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Intentional Diversity in the Church of the Nativity

Don McLaughlin
Don.McLaughlin@nacofc.org

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I believe the church is central to what God is doing in his world. No institution on the planet is better suited or positioned to make a difference in regard to reconciliation than the church. In this brief essay I want to outline how I believe this can be done. I hope to make my case with stories, Scripture, and common sense application. I intend to include real problems, barriers, and traps we face along the way, but none of these are insurmountable. Each of the steps I outline below is rooted in Scripture, cross-cultural conversations, experience, and practical application.

The Context for Our Story

I serve as the preaching minister in a beautiful church, or what many call a "faith family." We are located in Atlanta, Georgia and have around 1,200 members. Of this number, a little over fifty percent are white of mostly European descent, around forty percent are black of African descent, and the remaining ten percent include several ethnicities, but mostly a thriving Latino contingent. Since its earliest days, the church has always been seen as inclusive and accepting.

North Atlanta was never one of *those* churches that excluded people because of skin color or ethnicity. The local and international mission work was multicultural, whether in the former Soviet Union, an African country, or Central America. By the late '80s and early '90s, the church had already ordained a black elder, had a few black deacons, and had a black preacher-in-training on staff. This was considered progressive even for Atlanta at the time. But at our core, we were still a white, affluent, politically conservative, and culturally Southern church. Racist attitudes were overlooked even when culturally progressive members frowned on such. Racism was not a deal breaker when considering someone to serve as an elder. This church had long since moved on from any *systematic racism*, but we were still mired in *systemic white culture, preference, privilege, and practice*.

In the late '90s God began writing a new chapter in our story: *intentional integration*. Although I would like to say we were all aware and on board with what God was doing, we were not. God was at work in ways that would only manifest themselves as the process unfolded. So what exactly has been happening that grew us from being a church that was ninety-five percent white and culturally dominated by white, Southern traditions and values to a church of such diversity and intentional integration? Our story has many chapters, and none of these chapters are separate from another. I ask that you read this with grace and patience, because we are not *there* yet and would never claim (*never!*) that we are experts in this journey. We are simply followers of Jesus seeking to live out his life and teachings in our generation.

Read It Again!

Donna gave me an article to read. She is African-American and the wife of one of our elders. The article, written by a nationally known attorney married to a federal judge, was advocating people become "colorblind." When I reported back to Donna that I had finished the article, she asked me, "Well, what do you think?" I answered that I thought the article was great. She replied, "That's the problem. The article is not

great." So I asked her to explain and she simply told me, "You go back and read it again and try to see why there is a problem with this kind of thinking." So I did.

I read the article again, this time equipped with the awareness that people of color may see it through a different lens. My eyes were opened to something I had not considered before: to be "colorblind" means that if I were to notice your color, the outcome would be *negative*. Why else would we encourage colorblindness? We would never consider going through a rose garden wishing that all the roses were gray. We wouldn't say to a man or woman, "I'm 'genderblind'—I don't even notice gender." Inherent in the statement "I don't even notice color" is the idea that "I don't see YOU." God is not colorblind. God is colorful and his creation abundantly bears witness. Color is beautiful whether it is a rose, a sunset, or our skin. So I made an immediate shift in my thinking to abandon the concept of being colorblind and to embrace being colorful.

Conversation Partners

God introduced me to Dr. Jerry Taylor in 2001.[1] He and his wife and two children were a part of our church for a few years. Jerry is an amazing friend, brother, and conversation partner. One afternoon Jerry and I met in my office. We were talking about issues of diversity and shared life and I wanted his insights as an African-American man. Some of the things I said that day to Jerry were:

1. There are questions I want to ask, but I do not know how to ask them.
2. There are words that I will use that I will not know are offensive unless someone tells me.
3. There are questions about race and diversity that, as a person of European decent, I think are important, but people of color may see these differently.
4. Conversely, there are also questions that my experience tells me are not important, but to people of color they are essential.
5. I want to know what African Americans talk about when no white people are around. What are the concerns, frustrations, joys, hopes, and dreams that are shared around the "black table" when white people are not present?

I wanted to learn and grow, but I needed help. . . . I needed a conversation partner from a different culture who would be patient and honest with me. So I asked a final question: "Jerry, will you be that conversation partner with me?" He agreed, and we have been inseparable since. Jerry and I talked for over five hours in that first conversation, closing our time together on our knees, holding hands, shedding tears, in prayer.

