

INVESTIGATING THE EFFECTS OF CULTURAL INCLUSIVITY ON ST. JOHN
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH THROUGH THE USE OF A
CREATED BIBLE STUDY SERIES

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ABSTRACT

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The notion of a family church could be taken to unhealthy levels in a faith community where the membership is comprised of people who share the same racial/ethnic and socio-cultural identities. Moreover, this sameness may not reflect the reality of the surrounding community. There is likely a warm, palpable fellowship among the members, but they sometimes fail to extend hospitality to new entrants. This makes it difficult for the newcomers to feel welcome. Often, newcomers are expected to conform to the dominant church culture or stop coming. Longtime members often find nothing wrong with the status quo. Their attitude suggests, "If I like it, you should like it". This type of attitude renders the church unhealthy, eventually killing it.

This project was centered on the assertion that biblically based cultural inclusivity training would have positive effects on the members of St. John United Methodist Church. The goal was to create tools for intercultural dialogue at the local church level with the goal of mirroring the Kingdom of God. Since cultural inclusivity is essential to a healthy and growing church, the project was designed to educate and equip members of St. John with a biblical and theoretical understanding of the values of cultural inclusivity. The research methodology included pre and post surveys and the creation of a Bible Study

series on cultural inclusivity, complete with homework assignments requiring participants to practice inclusiveness.

From the research findings, it is clear that the implementation of the project brought deeper understanding of cultural inclusivity as an act of biblical hospitality and healing power in the church. As a result, members have become more open to each other and more welcoming of guests. The membership increased by 10 members in 2014. The program created by this project can be helpful for congregations of any size or location that desire to reflect the beauty of the Kingdom of God.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The issue of inclusivity has plagued the church from its inception. The first set of believers in Jesus were Jews. It was inconceivable to them that Gentiles could come to faith in Jesus Christ without first being circumcised as Jews. This issue divided the rank and file of the early Christian leaders. The Jewish Christians found it an unwelcoming idea that anyone other than Jews could become Christian. Even Peter with all of his sense of spirituality found this very challenging.

In Acts 10, the first test came when Cornelius, a rich man from Caesarea, a centurion of Italian Regiment, invited Peter to come and share the gospel of Jesus Christ with him and his household. Cornelius was a devout man who he feared God and taught his family to fear and worship God as well. Cornelius gave alms generously to the poor and also prayed to God always, yet only one thing remained for him and his household – faith in Jesus Christ. But because God is not a discriminating God, God told Cornelius to send for Peter who would explain the way of salvation to him more clearly.

Sometimes we think we are defending God who has not asked for us to defend him. In Acts 10:9-16, despite the fact that God has shown Peter in a vision what was about to happen, he was still not sure he was hearing God correctly. As Peter was contemplating the meaning of the vision, the messengers from

Cornelius arrived. Of course Peter went with them but, imaginatively speaking, he was still wondering how he could reconcile the idea of a Gentile becoming a Christian.

It is interesting and noteworthy, that when Peter arrived at Cornelius' house, there was a change of attitude. I am personally fascinated by the idea that "Cornelius fell down at Peter's feet and worshipped him". Employing what the French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, calls the "Hermeneutics of suspicion"¹, one could ask, why did Cornelius prostrate before Peter? Could it be that he had been told most of his life that the Jews were superior? Was he suffering from internalized oppression? Had he come to believe what he was told so much so that he, being a high ranking officer and a rich man, had to bow down and worship a peasant Jewish preacher? Was he just overwhelmed by the anointing of God upon Peter? Whatever it was, Peter responded by saying, "Stand up; I myself am also a man." The response of Peter lends credence to these questions.

Regardless of Cornelius' feelings or Peter's opinions about going to Cornelius' house, contact brought about congeniality and interaction brought down the wall of division, at least for a moment. Peter recognized the humanity of Cornelius even as he claimed his own. Recognizing that Cornelius was also capable of receiving the grace and the mercy of God, he explained the way of salvation to Cornelius and his household.

God's stamp of approval was immediate and very surprising. Instead of following the process which would have been comfortable for Peter and other Jews, God released the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and his household even though they were yet to be baptized according to the tradition. Peter responded well on the spur of the moment. He immediately ordered the baptism of these new found brothers and sisters, particularly

¹ Brian Leitbr, ed., *The Future for Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 74.

because God confirmed their conversion by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on them. Peter saw nothing wrong with what he had done.

However, the rest of the Jewish Christian leaders did not see eye-to-eye with Peter on this issue. “Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him saying, ‘You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!’ ”² I like the way Eugene H. Peterson translates this passage:

The news traveled fast and in no time the leaders and friends back in Jerusalem heard about it—heard that the non-Jewish “outsiders” were now “in.” When Peter got back to Jerusalem, some of his old associates, concerned about circumcision, called him on the carpet: “What do you think you’re doing rubbing shoulders with that crowd, eating what is prohibited and ruining our good name?”³

One would expect the people who had witnessed the Lord Jesus in all his fullness—they had seen and heard his interaction with the Samaritan woman, his shaking off the criticism he received when he went to eat in Zacchaeus’ house, his teachings of coming for the salvation of the whole world—to think differently and to realize that discrimination is irreconcilable with the gospel of Jesus Christ. When they heard that Cornelius and his household had received the gospel and had been baptized in the Holy Spirit and in water, they should have rejoiced and praised God for the expansion of the gospel. Instead, they were worried about circumcision and their own reputation among fellow Jews.

This experience probably shook the confidence of Peter to the point that he was no longer willing to be seen publicly with Gentiles, especially if the other Apostles

² Acts 11:1-3.

³ Acts 11:1-3 (The Message Bible: The Bible in Contemporary Language Version).

located in Jerusalem would be aware of it. In his heart, I think, he believed both Jews and Gentiles were children of God by faith in Jesus Christ. However, he did not always follow his heart, he followed his head. Still, it was difficult for him in his head to be seen as one who was close to Gentiles. For example, Paul had to confront him when this hypocrisy became apparent:

Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?⁴

Paul was instrumental in guiding the early church through this dilemma. Much like they did, we in the church today are struggling with this issue. The more the early Jewish Christians knew the more they welcomed people from other cultures⁵ and nationalities into Christianity. The tragedy of discrimination as it exists today is that the church is not setting a good example for society to follow. Discrimination exists in the church just as it exists in the society.

The issue of discrimination is particularly endemic in the United States, a country bearing the bitter history of slavery and discrimination against Jews, the Irish, people of Asian descent, Hispanics, and women. However, the economic prosperity of the United States has become so enticing to people across the world that they come here seeking to experience a "better standard of living". With immigration comes the challenge of what

⁴ Gal 2:11-14 (NKJV).

⁵ The concept of "culture" for the purpose of this project is used very broadly to include family of origin, gender, nationality, personalities and generational differences.

to do with people from different ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds who have come to make the United States their new home. The history of discrimination has dogged the country for a long time. In so many ways it has defined the United States for good or bad.

The propensity to discriminate has increased and some citizens claim that immigrants have come to the United States to change the way of life in negative ways. Others assume that immigrants will take their jobs. For these and other reasons, as the number of immigrants increase, discrimination increases. Discrimination is a systemic problem that exists both in the secular community as well as the church community.

I remember being with a small group of clergy at an inclusivity training not too long ago and some were expressing their disgust at the idea of an “inclusive church”. For them it is okay for people from other races and nationalities to come to their church, but they do not want them to become the majority. They also railed against the idea of cross cultural appointment of clergy in the United Methodist Church. One of them turned to me and asked why a Black pastor would want to be appointed to a White church. He further said, “I do not want to be appointed to a Black church.” I gently reminded him that the church ought to mirror the kingdom of God and if the church is to be a prototype of the kingdom of God on earth, it has to be inclusive in all its doings. The Kingdom of God will include people of all ages, genders, races, ethnicity, and nationalities.

In my opinion, too many people have a narrow view of the Kingdom of God and that is why discrimination based on age, race, gender, ethnicity and nationality continues to be a problem for the church. The fact remains that discrimination is alive and well. The tension is palpable both in secular society as well as in the church. However, society has

made great strides in its effort to end discrimination in the work place. While covert discrimination still exists in many work environments, overt old-fashioned discrimination has been reduced because there are governmental laws in place that are specifically instituted to abolish discrimination.

Unfortunately, some people still want to keep the church segregated. For example, a friend of mine was sent to pastor a church that was seriously declining in membership. The District set up an assessment team to look into why the once thriving church had become a fast declining church. The team found that the membership of the church was not reflective of the people in the community in which the church was located. The church membership was primarily White people who were not open to welcoming the mostly African-American and Haitian people who dominated the community. Over time, the community had transformed from a primarily White neighborhood into a primarily Black neighborhood. Eventually that church closed down.

In a different area, another mostly White congregation was losing members. However, many people from the Caribbean Islands joined the church and the congregation was doing well for as long as they had a White male pastor. As soon as the Bishop appointed a female Caribbean pastor to the church, all the White people in the church left at once to join another congregation that was primarily White. I share these examples to show how discrimination is still a problem in the church. Often people like to fellowship with others who look and speak like them because they feel more comfortable with the familiar rather than taking the risk of interacting with people who are different.

The missional purpose of the church is antithetical to the idea of segregated worship. The Bible says, "For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus."⁶

Jesus' main mission is to call all of humanity to a unified family of God. In John's gospel, Jesus prayed for the believers:

I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom you have given Me, for they are Yours. And all mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to you. Holy Father, keep through your name those whom you have given me, that they may be one as *We are*⁷

John also declares in chapter 3 verse 16 "For God so loved *the world* that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life". Jesus' mission includes people of all races, genders and ethnic backgrounds. God, the Creator of the whole universe, loves everyone regardless of such qualifiers as gender, sexual orientation, national origin, or race. To be a true follower of Jesus Christ and true to the identity of God, segregation or discrimination should be eschewed in all its forms. The ministry of inclusivity should be given priority in all churches. Church leaders should encourage an all inclusive church.

Ministry Context

In this dissertation, I use St. John United Methodist Church (St. John UMC) as a case study and a microcosm of the larger issue of cultural insensitivity within UMC

⁶ Gal 3:26-28.

⁷ Jn 17:9-11.

denomination. I became fascinated with this issue when I was asked by Bishop Timothy Whitaker to serve on a Task Team whose purpose it was to develop a plan to foster inclusiveness within the Florida Annual Conference. At the heart of this mission was tackling the pernicious problem of racism.

My immediate response was, “Why can't the Bishop just declare a zero tolerance policy for racism in the conference and follow up with some big changes to show how serious and committed he is to this mission?” However, I soon realized that the issue of inclusivity is much bigger than race, and it cannot be settled by just a policy change. It has to be a combination of training, preaching, policy changes, and mind set changes. The issues of racism and cultural insensitivity are endemic problems in the modern, and as elucidated earlier, in the early church.

Several churches are closing in the Florida Annual Conference for lack of outreach to the ever-changing demography of people that surrounds our churches. According to Dan Dick, the Research Coordinator and Project Manager for the General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church, "The growing concern in United Methodism is that many of our churches no longer reflect the community in which they are located."⁸

St. John UMC is not immune to this problem. A pastoral observation of the church indicates that given the percentage of people with no church affiliation in the new culturally mixed community around the church, St. John UMC has a potential for growth. Every local church exists in a unique community setting.⁹ The community around St.

⁸ Dan R. Dick, *Vital Signs: A Pathway to Congregational Wholeness* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2007), 36.

⁹ Ibid.

John UMC has changed over time. While once a predominantly Black community, it is now a racially, ethnically, and economically diverse community.

Much like all other tourist states, Florida has a large population of immigrants and is enriched with people of different cultures, races and ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, in my opinion, St. John has to reflect the diversity that exists in the community to remain relevant and to reclaim the vision of the pioneering leaders of our local church.

St. John United Methodist Church was established in 1904 at a time when segregation was an acceptable practice in social and secular institutions. The small group of founding members had not found full acceptance in the all White Methodist Church they attended. They wanted to worship God freely in an atmosphere where they would not be treated as less than others. Hence a few Black Christians gathered together to form a new congregation.

The church was named Saint John Methodist Episcopal Church and was located on the east side of the "railroad track" and east of Andrews Avenue in Fort Lauderdale, Florida within Dade County. At the General Conference of 1939, the word "Episcopal" was deleted from the name and identity of the church¹⁰. The new name, St. John Methodist Church was adopted. The reason why this is important is because St. John Methodist Episcopal Church—a Black only congregation—could have easily aligned with the African Methodist Episcopal church, a Black Methodist denomination, but the membership of St. John Methodist Church chose to remain with the Methodist Church General Conference, a predominantly White Methodist denomination. The pioneering leaders of St. John wanted an inclusive church, a church that reflected the demography of the Kingdom of God without regard for skin color.

¹⁰ "History of St. John United Methodist Church," Church Archives. Fort Lauderdale, FL.

Today, St. John UMC has a membership of approximately 400 with an average worship attendance of 165 people. It is comprised of 95 percent African Americans, 4 percent Caribbean and 1 percent others. It is a family church, its blessings and challenges. Some of the blessings are: (a) everyone in the church knows each other by name, (b) the sharing and enjoyment of fellowship among members, particularly those who have known each other since childhood, is real, and (c) church membership spreads across generational lines.

In addition to these blessings, the family church mentality also has many challenges. Some of those challenges include: (a) young adults are not coming to church with their parents for fear of losing their independence, (b) a closed-minded family church mentality makes it difficult for those who are considered "outsiders" to be fully integrated, (c) complacency amongst church members that robs them of their evangelistic spirit and willingness to reach out to others. This makes it difficult for the church to grow, (d) Intra-family rancor and infighting which has become accepted amongst longtime members but toxic to the church. It sometimes surfaces at committee meetings and other important events. It becomes more apparent when members refuse to show up at events that are being chaired by someone they think is on the "other" side.

According to information from church and community members, my female predecessor, was not welcomed by many of the church's members which surprisingly included many women. When I heard this, I asked several members why they did not welcome the former pastor and the response was immediate, "A woman is not supposed to pastor a church."

For one of our church anniversaries I recall telling the planning committee I was going to invite one of my former professors to be our revivalist and guest speaker. Some of the members of the committee came to me after the meeting to be sure I was not inviting a White pastor. I insisted I was not going to declare the race of the individual, only the name. I asked, "What difference does it make if I invited a Black or White preacher as long as the person can preach the word of God?" Not satisfied with my answer, they told me they researched the name I gave them on the Internet and found out that he was a Black preacher! I noticed the joy and satisfaction on their faces as they informed me of this.

The above are some of the examples that gave me the image of the church years ago. As a pastor, I have watched the members of the church grow over the years. For most members, gender is no longer an issue when they think of a pastor. I have invited several female preachers and the reception has been very positive. I have also invited many White preachers and the members have been very warm, happy and lively in welcoming the preachers. However, there are still elements of the past that are lingering and are noticeable among some of the members. I have received some negative feedback from guests to our church in the past that has created a negative image for our church in the community. Some young people have also reported that some of the older members have made certain comments that were insensitive toward the young people.

There is therefore a need for a new and different orientation for the members of St. John United Methodist Church. It is my opinion that learning cultural inclusivity skills through the lens of the scriptures will have a positive effect on the St. John United Methodist Church members and the community in which it is located. There are cultural

differences in the church and these cultural differences are real and sometimes permanent. The church often doesn't know what to do with these differences. I believe that the only acceptable option the church has in responding to issues of difference is to learn how to use them positively rather than allowing them to bring separation and conflict to the church.

Early Encounters with Cultural Difference

I was born and raised in Nigeria, a country that claims home to over 150 million people. Nigeria has more than 250 ethnic groups, with varying languages and customs, creating a country of rich ethnic diversity. There are four major ethnic groups in Nigeria that account for over 70 percent of its population. They are: Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and Fulani. The other tribal groups that account for about 25 percent are the Edo, Urhobo, Idoma, Ijaw, Itsekiri, Igala, Nupe, Gwari, Jukun, Ebira, Tiv, and Kanuri. There are other minorities that make up the remaining 5 percent.

