

5 PRACTICAL TRUTHS ABOUT THE INTERCULTURAL MINISTRY & CHURCH TRANSFORMATION

Revs. Eulando Henton & Kate Murphy

USING THIS CONVERSATION GUIDELINE

- *We recommend listening/watching the workshop together with your small group.*
- *Below are some points from the workshop around which you can have conversation but feel free to go off script and use any other parts of the workshop that stirs a response.*
- *Remember, the conversation is not about recalling content, but sharing your honest responses to them, both emotionally, intellectually, and even physically. Help create a safe space in which one can explore and express all aspects of their response to the workshop.*
- *Every question will land differently for a white person and for a person of color because of the racialized experience in America. And some questions are directed to white people (e.g. how they were taught racism) and others are directed to people of color (e.g. how they experienced and responded to racism).*

CENTRAL PREMISE: INTERCULTURAL MINISTRY **REQUIRES** WHOLE CHURCH TRANSFORMATION

TRUTH #1: **PRONOUNS MATTER: THE WAY WE TALK ABOUT THE CHURCH FORMS THE CHURCH**

Practice:

Notice the pronouns you use in front of the word church. Is it 'my' church, 'our' church or God's church? In the PCUSA we like deep theology—this is easy to discount and overlook. But 'out of the heart the mouth speaks,' the way we talk about church when we aren't consciously 'doing' theology reveals a lot about the hidden truths that guide our life together.

Questions for Leaders:

1. What pronouns do you use when describing the church you attend? Is it 'your' church? 'Our' church? Or is it 'God's' church? Notice what emotions this discussion brings up in you. Is your first response to dismiss this as 'stupid' or 'semantics?' If we all agree that the church belongs to God, why is it inconsequential to be intentional about naming it that way?
2. Do you believe it would make a difference in the discernment process if you used language intentionally in a way that reminded you that the church belongs to God and not to church leaders? We believe that sometimes what 'we' desire and what God desires is not the same and the intentional use of right pronouns can help us rightly order conflicting desires. Do you agree or disagree?
3. What pronouns or language do you use when describing people who do not belong to the church you attend? Do you describe people outside the congregation as 'them' or as 'neighbors?' Could intentionally shifting the language you use concerning those who do not worship with you help you uncover your responsibility and interconnectedness?
4. Who is served by your church—members? Outsiders? Jesus? When the felt needs of these groups are in conflict—whose needs take priority? Who advocates for the needs of people who are not already inside your community?

TRUTH #2: **UNDERSTANDING QUESTIONS MATTER:** THE QUESTIONS WE ASK DURING DECISION MAKING SHAPE THE DECISIONS WE MAKE. A NEW CHURCH REQUIRES NEW QUESTIONS.

Practice:

Notice what questions get asked when leaders and members make decisions. Replace the standard questions with a new foundational question: What does faithfulness of Jesus Christ look like in this situation.

Questions for Leaders:

1. List those common questions raised around the session & committee tables—examples could be: How much will it cost? What does the Book of Order say? Will it work? Will the _____ group buy in? Will this grow the church? How might this blow up on us? What kind of precedent will this set for the future?
2. We suggest intentionally replacing those questions with one central foundational question: What does faithfulness to Jesus Christ look like in this situation? We think that sometimes faithfulness to Jesus requires making costly, risky, unpopular, misunderstood and even ruinous decisions. Asking the question 'is this faithful' first keeps holy options on the table. As Jesus prayed, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children." We believe that truly wise servant leaders make decisions as children approaching the kingdom of Heaven—asking the question, 'what would please you in this situation Jesus?' Of course, faithful leaders will still talk about money, conflict, marketing and mitigating risks—but in the context of being faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Would you be willing to consider first what faithfulness to Jesus looks like?
3. When we ask other questions before we ask 'what does faithfulness look like' what theology are we operating from?
4. Do you believe that Jesus will provide his church with the resources and wisdom to be faithful to him?
5. Do you believe asking different questions will produce different decisions? Why or why not?
6. In making decisions, do you believe your church intentionally seeks to be faithful to Jesus or to the institution?

