

A Great Multitude from Every Nation: Diversity and Inclusion

When I received my first-year student orientation package from Harvard Divinity School in the summer of 1982, I discovered a word in the Divinity School's promotional literature that would later become a central part of my ministry, my academic research and my journey with Christ. Throughout the orientation package, one word—*"inclusiveness"*—stood out as the Divinity's School's main value, central theme, and its mission for educating future religious leaders, community activists and theologians like myself. At that time, I was a twenty-one-year-old graduate from Howard University, and like many of my friends from the early Hip Hop generation I was more concerned with getting occasional "touch ups" on my Jheri Curl hair style and having the right label on my designer jeans than with really beginning to think about the meaning of *"inclusiveness."*

My journey at the Divinity School would later change this, as issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality and religion would be a part of every class discussion and our worship. I remember worship experiences there that changed both my language and my life, as the Holy Spirit revealed to me that my experience and faith journey as an African American, rather sexist male Baptist Christian, did not have to separate me from other children of God whose spiritual lives and social backgrounds were different from my own. In worship, a spiritual space was created where diversity and inclusion became real, as students of African, European, Latino, Asian, and Arab descent; Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Wiccans, hetero-

Lectionary Loop

Pentecost, All Saints Day, Year A,
Revelation 7:9-17

Lectionary Loop

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C

sexual women, heterosexual men, gay men, lesbian women, bisexuals, and transgenders all found a common language in prayers, music, and ritual. What a blessing it was; yet over the years of my pastoral ministry since then, I reflect differently upon my first experience with “*inclusiveness*” at Harvard and now find that we were a bit too idealistic. Indeed, idealism is necessary for sustaining hope and belief that something greater than our divisions, battles and quarrels with each other is attainable, but the idealism of our “*inclusiveness*” did not take seriously the risks, sacrifices, and challenges that it takes to make real diversity and inclusion happen in our congregations, social settings and communities of faith.

Risky Business Of Diversity and Inclusion

Many pastors and leaders in congregational settings would take pride in building a diverse and inclusive community, like the community and great multitude of people seen in John’s Revelation: “*After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and people and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’*” (Rev 7:9-10) Wow! I don’t know too many pastors who wouldn’t want to stand before a diverse congregation like this one, or better yet, brag at the next meeting of the pastor’s cluster group about the unique cultures, languages, races, and faces of people worshipping God under our leadership. To have an experience or kind of revelation like John’s would, indeed, be a true sign of God’s work among us, and well it should. But let’s not forget. The revelation of a new heaven and new earth, where one inclusive people gathered to worship and cry out to God from diverse nations, tribes, cultures and languages, was not seen by a preacher welcomed as a full-fledged paying member of the pastor’s conference. The revelation of John was seen by an outcast, an exile, a prisoner on the isle of Patmos, exiled by the government and left alone as a jail inmate because he took the risk and challenge of

Teaching Tips

Defining Diversity

Before examining the texts in this study, it will be helpful for you to discuss how diversity and inclusion are defined.

1. Diversity is often narrowly defined in racial and ethnic terms that do not take into account the wide range of cultural differences and social identities that clergy and congregation members encounter.
2. Sociologically, race is used to describe social constructions based on skin color, physical and visible appearance, while ethnicity refers more to heritage, language and traditions of racial groups.
3. We often overlook or ignore the voices and concerns of Latinos, Asians, Southeast Asians, Pacific Islanders, Arabs, and other racial/ethnic groups within and between the racial spectrum of black and white.
4. Beyond race and ethnicity, what other aspects of human identity might we recognize as part of our definition of diversity?

Source

Andersen Margaret, and Patricia Hill-Collins, *Race, Class, Gender anthology*, 4th ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 2001)

not going along with the mainstream when it came to his faith and his religious tradition.

The pastor who has the vision to create and welcome a diverse and inclusive community must first be willing to recognize and admit that building an inclusive ministry is challenging and risky work. Many pastors know all too well the stories of colleagues and friends who were thrown into the ring of a congregational fight by the mere mention of welcoming other racial and ethnic groups into the congregation, or by making changes in music and worship that would reflect other cultural traditions. In my own religious tradition as an African American Baptist, I have watched pastors expelled from ministers' unions by their own friends when they welcomed the ordination of women, or welcomed gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons. These experiences have made many pastors fear mentioning the words "diversity" and "inclusion."

