**BECOMING A CHURCH FOR ALL PEOPLE**

**The Malaise**

When we encounter the Church for All People, it finds itself in the midst of a number of tensions and questions. This congregation, and Bruce particularly as its minister, have quite a task before them if they are to resolve the crisis situation they find themselves in and move forward together in a unified way. In order to discern positive, enduring ways forward within the CfAP, the congregation and its leaders must first understand the problems they are dealing with. In particular, they must recognize that there are two different levels of problems to be addressed.

There is, at this moment, the obvious presenting problem of Ansa and her hurt feelings. She is grieving, she is angry, and she feels abandoned by her church in her time of need. The encouragement and support of her fellow Christians will be essential for her to heal from her wounds and be reconciled to healthy relationship with the faith community that has disappointed her. She may also need to be challenged to grow in certain ways personally and spiritually.

But this particular situation with Ansa—important as it is—is also an indication of deeper underlying difficulties within the congregation as a whole. It is a symptom. The church must not scapegoat Ansa, ignore her voiced frustrations, or write the incident off as an isolated instance of disappointment. No, the CfAP is suffering from a number of similar symptoms, and treating only the symptoms will not heal the disease.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Having two levels of problems to address, then, requires two different approaches to the situation. The presenting problem will likely require a short-term solution, a technical fix using the resources already in hand.[[2]](#footnote-2) Bruce and the church need to respond to Ansa, who is feeling betrayed. We will look at ways they might do so healthily. But underlying problems of the magnitude found in the CfAP will require adaptive changes and long-term solutions rather than quick fixes. These issues of identity and relationship demand and deserve great attention, particularly if the congregation hopes to keep presenting problems like Ansa’s from cropping up repeatedly.

Addressing the underlying ailment requires first having some understanding of what it is, an objective accomplished by looking at the symptoms and what they indicate. Beginning with the presenting problem, then, we work our way backward to the true, concealed issue. In the CfAP, we are immediately confronted with Ansa’s frustration about perceived neglect. She grieves alone when she needs company and support. And we see other similar symptoms as well: some women feel degraded by the actions of their Latin American brothers, church leadership is disappointed by the lack of participation from members of the minority cultures, conflict arises over styles of music used in worship, and so on. Furthermore, an inability to respond well to these kinds of situations permeates the church atmosphere.

Symptoms like these suggest a deeper problem: differing cultural norms are causing conflict. The clash of the multiplicity of cultures found in this congregation is often chaotic and leaves churchgoers feeling violated, unimportant, or even betrayed—quite the opposite of the church’s intended goal of unity and edification as a “church for all people”! The very diverse constituents of this congregation come to the community with differing hopes, expectations, and fears, and as all of these hopes, expectations, and fears come into contact and begin to interact, contentions emerge.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Even this, however, is a symptom of a still deeper predicament. For diversity does not have to result in destructive conflict and distressed relationships. It is true that “as iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another,”[[4]](#footnote-4) perhaps even with sparks flying at times. However, such formation can be valuable, constructive, and often even amicable.

In the CfAP, the conflict caused by diverse cultures and their associated HEF indicates not that diversity is a bad thing, but rather that diversity is a potentially good thing being done badly. When we look closely at the interactions in the church, we see that diversity is spoken of highly and that some attempts are being made to celebrate it. We also see, however, that diversity is not understood or cherished as it should be among Christians. We see that an appreciation for diversity does not reach to the depths of this church’s identity, thereby permeating its every move.

Having traced the symptoms of the CfAP, then, we find ourselves confronting the true ailment of the congregation: an identity crisis. This church does not have a unified, transformative understanding of who it is at its core. It claims publicly and proudly to be “a church for all people,” yet it is struggling to live up to that claim because this corporate identity as a faith community does not trump—or even do so well at incorporating!—the diverse individual and cultural identities (with associated HEF) of the congregation’s members. They are, though it may sound cynical, “a church of diverse people out for themselves.” To be sure, their motivations may be good and their failings unintentional. The above pronouncement is meant as a description rather than a value statement. But the truth of it stands.

