**Perspectives on an Ideal, Inclusive Church Community**

Focus on an institution with which you are closely connected – one in which you would wish to have multiculturalism, inclusivity, and antiracism more fully embodied. Consider how inviting your institution (church, school, organization) is from the perspective of a person of color visitor. *Respond to these queries from the perspective of a person of color. Think of a particular person of color that you know in order to answer these questions*. Here we shall focus on the community for our institutional focus. By attempting to view your church community from the perspective of a person of color, you will begin to practice the very critical perspective-taking skills needed for effective cross-cultural interaction.

All effective cross-cultural communication requires using one’s imagination about the other person’s meaning making—how the other person may be making sense out of a particular encounter, event, message. Meaning is not within the words; meaning is within the person using the words. The meaning of the signs and symbols are not within the signs and symbols but within the meanings of the people who use the sign and symbols. There is never a direct equation between the meanings that any two people give to what they see and hear, because each person interprets from the framework of his or her life experiences and social identities.

So, the effort is always to image what someone is saying or meaning from the context of who the person is (gender, age, ethnicity, occupation, life experiences, and so forth). What we imagine people of color to experience at our church, if nothing else, reveals much about ourselves and our awareness of how we or our setting may be interpreted.

Be creative in your imagining—consider as many plausible alternative perspectives as possible, avoid stereotypic images as far as you are able. The deeper your knowledge of the person and the culture of the person whose perspective you are trying to imagine, the richer your response is likely to be. Your not being able to imagine the person of color’s response, if such is the case, or your apprehension in attempting to do so, is something you would need to acknowledge and then ask yourself why this may be so. If such is the case, ask yourself why you are unable to offer plausible perspectives on others’ realities? Such honest acknowledgements would be important in a context where you would wish to become multicultural. Multiculturalism does require the capacity to perceive alternative and diverse realities, values, norms, and behaviors, along with the capacity to behave appropriately within one or more of these alternative cultural systems.

The following concepts on empathy, sympathy, and empathic responses can assist you in understanding some of the basic issues involved in cross cultural interpretation and attributing meaning across cultures.

**Empathy:** Involves crossing differences by the self-conscious effort to share and accurately to comprehend the presumed consciousness of another. The effort is self-conscious in the sense that the facilitator needs always to remain aware of the cultural limitations, personal subjectivity, and imaginative nature of her or his own perception, understanding and evaluation.

**Sympathy:** Involves assuming inherent similarity and mutuality arising out of similar enculturation and common experiences, understanding similarities to result in congruent values, attitudes, perceptions and meanings. Expressions of sympathy tend to draw legitimacy/validity from dominant cultural norms which provide common shared rules that form the basis of fellow feeling and sameness. Sympathy allows for complete identification. (Sympathy is a presumption of “sameness.”)

**Empathetic Approaches to Understanding**

* Attempting to identify how the other person’s socio-cultural background and life experiences may influence how he/she will:

encode experience, and

perceive or decode messages from people with other socio-cultural backgrounds.

* Identifying how your own socio-cultural background, and your own location within a system of domination, are influencing the way you are:

encoding this experience, and

perceiving or decoding messages from someone from this person’s socio-cultural background.

* Attempting to identify the language, imagery, communicative style, and behaviors that are conducive to mutual understanding between this person and yourself. Attempting to identify what of this may be blocking or impeding understanding.
* Using your own accumulated past experiences to assist you in interpreting the possible meaning of the person’s statements and probable feelings – but always being aware that it is *your* experience you are reflecting and not *necessarily* what the other is referring to.
* Attempting imaginative participation in whatever the person is describing, with due regard for how structures of domination would be at work in that situation, attempting, insofar as it is possible, to *be* that person in that particular part of her or his experience.
* Putting all of these activities together, seeking to identify the core of what the person is expressing at this time (but not who they fully are).
* Allowing this experience to inform and transform you in your lived understanding of structures of domination.
* What kind of church community does the person of color desire, in terms of an ideal work/learning/spiritual community? How might this be manifested in the behaviors, norms, relational patterns, and lived values desire of, and found in, a church community?

1) Answer the questions above and below from your experience or informed imagination; or conduct a focus group or do individual interviews.

* 1. What would this person wish to be doing/learning/discussing while in such a church community?
  2. What would this person wish to see, hear and feel in this place?
  3. What values, behaviors and relationships would characterize this community?
  4. How would these ideal characteristics be evident to this person on first entering this community? What would be the signs that would attract the person to such a church community?
  5. What kind of initial experience and follow-up second experience might bring that person to consider membership?

2) Looking at the answers given above,

* 1. Are those values and behaviors present in your community?
  2. What allowed those values, behaviors and relationships to be present (historical accounting—interethnic competition or animosities, events in the community, larger community, real estate covenants)? Or, why are particular values, behaviors, relationship patterns not there – what prevents them from being present?
  3. What is the “vocational consciousness” of this community? What are its visible manifestations in the relational and institutional life of the community?
  4. How does the congregation actively promote theological or moral justifications for its aspirations and actions to be a multicultural, antiracist community?

3) A community, constituted as a social organization or institution, has a culture or character because of the particular work it does in, and for, society and because of the particular way it does that work (norms, style, values).

