Intercultural Leadership in Diversity-Oriented Churches

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The Church in the United States is at a critical juncture where its future could depend on leaders’ ability to reconcile historical patterns of incongruence between the Church, the Biblical message of reconciliation, and the socially integrated lives of people in a growing number of communities. Recent trends suggest that a significant number of churches in the United States are overcoming the limiting effects of racial conflict, prejudice, and ethnocentrism despite church traditions and systems that promote homogeneity as a practical alternative to the inevitable conflicts between different people groups. **Diversity-oriented churches, despite the challenges they face, are some of the fastest growing churches in the United States.**

As multiculturalism takes hold of the Church in the United States, there will be a greater need for leaders with intercultural competency. Intercultural competency is a set of skills, knowledge, attributes, behaviors and attitudes necessary for successful interaction with people from different cultures. Intercultural competence is behavior that promotes shared understanding between people with different values, experiences and perspectives. Intercultural leaders are able to reconcile cultural dilemmas and conflicts within their organizations. But how do successful leaders develop this and other related competencies? And, how much should an interculturally competent leader know about the context of the local church in order to be effective? In this article I will discuss the intercultural leadership in the context of leading in diversity-oriented churches. The
article will highlight recent trends in the growth and development of diversity-oriented churches and present a brief discussion of how it relates to effective leadership.

**Diversity-Oriented Churches**

At the group level, the term diversity is used to refer to heterogeneity within a group on characteristics such as informational (professional background, education, skills), visible (race, age, ethnicity) or value-based (ethic, motivation) differences. Diversity-oriented churches are missional multicultural organizations which are intentional about deconstructing socially divisive constructs in the church, denominations, and their communities with the message of the Gospel. Motivated by biblical mandates for reconciliation, justice, and evangelism, these churches express value for diversity in their vision, ministry practices, worship style, human resources practices, leadership practices, polity, and community engagement. In these organizations members and leaders promote value and respect for perceived and actual differences between a wide variety of individuals. The movement towards diversity-oriented churches appears to be influenced by individuals who are attempting to reframe their own reality and the reality of racial, ethnic, and cultural homogeneity in the Church.

The Christian faith is predicated upon the belief that Jesus’ ministry of reconciliation accomplished two otherwise impossible objectives: first restoring the relationship between humankind and the Creator, and secondly restoring the harmonious relationship God intended for people in community. Ephesians 2:13-16 (NIV) states it this way:
...now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

If the mission of the Church is the formation of one body out of many people who were previously divided socially, then it is reasonable to expect that local churches would be suitable examples of reconciliation, conflict resolution, and intercultural mission effectiveness. More importantly, it is fair to expect that the alignment of the church's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors with Jesus' vision, mission, values, and practices would bear fruit, which in this case would include spiritual, personal, organizational, and community reconciliation.

The following are some key characteristics of diversity-oriented churches:

1. Leadership that strategically creates vision and value congruence across the organization that empowers teams and individuals and fosters higher than normal levels of organizational commitment and productivity towards being multicultural.
2. Top-management team that reflects the demographics of the church membership and the community.

3. Organizational strategy that is clearly articulated and supported by decisive action when inequalities and conflict in the church and in the community need to be addressed.

4. A leadership development plan that is predicated upon the recruitment, training and professional development of future generations of leaders.

5. A formal plan to focus leadership with respect to organizational change and diversity management.

6. Policies and procedures for conflict resolution and reconciliation at all levels of the organization and in the community.

7. The leader defines, legitimizes, and reproduces the organization’s vision, mission, values, and practices across generations.

These seven criteria are by no means exhaustive; however, they begin to address how some churches are choosing to depart from traditional homogeneous models of church development that do not account for racial, ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic diversity in local congregations and communities.

**Intercultural Leadership**

Leaders of diversity-oriented churches need intercultural competencies because diversity in their communities is increasing the likelihood that they will find themselves leading diverse congregations. Cultural intelligence (CQ) is being recognized as a necessary competency for leaders who want to lead in diversity-oriented churches. CQ
is defined as “an individual’s capability to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings” (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008, p. 3).

According to Earley and Ang (2003) cultural intelligence requires people to switch national contexts and learn new behaviors. In other words, to become an effective leader of a diversity-oriented church a person must confront his or her own ethnocentrism, prejudice and bias. “Ethnocentrism is the tendency for individuals to place their own group (ethnic, racial, or cultural) at the center of their observations of others and the world” (Northouse, 2007, p. 303). If a leader knows only one cultural system it is inevitable that the leaders will be ethnocentric. From this position, an ethnocentric leader would be ineffective when leading a diversity-oriented church for a variety of reasons. Closely related to ethnocentrism is prejudice, which is often thought of in the context of race, but can include ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation and so on. Prejudices are preconceived notions about people groups, their beliefs and practices. The culturally intelligent leader is able to suspend personal judgments that lead to ethnocentrism, prejudice, and bias, thereby understanding, relating to and motivating people from diverse social groups towards organizational goals, thereby mitigating some of the challenges of intercultural social integration.

In a recent empirical study of 65 senior pastors and 92 top-management team members in the United States I discovered several findings relating CQ to effective leadership in diversity-oriented churches. One of the key findings is that senior pastors in diversity-oriented churches demonstrated significantly higher interest in experiencing other cultures and interacting with people from different cultures than senior pastors of homogeneous churches. And, in diversity-oriented churches, as the senior pastor’s CQ
increased, so did the top-management team’s openness to diversity. Therefore, the senior pastor’s CQ was positively related to the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the ministry team. Furthermore, I found that senior pastors in diversity-oriented churches influence the organizational diversity climate by articulating a vision for diversity and aligning it with inclusive leadership practices.

In summary, as with many other examples of effective leadership, leaders of diversity-oriented churches must practice and preach what they believe about diversity in keeping with the mission of Christ. The good news about intercultural leadership competencies is that they are attainable through continual self-reflection, personal reconciliation and intentional intimate relationships with a variety of people.

**Conclusion**

It appears that the movement towards diversity-oriented churches is being influenced by individuals whose Christian identity has been reoriented towards diversity and are attempting to reorient the trajectory of the Church in the United States away from historical homogeneity. As it relates to intercultural leadership, the leadership practices of senior pastors in diversity-oriented churches embody values for diversity within the church on visible (race, age, gender, ethnicity) along with culture, ability, age, gender, sexual orientation and socioeconomic class at every level of the organization. However, gender and sexual orientation remains an obstacle to full inclusion for many Christian leaders in homogeneous and heterogeneous churches. Leaders of diversity-oriented churches are more likely to engage with these issues through the lens of reconciliation and justice. Leaders of homogeneous churches, on the other hand, might try to avoid
them altogether. As multiculturalism takes hold of the Church in the United States, there will be a greater need for competent intercultural leaders.

References