The congregation’s identity crisis is also indicated in differing understandings of their corporate purpose. Ansa asks in the midst of her pain, “What is the church for?” She has her own understandings of what it means to be the church, as does Bruce, and as does each other person involved. We see these (often subconscious) perceptions of church purpose emerge in the words and actions and HEF of each person and group. And though they may not realize it, the question “What is the church for?” translates readily into “Who are we?” Therefore, when Ansa, Bruce, and the others answer questions about the purpose of the church, they are at a deeper level answering questions of identity, with a variety of interpretations of church identity emerging.

So as the CfAP seeks to be healed of the malaise that is causing its dysfunction, the congregation should start at the source of its troubles, solving its underlying problems as a foundation for healthier functioning when presenting problems arise. As the church understands its identity and calling as this particular collection of the people of God, it will be prepared and challenged to appreciate diversity within its midst. As a result, the church can learn to healthily engage differing cultural norms, differing HEF, and conflict in general, which all prepares them for crisis situations like the present one with Ansa. In short, as the CfAP answers the deeper, more enduring questions it faces, it will be better equipped to address its current dilemma.

That is not to say that Ansa’s dissatisfaction should be ignored until issues of identity and purpose have been solved and articulated. To do so would be pastorally insensitive, even negligent. Identity discernment is a long process, and implementing adaptive changes based on the results of such discernment is an even *longer* process. Ansa should not have to wait that entire time to receive pastoral care. She needs and deserves the attention of her church body now.

There may be ways, however, in which the immediate response to Ansa serves only as an anesthetic, dulling her pain while the rest of the church body is attended to and healed. The solutions implemented in this particular moment of crisis will not have the advantage of being the mature, deeply reflective responses that might be within reach after a time of identity discernment. There may be aspects of Ansa’s situation, then, that need to be readdressed after the discernment process is completed, for the presenting problem and the underlying issue, though not one and the same, are intimately related. We see in Ansa’s situation that various perceptions of identity, insufficient appreciation for diversity, and differing cultural norms with a variety of HEF arising from them are all at play. As a result, well-intentioned people find themselves entrenched in conflict with little understanding of how they arrived there or how to emerge.

The immediate crisis with Ansa can and should be addressed with short-term solutions and technical fixes to a great enough degree to smooth things over, at least for now. But if the CfAP is to maneuver its way through its underlying problems to prevent predicaments like the current one with Ansa from arising again in the future, it must look for long-term solutions and adaptive changes. It *must* give attention to its identity and the practical implications of what it means to be “a church for all people.”

**Discerning the Body**

The church’s self-professed identity as “a church for all people” is a marvelous identity to aspire to but a demanding one to live into. This concise self-portrayal incorporates theological issues concerning the identity and purpose of the church universal, at the same time attending to the context and hopes of this specific congregation. The CfAP exhibits both strengths and weaknesses as it attempts to fulfill this aspiration, but the shortcomings are sometimes overwhelming enough to cause the congregation (or at least its minister) to question the feasibility of its endeavor to be a flourishing communion of God’s diverse people.

*Identity*

The first major step in becoming that healthy, thriving fellowship, then, is to ascertain if the church’s presently proclaimed identity—a unified and welcoming collection of diverse people—is truly their God-given identity and purpose. Such a process of discernment requires that they attend to a number of questions, considering them carefully under the guidance of the Spirit and with open hearts and minds to receive what the Spirit conveys.

The following are only a few of a multitude of useful queries that could be made concerning identity: How is the church catholic brought together by God, and for what reasons? What is that church meant to express about God to the world? What is the current makeup of this particular congregation, and how did we come to be who we are? What are our strengths and limitations as a congregation? What of value can this congregation currently and potentially express about God? What would be good news in our societal context, and are we capable of testifying to that, either now or in the future? If we were to make certain changes (e.g., divide into smaller, homogenous congregations), how would that help or hinder our witness to the world?

With the communally discerned insight that arises from answering these kinds of questions, the CfAP will be able to move forward healthily and with assurance. They will have established a firm foundation of identity and purpose, and they will be highly practiced at perceiving the guidance of the Spirit in their midst. Such outcomes will be significantly beneficial tools in their future, no matter where God takes them.