We had begun a journey that can only be successful if taken together. Everyone needs conversation partners who will help him or her grow in this transformative dialogue. What started with Jerry became my template for conversations surrounding other arenas ripe for reconciliation, such as gender equality, immigration, politics, gay rights, education, and health reform. We need people to walk, talk, and listen with us—people who will not give up when we are struggling through delicate subjects.

Tell Me More . . .

We read and hear a chorus of lament in America right now over the toxic nature of public and private discourse. From our presidential politics to church business meetings, respect and common decency seem to have been abandoned. We simply do not practice listening with patience, thoughtful reflection, and humility. The issues surrounding systemic racism evoke strong emotional responses. It seems we are wearing our feelings on our sleeves, just waiting to be offended. We are emotionally frail and psychologically brittle. Venting has become socially acceptable. An entire industry with its own emerging vocabulary has grown up

1. Dr. Jerry Taylor is a professor at Abilene Christian University in Abilene, Texas, and is a very influential person in our national conversation about race and reconciliation. He founded the Racial Unity Leadership Summit, a nationwide initiative to bring churches into constructive and transformative conversations around race and reconciliation. Dr. Taylor has assembled a diverse team of men and women—black and white—to assist church, communities, schools, and businesses in reconciliation.

with social media where we can *like* someone's post, or reply with an emoticon, to punctuate our response. People can now *unfriend* those who offend them. Perhaps most troubling in this development is the lack of differentiation between the behaviors of those who claim Jesus as Lord and those who do not.

Perhaps what is lacking is a listening emoticon that says to others, "Tell me more." Listening well is an adult behavior. My daughter in her mid-twenties likes to say, "'Adulting' is hard!" and perhaps listening well in an emotionally charged conversation is the hardest adulting to master! An important question to address is "How can we make the most of our conversations if we do not have the emotional and psychological stamina to listen well?"

A key example of this came out in the aftermath of the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore. Politicians and newscasters used the word *thug* to describe those who were rioting/demonstrating against systemic racism in policing practices. To the average white person, this word seemed appropriate for the actions they were observing. But it was only after some African Americans began discussing how the word *thug* had become a term with negative racial connotations did whites sit up and take notice. Then, a divide typical of our culture erupted. Some mocked the concern and used *thug* all the more with their sense of righteous indignation. Others appreciated and respected the conversation as helpful and constructive. The difference in the responses seems to be linked to maturity, empathy, and humility.

These events and conversations from the public arena can inform the church. At our church, we hosted a listening seminar for our leadership. The objective was to train them in the skills to listen well and create space for others to share different and even opposing views without reprise or interruption. Listening well has proven to be essential to the success of our intentional integration.

Do I Have to Know You Less to Love You More?

Coming directly on the heels of our growth in healthy conversations and listening skills was the question posed above, *"Do I have to know you less to love you more?"* Much like the implications between colorful versus colorblind, we faced head-on the question of *assimilation* versus *integration*. Stated more plainly, did our black members have to "act white" to fit in?

When I would ask our members of color about this there was an initial hesitancy. That simple hesitation was answer enough, but I wanted more. More understanding. More nuance. More insight. One of our elders, Fernando, has been a faithful friend and conversation partner. He often suggests books and articles for me to read that give me background and context to the nature of systemic racism. At his encouragement I read *Souls of Black Folk*, wherein the author, W.E.B. Du Bois articulates *double-consciousness*. An excerpt from Du Bois could be beneficial:

> Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: . . . How does it feel to be a problem? . . . One ever feels his two-ness,–an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder . . .

In a slightly comical aside, I want to illustrate the problem of assimilation versus integration. A friend and I were discussing the "assimilation versus integration" struggle between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois in the early twentieth century. During the conversation we got into a disagreement about how to pronounce *Du Bois*. He insisted it was pronounced "Du Bwah" as in the traditional French pronunciation. I produced a document from 1939 where Du Bois himself explained how to pronounce his name: "Due Boyss."[2]

The response of my friend was, "Well, he even got his own last name wrong!" I have come to realize that many black people wonder if whites really care what blacks think and feel. Until whites are willing to respect how black people name and define their own experience, we will have assimilation without integration.

