

The Urban African-American Led Multiethnic Church

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Introduction

In 2000, I had the opportunity to travel to Perth, Australia. When I arrived at the resort, I saw something that I had never seen before. On the property was a group of kangaroos. I was so excited that I took out my 35mm camera and asked my friend to take my picture. Later, someone mentioned to us that we should check out the *barbie*. I looked at the person and said, “I am a grown man, I don’t have any daughters; therefore, I have no need to check out the dolls.” The person laughed and said, “I am not talking about dolls, I am talking about what you Americans call barbecue.” I said, “What time does it start?” That day, I learned that defining terms is very important. Therefore, I want to define a few terms.

Several connotations are associated with the word *urban*. Many people, especially suburbanites, connect *urban* with *black*. However, with the rapidness of gentrification, the face of the urban center has changed and is ever evolving. People who once shunned the urban center are now abandoning the suburbs in favor of it. *Urban* can be defined as a city (a densely populated area) or a larger metropolitan area comprised of housing, commercial buildings, and infrastructure.

Many churches will self-report that they are multiethnic when they have one or two people of another ethnicity in their congregation. However, this is far from the reality of what a true multiethnic church should be. Over the years, many have made numerous attempts to define a multiethnic church. Sociologists use one or both of the following terms: *multiracial* or *interracial*. I dismiss those two terms because they are not biblical terms. I believe that ethnicity is a more biblically correct way to identify racial groups. Christian authors such as Gary L. McIntosh and Alan McMahan agree that ethnicity is biblically correct.¹ They believe that “multiethnic

fits both the biblical concept and current understanding from a missiological perspective.”²

The National Congregations Study defined an interracial church as “one where African-Americans and Whites each comprised between 10 percent to 90 percent of the adult church attendees, and where Latinos and Asians comprised less than 10 percent of the adult church attendees.”³ Many others have defined multiethnic as one in which no one racial or ethnic group makes up more than 80 percent of the congregation at one of the worship services, and they are all in the same worship service.⁴

Pastor and multiethnic movement leader Mark DeYmaz defined a multiethnic church as a church that is comprised of a diversity of ethnic groups with implications of economic, educational, and generational diversity.⁵ Early in my ministry, I assumed that the church and academia accepted the 80/20 ratio; however, I found that there is no consensus or collective term universally used in the church and academia.

For this article, I define a *multiethnic church* as a body of believers made up of two or more ethnic groups with no dominant ethnicity or dominant culture (white culture or black culture). The church comes together to create an intentional multicultural church and each ethnic group has an equal voice, responsibility, and privilege in shaping the culture of the church.

Multicultural means two or more ethnic groups within a local church relinquish certain church cultural heritages and rights while incorporating certain church cultural heritages and rights of the other ethnic groups to create something neither group has seen, but which they recognize as elements of the new church culture. (I do not mean pluralism as it pertains to a sociological definition of culture.) I also acknowledge the 80/20 ratio for a multiethnic church as it is widely accepted in academia and the church; however, I believe that more than a benchmark, in this case, a number, is needed.

The African-American Multiethnic Pastor

An African-American Multiethnic Pastor (AAMEP) characteristically grows up around a culturally and ethnically diverse group of people. For AAMEPs, education, generational identifiers and cultural life experiences as African-Americans work together to shape the AAMEP. At some point in the AAMEP’s life, he experiences other cultures through schools, seminary, the military, or in the city or town in which he was raised.

Most AAMEPs have served or been part of a predominantly white church that caused them to be in and assimilate to what some sociologists call “Whiteness.” Henry and Tator stated, “‘Whiteness,’ like ‘color’ and ‘Blackness,’ are fundamentally social constructs applied to human beings rather than truths that have universal validity.”⁶

The power of “Whiteness, however, is manifested by how racialized it becomes transformed into social, political, economic, and cultural behavior. White culture, norms, and values in all these areas become normative natural. They become the standard against which all other cultures, groups, and individuals are measured, and usually found to be inferior.”⁷ Those types of experiences taught many AAMEPs the importance of ethnic inclusion.

An AAMEP is what Bryan Loritts calls a C2.⁸ In his work *Right Color Wrong Culture: A Leadership Fable*, Loritts suggests that there are three types of cultural expressions: C1, C2, and C3.⁹ All people exhibit at least one of these cultural expressions depending on how they relate to other races and ethnicities. Loritts laid out an extensive case for C2 leadership. A C2 leader is a “person who is culturally flexible and adaptable without becoming ethnically ambiguous or hostile.” For example, this person might be like Paul in 1 Corinthians 9 where he talks about being all things to all people, or the person might be like Denzel Washington.¹⁰ The previous examples are people who are rooted in one culture, their own, but they are acutely familiar with and comfortable interacting with people from other cultures.

