

A Multi-Ethnic Ministry Framework for Campus Ministry: Holding Tightly to the Lord and Loosely to Our Own Agenda

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Introduction

Should an effective multi-ethnic ministry function any differently than a thriving ministry with majority students? Should people of different cultures be able to adapt to a particular model for ministry or are there legitimate issues that should cause a divergence from other ministry models even though they produce impressive results?

I am convinced that ministry with people of different cultures will, of necessity, look substantially different from models that may work well in more homogeneous settings. In this paper, I make some preliminary recommendations for how to think about multi-ethnic ministry and some factors to consider in terms of participation, practice, power, prayer and praise. I write as a campus minister at a small, liberal arts college in New England. Amherst College has 1600 students and is approximately 35% students of color. The Christian Fellowship that I currently work with is 60% students of color.

I. Participation

One common ministry model operates in terms of concentric circles with the center circle being maximum participation. A person in the outermost circle may have simply expressed interest in the fellowship by signing a form during orientation, attending an evangelistic event or by friendship with a member. A person in a closer circle may attend a large group meeting or small group occasionally. Movement toward the center involves regular small group and large group attendance and may include participation in a high commitment study, small group or praise team leadership, conference and camp attendance, participation in a summer missions project, and involvement with the executive leadership team. A person generally takes on additional responsibilities and commitments as they move towards the center (see Figure 1 below). The concentric circle ministry model has proved to be a highly effective model of discipleship and means to build a chapter and for that I am thankful. There are, however, special challenges when this model is utilized with students of color.



Figure 1: Concentric Circle Model

The concentric circle model, as is true of any framework, can be abused. I am particularly concerned with two misuses. First, leaders sometimes apply it inflexibly with no allowance for exceptions. It is quite possible to take a good thing and destroy it by an overly strict application. This was the error of the Pharisees. Secondly, there can be a view that heightened involvement in the church or fellowship is always better. Although it is seldom stated, there is often an implicit message that one's commitment to Christ is in direct proportion to involvement in the fellowship. The more one does with the fellowship, the more spiritual one is. In this paper, I want to challenge the "more is better" assumption and, especially, the universal application of the concentric circle model to all people and situations.

The dominant culture meets many of the needs of majority students. This frees them to engage in the activities of the concentric circles described above. Majority students and staff are often unaware of ways that many of their needs are met and so, consequently, wonder why minority students and staff raise so many concerns or, as is more often the case, simply "vote with their feet" and drop out of the fellowship, if they were ever involved at all.

Carl Ellis has said some things that I find invaluable in trying to understand the tensions students of color face. He says that the critical issue in multi-ethnic relationships is an appreciation of one another's "core issues." He identifies core issues as being: personal, social and cultural. *Personal* issues are universal, internal reactions such as fear, loneliness and anxiety. *Social* concerns are such things as education, health and family. While these are common to all people, there can be dramatic

differences in each individual's situation according to their particular social and ethnic group's historical and cultural context. The *cultural* core issue relates to a specific situation and tends to be unique in its expression to any one people group.¹

Majority people have many of their social and cultural core issues addressed by the broader society and may not even need to think about them. Because of this, majority people are much more likely to focus on personal core issues. Because personal core issues are common to all people, there is some attraction to these areas for people of color as well. However, like Eric Erikson's basic needs pyramid, it is far more difficult for students of color to focus on personal core issues alone when so many other needs are pressing.

Differing constellations of core issues mean that behaviors that appear identical on the outside have varied meanings. A student with a long family tradition of college education may view studying quite differently than one coming out of a family and a community where few if any of their members have attended college. What might be "academic idolatry" for the former may be good stewardship for the latter.

The social and cultural core issues of a student of color may require involvement in groups and activities that are not at all felt needs for majority students. Some of these commitments may relate to central aspects of a person's identity. For example, a black student who has not lived in a predominantly white setting previously may find it essential to be involved in a black church and the Black Student Union on campus. These activities speak to who she or he is in a way that a multi-ethnic Christian group simply cannot. A person of color may be placed in the uncomfortable situation where, in order to move deeper into the fellowship's concentric circles, they will have to reduce or eliminate ties with groups that better meet their social and cultural concerns. This creates a basic identity tension that majority students are simply not required to address.

For instance, I have attended a Kwanzaa celebration where a highly respected, elder member of the community called upon each member of the black community to do certain things. She is a Christian woman and the requests were good and reasonable. They were things that would strengthen the black community and things that would make each student's parents proud. However, they would all require payment of that most precious of commodities, time.

