



Raising Up Indigenous Leadership: What's at Stake for the Churches?

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The spirit of the times is surely to move ahead as Christian churches into a more inclusive community of believers. This hoped for goal and rehearsal of the biblical vision touches the local congregation in its membership composition; it creates a focus for intentional outreach in city and village; and it redirects the concern for persons called and trained to be leaders, lay and ordained.

One major denomination puts it, "the church shall invite and include persons in membership, leadership, and mission, irrespective of race, sex, or class." The language is prescriptive and terse, articulating the firm conviction that American churches in the name of faithfulness to the Gospel need to reflect persons of color in their leadership and congregational membership.

How do the Christian churches as representative bodies go about the task of raising up native leadership, that is, leadership that emerges from the base, that reflects the culture and language, the color, and the context of the ethnic community where the Gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments administered? This challenge has been with American denominations for decades. The vision and call to inclusive leadership in the Black church goes back into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the Eskimo and Native American communities to more recent decades. The Hispanic and Asian-American presence in the churches is presently at the forefront of contemporary awareness.

The eighties call for renewed commitments on the part of the denominations to be intentional in the leadership development among Blacks, Asians, Native Americans, Hispanics, and Eskimos. Succinctly stated, if this Gospel-related inclusive ministry is pursued, what is at stake for the churches in lifting up indigenous leadership?

I. REASONS FOR INDIGENOUS LEADERS

It is the thesis of this essay that significant goals congruent with biblical faith will be gained by the realization of indigenous leadership among persons of color.

Briefly, the reasons for the argument unfold as follows:

1. Indigenous leaders are needed for the sake of a just and deserved respect for the ethnic culture and the people who are served by that pastoral or lay leadership. It simply makes sense for churches to mirror the people of color who are lifted up, called, and equipped to lead in such places as Rosebud, South Dakota, or Atlanta, Georgia, or Barrow, Alaska, or Taos, New Mexico, or Los Angeles, California.

2. Since language carries so much of the culture of a people, it follows that those able to converse, preach, pray, and sing in the “mother tongue” should be the ones in positions of pastoral leadership. Imagine what comfort to a bereaved family when the funeral service can be conducted, for instance, in the Lakota language, or Yupik [Eskimo], or Spanish.

3. The fact of indigenous leadership is a restatement of the Pentecost phenomenon. “Did we not hear them telling of the mighty acts of God, each in our own native language?” (Acts 2:8). The gathered church in Jerusalem that first Pentecost was rich in color, language, and ethnic diversity. On Pentecost, in precisely the opposite manner, the Holy Spirit worked the reverse of Babel and brought heterogeneous persons *together* around the Gospel proclamation. That primal experience of unity and diversity lies behind our vision of an inclusive church and multi-cultural leadership for ministry in the 1980s.

4. Indigenous leadership grows from the base, from the “grass-roots.” A particular communion of saints testifies that this identified (called) person has recognized spiritual gifts; he or she ought therefore to be further equipped by the church to serve in a preaching and teaching capacity.

5. Native leadership is a needed and ethically right response in an ecclesiastical system with denominational past history of institutional racism. It is necessary to combat the myth that all persons can be adequately served by white clergy. When pastoral leadership is primarily controlled by only one group, namely, white Euro-American, then persons of color are excluded. In the 1960s the churches were forced to deal with a radically changing world. Combating racism became a central priority then, and still is. To some extent we have been able to raise consciousness to the degree that the establishment of social justice and the equality of opportunity and the dignity of all persons is a generally shared perspective in our churches.

6. Indigenous leadership is a way to tackle the sin of ethnocentrism which believes that one (or more) races within the human family is superior to other racial groups and is entitled to a place and position of prestige and power. When such personal prejudice is mixed with economic and political power, the result is institutional racism. The white churches have not escaped the pervasive and pernicious reality of this dimension of human brokenness and self-centeredness.

7. The identification, calling, and training of indigenous leaders to serve their church is an affirmation of Jesus’ dictum: “Go therefore and make all nations my disciples” (Matthew 28:19). Each time we profess an historic creed we confess that Christianity is a universal (catholic) religion. In the sight of God, the human family is one. As the popular poster declares, “God is color blind”; or the refrain of the children’s camp song, “Everything is Beautiful.” The

cultural richness, the talents, skills, spiritual gifts of people of color need to be shared with the entire communion of saints. Together these unique perspectives can form a wholistic mosaic of faith and life in the churches. The special strengths and cultural blessings of persons of color can only enhance our catholic tradition.

8. God has created diversity and celebrates that human diversity. “All these are the work of one spirit who distributes different gifts to different people, just as he chooses” (1 Cor 12:11). The churches can exist more fully and profit immensely by being a harmonious tapestry of many racial strengths. Every culture is able to be enriched by other ethnic traditions. God continues to be at work in the collective experiences of people of Asian, African, European, Hispanic, and

Native American origin.

