

Engaging Your Community with

Cultural Sensitivity



#SEE ALL THE PEOPLE

“We cannot disciple people that we are not in relationship with. Discipleship begins with relationship.”

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This booklet is a companion piece to:

Engaging Your Community: A Guide to Seeing All the People

by Rev. Junius B. Dotson

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Introduction

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of ... the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

– MATTHEW 28:19-20 NIV

We are sent people—“Therefore, go!” The Great Commission charges us to be in relationship with God’s creation—our community, our world. John Wesley said, “I look upon all the world as my parish.”¹ Being in ministry with the world presents great possibilities as well as great challenges for those of us who wonder how we connect with our neighbors.

Many of our local churches are experiencing the challenge of being connected to the people who live nearby. There are numerous reasons for this challenge:

- members of the church no longer live within the community;
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¹ *Journal of John Wesley*, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.iii.v.html>

- demographic shifts have taken place;
- church members are aging;
- the church is still in love with the past than with the future;
- the church is seen irrelevant to peoples and community's lived reality and experiences; etc.

Wondering where and how to connect can paralyze church leaders from taking any beginning steps. However, this does not excuse church leaders from fulfilling the Great Commission mandate. It challenges us to seek ways to begin to build bridges between the church and the community. The Great Commission charge is part of our discipleship that is invitational and that challenges us to practice an incarnational model of ministry. To live into this incarnational understanding of discipleship, the church must understand what missional ecclesiology is.

Ecclesiology is a theological discipline that seeks to understand and define the church, and missional ecclesiology is “the fundamental Christian identity of the church being God’s sent out people.”² In other words, the church is understood as a community of witnesses that is called into being and prepared by God to go into the world to engage in Christ’s work. This begins with the *mission Dei* – God’s eternal movement into the world, God’s ‘self-sending’ for the sake of the world.”³ Being missional is being relational.

² Ibid, p.18 Location 291 of 2361

³ Paul Hooker, What is missional ecclesiology?, 3, https://presbyterywnc.org/content/info_clerks/documents/2012/missional-ecclesiology09.pdf

The words of St. John the Cross from the sixteenth century allow us to see why missional and relational go together. He says, "Mission is putting love where love is not."⁴ Why missional ecclesiology? We must understand the fundamental elements of missional ecclesiology, which begins first with the missionary nature of God and the church. These are two paradigm shifts in one. The missionary nature of God can be seen in the grand narrative of scripture, which is all about God's mission; it is about God redeeming all of creation back to the Divine. The other part to this is *the sending language*, as is contained in scripture from Genesis 12 when God calls Abram out and sends him. This sending language is found throughout the scriptures, where God is calling people and sending them to participate in God's redemptive purposes. The prophet Isaiah constantly declares God sent him to do multiple redemptive acts.

The nature of the church is rooted in the missionary nature of God. In other words, if we believe that God is a missionary God, then we as the people of God are missionary people. So, the church doesn't just send missionaries; *the church is the missionary*.

The second paradigm shift the church must experience to have a missional ecclesiology is *incarnational presence*. We must understand when we think of missional ecclesiology that God wants to embed our lives in the gospel and in a local context. This is incarnational presence when we allow the incarnation of Jesus to inform and shape our pos-

⁴ Cited in Daniel Goleman, *Social intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships* (Bantam, 2006), 12.

ture as it relates to the context we are called to serve. The incarnational presence requires us to love the people in our midst and to understand that our ministry is not *to* or *for*, but *with* people. Jesus came to be with us, and that reality should inform our posture with the people God is sending us to.

Missional ecclesiology creates a paradigm shift for the church to live out evangelism in a new way. It invites us to truly model Jesus' ministry and to practice missional communion, missional relating, and missional engagement. For this reason, engaging with our community is a response to our missional ecclesiology as a church. The following pages will provide you with some framing and tools as you begin to navigate in your community.

Current Demographic Reality

In the United States, we have many distinct racial and ethnic groups. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, White Americans make up the largest group (approximately 62 percent), with four other distinct groups—African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic or Latino/as—composing the majority of the rest of the population (approximately 38 percent). Of this last group, people of Hispanic or Latino origin make up 17 percent of the U.S. population; African Americans, composing 13 percent; Asian Americans, more than 5 percent; and Native Americans, around 1 percent. More than 7.5 million people (over 2 percent of those reporting) now identify with more than one racial/ethnic background.⁵ Clearly, the mission field in the United States is made up of multiple ethnic and racial groups! Thus requiring skills that provide the opportunity to establish relationships across the differences present.

