Becoming Inclusive Communities of Faith

Biblical Reflection and Effective Frameworks

*Stephen S. Dudek*

A growing number of parishes strive to become ever more culturally and racially inclusive communities of faith. Reflecting on the biblical account of migration and salvation history and drawing upon intercultural communication theory provide an excellent foundation for responding to this challenge and opportunity.

*Ethnocentrism, Prejudice and Race*

Race and ethnicity are strong forces that mobilize a wide range of emotions among people. Even for people of faith, tolerance and mutual understanding of ethnic/racial differences are not always apparent or desired. To some degree all of us are ethnocentric, in that we perceive ingroups to be “virtuous and superior” while we see outgroups as “inferior” blaming them for our troubles, as we try to maintain social distance (Gudykunst, 130).

When ethnocentrism leads people to make a prejudgment based on membership in a social category prejudice is born. Prejudice can take different forms rooted in gender, social class, place of origin, skin color, and other identifying characteristics. When it is based on race the resulting attitude is racism.

Discrimination and bias frequently develop because outgroups are perceived to be a threat, but equally as important “because positive emotions such as admira-

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tion, sympathy, and trust are reserved for the ingroup” (Gudykunst, 137). In a global age, where the compression of time and space is evident, people who previously had little or no contact with each other now live, work and worship, side by side, with their prejudices becoming increasingly apparent.

Twenty-five years ago racism was defined as “a sin that divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family, and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same father” by our nation’s bishops in *Brothers and Sisters to Us* (BSU, 3). They acknowledged this “radical evil” to be a tragic reality that denies the creation of a “redeemed world.” Not just one sin among many, racism we were told calls for fundamental change, real conversion, and challenges us to look closely at our relationship with others. Through biblical reflection and the help of two frameworks drawn from intercultural communication theory, this article is an attempt at helping parishes navigate the uncharted waters of becoming ever more inclusive communities of faith. Throughout the text, references to “culture” apply equally to “race.”

*Migration and Salvation History*

**Abraham: Prototype Stranger and Model of Hospitality**

The age-old experience of migration is the canvas upon which the sacred story of salvation history is painted and comes to life. Abraham in the book of Genesis is presented as a prototype stranger whose father migrated from Ur in present day Iran or Iraq, to Haran located now in Turkey. From there Abraham made his way to the foreign territory of Cana, then was driven by famine to Egypt, and eventually moved back to Cana (Gen 12:1–13:18).

At the sacred tree of Mamre, Abraham and Sarah shared genuine hospitality with three strangers. They provided them water for washing their feet and nourishment. All this was a way of showing deep respect for the stranger and may well have been a result of their personal experience of migration. This contrasts with what follows immediately in Genesis with respect to Sodom, a city not blessed but destroyed (Gen 18:16-19, 29). The destruction of the city had to do with transgressions regarding the law of hospitality and the protection of strangers. Mis-treatment of the orphan, widow or stranger had serious consequences.

**Moses: Caught between Two Cultures While Learning How to Feel**

Moses was born in Egypt of Hebrew slave parents. Jews at the time were being forced to work in the brickfields for the great building projects of the era. At birth Moses faced a death sentence by decree of the pharaoh, along with all male Hebrew babies. In a mysterious turn of events, he was adopted by the very daughter of the pharaoh, survived, and led his people to their Promised Land.
Moses was caught between two cultures and as a result had a lot to sort out. He appears as a sensitive man who became indignant both at the injustice shown his own Hebrew people at the hands of the Egyptians; and the sometimes self-destructive behavior evident among Hebrews. He killed an Egyptian who was exploiting and abusing a fellow Hebrew (Exod 2:11-12). He also attempted to break up a brawl between two Hebrews; which resulted in his having to flee into the land of Midian (Exod 2:13). Caught between two cultures he had to find himself with respect to his cultural identity and his place in the world.

It was in the desert that Moses and Israel learned God’s name, received the law, and became a covenant people. In the desert experience, they found their relationship with God defined. This physical and spiritual place was a barrier and means of communication; it was a place of intimacy and instruction; a place of danger, temptation, and trial not unlike the barren landscapes that countless immigrants cross, to find work in Europe, Australia, and the United States, and other “lands flowing in milk and honey.”