9. Spiritual leaders of color can assist the whole church by modeling various styles and perspectives in ministry. Other cultures offer new learnings regarding such things as the resolution of conflict, the formation of community, and decision-making. One example is the time honored practice of listening to the elders of Native American circles. Another opinion may be added to the cumulative oral process, but no one's prior conviction is put down. In the circle one learns first hand the value of silence in such consensual gatherings. Such manner of decision-making is dramatically different from that of the dominant white culture and thus becomes a fresh new window for church leaders to see through and gain a new attitude for relating.

10. Welcoming people of color and preparing them for church and community leadership through appropriate theological education (in a wide variety of forms) does not promote syncretism, but on the contrary gives living proof of the wide spectrum of ways the Gospel has been enfolded in many cultures. Professor Albert P. Pero, Jr. gets to the heart of the matter, speaking of the Black situation:

For the predominantly white churches to make contact with Black people in any significant way changes will be necessary....These will certainly include changes in attitudes of church members....Changes will involve the alteration and even dismantling of certain programs which have operated too much in conformity with European theological traditions and Anglo-Saxon life styles and values to be meaningful to people of different backgrounds.¹

To think only in the theological categories of northern Europe is to cheat theology of a more complete way of expressing Christian faith. The churches are learning that there are many ways of doing theology; Jesus Christ draws all people to bear witness to the one Lord God. The gift of faith has been spread abroad to people of all nations.

II. SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are special educational and cultural considerations that come into play

¹Albert P. Pero, Jr., "Correlating the Gospel to the Black Situation," *Partners*, April/May, 1984, 20.

when we train persons of color for leadership in the various Christian denominations:

1. There is little distinction made between being a local community and a spiritual leader for people of color. These roles are interchangeable. The integration seems natural and wholesome. Thus, when these women and men lead churches, their respective villages, reservations, or urban neighbors also need their sustained presence. Hence, structured theological education cannot take these identified leaders away from their "church and community home" for extended periods of time. The residential four-year theological seminary model does not work. Alternative ways of learning had to be found.

Varieties of practices exist. Black candidates for the ordained ministry in urban areas often come to classes two or three times in a week while still pastoring their city congregation. Institutes and workshops seem to accommodate the situation quite well in the Black church.

Native Americans on reservations pursuing theological training employ TEE (theological

education by extension) courses where a small cluster of candidates meet with a qualified teacher-mentor without having to travel great distances. For example, the Dakota Leadership Program at Mobridge, South Dakota, has used a mobile learning lab with tapes, books, filmstrips, available in the DLP van—a theological library on wheels!

Eskimo and native people of the Yukon and Alaska have participated in yearly ecumenical gatherings for teaching, project development, worship, fellowship, and cooperative future planning. Between the larger annual Ecumenical Consultations on Training for Ministry, clusters of Indian and Eskimo people from seven denominations study during winter months with visiting teachers and theologians. In Alaska the weather is a factor in theological preparation.

2. Development of a theological curriculum needs to take into consideration the racial-historical factors, cultural experiences and challenges, as well as the unique gifts and special needs of the respective groups.

Black leaders weigh heavily the experience of slavery in their reflection on what it means to be Black in a White world. Professor James Cone, perhaps the best-known writer of Black theology, sees this theology focused in the theme of *liberation*.

The theme of liberation...present in the appearance of Jesus Christ who takes upon Himself the oppressed condition so that all men may be what God created them to be. He is the Liberator *par excellence*, who reveals not only who God is and what He is doing, but also who we are and what we must do about human oppression.²

The Black church has seen its worship, flooded with joy and sorrow, authentic and empowering, as central to the lives of its people. Narrative preaching had its genesis with Black Christian ministers. The understanding of the Christian church as a servant shapes much of Black theology. Whether in the urban North or the rural South, the Black congregation has been a servant after

²James H. Cone, "Black Consciousness and the Black Church," *Christianity and Crisis* 30 (Nov. 2 and 16, 1970) 246.

Christ who was servant of all. Such spiritual vitality testifies to the hope that comes with believing in the power of God to accomplish all things. This is surely a much needed strength in American church life.

Native American Christians possess a spirituality which ties the human family as one with the creation and the land. The various rites of the Indian nations (such as the sweat lodge, the fast, the smoking of the peace pipe, healing ceremonies, and rigorous vision quests of the Plains Indians) have sustained Indian people through forced marches, dislocations, stolen rights and broken treaties. The respect paid to the Elders, the communal view toward possessions, the honor of one's word, are special religious learnings that can be brought to the White Christian churches. As in the Black church, oral tradition is very significant in the spirituality of Native American people.