2. *Chicago Sunday Evening Club* dated January 20, 1939. Cited in David Levering Lewis's *W.E.B. DuBois: Biography of a Race*, p. 11, Du Bois wrote, "The pronunciation of my name is Due Boyss, with the accent on the last syllable."

When applied to the church, it is inconsistent with the gospel of Jesus that anyone should have to endure systemic racism to find love, respect, and full fellowship in their local church (Gal 2). One should not have to hide a part of themselves to experience the love, compassion, acceptance, joy, and sweet fellowship at the table of the Savior in the midst of his family.

The Church of the Nativity

God began to impress on us the nature and impact of his earthly presence in and through the church. Scripture reveals this consistent theme throughout, and we noticed it powerfully illustrated in the extended birth story of Jesus. There is a surprising diversity in the characters God assembles to welcome the Christ Child. Consider these markers of diversity:

1. **Economic Diversity.** The Wise Men are so wealthy they can travel a great distance, off-load gifts of great monetary value, and still have plenty to return to their country of origin. Along with them you have Zechariah and Elizabeth (parents of John the Baptist) who are also white collar folk. But then you have the blue collar of a carpenter (Joseph) and the no-collar shepherds. The poorer estate of Joseph and Mary in comparison to the Wise Men is noted in their offering of two turtle doves instead of a lamb at Jesus's consecration at the temple (taking advantage of an exception made for the poor).
2. **Family Structure Diversity.** In this story you have an older couple (Zechariah and Elizabeth) who finally have their only child. But you also have a young pregnant girl with her not-married-long-enough-to-be-the-father husband, and an elderly widow (Anna).
3. **Cultural and Ethnic Diversity.** The Wise Men from the East were most likely Persian (modern-day Iranian), and their skin would have certainly been noticeably darker than the others in the narrative.
4. **Educational Diversity.** The Wise Men (perhaps men of science or astrology) represent the top of the educational ladder in the story, followed perhaps by John the Baptist's parents and Simeon, the man holding to God's promise that seeing the Christ would precede his death. But history bears witness that most of the others in the story would have been uneducated commoners, such as the tag given the apostles in Acts 4.13.

You may see other forms of the diversity in the story, but what is the significance of this detailed account? All of them were called by God to participate in this story! Either through dreams, a miraculous star, visions, angel visits, or the Holy Spirit, each of them was specifically recruited and cast for their role. God could have chosen anyone—or no one—to surround his son in Bethlehem, but it is significant that this collection of humanity is a template for the mission of Christ. He is consistently moving among the diverse peoples around him, breaking down barriers and smashing traditional walls of exclusion, oppression, and prejudice.

The Lord's Prayer and Heaven's Presence

Jesus's model prayer (Matt 6.9–13) coupled with the vision of heaven's house of worship (Rev 7.9–15) coalesced into a mandate for diversity: Around the throne in heaven is a "great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people, and language" in worship to God and in fellowship with each other. Jesus taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done *on earth as it is in heaven*," and you have our mandate. The church, right now on earth, is to be a witness to heaven's spiritual *and* social environment.

Once Born and Twice Born

In John 3 we overhear the gospel proclamation in a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Jesus articulates to Nicodemus that though all are *once-born*, there is a new birth from above that ushers people into the kingdom of God. Those born from above are the *twice-born*, birthed a second time by the Spirit. Twice-born people crystalize their lives around the person and work of Jesus Christ.[3] As they are centered on Christ,

3. A.W. Tozer., *Man, the Dwelling Place of God* (UK: Wingspread Publisher/Moody Publishers, 2008), chapter 4.

these twice-born people discover each other, and together they build the body of Christ. But what is this body to be like? It is not a body that is held together by social ties; but rather, it is a family formed by the new birth. Our relationships are rooted in a common Father, Savior, and Spirit. Skin color and cultural diversity among the twice-born people are welcomed as blessings rather than shunned as barriers.

