

# Diversity in Community Changes Us

Why I go to church with white people  
Natasha Sistrunk Robinson

When I posted "I Go to Church with White People" on my blog, I was nervous. It was the first piece I'd written about racial issues. As an African American woman raised in the black church in South Carolina, my choice to worship at a predominantly white church was not normal. God, however, opened my eyes to the need for intentionally choosing a diverse community.

Embracing a community of faith that is diverse, trusting, and mutually submissive can humbly reveal much about God, and even more about ourselves. Diverse community can give us a clear lens to know and love God, plus help us understand our blind spots. This renewed vision compels us to love others well.

Multicultural small groups—those that are racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse—can be a catalyst to help us love our neighbors because they bring us close to "the other"—people who are different from us in some way. Simple proximity to "others" is a good first step.

We truly become a united people, though, through sacred moments together as a result of prayer, study, listening, and learning. Through the fellowship and community of diverse believers, our hearts are changed and we can re-enter a diverse and changing world again and again as reconciled, transformed, and renewed people who glorify God.

When a watching world sees true heart change, it's a compelling witness. This change begins by drawing close to God and embracing a diverse community. The Holy Spirit changes people, and he uses changed people to miraculously change other individuals, organizations (including the church), and the world.

## Diverse Community Helps Us Grow

We naturally value unity in sameness—intimate connections with those who are like us. But it isn't as natural to experience unity with "the other." In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul writes that unity in the body of Christ requires complete humility, the bond of peace, gentleness, patience, and bearing with each other in love (4:2-3). Although God has graced us with different gifts and callings, Paul's number one priority is that the church labors for unity in the faith, knowledge of the Son of God, and maturity in Christ (4:12-13). Christ is glorified and the church is edified when there is sound teaching on, leadership toward, and strong commitment to unity in the body of believers. By embracing diverse community, we learn to unite with one another and grow together in light of our differences.

A multicultural community challenges us to revisit what the Bible says about loving our neighbor and "the other." Divisions in the body are often caused because sin has blinded us. Furthermore, we are far more lenient on those with whom we experience commonality than on those who are different than us. In their classic book, [Divided by Faith](#), Christian sociologists Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith report, "People do not evaluate ingroup and outgroup

members in the same way. Even when performing exactly the same actions, ingroup members are evaluated more positively and outgroup members more negatively."

This reality is not simply a concern of our day—we see this partiality toward self-interest and self-preservation throughout the Bible. But God has called us into a new life reflected by a new way of righteous and holy living. Righteous living includes the way that we think about and interact with God and our neighbors. Paul writes: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to *their* needs... . Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" ([Ephesians 4:29, 31-32](#), emphasis added).

In our human nature, it is quite easy to become bitter, enraged, angry, and slanderous toward strangers in the world, particularly when we feel threatened, sense a difference of morals or values, or feel that our rights or expectations have been violated in some way. The world watches our violent behavior as we fight political battles, disengage coworkers, and dishonor or disrespect people in authority—whether a pastor, the President, or our bosses.

Paul has a straightforward command for this type of behavior: "Stop it!" These are selfish and self-seeking attitudes reflective of our former way of life which is corrupted and deceitful in its desires. Oftentimes, these sinful attitudes are not revealed until we are confronted by those who see things differently than us because of their own life experiences. When we're confronted with our sin, God invites us to confess it. By embracing diverse community, we learn to confess our sins to one another.

Once we confess, we must ask the Lord for help and commit to wholesome speech that is considerate and edifies others according to *their* needs. Paul instructs the church of Ephesus to be kind and compassionate to one another. This kindness and compassion is reflected in the right speech and our willingness to forgive when we are offended. Living in a fallen world, it's inevitable that we will hurt each other—intentionally and unintentionally. In light of those offenses, however, God empowers and compels us to forgive each other. By embracing diverse community, we learn to forgive one another.

### **Diverse Community Presents a Compelling Witness**

The Apostle Paul was originally a persecutor of the church before God literally removed the blinders from his eyes and allowed him to see that the gospel was a message of reconciliation for both the Jews and the Gentiles. Paul was only able to teach what he had learned from his personal encounter with Jesus and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Before he lay down his rights and his life for the world, Jesus offered a prayer to his Father for all believers: "I pray also for those who will believe in me through [the apostles'] message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you, May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me ([John 17:20-21](#)).

Getting close to God is an important first step that draws us near to others. Paul understood this when he reminded the church in Ephesus of the gospel's intent to abolish the hostility between the Jews and Gentiles, and draw them together as one united and peaceful body ([Ephesians 2:15-16](#)). Christ "came and preached peace to you who were far away [the Gentiles] and peace to those who were near [the Jews]. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit ([Ephesians 2:17-18](#))." Get close to God and your former enemy. This is the apostle's command.

Notice in Jesus' prayer, however, that he takes unity to another level. Where Paul calls us to get close, Jesus prays for us to get "in." He wants us to get "in" because the world is watching, and by getting "in," the world may believe that the Father has sent the Son. Jesus says that he is "in" or "one" with the Father, and that the Father is "in" or "one" with him. While the two are distinct persons and have distinct roles, our God is united in purpose and spirit.

Jesus goes even further in his prayer to reveal the great mystery that through the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, which is actively at work in the hearts of all who believe, we, too, can be "in" or united with God in purpose and spirit. By being united with God in the diverse and universal body of Christ, which is the church, all the world may see and testify that Jesus is Lord.

This is the only reason that unity in the body matters at all. Our living as reconciled people—first reconnecting the broken relationship with God our Creator, and then redeeming the broken relationships with other humans—is a testimony to the world that we are a new creation and a new family because Christ has come.

### **Diverse Community Prepares Us to Reach Out**

It matters that Christ has come and that the world sees us relate to each other differently as a result. It also matters that we intentionally relate to the world differently. When we intentionally commune with "others" from different tribes, languages, people groups, and nations, we are better able to empathize with the plight of the diverse people groups who are in the world and outside of the church. Our proximity and unity with one another *inside* the body opens our eyes to transform the way that we relate to those *outside* the body of Christ.

The gospel comes alive in our daily lives when we remember that in the middle of this same prayer, Jesus said to his Father, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. . . . Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" ([John 17:15, 17-18](#)).

Multicultural groups that pray, share the Word of God, embrace their differences, and value the uniqueness of "the other" in the body of Christ are then launched into the world as transformed and sanctified people to the glory of God. Together we stand as one in him in the world.

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