Hispanic peoples, like all persons of color, have their unique resources which give shape to their theological reflection. Hispanics revere family life and care intimately for children and senior citizens. Family life is extensive in its outreach and inclusive of many. Community is

founded and shaped around significant dates and religious feasts. Their brave determination to remain faithful in the midst of oppressive circumstances is a characteristic strength. Church leaders and seminaries are discovering the Hispanic courage in the small-group Bible studies developed in the *barrios* of Latin America. It is there we can learn to listen and be engaged by the Gospel of Jesus to the poor and dispossessed. The straightforward piety of the Hispanic people is something to be admired. The churches can also be blessed with the influence of Hispanic music and dance and therein reclaim the evangelical power of joy in the village fiesta.

The Asian peoples³ are the most recent to impact the vision of an inclusive church. Many American churches have been revived with the influx of Hmong, Laotian, and Cambodian people in recent years. The Asian sense of wholism that orders life is something we can appreciate. Herbal medicine, Asian meditation and the influence of Eastern religions need to be attended to with openness. Asian Christians connect acupuncture and the power of the human touch to the earthly healing ministry of Jesus in the gospels. After Vietnam, the painful sacrifice rendered by some Asian believers gives new content to the concept of discipleship. Such a level of commitment can only strengthen the churches of America. Asian love for color, pageants and costumes, special foods for holidays and feasts, community celebrations can only enhance our Anglo-Saxon experience.

3. The denominations, in order to facilitate the entrance of persons of color into the ranks of ordained deacons and clergy, have developed through their theological seminaries Alternative Routes to Ordained Service (ARTOS). This has been done for several reasons: Candidates for ministry were generally older (40-50 in age). These candidates already had many years of experience as lay leaders in their churches when their call to ministry was validated by the

³According to the 1980 census, Pacific and Asian Americans were proportionally the most rapidly growing racial minority group in the U.S. during the 1970s. They now total 3.5 million. Blacks totalled 26.5 million; Hispanics numbered 14.6 million; American Indians topped 1.0 million. Asian-Americans would include: Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Laotian, Thai, Vietnamese, Hawaiian, and others.

village or urban congregation as a consensus emerged that “we want this person trained for the ordained ministry!” Also, financial responsibilities for maintaining families and assisting relatives living together in extended families in remote places or on reservations made scholarships necessary. Thus seminaries have developed flexibility in the content, shape and delivery of theological resources and recognized the different paces at which people learn, depending on their experience with oral and written communication. Knowledge of Greek and Hebrew is regarded as less critical than facility in the mother tongue for person-to-person ministry. The traditional Master of Divinity degree pattern of residential seminary education continues to be available to younger candidates with baccalaureate education.

III. PEOPLE OF COLOR: REALITY AND CHALLENGE OF SEMINARY STATISTICS

It would be useful to take a cursory look at recent statistics regarding people of color who are engaged in preparation for ministry through seminaries affiliated with the Association of Theological Schools. The ATS began to collect enrollment figures by race in 1970. The statistics we share are from a 1982 accounting from member ATS schools. The numerics are only a portion of the analysis of identifying and training indigenous leaders for the churches. The

churches (and seminaries) cannot rest on their laurels for first steps taken to include people of color in theological education.

1. One of the most exciting chapters in contemporary Native American culture is the story of an ecumenical organization, Native American Theological Association, headquartered in Minneapolis.

NATA was born of a vision that an all-Indian board representing several mainline denominations could enlist the help of theological seminaries, colleges, schools, and other Indian church-wide agencies in providing a new way to educate Indian women and men for service in the churches. Through its three tracks, Eskimo and Native American people are trained for service as lay or ordained pastoral leaders.

In 1974 it was discovered that in all the theological seminaries in the U.S.A. and Canada there were four seminary candidates of Native American origin. By 1982 those pursuing theological work through NATA numbered 86. At present 21 persons have graduated from seminaries through NATA and are in employment of the churches.

2. Hispanics have received attention regarding indigenous leadership since the 1950s. But several spokespersons look back on that period as “second class” certification for ministry. An earnest spirit of commitment emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Dr. Ceciluo Arrastia, the first and only Hispanic Affairs officer of the Association of Theological Schools, commented in a 1974 report that new models and new programs would be necessary since European and Anglo models tend to be oppressive and alienating. In 1972 there were 264 Hispanic students in ATS-related seminaries; in 1982 Hispanics numbered 1180, a 347 percent increase. A new study by trained population experts concludes that Hispanics now are 14.6 million or 6.4 percent of the total U.S. population [1980] and could move to nearly 47 million by the year 2020.