There is a diversity of ethnic groups in the middle part of Nigeria, notable among them are: the Pyem, Goemai, and Kofyar. Most of the major ethnic groups also have subdivisions of tribal groups who may be speaking the same language but have different dialects. The official population count of each of Nigeria's tribal areas has always been disputed. Northern Nigeria is commonly accused of inflating its population numbers to claim political advantage.

There are small minorities of British, American, East Indian, Chinese, white Zimbabwean, Japanese, Greek, Syrian and Lebanese immigrants in Nigeria. Immigrants also include those from other West African or East African nations. These minorities mostly reside in major cities such as Lagos and Abuja, or in the Niger Delta as employees

for the major oil companies. A number of Cubans settled in Nigeria as political refugees following the Cuban Revolution.¹¹

In the middle of the 19th century, a number of ex-slaves of Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian descent and immigrants from Sierra Leone established communities in Lagos and other regions of Nigeria. Many ex-slaves came to Nigeria following the emancipation of slaves in the Americas. Many of the immigrants, sometimes called Saros (immigrants from Sierra Leone) and Amaro (ex-slaves from Brazil) later became prominent merchants and missionaries in these cities.¹²

In spite of being a country with such diversity, fear of the “other” has always been a common sentiment of many people in Nigeria. I remember being warned by my parents not to go to the small Urhobo community in our neighboring village. Because they migrated from another part of the country and spoke a different language, the suspicion was that they were dangerous people. I was told that they were cannibals and warned to be extremely wary of them. The truth was that I had many friends from this community who were attending school with me. I had seen many of their parents as they came to pick up their children from school. My mother was the cook for the school, yet she had this fear of the Urhobos.

When I was twelve years old my mother sent me to the mill in the next village where the Urhobos lived. She warned me not to wander around but to come back home as soon as I finished blending what she had sent me to blend at the mill. Unfortunately, I saw some of my friends from school who are Urhobos, and, without thinking, I ran up to

¹¹ Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, s.v. “Cuban Revolution,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuban_Revolution (accessed November 14, 2014).

¹² Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, s.v. “Nigeria,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nigeria#Demographics> (accessed November 14, 2014).

meet them. They introduced me to their parents, and I saw several adults there. Suddenly fear came to me as I remembered what I had been told about the people. For a short while, the fear was so intense that I concluded, in my mind, that I was going to be killed that evening. The people speaking in their language and laughing. Little did I know they were just having fun. I thought they were happy because I was going to be their meat for the evening.

When I thought no one was paying attention, I ran back to the mill, picked up my stuff and ran away from the area as fast as I could. My heart was pounding within me until I got home. I could not tell my mother anything, and I was too embarrassed to face my friend the following day and explain why I ran away. I later realized my fear was baseless and imaginary. Overtime I overcame that phobia as I realized that Urhobos were loving and caring people.

From this situation, I gleaned that we sometimes project our own fear and assumptions on others to justify why we do not want to be around them. Or sometimes we may have had a bad experience with one individual and deductively assume everyone that looks like or speaks like that individual will behave or think the same way. Nothing is farther from the truth. Each person has his or her own unique personality. As a twin, I find many dissimilarities between my twin sister and I, yet we were born of the same mother on the same day.

Purpose

Improving the understanding of the members of St. John UMC related to cultural inclusivity will have a positive effect on the church. My hope is to create tools for

intercultural dialogue at the local church level that will enable it to mirror the Kingdom of God.

Definition of Terms

Culture: The behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group. For example, “the youth culture,” or “the drug culture.” Culture is the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another.¹³ Culture is a unified set of human behavior that include the language, thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, and values.

Personality: The combination of emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral response patterns of an individual.¹⁴

Monoculturalism: A rejection of other peoples' cultures, a refusal to welcome or admit people of different cultures into the dominant culture. It is a belief in the superiority of the dominant culture at institutional and interpersonal levels.¹⁵

Pluralism: The acceptance, appreciation, utilization, and celebration of similarities and differences of other cultures into the dominant culture at institutional and interpersonal levels.¹⁶ The following point is key to the definition:

Cultural pluralism is a term used when smaller groups within a larger society maintain their unique cultural identities, and their values and practices are accepted by the majority or dominant culture provided they are consistent with the laws and values of the wider society.

¹³ Merriam-Webster.com, s.v. “culture,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture> (accessed November 1, 2014).

¹⁴ Merriam-Webster.com, s.v. “personality,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/personality> (accessed November 1, 2014).

¹⁵ Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, s.v. “Monoculturalism” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monoculturalism> (accessed November 1, 2014).

¹⁶ Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, s.v. “Cultural Pluralism,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_pluralism (accessed November 1, 2014).

Cultural pluralism is often confused with Multiculturalism. Multiculturalism lacks the requirement of a dominant culture.¹⁷

Genograms: A pictorial display of a person's family relationships. The use of specific symbols for gender, marital, sexual and, relational status make genograms unique as a tool for understanding an individual, a family, and organizations.¹⁸

Family of origin: A key concept in the Bowen Family System theory expanded upon by Ronald W. Richardson. The family of origin work is an invitation to go back to the emotional rock from where individuals were hewn. It is an emotional and spiritual compass for people to find a better way of connecting with their families and congregations. The main thrust of family of origin is an invitation: "Look at our own unresolved emotional attachments within our own family of origin"¹⁹

Family system theory: An approach to treatment that emphasizes the interdependency of family members rather than focusing on individuals in isolation from the family. This theory underlies the most influential forms of contemporary family therapy²⁰. "Body of Christ" is a systems metaphor used by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 12:12-31.

Scope of Project

The intention of the project was to engage the membership of St. John UMC in a series of cross-cultural, cross-generational dialogues in order to stimulate a congregation-wide discussion on the significance of cultural inclusivity for church growth. The project

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ William Presnell, "Untitled" (lecture, Topics in Pastoral Theology course, Fall 2014, Drew University Theological School, Madison, NJ).

¹⁹ Ronald W. Richardson, *Becoming a Healthier Pastor: Family Systems Theory and the Pastor's Own Family* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 6.

²⁰ Ibid.

focused on developing a Bible study series of what I consider are the important components of cultural competence: (a) awareness of one's own cultural worldview, (b) awareness of one's attitude towards cultural differences, (c) knowledge of different cultural practices and world views, and (d) developing cross-cultural skills, which will result in an ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures. The Bible study style was conversational rather than didactic.

I conducted a survey of the members who were willing to participate in the survey prior to the project in order to determine their level of self-awareness, their knowledge of cultural inclusivity and their general interest in the subject matter. At the end of the project another survey was conducted to evaluate the effect of the Bible study series on the members. I will also evaluate my own learning and growth through this project in a subsequent chapter of this dissertation. The project took place in the spring of 2014.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL, BIBLICAL, AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE PROJECT

As indicated in the first chapter, the issue of inclusivity is not new, but it has taken different dimensions overtime. In the Biblical context, there are references to gender, ethnic, nationality, economic and social divisions. I did not find any mention of racism in the Bible. According to Audrey Smedley,

Contemporary scholars agree that "race" was a recent invention and that it was essentially a folk idea, not a product of scientific research and discovery. This is not new to anthropologists. Since the 1940s when Ashley Montagu argued against the use of the term "race" in science, a growing number of scholars in many disciplines have declared that the real meaning of race in American society has to do with social realities, quite distinct from physical variations in the human species. I argue that race was institutionalized beginning in the 18th century as a worldview, a set of culturally created attitudes and beliefs about human group differences.¹

Race became an issue when people began to formulate ideas and theories about the apparent differences in the skin color of people around the world. Race is the taxonomy of people based on culture, ethnicity, genetics, geography, history, language, religions,

¹ Audrey Smedley, "Origin of the Idea of Race." *Anthropology Newsletter* (November 1997), posted under Background Readings on PBS, http://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-02-09.htm (accessed December 2, 2014).

and societal affiliation. According to Wikipedia, “Race was first used to refer to speakers of a common language and then to denote national affiliations”¹

By the 17th century, raced identified people by their observable, physical traits. Such use promoted hierarchies favorable to differing ethnic groups.² Race has become a very divisive and toxic concept in the modern society. It becomes more of a problem when race is used to determine the level of access people have to social benefits. There is a broad agreement among many scholars today that “essentialist and typological conceptualizations of race are untenable”³, yet many people are still bent on using race as a way to categorize people and to determine their level of access to society’s benefits. Difference, in my opinion, should be admired. This follows the popular saying: “Variety is the spice of life”. Race, gender, and ethnicity differences have become tools for division.

The issue of human sexuality continues to breed controversy within Christian denominations. The United Methodist Church is still struggling over this issue. The mainline churches such as Episcopal and Presbyterian are facing a serious decline in their membership. Exploiting those differences is often the means by which one group seeks to dominate another. For example, data has supported the belief that there is nothing a man can do that a woman cannot do. But in a patriarchal culture, men have been seen as superior and able to do things that women cannot do. Hence men have been given privileges that continue to put them in a stronger position to influence society and gather

¹ Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, s.v. “Race (human classification),” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_\(human_classification\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_(human_classification)) (accessed December 6, 2014).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

more wealth. While discrimination continues to be a problem in society, the church has lost its prophetic voice on this issue because discrimination is endemic in its system as well.

In its 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, the ecumenical body, was alarmed about the danger of racism and began a conversation on how to tackle this problem⁴. In their deliberations the following was agreed upon as marks of a true church of Jesus Christ:

To be the church today requires deliberate, consistent and constant action in the struggle for racial justice. To be the church today requires an effort to overcome racism through actions to transform society and its structures of power and exclusion. To be the church today requires transformation into church communities which fully live the diversity of their peoples and cultures as a clear reflection of God's Creation and Image in humankind. To be the church today calls churches to make a costly commitment to overcome their own division on racial-ethnic lines. To be the church today means overcoming racism by re-establishing right relationships with the churches' own people: women and men, Indigenous Peoples, Africans and peoples of African-descent, Dalits, and ethnic minorities. It means churches facing the truth of the life and death wrongs that they themselves perpetrated in the past against racially and ethnically oppressed peoples, as well as their acts of environmental racism. It is to search and tell the truth about the realities of racism as expressed in assimilation policies, superiority myths, and disrespect to the diversity of cultures and identities, disrespect to creation. To be the church today is to be healing communities, transformed by the lives, gifts and spirits of their own people, and to uphold the interconnectedness of life as a whole⁵.”

It is interesting to note that the church today is still not reflecting the hallmarks of the church as enumerated back in 1910. Discrimination is a very stubborn issue.

Although significant progress has been made since this issue was first discussed, the

⁴ Central Committee, “Being Church and Overcoming Racism: It’s Time for Transformative Justice.” World Council of Churches, June 27, 2002, <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/2002/being-church-and-overcoming-racism> (accessed December 15, 2014).

⁵ Ibid.

church is far from completely eradicating discrimination from its system. Donna Hart rightly opined:

Racism takes many forms in American society today, not the least of which are racial profiling of African American males as potential criminals and associating Middle Easterners with terrorism. Physical characteristics define distinct racial boundaries for most people in the US although biological science does not support dividing the human species into different races.⁶

There is need for a new way of thinking. The church today must be orientated to developing an open mind. The church must show society the way. The church must be inclusive in all its actions.

Inclusivity in the Old Testament

Stories of discrimination, unfairness, and exclusivity abound in the Old Testament. This is in part due to the cultural environment within which the teachings of the Bible developed. Much of the Old Testament was compiled by a group of scholars referred to as the Deuteronomists⁷. Albert Rainer describes this group:

Since the mid-20th century, scholars have identified the Deuteronomists as country Levites (a junior order of priests), or as prophets in the tradition of the northern kingdom of Israel, or as sages and scribes at the royal court. Recent scholarship has interpreted the book as involving all these groups, and the origin and growth of Deuteronomism is usually described in the following terms: Following the destruction of Israel (the northern kingdom) by Assyria in 721 BCE refugees came south to Judah, bringing with them traditions, notably the concept of Yahweh as the only God who should be served, which had not previously been known. Among those influenced by these new ideas were the landowning aristocrats (called

⁶ Donna Hart and Pamela Ashmore, "Changing Students' Understanding of Race," *Anthropology News* 47, no. 3 (2006): 10-11.

⁷ Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, s.v. "Deuteronomist," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deuteronomist> (accessed November 13, 2014).

"people of the land" in the bible) who provided the administrative elite in Jerusalem.⁸

In *Joshua and the Promised Land*, Roy H. May Jr. further elucidates,

When the kingdom of Israel overrun by the Assyrians (722 B.C.E.), the Deuteronomistic Historians fled to south. For nearly a century, they re-worked their theology from Judah. The kings of this period were corrupt. King Manasseh (687-642 B.C.E.) was especially dictatorial and repressive. The Deuteronomistic Historians probably had to work secretly. However, when Josiah became king (640 B.C.E.), they became publicly prominent.⁹

For some scholars the primary objective of the Deuteronomists is “the prophetic view of history in which cause and effect are tied to the blessings and curses of the covenant¹⁰” The Deuteronomistic tendency within I & II Kings is to evaluate each king in regard to covenant faithfulness. For the northern kings, they are evaluated in comparison to Jeroboam (the first king of the north). For the southern kings, they are evaluated in comparison to David (on whom God bestowed the Davidic covenant). At each point, the author/editor is trying to establish the map of Israel's path to failure.¹¹

In this dissertation, I am offering a critique of the selective approach by the Deuteronomists to the historical trajectory of Israelites. My critique derives from the suggestion offered by Dr. Phyllis Trible, Professor of Sacred Literature both at Union Theological Seminary and Wake Forest University. Based on her research, I think the the scripture ought to be re-examined and rescued from the simply traditional viewpoint. In “Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Studies,” she writes,

⁸ Rainer Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 25.

⁹ Roy H. May and Annette Vanzant *Joshua and the Promised Land Study Guide* (New York: United Methodist Church, 1997), 13.

¹⁰ J. Paul Tanner, “Old Testament I: The Deuteronomistic Theory,” <http://paultanner.org/English Docs/OT 1/Notes/Sess24.pdf>. (accessed November 28, 2014).

¹¹ Ibid.

Born and bred in a land of patriarchy, the Bible abounds in male imagery and language. For centuries interpreters have explored and exploited this male language to articulate theology; to shape the contours and content of the church, synagogue and academy; and to instinct human beings—female and male—in who they are, what roles they should play, and how they should behave. So harmonious has seemed this association of Scripture with sexism, of faith with culture, that only a few have even questioned it.¹²

My concern is not only with the male language, which has been the bane of the church's theology about gender, but also with the narrative approach of the Deuteronomists has influenced the way the church understands society. In my opinion both the language and narrative approach of the Deuteronomists have fueled exclusion rather than inclusion.

The individual's ability to tell her or his own story is an important aspect of being able to control his or her own destiny. We have seen time and again that stories are often told from the cultural and social lenses of the storytellers. The Deuteronomists by and large told the stories in the Old Testament from their vantage point. The Old Testament was written within a male dominated culture. The language of the Bible bears this out. Language informs and shapes our thoughts and behaviors. The masculine language of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, has a significant impact on the way we now construe the image of God.

Of course the Bible is full of anthropomorphisms and this serves as an important vehicle for assisting humans in finding their connections with Yahweh. One example of anthropomorphism is the Genesis story that tells us that Adam and Eve heard God walking in the Garden and God asking them where they were. One interpretation of this

¹² Phyllis Trible, "Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Studies," *Christian Century* (February 1982): 116.

story is that God is limited in knowledge and in space.¹³ Another example is Isaiah's claim that he "saw the Lord sitting on a throne" (Isaiah 6:1). These are human ways of expressing their experiences of God, not necessarily a real description of how God is. The masculine personal pronoun used to describe God in the Bible is anthropomorphism. The idea of using a masculine personal pronoun for God, I suppose originates from the primordial story of humans as documented by the Deuteronomist Historians.¹⁴

The first reading of the creation story suggests that God created both male and female on the same day at the same time¹⁵; but the second account suggests that the man was created first and then the woman.¹⁶ Traditionally the second account of the creation has been taken as the genesis of humankind.