Becoming an African-American Multiethnic Pastor

As an African-American pastor, I have grown up in a predominately white culture. I was first introduced to diversity in high school. After high school, I played basketball for a majority white college. I joined the Navy to fly and track submarines. As an African-American aircrewman, I was highly respected by my peers. First of all, black people stereotypically don’t swim. Being a strong swimmer was required to be an aircrewman. Secondly, you had to be relatively intelligent. .

White males dominated my professional field. I spent five of my eight years in the Navy immersed in predominately white culture. I received both my masters and a doctorate from predominately white institutions. The summation of my teenage years through adulthood has been characterized by my ability to navigate what Henry and Tator call “Whiteness.” Since 1999, I have been involved in multiethnic worship. In 2009, I participated in a pastor residency program at an African-American Led Urban Multiethnic church (AALUMEC) in Memphis, Tennessee. During that time, I was recruited to plant a multiethnic church in the urban context of Memphis with a white pastor.

African-American Led Urban Multiethnic Church (AALUMEC)

I am an advocate for the AALUMEC because I believe that such churches show the power of Jesus to reconcile enemies in a racialized society like America. As the world watches the church through the proverbial looking glass, ethnically diverse congregations make a stronger case of the power of the gospel to reconcile, especially those that are led by African-American pastors. Historically, because of the dominance of white American culture, Caucasians typically do not submit to the

authority of African-Americans. Multiethnic and white homogenous churches that make it a point to have AAMEPs will make an undeniable statement that everything is about Jesus and not the skin tone of the leader or the congregation.

AALUMECs have many different ethnicities; however, black, white, and hispanic generally are the main ethnic groups in these churches. Because African-Americans lead AALUMECs, often 40 to 50 percent of the members in these churches are African-American. Most of AALUMECs are located in the urban context and are geographically found in the South. Although the multiethnic church has much to do with many ethnicities, the church is ultimately about the gospel.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the binding agent of the multiethnic church. The objective of a multiethnic church is to live out the great commission in the context of all nations. I have found that the best way for a church to live in obedience to Jesus' command to make disciples of all nations is to do so intentionally, which means every aspect of ministry must take on the posture of intentionality.

Ministry Setting

Though established on January 1, 2011, twelve core members and 72 attendees officially launched The Pursuit Church on April 8, 2012. One of the mistakes we made was launching with such a small core team. Growing from this small team has proved to be very difficult. The Pursuit Church is a gospel-centered, intentionally multiethnic, multigenerational, and diverse socio-economical church plant in the urban context of the great city of Memphis, Tennessee. The Pursuit Church exists to extend the pursuing love of Christ to the city and to the world, building intentional relationships in hope that they will turn into discipleship relationships to help accomplish this vision.

The church hopes to reach the lost by gathering missionally minded, disciple-making Jesus pursuers who would live out a contagious vertical (with Jesus) and horizontal (with fellow man) lifestyle. Missional living comes from the command of God to the children of Israel by the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 29:4-7). The ethnic makeup of The Pursuit Church is 45 percent African-American, 40 percent Caucasian, and 15 percent other, including Hispanic. The leadership team is made up of two African-Americans and two Caucasians. The ethnic makeup of the city of Memphis is 63.3 percent African-American, 29.4 percent Caucasian, 6.5 percent Hispanic, 4.0 percent other, 1.6 percent Asian, 1.4 percent two or more races, and 0.2 percent American Indian and Alaska Native.¹¹

Our Strategy to Reach People

Pray

Jesus said that we should always pray (Luke 18:1). Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson said people cannot be motivated unless their hearts are changed.¹² Hearts only change through prayer. Prayer is the most strategic aspect of the mission. Prayer

must happen individually and corporately. Corporate prayer time is used to address the prayer needs of not only the church, but also for missionaries, mission causes, and mission opportunities of the church.

Relationships

Relationships are our biggest draw to Jesus. Our first two years were spent in the community with the goal of building relationships and assimilating people of peace into the church. There was no programming designed to garner a strong attraction to the church. The people of the community were not used to pastors walking and talking with regular people of the community. When asked who we were, we would say, “We are urban missionaries.” This answer always seemed to bemuse the people in the community. As we grew, we expanded this concept of being urban missionaries to our church. We encouraged them to “Do Life,” meaning they were the missionaries in their neighborhood, on their jobs, and places that they frequented.

