

“Each Person is Sacred”: Leading Toward Full Inclusion in Faith Communities

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Assumptions about race, gender, and sexual orientation are deeply entrenched in American culture. Many of these assumptions reflect bias and stereotyping that can lead to painful discrimination and the perpetuation of oppression. The organizations and communities we create are both a process and product of social constructions¹, where bias can become embedded and go unrecognized. Faith communities, built on the foundation of centuries old traditions, may reflect social bias and hinder the full inclusion of all people they seek to serve.

Racial and Ethnic Differences

Most congregations are monoracial and monocultural, and most existing literature on inclusiveness focuses on race and culture in Christian churches. One study of Christian church congregations in the United States showed that nearly half do not have a single member of another racial group, and only 12% had a moderate amount of diversity². Congregations that are multiracial/ethnic, however, are often very diverse, and include Hispanics and Asians and either Blacks or Whites³. Churches struggle with whether they should encourage new members to assimilate into the existing church culture or support the expression of unique ethnic culture and language to enhance diversity⁴. Increased diversity, however, may impact the congregation in unexpected ways. One study found that in previously monocultural churches, as diversity increased, members who represented the dominant group were more likely to leave, causing instability within the congregation⁵.

Women in the Congregation... are Women in Power

While women are the majority among congregation members, they are not represented proportionally among the clergy⁶. Even congregations that have worked toward multiculturalism, and may promote other types of diversity, do not achieve gender equity. Theology may play a role in suppressing gender equity in conservative churches, particularly when the congregation is multiracial⁷. The value of women's participation is generally unquestioned, but interpretations of scripture may limit the degree of leadership and power women hold.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender – and not Included

It is probably of little surprise that a study found prejudice among conservative protestants against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people who were asking for spiritual care⁸. Homophobia and heterosexism are endemic in American culture. Religious ideas that oppose homosexuality can contribute to emotional distress and identity conflict, and the mental health field has not found a way to be fully inclusive of both religious ideals and non-heterosexual orientations⁹. This potentially leaves individuals with no community that responds to both their spiritual and psychological needs. The issue of full inclusion of LGBT people of color into predominantly Black churches may be even more complex. Homophobia seen in some Black churches ironically and painfully replicates the ways in which racism has demonized Black sexuality¹⁰, but attempts to protect against racism may contribute to rigid ideas of masculinity that reinforce homophobia.

It's Not Just Diversity: Ministering to the Marginalized

To more fully appreciate the meaning of inclusion, it is helpful to understand the experience of marginalization. An individual's identity and social standing are defined by society in many ways. One way to understand this is to recognize that we live in social contexts created by the intersections of systems of power and oppression: race/racism, gender/patriarchy, class/classism, sexual orientation/heterosexism¹¹.

Racism, patriarchy, and heterosexism can be understood as a systemic power arrangement that provides people with unearned privilege based on being White, male, and heterosexual¹². Members of these groups become the dominant culture and influence the norms, expectations, and attitudes of the larger society. Others are placed at a disadvantage and their views, traditions, and experiences are marginalized by the larger society. Members of non-dominant groups may pull back from multicultural relationships to seek comfort and camaraderie from members of their own group¹³. Beyond individual acts of meanness or prejudicial attitudes, the dominance of one culture can become woven into an institution. Thus, the prejudicial attitudes are perpetuated as a matter of course, regardless of the values of the individuals involved in the organization.

Inclusion in a faith community does not happen spontaneously. Racial inclusion needs to be intentional with race relations programs that address social oppression². Without attention to racial experience, the person of color is not understood “in a society where color has historically mattered in terms of physical, social, economic, and spiritual well-being”¹⁴. The same can be said of processes of inclusion directed at women and people who identify as LGBT. A robust diversity paradigm considers a wide range of difference, includes cultural and social context and

oppression, and identifies individual and collective strengths¹⁵. Leaders need to take responsibility for initiating, guiding, and supporting work toward organizational change that values and responds to individual diversity in the full context of social and environmental experience¹⁶.

Lessons from Leaders in Faith Communities

Very little existing literature provides guidance on how to enhance inclusion within a congregation. To learn more, we conducted interviews with 11 leaders in faith communities who have longstanding commitments to inclusion. Some also have roles outside of the congregation that inform their work: conflict mediator, social worker, and community organizer to name a few. All have held leadership positions for many years, with congregations ranging from 125 to 3,000. Most identified their congregation as multi-racial, but all indicated that one racial group was dominant. Three identified with historically Black churches, and one from a church that had been exclusively White but is now predominantly Black. Two were with congregations that intentionally reach out to the LGBT community. While some diversity exists in the group interviewed, it is not representative of the wide range of religious and social diversity found in the U.S. Giving voice to the experiences of this group, however, is an important contribution to the dialogue on inclusiveness.