TRUTH #3: **CONFLICTS MATTER:** WE BELIEVE CONFLICT IS ONE TOOL THE HOLY SPIRIT USES TO GROW AND TRANSFORM GOD'S PEOPLE, THEREFORE WE DO NOT AVOID, IGNORE OR MANAGE CONFLICT, WE LEVERAGE IT

Practice

Do a conflict audit of the church. List current conflicts. List common coping strategies. Spend some time seeking the Holy Spirit and discerning some holy practices for facing conflict in ways that trust God's providence. We believe that, in communities intentionally seeking transformation and intercultural ministry, conflict is not a sign that something (or someone!) is wrong. Conflict is a TOOL used by the Holy Spirit to grow individuals and communities closer to the 'full stature of Christ.' (Ephesians 4:1)

Questions for Leaders:

1. Is there conflict in the church? Describe it.

2. How do you handle conflict? What strategies do you use?
3. What do your strategies reveal about your theology around conflict? For example, do you avoid conflict because you believe that people who love God always agree? Do you manage conflict because you believe a 'good' pastor will please everyone all the time?
4. Does scripture confirm or challenge your belief about conflict? If you believe that God's people always get along—can you find scripture to support that belief? What does the bible teach us about the presence of conflict in faith communities? How does God show up in conflict?
5. Using scripture and your lived experience of holiness as evidence, list practices of faithful leadership during conflict. What happens when communities avoid conflict? What happens when communities respond to conflict unfaithfully? What happens when communities face conflict faithfully.
6. Can you make a plan to shift your practices surrounding conflict? Can you create an accountability system to help you take risks in implementing this plan? What would that look like?

TRUTH #4: **CALLING MATTERS: ALL PEOPLE ARE CALLED TO THE LOVE AND SALVATION OF JESUS CHRIST. NOT ALL PEOPLE ARE CALLED AND EQUIPPED FOR LIFE IN A HEALTHY AND HOLY INTERCULTURAL MINISTRY.**

Practice

Notice (or discern) the call God has put on your life and on the life of your congregation. Your calling is the life for which you will 'leave all things behind.' The calling of your life and the mission of the church is the first and ultimate priority of your life and the life of the local church you attend.)

Questions for Leaders:

1. Do you believe the church universal is called by God to be a multi-ethnic intercultural community? Why or why not? What scripture or experiences form the basis of your belief?
2. Do you believe that the church you attend can spontaneously transform into a healthy and holy multi-ethnic community? If yes, then why hasn't that already occurred? If no, what kind of energy and resources are you prepared to commit to becoming a healthy and holy multi-ethnic community?
3. If you do believe that your church is called to do the work of transformation—will you be honest with those who attend your church about the costs, risks, discomfort and change associated with this call? Why or why not?
4. If you do not believe your church is called to transform to become a healthy and holy multi-ethnic community, will you be honest in communicating that uncomfortable truth with those who attend the church? Why or why not?
5. We believe that the love, grace and salvation of Jesus Christ is for everyone. We do not believe that every call of the body of Christ is for everybody. If your church is called to the work of transformation to create a healthy and holy intercultural community—do you believe every person currently attending your church is called to that mission? If someone is not called or equipped to be part of a multi-ethnic church in a healthy way—what does faithfulness look like towards that person?

6. We believe that everyone is welcome to be part of the particular mission of the local church—but everyone is not welcome to re-shape the mission of the local church to suit their own needs and preferences. Can you accept that if you are called to this work, not everyone in your congregation will be called to join you and that, like Paul and Barnabus, you may have to separate for a season? Is the priority keeping everyone together or becoming a multi-ethnic church?
7. Conversely, if you are called by the Spirit to help form a healthy and holy multi-ethnic church but you currently belong to a church which is not called to that work—can you accept that you may need to lovingly and humbly depart to join a congregation that is ready to seek this transformation? Can you imagine that your departure might be one of the tools the Lord will use to help the church see the urgency of this work?