Locally

One part of the original target area is affected by gang activity, drugs, little to no education, poverty, overgrown properties, vacant houses, and single parent homes. Therefore, during the first year, we partnered with an elementary school located in the neighborhood. The purpose of this partnership was to extend the pursuing love of Christ to the school in order to gain relationship capital in the community. Some of our service evangelism projects were uniform drives for the neighborhood school. We collected uniforms, socks, underwear, and money. We also have had fall festivals where many people were served. The fall festivals have netted the most church growth.

Pursuit Memphis not only serves the community, but also the city through missional communities. Neighborhood Groups are the missional communities of Pursuit Memphis. Serving through neighborhood groups brings about unity in the body. Brandon Hatmaker makes the point that building missional communities is one of the best ways to incarnate the gospel of Jesus Christ, to be His hands and feet on the earth.¹³

In order to maximize the opportunity for a strong witness, we purchased a mission house in the target community in 2013. Our average age at the time was 24.7 years-old. We used the house for Bible studies, ESL courses, and urban missionary training. We also had a partnership with World Relief that helped refugees settle in Memphis.

Regional

The regional aspect of our mission strategy focuses on strengthening our partnership with World Relief in the state of Tennessee. We partnered with World

Relief, a non-profit organization that helps refugees resettle in America, specifically in Tennessee. With so many countries closed to the gospel, Pursuit Memphis has found a way to reach the world through refugees. Through the missional efforts of the Neighborhood Groups, we have helped assimilate refugees into the American culture. This effort allowed us to send one of our members with a church plant in her apartment complex.

International

Over the years, Pursuit Memphis has sent out members on short-term mission trips to the Philippines, Brazil, Japan, Germany, Northern Africa, Honduras, Australia, Columbia, Vietnam, Ecuador, Jamaica, East Asia, and Turkey. We have one member on a three-year assignment in American Samoa. We partnered with five local African-American urban churches to help build a church building in a village in Brazil.

Principles Discovered

1. Be You

Most people assume that I have to readjust my black identity in order to reach white people. Some AAMEPs may feel that pressure, but because I have navigated predominately white culture for so long, I don't feel the pressure to appease one people group at the expense of others. I decided to be who God created me to be. That is the only way I can please Him. When I am who God created me to be, He can be who He is through me. AAMEPs must embrace their ethnicity and calling. No one wants to follow a person who is trying to be someone they are not. I feel so free being me.

I would be remiss if I said there were not times early on when I tried to make some people comfortable, but in the end, they still left. I quickly learned that God has created me uniquely and I must be me. Remain who God created you to be because being someone else does not work.

2. Catch and Release

As an AALUMEC, many qualities allow Pursuit Memphis to be a training ground for church planters, especially African-Americans planting multiethnic churches. One of the hardest ideas to grasp is catching and releasing God's people. I never understood the fishing TV show where the fisherman would catch fish and release them. I didn't understand why he would put all of that time, money, and energy into catching a fish and releasing it until God called me to plant our church. There are so many fish that our church has caught (discipled and trained) and released to do other works. This is the goal of discipleship. If you are doing this right, you will have an uncomfortable turnover rate.

Over the past seven years, we have sent out eight people from our church to do ministry somewhere else (Minneapolis to launch a church plant, American Samoa as a missionary, Los Angeles, and three pastors to churches in Memphis, Mississippi, and South Carolina). I trained six of the eight people. I have at least three generations of disciples. I have learned to do the hard work of catching and releasing God's people to do His work wherever He calls them in the world. Learning to catch and release is one of the best things a pastor can do.

3. Be Intentional

Intentionality is the critical factor in AALUMEC. Gary McIntosh and Alan McMahan argued that there is always a dominant cultural group that rules the operation of the church.¹⁴ Curtiss Paul DeYoung and his colleagues found three types of multiethnic congregational models: the assimilated church model, the pluralist model, and the integrated church model.¹⁵ In an AALUMEC no dominant culture can exist. Assimilating to a dominant culture is an oxymoron in the AALUMEC and is counterintuitive of everything a multiethnic church represents. Intentionality is one of the most critical factors in bringing together diverse ethnic groups.