The second account of creation has been given prominence, I think, because it buttresses the cultural claim of male superiority. This second account of creation denies the equality of man and woman because it claims that man was created first and then woman. According to that story, woman was created out of man and was created for the man,¹⁷ thus suggesting her inferiority to a man. The story also gives the naming power to the man. According to the story it was the man who named the woman.

The story in Genesis chapters 2 and 3, present a patriarchal view of humanity and has been widely used from early Christian centuries to modern day conservatism to argue

¹³ Gn 3:8-9.

¹⁴ The Deuteronomist, or simply "D," is one of the sources identified through source criticism as underlying much of the Hebrew Bible, seen by most scholars more as a school or movement than a single author.

¹⁵ Gn 3:8-9.

¹⁶ Gn 2:5-19.

¹⁷ Gn 2:21-22.

for the subordination of women.¹⁸ However a careful look at the first account of creation suggests that from the beginning God has been very keen on inclusivity. In the first account of creation, God created man and woman in God's own image. God did not make woman to be subordinate to the man. Both male and female were created from the same material, dust. God did not create them in hierarchical order, God created them equally and in different gender.

Phyllis Trible, in her thought-provoking book, *The Rhetoric of Sexuality*, suggests a need to re-examine the linguistic composition of the primeval account of creation:

According to traditional interpretations, the narrative in Genesis 2:7-3:24 (most interpretations bypass the preface in 2:4b-6) is about "Adam and Eve." It proclaims male superiority and female inferiority as the will of God. It portrays woman a "temptress" and troublemaker who is dependent upon and dominated by her husband. Over the centuries this misogynous reading has acquired a status of canonicity so that those who deplore and those who applaud the story both agree upon its meaning.¹⁹

Trible is right. Often the scriptures have been cited as the authority for believing certain things and acting in certain ways. Many passages of the Bible have been misused by people who want to put the stamp and authority of God on their oppressive behaviors. For example, when you question those against women as pastors, they immediately quote Genesis 2 and 3, and say something like, "The one and only time that a woman was the spokesperson she caused problems for herself and her husband and, by extension, caused problems for all of humanity."

¹⁸ Phyllis Trible, "Taking Back the Bible," (lecture, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC, October 2, 2006) <http://www.ecu.edu/religionprogram/docs/jarvis.pdf> (accessed November 26, 2014).

¹⁹ Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 72-73.

The fact that there are two different accounts of creation in the same document calls for a deeper investigation. In what is known as, “source criticism,”²⁰ most scholars agree that the difference in the two accounts points to the fact that the stories came from two sources. The question is, which one is right? The implications are very significant and should therefore be thoroughly investigated. I like the way Tribble interprets the creation story:

For most people, the story of the Garden begins with the creation of man. All translations would like for us to think that, too. But in Hebrew the story begins in a much more interesting and subtle way. It begins with a wonderful pun, the creation of ha-’Adam from ha-’adamah. You can hear in the pronunciation of the Hebrew the similarities of those words. We have a play on their sounds. Moreover, we are not talking about an individual creature, but the (ha-), the creature who comes from the soil. It is difficult, as you know, to transfer the puns of one language into another, but in this case I think we can do it. Let us translate, “God formed the human from the humus.” As soon as we do that, we have radically altered the interpretation of this text. The point of the first creation is not gender and sexuality but the creation of a creature that comes from the earth, a creature not specifically identified sexually. So the first creature is not male; the first creature is not the first man. Indeed man, the male, enters this story of creation only with the advent of woman, the female, and that does not happen at the beginning. It happens at the end of chapter 2, where the one earth creature, the one human from the humus, is, through divine surgery, made into two beings, one female and the other male. And interestingly, if the order of words is important to you, the word “female” occurs before the word “male.” The two creatures that come from the one earth creature constitute the advent of sexuality in creation. They are bone of bones and flesh of flesh, phrases that mean mutuality and equality.²¹

²⁰ Theopedia: Encyclopedia of Biblical Christianity, s.v. "Biblical Criticism," http://www.theopedia.com/Biblical_criticism. (accessed November 26, 2014). Source criticism is one aspect of *historical criticism*. Source criticism is particularly concerned with identifying potential sources and precursors of the text we have now.

²¹ Phyllis Tribble, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Pamela J. Milne and Jane Schaberg, *Feminist Approaches to the Bible*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2012), 13.

I find Tribble's argument brilliant and compelling. I may not have fully endorsed every word used by Tribble here. For example, in my opinion, it is a stretch to suggest that the word female comes before male and that somehow that carries a mark of significance. I do not see anything in the second chapter of Genesis that supports that assertion. However, after a careful reading of the first account of creation, I find her overarching argument plausible. It does seem like the "ha-'adamah" is simply androgynous; one creature incorporating two sexes.²²

Tribble also points out that "the creation of woman was a divine act rather than a request by Adam."²³ It was God who decided to create a woman just as God decided to create a man. God created both of them for God's own glory. Tribble also seeks to debunk the notion that woman was created to be a helper to man and therefore she is inferior to him. Here is the way she interprets that particular part of the creation story:

Moreover, she is not created as his helper, that is to say, his assistant and his inferior. To be sure the Hebrew word 'ezer has traditionally been translated "helper," but the translation is totally misleading. If you look the word up in a concordance, you discover that most often in the Hebrew Bible it is used to describe God. God is the helper of Israel. And when we hear that God is the helper of Israel, we never think that God is inferior to Israel. To the contrary, we know God is superior to Israel. God is the one who creates and saves Israel.²⁴

She concludes by saying that both man and woman are equal, and none has authority over the other. The truth of the matter is that man and woman are equal in matters of giftedness, leadership, communication skills and so on. Gender has nothing to do with an individual's abilities to get things done. Given equal access to power and to

²² Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 1.

²³ Tribble, "Taking Back the Bible."

²⁴ Tribble et. al., 14.

resources, women will do just as well as men. However, what we see in the society today is men getting paid more for doing the same jobs that women are doing. This is injustice. The tragedy of it all is that this is not only happening in the society, it is happening in the church as well.

These are the questions that continue to come up in my mind: What will our denomination look like if men and women have equal access to power and privilege? What will the United Methodist Church look like if the relationship between men and women, young and old, Black and White, Latinos, Asians, immigrants and non-immigrants are characterized by equality, mutuality and a desire for deeper connections? What will the ministry of the church look like if we are less competitive but more desiring of a deepening of our relationships as children of God both with God and with each other? How will our denomination be different if pastors are assigned to churches not according to their gender, race or nationality but simply by their giftedness, experience and devotion to the Lord?

My suggestion in this dissertation is that the church ought to seriously rethink our theology. I also think the church should look seriously at the way we read the scripture and at our understanding of what God approves. This has to be done against the backdrop of an understanding of the nature of God rooted in love. I believe it is a common belief that God is just, God is love, God cares about all people, God shows no partiality.²⁵

As said earlier, the cultural and sociological lenses of story-tellers often color the story. The Deuteronomist Historians made very deliberate choices about whose story would be told and whose would not. Some stories were cast in a positive light while

²⁵ Acts 10:34.

others were cast in a negative one. According to their interpretations of the text, Eve caused Adam (Man) all the pain. She made him disobey God. So they made a choice to tell the story of Eve negatively.²⁶ Cain killed Abel. Even though Cain lived for many years and had children, his story would not be told favorably. Actually Cain's son, Lamech, was presented as a more wicked man than his father.²⁷ It was Seth, the third child of Eve and Adam, whose story was told positively.²⁸ Noah's story was also told positively. According to the Historians, when human sins became egregious, God decided to destroy the whole world except Noah, his household and those who may believe his message.²⁹

The story of Noah presents a new beginning of the human race. This story creates another opportunity for more emphasis on inclusivity. If this account is true, everybody on earth was supposed to have come from the same family. Noah unlike Adam was found righteous before God.³⁰ Noah had three children namely, Shem, Ham and Japheth.³¹ Very soon, discrimination found its way back into the narratives. Noah got drunk and Ham saw his nakedness.³²

In this story, Ham was not responsible for his father being drunk. Ham did not strip him naked. A man who lost his sense because of his drinking is presented as a victim, while Ham who did nothing other than see his father's nakedness was cursed. I

²⁶ Gn 3:12-19.

²⁷ Gn 4:1-24.

²⁸ Gn 4:25-26.

²⁹ Gn 6:5-13.

³⁰ Gn 6:5-9.

³¹ Gn 6:10.

³² Gn 9:18-27.

think this is a set up for what was coming. Ham was the father of Canaan, and it is interesting to note that the land that the Israelites took over after they came out of slavery in Egypt belonged to the Canaanites. The Deuteronomist Historians, I think, used God to justify why it was permissible for the Canaanites to be killed and robbed of their land. The explanation is simple, Ham, the father of Canaan, was cursed and the repercussion was the loss of ownership of their land.

The problem with the approach of the Deuteronomist Historians is that the same method of using God or prophecy to justify what is logically considered wrong is being used even in the 21st century. The Bible has been used to justify many things. Yet another example of how gender-biased behavior is proposed to be Christian-based can be seen when people who do not want female pastors quote Paul. In his statement to the Corinthians he advises “Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but *they are* to be submissive, as the law also says.”³³ This they do as though everything Paul said has to be accepted without question. Paul said many controversial things and some of them are no longer considered relevant in the modern times. In my opinion, Paul may have issued this statement to the Corinthian church, he certainly did not send similar messages to other churches he founded, which suggests to me that it was not intended to be generalized as ministry policy. In other words, it was not intended to be a law for all churches.

Similarly, a false interpretation of the Bible has also been used to support and to justify slavery and racist attitudes. For example, some people have espoused the idea that

³³ 1 Cor 14:34.

the African nations are largely Hamitic³⁴ because “the Cushites are thought to have lived where Ethiopia is today.”³⁵ The implication of this is that Africans, or put differently, Blacks are descendants of Ham who was cursed with a life of servitude. The Mormons take it a step further. In 1958, from the writings of the Mormon church proclaimed, “We know the circumstances under which the posterity of Cain (and later of Ham) were cursed with what we call Negroid racial characteristics.”³⁶ The Jehovah’s Witnesses in their 1929 publication stated that, “The curse which Noah pronounced upon Canaan was the origin of the black race.”³⁷ These assertions are completely false. The skin color of Black people has nothing to do with Ham or Canaan.

There is also discriminatory insinuations in the Abrahamic story as told by the Deuteronomists. Abraham was to separate himself from his people based on their religion. In the story, Abraham was the model of faith. He was a righteous man. The stories hold until they are subjected to critical analysis. For example, in Genesis 16, the Bible records,

Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no *children*. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, “See now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing *children*. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her.” And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai. Then Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan. So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had

³⁴ Gn 10:6.

³⁵ Carl Wieland, “One Human Family: The Bible Science, Race and Culture,” <http://creation.com/one-blood-chapter-6-are-black-people-the-result-of-a-curse-on-ham> (accessed November 24, 2014).

³⁶ Bruce McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 554.

³⁷ Bibcore: Bible Counseling Resources, “The Racist History of the Jehovah’s Witnesses,” <http://www.bibcore.com/sites/default/files/file/Downloads/For%20Discipleship/Cults/Jehovah's%20Witnesses/JW's%20and%20Blacks.pdf> (accessed February 22, 2015).

conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes.³⁸

This African girl called “Hagar,” was enslaved. She was impregnated by Abraham at the request of his wife Sarah without the consent of Hagar herself. I suspect slavery was a common practice at the time. This is corroborated by David Meager:

Slavery seems to have been a common practice in many ancient societies such as Egypt, China and the Middle East. Most slaves originated from the spoils of war, kidnap or voluntarily to pay for debts. The treatment of slaves varied in the ancient world, but in most cases slaves were the property of the master, with little or no rights or status. This meant that many were treated harshly, although most ancient societies had some laws to regulate slavery, such as the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi (1750 BC). Some people are shocked that slavery was an accepted practice in the Old Testament. However, it must be remembered that the slavery sanctioned in the bible is very different to the slavery that occurred in the Americas in the 17th and 18th Centuries which is perhaps the popular view of slavery. Old Testament treatment of slaves was also generally more humane than the slavery practiced in other ancient civilizations.³⁹

It seems to me that slavery was not portrayed as a problem when it was practiced by the Hebrews, whose stories the Historians wanted to tell positively. When Abraham and his wife enslaved this Egyptian girl, the Deuteronomists did not portray slavery as evil practice until the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites. Despite the fact that Hagar was impregnated against her will, she was later punished by Sarah for having a son who could rival her own son, Isaac, and the Deuteronomists’ claim is that God supports Sarah.⁴⁰

³⁸ Gn 16:1-4.

³⁹ David Meager, “Slavery in Bible Times,” *Crossway*, no. 102 (Autumn 2006): 1, reprinted, http://archive.churchsociety.org/crossway/documents/Cway_102_Slavery1.pdf (accessed November 26, 2014).

⁴⁰ Gn 21:12.

Another biblical story that shows the biases of the Historians is the story of Esau and Jacob. When Rebekah was pregnant with the twins, Esau and Jacob, the Bible records,

But the children struggled together within her; and she said, “If *all is* well, why *am I like* this?” So she went to inquire of the LORD.

And the LORD said to her:

Two nations *are* in your womb,
Two peoples shall be separated from your body;
One people shall be stronger than the other,
And the older shall serve the younger.⁴¹

A passage like this may be seen as a prophetic utterance of what was going to happen, but, for me, it raises a significant problem. How could a just God make one person to be the slave of the other? How is this consistent with the nature of a just God? Is this truly a word from the mouth of God, or a later explanation by the editorial board, the Deuteronomists? The later explanation seems to me to be a credible explanation of how this got into the Bible. This word of “prophecy” explains and excuses the behavior of Rebekah, who helped Jacob to cheat his brother. It explains why Esau could not control his appetite. It explains and excuses Jacob for doing the unthinkable – stealing his own brother’s birthright. It explains why the children of Israel (Jacob) were declared the chosen ones. It explains whose story gets to be told and whose will be lost. The Deuteronomist Historians elected to follow the stories of the descendants of Jacob. Their stories are cast in a positive light, and justify all of their choices as part of God’s plan and will.

⁴¹ Gn 25:22-23.

The Israelites' historical narratives got narrowed down by the Deuteronomist Historians by preferring Judah above the rest of the children of Jacob. The tribe of Judah was presented as the chosen ones. Joel L. Watts also discusses this imbalanced selective approach to the Israelites history by the Deuteronomist. He writes, "The Deuteronomistic Historians held up just a few kings as worthy to be remembered, but when they did, these kings were given a renewing of the covenant due to their religious reform."⁴²

Everyone's story deserves to be told fairly. There are voices that have been silenced in the church, voices of women, voices of minorities in the mainline churches, voices of young people and others that have been relegated to obscurity. Those voices need to be heard and their stories should be told fairly.

Based upon the preceding criticisms, the Old Testament may seem to be full of stories marked by exclusion rather than inclusion. But when we examine the stories with the lenses of God's nature, we can see that God has always been inclusive in the way blessings are released upon humanity. The Deuteronomic Historians clearly understood their audience. They did their best to interpret and document the stories that by and large existed only in oral tradition. Their purpose was to communicate God's plan for the people of Israel, to help people of Israel make sense of some of the hardships they have been and were going through and to help them understand their unique place in history. They needed to accomplish this within the context of their own cultural milieu. In my view, their agenda was not to show how universal God is but how special and unique Israel is in the sight of God.

⁴² Joel L. Watts, "Brief Thoughts on the Deuteronomistic Historian's Ideology," Unsettled Christianity Blog, entry posted on May 11, 2011, <http://unsettledchristianity.com/2011/05/brief-thoughts-on-the-deuteronomistic-historians-ideology/> (accessed December 18, 2014).

