Is the Church for Everyone? Planting Multi-Ethnic Congregations in North America

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Abstract

I grew up in one of the oldest towns in the Americas: San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. My parents were missionaries, essentially Dutch-American immigrants to Mexico. Born and raised in Mexico, I was therefore the second-generation of an immigrant family. As such, I grew up as what I call a "double-minority." I was part of a small group of about one hundred and fifty Protestants in a Spanish colonial town of 65,000 people who wished we did not exist. And ours was one of only four or five "foreign" families in town: "Gringos," strangers, pilgrims in a strange land. Now that I live in the U.S., I consider myself a Mexican-American immigrant of Dutch descent. So when I think of immigrants, ethnic minorities, and multiple cultures in North America, I tend not to identify with the dominant descendants of Europeans, but with immigrants from Latin America--past and present. I'm sure this colors the way I approach the issues in this paper, and I hope the reader will take that into consideration.

Both in North America and in missions work worldwide, the “homogeneous unit principle” of church growth has been unquestioningly assumed as the most effective way to multiply disciples and plant “strategic” churches. Churches grow fastest, church growth gurus say, when the gospel is propagated along existing social lines and networks and when people do not have to cross ethnic, cultural, or class. This “strategic” homogeneity pervades multiple church-planting organizations and fills the pages of missions and church-planting strategy manuals. But does the Bible support homogeneity? Or does Scripture set forth a different vision for the local church? heterogeneous nature of the congregations planted after Gentiles were brought into the church. Christian congregations, functioning in multi-ethnic environments, embrace the diversity of cultures in the spirit of an inclusive God – thereby becoming multi-cultural congregations. But what are the requirements for leadership in such faith communities? What self-awareness concerning multi-cultural interaction is necessary in such leaders? This article reviews leadership models presented in business and educational literature.