



WHY DOES IMPACT FOCUS ON PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT?

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Why The Impact Movement Focuses on People of African Descent

As a new campus missionary with Campus Crusade for Christ in the mid-1990's, I noticed something early on during my time at Kent State University. Although I had the privilege of seeing a number of African American students indicate decisions to receive Christ and then meet with me for personal discipleship, none of them wanted to continue on with their involvement in Campus Crusade after being invited to a weekly meeting or small group Bible study. Though one of the largest groups on campus, we were overwhelmingly made up of white students and staff members and had very few students of color involved in the ministry.

As a well-intentioned missionary reaching out to those that didn't know Christ, I learned something firsthand that Donald McGavran had stated years before when he said that "people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers."¹ In attempting to help these students grow in their faith, I was ignoring the influence that culture had in how their beliefs would be nurtured and developed. Once I came to this realization and changed our approach by partnering with an existing ministry that did outreach in a style most attractive to African Americans, we then began to see real success and fruitfulness.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE

One source defines culture as "the arts, beliefs,

customs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought created by a people or group at a particular time."² This could include, but is not limited to, preferences for food, music, clothing, family, time orientation and humor. Culture pervades all areas of life whether one realizes it or not. In fact, there is no human being on the planet that exists apart from culture.

Since people make up the Body of Christ, there is nowhere in the world where Christianity is expressed outside of a given culture. Even if that culture is made up of individuals of varying backgrounds (which is rare), that also creates a new cultural dynamic. Even in an intentional multi-cultural setting, all cultures of the world are not necessarily equally represented. For example, if a ministry is made up of white, Hispanic and black undergraduate college students, it doesn't necessarily mean that a Korean graduate student would be attracted to that environment.

The example of the Apostle Paul is worth following when he said that he desired to become all things to all men in order to save some. But even Paul realized he couldn't be all things to all people all at the same time.³ Paul realized that for the purposes of evangelism, when he was with Jews, he emphasized his Jewishness. When with Gentiles, he became like a Gentile.

Recognizing the role that culture plays in world missions, many missiologists have become advocates of the People Group Approach. A people group is defined as:



“A significantly large sociological grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another. From the viewpoint of evangelization this is the largest possible group within which the gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance.”⁴

This approach to missions takes into account the vital role that culture plays in the life of any human being and, therefore, its influence on evangelistic methods. It recognizes that, for example, a second-generation Mexican American, a fifth-generation German American and a tenth-generation African American may all be U.S. citizens and all live in the same city, but they each belong to very different people groups. It would take a different approach to effectively reach each of these individuals. Even as individuals grow up in an increasingly pluralistic and diverse world, many (if not, most) still choose to spend the bulk of their time with those that are of their own ethnic group and will be most receptive to the gospel when it is presented in the context of their own culture surroundings.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

For the cross-culture missionary, the importance of contextualization must be emphasized. David Racey provides the following definition for contextualization:

“Contextualization is the process of making the gospel accessible within a particular cultural context in an understandable and culturally meaningful way without losing the truth and integrity of the message. It is any action that puts the gospel into a more understandable, culturally relevant form by including elements from a target culture’s customs, language, and traditions.”⁵

To put it another way, whenever a given ministry chooses to focus on reaching a particular segment of the population, that leadership is also making a decision to not focus on other segments. Therefore, when a campus ministry chooses to focus on reaching out to students at a university that means they are choosing to not focus on reaching families, senior citizens or elementary-aged children in the surrounding community. Far from being unbiblical, this strategic mindset helps provide focus to those whom that ministry will target, knowing that many

from this target audience will eventually reach out to other audiences.

In addition, having contextualized movements gives more people the opportunity to gain valuable leadership training and experience. For all of the benefits that the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties brought to people of color in the United States, one of the downsides was that individuals that had been leading in a black cultural context were now relegated to inferior positions in an integrated environment. It was not they were not able or qualified to lead in an integrated setting, but most white people that had authority and power were not willing to step aside so that an African American could get a fair shot to lead.

In the same manner, contextualized movements provide the opportunities for young students of color needed to develop in their leadership. Oftentimes their unique giftedness and leadership styles, which are valued and esteemed within their own community, are dismissed or devalued within a dominate culture environment. A movement of evangelism and discipleship that enhances leadership within a given culture can be most effective in reaching those that don’t know Christ.