While obedient discernment could lead the CfAP in any number of directions, my own limitations here require me to presume that their currently professed identity is the one that will abide. To be sure, the community might faithfully determine an alternate identity and path forward in their process of discernment. The God whom they desire to imitate and serve is imaginative, ingenious, and adept at using finite people in an infinite number of ways. For that reason, the future of this particular group of people is unforeseeable, with many conceivable outcomes.

However, given the congregation’s location, priorities, and heartfelt endeavors to achieve healthy diversity, it seems quite plausible that they would retain and even strengthen the conviction that they are called to be a church for all people. True, the church does struggle due to an amalgam of understandings of identity and purpose, which leads to differing levels and ways of interaction, but there is already a sense of excitement about and thankfulness for the congregation’s diversity. And though the day-to-day workings of the church do not always correlate to its overarching professed identity, the CfAP presses on to do its best. It surely has room for growth, but overall, the congregation is far from falling apart and is even accomplishing a great deal in its own community and throughout the world that is consistent with its professed purpose. The resolve to be “a church for all people” runs deep within this congregation, and this pursuit, though difficult at times, is enduring, God-given, and achievable.

*Diversity*

With this identity envisioned and established, the church must now understand what it means to be a diverse people and evaluate how well they are living into that calling. They will first need to perceive how their drive for diversity is theologically motivated. This task will have already been partially accomplished through the questions asked in communal discernment, but it may need supplementation until this foundation has been firmly established. Next in its attempt to better understand and celebrate diversity, the church will need to comprehend what that entails and demands in their precise context, and they will also need to evaluate how they exhibit both strengths and weaknesses in that pursuit.

As Bruce himself seems to know, there are a number of significant theological foundations supporting a vision for diversity within the church. To use biblical metaphors, the church is the body of Christ, made up of a variety of differing but equally necessary parts. As a body, the church, though diverse, has been put together in a way that makes up one complete whole, and each part must be present, with all functioning harmoniously for the health of that whole.[[5]](#footnote-5) The church is the household of God, a chosen and holy nation in which those who were once strangers and enemies are being brought together in joyful fellowship.[[6]](#footnote-6) The church is, as Bruce describes it, “a foretaste of God’s reign where people would gather from north and south, from east and west, and sit at table together.” It is an anticipation of the coming Kingdom of God, offering hope of reconciliation to a world whose diversity is often characterized by divisiveness rather than unity. And the church is, at its best, a reflection of the triune Godhead, who though three is unified as one and though diverse exists in harmonious relationship.

In addition to theological precedents for being a diverse people, there are practical justifications and benefits as well. This particular congregation finds itself in the midst of a highly diverse society; in order for it to maintain its relevance in and witness to that society, it ought to affirm the divine beauty it sees in such diversity, honoring the image of God as it is found in a mix of heterogeneous people. And diversity, while providing its fair share of challenges, also brings a great deal of strength to a community. Strengths and weaknesses exist in every human expression of the image of God, but when a variety of manifestations of that image are brought together, each one’s weakness is compensated for by the others’ strengths.

Furthermore, the presence of diversity is simply unavoidable at some level. Even within groups of people that come from similar backgrounds, individuals exhibit great variation in their personalities and preferences, as well as in their hopes, expectations, and fears.[[7]](#footnote-7) No group can be truly homogenous, and even diversity at this milder level can cause conflict. And sometimes within similar-looking groups of people, the task of expressing differences is overlooked or deemed unnecessary, generally to the detriment of the group, as dangerous assumptions are made and a richer understanding of identity is missed completely.

Conflict, then, is inevitable and should be anticipated and embraced as part of healthy relationship as diverse people. For that reason, the CfAP should not be too discouraged when disagreements arise in their midst. Relationships can be difficult even among people who share much in common, and as greater diversity is thrown into the mix, the challenges increase. However, conflict can be handled well, and sometimes a diverse group of people with its better balance of perspectives is even more skilled at doing so. Furthermore, the end goal of a healthy Christian witness that the CfAP is aiming for in trying to be a diverse people is motivation for them to press on when times get tough.