Moses and the prophets remind Israel that the most important border to cross is that of one’s heart. Having experienced the pain and suffering of oppression, Israel was uniquely equipped to seek justice on behalf of the orphan, widow, and stranger. This spiritual quality of empathy allows people connected to the Judeo-Christian tradition to mindfully walk in the shoes of others. When we take time to feel and remember the lessons of our desert past, we regain the ability to enter into solidarity with people on the move today.

**Ruth: Salvation through a Foreigner**

The story of Ruth takes place during a period of great social/political disintegration and violence. It is a simple adventure of daily life concerning a Moabite woman, who marries an Israelite, despite Ezra’s discouragement of such mixed unions. When Ruth’s husband dies she demonstrates uncommon loyalty to her mother in law and to the God of Israel. Eventually she finds a new spouse, Boaz, among her former husband’s relatives.

Ruth was nameless like so many immigrants and people of color today, her place of origin and family connection with Israel define her (Ruth 2:6). Our protagonist invites Israel to a spirit of openness that transcends nation and race. Through her marriage to Boaz, Ruth, a foreigner, becomes King David’s great-grandmother.

Ruth helped Israel break free of the chains of ethnocentrism. Could it be that at this time in our own nation’s history when immigrants are suspect that our salvation might hinge upon foreigners as well? Will our national and ecclesial response to people of color, to the stranger, and to those who are poor, be in keeping with the spirit of invitation that Boaz extended to Ruth: “Stay here . . . gather here . . . be protected here . . . and be refreshed here” (Ruth 2:8-9)?
The Holy Family: Refugees both Political and Economic

Two of the gospels provide us with infancy narratives. Luke’s version is situated in the context of an empire-wide census. With Joseph and Mary on the move to fulfill their civic duties, the time came for Jesus to be born. His birth took place not where savvy travelers stayed but in a manger where desperate people found refuge. Fearful shepherds who lacked religious status were the first to visit Christ at his improvised home (Luke 2:1-20).

A desperate attempt at survival is a central feature of Mathew’s infancy narrative. Under the cover of darkness, a refugee-like flight is undertaken into Egypt, which situates Jesus as a new and greater Moses (Matt 2:13-15). Finally this family of sojourners makes its way to Nazareth located in Galilee rather than Judea, most likely for Joseph to find work. Joseph and probably his son as well were not carpenters as we know them, but “tectons,” skilled laborers specializing in stone (Matt 2:19-23). The nearby city of Sepphoris was being rebuilt as Herod Antipas’ capitol, resulting in employment for laborers anxious to support their families.

Frameworks for Understanding and Advancing Inclusion

Predictable Stages

When a new cultural group appears on the horizon and is welcomed into a parish, a process of accommodation begins that has a profound effect on both established parishioners and those seeking acceptance. Identifiable stages are evident when two or more cultures interact with each other: one being already established in the parish or institution known as the “ingroup”; the other or others, attempting to create a new spiritual home identified as the “outgroup” (Gudykunst, 75). Congregations and other entities involved in welcoming new cultural groups negotiate a number of predictable stages on a continuum toward increased sophistication and growth.

Framework 1

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These stages are drawn from the writings of Milton J. Bennett and were originally applied to individuals and their development of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 21–66). I believe these same six stages can be applied to parishes and other entities as they increasingly move away from cultural and racial isolation.
toward tolerance and the acceptance of strangers. It must be noted that the process of accommodation is generally a slow one and frequently is painful for both the ingroup and outgroup. What is important is not where a community of faith is situated on this continuum of increasing sophistication, but rather when and how the community takes the next step toward greater inclusion.

Of critical importance in all of this is how parish leadership responds to the challenges and opportunities which help congregations grow in intercultural and interracial sensitivity. Parish communities rarely move beyond where their pastoral leaders find themselves on this continuum. And while it is true that in any given faith community parishioners will be scattered over quite a number of stages, the response of the congregation’s formal and informal leaders is what in large part determines movement toward greater acceptance of others.

**Denial**

Certain faith communities have for years lived in relative isolation. When this is true they tend to minimize or even deny cultural difference. Physical and social barriers develop in these settings that create distance between the ingroup and the outgroup.

