



ADULT STUDY

from www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 1

Seeking the Intercultural Church: An Adult Lenten Study

Rejecting the False Gospel of Discrimination

Introduction to the Study

Almost fifty years have passed since Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. called it “appalling” that the most segregated hour in Christian America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning. Little has changed, even as church models and worship styles have gone through many revisions to stay relevant to culture and technology. We worship Christ as the Lord of all nations, yet more than eight in ten congre-

gations are of one predominant racial group, making up more than 80 percent of the congregation.¹ Though more congregations are becoming intercultural, from 6.4 percent in 1998 to 12 percent in 2012,² churches are still less diverse than their neighborhoods.³ In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 89 percent of the congregation are majority white.⁴ King lamented this segregated hour as “tragic” and stated that “nobody of honesty can overlook this.”⁵

Cultural Transformation

When we talk about intercultural transformation, we mean creating space that decenters whiteness to create equitable space for all cultures. For the segregation in the American church, as we will see throughout this study, was created by whites excluding nonwhites in fellowship or making assimilation the cost of fellowship. A white church, then, perpetrates the privileges of whites. For that reason, there is a need for Black churches and other churches that affirm nonwhite people, because they don’t have the privilege white people have of living in a society where they are pervasively centered in everything, from media to laws. In their daily lives, people of color are constantly reminded of their “otherness,” so they need a place where they experience the gospel of acceptance as they are. So the work of intercultural transformation is not making congregations of color more welcoming to white people. For example, if my Korean church jettisons its language as well as its theology and worshipping born from its immigrant experience and adopts a more “American” way of doing things to accommodate non-Koreans, it is simply becoming a white church. A congregation can have many races and still be monocultural, that is, a white church. Intercultural transformation is not a quota of races but an emptying that creates a truly equitable space for all cultures.

Many predominantly white congregations are trying to undo the segregated hour. They post “Welcome All!” on their street signs, bulletins, and websites. They host forums on race and reconciliation. Yet their congregations remain obdurately monocultural. Why is it so difficult for white congregations to be more inclusive?

Strong underlying currents sweep away well-intentioned programs of inclusion. Deeply held theological values have a hold on our personal and social behaviors, and our congregational life remains exclusive no matter the fervency and frequency of our statements of inclusivity. This study invites you to a hard and honest conversation about these deeply held theological values. There are many practical books on strategizing and implementing intercultural transformation.⁶ This study will challenge beliefs and values that sabotage programmatic changes and will help encourage actions that create intercultural church communities.

Intercultural transformation is fundamentally about reforming our theology because what we say about God impacts how we organize ourselves as worshiping communities and as a society. The reverse is true as well. How we organize ourselves reveals what we really believe about God.

I also hope to challenge readers who tolerate or even desire our segregated hour.⁷ Failure of changes is often not in the implementation but in the lack of commitment, when one does not believe in the change enough to do the work. The Protestant Reformation, a European movement in the 1500s that responded to what many believed were abuses by the Roman Catholic hierarchy, succeeded because enough people believed change was necessary to warrant the sacrifice. Luther’s “Here I Stand” speech before his accusers who threatened excommunication, an exiling from the Roman Catholic church community, is the culmination of Luther’s conviction that if he wasn’t willing to lose his life for the gospel, then he would lose his soul. Similar conviction is needed for intercultural transformation, because it will be a costly transformation. Unless we are convicted that what is at stake is our identity as God’s people, we will not be able to hold steady.

This Study’s Design

This first session looks at Galatians, where Paul denounces discrimination disguised as spiritual purity

and names it a false gospel threatening the gospel of grace. Session 2 examines Ephesians, which states that God intended the church to be an intercultural community from the start so that, by its diversity, it can be a preview of God’s intention to bring shalom for the whole creation. These two theological foundations of *gospel* and *church* will provide the resilience required to face the fundamental challenges of the intercultural life that will be addressed in sessions 3–6.

The third session addresses the discomfort around cultural differences in communities that surface a deeper confrontation of powers. This happens when a community moves from having a single center (one culture) to multiple loci (multiple cultures). Session 4 will train our ears to pick up on biases baked into our language and then hear how Christ redeems our language to speak words that create community. Session 5 will look unflinchingly at the importance and challenges of speaking truth. Monocultural communities sustain themselves through mythmaking; intercultural communities need the epoxy of truth. We will study the most powerful myth that directs most stories in America. Finally, session 6 discusses the cost and joy of the spiritual discipline of repentance and what it can look like for a congregation seeking intercultural transformation.

