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### Valuing Diversity as an Imperative for Fulfilling the Mission of the Church

Walter B. T. Douglas  
*Andrews University*

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## *Chapter 16*

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### **VALUING DIVERSITY AS AN IMPERATIVE FOR FULFILLING THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH**

WALTER DOUGLAS

Demographic shifts, cultural and ethnic diversity, globalization, and the rapid expansion of the church in the southern hemisphere strongly suggest that the future growth of Adventism may emerge in the developing nations. This article is an attempt to engage in conversation on the changing face of Adventism and the challenge this new Adventism presents across cultural, ethnic, and racially diverse communities. This article provides the church with a window of opportunity to view diversity not as an event but as a process to maximize and explore the richness of its diversity and to see it not as a problem to be solved, but as a blessing to celebrate; not as a cause for rejection of differences, but as a sign of the continuing power and presence of the Spirit at work in drawing men and women from every nation, kindred, tribe, tongue, and people to be part of the redeemed multicultural and diverse community who will sing a new song to the Lamb (Revelation 7:9-10).

My contribution to this volume is based on my years of experience as the leader of a multicultural and diverse congregation (1987-present), as a seminary professor for thirty-five years, and more recently (four years) as the founder and director of the Institute of Diversity and Multiculturalism at Andrews Uni-

versity. Based on my observations, experiences, and knowledge as a diversity consultant and practitioner, my bottom-line contention is that, given the diversity and multicultural nature of the church, diversity with inclusion is a highly effective strategy in helping the church fulfill its mission.

There are other voices that speak on the subject of diversity but from different angles and perspectives. Some have made the case for diversity as a business imperative. In the light of globalization, a market economy, and demographic and cultural shifts, these authors and practitioners argue that major corporations, institutions, and businesses that are serious about maintaining a competitive advantage, increasing the bottom line, and creating a more prosperous future cannot survive without embracing and implementing diversity initiatives at every level in their organization.

Consequently, these leaders, including many from Fortune 500 companies, are investing millions of dollars to recruit, qualify, train, and retain the best and the brightest from the talent pools of the underrepresented. Let us be clear on this. These people are being recruited not because of affirmative action simply, but because they are qualified and have the potential to add value to the organizations that recruit them (Hubbard 1997; Loden 1996; Rector 2003). Other voices view the concept of diversity from the perspectives of higher education; health-care delivery, race relationships, and gender inclusiveness (Hale 2004; Ipsaro 1997; Bowen and Bok 1998; Pollard 2000; Spector 2004).

Indeed, leaders in higher education are making a compelling case for diversity as an absolutely essential and indispensable part of the education process. In fact, Neil L. Rudenstene, former president of Harvard (1991-2001), states explicitly that “the concept of diversity or significant differences among people was central to any serious theory of education and learning” (Rudenstene 2004:71). Bowen and Bok in their definitive study, *The Shape of the River*, reveal that

Originally diversity was thought of mainly in terms of differences in ideas or points of view, but those were rarely seen as disembodied abstractions. Direct associations with dissimilar individuals was deemed essential to learning. The dimensions of diversity subsequently expanded to include geography, religion, nation of upbringing, wealth, gender and race. (Bowen and Bok 1998:218-19)

Many leaders in higher education are passionate about diversity as a strategy central to the educational goals and vision of their institutions. According to Rudenstene,

In colleges and universities, the way to gain the particular educational values that come from various forms of dissimilarity is to have an admissions process that takes diversity explicitly into account as one of its important goals and that brings different kinds of students together in a residential community, committed to learning in all its forms—outside the classroom as well as inside. (ibid., 65)

Health-care practitioners and professionals are no less passionate in making the case for diversity as an indispensable and essential core for the success of health-care delivery. Rachel E. Spector, in her recent work, *Cultural Diversity in Health and Illness*, brings the issue to a new level of consciousness by relating it to the events of September 11, 2001. According to Spector,

The catastrophic events of September 11, 2001, and the war on Iraq that began in 2003 have pierced the consciousness of all Americans in general and health care providers in particular. Now more than ever, providers must become informed about the sensitive meanings of health, illness, caring and healing practices. Cultural diversity and pluralism are a core part of the social and economic engines that drive this country, and their impact at this time has significant implications for health care delivery and policy making throughout the United States.

