, style, and traditions of the first generation begin to lose their sheen. Members of the second generation desire to be part of the broader culture and society. They speak English more often and better than their parents. They typically attend public school and become fluent in American culture. They are surrounded every day by kids from a plethora of racial, ethnic, social, and religious backgrounds. This is their normal! They don't necessarily want to learn "the mother tongue." They don't necessarily want to be steeped in the traditions of "their people" because those they consider *their* people aren't, necessarily, of the same tribe and tongue as their parents' people. I'll never forget the look of utter consternation that I received from a group of first-generation Sudanese church leaders when I asked them, "When I say the word *home*, what is the first thing that comes to your mind? And if I were to say the word *home* to your children, what do you think would be the *first thing* that came to *their* minds?"

So, the HUP is a sociological phenomenon that first-generation immigrant Christians use to their advantage to gather into congregations that fulfill their need to hear and experience the Gospel. And this is all well and good! It is my position, however, that we have *all* held onto the HUP as a way of planting, growing, and being the Church for far too long. True, many church planters in the 70s, 80s, and 90s were able (and were even encouraged) to use the HUP to their advantage in order to speedily gather a new group of believers and plant a new church that could quickly become a self-sustaining congregation. But times have changed, and our country is fast becoming a nation of minorities, to the point that if a local church does not mirror the ethnic diversity of its surrounding neighborhood and community, then it is viewed by the people in that community as odd, at best, or as irrelevant or counter-productive, at worst.

A year or so ago, those of us who were on the executive staff of the Minnesota South District were all challenged to come up with a Big Hairy Audacious Goal (BHAG) for our district. Here's what I devised and submitted:

*Revelation 7:9–12 gives us an astounding vision of the future: men and women from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue will one day gather before the throne and worship God with one voice for all eternity. If this is the future of the Church, can there be any doubt that God is pleased to see us pursuing such a vision here on earth? We often ask ourselves, "If the kingdom of heaven is not segregated, why on earth is the Church?"*³

*It is the multi-ethnic church at Antioch, and not the homogeneous church at Jerusalem, that should serve as our primary model for local church development in the twenty-first century. Yes, it is the church at Antioch, and not the church in Jerusalem, that is the most influential church of the entire New Testament.*⁴

Stretch goal (BHAG) for the next triennium:

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The churches and leaders of the Minnesota South District are intentionally working toward making their congregations as racially and ethnically diverse as the public high schools that are located closest to their church buildings.

How is this done?

- Invite, encourage, and welcome non-Anglo congregations and/or Christians to share our buildings, and intentionally engage in fellowship, service, and Bible study activities together with them.
- Encourage, empower, and expect Anglo ministry leaders to spend quality time around and build healthy relationships with non-Anglo ministry leaders.
- Provide cross-cultural competency education, training, and hands-on experiences for congregations and their leaders.
- Provide ample tuition aid for those non-Anglo leaders desiring and qualified to enroll in Concordia Seminary's Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology (EIIT), Center for Hispanic Studies (CHS), or Cross-Cultural Ministry Center (CMC) programs.
- Accommodate for including non-Anglo leaders in all district and circuit meetings, conferences, worship, and fellowship gatherings.
- Intentionally include non-Anglo leaders in district and congregational leadership.
- Work intentionally toward identifying, raising up, and equipping second-generation non-Anglo millennial leaders who can build and lead multiethnic ministries that reach the growing population of "nones," or the religiously unaffiliated, in our many diverse communities.
- Merge as many Anglo and non-Anglo congregations as possible, as soon as possible.

Nothing ever came of my recommendation, but I still stand by it. Not only because it is a way forward in forming new and more multiethnic congregations at a time when the world needs to see the power of the Gospel at work (i.e., gathering people from all races, ethnicities, backgrounds, and histories as one family in Christ), but also because this is the only kind of church that will grab and hold the attention and imagination of second-generation immigrants as well as the Anglo children and grandchildren who are already missing from our congregations. They have heard us say to them, at many times and in various ways, that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to make all things new. And yet they have also seen our congregations get smaller and weaker and older and less-relevant to the mission fields around them. The HUP at work among us has wrought this, and for the sake of the mission field all around us, it needs to be intentionally impugned, discredited, and discarded. As our local churches transform into multiethnic churches, they become places for the world to see humanity at its best. They become communities of love, reconciliation, unity, and hope. They become places of Gospel transformation for our children, our children's children, and for the world.