The Great Commission

This spirit and mandate of diversity is cemented in the Great Commission (Matt 28.18–20) and even more clearly articulated in Acts 1.8. The commission of Christ is the discipling of all *ethnoi*—that is, all nations. The miracle of Pentecost isn't the tongues of fire but the tongues of nations. With breathtaking boldness this gospel theme drives the early church. The commitment to all the widows in Acts 6 and the embrace of the Samaritans and Africans in Acts 8 are precursors to the ultimate step of accepting Gentiles on even footing with the Jews beginning with Acts 10. This non-negotiable idea of mutuality consumes the rest of Acts and the letters of Paul. *There will be one church of all and no church for some.* The elect will be the one family of God through the blood of Christ, not the elite family of a race through the blood of man.

The Great Command

Paul's letters are theologically and practically *stuffed* with the ministry of reconciliation. The work of Jesus on the cross was not just a ticket to an eternal home on the blissful shore by and by! Jesus had done something on the cross that would change the way people live right now. This is not the *social gospel* as some would name it; but, rather, it is how the gospel changes the society. The gospel confronts the social order of sinful flesh. In his body on the cross Jesus destroys the dividing wall that separated person from person. His intent was to create one new man in himself, thus making peace. All reconciled to God are reconciled to each other.

James, the half brother of Jesus, carries this same theme into his letter, noting that one cannot be faithful to the glorious Lord if one is not faithful to the *other* among us. John adds his own exclamation point when he writes that one's love of God is only authenticated by one's tangible love for fellow humans.

Access to All, Privilege to None

From the gospel perspective, anything that turns humans against each other, or even away from each other, is not of God and has no place in the church. In order to build a fellowship that bears witness to the unifying work of Jesus Christ in the world, we had to learn how to have substantive conversations about very difficult issues. Perhaps the most difficult of these conversations is the meaning and impact of white privilege and how a dominant culture can actually creep into the environment of the local church.

Through Jesus we all have *access* to the Father by the Spirit. The veil in the temple was used as a metaphor to illustrate the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles. But that "dividing wall of hostility" was torn asunder so that all people would be joined together. It was God's intent through the church that the powers and principalities know that God's redemptive power is greater than the world's divisive schemes. Therefore, what God has joined together let no man put asunder.

White Americans, including white Christians, often bristle at a discussion of privilege. When *white privilege* is discussed, most whites do not appreciate the supposed insinuation. It is necessary for any and all churches that intend to share their lives and worship across all cultures and colors to have productive discussions about privilege. There are majority cultures in nearly every nation of the world. This means that from country to country the privileged culture may be wrapped in a different color skin or speak a different language. But privilege is at the core of what the gospel of Jesus Christ seeks to remove, so it must be explored.

First, privilege does not have to do with assets or resources; but rather, it has to do with *access*. In the United States of America, the demographic that enjoys the highest level of unrestricted access is white European. Let me offer some examples that may help us understand this.

1. **Homer Plessy**—New Orleans, Louisiana
   Homer Plessy was born during the Civil War and became famous as an adult in the United States Supreme Court case known as Plessy vs. Ferguson. Although Homer received a brief taste of integration in the post-war South, it was short-lived. He had a fair complexion but was 1/8 black, which categorized him as a "Negro." Homer, *because of his complexion,* could have freely boarded any train car in his day, even those designated "whites only," but he believed this to be unjust. In 1892 he purchased a first-class ticket and sat in the whites-only section. He was arrested as part of a plan to bring the segregationist laws before the court. Judge John Howard Ferguson, however, denied his rights and this set the case on a track that ended up in the Supreme Court. The Court had started leaning more toward segregation and in 1896 handed down what became infamously known as the "separate but equal" ruling. This enshrined segregation in the legal code of the nation. A sad day indeed, and it would be nearly sixty more years until it would be struck down.

2. **Robert E. Jones**—Mississippi
   Jones was the first African-American general superintendent of the AME Church. While speaking at a retreat for white Christians in Ohio, Jones came up with the idea of establishing a retreat where blacks could attend. This was 1923 and the church, like the nation, was strictly segregated. In the south, blacks were not allowed access to public beaches with whites. Jones found a beautiful site on the Gulf Coast in Waveland, Mississippi. Although the locals would not consider selling the land to a black person, they sold the land to Jones, *thinking he was white because of his light complexion.* Make sure you read that last sentence again. Though the whites would not sell the land to a black person, they sold it to Jones because they thought he was white! Facing this kind of discrimination was common for black people. Jones then established the Gulfside Assembly that served the black community for decades.