For the purpose of this dissertation, my goal is to emphasize the universality of God's love rather than the uniqueness of Israel. In the 21st century, I believe, our understanding of God and the Kingdom of God must be culturally sensitive and have a universal reach. Hence, I set out to take selected stories of the Old Testament and tease out the universality of God's love and God's blessings. In doing this, I looked at three examples. First I began with the creation story:

Then God said, "Let Us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created humankind in His *own* image; in the image of God He created humankind; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."⁴³

In the above passage we can see the universality of God. God made humankind in God's image. God pronounced blessings on all of humanity. God gave authority and dominion to replenish the earth to all of humankind. When we see people from different ethnic or social backgrounds, we should see the image of God in them. We should learn to embrace one another rather than being afraid of other people who may appear different from us.

Second, God pronounced blessings on all the earth through Abraham

And the LORD said, Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing, since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?⁴⁴

Again, the universality of God's blessings can be seen in the above passage. God passed blessings on to all nations through Abraham. God's blessings was not intended to be

⁴³ Gn 1:26-28.

⁴⁴ Gn 18:17-18.

monopolized by any one nation. God does not intend for any nation to be blessed while others are cursed. I did not find a single place in the Bible where Yahweh actually pronounced curse directly on a whole nation.

There are Biblical references to suggest that a curse will be on a people if they do not obey the Lord, or that an influential individual may bring a curse on his/her people if they choose to do wrong. In Genesis 8:21, Yahweh categorically declared that the earth will no longer be cursed: “And the LORD smelled a soothing aroma. Then the LORD said in His heart, “I will never again curse the ground for man’s sake, although the imagination of man’s heart *is* evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done.” In Numbers 23:7-8 we also find another interesting story:

And he took up his oracle and said: “Balak the king of Moab has brought me from Aram, from the mountains of the east. ‘Come, curse Jacob for me, and come, denounce Israel!’ “How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how shall I denounce *whom* the LORD has not denounced?”

When Balak, King of Moab paid Balaam to place a curse on the entire children of Israel, God was angry with Balaam for even considering doing that. When God finally permitted Balaam to go and meet with Balak, God pronounced blessing upon the Israelites instead of a curse. God’s desire is for all nations upon earth to be blessed. God is very inclusive in all God’s doings.

Third, Psalm 145:18-19 says the Lord responds to *all* who call upon Him in truth:

The LORD *is* near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth. He will fulfill the desire of those who fear Him; He also will hear their cry and save them.”

From the above passage, we can also notice God who cares to listen to all people. The emphasis is on all. God’s love covers everybody. God cares about all people

regardless of their gender, creed, nationality, language or age. God is the Creator of all people.

God has been blamed or rather used as an explanation for many human abuses and instances of misconduct. God's name has been used to justify and to perpetrate so many injustices that I believe that it is high time that the church comes back to the understanding of the true nature of God and reclaims it. Because the church is not demonstrating its understanding of the egalitarian nature of God in its own systems and practices, it is not making the desired impact on the community.

In American society for example, discrimination is very palpable. Minorities and those of low economic status often go to jail for petty crimes while those who are rich and commit similar crimes either go free or get a slap on the wrist. For example, a member of our congregation who is a high school teacher told me a story of an incident in his school. According to this man, a Black boy was found with a small amount of marijuana and the principal—he was a White man—called the police immediately to get the boy arrested and taken to jail.

On the second day, a White boy was found with a much larger quantity of marijuana and the same principal called the boy's parents to talk to them and warn him never to do it again. My church member said he confronted the principal about this double standard. An argument ensued and he was extremely angry and tempted to “punch the principal in the face.” He did not do so, however he asked to be moved from that school because he could not see how he could work with that principal again.

Christopher Ingraham, an opinion writer at the *Washington Post*, made a cogent point on this issue:

Whites were about 45 percent more likely than blacks to sell drugs in 1980, according to an analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth by economist Robert Fairlie. This was consistent with a 1989 survey of youth in Boston. My own analysis of data from the 2012 National Survey on Drug Use and Health shows that 6.6 percent of white adolescents and young adults (aged 12 to 25) sold drugs, compared to just 5.0 percent of blacks.⁴⁵

Furthermore, drug usage is often presented as a problem among poor minorities and many of them are sitting in jail, when in fact drug usage is more rampant in affluent neighborhoods but the police simply do not look in that direction. The statistics below corroborate the fact of our discriminatory legal system that continues to put undue burden on minorities.

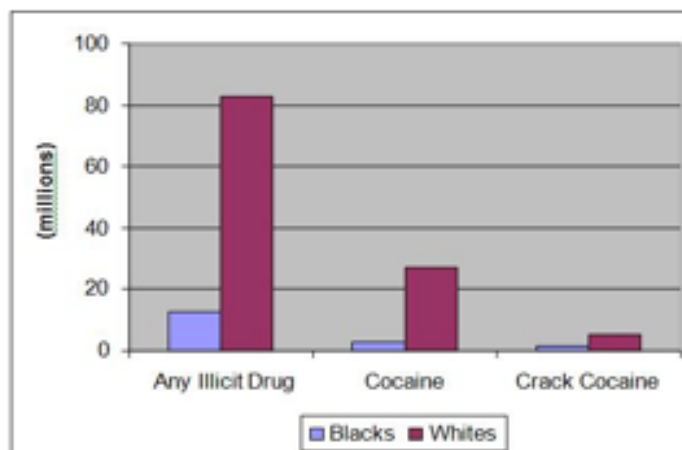


Figure 1. Lifetime Drug Use by Race, Ages 12 and Under

Source: Data from Jaime Fellner, “Race, Drugs, and Law Enforcement in the United States,” *Stanford Law & Policy Review* 20, no. 2 (2009): 267.

The church has a part to play by raising its prophetic voices louder than what we are hearing right now. God is a just God and the church must say amen to it, if the church will reclaim its relevance.

⁴⁵ Christopher Ingraham, “White people are more likely to deal drugs, but black people are more likely to get arrested for it,” *Washington Post*, September 30, 2014.

Inclusivity in the New Testament

Paul, the Apostle says, "So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and severally members one of another."⁴⁶ The church was intended to mirror the kingdom of God on earth, a place where everybody is somebody and Jesus Christ alone is the Lord. We must recognize the fact that though we may be diverse in ethnicity, race and language, we are all one because of our connection to God through our savior Jesus Christ. We will then learn to see our differences not as marks of separation but as the beauty of a diversity that makes us whole and complete.

Inclusivity must be shaped by our faith in Jesus Christ who died for all. "For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life".⁴⁷ The church must lead society in a meaningful, respectful, fair and balanced discourse on cultural inclusivity in the 21st century.

Paul writing to the Christians in Galatia said,

You are all God's children by believing in Christ Jesus. Clearly, all of you who were baptized in Christ's name have clothed yourselves with Christ. There are neither Jews nor Greeks, slaves nor free people, males nor females. You are all the same in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants and heirs, as God promised.⁴⁸

There are so many obstacles to inclusivity in the church and prominent among them is our theology. Most of the temporarily flourishing churches have broken down certain walls to allow for inclusivity in their worship experience. For example, the walls

⁴⁶ Rom 12:5.

⁴⁷ Jn 3:16.

⁴⁸ Gal 3:26-29.

of racial segregation have been torn down in many mega churches such that people from all over the world find home and acceptance there. Yet, there are still more walls that need to be pulled down there as well as in other mainline churches.

Denominations continue to disagree on certain doctrinal issues. Perhaps there will never come a time when we will all agree to only one interpretation of the Bible because of our different experiences. However, we must recognize each other as legitimate children of God regardless of our doctrinal differences. No one denomination has it all right while others have it all wrong. Christian leaders must be intellectually astute and morally honest enough to realize that we can all speculate what God was thinking about this issue or that issue, but no one can be so sure that he or she is right and thus justified to exclude the views of others.

Some of the doctrinal issues that have polarized the Christians denominations surround “the Sacraments.” I will discuss some of them with a brief reflection to demonstrate the fact that those sacraments are supposed to bring Christians together rather than creating division. The number of sacraments celebrated within the church varies according to the teaching of a particular tradition or denomination. Most Christian denominations recognize two sacraments: Baptism: Matthew 28:19 and the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion: Luke 22:19; Matthew 26:2. Some denominations consider other rites or practices to be sacraments as well. Since the Council of Trent,⁴⁹ the Roman Catholic Church has celebrated seven sacraments. In addition to Baptism and the Lord's Supper, they celebrate: Penance (Confession), marriage, holy orders (ordination)

⁴⁹ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, s.v. “Council of Trent,” <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/604238/Council-of-Trent> (accessed November 11, 2014).

Confirmation and Healing (also known as extreme unction, the last rites, or anointing of the sick or dying).

Christians must have an attitude of love and humility towards the different practices of various traditions. John Wesley said, "we may not all believe alike, but we can all love alike."⁵⁰ We may disagree on important matters like Christian Baptism. However, we can still find the foundation for our fellowship with one another and treat one another with genuine respect as members of the body of Christ.⁵¹

Doctrine around baptism has become divisive among Christian denominations: infant vs. adult, sprinkling vs. immersion. Baptism is a means of grace not an end in itself. No one denomination can claim absolute access to God to the exclusion of others. God's grace cannot be monopolized.

Similarly, the doctrine around Holy Communion is divisive. Holy Communion is a means by which we experience the gift of God's grace. Various Christian traditions refer to this sacrament by different names besides Holy Communion: the Lord's Table, the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist (which means grateful), the Divine Liturgy (Eastern Orthodox) or the Mass (Roman Catholic and some Lutherans). Jesus instituted the sacrament of the Holy Communion during his last supper with his disciples, and he commanded them to continue sharing the bread and the cup of the new covenant in remembrance of him.⁵²

⁵⁰ Wikiquote: The Free Quote Compendium, s.v. "John Wesley," http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/John_Wesley (accessed November 18, 2014).

⁵¹ 1 Cor 12:12.

⁵² Lk 22:19-20.

I have named some of the doctrinal issues that have become sources of contention among Christian denominations. As said earlier, these issues should bring Christians together. We must learn an essential lesson of inclusion from Jesus Christ. The initial twelve disciples of Jesus were all present at the table. Even though Jesus knew Judas Iscariot was going to betray him, he was included. Jesus knew Peter was going to deny him, he was included. Jesus knew Thomas did not have a solid faith in all that he was teaching them, yet he was not left out. In the first supper after the resurrection, Jesus shared a meal with travelers on the road to the Emmaus. When he broke the bread their eyes were opened and they recognized him.⁵³

Since the time of the earliest Christians, disciples have shared in this sacramental meal that re-presents the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to all who come to receive in faith.⁵⁴ When we come to the Lord's Table, we come to the banquet table of God. Every time we partake of Holy Communion we experience anew the love of God as given to us through Jesus Christ, who gave Himself freely for us. We experience the inward and spiritual grace conveyed to us through this outward and visible elements of bread and juice/wine.

When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, it was not intended for a fortunate few, it was not an esoteric meal that is available to only the elect. On the contrary, Jesus intended it to be a constant reminder to all, that at this table, all are welcomed and all are fed. At this table we can catch a glimpse of the way God intends for the world to be. We are to be all God's children sharing the bread of life and the cup of salvation together in a spirit of gratitude and love for God and for one another. There is no discrimination, no

⁵³ Lk 24:13-35.

⁵⁴ Acts 2:42; 1 Cor 10:16, 11:23-26.

better than or less than, no male no female, no White and no Black, all must have full access to the power and privilege of divine grace.

In conclusion, both our faith in Jesus Christ and our belief as a church demand that we become fully inclusive. Church members as well as clergy members should make every effort, as disciples of Jesus Christ, to live together in peace, mutual respect and mutual acceptance, in order to build a community of the beloved children of God and thereby make an indelible impact on the world.

CHAPTER 3

RELEVANCE OF INCLUSIVITY TO ST. JOHN UMC'S MINISTRY AND MISSION

For the most part, the idea of discrimination or put differently, the need for inclusivity, has been discussed more in relation to race by the Civil Rights Movement. This is rightfully so because slavery and racial discrimination were the most obvious and egregious forms of discrimination in human history. However, recent discourse regarding “inclusivity” has not focused only on race, but also on gender, age, physical health, sexuality, language and citizenship. As noted by Micaela di Leonardo, “Cultural and racial categories cannot be defined for all time. None has a Platonic essence. All are highly politicized and entirely historically contingent.”¹ Valerie Batts expressed the same idea this way:

Multiculturalism stresses learning to appreciate the impact of differences in social location based on such variables as race, gender, class, age, sexual orientation, religion, physical ability and language. This learning process is dynamic; as we begin to see the impact of differences, our sense of ourselves, others, and the world shifts. We impact others and others impact us differently. There is an interactive process occurring, potentially at four levels: the personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural².

¹ Micaela di Leonardo, “Human Cultural Diversity,” (paper presented at conference of American Anthropological Association, Alexandria, VA, September 12-14, 2004) http://www.understandingrace.org/resources/pdf/myth_reality/di_leonardo_abstract.pdf (accessed November 20, 2014).

² Valerie Batts, “Is Reconciliation possible?:Lessons from Combating “Modern Racism,” Visions, Inc., <http://visions-inc.org/article/is-reconciliation-possible-lessons-from-combating-modern-racism/> (accessed November 17, 2014).

In order for the church to be the prototype of the Kingdom of God on earth, there is the need for the church to address the issue of discrimination within its walls. The problem has always been that such conversation has often been delayed or deflected because the church is in denial. The reality can no longer be denied or ignored. I am not just speaking about St. John United Methodist Church, which is the context of my project, but rather I am speaking about the Church in general and the United Methodist Church in particular.

Generally speaking, discrimination or lack of inclusivity is woven into the language, the system and sometimes the theology of the church as discussed in the previous chapter. Often the church leadership is suffering from “the good will assumption syndrome.” This syndrome refers to the assumption that people of good will somehow automatically recognize that discrimination is morally wrong and will therefore spontaneously do the right thing by not discriminating. It also inadvertently suggests that by continuing to simply preach about Jesus, discrimination will end without making any organized or tangible effort to change the way things are.

When I first came to the United States, I visited a United Methodist Church. If I were not an ordained Elder with deep roots in Methodism, that experience would have driven me away from United Methodist Church. I was poorly received by the first members of the church whom I met at the door, i.e., the ushers. The greeting of the usher at the door sounded very vague and strange to me, “Welcome to our church.” The way it was said and the tone of the usher’s voice immediately sounded as though I was not welcomed there. It took a while for some of the members who came late to sit on the pew where I was sitting. The people in this church were affluent as indicated by the way they

dressed and the cars that I noticed in the parking lot. For a man from Nigeria, dressing well for church on Sundays is not an option. Hence I did not think they could have mistaken me for a homeless person.

I was the only Black person in the audience. I felt was so lost. The service went very well. I enjoyed the “Bell Music” of the choir. I enjoyed the preaching from the pastor and all the initial feelings of disappointment were gone. I was becoming hopeful. My apartment was about 2 or more miles away from the church and because I was new in the country, I did not have a car and had to walk to church in the morning. It was late October and to me it was very cold. I did not want to walk back home in the cold especially being with brothers and sisters in Christ, I thought, “I will not have to do that.”

When the service was over, the pastor was at the door greeting everybody. I waited for my turn and introduced myself to him as an Elder from the Nigerian Methodist Conference. I shared that I had just arrived in the States to further my education. I told him that I did not have a car yet and would greatly appreciate it if I could get a ride back to my apartment as I walked to church this morning. He chuckled and looked away from me for a while, then reached out and started greeting others while I was still standing there. He then asked a couple sarcastically if they would give me a ride, to which they also chuckled and said, “No.” He did the same with another couple and similarly, they said, “No.” At this point, I could not bear the humiliation any more. I left the scene and started walking back to my apartment. About half a mile down the road, a total stranger stopped and asked if I needed a ride and then took me to my apartment. It is conceivable that this congregation could have just been rude, insensitive, and inhospitable. They could have done the same thing to any stranger; however, I felt that as the only Black

person there it was more than just being rude and insensitive. I think my race was part of the problem.