When students of color are asked to do time-demanding things within their own ethnic community or church, these may well conflict with expectations of the Christian fellowship. These students are then called upon to make fundamental loyalty decisions that go to the core of their being. Are they Black or Christian? No one should have to face that kind of artificial choice. The Christian group that causes them to do that is creating an unnecessary and painful marginalization of the student of color.

¹ Carl Ellis, "Managing Diversity" (lecture presented at the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship New England Regional Staff Meeting at Toah Nipi Retreat Center, Rindge, NH on December 12, 2001).

Carl Ellis speaks about a “window of marginalization.” There are four aspects to the window. **Relational** marginalization takes place in direct, personal interactions. **Systemic** marginalization happens because of traditional social conventions. Ellis used the example of an elderly black man being required to call a 10 year old white boy “Mister” so and so. Marginalization **by Design** is intentional while marginalization **by Default** is unintended and comes about due to a genuine or perceived lack of power (See Figure 2 below).²

Majority people, if they address marginalization at all, tend to focus on the “Relational by Design” quadrant. Even some of the excellent work by Spencer Perkins and Chris Rice has highlighted this area of racial reconciliation.³ It is the most natural starting point for dialogue across racial lines and an important one.

	By Design	By Default
<i>Relational</i>	XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX	
Systemic		

Figure 2: Carl Ellis’s “Windows of Marginalization”

If the dialogue does not move beyond the upper left quadrant, however, then some of the most significant needs of minorities will not be addressed. Further, even if relational issues are being attended to within the context of the fellowship, there is a strong likelihood that people of color will be marginalized by a failure to examine their needs related to the other three quadrants. This is because the expectations and values of “committed” majority fellowship members may themselves militate against considering the other quadrants.⁴

Jesus broke with social and religious conventions to go through Samaria, to speak with and to teach women and to touch lepers. He used Samaritans as the

² Ibid.

³ Spencer Perkins and Chris Rice, *Racial Healing for the Sake of the Gospel: More Than Equals* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993, 2000).

⁴ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). This book provides a fascinating sociological analysis and explanation of why white evangelicals and blacks view their world so differently. They suggest that the theological system of evangelicals hinders them from being able to see the systemic injustice involved in the racism that they oppose in principle. The personal emphasis that is so important to evangelical religion actually helps to perpetuate racism.

positive illustration of ones who fulfilled the Great Commandment by loving the Lord and his neighbor and as a proper model of thankfulness. In each instance, he both challenged the status quo and affirmed the marginalized.⁵

Peter learned that the gospel was for all people through a repugnant vision, having to travel a substantial distance to Cornelius's house and by seeing clear evidence of God's Spirit moving amongst the Gentiles. The Holy Spirit was at work in a manner, with a people, and in a location that Peter did not expect. His own ethnocentric perspective had limited his thinking about the inclusiveness of God's kingdom. God chose to explode Peter's restrictions for the sake of the Gentiles and the kingdom of God.⁶

A recognition that the gospel and God's love are for all people means that we must hold tightly to the Lord and loosely to our own agendas. It means that we must be careful to analyze our cultural blinders and expressions, expectations and methodology in order to allow the Holy Spirit to work in whom, through whom and in the ways God desires.

II. Practice

On the night that the police arrested Rosa Parks in Montgomery, Alabama, leaders began making telephone calls. The next night black ministers and professionals met and planned the famous bus boycott of Montgomery's segregated bus system. They met at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the minister.

Dr. King led an entire community into an effective response against injustice by connecting faith in God and concern with the lost with social concern and action. He preached, saying "...that any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men...and is not concerned with the slums that damn them...and the social conditions that cripple them...is a dry and dust religion."⁷

I fear that many churches and fellowships have become precisely "dry and dust religion" for lack of a whole person and whole society concern. This is seldom *by design*, but it is often *by default* as our programs and commitments leave no room for action or involvement outside of the bounds of our own church or fellowship. Ministry is more complicated when we must make decisions about changing or canceling programs, allowing "exceptions to the rule" in leadership selection or participation in a training event, but I believe that is the kind of tough decision making that "shepherds

⁵ John 4; Luke 10:38-42; Mt. 8:1-4; Luke 10:25-37; Luke 17:11-19.

⁶ Acts 10.