And things will be hard at times, but since this church has chosen to embrace diversity as part of their fundamental (and inescapable!) identity, they ought to then examine how well they are living into that ideal. Their simple recognition that cultural differences do not have to be divisive or isolating is a great strength. This is a highly diverse church that has survived the ups and downs of life together so far, and that is quite an accomplishment! There is at least some awareness of the value of different cultural expressions, which is shown through events like the Ghanaian-led church picnic, World Communion Sunday, and the forums on members’ life experiences as people from a range of cultures and backgrounds. The lay leaders of the church have tried, if somewhat unsuccessfully, to deepen communication and use the gifts of various members in the corporate life and worship of the church together.

Furthermore, the church is led by a minister who is experienced with and passionate about cultural diversity and who also knows that cultural differences need to be acknowledged and attended to. Bruce is the kind of strong leader who can help this struggling group understand the challenges it is facing and lead them through those trials. He will do well at this if he devotes himself to being Spirit-led and if he is able to influence others, especially the congregation’s leaders (in honorable, non-manipulative ways, of course), to join him in the active pursuit of diversity and reconciled relationships. He must remain firm in his own God-given convictions, for the church looks to him to provide guidance, but he should also recognize his limitations and seek counsel from others when necessary. As Bruce has exhibited these kinds of characteristics already, he is one of this congregation’s greatest strengths at the moment.

There are, however, several ways in which the CfAP needs to grow stronger in its quest for healthy diversity. First, the church must recognize that though their hopes for and efforts toward diversity are praiseworthy, they are often falling short when it comes to translating those hopes and efforts over into successful relationships. The inadequacy of their attempts is often due to ignorance and misunderstanding, which is unsurprising in their context. Differing cultural norms and barriers of communication loom large. The situation is lamentable all the same, for the church members are, however unintentionally, allowing their lack of knowledge about one another to become divisive.

The members of the CfAP need to understand that unexamined diversity causes a great deal of tension. If differing HEF are unexpressed and unknown, those HEF are generally unmet. Unmet HEF lead to disappointment and disillusionment, anger towards specific people who are viewed as being at fault, and often frustration with or cynicism about the church as a whole. People with unmet HEF tend to offer responses out of hurt, anger, and fear. And they are frequently blind to the good intentions of others. Sometimes their own emotions cloud their ability to see clearly. Sometimes they have only a partial understanding of the situation, due to either limited information or their inability to interpret another’s culturally unfamiliar attempts at interacting with them. Sometimes their own arrogance gets in the way, and they refuse to see their own similar fault and failures. As a result, the attitudes of “no one else seems to care,” “I have done nothing wrong,” and “my way is the right way” increase the tension of already strained relationships and contribute to the downward spiral of conflict until someone or something enters the equation to change the situation. Maintaining healthy community is a difficult enough task in a church where cultural expectations are generally the same. In a church as extremely diverse as this one is, the difficulties will be magnified and will therefore require much more purposeful attention in being overcome.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Caring for Ansa**

The quandary requiring the most immediate attention is Ansa’s. In the midst of the turmoil of differing HEF in a congregation that only imperfectly lives out its identity and purpose as a diverse people, Ansa has been injured. She expressed to Bruce her need for the company and support of her church family as well as her feelings of betrayal when her expectations were not met. She indicated that she felt abandoned and mistreated, seen as important only on the basis of her capacity to work for the church. In order to heal these wounds and for Ansa to be reconciled to a healthy relationship with her church, numerous things need to happen.

To begin with, Ansa needs to be reassured that she is valued as a member of this church body, valued as a person and not just for what she can do. Bruce himself can express these things to her, but in order for Ansa to be confidently reconciled to her church, others will likely need to show their remorse and concern as well. Bruce should talk to Ansa or individuals from her culture, and based on what is deemed culturally appropriate, he should encourage the other church members to express, both in words and in actions, their love for Ansa, their sympathy for her in her grief, and their regret at having failed her in her time of need.