Now that I am the senior pastor of St. John UMC, I am very sensitive to how visitors are received in our church. I never want anyone to ever come to our church and feel like a stranger. Yet I have seen and continue to see something similar in the way some members of St. John interact with visitors and sometimes with each other that reminds me of my experience visiting that first Methodist church. Therefore I believe that training in inclusivity is very relevant to the ministry of St. John.

I am fully aware that talking about discrimination of any sort is a very sensitive topic. I think it is difficult to discuss discrimination because people are in denial about its continued existence. Another factor adding to the difficulty in discussing discrimination is the recent conversation as to whether or not Black people by definition can be racist. As Suntosh Pillay, a clinical psychologist who writes independently on social issues rightly argues, “The definition of “racism” must include the ability of one group to subjugate another, and since Black people have never had the social, economic or political power to subjugate White people, they cannot be racist¹. I agree with Suntosh Pillay that Black people cannot be racist. However, it could be extrapolated that Black people are capable of carrying out other forms of discrimination that are also repugnant to the victims such as when an African American discriminates against Haitian, African or Jamaican peoples based on the notion that they are superior or vice versa. I have noted earlier that our discussion about discrimination is not limited to race. Other forms of discrimination

¹ Suntosh Pillay, “One Simple reason Why Blacks Can’t Be Racist,” Thought Leader Blog, Mandela Rhodes Scholars, entry posted March 23, 2010, <http://www.thoughtleader.co.za/mandelarhodesscholars/2010/03/23/one-simple-reason-why-blacks-cant-be-racist/> (accessed December 10, 2014).

include bigotry, prejudice, xenophobia, gender, homophobia, and generational discriminations and everybody, regardless of race, is capable of any of these.

Another reason why discrimination is difficult to deal with is the paternalistic tendencies that have been inadvertently connected to some Christian ideas of “reaching out” or expressing godly concern for others considered less fortunate. This confused form of Christian Paternalism grows out of attitudes of self-importance and a sense of superiority. It belittles minority group persons, portraying them as incapable of caring for themselves or functioning responsibly. It can be very subtle. Often the person who is patronizing the other may not see his/her actions as demeaning. They focus more on their good intentions without noting the impact of their actions on others.

It is therefore time for a serious dialogue about discrimination and the need for inclusivity in our churches. It is difficult if not impossible to reconcile the idea of discrimination, whether in the area of race, gender, age, language, physical disability, sexuality or any other variables with the gospel of Jesus Christ, the head of the church. Is the training in inclusivity that this project undertook relevant to the ministry of St. John United Methodist Church? Absolutely!

Inclusivity is aligned with the vision and the mission statements of St. John UMC which states. The vision is to be a great church for God, to make a statement for God’s love, and to have a direct impact on the community. The mission says that St. John United Methodist Church exists to glorify God by winning souls for Christ; by following the precepts and examples of Jesus, by sharing his eternal love, by sponsoring, and participating in community based outreach ministries. The vision statement is recited every Sunday, and members work hard to live out this vision and mission. Since we

offered the training in inclusivity, the church has seen its positive impact. For example, in 2013, only 2 new members joined the church. In 2014 after the training, 10 new members joined the church.

It's The Gospel

The gospel of Jesus Christ teaches us that we are all children of God. If the church will follow the gospel of Jesus Christ and recognize God as the Creator of all, discrimination will have to be done away with. The church must recognize the fact that although humans may be different in terms of place of birth, economic situation, language, skin color, gender, and sexual-orientation, all are the same in essence. All humans are created in the image of God.

At its core, discrimination is idolatry because it is based on an assumption of superiority. For example, discrimination based on race discredits the dignity, the identity, the worth and security of persons based on a delegation of their race to an out-group. It then places the in-group race in the place of God. It is a violation of the First Commandment of God, which says, “You shall have no other gods before me.”² Jesus prayed for his disciples, “that they all may be one, as You, Father, *are* in me, and I in you; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.”³ St. Paul wrote,

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the Members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.”⁴

² Ex 20:3.

³ Jn 17:21.

⁴ 1 Cor 12:12-13.

The implication of these verses is that the unity of the church transcends every race and culture and is to be demonstrated in the full acceptance and inclusion of all peoples.

Reminding the Ephesian Christians to “take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them,” Paul continues by exhorting them to “look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”⁵ Discrimination is definitely one of the “works of darkness” that produces nothing good and nothing of any value to anyone.

There should be no room in the body of Christ for the language of a “we/they” dichotomy. Such a mindset perpetuates discrimination, “the evil work of darkness.” The unfortunate truth is that many United Methodist congregations have not come to accept pastoral leadership sent to them unless they are of a particular race or gender. Some do not fully accept people of other races, nationalities and sexual orientations as equal members of the congregation nor do they offer them full access to the power and privilege of being part of the ministry of the church. Merely to tolerate another person who is different from us is an expression of discrimination that should be rejected by the authorities of the Church. What attracts and convinces new comers to a community of faith is the eagerness of members of a Christian congregation to welcome them unconditionally.

⁵ Eph 5:11, 15-17.

Embrace Difference

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthian church talks about diversity and compares it to the parts of the human body in that none of the parts can function independently. The parts within the human body function at best when they all work together⁶. William Kondrath, professor of Pastoral Theology and Director of Theological Field Education at Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge Massachusetts, lays credence to this assertion when he says, “Faith communities can become vital through recognizing, understanding and celebrating differences.”⁷ We all have different personalities regardless of where we were born, the language we speak or the color of our skin. According to, Robert A. Rohm, “Different is not bad, it's just different! A lack of understanding of ourselves and others can lead to real problems such as tension, disappointment, hurt feelings, unmet expectations and poor communication”⁸.

Training on inclusivity is very relevant in the life of St. John united Methodist Church because an informed mind is a reformed mind. Many people do and say certain things based on the level of information they have. Correct information is necessary to bring about transformation. The starting point of transformation is self-awareness. The lack of self-awareness can result in our hurting someone without realizing that we have done so.

Every local church is made up of people who have different personalities. One of the mysteries of human society is how people could come from the same family and yet

⁶ 1 Cor 12:12-31.

⁷ William M. Kondrath, *God's Tapestry: Understanding and Celebrating Differences* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2008), 37.

⁸ Robert A. Rohm, “A Powerful Way to Understand People Using the DISC Concept,” Personality Insights, Inc., <http://www.discoveryreport.com/downloads/understanding-people-disc-personality-traits.pdf> (accessed November 12, 2014), 1.

be so different. Why are some people worriers, and others wanderers? Why are some people so easy-going and laid-back, while others are always looking for a fight? Why some people cooperative and others are antagonistic? Daniel Nettle, Professor of Behavioral Science at the Centre for Behavior & Evolution of Newcastle University has a theory:

Human personalities are rather like fractals. It is not just what we do in the large-scale narratives of our lives—love, career, friendships—tends to be somewhat consistent over time with us often repeating the same kinds of triumphs or mistakes. Rather, what we do in tiny interactions like the way we shop, or dress, or talk to a stranger on a train, or decorate our houses shows the same kinds of patterns as can be observed from examining a whole life⁹.

St. John is a church of many characters and personalities. Some people talk a lot while others don't. Some people believe they have to approve everything that takes place in the church before it takes place and some will follow others' leadership. Inclusivity begins by understanding our differences, embracing our differences and utilizing our differences in a positive way. Strength and weakness is a very good blend.

Learning to accept each other is the open door to accepting people we do not know and those with whom we have had few interactions. Christ has not called us into a mono-cultural church. Jesus has called us into a multicultural church. Jesus' command, "go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" is a command to bring people in from all nations. It is not a command to set up a community of faith that only serves people just like us, it is a call to embrace people in our neighborhood and beyond. If the people in

⁹ Daniel Nettle, *Personality: What Makes You the Way You Are* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 15.

our neighborhood are of the same kind, that is fine, as long as we are willing and open to welcome everybody without making anyone feel unwelcomed.

Below is a graphic representation of what happened when we at St. John embraced difference instead of running away from it. I believe that St. John will be able to move from being a mono-cultural church to becoming one that is multicultural.

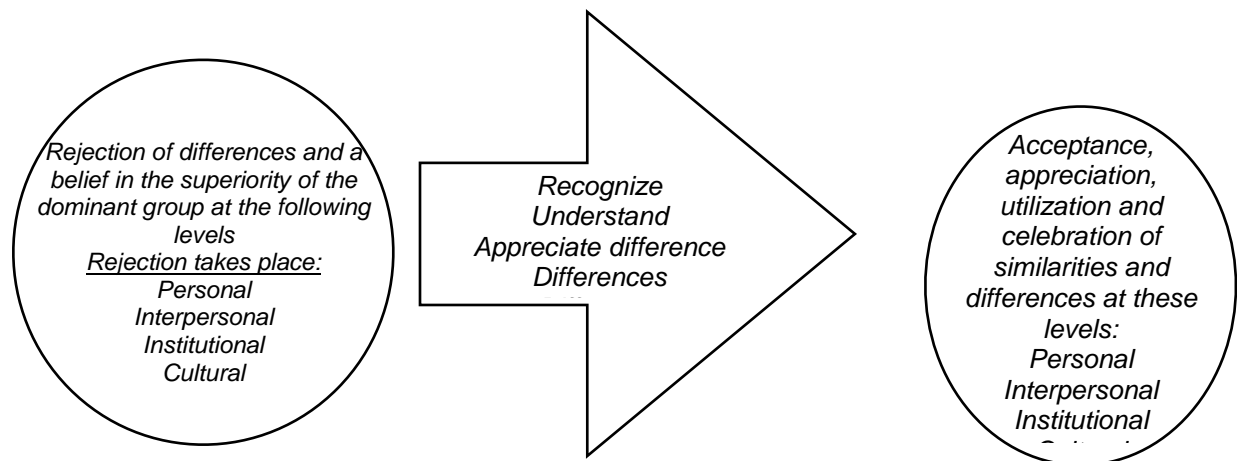


Figure 2. Multicultural Process of Change

Source: William M. Kondrath, *God's Tapestry: Understanding and Celebrating Differences* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2008), 37.

Welcome Change

As indicated before, St. John United Methodist Church is a Black Church. It was started at the time in U.S. history when Black people were treated as things not as people. But in 1904, a group of Black people with a sense of self-dignity refused to be treated as objects in the house of God. This group of Black people understood themselves to be children of the Most High God. Joining together they started a community of faith, which 110 years later is still standing strong as St. John United Methodist Church.

For many years St. John has been seen and has seen itself as a Black church. Things are changing around St. John. People are changing around St. John. Old members are dying. New members are joining the church. However, the way the church sees itself and understands itself has not changed much. If this does not change, this same mentality will be passed on from one generation to the next. The following statements about change by Harold Wilson, Mary Engelbriet, and Anatole France, respectively, are instructive:

- “He who rejects change is the architect of decay. The only human institution which rejects progress is the cemetery.”¹⁰
- “If you don't like something change it; if you can't change it, change the way you think about it.”¹¹
- “All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter another.”¹²”

It is really important for the church to change and embrace the blessings of diversity in our neighborhood. William M. Kondrath, argues that change must take place at three levels: Cognitive, Behavioral and Affective levels as illustrated by the following graphic and further explained below¹³:

¹⁰ Quote Garden, “Quotes about Change, Harold Wilson,” <http://www.quotegarden.com/change.html> (accessed November 14, 2014).

¹¹ Quote Garden, “Quotes about Change, Mary Engelbriet,” <http://www.quotegarden.com/change.html> (accessed November 14, 2014).

¹² Quote Garden, “Quotes about Change, Anatole France,” <http://www.quotegarden.com/change.html> (accessed November 14, 2014).

¹³ William M. Kondrath, *God's Tapestry: Understanding and Celebrating Differences* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2008), 46-47.

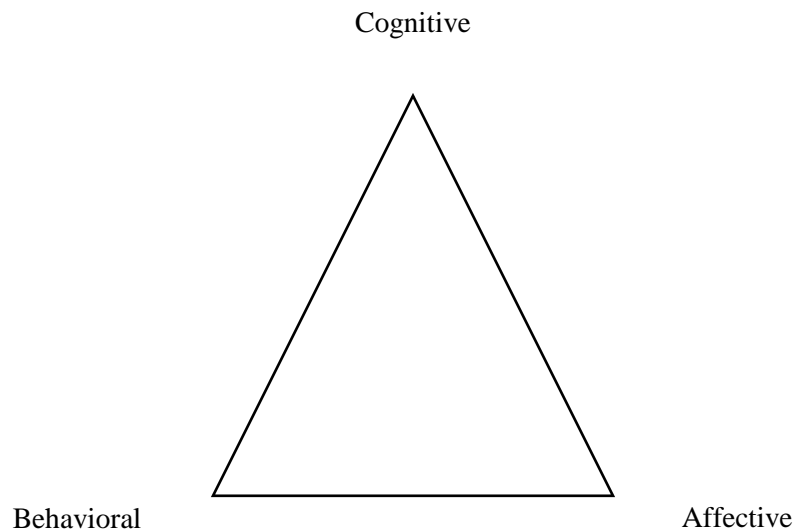


Figure 3. Dimensions of Change

Source: William M. Kondrath, *God's Tapestry: Understanding and Celebrating Differences* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2008), 45.

Cognitive: As the church members we have to change our thoughts and our beliefs about others. As indicated in the first chapter, most of our discriminatory tendencies sometimes reveal how little we know about the people we discriminate against. The Bible gives us an example of Pharaoh who did not know the heroic contributions of Joseph, an Israelite. When Pharaoh reigned in Egypt, he started his discriminatory and oppressive policy towards the Israelites. An informed mind is a reformed mind.

Affective: When we have a better understanding of other people, their values and culture, our feelings (Affective) towards them will change.

Behavioral: Our behavior towards them will change as we know them better and develop positive feelings towards their values and culture.

Cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions are incorporated into the way the Bible study series were constructed. For example, I gave a homework assignment to the church members to eat at a restaurant serving food not of their ethnic background. While

there, they were required to ask questions about whatever they did not know about that culture. It was interesting that people came back changed. Many of them said, “I never knew I could feel so close to people of that culture. We have more things in common than I thought.”

Many churches of one culture may continue to thrive despite their failure to address the area of ethnic/cultural diversity. But this is not likely to continue to happen if there is significant cultural change in the neighborhood of the church. The neighborhood of St. John is changing demographically at a faster rate than most people realize, and it is about time that the mentality of the church changes as well. Below is the statistical data of the 5 miles radius of St. John United Methodist Church.