Intentionality means that the church will explicitly state its desire to be multiethnic. This stated desire helps make diversity a priority for the church, which in turn helps the church resist any dominant cultural group or culture that would seek to rule the operation of the church.

AALUMEC are multiethnic not because of the 80/20 ratio, but because they are intentional about having racial diversity in their leadership, preaching, Sunday School teachers, childcare workers, ushers, musicians, singers, neighborhood group leaders, community evangelism, and sharing the vision of a multiethnic church with everyone they meet.

AAMEPs recognize that their leadership team and entire staff must represent their multiethnic congregation. The key to this intentionality is intentionally engaging the minorities (the smallest ethnic group in a congregation) within the church and building up a diverse leadership. ALUMECs do not happen in isolation. They exist because a congregation under the leadership of a visionary AAMEP is intentional about being an AALUMEC.

Intentionality must be in the DNA of an AALUMEC. Every member must intentionally pursue personal relationships with other ethnicities in the congregation and embrace their cultural and ethnic differences as a way to celebrate the majesty of God. Also, every member must intentionally practice ethnic unity that can only be built and truly cultivated outside of the four walls on a Sunday morning or Saturday night service. Without intentionality, as DeYoung and his colleagues believe, the natural human tendency will segregate because humans prefer homogeneity.¹⁶ African-American pastors seeking to become AAMEP must realize that intentionality is the essential element in becoming an AALUMEC.

4. Revitalize With an AAMEP

Revitalizing dying churches is a great way to have solid gospel-centered churches in the urban context. Transforming them into AALUMECs will be a blessing to America. I believe that AALUMECs show the power of Jesus to reconcile enemies in a racialized society. As the world watches the church through the proverbial looking glass, ethnically diverse congregations make a stronger case of the power of the gospel to reconcile, especially those that are led by African-Americans.

Urban multiethnic and white homogenous churches that make it a point to have AAMEP in leadership will make an undeniable statement that everything is about Jesus and not the skin tone of the leader or the congregation. The possibilities are endless. Revitalizing dying urban churches by turning them into AALUMECs will be a tremendous blessing for urbanites.

Challenges

1. Resources

Pastors face many challenges when in pastoral leadership in any church.¹⁷ The challenge becomes more difficult in a multiethnic church. When a minority, more specifically an African-American, leads a multiethnic church, the challenge becomes even harder. For me, maintaining and leading a healthy multiethnic church through nine relocations in one of the most racially divided cities in America has been difficult.

One problem is finding a suitable rental space or even a permanent building is expensive in the urban context. Often, African-American planters are under-resourced. African-American planters lag behind white planters in finances, resources, and training. Research shows that only 6% of African-American church plants had a paid staff of more than one person to start the church. The average funding in year one is \$49,800. Only 55% of planters received specific training for church planting prior to planting the church. Just 48% of the church plants had a sponsoring church.¹⁸ The resource challenge has been a consistent one for AAMEPs. For many African-American urban planters and churches, being bi-vocational is the only realistic choice. As a result, 69% of planters were serving bi-vocationally.¹⁹

Our church had to decide if we would have a pastor or a building. We decided that a pastor was more important. God has been faithful to our church and supplying all our needs. Unlike most urban African-American pastors and planters, I have been blessed to be able to raise money. I don't have an extensive donor base, but they are consistent. Nevertheless, raising support is exhausting; therefore, I taught our church that our vision and mission was our responsibility. I preached a few sermons on giving and generosity. These sermons were designed to challenge our people to follow God's example in generosity, and they took on the challenge.

2. White Millennials

White Millennials²⁰ have been one of the most challenging groups to understand. For me, they are the best at missional living. They are very optimistic and idealistic. Many young white millennials have come through our ranks. Once on the inside, they find more challenges and more commitments. They also find that they have to lay down many comforts and rights. For many, this is more than they bargained for and is not the fairytale church work they had envisioned. Sadly, after serving in the urban context, many quit, broken and defeated by their unrealistic urban multiethnic church experience, and go back to all-white homogeneous churches. As an African-American multiethnic pastor, I believe they have the right intentions, but the wrong expectations.

3. The Future

Although I had pastoral training through a residency program, I still needed to experience multiethnic church planting training. There was no training specifically for AAMEPs. Because of this, I believe that developing tools that will help train and equip African-American multiethnic pastors is essential. The birth of this idea of training AAMEP came because of the lack of resources available that are tailored for the AAMEP. I believe that North America has a great need for more urban multiethnic church plants. I further believe that African-Americans must lead many of those churches because of their close connection with the urban context. There is no learning curve for AAMEPs because they are intimately acquainted with the urban context.

