

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BLACKS AND WHITES

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In this paper, I will discuss some examples of cultural differences between Black and White peoples, based on my personal experiences as pastor and professor not only in the Democratic Republic of Congo, but also in the United States.

As an Ordained Minister in the United Methodist Church, I have served in both Black and White congregations, during the past 26 years. I have also taught Black and White students not only in the Democratic Republic of Congo, but also at eight different American colleges and universities. The cultural differences to be discussed today include evangelism, worship, outreach, and modes of behavior.

Evangelism:

Both Blacks and Whites who have become members of our local churches are following the example of John Wesley, the Founder and Father of Methodism, who said, “The World is my parish.” We have but one commission; it is the imperative command to go and preach the Gospel to every person teaching them to observe all things that our Lord has commanded.¹

We, who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, have the responsibility to take His message of salvation to those who have not decided for Him. When it comes to Evangelism, both Black and White people are always looking for ways to make known the love of Jesus Christ to all persons.

¹ *International Focus Ministries, Inc. 2007*

Both ethnic groups do not claim to know when Christ returns, but they know that the time to reach out is now.² They all know that our Lord Jesus Christ wants us to tell His story to our friends and relatives, in addition to reaching out to those who are unknown to us. Both Black and White Christians are willing to tell them that Jesus Christ is the only One who is able to save human beings from sin and death. Both ethnic groups want to tell people that Jesus Christ helps us, provides for us, and loves us.

However, Black and White peoples, whom I have served in local United Methodist Congregations in Africa and the United States take different ways to reach out to unchurched, inactive, and unbelievers. Due to individualism, which is a strong aspect of Western culture, White Peoples generally reach out to the members of their immediate families first, before contacting non-family members. They may be willing to participate in an evangelism committee workshop to learn how to reach out to others. However, only a few members of the church will be available to become active members of the evangelism committee.

During my seven years of a very successful ministry at Trinity United Methodist Church in Charleston, West Virginia, an all-White Congregation, I had a very active Evangelism Committee, which was made up of 25 white women and men. Following one month of training, I divided the committee into 12 teams of 2 people. The Evangelism Committee chairperson and I accompanied the teams as needed.

The first group to be visited in their homes were inactive members of the church. People who were absent from the church for a few weeks, months, and years. The second group of people were the unchurched living in our communities, and the third

² See Kelvin Sauls, 'Congregational Transformation,' *Interpreter*, January/February 2007, 15-16.

group was made up of the people who visited our church for the first time.

Most of the time we met at the church on Sunday evening following our home visitations to report to the whole Committee on our individual or team visits. We concluded our meetings with singing and praying before going to our homes. Home visitation program was a very successful ministry at Trinity United Methodist Church, as it led to church growth both numerically and spiritually.³

Under the impact of Black theology, African Americans usually do not get very much involved in evangelism, as I learned from my 15 years of pastoral ministry in the United Methodist Black congregations. From June 1983 to June 1986, I served a two-point Charge: Black and White congregations in Grafton, West Virginia. Each Sunday I had to prepare two different sermons. I preached at Trinity United Methodist Church, an All-White congregation, at 10:00 A.M. and at Warren United Methodist Church, an all-Black congregation at 11:00 A.M.

The theme of liberation expressed in story-form is the essence of Black religion. Like White American theology, Black thought on Christianity has been influenced by its social context. But unlike White theologians who spoke to and for culture of the ruling class, Black people's religious ideas were shaped by the cultural and political existence of the victims in North America. Unlike Europeans who immigrated to America to escape from tyranny, Africans came in chains to serve a nation of tyrants. It was the slave experience that shaped their idea of the United States of America. And, this difference in social existence between Europeans and Africans must be recognized if we are to

³ During my six years of service at Trinity United Methodist Church in Charleston, West Virginia, 1986-1992, we received 42 new members on profession of faith and 20 members who transferred their membership from other Protestant Denominations.

understand correctly the contrast in the form and content of Black and White theology.