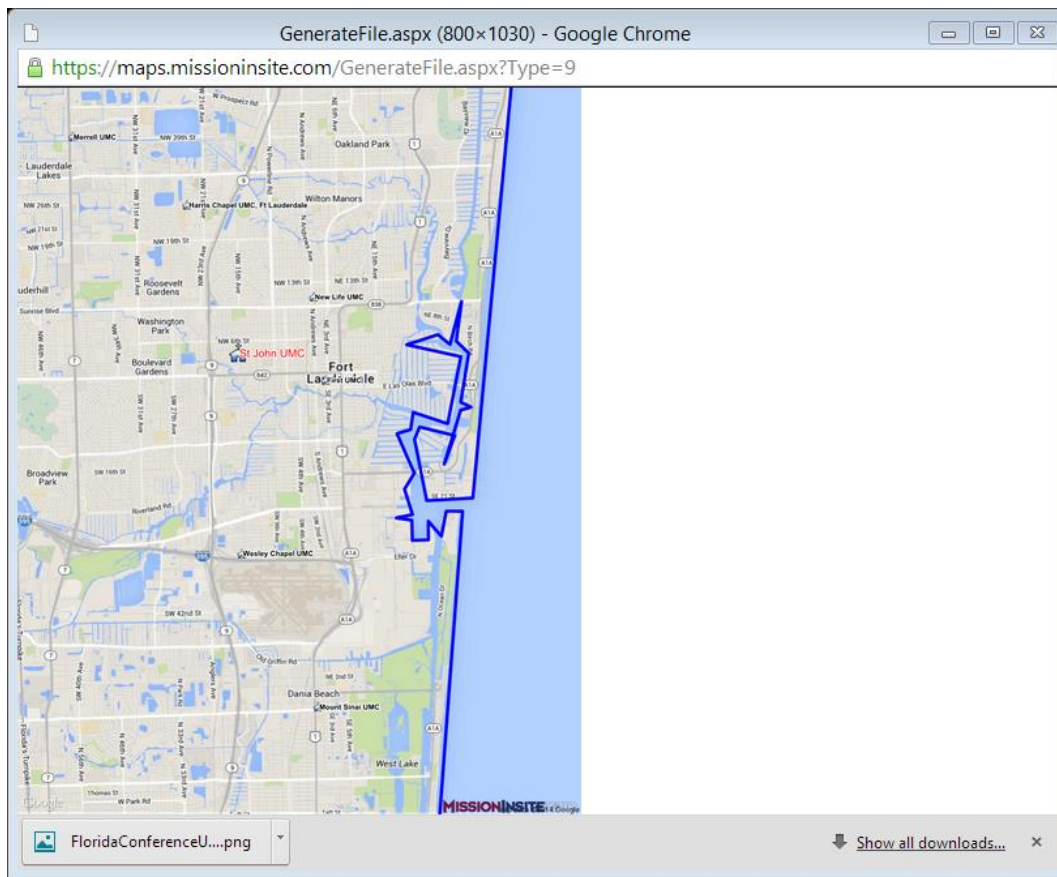


Figure 4: St. John United Methodist Church, 5 Mile Radius Aerial View

Source: Data from MissionInsite: Church Demographics Specialists, Community Demographic Reports, <http://missioninsite.com/screenshots/> (accessed December 1, 2014).

Table 1. St. John United Methodist Church, Racial Ethnic Trends, 5 Mile Radius

	2010	2014	2019	2010 %	2014 %	2019 %
Asian (Non-Hisp)	445,216	467,730	506,119	2.4%	2.4%	2.4%
Asian (Non-Hisp) Change		22,514	38,389			
Percent Change		5.06%	8.21%			
Black (Non-Hisp)	2,851,100	2,945,617	3,114,932	15.2%	15.1%	14.9%
Black (Non-Hisp) Change		94,517	169,315			
Percent Change		3.32%	5.75%			
White (Non-Hisp)	10,884,722	11,277,043	12,072,571	57.9%	57.8%	57.9%
White (Non-Hisp) Change		392,321	795,528			
Percent Change		3.60%	7.05%			
Hispanic or Latino	4,223,806	4,409,793	4,711,932	22.5%	22.6%	22.6%
Hispanic or Latino Change		185,987	302,139			
Percent Change		4.40%	6.85%			
Other Race (Non-Hisp)	396,466	412,703	442,522	2.1%	2.1%	2.1%
Other Race (Non-Hisp) Change		16,237	29,819			
Percent Change		4.10%	7.23%			
Totals:	18,801,310	19,512,886	20,848,076	100%	100%	100%

Source: MissionInsite: Church Demographics Specialists, Screenshots, <http://missioninsite.com/screenshots/> (accessed December 1, 2014).

Table 2. St. John United Methodist Church, Religious Survey, 5 Mile Radius

Beliefs about God						
1	Compared to the national average, how traditional or non-traditional are beliefs about God? <small>(See the Beliefs About God Theme)</small>	Very Traditional	Somewhat Traditional	Mixed	Somewhat Non-Traditional	Very Non-traditional
Beliefs about Jesus						
2	Compared to the national average, how traditional or non-traditional are beliefs about Jesus? <small>(See the Beliefs about Jesus Theme)</small>	Very Traditional	Somewhat Traditional	Mixed	Somewhat Non-Traditional	Very Non-traditional
Beliefs about Social and Moral Issues						
3	Do the social and moral beliefs of this study area trend towards the conservative or progressive side of the political and social scale? <small>(See the Social and Moral Issues Theme)</small>	Very Conservative	Somewhat Conservative	Mixed	Somewhat Progressive	Very Progressive
Presence of "Nones"						
4	Compared to the national average, what is the level of the religious preference "None, No Preference" in this study area? <small>(See the Religious Preferences Theme)</small>	Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High
Change in Christian Religious Preference						
5	In what direction has the Christian Religious Preference moved over the prior 10 year period? <small>(See the Religious Preferences Theme)</small>	Significant Decline	Some Decline	About the Same	Some Increase	Significant Increase
Christian to Non-Christian Preferences						
6	How does the aggregated Christian Preferences in this study area compare to the aggregated Non-Christian Preferences? <small>(See the Religious Preferences Theme)</small>	Significantly Less Christian	Somewhat Less Christian	About the Same	Somewhat More Christian	Significantly More Christian
Significance of Faith to Life						
7	Compared to the national average, how significant is "faith to life" in the study area? <small>(See the Faith and Religious Involvement Theme)</small>	Very Low	Somewhat Low	About the Same	Somewhat More	Significantly More
Change in Significance of Faith to Life						
8	How much change, whether positive or negative in the significance of "faith to life" is projected in this study area? <small>(See the Faith and Religious Involvement Theme)</small>	No Change	Little Change	Modest Change	Significant Change	Radical Change
Life Concerns						
9	Overall, how do the concerns about life compare to the national average? <small>(See the Life Concerns Theme)</small>	Very Low	Somewhat Low	About the Same	Somewhat More	Significantly More
Media Preference						
10	What is the level of religiosity in this study area? <small>(See the Media Preference Theme)</small>	Very Traditional Oriented	More Traditional Oriented	Mixed	More Online Oriented	Very Online Oriented

Source: Data from MissionInsite: Church Demographic Specialists, Religious Survey: Quadrennium American Beliefs, Preferences and Practices, <http://missioninsite.com/screenshots/> (accessed December 18, 2014).

The fastest growing population in the once historically Black neighborhood is now Hispanic or Latinos. White residents still maintain a dominant presence within the 5 miles radius of St John. These statistics call for the church to be more inclusive in its activities and outreach programs in order to reach all of God's children and expand the Kingdom of God.

From the statistics, we can see that this project is very relevant because of the diversity that exists in the neighborhood of St. John United Methodist Church. The statistics of the view of people about God in the 5 miles radius of St. John United Methodist Church shows that most people in our neighborhood have not completely given up on God, religion or church. But we can see the number of active church participants is shrinking while the church continues with its narrow view of God and spirituality.

In order to take full advantage of this diversity, the church must be inclusive in all its ministries. The demographic changes of the area compel us to be so. The church must show intentionality in its programming. What this means is that a genuine passion around inclusiveness was what was needed to move St. John United Methodist Church in that direction.

The "spirit" with which a congregation welcomes others can make all the difference. It requires deep listening, seeking "that of God" in the people with whom the congregation engages and finding the ways in which God is present and revealed through them. A welcoming and inclusive congregation will engage others, practice holy conversation, and create an atmosphere where each person is treated as a beloved child of God. A welcoming and inclusive congregation fosters listening, sharing one's own story,

hearing one another's perspective, and finding commonalities and shared experiences. Its vision is for building relationships around values that bring us together as opposed to things that polarize us. Here we are encouraged to tell our own story to reach a renewed understanding together as the Body of Christ. Here we are dedicated to overcoming estrangement and discord no matter what their sources may be.

As we read the Scripture, we see that Jesus engaged all to whom he ministered, and extended God's grace to all. Every individual is God's creation. Even those whom the world would call enemies, Jesus engaged with grace-filled love. He commands us to do likewise. Such an attitude is what discipleship is all about.

As followers of one who easily and gladly welcomed children, tax collectors, lepers, prostitutes, Samaritans and indeed, sinners of all sorts into his fellowship – how can we not do likewise? We cannot allow our congregation to be closed gatherings of like-minded, like-acting, like-looking and like-living persons. The book of Acts is the story of how the Spirit demolished every dividing social, ethnic and religious walls separating people from one another:

You are all [children] of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.¹

¹ Gal 6:28-29.

CHAPTER 4

THE NARRATIVE OF THE SURVEYS AND BIBLE STUDIES SERIES

I came to this project with a firm belief in the unity of the church and a conviction that the church is the best place on earth to experience the kingdom of God. The local church could be a place of tremendous joy for some people, while others may be lost in the crowd. While some are having fellowship, others may feel lonely. It is therefore the responsibility of a local church to make sure everybody that comes in to worship finds a true sense of fellowship with God and with other brothers and sisters.

Dr. Martin Luther Jr.'s famous statement that 10:00 am Sunday is the most segregated time in America is unfortunately still true today.¹ I firmly believe that the church should and could overcome this problem. It clearly has to begin with local church members dealing with discrimination within its own walls and then the church can do the work of transformation in the community. The intention of the project is to engage the membership of St. John UMC in a series of cross-cultural, cross-generational dialogues in order to stimulate a congregation wide discussion on the significance of cultural inclusivity for church growth.

To fulfill the outlines that I have detailed in my prospectus, I constituted the Advisory committee and met with them several times before, during and after the project was completed. I started meeting with the Project Advisory Committee in December

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Luker, and Penny A. Russell, *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Advocate of the Social Gospel* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2007), 149.

2013. Everyone on the Advisory committee was present at the first meeting except one of the committee members who lives in North Carolina and he joined us by Skype.

I selected the Advisory committee based on their individual areas of competence that I thought would be useful to my project. I trained them and explained to them the details of what the project was about and the goal it sought to achieve. I divided the Committee into sub committees. One of the subgroups worked with me on designing administering and analyzing surveys, another worked with me on developing the bible study series and the third one read through the materials for editorial purposes.

Additionally, I spent time reading more on the subject of inclusivity. I also conducted a survey of the congregation to determine their understanding or lack thereof of the issue of inclusivity. The pre-test survey was focused on seven major areas: biographical information, cultural, family of origin, age, gender, sexuality, and disabilities,

I began promoting the project at the beginning of January, explaining the purpose of the project to the congregation. Specifically, I talked to the congregation on January 12, announcing the dates that the survey would be conducted. The Church Council, the decision making board for the church, and the Lay Leadership Committees of the church were assembled for a discussion of the project and how the process was going to look. Some of the members of the Advisory committee are members of these committees as well, hence, they were well informed and involved in the entire process.

Then two Sundays before I conducted the survey, January 19 and 26, I talked to the congregation in detail about the project and the survey how they could become involved by taking the survey and respond honestly to the survey. I also noted that the

survey would be completed anonymously during the Bible Series. I conducted the survey on February 5, 12, and 19. I selected three consecutive Sundays because that is what it would take to have sufficient participation.

Participation in the survey was limited to those from age 12 and above. Not everyone completed the survey for various reasons. We used a written survey, and there are some older members who cannot write. Unfortunately some people just did not respond for unknown reasons. About 200 people received the survey, and while 85 turned in their survey, only 54 of the 85 actually completed the survey. Out of the 54 people that completed the survey 51 self-identified as African American/Black, 1 as Asian/Pacific Islander, 1 as White and 1 as Bi-Racial/Multiracial.

The Bible study took place on March 2, 9, 16, and 23. March 30 was set aside for a question and answer session. The Bible study was conducted during the normal worship services in place of the sermon. It lasted for an hour each Sunday. The Bible study series took the form of dialogue with the congregation rather than a didactic method. Everyone was able to voice their opinion. The discussions were very lively. Home work was assigned to encourage congregational participation in the project and as a way to keep members engaged in the project. As part of this process, members were encouraged to meditate and share. Many of them also took the home work seriously. Each one came back and openly reported their experiences.

Session One

The first Bible study was focused on the topic, “An awareness of one's own cultural worldview.” The Bible Passages we studied were:

Romans 12:3: For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think *of himself* more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.

Acts 17:26-28: And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’

Hebrews 10:24-25: And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as *is* the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching

In this session, we each looked at ways in which our learning experiences have taught us to fear or to suspect those different from us and to doubt the validity of opinions or practices that may be out of line with our traditional belief system. I led the congregation in a guided imagery exercise. The purpose of the guided imagery was to help the members to check in to their own assumptions about other people. These assumptions color the way we view others. Until we take time to explore the impact of those early assumptions on our world view, we may not fully realize how impactful they are on the way we still view others today.

The following were the questions that guided the Bible study and the conversations.

1. In the light of the above scriptures, how are we different and how are we the same as others?
2. How significant are those differences?
3. What do you think may be responsible for the fear of "the other" (i.e. People who are different from us)?
4. When have you spent significant time with someone of a different race, language, sexual orientation, ethnic background or people living with HIV/AIDS? (John 1:14)

Using any of the passages above, list some of the ways to deal with the fear of "the other" that sometimes seizes us.

The goal of this first session of Bible study was to encourage members to explore their own cultural lenses and investigate their assumptions. Sometimes our assumptions about other people are not based on what we actually know about them but what we were either taught by others or caught from others. It is essential that as church members and as Christians we become aware of our own cultural identity. It is imperative that we acknowledge our limited knowledge or ignorance of other cultures before we make statements about those cultures.

I believe that this is what Paul was saying in Romans 12:3, " For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think *of himself* more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith." In other words, no one should think they are better than what they actually are. It is this attitude of oversized ego that often leads people to make demeaning assumptions about other people's cultural values.

Assumptions are dangerous. Living, serving and worshipping together in a culturally mixed community is an ideal situation for achieving this awareness. Awareness is the first step toward developing cultural sensitivity and inclusivity.

Home work was assigned to the members. The home work was to intentionally seek out someone who is different or from a different ethnic background and start a conversation with him or her in a friendly, non-threatening and non-intrusive way. They were instructed to pay attention to their feelings before and after the conversation. They were further instructed to take note of whether their assumptions about that person was confirmed or proved wrong.

The following week several people came back with their reports. Some said they had wonderful conversations with more than one person. Some reported that they had more energy to talk to more people from other countries than they would have if the homework had not been given. Others reported that they had engaged homosexual individuals at their job and felt they share many things in common despite differences in sexual orientation. And there were those who stated that they always talk to people anyway, hence the exercise was nothing new for them.

Over all, what I think this homework did was to bring tangible awareness to people that everyone is not the same. Everyone will not have the same accent, or hair color. The more we are aware of our differences and similarities, the more we can break down the wall of division and hostility in our community.

Session Two

The second session was entitled, “Attitude towards cultural differences: Moving from monoculturalism to pluralism.” The scriptural passages that were read were Genesis 22:15-19:

Then the Angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said: “By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only *son*— blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which *is* on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.” So Abraham returned to his young men, and they rose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba.

Matthew 28:16-20:

Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age.

The session began with a video obtained from YouTube. I found the video appropriate because it speaks to the issue of inclusivity both in marriage, and by extension, to other areas of human interaction. The title of the video is “what does the Bible say about Mixed Marriages?”

