



Sharing the Good News!

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

ALIEN SIGHTINGS?

You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

-God (Leviticus 19.34 NRSV)

I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

-Jesus (Matthew 25.36 NRSV)

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.

-Paul (Ephesians 2.19 NRSV)

The theme is both pervasive and unavoidable in the Scriptures: the God of Israel and Paul—apostle of Jesus Christ—delights in mixing things up. Homogeneity is out; heterogeneity is in. Aliens (outsiders) are welcome!

It was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I believe, who said many years ago that “**eleven o’clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week.**” A full generation has now passed, and little has changed across the American Christian landscape. Not one in twelve American congregations can boast of 20% or more minority participation (according to David van Biema, *Time Magazine* 1/11/10, p. 39). I don’t have an exact figure, but minority participation in our own PNEC congregations can’t be more than about 1%—if that.

Not that some dedicated souls haven’t been trying to mix things up. One of our clergy sent me this note, expressing his frustration in trying to help his congregation to become an inviting faith community for people from other ethnic backgrounds. He stated what we all know but try to ignore nevertheless: “**The PA Dutch are very clickish and are somewhat closed to other nationalities.**” (He could have been speaking of any Caucasian group in our nation, I suspect.)

The pastor also expressed frustration with his church’s ineffective outreach efforts—as well as his own: “**If only they would open their hearts and minds to [other ethnic groups] and if only I could reach out to [them]. I try—no results.**” I appreciated his candor and self-criticism. We all need to be more honest about our failure to fulfill Christ’s dream “that they may all be one” (John 17.21).

It’s not enough for us to tell ourselves that everyone is welcome and no one who comes through our church doors will be turned away. For as we know, people *feel* welcome when they are treated as special guests—that is to say, when their hosts make a genuine effort to be sensitive to their needs.

Which one of us would invite a *vegetarian* relative, friend or neighbor to a Thanksgiving Dinner, and not offer several tasty non-meat dishes for him/her to eat? So why do we then resist making the kinds of changes to our worship and fellowship programs that would render these events more spiritually and emotionally attractive to guests from other ethnic, social, and *even* generational backgrounds?

Isn’t it true? People *do* feel welcome when they are treated as special guests, and when their hosts make an effort to be sensitive to their needs.

But someone will surely ask, “Why monkey around with what worked so well for so many years?”

My first response is theological: the whole Bible insists that welcoming the *Ausländer* (stranger) is God’s will for the whole people of God (see the Scripture verses cited at the beginning of this essay)!

And my second response is practical: what “worked” once-upon-a-time is most decidedly not working any longer. Compare your present membership and attendance with years past. I’ll bet many of us feel like we’re spiritual polar bears on a shrinking ice floe.

By mid-century, predict social scientists, there will no longer be a racial majority in the good ol’ U. S. of A. Every ethnic group will be less than 50%. We white folks will be in a minority, just like everyone else. This is an inconvenient demographic truth that no attempt to rewind America’s clock can change—no matter what the nativists on talk radio and TV proclaim.

Jim Mellado, one of the leaders of suburban Chicago’s 23,000 member Willow Creek Community Church, where one in five members are something other than Caucasian, cuts to the chase (*Time Magazine* 1/11/10, p. 41):

“Every church will have to deal with [this] or find itself on the side of the road.”

Is there any reason for hope that things might change, that we might be able to become a little more “mixed up” for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? I think there is, and I’ll talk about it in my next *S.T.G.N.*

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