Multicultural life together

by Carol Howard Merritt in the October 14, 2015 issue

New Covenant Fellowship in Austin gathers. Photo by Melissa Skorpil.

When James Lee met with a core group of people to start a new church, the group began by reading the book of Acts, recalling how the Holy Spirit visited that other small gathering of disciples 2,000 years ago. Wind and fire swept through their pleading until people were blown into the crowded streets, speaking in different languages. Boundaries of race, ethnicity, gender, and age could not stop the stories of God.

In much the same way, the Spirit disrupted Lee's plans. Lee had been commissioned to start an African-American congregation in Austin, Texas, but after reading in Acts about a church that included all people, the group decided to plant a multicultural congregation. Their church was named New Covenant Presbyterian Church because Covenant Presbyterian Church helped to start the congregation, but that moniker took on new meaning. "If we were going to be the new covenant church, then we needed to be for everyone," Lee said.

New Covenant is a place where many people feel comfortable—interracial couples whose families don't identify with one ethnicity, Euro-American women who adopt African children, and His-panics who aren't Mexican. Through this process, Lee has emerged as an expert in multicultural congregations in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

I asked Lee what people needed to know about planting multicultural churches. He pointed to relationships, context, and justice.

Since New Covenant welcomed people from different cultures, it couldn't rely on traditional Presbyterian hymnody to be a source of cohesion. And the church was evenly divided between conservatives and liberals, so it didn't agree on political issues or on the hot topics with which the PCUSA wrestles. So the church has had to focus on relationships.

That emphasis became important after the PCUSA approved same-sex marriage. The conservatives felt like they needed to leave. Lee was heartbroken. He told them, "You can take your banner and leave, but know that the church will die. You will be carrying your banner to our funeral." And he told the progressives who were rejoicing, "You can carry your banner to our funeral as well. Or we can learn to work together." The church learned again to focus on relationships and the biblical principles of forgiveness, grace, love, and mercy.

Location has also been an important factor in developing this multicultural church. New Covenant worshiped near a school, and the church worked out an arrangement with the principal and vice principal by which students who got into trouble were able to fulfill required community service work at the church. The students became ushers, folded bulletins, and ran the audiovisual equipment. Lee taught them how to look people in the eye and say, "Good morning. Can I help you to your seat?" The church brought gift bags to teachers and started a computer lab. Then the students invited their friends to join them at church. "Kids are the best evangelists," Lee said.

Their parents also became evangelists, as they talked with one another on the sidelines of playgrounds and football fields. They would mention the church and invite one another to services. Soon, the church had to shore up its nursery.

As for justice, Lee says churches have to invest in leaders of ethnic and racial minority churches. "If you want to do justice, then make sure my M.Div. is worth as much as my colleagues'," Lee said, noting that minority pastors often get paid much less than white pastors. In some areas, new immigrant fellowships have a different designation than new church developments, which sets up a system in which white church planters might get paid more than immigrant pastors.

Most denominations will need to make the important shifts that New Covenant has successfully negotiated in welcoming diversity, building relationships, and developing a local ministry. We can all learn from James Lee's vision, following that enduring wisdom of Acts.