A resource that might be available for you in understanding your community demographics is MissionInsite (*mission-insite.com*—Your conference may have a subscription that will

⁵ <https://www.census.gov>

generate a helpful demographic report of your community). The MissionInsite report provides answers to the “where” and “what about” your community. It provides a snapshot of who resides in your community. As you review the report, take a moment to think about who in your community is missing from your congregation. Identify new learnings about your community. Reflect on the following questions about your congregation:

- In what areas or segments in the community is the church experiencing blind spots?
- What do we know or what do we need to learn more about these areas/segments?
- What are some of the possible reasons for the blind spots?

Questions for exploring your community more deeply:

- Who lives in your community?
- What kind of diversity already exists? *(Expand your diversity beyond race and ethnicity. Consider, for example: age, developmental disabilities, disabilities acquired later in life, gender, education, social status, indigenous heritage, and so on.)*
- What kind of relationships are established among cultural groups?
- What kind of struggles exist among various cultures?
- What kind of struggles exist within cultural groups?

- What issues do different cultural groups have in common?

As the United States population becomes increasingly diverse, it is imperative for churches to develop the awareness and skills needed to interact successfully with people from diverse experiences. Methods that work well with a segment of the community may be irrelevant or inappropriate for other segments of the community. As church leaders seeking to connect with the community, we must be willing to be lifelong learners and willing to implement innovative ways of working with a diverse community. This work begins with understanding how culture operates.

Culture

If people are asked to define “culture,” they will offer a wide range of perspectives. Many times, people use the following words or phrases to describe *culture*: food, language, music, ritual, ethnicity, clothes, religion, and so on. The concept of culture has to be broadened beyond the visible aspects of culture—art, language, food, and artifacts—to include the norms, beliefs, and values learned from different groups that connect to shape identity. Shared values, norms, and beliefs affect our perceptions, attitudes, and assumptions. They inform our worldview and how we interpret our experiences.

Each of us interacts within many cultural groups (family, work, church, and others) that influence how we understand and interact with other people. It is important for us to take some time to become aware of our cultural being and how it informs how we view differences when we experience them. The local church itself must determine its own culture. How does the local church culture provide ways to build connections or create barriers for developing connections in the community? As you try to explore your church culture, keep in mind what your church view/perspective is of:

- Concept of family
- Practice of power
- Rules of social interaction
- Concept of time
- Concept of justice
- Systemic racism
- Concept of sexuality
- Patterns of superior and subordinate roles in relation to status by age, gender, class.

Taking the time to explore these and other aspects of the church culture will provide an awareness of where you might experience challenges in connecting with the community. It is recommended that you do the same exercise with the perspective of the community with which you are seeking to connect. Exploring the community views of these areas will allow you to note where there are similarities and where tensions might arise. This reflection process could highlight areas where the church and community experiences differ and may require some cultural empathy.

Cultural Empathy

An essential part of our work in connecting effectively with culturally diverse people is our ability to demonstrate cultural empathy. Cultural empathy invites us to have an awareness as well as an understanding of the feelings of people who are ethnically and/or culturally different from us. Some of the ways for cultural empathy to be conveyed are:

- Demonstrate genuine interest in learning about the another person's culture.
- Convey genuine appreciation for cultural differences between the person and yourself.
- Be sensitive to oppression, discrimination, racism, and micro aggressions that people encounter—often on a regular basis.

Cultural empathy allows us to authentically engage in a way that promotes relationships. These practices invite the suspension of judgment and infuse the relationship with curiosity. Being open to new learning and being informed by different experiences will broaden our world perspective and will affect how we view the other.

Curiosity

Janet M. Bennett, executive director of the Intercultural Communication Institute, has developed some principles for enhancing curiosity. In her work, Bennett elaborates on the need to focus on the following principles to position ourselves in a spirit of inquiry.⁶

- Suspending our assumptions and value judgments
- Enhancing our perception skills
- Developing multiple perspectives
- Increase our tolerance of ambiguity
- Asking questions as culturally appropriate.

