

A Pipeline for Diverse Leadership

How churches can build an inclusive team

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The winds of change are blowing around us. During the past year, we've experienced racial unrest, political division, financial uncertainty, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The events of 2020 will continue to shape our world in the new year and beyond. But there are other changes happening as well — developments that are far less noisy but no less impactful. Among them are the racial and ethnic shift our nation is making toward a majority-less society.

In 2019, 40% of Americans identified as a race or ethnicity other than “white alone, not Hispanic or Latino,” according to the U.S. Census Bureau. That share will increase to more than 50% by 2044, the Census Bureau projects. Our nation is experiencing an increase in diversity that will continue to climb.

This trend is reflected in the Assemblies of God USA, with non-white adherents making up 44% of our Fellowship.

How do we capitalize on this moment with proactive initiatives that glorify the Lord? As an African American leading a diverse congregation, I recognize the opportunity before us. But it's not just an opportunity for some of us. It's an opportunity for the entire Church to pursue Christ's vision of preaching the good news to all nations (Mark 13:10).

Granted, not all communities are seeing the impact of this shift. But those of us who are in a diverse setting have a responsibility to serve and represent all our neighbors.

We need to create systems for raising up, retaining, and releasing ethnically and racially diverse leaders in the local church. We need to recognize those with leadership capacity and give them places to serve.

I can attest to the life-giving power of this. Others in leadership have affirmed my calling and value by creating space for me to be seen and heard, and by investing in my learning and growth.

Some leaders struggle with the tension of intentionality versus tokenism. They fear being more inclusive means creating a quota system that is all about box checking. But that mindset suggests diversity and competence are mutually exclusive, which is certainly not the case.

When Brooklyn Dodgers President and General Manager Branch Rickey desegregated Major League Baseball, he chose to bring in Jack “Jackie” Roosevelt Robinson.

Robinson was black *and* a great player. He helped the Dodgers capture six pennants and win the 1955 World Series. In 1962, Robinson was inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

Recruiting diverse leadership is a matter of promoting biblical justice and identifying quality people who might not get a chance to lead unless you open the door for them.

Here are four ways to create a diverse leadership pipeline in your church:

1. Reflection

Reflection can be a powerful process. A great place to begin is with the question, “Why?” Why am I motivated to raise up diverse leaders? Am I upholding a biblical value, or am I just giving a nod to environmental pressures? Am I responding to cultural trends or Kingdom priorities? Is this a fleeting moment of conviction or a challenge toward a new mission?

Reflection brings clarity and releases passion for the journey ahead. I went through this process with the last staff pastor position we filled. As I reflected on the ideal candidate, I considered who was missing from our team in terms of diversity.

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I recognized that a younger leader would add value. I saw we also could benefit from someone white or Hispanic. This process proved invaluable because it opened my heart to gaps I might not have previously considered.

2. Vision

As you formulate a vision of investing in diverse leaders, begin to dream, with pen on paper, about the future. A clear vision can shape values, define where to invest your energy, and keep you on task during times of testing.

Our church developed a written statement that captures our vision for diversity. It speaks to how we fulfill the five attributes of the New Testament Church: worship, fellowship, discipleship, service and outreach. We cast a vision around the value of our multiethnic identity as a local congregation in this declaration:

We dream of a place where the love of Christ is made known within the local church and the greater community. A place where people, regardless of their gender, race, income, ethnicity, or age, can be a part of the Lord’s work that is happening at One Church, Lima.

Keeping this statement before our congregation has helped keep our vision for diversity vibrant and fresh.

3. Culture

We can do all the right things, for all the right reasons, with all the right motives, and still not make a lasting difference. That's where culture comes in.

The reality is, sometimes vision and culture collide. If we take a strong vision and immerse it in an unhealthy culture, that culture will stifle and suffocate the vision. As author Sam Chand says, "Culture eats vision for lunch."

If the culture cannot sustain the vision, then go to work on the culture. The folks we lead may not struggle with change as much as they struggle with the transitions the change brings. Help people deal with the emotional, financial, psychological and relational impact of the change so they can manage the new reality.

We recently built a new facility, and while most congregants were excited about it, I noticed some were struggling with the idea.

One young man in his 20s said about the former facility, "Pastor, I love this building! I love the memories and relationships I built in youth ministry. I'm away at college, and part of coming home is coming to worship in *this* building. I don't know how I'll handle never worshipping here again."

I took a moment to process these emotions with him and shared why this move was a good thing. Acknowledging what he was feeling and talking together about the new place God was taking us helped him deal with the transition.

Similarly, increasing your church's commitment to diversity may make some people uncomfortable. Work through those issues with love and grace, take steps toward creating a more inclusive culture, and move forward together.

4. Development

In *Multiplying Missional Leaders*, Mike Breen suggests four steps for developing leaders: recruiting, training, deploying, and reviewing.

Recruiting involves finding and onboarding qualified candidates for leadership. Build relationships with influencers who can help you identify diverse leaders. Your network could include local pastors, ministers from other areas, educators, and marketplace leaders.

Training means taking the time to provide new leaders with the necessary tools to be successful. Follow this with an ongoing investment in their personal growth.

Deploying leaders is all about releasing them to serve and giving them grace to make mistakes.

Reviewing is a matter of following up on progress at regular intervals. Continued engagement, involvement and communication can go a long way toward helping your diverse leaders feel safe and valued.

In Scripture, the tribe of Issachar “understood the times and knew what Israel should do” (1 Chronicles 12:32). Likewise, today’s church leaders need to model an awareness of our times. And those who can formulate a plan of action should do so.

God calls us to recognize where the Lord is working and join in with Him. May we seek to lead our churches to become what Jesus envisioned in Mark 11:17: “a house of prayer for all nations.”

This article appears in the January–March 2021 edition of Influence magazine.