In all clinical practice areas from institutional settings such as acute and long term care settings to community based settings such as nurse practitioners' and doctor's offices and clinics, schools and universities, public health and occupational settings one observes diversity everyday. (2004:4)

The compelling need for diversity as a process and an imperative for fulfilling mission is a concern not only for educators, business executives, health care professionals, and practitioners. It must also be a matter of great concern for the Seventh-day Adventist leaders and laity. If the church is to be faithful and serious about the divine mandate explicit in its nature and its vision of global mission, it seems reasonable to argue that the church has no option but to value and embrace diversity as an absolutely essential strategy for fulfilling that mission.

The cultural, ethnic, and racial complexion of the church challenges us to become creative and imaginative—guided, of course, by the Holy Spirit—in developing and implementing diversity initiatives at every level in the organization. It requires intentional focus on finding the best ways to make our mission engagement with other cultures more inclusive and effective.

But before we can do this, we need to know what diversity is. Diversity is not about race and gender. It is about intentional inclusion. It is a design for

understanding cultural, ethnic, and demographic shifts. It allows us to position ourselves to leverage and manage cultural and ethnic differences to gain a competitive advantage in taking the gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people (Revelation 5:9, 10).

From my experience in working with diverse, multicultural organizations and groups, I have learned that diversity work enables people of different origins and backgrounds not only to work together successfully, but also to value and take advantage of their differences. This approach makes their organizations even more effective and profitable than they would be if the differences did not exist.

The Adventist Church is made up of people with differences in cultures, races, ethnicities, and gender. This provides us with a fantastic opportunity to work together by forming coalitions based not on race or culture but on mission. If we believe as we do in the globalization of our mission, then it is absolutely essential to understand the changes that are occurring in the world and in the church to fulfill our mission effectively. Therefore it is a necessity for us to find approaches that will be relevant to the times and the changes we are experiencing in both church and world.

Indeed, as Leslie Pollard emphasizes in his work, *Embracing Diversity*,

The World is changing! Demographers say that the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be more globally connected than at any other time in history. Communications, technology, media, immigration patterns, educational institutions, and travel are bringing diverse racial and ethnic groups into more intimate associations. "Intimate diversity" is becoming the major descriptor of cross-cultural associations in our world. But intense diversity is not taking place in a vacuum. In every interaction between groups there is a history, sometimes positive; often troubled and tortured, even painful between groups, that make cordial collaboration a challenge. (Pollard 2000:15)

In a changing world, it is imperative that we learn to respect, value, and accept different cultures if we are to increase our effectiveness. We can do so through collaboration, coalitions of interests, empowerment, and understanding. Learning from other cultures does not lead inexorably to accommodation, indigenization or acculturation. It is a search for meaningful ways and windows of opportunities to share the gospel—ways that are culturally sensitive, culturally appropriate, and culturally competent. We must be aware at all times that one's personal cultural background, language, and ways of knowing have considerable impact both on how people, especially those from a differ-

ent culture, respond to us and how they interpret and translate our words and actions.

Cultural competence suggests an ability by those who interact with other cultures to understand and respond effectively to their culture's needs and concerns. This may be a difficult and daunting task. We may find it easier to share the gospel in a context and culture that is not so demanding. But as Ellen G. White observes with precocious theological insights, "The gospel invitation cannot be narrowed down to a select few, who we suppose will do us honor if they accept it. The message is to be given to all. Wherever hearts are open to receive the truth, Christ is ready to instruct" (White 1940:161).

In another equally arresting statement Ellen G. White states with admirable clarity,

Today in every land there are those who are honest in heart, and upon these the light of heaven is shining. Among all nations, kindred and tongues, He sees men and women who are praying for light and knowledge. Heaven's plan of salvation is broad enough to embrace the whole world. (White 1958:252, 376)

Clearly, in these statements Ellen White is articulating the principle of diversity with inclusion (all nations, kindred, and tongues) as a mission strategy. Again and again she speaks of unity in diversity as God's design for His church and its mission in the world. She challenges us to embrace diversity not only for global mission and organizational reforms, but for diversity of thought as well.

There are no two leaves of a tree precisely alike; neither do all minds run in the same direction. But while this is so, there may be unity in diversity. . . . Look at the flowers in a carpet, and notice the different colored threads. All are not pink, all are not green, all are not blue. A variety of colors is woven together to perfect the pattern. So it is in the design of God. He has a purpose in placing us where we must learn to live as individuals. We are not all fitted to do the same kind of work, but each one's work is designed by God to help make up His plan (White 1899:421).

