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Just What Do We Want?
Ministry in a Multicultural World

SETTING GOALS FOR MINISTRY IN A
MULTICULTURAL SETTING

Nearly everyone in ministry these days is aware of the complex tapestry of cultures that forms the backdrop to how we operate in our parishes, schools, and agencies. A multicultural setting is not something new in the Catholic Church; that has been the story of the American Church since the 1830s. However that first wave of European migration declined to a trickle in the 1920s, and for about fifty years we experienced the Church as consolidating its position in American society.

In the last third of the century, however, immigration has picked up once again. This time the new immigration comes principally from Latin America and from Asia and the Pacific. The immigration from Latin America and from the Caribbean has been particularly large, so much so that the United States is now the fifth largest Spanish-speaking country in the world. This population influx is about 80 percent Catholic. The Asian immigration is smaller but culturally even more complex. Percentages of Christians among the Asian immigrants tend to be higher in the United States than in their home countries (except for the Philippines).

In the first wave of immigration from 1830 to 1920, national parishes were the pastoral answer. These parishes catered to specific language and cultural groups, often providing not only pastoral service, but a wide range of other services as well. The national parish is not a favored solution today, for a number of different reasons. Immigrant populations often do not live in close proximity of one another and, when they do, are likely to move out of entry neighborhoods as their economic status improves. The attachment to a national parish can be profound, and when there no longer is a need for them, they are notoriously difficult to close down.

The path for ministry which is being chosen, whether consciously or not, is toward a single parish ministering to more than one cultural group. This presents a different challenge for those in ministry. At the diocesan level, where one finds offices for ethnic ministries, the challenge is to form policies and provide services which will help those in ministry be more effective.

It is not possible to give an overview here of the background or to trace the dynamics of ministry in a multicultural setting (see Schreiter 1992 and 1999). Rather, I would like to focus on an area which is frequently overlooked: just what do we really want? What are we trying to achieve? Can we set goals for this kind of ministry, even progressive goals which lead us into an ever more effective ministry in multicultural settings?

I would like to focus on what is often the implicit goal of ministry in these settings and then move on to a set of three progressive goals that can help shape a direction in our ministry in parishes, schools, and agencies, as well as provide the beginnings for policy formation at the diocesan level. The implicit goal is reducing conflict. The three progressive goals are: recognition of the other, respect for cultural difference, and healthy interaction between cultures. Let us look at each of these in turn.

REDUCING CONFLICT

The implicit goal for most people engaging in ministry in these settings for the first time is to reduce conflict. The conflict can be on two levels. It may be, and often is, between two or more groups who experience tension in their relations with one another. The tension may show itself in resolutely avoiding one another, competition between groups for space and other resources, or outright conflict. The minister views this as a setting in which conflict has to be mediated so that people involved can "get along" or, even better, "fit in."

But there is another level of conflict: conflict within ministers themselves. Most feel uncomfortable and confused about what to do. They would rather the problem go away or that some solution present itself.

Conflict between groups is real, and often very hard to reduce. Sometimes it needs to be addressed immediately and with clear measures, especially if the conflict becomes violent, either verbally or even physically. But such conflict cannot be treated merely as a problem to be solved. It is about relationships that have to be formed, and building relationships takes time, patience, and a view of where we hope to end up.

Important to addressing this level of conflict is dealing with the other level—the conflict ministers feel within themselves. That begins by understanding that ministers, too, belong to cultures. Most people are not really aware of their cultures until they are confronted with cultural difference. The first reaction is usually that cultural difference is merely deviance from their own way of thinking and living. This reaction forms the response to cultural conflict that others ought to "fit in," that is, fit in to the minister's culture.

Oddly, it is more difficult to analyze one's own culture than someone else's. But without understanding one's own culture as one culture among many—however powerful and dominant it may be—one has little chance of interacting with others. One of the reasons why this is important is that one needs to feel secure in one's own cultural identity in order to deal effectively and healthily with other cultures.

One very useful guide to understanding the white, majority culture of the United States is Edward Stewart and Milton Bennett's *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (1991). Written originally for foreign student advisors on college campuses to help orient students to American life, it bears reading as a kind of mirror which majority culture people can hold up to themselves in order to see how they appear to others. I have found that sometimes majority people react negatively to some of the depictions, but that only provides an opportunity to reflect upon how they in fact do appear to other people. It is a helpful tool for anyone wanting to become more effective in ministry in multicultural settings. It can sharpen awareness, and for non-majority cultures, it helps explain the powerful culture with which they must deal. It helps people realize that cultural difference is not simply deviation from their norm, but is a manifestation of a more complex interaction.