White theologians built logical systems; Black folks told tales. Whites debated the validity of infant baptism and the issue of predestination and free will; Blacks recited biblical stories about God leading the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, Joshua and the battle of Jericho. White theologians argued about the relationship between religion and science; Blacks were more concerned about their status in American society and its relation to the biblical claim that Jesus Christ came to set the captives free. The White people view salvation as largely “spiritual” and sometimes “rational,” but usually separated from the concrete struggle of freedom in this world. Blacks view salvation as largely eschatological and never abstract but usually related to their struggle against earthly oppression.

While White preachers and theologians often defined Jesus Christ as a spiritual Savior, the deliverer of people from sin and death, Black preachers viewed God as the Liberator in history. That was why the Black church was involved in the Abolitionist Movement in the nineteenth century and the Civil Rights movement in the twentieth. African Americans reasoned that if God delivered the children of Israel from Pharaoh’s army and Daniel from the lion’s den, He will deliver black people from American slavery and oppression. So the content of their message was liberation and they communicated that message through preaching, singing, and praying, telling the story of how “we shall overcome.”⁴

Another leading factor is the impact of the National Baptist Convention of the United States of America, Inc. on the Black churches of all Denominations, especially in

⁴ James H. Cone, “The History of Black Theology,” Theology Today, Vol.32, No.2, July 1975.

the South. The National Baptist Convention is the largest Black Denomination in the United States with a membership of about 8, 500,000 in 30,000 congregations in the late 20th century. African Americans who belong to other Protestant Denominations are strongly influenced by the Baptist doctrines, such as “once saved, the person will always be saved...”

Consequently, the African American’s method of evangelism is different from that of the White Methodists. The African Americans may talk to their children about attending church or Sunday school, but they do not think that leading people to Christ is one of their most important Christian duties. In many African American homes the man may be a Baptist, the woman a Methodist, and the children may not belong to any church. The children may attend either of the churches frequented by their parents once a year at Christmas or Easter.

In some African American churches which I served, the Evangelism Committee was made up of at least two people: the pastor and the chairperson of the committee. At one church I sent a personal letter to each member of the church to invite them to attend a one-day workshop and training on Evangelism. In a congregation of 45 members, nobody responded to my invitation after six months of waiting.⁵

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, my experience was quite different from the four African American churches which I served in the United States. Mission and Evangelism are based on the African theology, which is defined as a ‘theological reflection and expression by African Christians.’⁶ During the independence movement

⁵ Duncan Chapel United Methodist Church is located in the Lexington, Kentucky, District of the United Methodist, where I served from June 2001 to June 2006.

⁶ John S. Mbiti, “The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology,” in African Theology, 83.

from European colonialism of sub-Saharan Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, African theology transformed the biblical faith of Christ and Christian truth from a Euro-centric expression. The Bible became the foundation document for African theology and African Christianity.

Due to the concept of communality, which is a very strong aspect of the African culture, Christian parents reach out not only to their immediate family members, but also to their extended family members. The Congolese believe that the most important account which each of us will give to Jesus Christ on the Last Judgment will be an answer to Jesus' question: "How many people did you bring to me, while you were still living?" According to the Congolese people, the Last Judgment will be based not on what we did, but on what we failed to do.

"For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me."⁷

Congolese people often recount the story about Judah, Jacob's son, telling his father," The man, (speaking of Joseph in Egypt), solemnly warned us, saying, "You shall not see my face, unless your brother is with you."⁸ This same message is coming to the Congolese people today from God, saying that if they fail to bring their brothers and sisters to the church, which is the Body of Christ, they will not see God's face.

In addition to both immediate and extended family members, the Congolese people

Kwesi A. Dickson et al, Pour Une Théologie Africaine, Ellingworth, Yaoundé, 1969, 229.

⁷ See Matthew 25:41-43.

⁸ See Genesis 43:1-3

reach out to their neighbors, coworkers, and those living in their communities. They believe that it is their duty, obligation, and responsibility to share the Good News of our Lord and Savior with those who have not become members of the church, the Family of God. This task and mission continue until the day when we leave this world to be with the Lord in our heavenly Home.