⁷ Nancy Shuker, *World Leaders Past and Present: Martin Luther King* (New York: Burke Publishing Company Limited, 1985), 47.

of the church of God”⁸ are required to make for the sake of the people they lead and protect.

It is also uncomfortable for us to be out of control. Control, predictability, certainty and plans are never as definite as we might like in any field. When we walk with God there is really no telling where the adventure will lead us. Philip was called away from an ongoing revival to an isolated spot in the dessert. When the Ethiopian was converted and baptized, Philip was transported away by the Spirit to another place.⁹ No doubt this was a surprise to both Philip and the Ethiopian! It was also not our ideal “follow-up” plan, but God was the One clearly doing the directing.

I believe that we will often experience a tension between our desire to train and equip people, our plans for how best to do that, and what God wants. This may be true fellowship wide, but more often it relates to God’s plans for a particular individual or individuals. This is not to say that people should do whatever they want, but rather to recognize the obvious, that God’s will involves a far broader scope than ours, and than our own faith community. God may want one of our key leaders to leave to study abroad in Taiwan just when we seem to have a lot of momentum. If that is true, we can trust that God will do something through and in that person in Taiwan as well as through their absence with us. We know that to be true even if we never see the outcome clearly.

An important part of our job, as a community, and especially as a leader in a faith community, is to help individuals to ascertain God’s direction and will for their life as well as the community’s. Where will they most be stretched and where will they have the most influence for God’s kingdom? Where will they, as someone has said, be challenged enough to “fall on their knees but not on their face?” It may be that a person’s ideas are good, but the timing is wrong. A person may have a thought that takes us, and the fellowship with which we work, in a completely different direction than we planned, but it is from God. All of this is to recognize in practice what we declare in doxology: *Jesus is Lord*.

When someone comes to us with an idea or commitment that does not fit our plans, our default position should not be that this is wrong unless he or she proves to us otherwise. Rather, we should ask questions and help them to consider if this is from God. Perhaps, we should even take the positive view that it is likely that, in God’s sovereignty, they are in the right place and we want to support them where God has placed them. This was John the Baptist’s approach with tax collectors and soldiers who came to him asking, “What should we do then?” He essentially told them to carry out their work in a godly way, but he did not tell them to change their jobs.¹⁰ The apostle

⁸ Acts 20:28.

⁹ Acts 8.

¹⁰ Luke 3:10-14.

Paul took the same approach with the Corinthians when he advised them to remain in the situation they were in when God called them to himself.¹¹

Instead of neat concentric circles, this sort of model may look more like overlapping circles (see Figure 3). The leader's role is not to reorder the circles, but to provide support to individuals in their faith community by whatever means they are able. If God is calling someone to do something, then it is reasonable to expect that God will also provide prayer warriors to stand beside that person in prayer, if not in actual physical presence as a partner in whatever they are doing.

Family

Campus Fellowship

Church

BSU

Academics

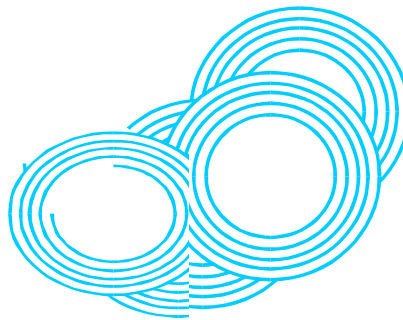


Figure 3: Circles of Involvement

How we help people in decision making and how we support them in those decisions is clearly more broadly applicable than people of color. Several years ago I had a white student who believed God wanted him to be an editor of the school newspaper. As we talked and prayed, this seemed like a wise decision. It was consistent with his field of study and long-term goals and he clearly saw it as an avenue for ministry. While there was no one else to join him on the newspaper staff, his small group prayed regularly for him and asked him how things were going. This student has now completed his PhD in English and is following Christ as college professor.

The same principle applies for the student athlete whose practice and game schedule prevents him from any sort of regular attendance at a fellowship activity. This person should not be made to feel "less spiritual," but supported in what she or he is doing. Likewise with the student who believes that he or she needs to be involved with their church for bible study or a small group.

Another instance that comes to mind was a Latina student. She was a pre-medical student going into her junior year and had been a small group leader during her sophomore year. Her dream was to become a physician and return to serve her

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 7:17-24.

community. She told me that her junior year would be incredibly demanding academically and that she would need to “disappear” for the year. As we talked this through, it was evident that she was struggling with the desire to be both a responsible student and a faithful follower of Christ. We decided that she would come only to our Friday Night Fellowship and that, otherwise, she would focus on her studies. She had a network of friends who would pray for her and support her. She also committed to coming to a week long camp at the end of the year and leading a small group in her senior year. She did both of those things. She has now graduated from medical school and is working in her home community.