Figure 1: Respondent Demographics

Gender	Race and Sexual Orientation	Faith	Position
Male: 8	White: 5 (1 gay) Black: 3	Christian: 6 Jewish: 2	Pastor (senior or associate, current or retired): 5 Rabbi: 2 Deacon: 1
Female: 3	Black: 2 (1 lesbian) Latina/Black: 1 (lesbian)	Christian: 1 Interfaith/non-denominational: 2	Reverend: 1 Youth Minister: 1 Committee Member: 1

All of the leaders described a variety of issues related to inclusion in their congregation. Older respondents reflected on how issues of inclusion have changed over time, noting that the focus was on race in the 1950’s and 1960’s, then shifted to women in the 1970’s and 1980’s, and is currently on lesbians and gay men. Most admitted to not being quite ready to take on the issues of transgendered people yet, and acknowledged that inclusion work has been difficult, “Issues of inclusion have been controversial – it drew fire and continues to draw fire.” (retired senior pastor, male)

Another discussed the difficulty bringing anti-racist work and anti-homophobic work together, stating that,

“There is a social conservatism in the Black community, which made acceptance of my work with gays and lesbians difficult. The White community had a problem with both aspects of my work.” (retired pastor, community organizer, male)

But they agreed that their spiritual calling motivated their desire to pursue the challenge,

“If you are saying you are called by God you need to be ready to serve everybody, you can’t just pick and choose. You don’t know who will show up at your doorstep.” (Reverend, female)

“We need to look at how we’re modeling, what we’re saying through our actions. People look at how we’re going to respond to issues of inclusion and we need to be in integrity while demonstrating to the community what we preach and teach.” (youth minister, female)

They also noted a need to balance their obligation to provide spiritual care with their role as educators on issues that can enhance inclusion,

“When somebody comes to be taught, they are asking to be challenged to grow, but when somebody comes to a leader they come with [spiritual] needs.” (Rabbi/chaplain, male)

“You need to be there with the people in the congregation, through life, challenges, death... There is still a job that you were hired to do [to provide spiritual care].” (retired pastor, community organizer, male)

Race

All of the leaders valued racial and cultural diversity, but noted the complexities involved. In discussing his “typically White suburban” congregation, one noted that although the congregation was accepting, they did not make necessary changes so the new members would feel genuinely welcome,

“They welcomed Black people but the Black people didn’t stay because they didn’t get the communication, caring, and celebration that would have helped them feel genuinely connected and embraced... There was no willingness to change in response to diversity.” (retired pastor, male)

Leaders also noted that, while racism still persists, the need for Black Churches is changing. They noted that greater inclusiveness, including racial diversity, is desirable to maintain the viability of the church and grow congregations,

“[The Black Church] is a past paradigm. The Black Church had to exist because of the culture that existed...As we move into the new century, I would fully expect that the churches will have to embrace a diverse community. If we have a genuine purpose to serve, if we are interested in growing the church, we have to be open.” (deacon, male)

Gender

All of the people interviewed supported full inclusion of women, stressing the vital role they play in the congregation,

“We have four women who sit on the pulpit on any given Sunday. They teach, preach, and when they get ordained they will [perform marriage ceremonies]. We get in trouble if only men are on the pulpit...Women need to see other women in leadership.” (senior associate pastor, male)

“Women have a big voice in our church. They work as treasurers, chairperson, working with the minister.” (committee member, female)

One noted that as women take more leadership it may result in feminization of the role of spiritual leaders in a way that makes it less attractive to men or boys,

“All the women are reading the Torah and women are leading the service...There is a concern that since women have been becoming the majority, sometimes extreme majority in rabbinical classes, boys only see women as ritual leaders. This has implications for the boy’s participation; it could be seen as a girly thing to do.” (rabbi, male)

Others noted a tension that they attributed to gender and sexism, where women's leadership styles were not always validated or accepted,

“There is a drive from some of the men in leadership, a different energy – harder, faster, ‘do this now’ type of energy – that the leadership in place just wasn’t able to do, it wasn’t how they moved. There was some frustration, women had the last word, and at some point it blew up.”

(youth minister, female)

“Problems can manifest as gender difference, where men are expected to function more in the left brain [logic] and women more in the right brain [relational]. This is not always true, but because of the social expectations, men may discount women's left brain functioning because they are hearing her, or expecting to hear, right brain message.” (retired pastor, male)

“Our pastor is female, and...we have three other females and four ministers who are males and there's still issues around who's in charge.” (reverend, female)

LGBT

Many respondents indicated that those who identify as LGBT are not discouraged from attending services, but are also not given a space to talk openly about their identity and lifestyle,

“As long as they play the role in church they can be accepted, but if they show who they are in the church they are ostracized.” (deacon, male)

“Our synagogue doesn't know who is gay and who is bisexual, it has a rainbow inclusive posture.” (rabbi, male)

Some recognized the difficulty with these practices,

“If they feel like they have to keep it a secret it could be very painful. How do we help them take that risk to talk about themselves...in a way that people can hear and be supportive?”