Today Hispanic programs of theological education are not marginal but intentionally bicultural. Efforts to equip Hispanics sweep from St. Vincent’s Seminary of Boynton Beach, Florida, to the Archdiocese of New York, to the Austin Lutheran House of Studies and the Presbyterian Synod of Texas, on to Hispanic Institutes in California. Hispanic seminarians use their own Spanish language, affirm Hispanic history and culture, and proudly share its contribution to the Church.

3. A historic conference convened by the National Council of Churches in March, 1959, at Seabury House in Greenwich, Connecticut, faced the increasing shortage of educated Black clergy for the churches of the U.S.A. In 1958-59 there were 387 Black candidates for all degrees in sixty-five ATS seminaries. By the fall of 1982 the total had grown to 2,576—627 in five Black seminaries, and 1,939 (the vast majority) in the remaining 191 Protestant and Roman Catholic schools. The Black percentage of total seminary enrollment grew from 2.6 percent in 1969 to 4.9 percent in 1982.

But the increased numbers do not adequately provide sufficient candidates for ordination. Put in another realistic light, the 1980 census estimated that Blacks were 11.7 percent of the total U. S. population. If theological schools enrolled this proportion, there would be 6,156 Black students rather than the 2,576 registered in 1982.

A remarkable statistic concerns Black women enrolled in seminary degree programs. In 1972 there were 89 Black women in degree programs leading to ordination; in 1982 there were

569. Juxtaposed with that notable increase is the troubling if not pathetic enrollment of Black male Roman Catholics studying for the priesthood. Out of the total number of 5,957 Roman Catholic seminarians in 1982, only 90 were Black.

In 1959 the only Black faculty in the fifty-nine primarily White Protestant ATS seminaries numbered six persons. In 1982 there were 103 Black full-time faculty out of a total of 2,519. These figures represent an *actual decline in Black faculty* strength in relation to the total seminary faculty. In 1977 Dr. Marshall C. Grigsby concluded in his assessment of Black experience in the theological curriculum of seminaries, "It is clear, if the past is any single guide, that the future is not too bright—particularly regarding the non-black schools." In 1983 Dr. C. Shelby Rooks, looking at the need for Black leadership, commented, "Though much has been done, much remains."

IV. HOPEFUL SIGNS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

It would be foolish to draw conclusions based only on these statistics concerning persons enrolled in theological seminaries. But the last decade does show the entry of people of color into the process of preparation for ministry. Seminaries are responding with the acquisition of special staff to work in the areas of crosscultural studies. New courses are being developed that can better prepare White seminarians for the multi-cultural contexts in which they will minister. Persons of color are being called to theological faculties, although the number in doctoral programs is woefully small. Centers for Continuing Theological Education are sponsoring Black History, Native American, *Raza Unida* weeks for priests and

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ministers to acquaint themselves with the heart and pulse of these ethnic groups. Slowly but surely, new pedagogies are introduced to theological circles that can make for a more friendly yet critical interaction among persons from diverse racial, economic, and cultural backgrounds.

International study and dialogue is being added to residential seminary preparation. Opportunities for short but intense engagements with people of color in Latin America, Africa, and Asia are there for the taking. With this emphasis on global education there is also a growing respect for the place of experiential learning as one interacts with people of color. The powerful role of immediate and extended family and community loyalties which shape Asian, African, and Native American persons is profound. That modeling has a most positive affect on White seminarians.

Early statistics bear out that people of color are being called to positions and desks in church-wide agency work for the mainline denominations. A wide variety of ministerial callings are open to Black pastors. The influx of Southeast Asians to the U.S.A. has meant the planting of new congregations in Washington, Texas, and Minnesota. Bicultural realities have enabled the 1978 *Lutheran Book of Worship* to be put into Spanish. The United Methodist Church has added a worship supplement with a collection of hymns whose sources are multicultural and international.

White pastors are invited to attend matrix events, especially in Indian country, gathering on reservations to talk and to learn from experiencing the "Indian Way." Large metropolitan areas like Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and New York are the home of urban institutes and theological consortiums delivering necessary course work for Blacks, Asians, and Hispanics.

Given limited resources these days in the churches, it would be well for denominational leaders to work closely with ecumenical partners. One place to watch is the state of Alaska where ecumenical conversations and work have been going on since the 1970s. There is strong support from several of the bishops within the seven major denominations in Alaska for a shared Alaska School of Ministry. It would be quite something if Moravian, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, and United Church bodies could develop a jointly funded, staffed, and endorsed program for the training of lay and ordained persons to leadership positions among native people.

It is my conviction that the 1980s provide the “ripe time” to continue to develop needed models and receptive environments for the training of indigenous leaders among persons of color. The churches are blessed with the incorporation of the unique people, strengths, and gifts Blacks, Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans have to share. That is the challenge and sign of hope which faces congregations and seminaries in the 1980s.