Make no doubt about it. Creating diverse and inclusive communities of faith involves risks and challenges that some clergy are afraid to take. As a pastor and religious leader, you might find yourself in the shoes of John, exiled for standing up against longtime traditions and beliefs that have created racism, sexism, classism, nationalism and heterosexism. Yet, your role and call as a religious leader and student of the Bible place you in a unique position to transform these traditions and beliefs, because traditions of exclusion are often based on biblical ideas. Behind every act of hate and discrimination lies someone's interpretation of "what the Bible says." Yet, while the Bible can and has been used as an instrument of discrimination in the hands of those who promote exclusion and hate, the Bible is, at the same time, a source of comfort, hope, healing, reconciliation, liberation, equality, freedom, pride and good news to those whose ministries are not confined to maintaining the status quo, but who see the work of God in the biblical witness as an ongoing dynamic process to create, for every generation, a more diverse and inclusive world.

This study on diversity and inclusion challenges

Reflections

Inclusivity and Exclusivity in the Bible

1. Other biblical passages that suggest inclusion of diverse people are Isaiah 56:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31; and Galatians 3:26-29.
2. However, there are biblical passages that explicitly exclude others, such as Ezra 10:10-12 and Matthew 10: 5-6.
3. What is the basis for exclusion of certain people in Ezra and Matthew? Does this exclusionary attitude ever change? (See Matthew 28:19-20).
4. When has it been dangerous for you to take a stand against a social convention?

you to grapple with questions like these and to think more practically about the role you play as a pastor or leader in either working against diversity and inclusion, or making it happen in your congregation, community and in God's global world. This study moves toward a broad definition of diversity and inclusion, in terms of what sociologists Margaret Andersen and Patricia Hill-Collins identify as a "matrix" of cultural experiences. As a pastor, you may have already considered and attempted to address the web of interrelated, multi-layered and sometimes contradictory cultural differences of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality and generation in one congregation. As you journey through the texts selected for this study, the matrix approach will guide you to see that even the members in your congregation who seem most accepted can and may be excluded and isolated in other ways. Therefore, always keep, within your pastoral call, the compassion to see that everyone in your ministry, at some point, needs the message of God's inclusive love.

The texts for this set of Bible studies were chosen because they have been in seminars and presentations on diversity issues. I find that the texts reflect the personal experiences of many persons, including me, who participate in a conversation about who is to be included and why in the worship and nurture of our congregations. We begin with Genesis 11:1-9, the story of the Tower of Babel, where God scattered the people, and in so-doing, gave them diversity. Session 2 deals with a case of apparent racial prejudice in Numbers 12:1-15 and discusses the ways in which the church disguises racial prejudice behind other issues. Session 3 addresses the inclusion of women in the church with a reflection on Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4:1-30; 39-42. The subordination of the needs of disabled people, the topic of Session 4, is illuminated by the story of the paralytic and his friends in Mark 2:1-12. The baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 20:7-12 gives us an opportunity to discuss sexuality as a context for diversity and inclusion in the church in Session 5. The risk of losing young people to venues more exciting (and potentially more dangerous) than the church is the

focus of Session 6, with the story of Eutychus falling out of the window while Paul preaches in Acts 20:7-12. Paul scolded the Corinthian church for their exclusion of the poor from the common meal (1 Cor 11:17-34); our similar treatment of the poor is the topic of Session 7. Finally, Session 8 focuses on the power of the Holy Spirit to bring diverse peoples together into one church, based on the story of Pentecost in Acts 2:1-21.

Reflections

How Do You Read the Bible?

If given the choice to use the Bible as a source of discrimination or a source promoting cultural diversity and inclusion, what choice would you make as a pastor? What revelation would you see? Would you continue to perpetuate biblically based traditions that hold racial, class, sexual, and gender discrimination in place? Would you question those traditions and biblical beliefs so that you might see new heavens, new earths, and new kinds of people, which no one could categorize "or count," finding welcome in the community of Christ? And if it is the message of diversity and inclusion within the Bible that inspires you, what kind of personal sacrifices would this interpretation call you to make? What kinds of privileges would an inclusive interpretation inspire you to give up?