### **Lessons from the Ministry of Jesus: Diversity with Inclusion**

Fundamentally, the approach I am advocating is central to the christological model for mission and ministry. The church has always contended that

Jesus is the one through whom all peoples are reconciled to God. Indeed, biblical faith affirms that only He can do for us that which no other person can. He brings God to us and us to God. In any context and culture, we have the incarnational model for mission—God dwelling among us. However, I need to emphasize again and again the fundamental and irreversible truth that the incarnate Christ honors diversity with inclusion. This truth establishes the authority, inclusiveness, and contextual appropriateness of God, who honors and respects all cultures.

So then, in its interaction with diverse cultures and peoples, the church must return again and again to the story of Jesus as the One who speaks with hope, love, and grace to all humankind. We learn from His practice of mission and ministry that He was very intentional in accepting the challenge and the risk of diversity as an absolutely indispensable strategy for creating an inclusive redeemed community. In His ministry, Jesus risks departing from longstanding cultural and ethnic conventions and practices as He interacts with Samaritans, Gentiles, sinners, and women, especially those of questionable character.

The invaluable principle we learn from Jesus' example of inclusion is that we do not have to endorse the things which we must tolerate to be inclusive in reaching people with the gospel. For example, as a Seventh-day Adventist I do not use alcohol and tobacco. Does that mean I must not interact or form friendships with people who do? Jesus was able to transcend Jewish practices and customs to embrace people who were rejected because of race, culture, or ethnicity.

Though He was a Jew, Jesus mingled freely with the Samaritans, setting at nought the Pharisaic customs of His nation. In face of their prejudices He accepted the hospitality of this despised people. He slept with them under their roofs, ate with them at their tables,—partaking of the food prepared and served by their hands,—taught in their streets, and treated them with the utmost kindness and courtesy. And while He drew their hearts to Him by the tie of human sympathy, His divine grace brought to them the salvation which the Jews rejected. (White 1942:25, 26)

This approach was characteristic of Christ's ministry. It was His way of embracing people in their differences. In Mark's narrative of Jesus' encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman, we have another example of Jesus' practice of the principle of inclusion. Although it appears that Jesus rejected her request for healing on behalf of her daughter, based on Jewish exclusiveness, the story ends with the woman rejecting Jesus' rejection of her request. She engages

Him in dialogue that involves divine compassion. So Jesus responds with a commendation about the quality and vitality of her faith. According to Judith Gundry-Volf:

The Syro-Phoenician believes that divine mercy knows no bias. And she believes that Jesus will show this kind of mercy. As she expresses her faith in him, he also begins to believe. He, the one sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, can also do a miracle for a Gentile woman. He can extend help to even a Syro-Phoenician Hellenist who belonged to his and his people's oppressors. For mercy is unbounded. (Gundry-Volf 1995:519)

Every time Jesus reached out to people from different cultural and racial backgrounds, He broadened His vision of mission and demonstrated intentional inclusiveness of God's grace and love. His mission was to do the will of His Father. And He did so by ministering to the needs of all peoples. In His conversation with the woman of Samaria, Jesus did not conceal His own cultural and religious convictions. From the woman's own words it was clear that she recognized Jesus as a Jewish rabbi and all that His identity implied. But His response to the woman revealed an intentional inclusiveness that affirmed her. He did so by showing respect and value for her culturally and racially influenced search for the truth (John 4).

In Luke's narrative of the Good Samaritan, we see again Jesus' strategy of inclusion and respect for different cultures and races. This is a particularly interesting story. Here Jesus deliberately, one might say provocatively, identifies a non-Jew as the paragon of divine love, kindness, and generosity. The Good Samaritan displays precisely the qualities and principles that are required when one is especially challenged by cultural, ethnic, or racial differences. His behavior exemplifies a spirit of self-sacrifice, courage, and even risk. "Who is my neighbor?" After Jesus told the story (Luke 10:25-27), it was clear to the questioner who was truly neighbor to the injured traveler as Jesus contrasted the kindness, generosity, and respect of the Samaritan with the unrighteous, pious, and exclusive attitude of two of the most respected and revered leaders in Jewish religious thought and culture.

### **Summary**

From our examination of Christ's method of diversity with inclusion, valuable points emerge:

- His interaction with various cultural and ethnic people required Him



to depart from or transcend longstanding prevailing conventions and practices. He would not exclude them from His world.

