

It's a phenomenal honor and opportunity: Jesus has invited you to accompany him on a trip across race, culture and class. What a wonderful idea, we agree . . . but are we going to accept the invitation? Or are we going to postpone it indefinitely? What's holding us back? What stands in the way of change?

If you feel twinges of discomfort at the thought of "starting a multicultural journey," you've got plenty of company. In fact, relating to other people even in our own culture, race and class isn't always easy. The biblical story of Pentecost, in which people of many different cultures were suddenly able to understand each other, seems beautiful, but also long ago. It's a lot harder to imagine that Spirit wind blowing on us today!

How did it happen that we, God's people, are so willing to settle for less than seeking that Spirit wind every day? We know the world is broken. We've experienced the beauty of what relationships can do to bring people together, to create wholeness, and even to mend and to heal broken hearts. Yet when we are faced with the "isms" that create havoc with the world God made, we forget that with God, nothing is impossible. The racism and classism, the me-isms are overwhelming; and we may honestly believe we are too small to do anything much about them. Or that this area of ministry is someone else's calling.

All too soon, the trip becomes something we hope to go on "someday," but which never truly happens. And oh what a trip we're missing! A chance to experience God's power in our lives, overcoming hesitations and fears, filling us with Holy Spirit love to bring hope and healing across our differences of culture, race and class. A chance to reclaim our identity as children of God, who hold to the promise that when we step out in faith, God will always be there with us.

All this said, it's not unusual that pesky internal barriers can persist. God has invited us to go on a trip with Godself, and we're not excited about it? What's holding us back? What's standing in the way of change?

God isn't surprised by anything we might confess during our prayer or devotion time. If we don't like being in a situation where rules may be different, where we feel vulnerable or it's scary, why don't we pray about that and expect a good answer? If we feel awkward talking with neighbors we don't know yet, it's likely they're not feeling all that comfortable either.

As a wise leader once said, "You have to believe that you can. That's the beginning of change." A Lutheran word on this would be, "We have to believe that we can—because we're not doing anything by ourselves. God does it all, through us."

Exercise #2: Dispelling the shadows with light

Reflect on times in your life when a fear or anxiety lost its power. What happened that made it go away? What did the experience teach you about yourself or other people? You've got a "travel kit" of tools for your life, and all the lessons and skills you learn become a part of it. From your storehouse of memories, what can you gather to encourage you now on a journey across race, culture and class?

For example, one lesson might be “I feared something in general, but once it became specific and I dealt with it bit by bit, it wasn’t so bad.”

As a group, share a fear that you live with, or a fear that has gripped you in the past.

How have you or do you now deal with and live with your fears?

For each of the fears named in the group, consider: Who do you know (either personally or generally) who seems to not fear what you fear? In what way can you learn from them? Through a website, a conversation, a book or article they’ve written, a program, an invitation to come and speak at your church? The world is full of people and resources who are willing to help. How do we find them if we don’t look? Sometimes, practical exposure to programs and role models is just what we need.

How can we learn from others as we face our fears of journeying across race, culture, and class?

o Are there persons within your congregation who have had greater experience and who can serve as guides?

o Are there congregations or other organizations in your community who have experiences to share?

Using resources to better understand your own journey as a congregation would be helpful at this stage of the journey. If you are a congregation of similar members who are primarily White, look at how you could use the resource *Troubling the Waters for Healing of the Church: A Journey for White Christians from Privilege to Partnership*. If you are a congregation of similar members who are primarily African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Arab or Middle Eastern, or a particular Asian or Latino heritage, consider using the resource *Breaking the Bonds: A Workshop on Internalized Oppression*.

Deep examination of how you as individuals and as a congregation have been socialized into systems of oppression is deeply important as you prepare to embrace your fears and journey across race, culture, or class to “meet your neighbors again for the first time.”

Ask God to reveal to you further ways to challenge the fears that cast shadows on your journey. Look for the light that God shines on us always! Guidance is always at hand. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body.” (Proverbs 3:5-8, NRSV)

Continue to Exercise: Naming the fears or anxieties



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Exercise #1: Naming the fears or anxieties

It has been said that naming fears or anxieties is the beginning to making them lose their power. You have already named your fears of what you might lose. Now take time to name your fears as you contemplate embracing diversity. Consider a full range of fears from meeting your neighbors, to engaging in conversation, to entering into another person's world, to being able to respond to what will be asked of you. You might even begin with "I'm not afraid, really. I just don't know what's being asked of me" Then reflect some more and see what may arise.