As we incorporate these principles into our discipleship practices, we open ourselves to relationships and perspectives that we otherwise would not have considered. These new relationships will broaden our understanding of God, as we see God's movement in others' lives. These relationships will also challenge some of our own perspectives and might even invite us to reconsider our beliefs, values, and/or norms.

⁶ Janet M. Bennett. "Principles for Enhancing Curiosity." Developing Intercultural Competence for International Education Faculty and Staff, AIEA Conference, February 2011, (Portland, OR: Intercultural Communication Institute, 2011), 10, https://www.messiah.edu/download/downloads/id/923/developing_intercultural_competence_for_international_education_faculty_and_staff.pdf.

Ways to Build Relationships with People from Other Cultures

Examine Your Biases

It is important that we be honest and recognize the biases we have toward another culture, custom, and life experience. By acknowledging these biases, we can work toward overcoming them. Consider taking the Harvard Implicit Bias test as a way of becoming aware of your implicit biases (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>).

Spend Time in Unfamiliar Spaces

We tend to spend most of our time in places and with people who are "like us." Be open and willing to step out of your comfort zone and meet others in their comfort zones. Be in the community where the people are!

Learn Names with the Correct Pronunciation

It is important to make an effort to remember unfamiliar names. People are willing to help you learn the pronunciation, and it demonstrates your effort in honoring them.

Be Willing to Risk and Make Mistakes

As we engage with people of other cultures and/or other lived experiences, we likely will make some mistakes. Do not let making mistakes keep you from seeking to meet new people and build relationships. If you say or do something that is insensitive, you can engage in a conversation about the effect of your words, apologize, and continue building the relationship.

Conclusion

As we live out the gospel of Jesus Christ, we are charged to be the incarnational presence in our communities. It is important that we begin with understanding ourselves and the way culture shapes our world perspectives. The work to connect with our communities is ongoing and requires intentional effort. The information provided thus far can help begin the work of engaging with the community. Please consider the additional resource section as a way to further your knowledge and awareness.

Additional Resources

The General Commission on Religion and Race is committed to providing practical resources and support to leaders throughout the church to help them engage and embrace the cultural diversity present in our congregations and communities. We invite you to consider reviewing these, along with many additional, resources that can be located at our website: **www.gcorr.org**.

Entering into the Story of Others

A small-group resource that explores barriers to entering the stories of others as well as recognizing and honoring the other's stories.

Listening in Diversity

A resource that provides definitions and group activities that explore ways to better understand diversity and how stereotypes are present.

10 Ways to Become More Faithful than Post-Racial

This resource provides ten steps to help us persist in our struggle for racial equity. It provides excerpts from church websites showing how these faith communities are becoming more faithful than “post-racial.”

Listening in Diversity

A resource that provides definitions and group activities that explore ways to better understand diversity and how stereotypes are present.

25 Traits of The Beloved Community

Provides the guiding principles for expressing beloved community.

Face Test: Do I Have the Full Picture?

This group activity allows for self-reflection in related to diversity and worldview.

Living Into the Beloved Community: Making the Beloved Community Real

Often, we hear the term “beloved community” and seek to live into it without a firm grasp on how to do so. This resource provides a small-group process to consider how to reflect on the 25 traits of the beloved community.

10 Honorable Ways to Learn About Another Culture

This resource provides ten ways people of God can learn about other cultures in honorable ways.

Video and Webinar Resources

The Building of Bridges to Community

A video-based small-group resource that provides a discussion guide about how the church in Baltimore City engaged the community after the Freddie Gray incident.

Church to Community Webinars: Concepts that

Deliver Results

Is your church looking for ways to reach more people across lines of race, age, and class? Are you looking for new ideas and concepts to build a more just and equitable community? GCORR and the United Methodist Church 4 All People (C4AP) has developed a series of webinars on the following:

- C4AP Overview
- Radical Hospitality
- Third Places
- Divine Economy of Abundance

Implicit Bias: What We Don't Think We Think

This self-directed online course is for anyone who is interested in learning and teaching others about implicit bias.



If you would like to learn more about the resources of Discipleship Ministries, please visit **UMCdiscipleship.org** and **SeeAllThePeople.org**.

For resources from Discipleship Ministries related to Community Engagement visit:

www.UMCdiscipleship.org/articles/cultural-sensitivity



If you would like to learn more about the resources of The General Commission on Religion and Race, please visit **www.gcorr.org**.

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available for download and purchase at:

<https://store.umcdiscipleship.org>

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