Galatians: Have We Been Following the Wrong Gospel?

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel” (Gal. 1:6). A shocking accusation to start a letter! But that is how Paul begins his letter to Galatia. Paul doesn’t even give the obligatory thanks and praise, which he did with the Corinthian church, who had a laundry list of scandals!

But Paul didn’t have time for formalities. If someone dozes off and veers toward the divider, you slap them awake or even take the wheel.

For what is at stake is the gospel! In four short verses (Gal. 1:6–9), he blows the foghorn repeatedly: Galatian Christians are “deserting . . . Christ,” “turning to a different gospel” and “pervert[ing] the gospel.” This young church is about to splinter into a crag on their maiden voyage. So Paul threatens the curse of God on anyone who would preach a false gospel.

What is this anathema-deserving “false gospel”? Before he explains what the false gospel is, Paul recalls an event where this false gospel was played out in public. Paul was not addressing an issue of teaching but an issue of congregational life.

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood *self-condemned*; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this *hypocrisy*, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their *hypocrisy*. But when I saw that they were *not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel*, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (Gal. 2:11–14, emphasis mine)

When Cephas, another name for the apostle Peter, stood up and separated himself from the Gentiles, creating two tables, one for the Gentile-Christians and another for Jewish-Christians, Peter followed a false gospel that misled the Gentile-Christians. Paul uses the word *hypocrisy* and talks about false gospel when describing Peter’s actions and to echo the warnings at the start of his letter.

We must dig into the historical context of this incident to see why Peter’s behavior of separation threatened the gospel.

The Antioch Church

First, the incident occurred in Antioch. The church in Antioch looked different than the one in Jerusalem (Acts 13:1). The Antioch church was birthed out of the scattering of Jesus-following Jews when the first persecution against Jewish Christians slammed down on Jerusalem with the murder of Stephen (Acts 11:19). While the disciples fled Jerusalem to save their necks, fear did not dampen their zeal to preach that Jesus was the messiah, no matter what metropolis or hamlet they fled to as refugees. The persecution in Jerusalem became a sending.

Most Jewish, Jesus-following refugees told the story of Jesus to fellow Jews. But when non-Jews overheard the story of Jesus, they also experienced salvation, even though they did not grow up Jewish. Much of this preaching to non-Jews started at Antioch.

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In Antioch, you saw the Jesus movement stretching beyond its Jewish cultural origins to convey the heart of the gospel, which was not constrained or limited to Jews only. Antioch church was the first intercultural church where more than a few Gentiles joined the Jesus movement. Gentiles flooded in, and this resulted in changes in worship style, leadership, and fellowship food. Koreans were bringing in *kimchee*, and the council or session was speaking Spanish! It was no longer a Jewish assembly with Gentiles expected to assimilate but a hodgepodge assembly beginning to reconsider their identity and how to live life together. For this reason, people started calling the disciples in Antioch “Christians” because this Jesus-following community was not a Jewish sect anymore. Whether it was a moniker the community concocted for itself or a coopting of a slur by detractors, the fact is that when people saw them, they could no longer be designated by an old label. The new wine needed a new wine skin. They became “Christians” because they were an intercultural community.

In this Antioch church, the aroma of spices from different cultures wafted through the homes. Jews and Gentiles ate together regularly. What was frowned on by the society at large was the norm for this intercultural fellowship of Jews and Gentiles.

But this norm in the Antioch church suddenly became a scandal when Jewish Jesus followers from the Jerusalem church showed up. Before we get morally outraged at spineless Peter, Paul reminds us that it was all the Jewish Christians at Antioch, including Barnabas, who were at fault!

Why did Peter and Barnabas fold so quickly? Because their intercultural fellowship was breaking a

long-standing Jewish policy. James's people came in the name of fellowship, but the subtext was obvious to all: they came as auditors. They wanted to see if the Antioch church was following a policy they had agreed on in the Jerusalem Council that in effect made eating together with Gentiles illegal.

The Jerusalem Council's Policy

This first church-wide council, referred to as the Jerusalem Council in the New Testament, dealt with the question of circumcision. From the inoculating distance of history, we read it as a doctrinal question. But it was a practical question about membership, that is, what does one need to do to be included in the roll of God's people? It was also an existential question among some Jews who were afraid that as different people were coming in, with their different languages and lifestyle, the Jewish way of life was being lost. "Circumcision" wasn't simply a question of salvation but a question of community and identity.