(committee member, female)

And stated a need to move toward genuine inclusiveness to ensure they are providing safe haven and spiritual support for all,

“There’s so many of our children struggling with their sexuality, and if they don’t get support they may consider suicide, or disappear from church. If you can’t work that out with church where do you go? If your parents don’t understand where to you go?” (senior associate pastor, male)

Many of the leaders related to homosexuality and theology and expressed that their congregations are currently struggling with how to respond,

“There are items in the bible that deal with homosexuality and every church is trying to find out how to reconcile the Bible with what is going on today.” (deacon, male)

“I don’t know how they [the church] are going to deal with the law about same sex marriage. I don’t know how far they can go.” (committee member, female)

“Abomination is used in connection with a man lying with a man as with womankind. In conservative tradition, what they sorted out is that the verse is talking about sex outside of a long term committed relationship.” (rabbi, male)

Spiritual Practice and Belief

In relating to issues of inclusion in general, the leaders often referred to stories from scripture or text to explore issues of diversity, acceptance, and inclusion. For example, the Book

of Ruth and the New Testament story of the Samaritan woman at the well were offered as illustrations of Biblical messages supporting inclusion and acceptance. Other messages from sacred text were referred to as well,

“Jesus Christ in his life was trying to say that in addition to the law there has to be a provision for love and compassion. Jesus Christ portrayed a life of love and acceptance.” (deacon, male)

“Every year we read about the passionate relationship between David and Jonathan and some see this as a gay relationship; there is a homoerotic connection.” (rabbi, male)

“John’s gospel tradition says he was the only disciple who did not marry, that he was responsible for Mary after Jesus’ death. [In a sermon] I said something to the effect, raising the possibility that the beloved disciple might be gay.” (senior pastor, male)

“I love the stories in Genesis that give different pictures of families: Jacob had four wives; Abraham who’s wife brings another woman into the relationship so he can have his needs met; Rebecca as the person in charge, she makes all the decisions. Are these the traditional family?” (rabbi/chaplain, male)

Ultimately, themes of love, acceptance, and non-judgment were repeated,

“My belief about salvation is that is it right now. I have to demonstrate love, compassion, and caring and I have to demonstrate that right now.” (retired pastor, male)

“Each person is sacred, created in the image of God. Keep that foremost. That makes this person who disagrees with you important.” (retired senior pastor, male)

“We’re asking the wrong question: does homosexuality make you a sinner?...We need to ask, does being heterosexual make you righteous?” (senior pastor, male)

“As a leader I always want to be in a place of love and loving honesty.” (rabbi/chaplain, male)

Skills and Advice

When asked to offer suggestions for other leaders in faith communities to help them respond positively to inclusion issues, many focused on the need to talk about diversity and the related issues of oppression with members of the congregation,

“The more we are inclusive in our conversations, the more we are educating one another and not hurting.” (reverend, female)

Suggestions included using the natural flow of the religious calendar as an opportunity to explore issues,

“[Fall] is the season of change and renewal, the month before Rosh Hashanah through the High Holy Days, and this could be a great time to talk about structural racism, because we talk about misdeeds that are not conscious or intentional.” (rabbi, male)

Listening to understand,

“Use communication skills to understand differences and different positions... Agree to disagree, understand where the other person is coming from...[do not] put down the other person’s perceptions of the world.” (retired pastor, male)

“Leadership in my perspective is the command to listen...Listening is about comprehending what is being said to me.” (rabbi/chaplain, male)

And building diversity within teams in the congregation,

“You need a real voice, an intentional forming of leadership teams that are representative, and kind of instilling the people who are marginalized or underrepresented and doing leadership training in those segments of the organization...I need to provide training and preparation so they are ready for leadership.” (senior pastor, male)

“The minister of music had a musical group...and they were mostly White. It was not that she had anything against Black people, but she was reaching out to her own and people of color were not being included. We need to look at how we’re modeling, what we’re saying through our own actions.” (youth minister, female)

The need for education, continued learning, and peer support were also echoed,

“[We] are not trained adequately to confront these issues. We might say we are supporting inclusion or equity, but we don’t know how to work it, especially in settings that are more conservative. We need training that helps people understand issues of oppression and how to be organizers to work toward change.” (retired pastor/community organizer, male)

“I was helped in my understanding of issues by exposing myself to new things, things unfamiliar to me.” (senior pastor, male)

“You can’t do ministry on your own, you need a support group. It doesn’t have to be formal. Have lunch together. Talk each other through things and support each other.” (senior associate pastor, male)

Conclusion

Leaders in faith communities are called to balance many priorities, the most important of which is spiritual care. Providing this care to all members of a community, however, requires intentional action to create safe and welcoming congregations, particularly for those who do not experience safety and acceptance in other aspects of their lives. The path toward inclusion may create disruptions in the existing congregation, a risk some may hesitate to take if membership and donations are already shrinking. In the words of one leader, however,

“I have the responsibility to bring words of inclusion and hope into a world that is so easily divided. Inclusion may be the only true way to peace.” (senior pastor, male)

Endnotes

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