- Take time individually to list at least five of your fears in reaching across race, culture, or class.
- Share your fears within a small group.
- Reflect on what would it take to release your fear or to embrace your fear and move on despite it.
- Reflect on the fears you hold collectively as a congregation.
 - o How can those fears be lifted up and named within the congregation?
 - o Can they be regularly included in the Prayers of the Church?
 - o What Gospel message can speak to those fears?
 - o How can congregation members support one another to walk through the fear?

Exercise #2: What's your vision?

Let your creativity flow. This exercise lends itself well to many avenues of expression—you may want to draw your vision and see it in contrast to your current picture of who you are, or act out your vision, or put it to song and music. Again, it is excellent for small group activity, an enlightening way to discover and shape a vision toward diversity. It can be fun, too!

- Begin your visioning process with prayer. Recall that in Acts 10, both Cornelius and Peter were deeply engaged in prayer when they saw God's vision.
- What do you envision your congregation could look like five years from now?
 - o What would you be seeing, feeling, and experiencing as you walked in the door?
 - o What characteristics would define the life of the congregation?
 - o What would people in the community be saying about the congregation?
 - o How would it reflect a community of faith that is "one body, many members"?
 - o Remember to review your distinctive traits from Exercise #1. How might those be seeds for growing into your future?

For example, let's say you are a congregation that attracts young parents with children. Let's say you hope to cultivate a next generation of leaders that will not leave the church or community when they grow up, but will stay and serve as a cadre of Christian leadership in some capacity.

o How shall your congregation focus its energy on this so that the group will develop?

o What would your church look like if this dream came true?

- Share your story with the wider group as a newscast from the future; a drawing; a role play; a skit; or some other form of presentation.

Collect the visions if they are drawings or in a written format. Take notes of skits or verbal presentations of vision. All expressions of vision – from this exercise, from the congregational event in the Awareness section, or any other activities – are important to guide and direct the leadership team. Spend prayer-filled time listening to the visions. Ask God's guidance and direction for the shaping of your vision as a congregation.

Continue to Exercise: Dispelling the shadows with light



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Continue to Bible Study: It’s about Relationships-Jonah or Mother Teresa



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No matter what race, culture or class we are from, we've all got our comfort zones. So did Moses, Jonah, and many other people in the Bible. Is it really possible to act beyond our comfort zones? Jonah was reluctant to go where God was calling and to embrace the people God forgave. He declared, "It is better for me to die than to live."

For a small group study and discussion, read the book of Jonah. Reflect together on the meaning of the story of Jonah to the life of your congregation.

- How does your congregation respond to God's call to go out and move beyond comfort zones and embrace people who are different from them?
- How far is the congregation willing to run to avoid entering into a relationship with persons to whom the congregation is being called?
- Are there persons within the congregation who would rather die as a congregation than live into a new reality?
- What is the tension between death as a congregation and life with new realities of diversity and a sharing of cultures?

Consider what it means to act beyond your comfort zones.

- Reflect on several instances when you went out of your way for someone else; or when someone did that for you.
- Collectively share experiences of going beyond your comfort zones.
 - Did you spend hours or days helping a friend get settled into a new home?
 - Or pick up someone at the airport late on a cold night?
 - Or lose sleep to care for someone else who needed it?
 - Name your experiences.
- Why did you do what you did?

Most likely you were willing to go beyond what was comfortable or convenient because of your relationship. As Mother Teresa said, "I can do no great things. I can only do small things with great love." And so can we.

So, surprise! It is possible to act beyond our comfort zones. The relationship is why we do it. As we grow in faith and closeness to God, we find ourselves infused with greater courage and willingness to step out with others on a multi-cultural journey.

Reflect on what it means for you to develop a relationship with those who are different from you.

- Share what relationships across race, culture, or class have meant for you in the past.
- What will it take for you to move beyond your comfort zone as a congregation?
- What do you yet need to do to prepare yourselves?
- What small things can you begin to do with great love?

Continue to How We Exclude



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