A long debate ensued. After prayer, they concluded that circumcision was not a requirement. The council wrote and distributed a short letter whose primary recipient was the Antioch church. It was a policy letter.

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. (Acts 15:28–29).

It was received as a liberating document since the issue of circumcision was settled. When the Antioch "members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation" (v. 31). They did not have to get a doctor's appointment for circumcision! But there was a catch. The cultural spirit behind the push for circumcision was reiterated in the policy against eating food sacrificed to idols.

Followers didn't have to be circumcised like the Jews, but they still had to eat like the Jews. The food restrictions may have seemed like less of a burden than the one-time surgery for males, but it was equally, if not more, burdensome. In what place is our culture embodied and celebrated more frequently than around the dining table and our "daily breads"?

This policy will continue to vex the early church. Even in his letter to the Romans, Paul is addressing

this food issue. The policy, in effect, created two tables in the church. Though it doesn't say Jewish Christians cannot eat with Gentile Christians, that was the impact. The policy prohibiting specific foods made intercultural potluck meals illegal. Those who sided with James had the law on their side. Peter and Barnabas felt the pressure to adhere to the law. After all, they signed it. Paul says "to hell" with that law and anyone who preaches law over the gospel of grace that Christ welcomes everyone as they are.

To be clear, what threatened the gospel wasn't that it was a *Jewish* law; the gospel is not anti-Semitic. One can get circumcised, like Timothy did. One can eat kosher food. Paul wasn't against Jewish laws. But Paul was confronting cultural laws pretending to be moral laws in order to make room for discrimination.

Paul gives a definitive interpretation of this event when he calls out Peter and says: "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Gal. 2:14). *Imposition of cultural practice on God's people is legalism and creates discrimination.*

Discrimination Leading to Segregation in Our Church Today

The Galatian letter holds a mirror up to today's American church, for the American church came to be a persistently segregated Sunday hour through policies of cultural and racial discrimination.

In the 1960s, when African Americans in transitioning neighborhoods began visiting white churches, many churches voted for closed-door policies. Conservative churches like Kirkwood Baptist Church in Atlanta voted to "request our Negro friends to attend services at their own churches."⁸ Progressive churches like Capital Avenue Baptist who integrated "social justice through their weekday program" stated, "this church is not integrated and there are sufficient Negro churches in the community where they could worship."⁹

When such policies became difficult to enforce, many abandoned their urban locations and planted suburban churches where they could "escape and preserve racial homogeneity."¹⁰

In the 1960s, barely cloaked racist reasons were used for discrimination; today we use cultural and personal preference as valid reasons for segregation. Our preference for hymns and sermon styles can be a proxy battle

for keeping whiteness as a dominant culture in our churches.

I had finished a Bible study on this Galatian passage and the pastor courageously asked his congregants if there were things they could change to be more inclusive. One member responded, “Well, I came here

elderly lady doesn’t have theological training, she is a brilliant theologian of lived faith who knew intuitively that the gospel of grace in the sacrament of the communion table is more beautifully true to its message when diverse people gather around it every Sunday.

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because of the hymns.” In making hymns an essential part of his church life, he was demanding a norm that was cultural.

A Church That Chose Inclusion

I once had dinner with members of small, struggling white congregation that, in a dramatic congregational meeting, committed to become an intercultural community. The transition was difficult. They lost members. Today, they are a vital congregation. I wanted to hear the story of this church from their members, from those who lived through the transition to the most recent ones. Sixteen of us gathered at an elder’s home over Thai-curry rice. The last person to share was an elder lady in her eighties who had been with the church for twenty-seven years. She had a dimpled smile. She shared how she thought about leaving the church when many of her white friends started leaving because they were uncomfortable with the changes in worship. “But I asked myself a simple question,” she said, “was anything that was happening displeasing to the Lord?” Change is always hard. Loss of friends is more traumatic as you age. But she concluded that nothing was displeasing to the Lord. She stayed. She was beaming a dimpled smile as she said, “I have new friends, though. I never imagined I could have such deep friendships with others like,” and she looked at a young Hispanic woman sitting across from her, “that has been such a great joy.” There was a long silence as the two women took time to see each other. “The greatest joy is on Sundays,” she concluded, “when I see all these new friends of mine come up for communion.” Though this

change direction and commit to the gospel of grace that welcomes all to the same table.

