

Theology that Matters

Is Presbyterian Church prepared for ethnic demographic shift?

By Jin S. Kim

According to the U.S. Census, by 2050 we will be a nation where today's minorities will become the majority. America is already the most ethnically diverse country in the world's history. Yet in a country that is currently two-thirds Euro-American, how do we belong to a denomination that is 93 percent white? Even if we met the General Assembly's target of a 20 percent minority membership by 2010, the PCUSA would still not be representative of the larger population. Does this make sense in the light of the Presbyterian Church's impressive historical record in global evangelism?

Is our church prepared for this massive shift? What are we doing about all of the immigrants coming to our country, many of whom come from a Presbyterian background, due to our mission efforts long ago. The irony is that a gospel that was originally transmitted cross-culturally (white missionaries in Asia, Africa, South America) seems in this country to be contained within monocultural churches. Immigrants cannot understand how a gospel that seemed so transcendent in their home country seems so bound by race and culture in America. A racialized, ethnically and socio-economically segregated church remains our inescapable reality.

When white evangelicals want to defeat Amendment "A," "B," or "O," they will seek the support of ethnic evangelicals, which is fine. But where are our white brothers and sisters in our struggle for social justice, racial equality, affordable housing, immigration policy reform, and other pressing matters in our communities?

What "good news" do we evangelicals have to bring to this sad state of affairs? I have been to many evangelical gatherings, and even when many hundreds are present, you can count the minorities on one hand. Why are the vast majority of Presbyterian African-Americans, Asians, Hispanics and

Middle Easterners evangelical and conservative, yet do not feel enfranchised in the evangelical movement? Could it be that while we are all for orthodoxy and against gay ordination, that we have other concerns that are of critical importance to our communities?

When white evangelicals want to defeat Amendment "A," "B," or "O," they will seek the support of ethnic evangelicals, which is fine. But where are our white brothers and sisters in our struggle for social justice, racial equality, affordable housing, immigration policy reform, and other pressing matters in our communities? When will others advocate with us for a less onerous bureaucracy in the church? When will we actively help create new ethnic and multicultural churches that depart from the suburban model norm? There should be a natural alliance between white evangelicals and the vast majority of ethnic Presbyterians who are evangelical. Yet we are blind to this opportunity. Jesus

healed those who were stricken with blindness. He had an altogether different word for the willfully blind (see Rev. 3:17).

We seem to be stuck in the legacy of the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy that began in 1910, perpetuating to this day the false dichotomy between evangelism and social justice. Our evangelical churches are often as institutional, clerical-sacerdotal and sterile as liberal churches, except that we have "right belief." Some even celebrate the fact that our conservative churches are declining at a slower



Jin S. Kim

rate than the liberal churches!?! Jesus said of the Pharisees, "Do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach." (Mt. 23:3) And a little later, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe the mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith." (Mt. 23:23) In other words, they were orthodox, but failed to promote justice and practice compassion. Do we evangelicals need to hear this word afresh?

Those committed to orthodoxy in the PCUSA are considered part of the "renewal wing" of the church. I have a problem with the notion that the church would be "renewed" if the liberals were defeated or departed. A dying white, conservative church that holds on to its property to the bitter end instead of graciously inviting an ethnic fellowship needs renewal. An all white, middle class church in a socio-economically mixed neighborhood needs renewal. A conservative church with no young people needs renewal. An evangelical church that runs Alpha

but does not lift a finger for the poor needs renewal. A church that helps blacks in Africa but has no relations with blacks in America needs renewal. A church lusting after numerical growth and big structures to prove that it is "successful" needs renewal (not to mention repentance!).

I also believe that a prime obstacle to renewal is the insistence on one way of knowing. Every culture believes that its worldview, or epistemology, is "normal" (normative). In culturally pluralistic America, we can no longer afford that illusion. I have heard many Westerners remark that Korean Christianity is syncretistic because of its Confucian influence.

Yes, I can personally attest that there is strong influence, but is American Christianity any less syncretistic? I see a strong Platonic, Aristotelian and Enlighten-

churches are segregated by race, education, income level and worship style? The movement towards becoming a multicultural church is nothing short of a Biblical mandate (Acts 2, Rev. 7).

Literally, to be evangelical is to proclaim good news. One way Jesus defined good news was this: "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Only when we integrate right doctrine (orthodoxy) with right practice (orthopraxis) and right suffering (orthopathema) will we enjoy right life (orthozoe). Only comprehensive renewal will lead us out of the grossly distorted and crippled evangelicalism of our day. A "church for others," as Bonhoeffer advocated, rather than one for its own institutional well being is precisely the good news that our world desperately needs.

It just may be God's plan that so many evangelicals from Asia, Africa, and South America have come to this country in recent years. Before we renew the whole

The irony is that a gospel that was originally transmitted cross-culturally (white missionaries in Asia, Africa, South America) seems in this country to be contained within monocultural churches. Immigrants cannot understand how a gospel that seemed so transcendent in their home country seems so bound by race and culture in America. A racialized, ethnically and socio-economically segregated church remains our inescapable reality.

ment influence on the way Euro-Americans do church. Let's be honest: There is no such thing as a "pure" church, a "cultureless" church, a "kingdom culture" church this side of heaven. The best we can do in the midst of all our fallen cultures is to mix it up, to affirm the gifts of God inherent in each culture, and to confront and correct in love the sinful distortions inherent in each culture. How else can we move towards a kingdom culture? How can we "submit to one another" (Eph. 5:21) if our

church, perhaps racial ethnic minority evangelicals are to help renew the evangelical wing first. Maybe then, we could really be used to renew the larger church. After all, Jesus teaches, "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much." (Lk. 16:10) With so much left to do, thank God for this word of hope!

Jin S. Kim, president of Presbyterians for Renewal, is pastor of Church of All Nations, PCUSA in Minneapolis