



Uncomfortable Church

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Church was a struggle today.

It is so different being in a multi-ethnic church and being in the minority. It's one thing to welcome others into a church where the default culture is your own. There is reassurance in knowing that when things return to normal it will be more familiar. That's why I love some multi-ethnic churches where the pastor is Caucasian (like me) but has a mission heart. The samples of music and culture are delightful. But the mental construct of the church comes out of a Caucasian mind and somehow, quietly, that makes me comfortable. It's like a cultural safety net.

So don't tell me the HUP (Homogeneous Unit Principle) is passé or unbiblical. The HUP exists! I operate on it constantly while still being an advocate for multi-ethnic churches.

In my church, when things swing back toward the default culture, I get threatened, uneasy. This morning was a case in point.

The worship leader was a black woman—our church is majority black, I'd say 75%. It was a 9 a.m. service and we walked in two minutes late. The worship leader was trying to get the crowd to engage emotionally, asking God to remove a spirit of heaviness she felt. Well, within a couple of minutes, I was contributing to that spirit of heaviness! I don't like being told in *fortissimo* to get excited, but the black congregants around me were soaring—hallelujah—with her repeated calls—hallelujah—to engage the spirit of praise—hallelujah! I reached for my coat twice, ready to exit, but I forced myself to stay.

My jaw gradually unclenched as she finished.

Then the most amazing thing happened.

A man was suddenly speaking into the microphone. He happened to be Caucasian, though I don't think it would have mattered as far as our collective response is concerned. He began sharing, struggling through deep emotion, that he was going through a terribly difficult season. He was losing everything, even his family. He spoke with a passionate sincerity that melted my heart. He asked not for sympathy, not for money, but that the church would just pray for him. He said he prays but no one seems to hear him.

As he spoke several came around and hugged on him. As he finished, one of the pastors took the microphone back and invited others in the congregation to indicate by a raised hand if they were also going through a similar time. Several did, one right in front of me. We clustered around all these hurting ones while the pastor prayed mercy over them.

I don't know how to evaluate my experience, but I am surely glad I didn't leave the service. The evening before, Lyn and I were talking about how difficult it is to attend this church, how hard it is to know that tomorrow is Sunday and we have to get up and venture into the unknown. We know the volume of the music will assault our ears. We'll feel like outsiders as members pass us by to greet people like themselves. Why are we attending this church? I gave Lyn my usual pep talk.

One thing that came to mind is that church and self-denial are not an oxymoron. When Jesus told us how to follow Him, He said to deny ourselves, take up His cross daily and follow Him. Daily? Even on Sunday? Even in our home church?

I've gone to rambling now, but I guess my point is that God showed up yesterday in the humble plea of a hurting brother. God showed up for others in an emotion-seeking song leader. And I got to see how diverse the Body is, and I suppose I should learn that this is the kind of variety the Head of the Church loves. I say I am there for Him, not myself. Living it out demands I be in places where His variety is allowed to show, where I am out of my comfort zone.

If I must have things my way, I'm going to miss seeing the diversity of Jesus' tastes!

Years later...

Ten years in fact. I eventually left that town, and had to leave that church behind. It was really hard to leave. I had made friends. The congregation has seen us through difficult trials. I had been asked to serve as an elder.

Gradually, it had become my church family. And I had changed for the better.

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