Conclusion

Could it be that, like Peter, we are “not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14)? If Peter could act contrary to the gospel, then any of us can. Which also means if Peter can accept Paul’s reproof, change, and be used by God, there is hope for us. We can

Practice Suggestions

- For this week, read through the book of Galatians daily. Try reading the whole book in a single sitting. Or you can read the book in a small group.
- After each reading, spend time praying and asking God to show places in your personal and congregational life where you might have strayed from the gospel of grace. Consider if you are demanding assimilation as a prerequisite to membership in your congregations.
- Read about Grove Presbyterian Church’s journey of transformation featured at Duke’s innovative website: <https://faithandleadership.com/kuhnekt-initiative-builds-relationships-among-church-members>.

Notes

1. Bob Smietana, “Sunday Morning in America Still Segregated—and That’s OK with Worshipers,” LifeWay Research, January 15, 2015 <https://lifewayresearch.com/2015/01/15/sunday-morning-in-america-still-segregated-and-thats-ok-with-worshippers/>.
2. Adelle M. Banks, “Multiracial Churches Increase as Blacks, Whites Learn to Worship Together,” Religion News Service, June 29, 2018, <https://religionnews.com/2018/06/29/multiracial-churches/>.
3. Aaron Earls, “America’s Churches Are Becoming More Diverse,” LifeWay Facts and Trends, June

- 27, 2018, <https://factsandtrends.net/2018/06/27/americas-churches-are-becoming-more-diverse/>.
4. "Comparative Summaries of Statistics," PCUSA .org, www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/statistics/2018_comparative_summaries_of_statistics_42419.pdf.
 5. Comment made during a Q&A session at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. See Paul Edwards, "Sunday at 11: 'The Most Segregated Hour in This Nation,'" The Center for Study of God and Culture, September 9, 2010, www.godandculture.com/blog/sunday-at-11-the-most-segregated-hour-in-this-nation.
 6. See Jacqueline J. Lewis and John Janka's *Ten Essential Strategies for Becoming a Multiracial Congregation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).
 7. See Smietana, "Sunday Morning," which states, "Two-thirds of American churchgoers (67 percent) say their church has done enough to become racially diverse."
 8. Preston Carter Hogue, "'The Ties That Bind': White Church Flight in Atlanta, Georgia, 1955–1985" (honors thesis, Emory University, April 10, 2013), <http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/wabe/files/201305/Hogue%20Honors%20Thesis%204-1-13.pdf>, 18.
 9. Hogue, 38–39.
 10. Hogue, 19.

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LEADER'S GUIDE Session 1

Seeking the Intercultural Church: An Adult Lenten Study

Rejecting the False Gospel of Discrimination

Goal for the Session

Participants will explore the benefits and challenges of forming intercultural churches and examine biblical exemplars of multiculturalism.

Preparing for the Session

- Pray for guidance as you prepare to lead a session on a very polarizing topic.
- Think about your feelings about the topic of race and any anxiety you may have around the subject. Determine whether or not you are able to lead a session on such a sensitive issue, especially when there may be others who have a vastly different opinion than yours. If you feel unable to lead, consider asking someone else to lead the session with you.
- Read the Participant Handout and this Leader's Guide at least once.
- This Leader's Guide does not assume participants have received and read the Participant Handout in advance. Time will be used during the session for them to read specific sections and discuss them. Encourage them to read future handouts in

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Taking a poll
- Opening prayer
- Distribution of handouts

ENGAGING

- Reading the Participant Handout
- Discussing pros and cons
- Having a friendly debate

RESPONDING

- Engaging in personal reflection

CLOSING

- Closing prayer
- Distribution of Participant Handout

their entirety before the session where they will be discussed.

- If you have not previously distributed the Participant Handouts, make copies to distribute at the beginning of the session.
- On a board or newsprint, draw a chart with two columns and two rows. Label the columns with the words “pros” and “cons.” Label the rows with the words “white people” and “people of color.”
- Pray for the members of your group. Think of who may come to this study and how they may react to a conversation about race and multiculturalism.

Materials Needed

- Board or newsprint
- Marker
- Copies of page 1 of “Seeking to Be Faithful Together,” which is available to download at bit.ly/SeekingToBeFaithfulInTimesOfDisagreement.
- Copies of the Participant Handout
- Paper and pens

Teaching Tip

The subject of race can be very uncomfortable for some individuals. This session could evoke some strong feelings as individuals struggle with addressing their own privilege and inherent biases. Conversely, some participants may feel compelled to remain quiet because they are afraid of “saying the wrong thing.” Remind participants to speak honestly but to do so respectfully. Also encourage them to listen with empathy. If someone says something they find to be problematic, they should assume the intention was not to be hurtful and then respectfully communicate their disagreement. On the other hand, if someone finds something *they* have said to be problematic, they should not be too quick to be defensive. Rather, they should try to understand where the other person is coming from. The focus of the session should not deviate from the fact that all people are worthy of love and respect, regardless of cultural, theological, and ideological differences.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Taking a Poll

Ask respondents to raise their hands if the following statements are true for them personally:

- All or most of my friends are very similar to me.
- I wish the demographics of my friends were different.

