

GA Talk - Presbyterian Multi-Cultural Network Dinner (July 5, 2012)

I recently read a short interview with former secretary of state Madeleine Albright, who was asked what book should President Obama and all heads of state read. She recommended one called "The Art of the Impossible" by former Czech president Vaclav Havel. My first thought was that any book titled "The Art of the Impossible" should also be required reading for pastors, so I got a copy out of the library. It was a collection of Havel's speeches during the early 90s and several things he said really struck me.

Havel lived through the tumultuous times in which the fall of communism brought incredible changes throughout Europe. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 - and later the Velvet Revolution in his own country, in which this former intellectual dissident found himself elected to sit behind the desk of the President of Czechoslovakia. Havel noted there were two important political events in the second half of the 20th century - the fall of communism and the collapse of colonial hegemony. For him it was important to note both events, because as he put it: "Decolonization brought an end to the long European domination of the planet, [just as] the fall of communism brought an end to the injustice by which that earlier injustice - colonialism - [had] transformed the world into a place of bipolar divisions." (Speech, Indira Gandhi Prize, 2/8/94; p. 153)

Here in my American context, I heard a lot about the fall of communism (Mr. Gorbachev, tear down that wall!); but I realized how much less I'd heard about the end of colonialism - perhaps because I lived in a land that had self-defined itself as being in opposition to the former category, but had benefited from the latter category. Having benefited from a world order in which European and American powers had projected their authority over so-called Third World and developing nations for generations, the movement of independence and self-reliance in those same nations was much less heralded here at home. Suddenly the economic growth and competition offered by the BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China) caused serious soul-searching here in America, including the question about "How shall we all live together under a new world order in which colonial powers and communist powers no longer benefit from unchallenged authority?" And as I'll flesh out in a moment, that same question strikes us much closer to home - in each of our church sanctuaries - when we look around and ask, "How shall we worship God together in a day and age in which our neighborhoods are no longer ethnically homogenous nor are our mid-20th century models of doing church appropriate for an early 21st-century world?"

Back to Havel's book: In a speech he gave in Prague in 1994, he said this: [Today] we live in a world with a single global civilization. The time when conflicts between peoples, cultures, and individual civilizations had only local impact is gone forever. On today's overpopulated planet, girdled by dense networks of political and economic relations, supersaturated with information and communication, everything that happens inevitably touches and concerns us all far more and in different ways than it ever did before."(184)

His words surprised and shook me up. I had not pictured our world as a single global civilization - but I could see the truth in his description. Think of how much we know

today about the rest of the world and how the rest of the world impacts our daily lives. We now know a lot about the Arab spring uprisings, unrest in Syria, currency troubles in the Euro-zone, and tensions with Venezuela, Yemen, and Iran. We know about these things, not because we are foreign policy buffs and enjoy studying different cultures, but because our livelihood, our paychecks and pensions are inexorably linked to what is happening in Greece, Spain, and China. After 9-11, we know now that one act of violence arising out of Saudi Arabia or Yemen can affect us directly here in Pittsburgh or wherever your home may be.

So how do we live together, and ultimately worship together, in a rapidly-changing, shrinking, converging world? A world that is flat, according to Thomas Friedman. A world that is bound together by Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and smartphone technology. A world that truly does have aspects of a single, global civilization.

There's a legend that comes out of ancient India about the Bharunda bird. It was a beautiful creature with two heads, but one body. Legend had it that when the bird sang, its beautiful voice could calm any creature who was angry or agitated or afraid. One day one head of the Bharunda bird found a luscious piece of ripe fruit. The other head asked to share in eating it, but the first head laughed and said that since they shared a common stomach, whatever one ate, the other automatically received as well. Angry that it couldn't enjoy the fruit equally, the second head became bitter and began to fight and peck at the first head. The bird's song was lost due to their anger, and eventually each head found poison to eat, believing that would punish the other head. But the acts of anger only ended up destroying the bird altogether.

The bible is full of lots of stories of angry siblings who find it difficult to live together. Genesis opens with the tragic tale of Cain's murderous jealousy of Abel. Later we read of the lifelong rivalry between Jacob and Esau. Then in the New Testament, we hear in Luke's gospel the famous parable of the Prodigal Son, where the return of the younger brother only leads to resentment and discord in the heart of the elder brother. In some versions of the Bharunda story, the troubled bird is brought back to life by the benevolent grace of Krishna so that their story would serve as a witness to all people about the tragic fruits of hatred. I was somewhat hard-pressed to find Christian equivalents to the benevolent, reconciling grace of Krishna. But then there is the witness of how the violent Saul is blinded by his rage, literally, and is restored to a new life of Christian witness in community with his new brother in Christ, Cornelius. The parallels between the Jewish and Gentile communities finding new life together in Christ is one example of hope from our faith tradition. Another is the obvious example of Christ's resurrection from the dead - the first-fruits promised to us, when we stop seeking out poison and hatred that only kills the very relationships that God intends to preserve and we learn to live together, different heads, different gifts, one body in Christ Jesus, who is our song, our savior, our eternal hope.

In the remaining time I have today with you, I'd like to briefly share some ideas to keep in mind as you live into being part of healthy, growing, creative multicultural churches, based on some of my own experiences having lived in Europe, pastored in Zimbabwe,

Wisconsin, and now at East Liberty Presbyterian Church here in Pittsburgh. Let me offer four markers of a healthy multicultural ministry. (I didn't have time to organize these four markers into some snazzy acronym or mnemonic device, so you get bonus points if you can suggest some way to do that when I'm all done.)