During this period it is not uncommon for the dominant culture to overlook, ignore, or even deny the presence of others whom they perceive to be different. One predominantly European American congregation was asked, “when did the parish’s Hispanic presence arrive on the scene?” people responded: “in the 1950s or 1960s”; when in reality the parish’s baptismal records indicated that the parish’s Hispanic presence went back at least to the 1930s! Parish histories tend to be written by the ingroup sometimes to the exclusion of other groups and tend to minimize or deny the strangers presence.

Since intercultural sensitivity is not natural, denial is a normal way of dealing with cultural difference. However once the number or frequency of contacts with strangers increases to a certain level, denial can no longer be utilized as a way of coping with reality. A second combative stage becomes imminent.

**Defense**

This stage has to do with how a faith community postures to counter the impact of what is perceived to be threatening. The “foreign culture” can no longer be ignored, now it must be defended against! Attitudes of superiority are employed by the ingroup with respect to the outgroup, along with negative stereotypes, in an attempt at preserving one’s worldview as being absolute.

This stage expresses itself in various ways. It can take the form of animosity, angry undercurrents, and above all fear. Separate but equal worship arrangements are frequent, even to the point of purchasing adjacent storefronts or chapels to ensure appropriate distance between cultures. A wide variety of creative defense strategies can be employed to what is perceived to be a threat.
Minimization

A third stage occurs when the dictates of cultural similarity begin to be employed on a regular basis. Cultural difference is no longer evaluated negatively but rather is rendered relatively unimportant when contrasted with cultural similarity. Minimization begins to downplay cultural difference. Cultural difference is trivialized by the ingroup with respect to the outgroup in an attempt to preserve one’s worldview.

This phase provides opportunities for deeper sharing across cultural boundaries and greater self awareness particularly on behalf of the dominant culture. “Integration” is generally the operative mode for cross cultural interaction in this phase, since a “separate but equal approach” can no longer be defended.

Acceptance

Parishes mark an important transition when they pass from minimization to acceptance as a way of relating to cultural difference. Defense strategies are no longer employed. Cultural difference is both acknowledged and respected. For the first time, the ingroup begins to perceive their worldview as being relative and tolerance for ambiguity is noted. Respect for both the behavior and values of others become evident. No longer is the “other” perceived to be “good” or “bad” but simply “different.”

Parishes at this stage sometimes employ a “parallel tracks approach” with respect to worship, catechesis and ministry due to linguistic differences; but generally have begun to bring the various cultural groups together at least periodically.

Adaptation

This stage involves seeing the world with two or more internalized cultural frames of reference. Bennett describes this stage, the former, and the next one, as being “ethnorelative” or as I prefer “ethnopluralistic” in nature. Cultural difference is perceived to be nonthreatening and is accepted; it is enjoyable and sought out. Empathy is a key skill that demonstrates this adaptation phase. It involves the ability to feel and comprehend from another’s perspective. Enhanced relational and communication skills are also evident.

Proof that parishes have reached this stage can sometimes be found in their Mission Statements or in the architecture and design of new or renovated sacred space. The explicit exclusion of assimilation is what gives witness to this ethnopluralistic stage. Faith communities living this reality promote unity without uniformity as they defy standardization.

Integration

The final stage involves the ability to both analyze and evaluate situations from a number of chosen perspectives. The ethnopluralistic stages prior to this moment involved suspending evaluation when it came to cultural difference. Here, evaluation is clearly present based on the cultural context. This leads to cultural
marginality that allows for the construction of appropriate frames of reference for specific purposes.

Congregations who have come to grips with a multiplicity of realities are at this stage. I believe they are exceedingly rare and special. They possess the ability to both analyze and evaluate situations from more than one chosen perspective. The marginality they live can at times be painful. They are always in the process of being “apart of” and “apart from” a given culture. These parishes like the intercultural people described in *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us* are specially equipped to “appreciate differences, work out conflicts, and build on commonalities” (WSAU, 34).

**Intercultural Dialogue Ladder**

A second framework, a developmental ladder, enables congregations to get beyond ethnic communities living side by side without any connection to each other. I am deeply indebted to Alejandro Aguilera Titus for this framework. Originally used in a presentation at the National Catholic Stewardship Conference, this model sensibly yet realistically promotes communion. It has been reworked with an emphasis on its implications for culturally diverse parishes. With it we ask: what promotes communion when the Body of Christ does not always enjoy a common narrative, relationships, decisions, or a shared sense of ownership? As with every ladder, you begin at the bottom and work your way up. Opportunities for intercultural dialogue must be provided in multiple and intentional ways since in any given congregation parishioners will be found on a number of different rungs.