3. **Walter White**—President of the NAACP, 1931-1955
   White's story is fascinating. He was a dynamic leader with relentless energy and a keen mind for mobilizing people to a cause. Following his own description of himself, White looked white. He had blonde hair and blue eyes. Of his thirty-two great-great-great grandparents, five were black and twenty-seven were white. How would this categorize someone racially? Here's a snippet of his story, and it is instructive for the larger picture of white privilege.

   While White was in Arkansas investigating the lynching of blacks, he overheard whites of European descent pledging to kill him, and they noted that he was a "yellow n-gger" trying to pass as a white man. But those hunting for White didn't realize he was right there in their midst because he didn't look black. His *appearance as a white man* sheltered him from the violence other blacks were facing. Some complained that he wasn't *truly* black. But in 1924, the Racial Integrity Act had been passed, codifying into law the one-drop rule. The one-drop (of blood) rule sought to legally bind all US Americans into either the "white" or "colored" categories at birth. One drop of black blood (five black great-great-great grandparents in the case of Walter White) would legally classify him as Negro. These laws were in effect until overturned in 1967 by the US Supreme Court.

   Originally, citizenship and ethnicity records were not so narrowly defined. But white people who held the reins of power wanted to restrict the lives and opportunities of blacks, and this required legal classification. So the one-drop rule was put into place by whites, but it was clearly nonsensical and woefully inadequate for even their own segregationist aims.

4. **George McLaurin**—University of Oklahoma
   In 1948, George applied to the law school at the University of Oklahoma and was denied. The school cited segregation laws, but the Supreme Court ruled in 1950 that OU had to admit McLaurin to class. The school acquiesced, but seated McLaurin in an anteroom, separated from the rest of the students

who were white. George McLaurin was fifty-four years old and had already earned his master's degree in education when he was denied *access* to OU.

5. **Linda Brown**—Topeka, Kansas
   Linda Brown was a third grader when her father, Oliver, joined the class action lawsuit against the Board of Education. Along with the other plaintiffs, Brown simply wanted shared education. He wanted his daughter to be able to attend the elementary school that was nearest to their residence rather than being transported across town to a racially segregated school. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, striking down the "separate but equal" ruling nearly sixty years earlier in Plessy vs. Ferguson.

6. **Ruby Bridges**—New Orleans, Louisiana
   On November 14, 1960, six-year-old Ruby Bridges was the first black student to enter William Frantz Elementary School. The Supreme Court had already struck down segregation in public schools some six years earlier, but many states and locales were not in compliance with the federal law. Many state and local leaders in Louisiana were committed to segregation, so it would take legal action by the federal government and troops to escort Ruby to the school that was legally *accessible* to her. The famous American artist Norman Rockwell captured the emotion of the day and determination of Ruby in his classic work *The Problem We All Live With*.

7. **James Meredith**—Mississippi
   Meredith was a nine-year veteran of the United States Air Force and had achieved good grades during his two years at Jackson State University when he applied for entrance to the University of Mississippi. It required a Supreme Court decision, pressure from the Attorney General of the United States, and five hundred US marshalls to enroll Meredith and seat him in a classroom on October 1, 1962. Why would a veteran of the United States military, especially one who demonstrated academic acumen in two years at another state-accredited college ever be denied *access* to a public university? Because he was black. Meredith himself noted that he was not at war with whites but, rather, he was at war with the idea of *white supremacy*, and he knew that many whites could join him in the fight to dismantle this inequity and insure liberty and justice for all.

I highlight these examples, but they represent millions (yes, *millions*) of experiences. All of these examples share a common thread: privilege did not have to do with *assets* but with *access*. In the famous 1960 case of the sit-ins at the lunch counter in the Greensboro, North Carolina Woolworth store, four college freshmen chose to demonstrate against segregation. This case was a landmark moment in the Civil Rights Movement as it highlighted the white privilege of access. Privilege is not about resources. In this case, the wealthiest black person in Greensboro was barred from service at the "whites only" lunch counter while the poorest white, if present with a nickel, could sit down and buy a cup of coffee. The poorest white had access where the richest black did not.