- He did not simply acknowledge differences. He embraced, respected, and valued them as opportunities to broaden His ministry and mission.
- He left us the invaluable lesson of rejecting rejection without rejecting the rejected or the rejecter.
- He did not allow grievances, past and present misconceptions, injuries, and animosities between Jews and Samaritans to affect the quality and nature of His ministry toward a group or individuals.
- From “His earliest years, He was possessed with one purpose; He lived to bless others” (White 1911:70).

These lessons must mirror our commitment to serve others and share the Good News as we embrace the principle of diversity with inclusion as a strategy for fulfilling mission.

From our summary, there could be no doubt at all that Jesus practiced a ministry of intentional inclusiveness. He did so as part of the revealed will of God for all cultures, races, ethnicities, and gender. He left a clear and compelling example for us who are commissioned to fulfill His mission in all the world. This was the mandate that His earliest disciples were committed to, even though at times it was difficult for some of them to break out of their Jewish ethnocentrism and exclusiveness. Peter is a case in point.

Commitment to the Vision of Diversity: Peter’s Conversion in Acts 10

“Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to Him” (Acts 10:34-35).

This story of the conversions of Peter and Cornelius is a case study for the appropriate application of diversity with inclusion as a strategy for fulfilling mission. Peter was faced with the confusing and perhaps painful task of embracing diversity as God instructed him to share the gospel with the Gentiles. Peter knew that obeying God and engaging this strategy would bring him into conflict with his Jewish exclusiveness and sameness. But what choice did he have when God emphatically commanded him to be inclusive—to value, honor, and respect the diversity within His creation? Remember, God is no respecter of persons or cultures. With this new vision of ministry modeled after the ministry of Jesus, who honors diversity and inclusion, Peter acted by venturing perhaps for the first time into Gentile territory. When he arrived, he not only preached about the inclusiveness of God but also welcomed the Gentiles into the fold through baptism (Acts 10:46).

This remarkable story vividly reminds us of the freedom of the Holy Spirit at work in diverse cultures and backgrounds. It speaks to the challenges of cultural diversity and intentional inclusion that were faced by Christians in the first century and that are instructive for the church in the twenty-first century. Diversity as a strategy for fulfilling mission, while it may seem daunting, is not something we can accomplish by our own effort, ingenuity, and hard work. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 10, the Holy Spirit descended on the Gentiles in a way reminiscent of the first Pentecost that baffled the Jews and Christians who accompanied Peter. “Even the Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit just as we,” they exclaimed.

The dilemma Peter faced was to discover how to reconcile his loyalty to his faith tradition, that focused on exclusion and sameness, with the new vision of mission that was consistently modeled for him by his Lord.

Peter had to commit to this new vision. And he showed exemplary courage to embrace the vision and to change. Later he would lapse into his ethnocentrism and thus force a confrontation with Paul (Galatians 2:7-16), but his commitment to this strategy signaled to the early Christian community that there may be significant times when aspects of peoples’ cultures are, surprisingly to us and counter to our cultural preconceptions, used by God to build up His kingdom and advance His mission in the world.

Valuing diversity as a strategy requires us to be respectful of the ideas and actions of another culture. Indeed, some of these elements may become vehicles of communication and interaction with people within those cultures. This could very well deepen our understanding and appreciation for the divine activity among them. When God in His wisdom sees that the time is right, He may guide the church in this or that part of His vineyard by a startling means that may seem inconsistent with what has been considered the “true” or recognized way. The crucial question is whether the church, in that place and time, is willing and bold and committed enough to follow God’s leading.

From Peter’s example, the following lessons can be learned:

- Our attempts at diversity are fraught with risk, but if our mission is to prepare people to live in God’s inclusive community, we will have to embody diversity at every level in our mission, whatever the risk.
- Like Peter, we are challenged to see, understand, and respond to God’s call across cultures.
- We are to embrace God’s vision of intentional inclusion as revealed in the ministry of Jesus. When we do, we discover the connection between

authentic intentional diversity and cross-cultural ministry. Upon this foundation we see the value of a reinterpreted mission committed to the vision of diversity that cultivates new attitudes and willingly creates policies and practices that support ongoing diversity.

- We must resist the temptation to adopt a “color-blind” or “a-cultural” posture that will shield us from differences rather than help us appreciate and learn from our differences. This attempt to neutralize cultural particularities creates an ethos of cultural uniformity through commonality rather than the dynamism of unity in diversity.