Below is the transcript of the video:

What does the Bible say about Mixed Marriages? This is something I wished I did not have to talk about. It seems after all these years you think I would not have to mention this. I want to bring this up because it has to be said. There will always be a conservative on YouTube who is of a different color. The first comment you will mostly see is well I bet you are

married to a white woman. I am like wait a minute I thought you liberals were supposed to like everyone. The bottom line when you get to down to it is nothing but pure jealousy or discrimination. If I see a liberal white dude I would never say I bet you are married to black woman that would be stupid. Liberals come in different packages just like conservatives. I hate stereotypes of everyone. The Bible says that Satan is beautiful and appears as an Angel of light so I am on the lookout from lies from everyone. God never says anything much about black, white, red or anything about that those are labels that man gave to everyone. It does talk however about a story of Miriam and Aaron who was jealous of Moses for airtime so they saw when Moses had an Ethiopian wife they found this as an opportunity to go up against him and he turned the Israelite Miriam who was not white into a leper who are white basically saying hey you going to spout against color I will make you colorless. He basically gave her nice Clorox bath. I was reading today how a guy said that "well just because she was Ethiopian it does not mean she was black". Uh okay so in a time where Klan and Family government was taught Moses found the few brown Ethiopian women out of millions of Ethiopians. Dude you totally missed the point noticed how the Bible says that "And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married: for he had married an Ethiopian woman. 2 And they said, hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses? Hath he not spoken also by us? And the Lord heard it." If Miriam and Aaron were telling the truth. It sounds like a little jealousy is going on here. It seems in most discrimination the root comes from jealousy if a group of white men don't want Black men "Marrying their women folk" It is because of jealousy. A great example of this if you go to Japan after hours you will find that the Japanese men will only take white and black men certain places and the Japanese men will tell you because it is jealousy of the Black and white man. If a Black woman does not want a black man marry a white woman it is most of the time it is because of jealousy. It's because she could not afford that certain dress or she can't go to the salon more times than the "White Girl" believe me women are very competitive and when you lose to another woman that jealousy finally comes out. Then of course there will be these liberals who will say well I went to a church who preached Hate. My question will always be was it God in a pulpit? Just because a Counterfeit 10 dollar bill looks like a 10 dollar bill does not mean it is legal tender. People who want use counterfeits as an example not to follow God and forget what Christ said "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not Burned Crosses in thy name? And in thy name have I not told that Conservative Black Man not to marry that snowflake and in thy name done many wonderful works? 23 And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity. Now I added some to it but you get the point. For every Church that discriminates I can find a Church who does not and maybe more. You ought to be glad you have the choices here in America you have to follow the ways of God.

Now those of you who want to be sinners and feel you are being condemned by the church. This is not discrimination Got hates the Sin not the sinner. You just need help to get over your sin in a world who does not encourage righteous behavior you are not a race of people you are not anything special. You just have to realize you are powerless and you need help. The same rule goes for people who discriminate if you find yourself with jealousy issues pray that God can heal you of that issue if it becomes more of a problem talk to someone of God about it and let the healing begin. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. James 5:16¹

Introduction to Bible Study Two

As we read the Scripture, we see that Jesus engaged everyone to whom he ministered with a deep sense of God's Grace. Each person is a beloved child of God. Every individual is God's creation. Even those whom the world would call enemies, Jesus engaged with Grace-filled love and command us to do likewise. Such a posture is what discipleship is all about. The following were the questions for our discussion:

1. How would you answer the question that was posted to Jesus who is my neighbor? (Luke 10:25-37)
2. As followers of Jesus who easily and gladly welcomed children, tax collectors, lepers, prostitutes, Samaritans and indeed, sinners of all sorts into his fellowship – how can we follow His example?
3. Read Genesis 22:15-19, Matt. 28:16-20. If we truly want to move from monoculturalism to pluralism, how can we change our congregation from being a gathering of like-looking, like-speaking and like-living persons? Those who create a closed gathering of family? Those who hold feelings of ambivalence

¹“Poxy what does the Bible say about Mixed marriages?” YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8I95fTEf7AQ> (accessed December 12, 2014).

towards people with HIV/AIDS and persons who claim a different sexual orientation? Those who have ambivalence towards female leadership

Conclusion

The book of Acts is the story of how the Spirit bulldozed down every dividing social, ethnic and religious wall separating people from one another. As Galatians 6:28 proclaims, “You are all [children] of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Homework was assigned. The homework for the week was for each member of the congregation to go to a restaurant where they serve food from an ethnicity different from theirs. They were further instructed to taste the food and pay attention to how they felt. They were told to ask themselves, what assumptions or beliefs they have about that ethnicity. Are those assumptions established or debunked?

Session Three

The third session was titled, “The Knowledge of Different Cultures,” as a key to breaking down the wall of division and oppression.

Introduction to Bible Study Three

Cultural identity has a profound impact on our sense of well-being within our society and on our mental and physical health. Our cultural background refers to our ethnicity but it is also profoundly influenced by social class, religion, migration, geography, gender oppression, race and sexual orientation as well as by family dynamics. More often than not we are apprehensive of people when we do not take time to know them. The more we think we are different the more we find that we are actually the same.

The Egyptian Pharaoh was afraid of the Israelites because he had no knowledge of how an Hebrew man, Joseph, had held a position of influence in Egypt and had saved the entire country of Egypt from being completely annihilated by a severe famine. Spending time with people who have a different cultural heritage than us is the first step to breaking the cultural barriers.

This session also began with a YouTube video by California Newsreel titled, "Race the power of an illusion." The video is a documentary which aired on NPR and has been used in many circles to understand the concept of race. The presenters were several professionals and academicians, many of whom are biologists, psychologists and historians. This video attempts to debunk the idea that race is a scientifically proven reality. It clearly describes race for what I believe it is, a political and sociological delineation of humans by Whites to oppress Blacks.²

The division of the world's peoples into distinct groups - "red," "black," "white" or "yellow" peoples - has become so deeply imbedded in our psyches, so widely accepted, many would promptly dismiss as crazy any suggestion of its falsity. Yet, that's exactly what this provocative, new three-hour series by California Newsreel claims. **Race - The Power of an Illusion** questions the very idea of race as biology, suggesting that a belief in race is no more sound than believing that the sun revolves around the earth. Yet race still matters. Just because race doesn't exist in biology doesn't mean it isn't very real, helping shape life chances and opportunities.

Episode 1- The Difference between Us examines the contemporary science - including genetics - that challenges our common sense assumptions that human beings can be bundled into three or four fundamentally different groups according to their physical traits.

Episode 2- The Story We Tell uncovers the roots of the race concept in North America, the 19th century science that legitimated it, and how it came to be held so fiercely in the western imagination. The episode is an eye-opening tale of how race served to rationalize, even justify, American social inequalities as "natural."

Episode 3- The House We Live In asks, If race is not biology, what is it?

³"Race-The Power of An Illusion," California Newsreel. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8MS6zubIaQ> (accessed December 22, 2014).

This episode uncovers how race resides not in nature but in politics, economics and culture. It reveals how our social institutions "make" race by disproportionately channeling resources, power, status and wealth to white people. By asking, What is this thing called 'race'?, a question so basic it is rarely asked, **Race - The Power of an Illusion** helps set the terms that any further discussion of race must first take into account. Ideal for human biology, anthropology, sociology, American history, American studies, and cultural studies³.

Questions for Discussion

1. State clearly your learnings from the video you just watched
2. Read Exodus 1:6-11. Explain what you think would have been different if Pharaoh had knowledge of Joseph's contribution to Egypt?
3. What are the disadvantages of stereotyping people? (Exodus 1:8-10)
4. Do you feel your cultural views have always been understood by others?
5. Have you ever been discriminated against? How did you feel about it?
6. Why is it important to learn about other people's cultures? (Exodus 1:12)
7. Read Galatians 3:26-29. What do you hear? What do you notice? What stands out to you?
8. Read Acts 2:4-13. How does this scripture reveals God's desire for an inclusive church?

Conclusion

Paul, the Apostle says in Romans 12:5, "So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and severally members one of another." The church was intended to mirror the kingdom of God on earth, a place where everybody is somebody and Jesus Christ alone is the Lord. When we recognize the fact that though we may be many in ethnicity, race and language, we are all one because of our connection to God through our savior Jesus

³ Ibid.

Christ. We will then learn to see our differences not as marks of separation but as beauty of diversity that makes us whole and complete.

Session Four

The topic of discussion in the fourth session of the Bible study series was “Developing cross-cultural skills - Learning alternative behaviors.”

Introduction to Bible Study Four

The main purpose of these Bible studies was to call our awareness to cultural diversity and the need for us to be a more inclusive church. Reaching out to the lonely, welcoming strangers, being patient with each other is our collective responsibility. The church ought to mirror the kingdom of God. Jesus taught His disciples to pray, 'let your kingdom come, let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' In order for us to do God's will on earth as it is in heaven, we have to learn the manner and the conducts of heaven. We must learn the culture of heaven. Since we believe that God made us diverse in every way: gender, nationality language, race or any other variables, there must be room for all in the Kingdom of God. And if our church will mirror the kingdom of God, then we must be welcoming to all people, not in a disingenuous way but in an open, warm and loving way.

Developing Communication Skills In Cross Cultural Dialogue

The first level of alternative behaviors we must learn in cultural inclusivity is respective communication skills as suggested by Rev. Eric H. F. Law, the Director and Founder of Kaleidoscope Institute⁴ Respect is used here as an acronym and this section on RESPECT are direct words and ideas of Rev. Eric Law and I found it really useful to just use it as it is.

⁴ Eric H. F. Law, “Untitled,” *Kaleidoscope Institute Newsletter* 2, no. 2 (February 2007).

R- Take **Responsibility** for what you say and feel without blaming others. ” This means using “I” statements such as “I think,” “I feel,” or “I believe.” There are two reasons for this. First, it is important to claim your experience and respect your ideas, thoughts and feelings. Secondly, using “I” statements makes us less likely to judge or blame others for what we are feeling. For example, when someone says something that I disagree with, if I am not taking responsibility for what I feel, I might say something like, “You’re wrong!” A more responsible way to express my views would be, “I have a different perspective on this issue and this is why.”

Some people might say, “It doesn’t matter how I say it as long as I say what is on my mind!” But in English, sentences beginning with “you” often have a very judgmental feel. When someone feels judged, he or she becomes defensive and stops listening. Whatever important things I have to say after that have very little chance of being heard. “I” statements help keep communication lines open.

E- Use **Empathetic** Listening. Listen not just to words; listen to the whole person. Try to feel and see the world as the person who is speaking sees and feels it. Of course this is an almost impossible task because no matter how empathetic I am to someone, I am not that person—I have not had the same upbringing and experiences.

For example, as a man I am limited in my ability to empathize with women when it comes to talking about subjects such as pregnancy. Such limitations make it reasonable to ask questions when we do not understand. This might mean that we need to be patient with each other; sometimes we may have to explain something in a different way so that others can understand us more fully.

S- Be **Sensitive** to differences. Sensitivity to different communication styles is essential to effective inclusive communication. For example, when someone is silent in a meeting, it could mean that the person agrees with what is being said. It could also mean that the person disagrees, or is tired, or does not care, or is thinking, or is confused. Here we have one behavior and many possible interpretations of its meaning. Remember that people communicate in different styles; therefore, do not simply interpret another's behavior from your own assumptions. Ask questions for clarification.

P- Ponder what you hear and feel before you speak. Consider what we are going to say before we say it. When we attend to what is going on within ourselves, we communicate with more authenticity.

E - Examine your own assumptions and perceptions. This involves asking, "What caused me to think or feel a certain way now? Were there personal experiences that I need to explore further before I speak?" This is another way to take responsibility for what we feel. For example, I was in a meeting where someone used a word referring to Chinese Americans that caused me to react with anger. Taking time to examine my response, I discovered that my reaction came from how this word was used to refer to Chinese Americans employed to build the railroad on the West Coast of the United States during the 1800s. They were forced to live in sub-human conditions and nobody cared. They were blown up by dynamite, and nobody cared. This reality lay behind my anger.

Continuing my self-examination, I asked, "Does my anger have anything to do with what is taking place right now?" The answer was both yes and no. I realized that if I responded by saying, "You shouldn't use that word!" the conversation would end and no one would learn anything. Instead, I pondered first, and then responded by saying, "When

I heard that word, I felt angry because that word brought up all of these feelings that I have about . . .” I used “I” statements after I had “pondered” and “examined.” I did not accuse the person who used that word for making me angry.

I stated my feelings and shared my experiences without blaming or judging the other person. This kept the lines of communication open, allow creases frustration and leads to paralysis. By debating each other when we are trying to address very significant issues in our lives, we buy into what the “isms” such as racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, classism, and others, tell us: we are made for division. When we resist the temptation to debate and truly listen to the different perspectives and experiences of the different people in the community, we can, together, name the “ism” and describe its many dimensions. We can then work together to dismantle it, instead of letting the “ism” continue to control and divide us.

C- Keep Confidentiality to uphold the well-being of the community. Keeping confidentiality differs from keeping secrets. Secrets are kept to hold power or protect the interests of those who know. Keeping confidentiality upholds the well-being of the community that is being formed and the communities from which we come. Information that does not pass this test should not be kept confidential. For example, in a meeting, a major issue was discussed. Juan, Mary and Ming spoke passionately about the issue with very different opinions and perspectives. They disagreed on some points but they also found some common ground. After listening to the different perspectives, the committee decided on a course of action by consensus.

In this case, it was inappropriate to tell people who were not present that Juan said this, Ming said that and Mary agreed with Ming that Ming and Mary did not like Juan.

Doing so could alienate people from each other and divide the community. Instead, at the end of the meeting, the group needed to discuss, “What in this meeting should stay confidential and what should be communicated to whole community?” The committee might decide that it was appropriate to share what happened in the meeting without using names. They reported on the issue under discussion and the final decision, describing each perspective without saying who held those opinions. In this way, confidentiality was kept, appropriate information was communicated, and the well-being of the community was upheld.

In most situations, confidentiality means two things: One, personal information shared in the group stays in the group; and two, information about specific communities (for example churches or ministries) shared in the group stays in the group. This assures group members that what they say about themselves and their communities will not be communicated outside the group without the benefit of the shared context developed in the group.

T- Trust ambiguity because we are not here to debate who is right or wrong.” In a multicultural community, there will inevitably be differences of experience, understanding, and opinion. There will be ambiguity. For example, different cultural groups might approach a task in ways that are markedly different yet are totally appropriate to each group’s culture and customs. This is the kind of ambiguity that needs to be tolerated so that together we may discover greater truth.

For example, in many antiracism training workshops that I have seen, participants debate which definition of racism is correct. In many diversity workshops, participants debate whose pain was greater or who was more oppressed. Such debates often do not

help the gathered people address these issues constructively. Many times this approach increases frustration and leads to paralysis.

By debating each other when we are trying to address very significant issues in our lives, we buy into what the “isms” such as racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, classism, and others, tell us: we are made for division. When we resist the temptation to debate and truly listen to the different perspectives and experiences of the different people in the community, we can, together, name the “ism” and describe its many dimensions. We can then work together to dismantle it, instead of letting the “ism” continue to control and divide us.

A Judeo-Christian tradition provides support for finding greater truth by trusting the ambiguity that comes with diversity. For example, why are there four versions of the story of Jesus in the Bible – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? Why not just one? That might make Christian life easier. But the early church leaders decided to keep four different stories of Jesus in the Bible even with inconsistent information and discrepancies.

The different texts challenge us to struggle with this diversity. In that struggle, we might discover that Christ was and is much more than any one story as remembered and recorded by any one community in a specific time and place. Through this struggle with the diversity in the Bible we have a greater chance to discover who Christ is for us now. If we trust ambiguity and listen to how God relates differently with different groups and persons, we are more faithful to the God whom we acknowledge as greater than what any one person or community understands. Thus the quest for deeper understanding and faith

calls us to encounter people from whom we differ and who have different experiences of God.

Developing Interpersonal Skills in Cross Cultural Relationships

The second level of alternative behaviors in cultural inclusivity are the ways we relate as suggested by Dr. William Kondrath, professor of Pastoral Theology and Director of Theological Field Education at Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge Massachusetts in his book *God's Tapestry: Understanding and Celebrating Differences*. Kondrath listed nine guidelines in his book. I am using one of these nine guidelines and also two from VISIONS INC. Cultural Inclusivity Training Manual from the section on the ways to fight internalized oppression and modern "isms.