I think that it is also worth noting that students of color are likely to have varying degrees of comfort within a multi-ethnic fellowship at different times in their life. They are likely, particularly in the college years, to move through several shifts in understanding their own personal and ethnic identity. There may be times when it is exceedingly difficult for them to interact regularly with whites or people of ethnicities other than their own. Likewise, there may be times when it is very helpful for them to closely associate with a faith community whose membership is largely of their own ethnic make-up.

I have three concerns in proposing this model. The first is that students may be stretched too thin and be involved in too many things. This is, essentially, a Lordship issue and a matter of Christian maturity. People will need to make decisions about what to do and what not to do for their entire life. They now, in consultation with believers they respect, have the opportunity to learn some things about decision-making and trusting God.

The second area of concern is community. How does one develop a strong sense of community if the focus of involvement is so diffuse? I believe the answer lies in the above illustrations. If people have a sense that they are welcomed and loved, there will be community. A faith community that is constantly drawing its people in and sending them out is a healthy community. We have found Willow Creek’s definition of community very useful as a place where we can: know and be known, serve and be served, love and be loved and celebrate and be celebrated. We have also found it necessary to add to these a fifth characteristic. Our community must also be a place where we can forgive and be forgiven. It does require more effort to develop commitment to one another when there are less points of contact with the community (for example, only small group or prayer group attendance instead of large group and small group). It may be natural to feel this tension even more when one of the other foci is another faith community. Yet this also serves to force us to examine our own motives and be certain that our real goal is seeing people develop as disciples of Christ and that we are truly desirous of seeing Christ’s prayer fulfilled, that there be unity in the Body of Christ.¹²

¹² John 17:20-26.

My third concern has to do with the need to help people to know the scriptures. Biblical illiteracy is so widespread that there is a need to be intentional in providing training opportunities. It seems logical to help people to minimize other commitments during their college years so that they can learn as much as possible about being a follower of Jesus.

My question, however, is whether or not an academic approach is the most effective way of training a person in Jesus' school of discipleship. Patterns established in college tend to carry over after college years. There is no normative sense in scripture that gathering to study scripture, sing and pray should substitute for or delay our involvement in the world.

Jesus frequently emphasized the place of applying what we learn. His most famous teaching, "the Sermon on the Mount," ends this way:

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.¹³

Similarly, in his "Upper Room Discourse," Jesus told his disciples that their experience of the love of God would actually be enhanced and deepened when they obeyed his teaching:

If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.¹⁴

These words and others convince me that it is vitally important that we be sure that those in our faith community are able to put the teaching they receive into practice. We do talk about "application" in our small groups, but we seldom emphasize obedience by leaving time in the schedule to practice what we are learning together. What Martin Luther King, Jr. did in Montgomery was not just an act that helped to alleviate suffering, but it was a powerful act of discipleship as he helped people to apply Christ's teachings.

The Urbana 2000 Student Missions Convention echoed this priority in the repeated emphasis that worship leads to mission and mission leads to worship. Our doxology heightens our desire to respond in obedience and our service deepens our doxology.

¹³ Matthew 7:24-27.

¹⁴ John 14:23.

III. Power

A fellowship is not multi-ethnic unless power is shared. It is not enough to have a smattering of people of different ethnicities in attendance. People of different races and cultures need to be in positions of decision-making and visible leadership. This is not tokenism, but a way of being certain that God's voice is heard through the various backgrounds and lives of each person God has brought into the community. We will all have "blind spots" that cause us to distort what might be clear to others. We need one another.

The first internal crisis in the early church occurred when the Grecian widows were overlooked in the distribution of food. This was an instance of Carl Ellis's systemic marginalization by default. The apostles response was actually quite surprising. They addressed the relational and systemic aspects by appointing seven Grecian believers to take responsibility for the distribution.¹⁵ I find no mention of any of these disciples before that time. The next several chapters deal specifically with several of these leaders and how God used them. The entire rest of the Book of Acts explains how God worked in expanding the kingdom amongst the gentiles.