Acts 10 is known by many as the second Pentecost because it is in this account that the power of the Holy Spirit descended upon the Gentile Christians. Those involved were reminded that in spite of their differences, the ultimate power to actualize the kind of transformative leadership needed for their diverse time was found in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

### **Paul’s Strategy: Goals to Achieve, Pitfalls to Avoid**

Like Peter, Paul also worked within the free play of the Spirit. He too had a vision of God’s mission of diversity and inclusion. He wanted to share the riches he possessed and the infinite goodness and wisdom of God with those who, like himself, were entitled to the grace of God made possible through Jesus Christ.

Although Paul’s roots were Jewish, he did not allow these roots to be an impediment to his ministry of inclusion and embrace. He appreciated, valued, and respected the cultural and ethnic differences he encountered in his work with the Gentiles. He understood that culture was the lens through which people perceive and interpret reality. He was aware that human experience is historically, culturally, and sociologically conditioned (1 Corinthians 9:19-23, RSV). And this knowledge helped him to avoid many pitfalls and achieve his goals. In other words, Paul was convinced that, through a strategy of unity in diversity in Christ, he was in a much stronger position to reach the Gentiles and to leverage some of their cultural differences to give him a competitive advantage in presenting the gospel. This should not surprise us, for Paul himself understood that people who were accustomed to a particular way of feeling, knowing, and doing would not simply and easily appreciate the “new religion” or the “new God” he proclaimed if his message were packaged in language alien to their cultural sensitivity and which they could not comprehend or value.

In his mission and ministry to the Gentiles, Paul very skillfully avoided many pitfalls that others failed to avoid. He successfully embraced diversity with inclusion as a strategy for fulfilling mission.

As the church became increasingly diverse through the accession of Gentile converts, the Jewish Christians grew increasingly apprehensive and uncomfortable. There was a growing cultural conflict within the faith community. How must they relate their Jewish ethnic practices and their longstanding cultural attitudes toward Gentiles to this new reality?

When Paul wrote his letter to the Christian community in Rome, it was largely Gentile. The reason for this transformation was, in part, the edict by Emperor Claudius in 49 A.D. expelling all Jews from Rome because of disturbances concerning the man named *Christus*. With the expulsion of the Jews, leadership in the Christian community was transferred to the Gentiles. This situation continued for awhile until the edict lapsed, and with that the Jews were allowed to return to Rome.

Serious and intense conflicts developed in the community between Jews and Gentiles as they jockeyed for power and leadership. From the standpoint of the Jews, the church had become too Gentile. They were worried about losing their cherished practices about clean and unclean foods, holy days, laws and ceremonies, and circumcision. These they had very zealously preserved and nurtured over the years, especially in a pagan society.

Paul had a hard nut to crack. In his letter to the Romans he immediately laid the foundation of his strategy for easing the resulting ethnic, cultural conflicts and tension in the church.

The cornerstone of his strategy, the principle on which he constructed his response to the challenge, was the principle of inclusion. He does not hesitate to lift up the power of the gospel of Christ as the great equalizer and transformer, not only of human life, but of human structures as well. In Romans he admonishes congregations to “welcome and embrace one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy” (Romans 15:7-9).

Paul acknowledges that the Gospel he preaches was first given to the Jews, and beforehand to the prophets and patriarchs, but he does not hesitate to press home the point that this same Gospel is “destined for the obedience of faith among the Gentiles.”

Paul recognizes that his principle of inclusion of valuing and respecting differences may include an unnerving array of convictions. But what truly matters was unity in diversity in Christ. Through this principle, Paul clearly rejects the practice of judging, categorizing, and valuing people on the basis of their racial and cultural identity. With great rigor he insists that unity in diversity in Christ is by its very nature and mission always to be inclusive.

So, then, it is true that the principle of inclusion—valuing, respecting and accepting people as God’s creation—is at the foundation of Paul’s theology in the book of Romans. Paul is very determined to make this central to the vision of the mission of Christ. This is how he frames it:

For though I am free from all men [women], I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became under the law—though not being myself under the law—that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ—that I might win those outside of the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I might share in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:19-33, RSV)

One of the pitfalls Paul skillfully avoided to achieve his goal of including the Gentiles as worthy of Christ’s grace was to inform them that they did not have to become Jews to benefit from the blessings of God’s saving grace. Paul was sensitive to the tension, indeed the cultural and religious conflicts, between the Jewish attitude to law and that of the Gentiles. What was the meaning and purpose of the Law?

