Who’s Beyond the Maps We See?

In New York City the subway system is a massive network that connects five boroughs and carries seven million riders a day. The printed representation of it, “The Map,” is complex and far-reaching; yet when we ride it often, we no longer need the print version with us for reference. We have learned to navigate the system, including alternate routes when changes are announced.

When I was young and had not yet commuted widely, I used to think no one lived beyond the routes that were shown, especially in the outer boroughs. They did of course; I just didn’t know. They were the New Yorkers who took buses to locations beyond the subway stations, or who owned cars, living in areas not easily reached by subway lines.

Similarly, each of us has in our minds a representation of our world as we see it. Unless we live in a very racially/ethnically diverse neighborhood, we don’t have daily contact with people who are very different from us. We know how to navigate our system. But because everyone is traveling on their own journeys, and only use portions of the map, we don’t pay much attention to people who may exist beyond the map of our minds. Of course they do; we just don’t know.

Whether on a subway or a diversity journey, you don’t have to know everything about it in order to ride. You can take a short trip for a special occasion, and take a friend along for company. After a while you can find your way around more easily. As we become even more familiar, we will lose the discomfort of the newness and grow more confident in travel.

. . . Here There Be Dragons!

In the diversity journey, you are likely to meet people who see the world differently, while also sharing commonalities with you. I smile when I think of early western cartographers who wanted to indicate yet-unexplored areas on their maps. They would write in those areas, “Here there be dragons.” In western culture, dragons were feared, mutilated and slain.

In Chinese culture, dragons are magnificent and benevolent companions to humankind. They are creatures to be respected and honored, which our community does with traditions such as dragon boat races and dragon dances. Wouldn’t I love to meet a dragon!

Gather in small groups to talk about your maps of the world and traditions that give support on the journey. Re-gather as a large group to share the insights and “aha” moments of your discussion.

When did you first realize that the world was bigger than the map in your mind? What did your first map consist of?

What was your first experience of traveling (literally or figuratively) beyond what was racially/ethnically familiar? What thoughts and feelings went through you?

Talk about a tradition from your culture that blesses those who are beginning a new stage on the journey of life, e.g. beginning college, getting married, having a baby, beginning retirement. What is the significance of that tradition for both the traveler(s) and for the community that surrounds them?
Recall together the cultural heritage of your congregation. How has it been a blessing to people on the journey of faith? Who are those who have been equipped within the congregation and have gone to other places to live lives of witness and service?

Continue to Leader Reflection: Becoming Aware of Culture
Part 1: One Body, Similar Members
Beginning Conversations
Leader Reflection: Becoming Aware of Culture

Fish in Water
We’re all like fish in water
Often seeking those the same
With human limitations
Doing more is not our aim
Yet God works through and in us
For love and not for blame
To lead us to new waters
Is the reason that God came

For most of us, being a family member was our first experience of being part of “one body.” And what we did was just how we did things. How did we cook rice, bake tortillas, make corn bread, muesli or pancakes? What was considered good use of time? What did we learn to believe about relationships, who to trust or not? How did we react to differences and conflict?

These and countless other areas of life became ingrained in us, as our culture – our traditions, customs, norms. As human beings, culture is like the air we breathe. Like fish in water, culture is the water surrounding and sustaining us.

So who is ever aware of culture? Why would we need to be? As it turns out, culture also applies to church families, organizations, institutions. Whenever human beings gather together, a way of doing things is going to develop. So actually it’s not how things were always done. It’s how they developed to this point when we received it. Becoming aware of culture is our first step toward knowing if we want to preserve something, or improve on it. What a gift it is from God, to be able to help shape culture as a legacy for generations to come!

For Christian people, awareness of culture as it relates to race and class is paramount in a world of diversity. What do others perceive Christianity to be, by what Christian people say and do? Can they tell we are Christians by our hospitality and behaviors? It’s easy to love those who are near and dear to us. Learning to love across differences of race and class is more of a feat. One Body, Many Members is a gathering place for us to learn together, infused by the power of God’s Holy Spirit for love. Recall together the cultural heritage of your congregation. How has it been a blessing to people on the journey of faith? Who are those who have been equipped within the congregation and have gone to other places to live lives of witness and service?

Continue to Leader Tips: Awareness—Getting Started
Do these statements and questions reflect your congregation?

Are you one body in Christ with members of similar race, culture, and class?

Does your neighborhood include persons of other parts of the body?

Are you as a congregation beginning to ask, “Where do we go from here?”

Traveling across race, culture, and class is not easy. It will require honesty as we reflect on who we have been and who we want to be. We need to be fully aware of what we’re getting into and what we’re asking of our congregation. And we need to commit ourselves to all of the time, resources, and energy that it will require.

Don’t hurry through this first stop. Take time to share stories and celebrate who you are. Spend time here as a leadership team and as a congregation. Solid preparation is essential for a good trip. It is deeply important to know ourselves before we reach out to our neighbors. We need to:

- understand our fears and our challenges;
- examine our feelings and attitudes that may become roadblocks;
- share our stories and honor our heritage;
- celebrate steps already taken that have brought us to this day and place.