There are two primary reasons many whites chafe at the idea of white privilege. First, it offends their sense of being upright and fair, casting a demeaning embarrassment on their sense of personhood. It feels to them like being white is inherently bad. Secondly, whites react negatively against the idea of white privilege because they believe it belittles their own hardships, struggles, poverty, and challenges. It is as if all their accomplishments were handed to them and doesn't recognize their hard work in overcoming their unique struggles.

This was highlighted in an August, 2014 interview with television personality Bill O'Reilly. He spoke passionately about his hardscrabble life growing up in Levittown, New York. He noted that his personal story "proved" that white privilege is a construct of liberals who are making damaging excuses for blacks not to succeed. But one only has to do a little research to learn of the whites-only history of Levittown,

leading to generational wealth and equity that was denied to blacks because of race. O'Reilly's argument from personal experience proves the exact opposite of his claims. That blacks were denied the opportunity to rent or own homes in the post-WWII explosion of the American suburban expansion (and specifically Levittown) absolutely gave whites a leg up, and continues to generate economic inequity. (Check out the history of Levittown and the current socioeconomic statistics for a more detailed awareness of the embedded racial inequity.) Again, privilege is not about resources but about access, and it resulted in blacks (even WWII black veterans) being denied access to own or rent homes in Levittown communities across America.

Levittown, Pennsylvania, was the largest planned community in the world when it was finished just outside of Philadelphia. Construction began in 1952 upon the completion of the first Levittown on Long Island, New York (where Bill O'Reilly grew up). There were 17,311 homes, with 60,000 residents—all white by design. William and Daisy Myers were the first family of color to buy a home in Levittown. Daisy recounted their harrowing ordeal of rocks coming through their windows and a cross burning in their front yard in a gracious recounting published in the *Baltimore Sun* in 1997.[4] She chooses to remember the wonderful people of God that rallied around them and supported their family, but it doesn't erase the reality that whites thought blacks should not have access to the same housing where whites were welcomed. This is the definition and the outcome of white privilege.

Bill O'Reilly does, however, highlight the struggles whites have to feel validated for their own accomplishments *while also* admitting their privileged status. White privilege does not ignore the hardscrabble life some whites have had to endure. These concerns are valid and should be taken seriously.

1. White privilege is not an attack on white people for being white.
2. White privilege is not an attempt to make white people feel guilty for having white skin. No one should bear an unequal burden for his or her skin color, right?
3. White privilege does not demean the hardships of anyone, and certainly does not belittle the poverty that many whites experience.

White privilege does exist. It exists in the form of what author Peggy McIntosh termed *the invisible knapsack.* It means that white culture in America is born into the dominant culture. This status means that in our country a white (gender bias is a discussion for another time) person was offered citizenship while blacks were denied. Whites were never denied access to a school, higher education, or the political process *based on the color of their skin*. White people were not excluded from stores, restaurants, beaches, public parks, toilets, or drinking fountains because of their skin. Because of this access, whites were exposed to experiences and opportunities for many generations that give them invisible advantages. This invisible knapsack allows them to navigate many circumstances that others without this privilege of access still, often, cannot leverage for their own advancement.

I have been criticized many times for speaking and writing on these issues. I have been directly accused, and even hit in the head with a purse, for "stirring up old issues that are no longer relevant." But it has always been white people that have declared that these issues are "old" or "fixed" in America. The last twenty-four months (2014–15) made it clear, from Ferguson to Baltimore, that "this ain't fixed!"

Individual Episodes or an Ongoing Narrative?

Many white people isolate these cases as individual events and then discount them as case-by-case episodes. They want to find something in each episode that suggests the outcome, such as in the case of Michael Brown (shot to death in Ferguson, Missouri), is really that person's fault. Many whites do not understand the Black Lives Matter movement because they do not see the connection between Trayvon, Eric, Michael, Tamir, Freddie, and others on a seemingly endless list.

4. See http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1997-08-21/news/1997233064_1_daisy-myers-levittown-epithets.

In reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement, we saw the rise of All Lives Matter, White Lives Matter, and Blue Lives Matter. I don't believe anyone is questioning if all lives matter, but at North Atlanta, we had to face different questions—gospel questions. *Is it best to dismiss the cries of the hurting?* Is the best response of the church to point fingers of accusation, or to quickly attempt to disqualify the cries of others? This is not the way God speaks to Moses about the cries of his people Israel, nor of the cries of the laborer in the field, nor the cry of the alien living in their land. This is not how Jesus responded to the cries of the marginalized and outcasts. The church must offer something better that befits the heart of the God we serve.