TRUTH #5: **CULTURE MATTERS: THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST IS A HEALTHY AND HOLY INTERCULTURAL COMMUNITY WHERE ALL CULTURES ARE VALUED AND WELCOMED AND NO CULTURE IS SUPREME.**

Practice

Notice your own culture. Recognize that it is just that—your culture, it is not the only, default or supreme expression of the gospel.

Questions for Leaders:

1. If you are a white person—what elements of life in your congregation are shaped by white culture? Make an extensive list. Some examples might be: music style, standard attire of worshippers, composed vs. spontaneous prayers, responsive readings, gender neutral pronouns for God, educational background of leaders, yearly bag pipes at ‘homecoming’ service, smocked dresses, bow ties, 20 minute sermons, worship confined to one hour, etc.
2. If you are a white person and you cannot identify or describe your culture, it is highly likely that you (consciously or unconsciously) believe that your culture is the default or standard that is God’s preference. Do you see the danger of this bias?
3. Do you identify aspects of the worshipping life of other ethnic groups as unique to their culture? Can you make a list of those aspects?
4. Do you believe that God prefers one culture over another?
5. What does it look like to have a church that finds unity in Christ and not in common culture—a church of people who have ‘nothing in common but Jesus?’ How might this be joyful? How might this be uncomfortable? Do you believe that God can use the discomfort and the gifts as tools for spiritual growth and transformation?
6. How are you prepared to make space for a brother or sister whose culture is different than your own? How are you prepared to hold space for your own authentic identity? Is it okay with you if the person next to you in the pew is louder/quieter/more active/less expressive than you? Is it okay with God?
7. We believe that one revelation of the gospel is that it forms communities where Jesus has ‘made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.’ (Ephesians 2:14) We believe that when Jesus ‘makes the two one’ that is different than making the two the same. Are you committed to finding unity with others without demanding assimilation? In the church where you worship, do you have the opportunity to be reconciled with believers of other ethnicities—or are you worshipping with people who share your culture and who are similar to the people you work with, live with and socialize with?

BONUS TRUTH: THIS IS THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

CHURCH TRANSFORMATION AND GROWING HEALTHY AND HOLY INTERCULTURAL CHURCHES IS ONLY POSSIBLE THROUGH THE GLORY OF GOD. DISCIPLES, EVEN THE BEST AND MOST FAITHFUL, CANNOT MANAGE, CONTROL OR PRODUCE THIS WORK. IT IS A FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT AND CULTIVATING IT REQUIRES ABSOLUTE RADICAL VULNERABILITY ON OUR PART.

Practice

Face the truth that we can't make this happen—there is no secret sauce, there is no fool-proof 7 step plan, there is no conference you can attend that guarantees 'success.' Healthy and holy multi-ethnic churches are absolutely the work of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit does not work for us—'The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone [and every church] who is born of the Spirit.' (John 3:8) We can not decide to be successful in this calling, we can decide to be faithful in this calling—no matter what the outcome looks like.

Questions for Leaders:

1. Who is in control of the church you attend?
2. Have you ever experienced radical dependence on God? How were you changed by that experience?
3. Using scripture and your lived experience as evidence, does faithfulness to God always look like success?
4. Are you willing to be faithful to this calling even when faithfulness looks like failure?
5. We believe the work of church transformation and intercultural ministry requires radical trust in God—and we believe that radical trust in God births freedom for rest and the peace that passes understanding. What are your practices for rest and sabbath? Do they witness to a radical trust in God (or anxiety and hyper-responsibility)? Where do you find peace in this work—external affirmation from ministry or your radical acceptance by God?
6. We believe church transformation and intercultural ministry are signs of the resurrection. Resurrection only occurs after death. Are you willing to face death to experience resurrection? Do you need to maintain the life you have while you seek resurrection?