

Tipping Point

How Pentecostalism must embrace Ethnic Diversity

A tipping point by its very definition encompasses the idea of a previously rare phenomenon becoming rapidly and dramatically more common. It could very well apply to the occurrences in Exhibit Hall A of The Indianapolis Convention Center on a hot and humid August day in Indiana. On that day, The General Council of the Assemblies of God, The World's largest Pentecostal Fellowship, meet in its business session to elect the executive officers of the fellowship. The movement just elected George O. Wood to succeed Thomas Trask who led the fellowship for 14 years. Yet the most telling election was yet to come.

Undoubtedly, Thomas Trask will go down in Church history not only as one of the most successful Pentecostal leaders with millions of new adherents, members and churches around the world added to the fellowship and more importantly to the Kingdom of God, but also as an agent of reconciliation between the races. Trask not only reaffirmed the Pentecostal commitment to Holiness, Biblical orthodoxy, and Spirit Filled living, but he added an element necessary for the fellowship's viability in a 21st century world; diversity.

Hence the tipping point. On that humid Friday afternoon, the fellowship for the very first time, elected to the board of administration or its executive leadership an African American, Zollie Smith. Smith, a former police officer/Detective; U.S. Postal Inspector; and Airborne Infantryman in the Vietnam War, where he received the Purple Heart and Bronze Star as a result of his services, personify perseverance and spiritual courage. Upon election, Zollie Smith addressed the body and recalled the days of lying wounded on the battlefield of Vietnam and his moments of angst with the fellowship. "On many occasions I wanted to quit and give up on the Assemblies because I felt there was no place for me, but to the young people under 40 and the women, your gift will make room for you, you must persevere, you must pray, you must be consistent, let everyone know you have a mandate from Almighty God..", exhorted Smith.

The historical moment created a wave of enthusiasm and hope that finally the Pentecostal community would understand that the Upper Room did not separate us but rather it was the biblical convocation of all races, languages and cultures for the purpose of building one Kingdom, His Kingdom. Out of all the evangelical streams, if there is one that should embrace multi-ethnicity it should be the Pentecostal/Charismatic community. Dr. Jesse Miranda, Executive Presbyter and the Commissioner of Ethnicity for the Fellowship applauded the election. "This is a giant step in complying with the vision of the book of Revelation. After 100 years of the Azusa Street Revival where the cry was heard that the blood of Jesus has washed the color-line, the Assemblies of God is complying to fulfill this claim" declared Miranda.

Miranda, who also oversees the World Hispanic Evangelical Alliance for the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference believes that although Hispanics have been widely accepted since 1916 and more so since 1995 when he was elected the first Executive Presbyter of color, the Black membership have not had the same privilege. "Because of the historic Black-White tension this is a giant step toward diversity" he added. In addition, Dr. Miranda believes it's time to go beyond elections. "The issue now for ethnics to move beyond mere representation to effective influence and for Anglo leadership to seek and gain cultural competency toward achieving what we represent in God's Kingdom - a cooperative fellowship" concluded Miranda.

Other prominent leaders view the election as the beginning of a new era for Pentecostalism in America. "I firmly believe that it is a step forward in the right direction because the Assemblies of God is no longer talking or simply writing (Enrichment Summer of 2007) about embracing Diversity but rather putting it to practice", stated Rev. Felix Posos, Superintendent Emeritus of the Northern Pacific Latin American District of The Assemblies of God and Chairman of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference.

Rev. Dennis Rivera, Assembly of God Superintendent for the Central Latin American District sees the election as a victory for all ethnic communities. "We have a face that will give us greater access to the executive leadership of the movement", declared Rivera.

At the end of the day, diversity is not a Republican or Democratic issue. It is above all, a Kingdom issue. "...Men from every tribe, and tongue and people and nation and thou hast made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God", Revelation 5: 9, 10. As churches, denominations and fellowship embrace ethnic diversity simultaneously they embrace the Kingdom of God. Prayerfully, the day will come where the next generation will not know what a black, brown or white church may be, but certainly they will know what a Kingdom church embodies; all races, tongues and people worshipping one God.

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