1) Be honest in naming who is present and who is being excluded from your community of faith. That may seem contrary to the gospel good news, in which we insist in Christ Jesus there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. However, we exist in a world that does categorize us - for good, for ill - such is our reality. We are defined by age, by height, by weight, by arbitrary distinctions of racial identity, by nationality, by geography, by too often controversial categories related to sexual orientation or family dynamics. The list goes on and on. Think about your church community, but look beyond the surface categories and see deeper areas of commonality and diversity. Think about how many people in the pews have lost a loved one tragically - by car accident, cancer, or suicide. You may not "see" that quality in them when you first meet them, but that aspect of their life is never, ever far from their thoughts or their faith reflections. Or think about how many families have someone serving in the military, in the National Guard, or a veteran of a past military conflict. Think about how many have adoptions in their family history - or divorce - or abortions - or alcoholism. Think about how many have traveled overseas; how many have taken part in a mission trip; how many volunteer to work with kids after school. Be creative in how you describe the family of faith God has placed around you. And then go the next step: how does my church minister to the people inside our walls for each of these categories - and how does my church care for the same people outside our walls. In honestly reflecting on those questions, fruitful, faithful ministry can emerge.

At ELPC, we have a wonderful young adult named Matt who has a mild version of Down's syndrome. One of the many roles he has in our congregation is to serve as the beadle - the person who carries in an open bible when the choir processes in during the opening hymn. God's word in Matt's hands is a witness all by itself. We also have another young man named Mark, who suffers from a debilitating condition that keeps him in a motorized wheelchair and prevents him from speaking. But he is exceptionally bright and talented - so with enough preparation, Mark can program his computer to speak words for him, so that Mark can read scripture or play the role of King Herod in the Christmas pageant, since he has his own throne, or lead the congregation in prayer. By the way, Mark currently serves on our Worship & Music committee.

2) Seek to model multicultural diversity without words whenever possible. There is no denying the importance of modeling diversity explicitly in your worship services. Choose hymns that can be sung in English and Spanish or other languages. Pick anthems or songs that come from the international church community. Have speakers share stories from their homelands, from their life experiences, from their heritage. All that has value. But how do you model diversity non-verbally? Who is up front in your church every Sunday? White males - white females - 50-70 year olds - middle class/upper middle class homeowners? A picture is worth a thousand words,

and a worship non-verbal picture is worth a thousand words of theology, especially to a visitor who comes into your church looking for a place where they can belong. A place that will welcome them if they are divorced, or unemployed, or immigrant, or of mixed ethnicity, or young, or new to town - you fill in the blank.

At ELPC, I looked around one day and noted that although our worshiping congregation is about 30% African-American, with a growing number of Latino and Asian friends, the pictures on the wall in the church or sometimes on our bulletin boards did not reflect that same diversity. So we intentionally found artwork that moves away from the dominant Western European, Caucasian categories. We ensured that worship liturgists will always reflect racial, age, and economic diversity as often as possible. And we were more intentional in checking the message being communicated by our bulletin boards, bulletin inserts, and newsletter materials. What you say often communicates less well than how you say it.

- 3) Determine what is the “critical mass” for which you strive as you work towards greater diversity and multi-cultural expressions of faith. Again I want to be careful here. Church work is not about numbers. Bigger is not better. As the old quip goes, Jesus said “Feed my sheep” not “count my sheep.” However, if you articulate your goals in vague terms impossible to measure or monitor, you will invariably be disappointed in your ministry.

As part of a racial-ethnic taskforce here in Pittsburgh Presbytery, I reviewed some statistics about the congregations who reported any level of growth in their worship attendance during the years 2004-2009. Sadly, only about 1/5 of the churches in our Presbytery could show any growth at all in worship attendance during that five year period. And when I looked to see what, if anything, was a common factor uniting that select group of churches, I didn't see anything obvious. Churches that grew varied in size, location, tenure of pastors, and theological “positions.” But I did notice that 2/3rds of the churches that grew had reported on their Statistical Reports the presence of at least 1-5 members of non-Caucasian ethnicity - a percentage far greater than the average for our overall Presbytery.

Here's the point: If your church can figure out the way to do worship and education and ministry so that even one family from your neighborhood who doesn't look like everyone else currently in your pews is comfortable fully joining in your faith life, then you are likely moving in the right direction to be a diverse, multicultural church. So maybe your critical mass is one or two families per year brought into your church that reflect diversity. Maybe it is one family whose children are integrated into your Sunday school program. Maybe it is five people who are visible, active participants in your church life for whom you make some accommodation to make sure they are welcome - whether that involves accessibility issues, sound system issues, language issues, whatever. I believe that the degree to which you are willing to move towards someone with the love of Christ – to accommodate yourself and your positions of privilege - is the measure to which Christ will be fully honored by your overall ministry.

- 4) Lastly, rejoice in God's moments! Look around for God's multicultural fingerprints as God actively molds and shapes and challenges our church families every single day. The God moment may happen in the Sunday school class or around the copy machine in the office. It may happen at a church potluck, when you stop insisting people only bring traditional Thanksgiving items and suddenly next to the turkey and stuffing you see tamales or sushi or pasta or fried chicken. Remember Paul and Cornelius and the wonderful diversity of the body of Christ. Remember how resurrections happen every day, both in individual lives and church congregations - and that resurrection invariably is bigger than any one ethnicity or personal story can contain. Remember the song of the Bharunda bird, whose inherent diversity was necessary both for life and for offering healing music to the world. And remember the one who came, who lived and healed, died and rose again, that we might be far more together in Christ than we could ever be on our own.

Thank you again for this time together today.