RECOGNITION OF THE OTHER

How do we enter into that complex interaction? It begins by *recognition of the other*. In most multicultural settings, the first reaction is to try to avoid or ignore difference. This takes two forms. It sometimes takes the form of ignoring the presences of another group by rendering them invisible. In parishes we do this by assigning worship times for such groups at times when the church building is not otherwise occupied. Or we consign them to a space which is not central to worship, such as the parish hall or the school. Their language and music does not figure into the regular liturgical celebrations, and their food never appears in parish social events. Their special days are not acknowledged in the cycle of celebrations in the parish, and images special to them are not present in the church. At best, these groups are tolerated; at worst, they are ignored.

The other reaction is to cover over difference with a rhetoric of "we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. Difference doesn't make any difference in our parish." It is of course true that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, and are meant to live in unity and harmony. But the use of this rhetoric is frequently a way of ignoring the realities and the tensions that intercultural interaction often brings. In the pluralist situation which many cultures together brings, the only way to unity is through acknowledging the Church's catholicity—the many tribes and

tongues, peoples and nations which constitute the Church. This is important because, despite efforts to ignore cultural difference, it is the difference to which we are continually drawn in interaction. Difference in accent, clothing, and social patterns are too salient to be ignored. Sometimes that difference leads to stereotyping and prejudice, making generalizations about others. Sometimes it leads to outright hostility.

How does recognition happen? It begins with welcoming the other. Welcoming the other is an acknowledgment of their presence. That welcome is manifested in how we show hospitality. And it must be a hospitality that the other group can understand.

Majority culture Americans consider themselves to be a friendly, hospitable people. And that they indeed usually are. But to people from other cultures, the perception is more complex. While these Americans appear to be friendly and hospitable, the hospitality is superficial. This hospitality is like other features of American culture: business-like and goal-driven, likely to be turned off as quickly as it had been turned on. Hospitality does not form a relationship, but is a function of attaining some result. The hospitality that majority culture Americans offer must be intelligible to the other; it must be hospitality as they understand it. Thus, a cheery "Good Morning!" from the greeters at the church door does not reach very far. Ministers need to inquire into the cultural patterns of the people they hope to reach.

Recognition, then, is about relationships and building relationships. Respect for cultural difference, the next goal, builds upon recognition. This recognition, made concrete through hospitality, is ultimately a commitment to begin the journey toward a long-lasting relationship. That journey will be replete with side-tracks and may find itself in a rut from time to time or mired down in some problem along the way. But it is an ongoing commitment to learn, to understand, and to appreciate the other. It seems to me that, at this first stage, this is the meaning of being brothers and sisters in Christ.

RESPECT FOR CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

If recognition of the other is the beginning of the journey toward intercultural relationship, respect for cultural difference is a description of that journey underway. Tolerance may mean putting up quietly with difference, perhaps with the silent hope that eventually it will go away. Respect, however, means coming to the point that one values the difference in its own right, that it adds to the richness of our relationship and to the richness of the world. It means coming to see the cultural difference of the other not as a deviation from some norm, or a failure to reach a certain level, but rather as having intrinsic value.

The etymology of the word "respect" is to look or regard again. What marks growing respect is the continuing interaction between

ourselves and the other, an acknowledgment that what is "other" about the other is not going to go away. It implies also that this interaction with the other may lead to our changing how we think and act.

Milton Bennett (1993) has provided a useful model of this path toward this kind of respect, what he calls intercultural sensitivity. He sees people as developing from ethnocentrism—seeing one's own cultural as the center (and sole legitimate form) of all things, to ethnorelativism, where one respects and celebrates difference. (Ethnopluralism may be a more appropriate term for what he calls "ethnorelativism.") Overcoming ethnocentrism is the equivalent of the recognition of the other just described. In Bennett's scheme, the move out of ethnocentrism has three stages. The first stage is a *denial of difference*, in which one tries to ignore the other. The second is *defense against difference*, in which one reacts with stereotyping the other or in other acts of prejudice. The third is a *minimization of difference*, where one appeals to common humanity as transcending all difference; "it only matters that we are all one in Christ."

The move into ethnopluralism has three stages as well. The first stage is *acceptance of difference*, wherein one comes to accept that cultural difference will not be going away, and that one must find other ways to deal with it than denial, defense, or minimization. This is, if you will, the commitment to begin the journey of intercultural relationship. The second stage is *adaptation to difference*, in which one begins to change as a result of the interaction in intercultural relationship. This leads to the final stage of *integration of difference*, in which those interactions now constitute an irreplaceable part of one's own self: one would lose a sense of one's own identity if that cultural difference were to be taken away.

