

## **ONENESS PENTECOSTALS ARE COMMITTED TO DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION**

### **Biblical Basis**

The Bible teaches that every human being is of equal worth in the sight of God. God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11). The church has diversity of members but is one body; by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body (I Corinthians 12:12-13).

In Christ, there is no unequal treatment based on race, social class, gender, religious background, or national origin. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). “There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bond, nor free: but Christ is all, and in all” (Colossians 3:11).

We are to conduct our lives and ministries without partiality, discrimination, or favoritism (I Timothy 5:21). It is wrong to be prejudiced against someone because of race, social standing, lack of education, or poverty. “If you show partiality, you commit sin” (James 2:9, NKJV).

In the apostolic church, people of diverse ethnicities and backgrounds worshiped together and served in leadership. The ministers in Antioch included Barnabas, a Jew from Cyprus; Simeon Niger, whose surname means “black” in Latin, probably referring to skin color; Lucius of Cyrene in North Africa; Manaen, of a noble family; and Paul, a Jew and Roman citizen from Tarsus (Acts 13:1).

The Book of Acts recounts how the apostolic church grew by overcoming social, cultural, and ethnic barriers. Jesus commissioned His disciples to become His witnesses in Jerusalem (home city), Judea (home province), Samaria (neighboring province, people of different ethnicity), and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). The church progressively expanded from Palestinian Jews to Hellenistic Jews, Samaritans, and ultimately Gentiles of various nations, ethnicities, and races. (See Acts 6, 8, 10, 15.) Consequently, the New Testament church encompassed Middle Easterners, Africans, Asians, and Europeans, and this diversity was reflected in its leadership. (See Acts 13:1; 14:20-27; 16:9-12; 19:10.) It gave prominent roles to people who had low status in ancient societies including women, youth, foreigners, the poor, and even slaves.

### **History of Diversity in Oneness Pentecostalism**

When the modern Pentecostal movement began in the early twentieth century, American society was characterized by racial prejudice and segregation, yet the Holy Spirit overcame these barriers. The Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, which spread the Pentecostal message around the world, was

started by an African American, William Seymour. Hispanics, blacks, whites, and people from many nations worshiped together. Blacks and whites served in leadership.

The three most significant theologians of the early Oneness Pentecostal movement were Frank Ewart, an Australian who immigrated to Canada and then to the U.S.; G. T. Haywood, an African American; and Andrew Urshan, an Assyrian immigrant from Persia (Iran). The oldest surviving list of Oneness ministers, from 1919, contains 704 names. Of these, 29 percent were women, about 25 to 30 percent were African American, and several Hispanic names appear on the list. Once again, both blacks and whites served in leadership.<sup>1</sup>

By this time, Trinitarian Pentecostals were segregated racially, as were all other major religious organizations in America. All social institutions, including business, the military, political parties, and labor unions were influenced by racism. Oneness Pentecostals were perhaps one of the most integrated groups in society.

Unfortunately, the pressures of a racist society as well as influences of prejudice caused a division. Persecution from unbelievers often resulted when blacks and whites worshiped together, and evangelism was often hindered. No conferences could be held in the South because of Jim Crow laws that forbade blacks and whites to meet, lodge, or eat together. Travel was difficult and expensive, so most Southern ministers could never attend official conferences, and some began to organize fellowship conferences in the South. As a result, in 1924 most white ministers left the original fellowship and formed three regional organizations.

The desire for unity was so great that in 1931 most of these ministers reunited in a new organization, stipulating that the governing board would be composed equally of whites and blacks. Sadly, the same social pressures continued to work, and by 1938 most black ministers left the group. If Oneness ministers could have remained united for another twenty-five years as a countercultural witness to biblical holiness, perhaps they could have influenced the Civil Rights Movement.

Some black Apostolics did. For example, Bishop Smallwood Williams was president of the Southern Christian Leadership Council in Washington, D.C., prayed at the funeral of President Kennedy, and worked with President Johnson to pass civil rights laws.

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<sup>1</sup> For documentation of early Pentecostal history, see David K. Bernard, *A History of Christian Doctrine*, vol. 3: *The Twentieth Century* (Hazelwood, Mo.: Word Aflame, 1999).