This Congolese outreach ministry explains the rapid growth of the church in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In fact, the United Methodist Church is growing faster in Africa than it is anywhere else in the world. Each church member feels called by God to engage in evangelization.⁹

Worship:

The worship services have always been alive in both Black and White churches which I have served in the United States. All the churches had choirs which presented special music during the worship services. While the White choirs usually sing one special music, African American choirs usually sing more than one song. While White members of the church expect to end the worship service by 12:00 noon, the African Americans do not mind attending a worship service which lasts more than one hour. While the European Americans enjoy a sermon which lasts 15 to 20 minutes, Many African Americans expect a sermon to last between 45 minutes and one hour.¹⁰

Another difference between Blacks and Whites, based on my personal experience in the United States, is the concept of time. While “time is money” to the White Americans,

⁹ Michael Kasongo, History of the Methodist Church in Central Congo, University Press of America, 1998, 25-56; Joseph Onema Fama, Gospel and Culture in an African Context: The Tetela-Kusu-Anamongo People and the Church, The United Methodist Publishing House, 2006, 163-210.

¹⁰ In the spring of 2007, I attended a worship service at a Black Baptist Church where the pastor preached for one hour and twenty minutes.

Black people consider the time to be an opportunity to build meaningful and lasting relationships with other human beings. While Whites tend to make every second and minute count, Blacks tend to make the time dependable on them. “Take your time,” we usually say, when someone gives a testimony in church. The time is in their service; it is also on their side.

These differing concepts have a strong impact on the lives of Black and White people. Officially, the worship services at both Black and White churches may be at 11:00 A.M. Many times, some Whites will be in the sanctuary at 10:45 A.M. waiting for the service to start at 11:00 A.M. sharp. The service will go smoothly, according to the church bulletin, from 11:00 to 12:00 Noon.

However, at most African American churches, especially at the most recent congregation, which I served in Kentucky, things were different from the White congregations. Although the worship service was supposed to officially start at 11:30 A.M., most church members will show up at 12:00 Noon or 12:30 P.M. The church member responsible for announcements to be read from the church bulletin, will take at least 10 minutes “preaching.” The choir will present four anthems. Sometimes a church member will take at least 15 minutes to offer an invocation or an opening prayer.¹¹

While older generations who may not have anything to do at home, may feel comfortable attending churches which do not follow and respect a printed order of worship, younger generations or young adults will be attracted by the churches which end the services within one hour.¹²

¹¹ It happened every Sunday at Duncan United Methodist Church in the Lexington District of the Kentucky Conference.

Another aspect of evangelism which I would like to discuss in this paper is the campus ministry. A Campus Ministry operates in much the same way that a “regular” church operates. The difference is while the local churches are divided between black and white congregations which may take different approaches to reach out, the campus ministry includes both black and white students to be won for Christ.

The difference between local churches and a campus ministry has to do with the fact that a campus ministry has a lot more participants with body-piercing, brightly colored hair, and sagging, baggy pants!¹³

As humorous as the last statement is, it brings up a very important and vital aspect of campus ministry—that in order to effectively win people for Christ, you must meet the people where they are in life.

Although I have not been officially appointed to the position of Campus Minister, I have privately been offering spiritual services to my students. Before and after my teaching assignments, I have met with the students not only in my office, but also in their dorms to offer personal counseling and to see what I or the members of my local church can do for them. I have been following the words of the Apostle Paul when he said, “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.”¹⁴

In following this challenge, it has become my responsibility to discover who these college kids are and what interests and attracts them. By extensive research and interaction with students, I have been able to develop meaningful and lasting

¹² Instead of attending the regular worship services, young people are attending the ‘Children Church’ where they watch the videos or discuss children’s issues.

¹³ Aaron Racz, “A Potential for a Campus Ministry,” Foundations of Campus Ministry, CM 510X, Fall 2002.

¹⁴ See I Corinthians 9:20-22

relationships with my students who live in the dorms and off campus.