Gently and over time, however, the role of differing HEF in Ansa’s situation likely needs to be brought to light. Bruce should encourage Ansa to broaden her understanding of the situation and to do her part in reconciliation by forgiving those who wronged her. He might help her look at things from the perspective of those whose attempts to minister to her were misdirected. This will involve a frank discussion of any cultural and personal differences which precluded the response which she had expected, and it should also include an explanation of the efforts that were made and the good intentions behind them. Ann might be particularly well suited to this task as well, if she can express to Ansa her own experiences of unmet HEF in her own time of grief.

**Caring for the Body**

As the CfAP undertakes the task of seeking to understand its God-given identity, Bruce and the church’s current leadership could lead the way by proposing a church-wide focus on identity and purpose, say over a six month period. They should call upon the members of the congregation to be in prayerful discernment on their own time and also set aside specific times during worship assemblies for communal discernment and vision-casting.

As they engage in these processes, the already established leaders of the congregation must be particularly careful not to slip back into their old habits of completely running the show. They may have greater knowledge to be sure, particularly to begin with. However, they must commit themselves to attending to each member of the body and to what God may be saying through even the most unexpected of mouthpieces. It is probable that once the general purpose of the conversations have been explained, these leaders should listen more than they speak and serve primarily as advocates for those whose voices have not been heard. It is only through heeding the diversity of HEF and needs and through submitting to the discerned guidance of the Spirit that the church will be able to move forward healthily.

In order for there to be lasting change within the CfAP, it is especially essential that the ordinary people of the congregation take responsibility for the decisions that are made in the process of discernment. For that reason, Bruce and the other leaders should encourage the entire congregation to be deeply involved in the endeavor, through their eager participation and by taking ownership of and responsibility for specific aspects (e.g., coordinating and leading times of prayer and conversation). Change needs to happen from the grassroots level, not just because one person or a leadership team thinks it is important.

After the CfAP has ascertained its calling as a diverse body of people, if it is going to positively engage diversity, meeting the HEF of its members, it then needs to promote greater awareness and understanding of the cultures that are in its midst. In short, because this church is the body of Christ and the household of God, it ought to give greater attention to *who* it is that God has brought together in that body and household. Ideas like the ones that follow can be discussed either church leaders or by the congregation as a whole in order to find the best fit. As this church’s minister, Bruce is ideally situated to begin that kind of dialogue.

People from various backgrounds need to be invited and equipped to share their cultural history, loves, and expressions of faith in a safe, welcoming environment. Events like the church picnic and World Communion Sunday should continue, but other similar events should be planned to further showcase the kaleidoscope of cultures within the church. There should to be times set aside for the blessing and affirmation of the cultures represented in the church, showing how each culture bears the image of God and how it is an important part the CfAP, as well as how the church as a whole is made strong and beautiful because of its diversity.

The congregation should also find ways to place greater emphasis on the HEF that are norms in each of the church’s wealth of cultures. The forums on cultural backgrounds should continue, though with greater emphasis, even with time devoted to them as a part of corporate worship together. Furthermore, special attention ought to be given to expectations during life-changing events such as birth, marriage, the loss of a job, death, and so on. If these kinds of cultural HEF are fleshed out and reactions are contemplated and discussed openly beforehand, then when a response is necessary, it can be expressed promptly and appropriately. Perhaps the congregation could compile a short, engaging publication for its members.

As the minister to this congregation, Bruce can, of course, help implement some of these kinds of changes. Again, though, there must be a great deal of involvement from the general members of the church. Perhaps individuals feel particularly passionate about designing a certain event or experience for the betterment of the entire church. Bruce can help coordinate such activities and serve as a resource (pastorally, theologically, etc.) for those planning them. Or if a number of people feel drawn to do so, a cultural experience/expression team might form to systematically highlight and affirm the diversity found within the congregation. In any case, these types of events should be more frequent than they currently are.