Framework 2

*Intercultural Dialogue Ladder*

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**Welcoming**

While intercultural communication is a slow and sometimes uncomfortable process, it is greatly facilitated when strangers experience hospitality. Research has repeatedly shown that a positive emotional climate facilitates intercultural communication, while a negative one contributes to a lack of self-confidence, increased anxiety, and a lessening of desire for ongoing contact with the new culture. A stress-free environment is neither possible nor totally helpful in the adaptation process. What is best is an environment where adaptation and receptivity are in optimal balance. The everyday stress that strangers experience in a new cultural milieu is more than sufficient to activate the adaptive energy that helps people reorganize their lives and leap forward.

Anxiety levels are high when intercultural communication is initiated. Strangers face uncertainty dictated by gross stereotypes, often a result of racism, rather than accurate insights about them. Hosts are anxious as well and frequently quite unaware of their anxiety, which makes tolerance difficult. This typically results in formal and sometimes inquisitive conversation on the host’s behalf. Care must be taken to avoid intrusive or inappropriate questions.

There is a tremendous variance in cultural norms with respect to appropriate welcoming patterns for strangers. The host community generally, however, inflicts more damage with inaction than through an inadvertent less than perfect welcome, which may result in minor offense to the stranger but usually can be overlooked due to the new cultural context.

Serious attention must also be given to how a parish’s art, architecture, and environment speak to others. Sacred imagery is a particularly important concern. Not only must it appeal to the cultural sensibilities of newcomers, but serious thought must be given to its placement and illumination as well. The timing and location of worship services among the different groups also communicates volumes with respect to hospitality and welcome.

**Sharing Stories**

Once we have begun to welcome one another, we can then open ourselves to each other’s narratives. Storytelling is a sacred act. The narratives of our lives come from a hallowed space deep within and call for reverence and awe. There is no better way for cultures to connect than through the sharing of life stories that inspire and heal.

The chasm of culture often prevents us from experiencing the inherent wisdom in other people’s narratives. Processes are urgently needed for the ethical sharing of stories across cultural divides. Storytelling is the key element for relationship building in the multicultural context, especially when it is based on mutual respect and encourages bonding between insider and outsider. It is here that the “little stories” of people’s lives connect with the “bigger stories” of faith and theology in ways that the latter are heard and understood, and sometimes radically altered (García-Rivera).
Strangers, in order to integrate themselves into a new society, rely on the narrative of their adopted communities, where they are called to be both unique and joined. This integration takes place at whatever rate the stranger deems appropriate. Host communities also need the stranger’s narrative if they are to be complete. All of us are incomplete without each other’s narratives, which are required to fully live life with purpose and the deepest of emotion.

**Building Relationships**

Researchers have discovered that the “quality of contact” was what primarily influenced the development of positive intercultural attitudes (Stephan, 247). The contact must be among people of similar status and be “voluntary, positive and individualized.” The building of relationships cannot be forced; however, it is to be encouraged. When it comes to building relationships with others, take advantage of opportunities that center around sharing, food, and the simple senses.

**Belonging**

For belonging to happen, host communities must not only share space and resources; they have to create them anew. The biggest danger at this point is to offer others solely what is left over or inconsistent with the ingroup’s mission. Another danger is paternalism, when insiders treat outsiders as children, fearful of their ability to adequately handle adult challenges. Both perspectives fail to recognize that at this point, the outsider is no longer fully a stranger nor has the insider remained unchanged. While outsiders may still approach institutions with guarded confidence, frequently they are willing to travel long distances to interact with others they perceive to be friendly to their perspective or culture. An initial sense of belonging generally takes root among the outgroup sooner than some might think. By this time mutual ethical and relational obligations become real. If either party pulls out of the relationship without discourse, serious spiritual and emotional damage will likely occur.

**Complaining**

This step is one many pastoral ministers wish would just go away! Complaining is an unpleasant yet intrinsically necessary part of intercultural dialogue. When seen in a positive light, complaining or friction, become a force for understanding and life giving change. They are positive indicators of the ground that has been covered on the journey toward greater understanding and communion. People do not complain before they have been welcomed, shared their stories, built relationships, and feel an initial sense of belonging.