What was the relation of Israel to the Gentile Christian community? Quite often the conflict did not exist only between the Jews and Gentiles but significantly between Paul and the Jewish believers.

Paul dealt with this conflict by insisting that the Gentiles did not have to become Jewish in their religious behavior. They did not have to divest themselves of their Gentile identity to be grafted into the family of God. He consistently established this truth by focusing on unity in diversity as it is realized in Christ. “Saint Paul was neither a systematic theologian nor a barren intellectual, superimposing layer after layer of speculation upon a hypothetical Gospel. He was a missionary, concerned with the care of Churches, and in what he had to say, drawing upon his own immediate experience of God’s decisive action in Christ” (Zaehner 1967).

Paul's example of creative leadership in a multicultural and diverse faith community can benefit us in the following ways:

- Help us focus on how Christians who have received the gift of salvation will live in relation to each other without allowing differences to erect barriers that will frustrate the spread of the gospel.
- Teach us to be tolerant, respectful, and embracing of people who are different and do it for the glory of God.
- Show us how he initiated and couched his discussion in terms of respect and sympathy with the concerns of each group, and thus was courageously bold in identifying and addressing problems that are fracturing the body of Christ (such as ethnic conflict, racial biases, exclusion based on religious and ritual practices, etc).

These are precisely some of the issues and challenges we will face in global mission as we seek to reach people with the gospel.

### **Change of Attitude**

It is in my contention that the success of the apostles' mission was due largely to a change of attitude through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. It was a huge leap when at the Jerusalem Council Peter, Paul, and Barnabas took the firm stand against imposing Jewish practices and traditions upon the newly converted Gentiles. Clearly, for the apostles, that was an unnecessary cultural practice that had no salvific value or historical significance for the Gentiles.

Peter gave reassurance that his experience in Cornelius' household was a major cultural and theological shift. So at the council he was prepared to argue the merit of cultural awareness and understanding as a legitimate claim for inclusion of Gentiles in the church.

Since salvation comes to anyone who believes in Jesus Christ, "why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear (Acts 15:10)? Granted, neither Paul nor Peter were not always consistent in living up to this idea of diversity and inclusion. Paul opposed Peter when he lapsed into his Jewish exclusiveness and ethnocentrism. Paul was unbridled in his attacks on those who threatened the unity of the body with their strange and dangerous teachings. But they both will agree that a change of attitude toward other cultures, though difficult, is absolutely indispensable for the successful implementation of diversity and inclusion as a mission imperative. This may include a change of attitude toward

ecclesiastical structures, policies, and programs. We must resist the increasing tendency, or perhaps practice, to interpret diversity and inclusion only in the light of a unified institutional culture and an organizational structure that is one in polity and hierarchy.

There is no doubt that the New Testament teaches unity in diversity in core doctrines with diversity of forms expressing the variety within the community. This diversity does not threaten the essential unity in the church, nor does it compromise the proclamation of the gospel (Dunn 1977:17). The substance and truth of the unity of the church is made up in and by Jesus Christ. It is impressive that once Peter committed himself to God's vision of diversity and inclusion, the focus of his proclamation in Cornelius' household was Christ. He simply told the story of Jesus and assures Cornelius and his household that anybody who fears God to the limits of his/her faith and does what is morally correct is acceptable to Him. This change in attitude is not a reductionistic approach by any means. It is instead a Christocentric approach which uplifts the Name and the power of that Name. The beauty of this strategy is that Peter began with a solid theological declaration, not a speculative human position (Acts 10).

One of the fundamental principles that guides a diversity initiative in relation to mission is that growth is optional and change is inevitable. The church could choose to grow or not to grow. But time and history will change it. God Himself will change it. Valuing diversity is a design for dealing with the inevitability of change. It prepares the church to fulfill its mission without being threatened by differences in race, culture, ethnicities, and languages.

Truly embracing diversity and inclusion requires the same courage, conviction, commitment, and risk so clearly seen in the examples of Jesus, Peter, and Paul.

## **The Changing Face of the Church**

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, All authority is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world (Matthew 28:18-20).