## **Ongoing Commitment to Diversity and Inclusion**

In recent decades the UPCI has sought to recapture the biblical unity of the apostolic church and the early Oneness movement. In 2008 it adopted a position paper entitled “Racial and Ethnic Affirmation” that opposes racism, prejudice, and segregation. The paper states that the UPCI “must continue to take deliberate, intentional steps toward inclusion in all areas of the fellowship and at all levels of the organization. . . . [It] is dedicated to overcoming any appearance of racism within the church by making a deliberate effort toward inclusion and a firm, open stand against racial bigotry and segregation.”

For some in society, diversity has become a method to promote personal agendas; for some it is a tool to dismantle traditional values. Some seek to create artificial diversity through quotas and political correctness. Nevertheless, diversity is a positive goal when it means providing increased opportunity and participation for people of every ethnicity and race. The church in Heaven will consist of those who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ “out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation” (Revelation 5:9). Together they will worship the one God around the divine throne as one people.

The church today should emulate the first-century church by being diverse at all levels of participation. It should promote integration while opposing prejudice, discrimination, and segregation. Moreover, it needs to focus evangelistic efforts on people of every language, ethnicity, and race. Local churches should actively welcome people of every background. In addition, the church as a whole must be intentional about making disciples of every people group in every locale. It needs strategies for reaching minority groups within each nation such as ministering in various languages; promoting cross-cultural missions; developing leaders from within minority groups; and planting churches in ethnic neighborhoods, towns, and regions. In other words, the church needs to reach people where they live, not only geographically but culturally, socially, and linguistically.

In global missions the UPCI has long followed this dual strategy of inclusion and targeted outreach. Consequently, the UPCI has believers in 203 nations and territories, and the vast majority of its total constituency is nonwhite. It has multicultural, multiracial churches in large cities around the world. In the U.S. and Canada the UPCI has traditionally reflected the majority culture with the majority of its constituency being Caucasian and Anglo-American. However, in recognition of the diversity of the first-century church, the diversity of the early twentieth-century Pentecostal movement, and the increasing diversity of modern society, in the last quarter of the twentieth century the UPCI became more intentional about reaching every race and culture in North America.

Consequently, over the years the UPCI of the U.S. and Canada has established several important ministries that focus on the evangelism of minority groups. As of 2013 these ministries have made significant progress and are led by representatives of the various ethnicities. Spanish Evangelism Ministry reported over 700 Spanish-speaking ministers and about 350 Spanish-language congregations. Building the Bridge Ministry develops strategies for cross-cultural ministry, urban ministry, and particularly evangelism into the African-American community. Its leaders estimated that the UPCI had about 500 Black ministers and 250 Black pastors. Multicultural Ministries coordinates outreach to eighteen language and ethnic groups, encompassing 186 ministers and 195 works. Based on these statistics in 2013 about 1,400 ministers were from minority groups, or fifteen percent of the total, and about 800 churches were ministering primarily to ethnic minorities, or eighteen percent of the total. In addition, most UPCI churches have significant involvement by ethnic minorities, especially larger churches, growing churches, and churches in urban areas. This involvement was an estimated ten to fifteen percent of constituency. In sum, as of 2013 an estimated twenty-five to thirty percent of UPCI constituency in the U.S. and Canada was nonwhite.

This diversity is increasingly reflected in leadership. For example, according to a 2012 survey of the fifty-five districts in the U.S. and Canada, thirty-one had minorities as department heads and thirty-nine had minorities in some leadership position. Of these, eleven had African-American or black board members; five had Asian, Pacific Island, or Native American board members; and five had Hispanic board members. The Board of General Presbyters (General Board), which is the governing body under the General Conference, has African-American or black, Hispanic, and Asian members. The work of the organization is conducted by eight general divisions (major ministries), and each of them has minority representation on its general committee or board. For several divisions such as Youth, Sunday School, and North American Missions, the participation is twenty percent or more. Significantly, these leaders were not chosen on the basis of ethnicity, but they have risen through the ranks and have been elected by their peers based on involvement, qualifications, and abilities.

Much has been accomplished, and much remains to be accomplished. It is God's will for us to reach every language and ethnic group—not only around the world but in our own nation. By God's grace, let us represent the church in Heaven, where people of every race, nation, and language will gather around the throne to worship the one true God in oneness of heart and mind.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This article is adapted from David K. Bernard, *The Apostolic Church in the Twenty-first Century* (Hazelwood: Word Aflame Press, 2014), 71-76.