Shared and representative leadership may require a more flexible approach to leadership selection. There are clear character issues that are given in scripture as leadership qualifications and these should not be compromised. However, we sometimes add to these in an effort to strengthen our community. These additions are good (e.g., going through a study in the Gospel of Mark, attending a fellowship small group), but we may want to hold them loosely as suggestions rather than requirements if we are to embrace students of color in leadership. This is because of the reasons discussed above. People of color, who may not feel at ease with the majority membership of the fellowship, may well benefit from other avenues of support outside of the fellowship. These other involvements are actually a way that we champion students of color who are involved in a multi-ethnic fellowship. These outside commitments, however, also make it difficult for them to be as actively involved in the fellowship as a majority student who does not have these additional commitments outside of the group.

The InterVarsity Christian Fellowship group at Wayne State University has a position on its executive leadership for "black student outreach." This allows for valuable input and mutual encouragement from a black student whose primary ministry and focus is outreach amongst black students.¹⁶

¹⁵ Acts 6:1-7.

¹⁶ R. York Moore of Detroit, interviewed by author at The Chancellor Hotel in Champaign, IL, December 27, 2000.

Likewise, a student of color may be an effective small group bible study leader within his or her own ethnic context, but be unprepared to lead in the typical inductive method used by most majority groups. They may be used to a style that is more authoritative in its leadership. This is an opportunity to learn from the strengths of each approach. It may also be that a small group geared to a different ethnic group will be more effective within its own teaching tradition.

When I refer to "sharing power," I do not mean a diminishment of whites, but an elevation of people of color so that we have parity. All of us are to use our gifts and who we are for the sake of the kingdom. I appreciated what black minister Alex Gee had to say at Urbana 2000. He was following Brenda Salter-McNeil's talk on racial reconciliation. Speaking to majority people in the audience, he affirmed us and said, "We need you to be white!" He also encouraged us to use our power for godly ends.

IV. Prayer and Praise

The Apostle John described what he saw in the Book of Revelation. He writes:

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried in a loud voice:

*"Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb."¹⁷*

A multi-ethnic worship gathering awaits us in heaven. If we are to begin on earth, we will need to have God's intervention. Racial healing is a particularly complex process. There is a great deal of corporate and individual history that underlies a multi-ethnic faith community. Many of the issues are so personal that they are largely unknown to others and even to a given individual. Further, the enemy of our souls seems to attack any attempts by believers to unite. Racial reconciliation has proven to be a powerful battleground. We dare not attempt it in our own strength.

Prayer and worship are key ingredients in any Christian community. Nevertheless, these two present a particular challenge to a multi-ethnic community. Singing and prayer have a great deal to do with how we experience God. If we are to come together in prayer and worship, we will have to be intentional in learning from one another in a posture of humility. We will need to see our own style of prayer and singing as one style and not the only or the preferred style. Throughout eternity we will never become bored with the multi-faceted diamond of prayer and praise. We can begin to appreciate that now.

¹⁷ Revelation 7:9-10.

Robert Webber has defined worship as "a community response to the God who has acted in history."¹⁸ Learning to respond to God in ways that are meaningful to all its members will provide rich rewards for a multi-ethnic community. Prayer and worship are so central to God's desire for his people that we can be certain that God will lead us in answer to our prayers.

The Rev. Dr. Alice Brown-Collins described five purposes for prayer:

1. Liberation and building a beloved community of people.
2. Release. Prayer is a way of making it through life.
3. A weapon of social change. We should expect **real** change as a result of prayer.
4. Personal fulfillment.
5. Intimacy with God.¹⁹

All five are necessary in a faith community and all are needed if we are to overcome the evils of racism in our midst and in society. Effective prayer for healing will be costly prayer. Our black brothers and sisters know a lot about suffering. Dr. Alice Brown-Collins has suggested that "Lift Every Voice and Sing," sometimes referred to as "The Black National Anthem," serves as a model prayer for African-Americans.²⁰ I close with it as a prayer.

*Lift every voice and sing, 'til earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise, high as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us;
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on 'til victory is won.*

*Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;*

¹⁸ Robert Webber, lecture given at Regent College, Vancouver, B.C. in June of 2000.

¹⁹ Alice Brown-Collins, lecture given at the Church of the Good Shepherd, Roxbury, MA on December 6, 2000.

²⁰ Ibid.

*Yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered;
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the
slaughtered;
Out from the gloomy past, 'til now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.*

*God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who hast by Thy might led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee,
Shadowed beneath Thy hand, may we forever stand,
True to our God, true to our native land.²¹*

²¹ James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*.