

ETHNIC BLENDS **MARK DEYMAZ**

Growing Churches **Just Like Us**

for 18 years I served in a variety of church contexts, with Sunday morning attendance figures ranging from 150 to 5,000. One thing, though, was constant: Every one of these churches was homogeneous. Frankly, I never thought much about the lack of ethnic and economic diversity within these congregations. I did not consciously consider who we were, who we were not, or who we might have become if we had not been segregated by race and class distinctions. Sure, each church, in its own way, sought to *build bridges* to the community. At no time, however, could it be said that we *were* the community. Years later, I recognize this nuance is significant and one that can no longer be ignored by churches hoping to present a credible witness of Christlike love for all people in an increasingly diverse and cynical society.

These revelations should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with churches throughout North America. Rice University sociologist Michael O. Emerson cites recent research that states 92.5 percent of churches in the United States are racially segregated. In fact, his studies indicate that churches today are 10 times more segregated than the neighborhoods in which they sit and 20 times more segregated than nearby public schools. And while the country is becoming even *more* diverse, the church remains consistently segregated.

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Beyond ethnicity, economics also divide us and are largely responsible for the meager numerical gains within the North American church over the past 20 years. According to David T. Olson, director of the American Church Research Project, churches with a median income of more than \$60,000 a year grew by 17.6 percent between 2000 and 2009, while churches with a median income below \$30,000 declined by 4.3 percent.

Such evidence confirms systemic segregation is a presumptive reality in the local church today—an unintended consequence of the widespread propagation of what is known as the Homogeneous Unit Principle.

According to its progenitor, Donald McGavran, this principle recognizes that “[People] like to become Christians

without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers.” But for decades, this principle has been promoted as something more: the *modus operandi* for those who would plant, grow or develop a successful church typically measured by numbers, dollars and buildings. But is the principle biblical?

Interestingly, this principle was never intended as a strategy for creating large churches, but rather as a strategy to reach unbelievers—a missionary principle. Likewise, missionaries first coined the term “church growth” to describe a movement through which the Gospel would be shared cross-culturally and new believers added to local churches through evangelistic efforts outside of North America. In time, however, ministry leaders within the United States co-opted the Homogeneous Unit Principle and repurposed it as a marketing strategy for the local church that to this day feeds a spirit of competition, independence and success measured in large part by Sunday morning attendance. Yet to quote Newsong Church Pastor Dave Gibbons, “Is it really, at the end of the day, [about] how big your church is? Are you really that disappointed that you are not on the list of the 100 fastest-growing churches of America?”

After all, even our Lord did not measure His own success by numbers, dollars and buildings. If successful local church ministry is to be defined by enfolded large numbers of people into churches as quickly as possible, wasn't Jesus Himself a failure?

Churches may grow fastest when they're homogeneous. But the question persists: *Is this God's will and His best for the church?*

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