

Diversity training: How community comes about

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It's a painful irony: congregations in mainline churches—which have long made racial reconciliation one of their highest priorities—are no more racially integrated than other churches, and in fact tend to be somewhat less integrated than independent and theologically conservative churches (see John Dart's "Hues in the pews").

One should refrain from too much moralizing over these statistics. As the researchers point out, demographic and historic reasons help explain the mainline situation. And few congregations in any Christian tradition can claim to exhibit a rainbow of humanity. The reality of congregational life rarely matches the diversity featured in denominational literature.

It should be noted also that the politics of integration has changed significantly in the decades since Martin Luther King Jr. lamented the fact that blacks and whites go their separate ways on Sunday morning. Many thriving, dynamic African-American churches are determinedly and understandably Afrocentric. Racial integration of the church at the local level is not necessarily one of their priorities.

More generally, the concern for fostering racial integration has been replaced in American culture by an interest in acknowledging racial and ethnic differences. "Celebrate diversity" is the theme, not "erase differences." The injunction to "celebrate diversity," ubiquitous in mainline circles, is purposely ambiguous on an important point: it's not clear whether we're being called to build a unified community out of diverse members or to appreciate—and support—different communities that retain their racial and ethnic distinctiveness.

The recent data on multiracial churches should at least remind us that a diverse community is not likely to be built for its own sake. Indeed, no community is built just for the sake of community. Community arises, instead, as a byproduct of the members' commitment to something they regard as more important than

community—whether that something is justice, or mutual care, or education.

In the church, of course, that something is God. It is the desire to worship God and follow Christ that leads people to church. (If they attend out of a commitment to realizing diversity, they are not likely to last for long.) And in the acts of worship and discipleship, community with diverse others develops.

The church made its first momentous step toward diversity when the elders of the church in Jerusalem opened the Christian movement to gentiles. As the account in Acts 15 makes clear, they were moved to do so not by the notion that diversity is a good thing in itself, but by something much more decisive: God, and what God was manifestly doing among the gentiles, “giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us.”