These people are mostly unchurched and, in my opinion, seeking purpose and meaning in their lives. Once a friendship develops, the door for witnessing is open.

I encourage my students to be in contact with campus ministers, their local church pastors, and sometimes I invite them to visit the local churches which I have been serving. I have found out that it is very important for the college students to experience a positive worship, a relevant message, and genuine love and need for Christ. They enjoy being welcomed warmly by local church members.¹⁵

Outreach:

Here is another major difference between White and Black churches. Whites tend to be more open to new comers. Meeting new people and inviting them to our existing committees and organizations is one of the cultural aspects of White people. European Americans are more gifted in this ministry than African Americans. Typically, Whites begin conversations with people they are meeting for the first time by asking for information. New neighbors will inquire about each other's family situation: the number and ages of the children, whether they all live at home, where they go to school, which church they attend and what the parents do for living. In seeking this information White people do not consider themselves as prying; they believe that such exchanges are part of what they call being "neighborly" or "sociable."¹⁶

They display a similar inquisitiveness at social gatherings, when they attempt to

¹⁵ While serving in local churches in Grafton, West Virginia, Charleston, West Virginia, Richmond, Virginia, and Lexington, Kentucky, the Evangelism Committees invited college students to worship services and fellowship dinners on special Sundays.

¹⁶ Thomas Kochman, *Black and White: Styles in Conflict*, The University of Chicago Press, 1981, 97.

locate individuals they are meeting for the first time within some social, educational, and professional network or context. These inquiries generally reflect the way Whites make conversation and specially denote their preoccupation with status and social environment. Blacks consider this kind of questioning and probing improper and intrusive.

One reason for this is that they reject the primary value given to social considerations that these questions reflect. Blacks are principally person-oriented. Consequently, what matters first for them are those aspects of self that people actually show in face –to-face interaction: intelligence, charm, sensitivity or, conversely, stupidity, hostility, intolerance, insensitivity, etc. Social information, such as what people do for living, may never become a topic of conversation in a Black social gathering. In a Black community, parties have meant fun, frivolity, and casual conversation with friends and acquaintances. The social event as an extension of business, politics, religion, or work is essentially a White phenomenon.¹⁷

Another reason Blacks consider such questioning to be improper is that they regard as private much of the personal information that Whites exchange in public. Because of this, Blacks object when people try to make such information public.

A third reason why Blacks see such probing as intrusive is that they think that the disclosure of personal information should be entirely at the discretion of the person. Only he or she can appropriately instigate its disclosure. For these reasons Blacks see direct questions as an inappropriate way of seeking personal information. Blacks resist information-seeking probes because, as a minority group, they have been and continue to be vulnerable to the way such information might be interpreted and used.

¹⁷Kochman, 102

Modes of Behavior:

The last cultural difference, which I have observed in the United States among the Black and White members of my churches and among my Black and White students are modes of behavior. The modes of behavior that Blacks and Whites consider appropriate for engaging in public debate on an issue differ in their stance and level of spiritual intensity. The Black mode – that of Black community – is high-keyed: animated, interpersonal, and confrontational. The White mode – that of the middle class – is relatively low-keyed: dispassionate, impersonal, and non-challenging. The first is characteristic of involvement; it is heated, loud, and generates affect. The second is characteristic of detachment and cool, quiet, and without affect.

In discussion, Whites also hope to avoid opposition. This is because they see confrontation as leading to intransigence, a hardening of the opposing viewpoints, with the result that neither opponent will listen to the other's viewpoint. Blacks do not believe that the presence of affect and dynamic opposition leads to intransigence. They use the formal argument as a means of testing their own views. Thus they speak their minds with the expectation that either their views or those of the opposition will be modified as a result of a successful challenge.¹⁸

The areas of cultural differences between Blacks and Whites discussed in this paper include evangelism, worship, outreach, and modes of behavior. It is my hope that when we become aware of our cultural differences we will respect each other's method of leading people to Jesus Christ, as we have all been called to serve Him in the present age.

¹⁸ Kochman, 120