Why is diversity with inclusion a mission imperative? Why is it essential to the vitality and integrity of our missionary engagement with different cultures, races, accents, languages, and ethnicities? Because it is embedded in the Great Commission, which is intentionally diverse and inclusive. If the church is to be faithful to the One who sends, it must be clear about its nature and mission. It really has no option but to remain sensitive at all times to its divine original commission. Therefore, in a time of rapid change, it is especially necessary for the church to question whether its activity is determined by the understanding of its original call to be an inclusive missionary community. According to Jürgen Moltmann,

... the church is the people of God and will give an account of itself at all times to the God who has called it into being, liberated it, and gathered it. It is, therefore, before the divine forum that it will reflect upon its life and the form which that life takes, what it says and what it does not say, what it does and what it neglects to do. (Moltmann 1977:4)

The church is always accountable to its Lord. But the church is also under obligation to humankind. Consequently, it will at all times render an account to men and women about the commission implicit in its faith and the way it fulfills that commission (*ibid.*, 4-5).

Presently, cultural and racial diversity and demographic shifts constitute one of the millennial major challenges facing the church.

Undoubtedly, in my mind, the major contributing factor for these challenges is the missionary success of the church. This has changed forever the face of the church. Dramatic shifts in demographics, immigration patterns, globalization, political ideologies, economic resources, and the increasing role of women and minorities, not because of race or gender but because they are qualified, have all contributed to the changing face of the church. But significantly, at least for this writer, the most dramatic millennial change is the missionary success.

Historically, Seventh-day Adventism is a nineteenth-century religious phenomenon which arose in America at the time of the Great Religious Awakening. From an American-based and American-oriented movement it has grown to become a universal church well established in more than 203 out of the 228 countries of the world. From a membership of just about one hundred in 1849, three thousand in 1863, and six thousand in 1874, when the first official missionary was sent to Switzerland (J. N. Andrews), this church has



grown to a membership of nearly 13 million. There are 13 world divisions, 53,500 churches, 516 conferences/missions, and 94 unions (General Conference 2002).

We operate our work in 853 different languages. We embrace people of different cultures, ethnic origins and languages, and socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. We have universities and colleges, museums and archives, health systems and publishing associations. In about 160 years the church has grown so that today it is one of the most widespread missionary societies and the single most comprehensive movement to advance the gospel into all the world. The church has changed radically. It has transitioned from a racial majority church to a racially diverse church, and this trend is irreversible. These changes merge to create a new church that is almost unrecognizable from decades ago.

My issue is that diversity was and remains a powerful force in changing the shape of the church for the future. And for the church, the future is already ahead of schedule. We must learn to embrace and accommodate diversity:

- to position ourselves to be more faithful to God's mission of inclusion,
- to manage and leverage differences to give us the competitive advantage in advancing the Kingdom of God, and
- to help the church approximate what the Kingdom of God will be in the redeemed community.

I have tried to make the case for diversity as an effective mission strategy. However, we need to remind ourselves that our confidence is not in our strategy, planning, and programs. Our confidence is in God. His grace alone enables the church to face the challenge of change in an increasingly diverse and multicultural world. The missionary success of the church must never be a cause for boasting. It is a humble recognition that God, the Creator of the ends of the earth, "who in the past spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in diverse ways, in these last days has spoken to us by His Son whom He appointed heir of all things and through whom He made the universe" (Hebrews 1:1, 2).

## **Conclusion**

I believe embracing and implementing diversity initiatives as a strategy to fulfill mission will be a blessing and an opportunity for the church. It will

- provide a clear understanding of the biblical foundation for diversity with

intentional inclusion

- position the church to deal with the inevitability of demographic, cultural and cross-cultural changes
- foster the ability to apply theological insights in different cultures, and context while remaining faithful to the biblical witness
- supply the mandate to keep at the forefront of our consciousness its divine calling to be a missionary community
- encourage the church to appreciate, respect, and value more comprehensively the cultural complexities and practices of non-Christian people as it looks for “evangelistic preparation” through God’s presence in their history and culture. God has not left Himself without witness in any culture, race, or nation.
- urge the church to accept diversity as God’s idea and design for reaching all humanity and creating an inclusive redeemed community (see Revelation 5:9, 10)

So we need to see diversity not as a problem to be solved, but as a blessing; not as a cause for despair, but for celebration; not a cause for rejection, but for rejoicing. The diversity of the church makes us richer, stronger, healthier, wiser, and freer in taking the gospel into all the world until the end of the age.

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