Afterward, invite volunteers to expound on their responses and share how it felt for them to answer these questions.

2. Opening Prayer

Lead the group in this prayer or one of your choosing:

Creating God, we know that you have made all of us in your image. We celebrate the beauty of humanity, including what makes us the same and what makes us unique. Be with us as we learn to create beloved community with one another. Amen.

3. Distribution of Handouts

Give all participants a copy of “Seeking to Be Faithful: Guidelines for Presbyterians in Times of Disagreement,” found here: bit.ly/SeekingToBeFaithfulInTimesOfDisagreement. It comes from the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program. Other denominations have similar suggested guidelines for ensuring respectful dialogue in order to discuss and not avoid controversial subjects. Spend some time going over and agreeing to use these as you discuss various topics during this study. Keep copies handy for future sessions or print them on newsprint and have them posted on the wall. Also distribute this session’s Participant Handout.

Exploring (30 minutes)

4. Reading the Participant Handout

Have participants read the Participant Handout sections titled “Galatians: Have We Been Following the Wrong Gospel?” and “The Antioch Church.” Encourage them to take note of anything that stands out to them or any questions that arise as they read. Take a few minutes to discuss any particular questions participants may have.

5. Discussing Pros and Cons

Direct participants’ attention to the four-way chart on the board or newsprint. As a collective group, come up with pros and cons of monocultural churches for white people and for people of color. Do the pros outweigh the cons for either group? If so, what does this tell us?

6. Having a Friendly Debate

Have participants form two groups. One group will argue in favor of intercultural churches, and the other group will argue against them. Give the groups a few minutes to form their arguments using the chart from the previous activity and biblical support from the Participant Handout. Then have each group argue their position in three minutes or less.

Teaching Tip

Try to ensure that individuals are not grouped according to how they feel about whether churches should or should not be intercultural. It will be beneficial to have some individuals who may be arguing for a position with which they do not agree, as this will stretch them to consider an alternative position. You may wish to assign groups randomly (e.g., draw numbers out of a cup) or simply wait until after they have been grouped to explain the activity.

Responding (5 minutes)

7. Engaging in Personal Reflection

Ask participants to write down three things about their church that are most important to them or are the most enjoyable, leaving space between each item to add more information later. Then, for each item listed, have them briefly write why those particular aspects of their church are so important to them. Finally, for each item listed, have them write how those aspects of the church might be excluding people who may be dissimilar to them. If time permits, invite participants to form pairs and share at least one item from their list with their partner.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Closing Prayer

Lead the group in this prayer by having them repeat each line after you, or offer a prayer of your own:

Loving God, /
we have made mistakes; /
we fall short /
of your expectations. /
Help us love more deeply /
and welcome more widely, /
just as you have done for us. /
Amen. /

9. Distribution of Participant Handout

Distribute copies of the Participant Handout for the next session and encourage participants to read it before your next meeting. Alternatively, you may have a sheet for participants to list their email addresses as they leave, and you can then send the Participant Handout electronically shortly after the session.

Teaching Alternatives

- Watch a video about Bishop Richard Allen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Zd-PuQZVFE>. After experiencing continued racism in white churches, Allen founded the first Black religious denomination in the United States. Allen explains the origins of segregation in U.S. churches and elucidates why racial minorities have formed their own churches and denominations.
- Have participants form two groups. Have one group read Galatians 2:11–14 and the other read Acts 15:4–11. Then each group should come up with a dramatic retelling of the story as it might occur in today's context. Encourage the groups to be creative but to try and maintain the integrity of the biblical narrative. Then have each group perform their dramatization for the other participants.

Key Scriptures

Galatians 1:6–9; 2:11–14
Acts 11:19; 13:1; 15:28–31

For More Information

Books

Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness, and Justice* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015).

News and Articles

Martin Luther King Jr., "Interview on 'Meet the Press,'" http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/Vol105Scans/17Apr1960_InterviewonMeetthePress.pdf.

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