

Changing Contexts for Evangelism in the 3rd Millennium: Leadership Opportunities for New Demographics.

Dear friends – you should have on your tables a sheet of paper with a text from the book of Acts (2:1-8) along with an article from the *New York Times* on the changing demographics in Orange County, California – where I happen to live and for which I have oversight as Bishop Suffragan. As a way of background and as you may well guess, the Diocese of Los Angeles is home to one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse populations in the United States. On any given Sunday, services are held in Spanish, Cantonese, Mandarin, Taiwanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Tagalog and English. We also have many English speaking ethnic communities worshiping side by side with Anglo congregations. In addition, we have several “emergent” churches in which the language and structure of the liturgy are different from what we find in the BCP.

I first want to reflect on the Pentecost passage with you. As that gale force wind swept through the place where the disciples were staying, they had a choice – to run, batten down the hatches, or go with it. They went with it. When they went with it, the Holy Spirit was able to do a great work in and through them. As a student of linguistics, it would be wonderful to say that a linguistic miracle occurred – the undoing of the Tower of Babel story, if you will, – where all could understand each other without taking a language course via Rosetta Stone or a local community college. How did this event transpire? What can we learn from it? Upon prayerful reflection and having spent time “in the field”, so to speak, I have come to understand that we don’t need to speak **all** the different languages that may be spoken in our dioceses in order to be successful leaders. There is only one language that we need to speak – and I believe it was this language that was spoken at the first Pentecost – it is the Trinitarian language of *radical hospitality, listening and love*. This is the language we need to recapture and honor today as we minister in a time of rapidly changing demographics in many of our dioceses.

As leaders in the church, the invitation to all of us is to understand who is living in our neighborhoods and to put into practice what our church signs say: *The Episcopal Church Welcomes You*. How do we do this?

We honor and welcome those among us when we take the time to offer them RADICAL HOSPITALITY by walking among them, and opening our doors to them.

We honor and welcome those among us when we LISTEN to THEM and work to understand their stories and their cultural context.

We honor and welcome those among us when we take the time to learn what is burning on their hearts – what are the needs of this community, and how can we work together, collaboratively, to fulfill those needs – to show them the **love of God in Christ** that is the work of the church.

I have been around incredible groups of people where I couldn't speak their language AT ALL – and I have studied 8 languages throughout my lifetime so far – but, you know – a smile, warm eyes, and an heart open to listening, learning and loving goes a LONG way to express not only God's love, but our faith. That, again, I feel, is the Pentecost language miracle – the disciples were able to see people in a new light – indeed, in a holy light – through the lens of love of God in Christ.

Finally, we honor and welcome those among us when share the story of who WE are, and share our cultural context and needs.

Once we have heard each other, the real work begins.

How we welcome those of other cultures and languages into our congregations speaks volumes about how we can accommodate their needs linguistically and socially – OR, worse case, how we force them to “be like one of us”. “We need to be one church” is a frequent response to forcing non-English speakers into participating in part of a primarily English speaking service each Sunday. When we don't honor issues such as language needs and especially in Asian culture, the need for a communal meal directly after a church service, we are participating in the worst form of tokenism, and tying the hands of the new group instead of honoring them and setting them on a path to grow.

This applies also to the *emergent church* or *fresh expression* – however you want to label this movement around the world. It is another form of worship and gathering communities that begs our same leadership and oversight – to nurture and support not only the people that are drawn to it, but to listen, love, and honor them by allowing them the flexibility to worship in the way that the spirit is moving them.

Our opportunity IS radical hospitality, listening and love. We've all had the opportunity to welcome people into congregations. Indeed, we've all made promises many times as we welcomed a new member into the body of Christ through the sacrament of baptism – you know the words as we renew our own baptismal covenant – *Will you respect the dignity of every human being?* I've always been struck by this particular promise we make – and grateful for the response --I will, with God's help.

We **do** need God's help. As leaders in the church, we especially need God's help as we help others live into the baptismal covenant. This means allowing that same gale force wind that the disciples experienced to blow through us and instead of shutting our doors against whatever is outside, we need to open our doors wide. We must allow the Holy Spirit to do her work. This means opening our doors and our hearts in a new way – not **tolerating** the “other”, but embracing all as children of God. Not practicing tokenism and patting ourselves on the back because we have [**put the name of the ethic or OTHER group here**] in our congregations. It means we need God's help as we embrace and welcome the other, not to conform to OUR ways of doing things, but to understand and see that God is doing an incredible work in and **through them** – if we but RESPECT THE DIGNITY OF EVERY HUMAN BEING. It also means that we need

to rethink traditional seminary education and encourage our seminaries to develop special educational programs to help us identify, raise up and train lay leaders as well as clergy for these new ministries. We also, when we have clergy trained and ordained, need to ensure that there is parity in compensation among **all** clergy serving in our dioceses.

So, when people come before us looking differently or speaking a language we don't understand – which, I want to remind us, can be English – such as the 20 and 30 year olds that we long to have join our parishes or those who see the Emergent movement as the movement of the love of God in Christ and the Spirit in a new and exciting way – we need to STOP. We need to think back to the Pentecost moment. Open our hearts, minds and doors – let the wind blow and the Spirit move -- practice radical hospitality, listening and love. Then, only then, will we and the clergy in our dioceses be answering I WILL, WITH GOD'S HELP to the question that is in our fortune cookies today. And it is THE question – the answer, well – that's up to us – and to the people who serve in our dioceses.

Note to the reader: The text in the fortune cookie distributed to the members of the House of Bishops reads in Spanish and Chinese the following: **Will you respect the dignity of every human being?**