

**As Disciples** become a more diverse body of believers, how we reflect that shift in the leadership of our fellowship shows our maturity as people of faith.

**O**ur denomination is changing. The ever increasing presence of ethnic groups is transforming the face not only of mainline denominations, but of the nation as a whole. During the last two decades, the percentage of new African-American, Asian-American and Hispanic-American Disciples congregations has outpaced the growth of those congregations whose parishioners are mainly of Anglo-European descent. The growth of African-American congregations like Light of the World in Indianapolis and Ray of Hope in Decatur, Georgia, has been mind-boggling. By the same token, the number of developing Hispanic congregations in Central Florida has been phenomenal. In Southern California, Asian congregations spur growth in the region.

While the vast majority of Disciples in the United States and Canada rejoice in the growth of racial-ethnic congregations, such growth has been the source of much conflict in our denomination. On the one hand, the denominational structures established in the 1960s never envisioned such a dramatic demographic change.

While the new design included African Americans—represented by the leadership of the Convocation—little or no provision was made for incorporating national Hispanic and Asian-American leaders for those emerging groups. On the other hand, ministry to and with these new constituencies required resources that the denomination was not fully prepared to provide. It required bilingual and bicultural ministers, acculturated educational resources, ethnic programs at seminaries and financial support that the church is still struggling to produce.

We are aware of the denomination's limited resources to pursue its different avenues of ministry. We also are aware that several Disciples leaders from all ethnic groups are forging together a more inclusive church.

Yet, we must also acknowledge that there is a significant percentage of Disciples who remain unconvinced.

These well intentioned brothers and sisters think that ethnic groups—particularly Hispanics and Asian Americans—will be assimilated to American culture in a generation or so. Therefore, they ask, why should we transform our church in order to incorporate transitional congregations meant to serve solely the newly arrived immigrants? Why do we need a more "inclusive" denomination?

### Update the standards

Mainline denominations have employed several arguments in support of the inclusion and full participation of ethnic minorities. Two of the most common ones call for updating the denomination and for democratic representation. The first argument can be summarized in the phrase "Update the standards," although it is commonly stated in phrases like "It's the 90s." This reasoning calls the church to be responsive to the changes in contemporary society. It is a kind of Protestant *aggiornamento*. In this sense, the full inclusion of people of color in the leadership and ministry of our denomination would be an appropriate response to the new demographic trends.

### Look like the Church

The second argument is expressed in phrases such as "We should look more like the Church." It recognizes the growth of ethnic congregations and calls for proportional representation. Based on democratic principles, it calls for the appointment of leaders who truly represent the new faces of the denomination. It also calls for a proportional distribution of funds, based in the number of members from a given constituency. For example, if 2 percent of all Disciples would be Hispanics, a proportional percentage of all

funds should be allocated for Hispanic ministries.

I must confess that the crisp logic of these positions has seduced me at different moments. I have even used phrases such as "It's the 90s" or "We should look more like the Church" in many arguments and discussions. Nonetheless, I now understand that these arguments are faulty. They are inadequate because both are based on pragmatic and utilitarian visions of the Church, not on a sound theological understanding of the Gospel.

#### How about: 'be faithful'?

After much reflection, I have come to understand that the main reason that should motivate the Christian community to fight against discrimination both in the Church and in society is faithfulness to God. God is the one calling us to be inclusive. Therefore, our desire to be faithful to God should be motivation enough to help us rise above our class, racial, ethnic, and gender biases and prejudices. The Bible states this principle clearly in texts such as James 2:1-9 (see below).

Notice that the text calls the Church to show no partiality or favoritism. Such a call is not based on pragmatic arguments, but on the character of God. The one who

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rejects partiality to the powerful and discrimination against the poor is none other than God.

James is not the only New Testament document that advances this idea. We can find a similar argument in Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Notice that Romans 2:11 says: "For God shows no partiality." The Greek word translated "partiality" in this verse is the same one rendered in James 2:1 as "favoritism." Therefore, both James and Paul affirm the same ideas in different places and under different circumstances: God's character—as revealed in the Scriptures—must be the basis of and the model for our conduct.

The theological understanding of this issue has important implications for the life and ministry of our denomination. If we believe indeed that God has no preference for a ruling class, we cannot accept the hegemony of a particular ethnic group over all others. If we believe indeed that God is not a


racist, we must accept, minister, promote, and nurture developing ethnic congregations.

In short, the voices of protest that Hispanic Disciples, as well as other constituencies, may raise on several issues are not a matter of mere denominational politics or senseless power struggles. On the contrary, such action is a matter of faithfulness to God. The reason why we may denounce situations that we deem to be unjust is that we want our denomination to mend its ways and to be faithful to the just God.

Under this light, each time a Disciple addresses issues of class, race and gender, such person engages in a theological endeavor. Therefore ...

- The effort to achieve proper representation in the leadership of the general units of the denomination is a godly struggle.
- The yearning for multicultural leadership at regional levels is a godly struggle.
- The call for adequate funding for the development of new ethnic congregations is a godly struggle.
- The request for contextualized resources for Christian education is a godly struggle.
- The demand for multicultural programs at seminary level is a godly struggle.

All these are theological and godly endeavors because they are inspired, motivated, encouraged and compelled by God's character.

The topic of the representation of ethnic minorities in the different units of our denomination will continue to be an important issue for all Disciples. Let us then move away from the pragmatic and utilitarian arguments to theological ones. In the final analysis, the struggle against racism is nothing but a matter of faithfulness to God and to the gospel handed down to the church. 

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**My brothers and sisters**, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

—James 2:1-9