THE MISSION OF THE IMPACT MOVEMENT

Continuing on with the rich heritage of focused ministry strategy found with Campus Crusade for Christ, The Impact Movement has as its mission to take the truth of Jesus Christ to the campus, community and world by producing leaders of African descent who are spiritually focused, financially responsible and morally fit. The Impact Movement acknowledges the unique contribution that those of African descent make to the Body of Christ and seeks to enhance the elements of black culture that bring glory to God and redeem those elements that do harm.

We believe that a black expression of Christianity is not only valid, but enhances the Body of Christ around the world.⁶ In addition, we feel that other expressions from other cultures are equally valid and also enhance the Body of Christ. An approach to evangelism and discipleship that focuses on a given people group not only coincides with the historical approaches within many mission agencies, but also follows the approach of Jesus himself. Look at what C. Peter Wagner has to say about Jesus’ approach:



“Beyond differences in political positions, social class, vocation, age and disposition, Jesus’ followers belonged to the same ethnic group, had the same color skin, shared similar cultural values, including prejudices, ate and abstained from the same foods, followed the same dress code, spoke the same language and perceived themselves to have a common affinity for one another.”⁷

There can be no mistaking God’s heart for people of all nations of the world, so if Jesus was concerned with reaching the whole world,⁸ why was his select group of disciples all Jewish and all male? Perhaps he was modeling an approach to missions for His followers to continue on after he had departed. Knowing that the heart of Jesus was for both the Jew and Gentile, the only logical reason for his approach was that it was more strategic in nature than theologically motivated. For if his impetus was purely theological then his core group of disciples would likely have been made up with followers representing the diversity of His day.

In following Jesus’ approach, it does not mean that we should all invest our lives in Galilean Jews. That is not the point. The principle here was that Jesus invested in those that were culturally the same as he and, in time, even called some through his Spirit to serve as culture-crossing missionaries. Even today, most Christians will serve in a ministry context with those that are culturally similar to themselves, although God calls some of us to leave our own culture, like myself, to reach those of another people group.

MULTI-CULTURAL MINISTRY & RACIAL RECONCILIATION

There are some that have trouble accepting the people group approach to evangelization due to its seeming contradiction with the teaching of Scripture on unity in the Body.⁹ But it needs to be remembered that our ministry focus is to reach those that do not already have a relationship with God through Christ. In order to sit at the table of reconciliation with those of other cultures, those individuals have to first get to the table!

As has already been stated, most people in the world feel most comfortable with and live most of their life around people of their own culture. In light of this, we believe that the most effective approach to evangelism is presenting the gospel in the context of a specified

culture. It is extremely unreasonable and unwise to ask those far from God to jump over a myriad of cultural hurdles in order to hear about Jesus.

This does not mean that we are in any way opposed to attempts at racial reconciliation where all cultures are esteemed, valued and appreciated. Prayer times, outreaches, community service projects and social events are just a few ways that different movements on a campus can come together as equals and peers in the family of God. However, the assimilation of minority cultures can have unintended consequences. When any ministry predominately comprised of those from one culture is seeking to become multi-cultural, it is wise to heed the words of Richard Twiss, president of Wiconi International:

“It is most difficult for any of us to resist the temptation to attach a biblical value to our own cultural preferences or distinctives, as though no other culture could be as biblical or valuable as ours. Many Western missionaries over the past few centuries have couched the gospel in their own cultural distinctives – language, musical instruments, housing structures – as though these preferences were biblical or holy, often declaring outright that the cultural preferences of the indigenous peoples were in fact unbiblical or unholy.”¹⁰

For example, ethnic minorities that become part of a white-majority ministry are typically trained up in an environment that is culturally different than their own background and, therefore, ill-equipped or unprepared to lead in their own cultural context. In developing campus spiritual movements everywhere, we are not advocating a vision in which a few students of color add a little diversity to largely white movements. What we are trusting God for are movements in every community and in every people group where individuals can meet Jesus right where they are at and not have to leave their culture at the door to do so.