Bennett's way of describing the move from avoidance of the other to deep respect for difference can be used as a map to chart progress along this journey of intercultural interaction.

If the language of recognition of the other is informed by hospitality, the language of respect for cultural difference is suffused with the notion of the gift. One hears it frequently in ministry settings: the gift of other cultures or the gifts that cultures offer one another. It is a language in church use which goes back at last to St. Paul and his talk about the differing gifts of the community at Corinth.

As with hospitality, the language of gift carries cultural significance as well. If this language is employed in moving cultural groups to greater respect for cultural difference, one must be aware of the cultural meanings that the notion of gift can carry. In majority American culture, "gift" can mean something nice and appreciated, but it can also mean something somewhat superfluous to daily life. It can mean a luxury item which adds to the quality of life but is not essential to it. If re-

spect for cultural difference means the acceptance of gifts, gift will have to mean more than that.

In many cultures, giving and receiving gifts is about relationships. The gift is a symbol of the reciprocity that exists between two parties. Receiving a gift means giving a gift in return, and so on and on. In fact, there are cultures where receiving a gift requires giving a greater gift in return, and so gifts can even be dreaded. In the old Germanic languages, *gift* meant both gift and poison (see Gittins, 1989).

Respect for difference, then, entails engagement. It requires an interaction and growing relationship that do not brush difference aside, but engage it directly and frequently.

HEALTHY INTERACTION

The third goal is healthy interaction between cultures. The word *healthy* is important here, since much of the interaction between cultures is often very unhealthy. It may be marked, on the one hand, by stereotyping, prejudice, unwarranted suspicion, racism, and even overt verbal and physical violence. On the other hand, it may be characterized by a stifling romanticism which glorifies difference as a lost ideal of one's own culture or a childlike stage which will eventually move up to one's own cultural level.

Healthy interaction is based, first, upon confidence about the value of one's own culture, and a sense of security that is not threatened by an encounter with difference. Its hallmark is a willingness to be changed by the other, to incorporate aspects of that otherness into one's own world in such a way that one is truly changed. The presence of that difference in one's world is not some antibody dwelling as a foreign substance within oneself, but something which is truly part of oneself—part of one's own identity.

Second, healthy interaction means that two cultural groups interact so well that they can point to each other's shortcomings. This is a very advanced stage of healthy interaction, since we all know how difficult that can be even among persons who share the same culture.

More common is a less healthy interaction between groups. There is a tendency to attribute failure or wrongdoing within one's own group to external factors that had an unfortunate effect upon behavior (such as "the devil made me do it"). The tendency to blame outside cultures for things that go wrong is especially strong in collective-minded cultures where any internal fault threatens group cohesion and identity.

On the other hand, if failure or wrongdoing happens in the other group, one's own group is likely to attribute that to the active will of the other group. The failure or wrongdoing happened because someone in that group wanted it to happen. As one can see, people tend to

be most generous in the interpretation of fault in their own group, and least generous with the faults of other groups.

Healthy interaction is a form of communion in which neither group loses its own identity, but has taken to itself elements of the other group. There is a sense of trust, that is, a security in one's own self and a vulnerability and generosity toward the other.

IMPLICATIONS

The three goals sketched out here represent a progressive development of intercultural relationship, from an initial acknowledgment of other groups and a beginning commitment to journey along together, to sustained healthy interaction. What are some of the concrete implications connected with such a set of goals?

First, the tidiness of a scheme of progressive goals has to deal with the messiness of reality. Different cultural groups in the same parish or diocese do not fall quickly or easily into this pattern. Before beginning, it is important to see the obstacles to intercultural communication that a group might present. An obvious one is language. If people do not feel at ease communicating in another language (and that "another language" is likely to be English), then it is hard to get much going. For first generation arrivals, religious practice may be the major link to the lands they left behind, and it may be the only place in their week where they can be themselves, so to speak. Moreover, groups are not uniform internally. Second-generation members of a group may feel more at home with this kind of cultural interaction than their parents. They are usually comfortable speaking English as well as their first language, and they have grown up in constant interaction in school and the workplace. Their problems may be more of inhabiting a space between two cultures than reaching out to another culture.

Many parishes with multiple cultures really function as separate, parallel communities of the various groups. They are parallel in the sense that they rarely meet. For reasons of identity formation that can at times be necessary. What parish leaders need to work toward is at least to have *linked communities,* where certain events and functions coincide, in order to lead to greater interaction.