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A Lesson from the Early Church

So how do we get from where we are in terms of racial, ethnic, and cultural makeup to where we ought to be? How do we create Christian congregations that look like the communities in which they reside? Well, perhaps looking at how the first-century Church did that exact thing will help us. As we can read in Acts 11:19, some of our early Christian brothers and sisters “were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen,” which incited the multiplication of churches. In other words, the fact that God allowed early Christians to experience hard times actually served to move them into the mission field. Reading the early chapters of Acts, we get the impression that those early believers were quite happy living in and around Jerusalem where most of the people they dealt with were just like them—but that wasn’t accomplishing God’s mission. So, God used persecution to thrust them into the midst of new people who lived in new places.

The disciples “traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:19–21, NIV). This way, persecution resulted in missionary work. Those nameless men from Cyprus and Cyrene did not go back to Cyprus or Cyrene after they were scattered from Jerusalem. Rather, they went to Antioch and did what Christians do: they talked about the person and work of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit used their Gospel presentations to save a great number of people. We don’t know their names. We don’t know how long they had been Christians before they traveled to Antioch. The most we can know about them is that, as early Christians, they were baptized, and “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). That’s pretty much all we know about their level of training. And that qualified them! It qualified them to share the Gospel with people who were just like them, and it qualified them to share the Gospel with the Greeks—that is, with people who were *way different* from them. And in saying that, I’ve just described pretty much everyone reading this article or sitting in our sanctuaries on Sunday mornings! We *all* have been baptized, adopted into God’s family as sons and daughters of the King. We *all* have been purchased and won from all sin, from death, and from the power of the devil—not with gold or silver, but with the holy precious blood and innocent suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. That’s what we’ve received, and that’s all we’ve ever needed to be His witnesses and missionaries wherever we find ourselves. Ordinary Christians make extraordinary missionaries.

Furthermore, as a church receives the Gospel of Christ and is immersed in the Word of Christ, it cannot help but share the love of Christ. In Acts 11, nameless missionaries from Cyprus and Cyrene speak the Gospel to Greeks living in Antioch and a great number of them believe and turn to the Lord, and a new and truly multiethnic church is born. Next, word of this new multiethnic church reaches the ears of the still monoethnic church in Jerusalem, and they send Barnabas to Antioch to check it out. Barnabas sees clear evidence of the grace of God at work among these new Christians and in their multiethnic church,

and he wants to help them, so he travels to Tarsus to fetch Saul (also known as St. Paul), and for the next year the two of them devote themselves to teaching the Word of the Lord to the multiethnic church in Antioch. All that immersion in the Word of God turns that congregation into a unified and loving church that cannot help but reflect the love of God for all people. Jews are loving Gentiles and Gentiles are loving Jews, so much so that the church in Antioch becomes a sending church.

They are engaged in mission through sending money (Acts 11:27), sending missionaries, and probably most important of all, these brothers and sisters in the church in Antioch are sending a message. You see, they have come to learn that as the leadership of a church goes, so goes the church. If the church is serious about reaching its community, then it will eventually look like its community, and if it really wants to look like its community, then it will work to make sure the leadership of the church looks like the community. So that is what we find in Antioch. The Bible tells us that there are prophets and teachers there. Two of them are from Africa, one is from Asia, and one is from the Middle East.

This shows everyone living in the city of Antioch that the Gospel is for *everyone!* Though they look and sound very different from each other, the leaders of the church are nevertheless *one* in the Gospel. Though they look and sound very different from each other, the people of the church at Antioch are nevertheless *one* in the Gospel: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

That kind of unity, respect, cooperation, and love is such a rare, special, and attractive thing that the rest of the city simply cannot refute the power of the Gospel to change hearts and lives. The church in Antioch sends a powerful and visible message of love and reconciliation to their community, and for that, they are the first Christians *ever* to be called “Christians,” that is, a people—a diverse people—who love *everybody* like nobody else on earth. As they receive the Gospel of Christ and are immersed in the Word, they cannot help but share the love of Christ.

So, we give ourselves over to this. We give up our illusions of control. We give up our efforts to run our churches our way. We give up our standard operating procedures, our preferred way of doing things, our buildings and programs and past successes. We give up the things we like, prefer, and are comfortable with in order to become what God has already declared us to be: His church in mission to the nations.

ENDNOTES

¹ See similar arguments in C. Peter Wagner, *Our Kind of People: The Ethical Dimensions of Church Growth in America* (Atlanta: J. Knox Press, 1979); Gemma Tulud Cruz, “Christian Mission and Ministry in the Context of Contemporary Migration,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 20, no. 2 (2016): 249, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2015-0030>.

² John A. Mayer, *CityView Report 17th Edition* (Minneapolis, MN: City Vision, 2020).

³ Mark DeYmaz and Harry Li, *Leading a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 31.

⁴ DeYmaz and Li, 42.