1. If the church community, constituted as a social organization or institution, is constituted by prevailing and constantly reoccurring set of practices, rituals, roles, and social interactions governed by stated and unstated values, norms, and rules, what aspects of the community’s institutional identify is communicated to the observant visitor?
2. Who is the presumed or ideal member—class, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, marital or family status? How is that presumption communicated?
3. What are the power relations between the members—who is IN, who is OUT?
4. What is the presumed political, theological, class, ideological orientation of the members? How is that communicated?
5. Of what markers and characteristics of the community’s identity is it most protective? How can that be discerned? Class, racial/ethnic, religio-political, ideological, theological identity(ies)?
6. To what extent does the church community use its money as a means of relationship with communities of color – in-house services (staff – administrative and custodial), in its choice of service providers, vendors, subscriptions to news media, support of scholarship campaigns, and other use of resources to further social justice?

4) Thinking of your own church community context, what would this visitor see, hear or feel in your community setting? Consider:

* 1. The physical features within and without the buildings.
  2. The content of the work/learning/spiritual experience (topic, theme, artistic traditions, images and illustrations, authors or composers or artists represented).
  3. The emotional climate displayed in all human-to-human contacts within the community setting.
  4. Network of “best friends” clusters based on interests, commonalities, and certain kinds of affinities and likenesses (justice and witness, social justice and antiracism associations, civic engagement associations).
  5. Best friend clusters that extend out into other aspects of the members’ lives—home visits, social phone calls, attending public events, celebrating each other’s life passages.
  6. Sense of ownership, sense of having something at stake in the welfare of the community, that its well-being matters—such as attendance at institutional sponsored events, monetary support, service in care of the building and grounds, participation on committees that contribute to the economic survival, growth and well-being, governance, and other functions vital to the congregation.
  7. Efforts to identify structures of racial domination within the community and the way those structures shape us as individuals and as a community.
  8. Explicit efforts to understand white privilege, personal and institutional racism—study groups, adult forums, book studies, children’s and youth curriculum, books in the community library.
  9. Ways the community openly addresses the core interests of the visitor.
  10. Organizations, activities, and ministries offered by the community.
  11. Actions, collaborations, and affiliations between the institutional community (school, workplace, place of worship) and the surrounding broader community.
  12. Shared collective effort to address structures of racial domination within the broader community.
  13. Awareness and response to the demographic diversity within the community—celebration of the diversity (cultural, racio-ethnic, religious, sexual orientation, age, nationality).
  14. Nature, character and diversity of leadership and decision-making within the institutional community.
  15. Culturally influenced styles of working/teaching/communicating/worshiping do you employ (monocultural, diverse, multicultural) in response to the differing cultural, ethnic, and communication patterns, values, and styles.

5) What, in your church community’s cultural life, would this person

* 1. Celebrate?
  2. Be elated from? Feel oppressed from? Be angered by? Be disappointed in? Rejoice in?
  3. Wish to have extended or deepened?
  4. Wish to have changed? Changed in what way?
  5. What committees, clubs, ministries, or sponsored events would this person most wish to participate in? Wish to stay clear of?
  6. What personalities in the congregation would the person be attracted by or repulsed by?

6) What range of differences ix currently being accommodated in your community? What social identity “difference” is the community uneasy with? How is this evident? What absence of particular social identities is noteworthy in your church community?

* 1. What form does that accommodation take?
  2. What is being done to address areas of unease with particular social identities?
  3. What parallels does this suggest for becoming a multicultural, antiracist, open and affirming community?
  4. What beyond multiculturalism is required to be a holistic, health, humanistic, compassionate, God-fearing community?

7) What would appeal and what would not appeal to this person on visiting your church community?

8) On what basis could a follow-up visit or invitation be made to the person to participate in some event at the community (family night event, men’s or women’s social, study group, political action event, film viewing and discussion)? Note that invitations ought to be explicit, not just implied. People who carry “outsider” social experiences because of ways they have been responded to in the past will carry that identity with them and expected to be treated as an outsider. You must be explicit about your acceptance of them. Where possible give them a role, task, or assignment that will get them involved in an activity for which they are likely to have an interest. You must repeatedly invite them to participate in functions and events and join organizations within the Community. You must also visit where they are at—come to some event with them associated with their life and interests, ideally in their neighborhood or community.

1. Are visitors who are people of color met with an awkwardness and tension—or with easy, comfortable casualness? From what experiences or training would greeters, escorts, or tour guides and the membership at-large gain such relational skills? How may this be provided?
2. How and where does the organization/community find the space and time to reflect on the issues that matter to people of color and their relationship to white people?
3. Do community gatherings, and especially worship, include the realities of being a person of color in this society—realities of affirming self-worth in the face of social minimizing, of an innocent loved one crucified by the authorities, of there being “no room in the inn” or place at the table, of recovering from the rage of injustice perpetrated on oneself or a loved one, of a desire for a God who drowns the pharaoh in the sea in order to set God’s people free? – possibly involving a desire for retribution, vindication, right relationship, or reconciliation based on justice and reparations.

9) What sociological knowledge and personal knowledge have you about the visitor?

1. What is the basis and depth of your sociological knowledge about the visitor? How could it be enhanced?
2. Who does this person know in the congregation—acquaintances, friends, relatives?
3. Who is most like this person in background or interests?
4. Who is the person likely to make friends with? On what basis? How can you bring the visitor and prospective friend together, to get them acquainted and interacting with each other?
5. What are the avocations and gifts of the person?
6. What specifically prompted or attracted the person to visit the community?

* Considering all of the above, what lines of action do you suggested for yourselves and others?

1) What are your findings?

2) What do you intend to do now?

3) What ministries in the church have responsibility for what actions or tasks in response to what particular questions or findings?

4) What are your priorities?

5) What time-table or calendar of action are you able to lay out at this time?