Second, a way of getting started toward greater interaction is to provide intercultural communication training for parish, school, and diocesan leadership. Majority culture people can feel their need for such training, but they often assume that non-majority leaders know all about intercultural communication already. This assumption is based on the fact that those people from other cultures have learned how to interact with the majority culture, or they exhibit significant ways of doing things different from the majority culture yet are able to maintain contact. To be sure, non-majority cultural people learn to in-

teract with the dominant culture, but may not know how to name those forms of communication, nor how to pass them on to other members of their group. It is a situation similar to that of thirty years ago, when pastoral counseling began to be taught in Catholic seminaries. Many parish clergy felt they needed to take courses in this area. What they often discovered in the courses was that they already knew and practiced a lot of counseling, but they now felt more confident about what they were doing because they could name it. We are at something of the same point today with intercultural communication.

Leaders in cultural groups are key to interpreting intercultural interaction to their own groups and between groups. That is why it is extremely important that they be involved in training programs.

Second, if there is a bottom line to many cultures in the one Church, it is about belonging and building relationships. We must welcome others so that they sense that they are more than guests who are expected to be quiet and to leave at the designated time. We must respect their difference as a positive value and interact with them so that they are fully engaged. Belonging is a fundamental human need, perhaps second only to survival itself. We are by nature social beings. Being made to feel not to belong by racism, fear of the stranger, prejudice, suspicion, or simple ignorance strikes at the core of who we are. To belong is to experience security and trust.

For that reason, any plan to enhance intercultural communication must begin with a commitment to build and sustain relationships. Majority culture Americans tend to be very goal-oriented. They like to reduce a challenge to a problem which can be solved. Intercultural communication is not something we achieve once and for all, and then move on to something else. Collective-minded cultures have a stronger sense of relationship as an end in itself than do individualist cultures, which tend to be more utilitarian in their relationships, seeing relationships as a means to an end. This must be kept in mind as programs are developed to enhance intercultural communication. Partnering among groups is not a short-term relationship to reach a goal, only then to be abandoned.

Third, intercultural cultural communication is about more than principles of communication and the exercise of them. It has to be imbedded in concrete cultures, specifically in three elements of cultures: language, customs, and material aspects of the culture. This is important not only in cultural interaction but also in the public spaces and spheres of a parish or diocese.

Language is central to cultural identity, and is crucial for the first generation to arrive in making the adjustment to a new culture. Even the second generation, which may be bilingual or even prefer English, attachment to the language may linger in hymns and certain prayers.

While no multicultural parish can hope to learn all the languages in-volved, their symbolic presence in public events is important as recog-nition.

Customs (special holidays, special events connected with the life cycle, special practices connected with common feasts such as Christ-mas and Easter) will often last longer than language use. Engaging in certain practices together creates solidarity in a group and indicates be-longing. Incorporating customs of a group into parish life and urging all cultural groups in a parish to participate is an important kind of community builder. As was noted above, different cultural groups fre-quently operate as parallel communities in parishes. When that is the case, building bridges by participating in one another's customs is a way of building understanding and interaction.

Finally, there are the material aspects of a culture. Modes of dress, and especially food are the principal forms of material aspects. Certain images of Mary and the saints also figure into this as well. The presence of these in parish events is another form of recognition.

Fourth, at the diocesan level, policies and goals must be articulated. These policies must of course be commensurate with the cultural com-position of the diocese and the human and financial resources which can be brought to the needs. Many diocesan offices are devoted espe-cially to providing basic pastoral services, engaging in social work among cultural groups, and sometimes providing advocacy for them. These are all necessary functions. Along with these important func-tions, there needs to be an emphasis on education which will equip both majority and non-majority groups to have better intercultural communication, as has been already mentioned. To that might be added a common spirituality that can bridge the various cultural com-munities.

Many parish communities have found such spiritualities. Three bib-lical starting points most commonly called upon are Pentecost, the body of Christ, and the multitudes in the book of Revelation. Each has its particular strengths.

Key for most groups in the Pentecost image is all groups peacefully together hearing God's Word in their own language. The weakness is that they might not understand each other. The body of Christ image has the strength of being organic and not downplaying difference. But as Paul shows already in First Corinthians, it can be a hard metaphor to sustain. The multitudes of the book of Revelation have the advantage of having come through a great tribulation—which is often what the experience of a multicultural parish can be! Its weakness may be a kind of triumphalism that papers over lingering division.

However the case may be, images must be found to spark the spirit-ual imagination if we are to be faithful and effective in ministry to

many cultures. We need those bold biblical visions to challenge us to serve a Church so varied and so rich.

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If cultural pluralism will be the issue on the main stage of the world for the next half-century, it will also be affecting every world organization, the Catholic Church included. . . . We as Church will have to face up to a future that is marked by cultural pluralism.

—Archbishop Rembert Weakland