Friction provides real opportunities for cross-cultural understanding when it is reflected upon in an intentional way. It can provide people with opportunities to go beyond customary “surface interaction” to explore another’s way of being in the world. In the culturally diverse context, friction is required for the interaction
among groups to be fresh, real, and vital. Complaining is not to be feared and avoided, but seen as a mile-marker and positive force in overcoming both egocentric and ethnocentric tendencies.

Making Decisions
How decisions are made and by whom varies tremendously from group to group. Multiple ways of making decisions are evident in culturally diverse parishes. This can be very unsettling for people accustomed to a culture of standardization. A high tolerance for ambiguity is required for successful navigation through diversity’s waters.

Collectivist cultures make decisions quite different from individualistic cultures. Group consensus is of great importance to the former and may result in extended deliberation, beyond what is customary to the latter. Among some groups it is fine to select representatives for consultation, while with others what is required is extended dialogue with the community’s “power brokers” or a decision by the “elders.” When these approaches are not respected, real decision making rarely takes place.

There is a tendency for the ingroup to appoint “ethnic representatives” from the outgroup to boards and committees with the hope that these individuals will provide the minority community’s perspective on matters at hand. However, unless they become a “critical mass,” outgroup members tend to be guarded when it comes to giving their real opinions. Honest feedback can best be achieved through the formation of “reactor groups” made up of outgroup members. In these settings frank discussions readily take place and real learning is made possible.

Accepting Ownership
Accepting ownership is a major paradigm shift for those who previously perceived themselves as guests but have now significantly integrated themselves into a new cultural context. While it is more comfortable to maintain a familiar identity and repeat habitual practices, the acceptance of ownership implies change. This is a time of transformation where the old is not forgotten but is reconfigured in the process of becoming something new.

An insightful African proverb provides the following advice: “Don’t ask the stranger to carry the head end of the coffin.” Why, we might ask? Because the stranger in the lead, not knowing the lay of the land, might never get you to the cemetery! Up until now the prudent approach taken by many outsiders was to avoid taking on ownership. But now that one has become familiar with the roadmap of a given culture or parish, ownership is precisely what is called for!

Practicing Stewardship
The practice of stewardship involves gratefully sharing the gifts we have been given, including who we are and our cultural attributes. Stewardship is a way of
life rooted in grace and responsibility. The goal of communion and the Christian steward's response parallel each other. Communion and stewardship are about the art of giving as people “place their gifts, their resources—their selves—at God’s service in and through the Church” as we were reminded by our nation’s bishops in *Stewardship: A Disciple’s Response* (SDR, 34). Both result in a heightened sense of human interdependence and solidarity. Healthy intercultural dialogue requires the participation of both insiders and outsiders. We climb the ladder of life together, one rung at a time, a spiritual journey that leads to true communion.

**Conclusion**

Immigrants and people of color are challenging and revitalizing local communities of faith. Social distance among parishioners is no longer measured solely in kilometers but increasingly in centimeters, in church pews each Sunday; as “people of every race, language and way of life” are gathered together. Eucharistic communities increasingly are becoming broad sweeps of people “from east to west.”

The age-old experience of migration continues to be the canvas upon which the sacred story of salvation history is painted and comes to life. This life and our salvation are frequently found in places and people where many would never think to look: progeny to form a great and mighty nation in elderly and barren couples, like Abraham and Sarah; liberation from enslavement by prophets, like the stuttering Hebrew adopted by the Egyptian Queen, as was the case with Moses; salvation won through foreigners, often women, like Ruth, who legitimized the male centered Davidic dynasty; and safety found not always in promised lands, but places of slavery like Egypt, as experienced by the Holy Family!

In these biblical settings and in the theologically fertile venues of culturally diverse parishes, the sins of ethnocentrism and racism are still apparent. Strained relationships between insiders and outsiders continue to lead to misunderstandings and even hostility. But within our congregational narratives and our scriptural tradition, we also discover an unremitting challenge to our idolatrous tendencies. New pathways for grace and blessing become apparent when people no longer make an absolute of their own culture and/or race to the exclusion of the other tribes. The Spirit is at work in the church every time the diversity of our assemblies astonishes and amazes the world, when people ask once again, “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:12).

**References**