For those movements that are seeking to be truly multi-cultural and not just have a few students of color represented in their ministry, a word of caution is offered. Although these types of ministries are admirable and necessary in some environments, they will almost never be sufficient in reaching lost students of African descent who come from a background that is exclusively or primarily made up of other black people. Even on campuses where a



multi-ethnic ministry is needed, we also offer that in order to reach lost black students that don't prefer a multi-cultural environment, an Impact chapter is still required.

For instance, most major state universities have a predominately white population. In many cases it is 80-95% of the overall student body. If that is the reality, even a movement that has a ministry reflecting the percentage of the student body on that campus, the numbers of African Americans would still be relatively small. For example, a movement of 200 on a campus of 20,000 with a black population of 6% would have 12 African American students involved. If percentages hold true across the board, there would be 0-1 black students on the leadership team. If this were the case, the average African American non-Christian that entered into that ministry setting would 1) likely not see themselves well-represented up front; 2) likely not see other African Americans in authority or positions of decision making and 3) therefore, not consider this to be a "diverse" movement or a place for them.

For the sake of argument, let's say this movement is tremendously committed to reaching the 1,200 African Americans on that campus. They have compiled a leadership team where blacks comprise half of the team and the worship team is predominately African American. In addition, meetings regularly feature local African American pastors as speakers. This is all admirable and needed. But does the average white student, who makes up 85% of the campus population, now feel that this ministry is "for him?" What about Latino, Asian, Native American and international students? Where is their place in leadership or up front?

On campuses that are truly diverse (i.e. a majority population does not exist), an effective multi-cultural ministry is possible with a lot of prayer and hard work. But on campuses where white students make up the vast majority, a multi-cultural movement that effectively reaches all audiences on the campus is nearly impossible. This is why we advocate an emphasis on culturally contextualized movements, with the possibility of multi-cultural movements alongside ethnically contextualized movements where the environment dictates it.

THE GREAT COMMISSION

In conclusion, it needs to be stated that The Impact

Movement is unequivocally committed to helping fulfill the Great Commission. We want to see every person in the world reached with the gospel no matter the color of their skin or their cultural background. While we are committed to building godly leaders of African descent, our heart is to see all peoples reached for Christ.

Any individual, regardless of ethnicity, is welcome to be a part of a local Impact chapter. In fact, The Impact Movement has had leaders on campus and at the national level that are not of African descent, including myself. Any person that wants to be a part of the Impact mission is more than welcome to do so.

For those of African descent that choose to participate in other ministries, we support and encourage them as our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our desire is that each and every person of African descent has an opportunity to hear about Jesus in an environment that is most conducive to them hearing and responding to the gospel.

We believe that The Impact Movement can make its greatest contribution to the Great Commission by seeking to develop local movements on the campus, in the community and around the world where people of African descent can be won to faith in Christ and trained how to effectively reach others with the gospel. We do not feel that our approach to ministry is the only way, but we do believe it is a biblical and effective approach in reaching the lost.

We affirm all believers that are seeking to reach others for Christ and encourage partnership with others any time that will enhance the accomplishment of the mission God has given us. Bringing lasting, eternal change to communities of African descent is a seemingly insurmountable task, but we believe that our God can do the impossible.¹¹

NOTES

¹ McGavran, Donald. *Understanding Church Growth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990. p. 163.

² *The American Heritage Dictionary*, Based on the New 2nd College Edition. New York, NY: Dell Publishing Co., 1983. pp. 168-169.

³ I Corinthians 9:19-23

⁴ Wagner, C. Peter. *Acts of the Holy Spirit: A Modern Commentary on the Book of Acts*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2000. p. 30

⁵ Racey, David. "How to Communicate in a Relational

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Culture.” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 32, No. 3.
July 1996. p. 304-309.

⁶ I Corinthians 12:12-27

⁷ Wagner, p. 31

⁸ Genesis 12:2,3; Matthew 28:18-20; Revelation 7:9

⁹ Ephesians 4:4-6; John 17:20-26

¹⁰ Twiss, Richard. *One Church, Many Tribes:*

Following Jesus the Way God Made You. Ventura, CA:
Regal Books, 2000. p. 113

¹¹ Matthew 19:26

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