

In the church there is no 'them,' only 'us'

by Keary Kincannon



Peter fairly exploded with his good news: "It's God's own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from – if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open. The Message he sent to the children of Israel – that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again – well, he's doing it everywhere, among everyone."

– (Acts 10:34-36 The Message)

The first 18 years of my life I lived an isolated experience with all the privileges of being the son of a white middle-class military officer. I attended all-white schools, lived in all-white neighborhoods and worshiped in all-white churches. If I encountered others from a different race it was on a naval base with my father, where I always was given the respect and privilege of my father's rank.



Pastor Keary Kincannon and members of the diverse congregation of Rising Hope UMC.

Even as I attended seminary, I never imagined that one day I would pastor such an ethnically, racially and economically diverse congregation as Rising Hope United Methodist Mission Church. As a white middle-class European-American, I am in the minority. The majority of our congregation is racially black but not all African-American. We also have African members from Liberia and Ghana and Afro-Caribbean members from Jamaica, the Virgin Islands and Haiti. Hispanic cultures are also represented from countries that span the Americas: Peru and Chile in South America, Guatemala and El Salvador in Central

America, Mexico in North America, and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean. It also is not uncommon to meet someone from Korea, Thailand or China.

Being united and coexisting across racial and ethnic lines requires an ability to accept the diversity of God's creation. Yet, I actually think the greater witness to the unity we have in Christ at Rising Hope is the economic and educational diversity of our congregation.

The cultural gap between those who live in poverty and those who live with plenty is huge. One group grows up with a mind-set of survival, and the other grows up experiencing every need cared for. The vast majority of the members would be considered poor by federal guidelines. Most have experienced homelessness at some time in their lives. Yet this is not our entire story. Rising Hope also has some solidly middle-class members. We have had members join us who are functionally illiterate, and members join who hold Ph.Ds. We have families surviving on minimum wage jobs or Social Security disability checks and families with professional careers and six-figure incomes.

What unites us in the midst of our diversity is our mission. It is not that our race, our ethnicity, our education or income levels are ignored or unimportant. What is most important is our calling and mission to serve the least, the lost, the lonely and the left out in our community. We take Jesus seriously when he says, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers [or sisters] of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25:40 NIV)

We also are clear that Jesus did not come to call the righteous but the sinner (Matthew 9:13). If Jesus gathered his disciples from among the most disreputable members of his society (tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners) can we do any less? We are not called simply to serve the least, the lost, the lonely, and the left out, but also to recruit them for our mission. Volunteers in the ministries of Rising Hope come from both the middle-class churches that support us financially and the people in need of the services we provide. You cannot always tell the difference between those who are serving in our food pantry and those who need the services of our food pantry (because sometimes they are one and the same).

A former chair of Rising Hope's Church Council is a recovering crack addict. The current chair came from Liberia, where his father was a United Methodist circuit pastor. We have had lay leaders who have been homeless and those who always have been financially successful. Key leadership positions at Rising Hope are being filled by ex-offenders as well as by those the world would call "respectable" citizens. God shows no partiality to a person's background; what is important to God is a person's heart, what they value, and whom they serve.

I am clearly in an appointment with many people whose cultural backgrounds are very different from mine. But the gospel of Jesus Christ makes very clear that in the church there is no "them," only "us." □

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