My wife and I have four sons and one daughter, including an adopted African-American son. Through our son we have been made painfully aware of the ongoing systemic racism that plagues our society. And as the nation confronts these situations from different points of view, politics are woven into the equation, often resulting in an even greater divide. Whites can make a huge difference by respecting, and not discounting, the voices from minority communities that attempt to shed light on their experiences in a white-dominated system.

The Church of Jesus Christ Can Do This!

Yes! The church—*the intentionally integrated church*—can speak a fresh message of unity into this fractured world. The core message of the gospel levels the playing field. Our *shared access* to God through the work of Christ on the cross and the presence of the Holy Spirit destroys the barriers and the hostility. The love God gave us flows through us to each other. We do not fear each other because we know and love each other. Every syllable of the gospel message unifies the body of Christ into a colorful display of the creative heart of our Creator. This gospel message is centered in Christ and decenters any privileged group. The gospel destabilizes all systems that grant privileged access to power and resources.

Yes! A church that is willing to take tangible steps toward intentional integration can make a difference, but rays of hope must be wrapped in practical steps. These are some of the steps we have taken:

1. **Hospitality challenge.** At North Atlanta, we recognized that worshiping together didn't equate to relationships, so we initiated the hospitality challenge. We challenged every member in our church to have a meal with another member *in their home*— no restaurants allowed! This pressed us to share table time together in each other's space. As we continued this challenge over the years, the familiar structures of systemic segregation continued to fall into irrelevance. As Jesus makes room (is hospitable) to all of us, so we make room for each other. When Jesus is at the center of the table, there is room for all.
2. **Integrated leadership.** If leadership and decision-making power is not shared, the church is not integrated. Our pastoral staff enjoys the distinct advantage of diversity with men and women of African, Latino, Asian, and European heritage serving together. Our eldership is still heavy on the European demographic, but we do have two black elders and one Latino elder. *But this is significant.* One of the hidden problems of systemic racism is shutting minorities out of the leadership development process. If you want a more diverse leadership you must open all the doors along the way that will contribute to their growth and experience. In October, 2014, we ordained our first Latino elder. Significantly, Spanish is his primary language and his English is a work in progress. Not only did this impact the way the church saw leadership, but, it shifted the pronouns in our Latino members from *them* to *us*. When Jesus is the center of our leadership, *there is no them among us*.
3. **Small groups and discipleship models.** Our twenty-plus-year-old commitment to intentional integration exposed tenacious pockets of systemic segregation. We determined to intentionally equip our small groups for diversity. This does include recruiting leaders and hosts from diverse demographics but, more specifically, it equips these leaders to create environments where integration can flourish. This means leaders learn how to facilitate safe conversations that welcome and affirm diverse points of view concerning the application of Biblical teachings to complex social concerns. It means purposefully getting to know each other in the small group so that we don't perpetuate assumptions about family, community, education, economics, and politics that affirm only one

dominant culture. When our small groups are centered on knowing Christ and being transformed into his likeness, the reasonable and expected outcome is the blending of our shared lives.

4. Worship. You know the challenge churches face in regard to worship styles even when the membership is homogenous, so you can only imagine the size of the challenge with diversity! But once again, we have found this to be a gift in disguise. Many people assume that all whites prefer country, classical, or rock music and that all blacks prefer hip-hop, rap, or jazz! This couldn't be further from the truth! Worship has given us a shared language where God and his mission in the world are the preferred language, style, and genre. The physical presence of diversity actually sets an expectation for diversity in worship. This doesn't solve all the worship frustrations, but diversity in worship is a blessing, not a curse. When God in his glory is the center of our praise, then the vision of Revelation 7 becomes the reality of our gatherings on earth.

As I close my thoughts, Jesus only and always is at the center of the church, his faith family. The call goes out from him, and, as he is lifted up, he calls all people to himself. All who respond to his call meet each other at the center and become inextricably integrated with each other. There is **no** other arrangement that qualifies for the label *church of Christ*.

Don McLaughlin preaches for the North Atlanta Church of Christ in Atlanta, Georgia (don.mclaughlin @nacofc.org).