

by Wayne
Warner

INTENTIONALLY INCLUSIVE

I served southern segregated white congregations during my early years of ministry. When Martin Luther King Jr. took up the cause of civil rights in Montgomery, my Baptist neighbor vehemently declared “I’d blow my kids’ brains out before I let them go to school with *them*.”

When we visited my home in the north, people looked at our license plate and saw that we came from a place where cotton was king and segregation ruled...and they stared in consternation. And we felt their condemnation.

When we visited a local church with my family on the weekend, we observed an emotional group discussion in the Bible study hour. The prevailing question: How would they adjust to a black preacher visiting their church? They were not prepared to hear anything we said.

However well-intentioned they were, they were a well-insulated, lily-white community where a black man was not allowed to stay the night.

That Was Then—This Is Now

I am a white male minister. I live in a predominately white culture. Thus, I enjoy the privileged status of my majority. I go freely, wherever I wish to go, whenever I please to go, and I need defer to no one because of my race.

I am not ignored because of the color of my skin, nor do I need to be discrete about it. When I apply for a bank loan, I do not worry about being rejected or redlined due to my skin color. When I apply for a job, I do not worry about my ethnicity. I live where I do by choice, not because my color defines my neighborhood. Racial profiling offers me no threat. The police dare not hassle me because people of my ethnic origin are more suspect.

On the other hand, after five decades in ministry, I still see undesirable pockets of racial resistance, most notably among fellow believ-

ers who simply do not see any problem with the status quo!

Years ago, I learned how easy it is to simply look through a person and not see them. We don’t dislike anyone; we just do not see a problem. We view life through our lenses of assumed prerogatives and thoughtlessly acquired equality, and take it for granted because it is the law of the land.

The truth is, great masses of people, of every stripe, need to become

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intentionally inclusive. Too many neither see a problem, nor do they see the need for such a priority.

We Do Have a Problem

Since we see no problem, we can continue to take things for granted—as long as we refuse to peak through “their lenses.” This restricted vision—blinders—prevents our recognizing our need for new glasses and allows us to accept a status quo that remains unchanged and unchallenged. An old black preacher defined status quo as “Latin for the rut we’re in—a grave with both ends open.”

I spent my boyhood in an integrated community occupied by churches that saw no problem. During my boyhood, my father worked with several black men. Our families shared a common life—attending school together, playing together. However, we worshiped separately.

In time, I realized that my elders simply failed to recognize those people different from them; they had a vision problem. There was no hostility—we were friends, but they saw no need for “intentionality.” After all, everyone is free to go whichever direction he desires.

When I was a Senior in High School, my parents moved across

town, for reasons unknown to me. The old neighborhood where I grew up and first went to school slowly evolved into an all-black south-end of town. Meanwhile, worship continued pretty much “for each his own.”

Upon my retirement, to stay within my denomination, I became part of an all-white congregation. When I expressed my dislike of belonging to an all-white church and inquired about becoming inclusive, I was told by a staff member “The congregation is not ready for that yet.”

I interpret this as a problem of pervasive blindness. I am happy to see light at the end of the tunnel, but I recognize that far too many congregations see no need to become *intentionally inclusive*. Feeling no need to challenge the status quo, they see no need for diversity.

Paul tells us that we are “Ambassadors for Christ.” Christ “died for all,” Paul declared, so “that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.” On that basis, Paul insisted, “Therefore from now on *we recognize no man according to the flesh*.” (2 Corinthians 5:15-16 NASV, emphasis added). □

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