Through their research, Ed Stetzer, Micah Fries, and Daniel Im recognized a significant deficit of African-American church planters in North America. According to them, “An area where new churches must improve is raising up ethnic minority leadership. The two ethnicities that are not represented at a rate consistent with their percentage to the entire U.S. population are African-American pastors and Hispanic pastors, both of which reflect around half the percentage that their ethnicity occupies within the United States.”²¹ Therefore, training African-American pastors is an urgent need.

Because diversity in America is changing, the need for multiethnic churches will rise in North America. Not one racial or ethnic group will dominate the U.S. regarding size by 2044.²² Therefore, those churches who do not change their social structure will “play alone.” The way the American church segregates in 2019 will not be the norm in 2044. A time is coming when a great need will exist for multiethnic church plants in the future. African-Americans will lead some of these churches, especially in the urban context.

Church revitalization through mergers will be a significant bonus for the church in America. Taking dying congregations and bringing them back to life will play a major role in getting people back in the church. There are many older

white congregations in the urban context that no longer reflect the neighborhoods in which they serve. These churches would do well if they brought in an AAMEP to lead the congregation into a new day. The kingdom of God would certainly grow.

The sad reality is too many churches in the urban context refuse to let go of what used to be for what could be. It has been my experience that the pastors and congregations know what they need to do, but many pastors do not have the courage to do what they know is right. In the past two years, I have been approached by two white churches that needed to reflect their community. I cast a good vision, but the excitement didn't last long in the end. I am convinced that some church people are not willing to exchange their comforts and preferences in order for the Church to thrive and win people for Christ. I believe the urban center will be a much better place to live if practitioners like AAMEPs are raised up and resourced like our white suburban brothers. It is important to note that white urban pastors and church planters have some of the same struggles that African-American pastors, but not on the same level.

NOTES

1. Gary L. McIntosh and Alan McMahan, *Being the Church in a Multi-Ethnic Community: Why It Matters and How It Works* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2012), 26.

2. Ibid.

3. Korie L. Edwards, *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 142.

4. George A. Yancey and Michael Emerson are sociologists who ascribe to the 80/20 rule.

5. Mark Deymaz and Harry Li, *Ethnic Blends: Mixing Diversity Into Your Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 39. Also see Mark DeYmaz, *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church: Mandate, Commitments, and Practices of a Diverse Congregation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

6. For more information on "Whiteness," see Henry, F., & Tator, C., *The Colour of Democracy: Racism in Canadian Society*. 3rd Ed. (Toronto, ON: Nelson, 2006), 46-47.

7. Ibid, 46-47.

8. Bryan Loritts, *Right Color, Wrong Culture: The Type of Leader Your Organization Needs to Become Multiethnic (Leadership Fable)*, New ed. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 123.

9. Ibid, 123, 199.

10. Ibid, 201.

11. "Memphis, Tennessee," InfoPlease, accessed June 10, 2016, <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0108552.html>.

12. Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville, Tenn.: B & H Pub. Group, 2007), 133.

13. Brandon Hatmaker, *Barefoot Church: Serving the Least in a Consumer Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 59.

14. Gary L. McIntosh and Alan McMahan, *Being the Church in a Multi-Ethnic Community: Why It Matters and How It Works*, 26.

15. Curtiss Paul DeYoung et al., *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 164-168.
16. Curtiss Paul DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race*, 177-178.
17. Thom Rainer, "The Twelve Biggest Challenges Pastors and Church Staff Face," ThomRainer.com, June 26, 2013, accessed February 05, 2017, <http://thomrainer.com/2013/06/the-twelve-biggest-challenges-pastors-and-church-staff-face/>.
18. Stetzer, Ed. "African-American and Urban Church Planting: A Recap of the Church Planting Leadership Fellowship." Christian History | Learn the History of Christianity & the Church. September 11, 2013. Accessed June 08, 2016. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2013/august/african-american-church-planting.html>.
19. Ibid.
20. This is not a generalization of Millennials, but is a summation of my experience as an AAMEP.
21. Ed Stetzer, Micah Fries, and Daniel Im, "The State of Church Planting in the U.S.," LifeWay New Churches 2015 Executive Report, accessed June 10, 2016, <https://newchurches.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/NewChurches.com-TSOCP.pdf>, 6.
22. Colby and Ortman, <https://www.census.gov>.