1. Notice Intent and Impact. In the words of Kondrath, "Intent is my intention or motive in doing or saying something. Impact is the effect or consequence my speech or action has on another person or persons. Sometimes I make comments that I do not intend to be sexist, racist, elitist or heterosexist, and nevertheless another person is deeply affected by my comments. The person who feels hurts or offended may then accuse me of inappropriate behavior and may even say that they think the remark was racist, sexist and so forth. The conversation quickly escalates both of us becomes defensive."⁵

I remember a conversation I had with my school mate when we were both summer interns at Greensboro Urban Ministry in 2001. We were both having a conversation with our supervisor and were in a very relaxed and jocular mood. She is a Caucasian woman and I a Black and African man. I said to my friend, "This summer internship has been very good. You are now a big woman" Her demeanor changed

⁵ William M. Kondrath, *God's Tapestry*, 75.

immediately. She moved from being happy and jovial to being silent and withdrawn. I was wondering what brought the sudden change.

Our supervisor, a Caucasian man, said in a very polite way, “Simon, you have to watch what you say to a woman.” We laughed and I left it at that but I was still wondering what the problem was. My intention for saying what I said was to pump her up. My intention was to say something nice. In Nigeria when you say someone is a big man or a big woman, it means that person is a well to do or a rich person. I was wondering what offence I had committed for saying she was rich and that the internship had been a great experience for both of us? I had no clue.

We had to ride together back to Winston-Salem where we both attend school so I determined to ask her what she heard when I said what I said. She told me, “I heard that you called me a fat lady.” I said, “No! Where I come from when you say someone is a big man or big woman, it is a complimentary statement. Not one commenting on your body size but on your financial status.” She and I laughed about it and she said I was wondering why you would call me fat, but now I understand. My intention was really something good, but the impact on my friend was devastating because of our two different cultural backgrounds.

2. Functional Helping instead of dysfunctional rescuing.⁶ As said in previous chapter, dysfunctional rescuing is a patronizing and condescending attitude of trying to help someone who obviously knows what they are doing although we believe that they do not. Offering help to someone who does feel she or he needs it also creates a situation in which we are behaving as though our assistance is necessary for their success. For example, helping someone complete their sentence in a conversation may result in saying

⁶ Visions Inc. *Teaching Manual 2012*, 10.

what they are not intending to say. It is likewise presumptuous to assume that a female pastor always needs a male pastor to help her lead her congregation especially if she has better credentials than that male pastor. Contrary to “dysfunctional helping”, here are some examples of functional help. Ask questions differently: Is there anything you would like me to do for you? Or “let me know if you think I can be of help to you in any way etc.”; rather than assuming the need for your assistance.

3. “Standing up” instead of “system beating”⁷. There are times when someone who feels the system is oppressive tries to go around the system or look for loopholes in the system to take advantage of. This has led many to a dependent lifestyle instead of standing up for themselves. When someone tries to patronize us, we must develop enough courage to say what we mean and mean what we say.

For example, I have been in gatherings where I was either the only or one of the few minorities and we were told that everybody is welcomed to express their opinion. However, every time I said something, the coordinator would ignore my point. However, when a member of the dominant group restated the same point or others showed their approval of what I said, then the coordinator considered it as a valid point. I noticed that he treated non-minorities with respect and consideration.

I knew I had many options: 1. to keep silent for the rest of the meeting and wait to see if someone would notice my silence and ask why 2. to share my opinion with a White man whose voice the coordinator was willing to respect 3. Get angry and leave the meeting. I did not think any of the above will change the situation. I decided to politely confront the coordinator that I felt that while he ignored me when I made a point, he

⁷ Ibid.

acknowledged the same point made by someone else. He eventually realized what he was doing and I noticed a change of behavior.

Instead of speaking up, or confronting the perpetrator of discrimination, those who beat the system, may internalize the oppression, and blame themselves for being treated unfairly. They may look for undue favor from a member of the dominant group, or get angry and refuse to participate. Acting out these options make the oppressor feel justified to oppress.

Developing Bible Based Individual Attitudes Towards People of Different Cultures

3. The third level of alternative behaviors are in our individual attitudes

- Seek mutual respect, Luke 6:31
- Judge not, James 4:11-12
- Welcome Strangers, Heb. 13:2
- Do not show partiality, James 2:1-8
- Recognize the universal needs of all humans, 1 Corinthians 11, Hebrews 10:24-25

Conclusion

The reality of our time has taught us that we can no longer live in the bubble as we used to. We have to loosen up and wake up to the demographic changes around us. The time is long gone when a viable church can be a like-looking, like-speaking, like-living and like-believing group of people. The United Methodist Church and indeed St. John UMC will reverse the downward trend, when we do not only talk about "open heart, open mind, open door" but truly begin to practice it systemically, interpersonally, and intra-personally.

Session Five

The fifth Sunday was set aside to answer any remaining questions that the participants may have had. One of the questions asked involved the United Methodist Official position on homosexuality and if I was doing the project partly to prepare them for possible church policy changes. My answer was that change is inevitable regardless of what we think about it. I assured them however, that my main and only purpose for the project was to help the church cast a wider net when it comes to our outreach. My desire was and to develop a broader understanding of the kingdom of God, which is much larger than what our traditional view of things may have suggested to us.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION OF THE PROJECT

Evaluation by the Advisory Committee

The Advisory Committee met several times over the course of this project. Below are the dates that the Advisory Committee met with the candidate in 2014: January 6, 8, 13; February 3, 10, 12, 20, 27; March 27; April 2, 6. The advisory committee was well prepared and trained for the task the candidate was asking us to perform. The candidate gave each member of the advisory committee a copy of the prospectus and sufficient time was provided for each of the committee member to read through the document.

Actions taken by the Advisory Board at the Project Phase.

The committee conducted several meetings prior to the implementation of the Project. With prayer and dedication we were able to construct and conduct a successful diversity survey. The team was very diverse educationally, professionally, culturally and racially. It was comprised of males, females, white, black, clergy and laity as well as people of diverse ages. Hence the team first learned to work together in order to have a successful project. The team was divided into subgroups, each group taking responsibility for different aspects of the project.

The team learned a lot from this project. The committee members were able to broaden their own perspectives on diversity and cultural differences. Each member present, first admitted their own limitations in diversity issues, and acknowledged the

biases that they brought to this project. The team worked together collaboratively. Each committee member developed an open mind to differences and did so with good communication through in-person meetings, conference calls, and emails. Each Committee Member supported the effort to ensure that we followed the prospectus and worked within the timelines set up in the prospectus.

The feedback that was received from the congregation was extremely positive and also provided encouragement and enthusiasm to the candidate. As a result of his insightful leadership of this project, the congregation asked several questions, and provided examples of cultural dialogue from their own experiences.

Impact on the Candidate

The Candidate had an opportunity to dialogue with the congregation as a whole. He was very enthusiastic about implementing this project. He was also passionate about follow-up based upon the congregational input and post-test surveys. Candidate expressed how diverse the congregation is. This project paved ways for him to interact and get to know individuals in a more personal and profound way. It truly was a learning experience. It allowed him to hear how opened minded a lot of the members are on divisive Issues such as homosexuality and mixed marriages.

Impact on Congregation

Based upon the posttest survey, positive feedback was received from the congregation. Most members that took the survey were willing to implement their learning through the project and are open to a future training like this. Some members that participated in the project expressed their delight at the conversational method

adopted by the candidate. Seldom do the parishioners get to speak during the sermon, but this time the parishioners did most of the talking instead of the pastor.

Many people expressed their appreciation for not being pressured to participate in both the pretest and posttest surveys. They were pleased that ample opportunity was given to those who wanted to complete the survey to do so. The homework assignments were very helpful. Many people said they would never have gone to try out other ethnic food if the home work had not been given. Over all, change of attitudes has been noticed in the members of the congregation. Many seem to be more accepting of others who are different from them. The congregation is more welcoming. This has yielded immediate result in the increase in our membership.

Candidate Self-Evaluation

What difference has this project made in the life of St. John United Methodist Church?

I believe this project has had a great impact on the congregation. The posttest survey demonstrated that the overwhelming majority of the respondents expressed that the project was a tremendous benefit to them in relating to others who are different. They all affirmed the need for such project in the life of St. John UMC. Many people came to me personally to share what they had learned, and many more actually wrote them down in their general comments on the posttest survey.

One man said, (in terms of his attitude towards people of other races and nationalities) “this project has helped him to loosen up”. Another person said it has changed her view of ageism. One other person said the homework helped him to get over the fear of eating other ethnic food. Three people decided it was time for them to join the

church after the first two sessions. One of the members asked me to revisit the studies in six months so as to see how they are doing. At the end of the year, ten people joined the church.

I have already seen a change of attitude in the way guests are welcomed to our church. Ninety-six percent of respondents to the post-test survey responded back positively. Ninety-eight percent says that they are willing to change and implement alternative behavior. Over all at the end of the year ten, new members joined the church and they credit their decision to join, to the love and the welcoming spirit of the members of the congregation. Fifty percent stated that the usage of audiovisual was very helpful. Seventy-five percent are willing to participate in another project. One hundred percent of the respondents said that the candidate demonstrated a clear understanding of the subject matter. Ninety-nine percent of the respondents stated that the candidate made clear the purpose of the study.

Members now have broader perspectives when talking about mission work in other places around the world. I have even noticed that some people now show more respect and care when we discuss our different cultural upbringing. Now I see some who used to be sarcastic when they asked me question about Nigeria, demonstrating genuine inquisitiveness and a true desire to know.

I can say that members of St. John seem ready to work with any pastor now whether male or female.

In what ways are the members demonstrating their own cultural awareness in a way that they have never done before?

Towards the end of 2014, a Hispanic lady who recently moved to South Florida decided to visit St. John. She came to me at the end of the worship saying that she felt drawn to this church. She said she loves everything about the church and particularly the love she felt when she came in. This is a new time indeed in the life of St. John United Methodist Church. When this lady decided to join the church, I saw many people coming up to support her. When that worship service was over, she was surrounded with love and care, by some of the women. She speaks English very fluently and has no problem communicating at all. A few Sundays after, she brought her husband, a White man, who also expressed the same satisfaction about how he was received. Both of them will be going through New Members Class in March of 2015.

I have personally seen a great improvement in the attitude of many of the members towards each other as well as towards guests to our church. There is a groom for improvement but there is already a lot of improvements to be celebrated.

What were my strengths as a leader?

Looking back, I believe I have provided very good leadership for the project. I have been able to make the purpose of the project not only an idea in my head but something that the majority of the congregation now see as a ministry to be carried out. I trained the Advisory Committee, I advertised the project. I conducted the Pre-test and the posttest surveys. I drafted the Bible Study series and facilitated the discussions on the subject of inclusivity as outlined in the prospectus and the Bible study outline.

I communicated well with the Advisory Committee members and listened to their suggestions. My leadership strengths include staying on task, providing clear direction of the project, strategic thinking in being able to put the right people together, being able to

manage diverse opinions of the members of the Advisory Committee and condense them into one focal point that most of the people can rally around. I think I have very good listening and communication skills.

What could I personally have improved in the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the project?

Some of my weaknesses include not being very firm in the amount of time I allowed each member of the congregation to speak during the time of Bible study. This drew the Bible study out longer than I had anticipated. Another thing that I could have improved upon was knowledge of our audiovisual devices. They did that did not work well when I was playing the second video on "Race, the power of an illusion" however we got it to work in the second service. The problem was only in the first service on the second Sunday of March. I could have made sure our audiovisual devices were in perfect working condition. I assumed they were, but I was wrong.

How has my own understanding of the cultural dynamics in the neighborhood of St. John been enhanced through this project?

Before the project I knew that Blacks are the majority in the neighborhood of our church and that other races and ethnicities are on the rise. This still holds true after the project. There is still a dominant presence of Blacks in the community. What is new for me after the project is that Black dominance in our church community is not going to last very long. The housing developments in the area are bringing diversity to the community faster than I had previously thought. Therefore the timing of this project is just right. Our church is eager to reach out to everybody, and people from different ethnicity that are coming to worship with us are finding a welcoming environment at St. John UMC.

I have always been interested in learning about other cultures and that is one of the reasons I came to the United States. Through this project, I have learned more about cross-cultural communication. I realized that human beings are similar in many ways. The fear of people that are different from us is a human problem not just an American problem or church problem. As shared in the first chapter of this dissertation, I was raised to not fully trust strangers, particularly when I am not familiar with their language. This project has opened my eyes wider than ever that there are certain values that are essential across the spectrum of cultures. Some of those values are, respect, love, family, happiness, liberty and life. Since I also want these things, I must assume that everybody wants them too and those are stronger than the differences in the way we go about these values.

This project helped me to get to know many of our church members better. I had certain assumptions about some of our members in terms of their family of origin that I found out were not accurate.

Congregation Involvement

I started promoting the project the beginning of January by explaining the purpose of the project to the congregation. I also discussed the project with the church council and the Lay Leadership Committees of the church. Some of the members of the Advisory committee are members of the church and so they were well informed and involved in the entire process. Then two Sundays before the beginning of the project, I talked to the congregation in detail about the project and how they could participate by responding honestly to the survey, which was made anonymous.

I also conducted a survey of the congregation and ran the survey for three consecutive Sundays to allow those who may have missed one Sunday or the other the same opportunity to participate in the survey. The Bible study series took the form of dialogue with the congregation rather than didactic method. Everybody was able to voice his or her opinion. The discussions were very lively. Homework was assigned to encourage congregational participation in the project and to strengthen engagement in the project. Each one came back openly reporting their experiences with the homework assigned.

The Impact the Project Has Had on the Congregation So Far.

Previous examples support my belief that this project has had a great impact on the congregation. As already indicated, I think this project is very effective because an overwhelming majority of members said that it was very helpful to them. An overwhelming majority also pledged to apply the alternative behaviors learned in order to propel our church to become an inclusive congregation. Many people took the homework very seriously. This pleasantly surprised me, because usually our people don't comply, and if they are asked they will say "I forgot."

I have personally seen some members going out of their way to talk to visitors just the way I mentioned to them in the teaching of alternative behavior. Since the beginning of this project we have received three new members into full membership of the church and at the end of October, we received 10 new members.

How I Involved the Advisory Committee in the Project?

When I called individual members of the committee, I explained to each member of the committee why I wanted them to serve on the committee. They all joined the committee

knowing what contributions they have been asked to make. I sent each member of the committee a copy of the prospectus and I explained to the committee what I was hoping to accomplish. At the first meeting, I explained the purpose of the project and we divided the committee into three sub groups. One group worked with me on developing the pre-test surveys and the posttest surveys.

They also worked with me in analyzing the results. The second sub group worked with me on gathering materials, and providing ideas for the Bible study series. The third sub group read through the materials and offered their suggestions and corrections. Our meetings were task focused, hence the content of the meeting depends on what task we wanted to achieve at that time.

Conclusion

The scripture is very clear on what our attitude should be towards each other regardless of our culture, gender or race. In John 13:35, Jesus said, “By this all will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.” Throughout the United States there is a significant demographic shift as Hispanics, Asians, Africans, Caribbean people, and many other communities of non-European origin are on the increase.

Today, as ever, the Church's mission to make disciples of all people for the transformation of the world depends heavily on our collective understanding of cultures and the love and dignity with which we treat everybody. Loving one another is the only true witness that the church has to show to the world that the kingdom of our God has begun just as Jesus taught us to pray “Thy kingdom come”. The kingdom of God is wherever people are treated with love and dignity.

During the project I realized that many of our members either personally know or are friends with someone who is homosexual. The conversation on the issue of homosexuality seemed to be genuine. Many people in the survey said they would not mind going to the same church with someone who is homosexual. However, a limit to that openness was clearly drawn. Many people expressed their resolve to leave the church if a pastor who is homosexual was appointed to the church. Some indicated they might leave the denomination and go somewhere else. Everyone should be welcomed in the church of Jesus Christ. There is enough room for everybody in the kingdom of our God.

Some people told me that they care about everybody, love everybody but could not reconcile homosexuality with the scriptures. I conclude that this is an area that will take time for many people to evolve. Therefore a future training and further development will be necessary in this area. Inclusivity training will be included in the new member's orientation classes and a periodic re-engagement of the members with the values of cultural inclusivity will be a great follow up. I plan on publishing this dissertation at some point. The created Bible study series will be made available to other churches that also desire growth in the area of cultural inclusivity.

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