Striving for healthy diversity at the wider church level might also mean encouraging smaller and more intimate groups of people to form—as long as diversity is maintained within these small groups. When church members begin to interact with cultures other than their own on an everyday basis, they will grow in knowledge about experiences, needs, and HEF that are normative for that culture. They will also establish deeper cross-cultural relationships, which will prove to be a great strength in times of cross-cultural conflict. Because they deeply know and deeply regard people from cultures other than their own, they will no longer be as prone to viewing others as odd or wrong and will instead have a relatively solid foundation of respect for differences.

In addition to these kinds of improvements, an appreciation for diversity needs to permeate the church’s functioning, particularly its leadership and decision-making structures. If this truly is to be “a church for all people,” the current leadership is not suitable for the task, for a very select group—white, upper middle class businesspeople—run this church for “all.” Even when they invite people of other backgrounds to participate, they do so on their own terms (task focus, businesslike meetings, particular predetermined times of meeting, etc.), thereby enforcing certain stipulations, which some might even scrutinize as a colonialist habit of domination. Leadership up until this point has not been all bad, to be sure, but it has been limited, and changes must be made to include greater representation from the array of cultures represented in the congregation. Making such adjustments will require finding creative solutions to issues of time and availability, for a number of people representing the congregation’s minorities were more than willing to serve in leadership capacities but lacked the time to do so. These changes will also likely require surrendering needs for efficiency and task orientation, at least for a time. Overhauling the configuration of the church leadership will not be easy, but the undertaking is necessitated by the church’s commitment to flourishing diversity.

And because these kinds of transitions promise to be particularly difficult, perhaps putting a strain on interpersonal relationships—for example, if someone lacks the humility to step away from a position of power, or if differing HEF cause considerable conflict among newly formed leadership teams—having a person of deep commitment to diversity overseeing the change would be essential. Bruce might be able to play such a role, but his own limitations of time and talent may prevent that. Even if that is not the case, it might be advisable to ask for expert guidance in order to preserve good relationships and move forward as constructively as possible.

Bruce can however, serve powerfully through his position as minister, conveying an important, transformative message to the congregation: honor one another above yourselves; put others’ needs first; give up your rights in order to serve others. A detailed study on the kenosis of Christ and what it means for his disciples would also be beneficial.[[9]](#footnote-9) With a congregation of humble, self-sacrificing servants, respect for various cultural ideals and boundaries would be more prevalent, and perhaps fewer people would end up feeling neglected or offended. They truly could be “a church for all people.”

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1. In their book *Creating Community Anywhere*, Carolyn Shaffer and Kristin Anundsen write, “This process [scapegoating] is not unlike surgically removing a cancerous tumor from a human body. This strategy might work for a time, but if the patient never deals with the conditions that gave rise to the tumor, chances are other tumors will appear or the person’s disease will express itself through different symptoms.” See Shaffer and Anundsen, *Creating Community Anywhere: Finding Support and Connection in a Fragmented World* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1993), 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The distinction between technical fix and adaptive change was made by Ronald Heifetz. To determine which approach is best in a given situation, Heifetz proposes this question: “Is this a problem that an expert can fix, or is this a problem that is going to require people in the community to change their values, their behavior, or their attitudes?” Taken from Joe Flower, “A conversation with Ronald Heifetz: Leadership without Easy Answers,” *The Healthcare Forum Journal* 38.4 (July-August 1995). Accessed online at <http://www.well.com/~bbear/heifetz.html#adapt> (April 9, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I am particularly thankful to one of my own faith community members, Rosten Callarman, for first framing conflict for me in the terms of differing hopes, expectations, and fears. I am not sure if the trio is original to him, but I do believe whoever introduced it has certainly articulated something important for community dynamics. Also, from here on out in this paper, I will often shorten the lengthy “hopes, expectations, and fears” to “HEF.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Proverbs 27:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Romans 12:3-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ephesians 2:11-22; 1 Peter 2:9-10 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is a reality that the homogenous unit principle (HUP) does not take seriously enough. Sometimes, however, it is also given too little consideration in diverse collections of people, as individuals are lumped together into cultural groups with little attention paid to variety of expression *within* those cultural groups. Cultural norms do exist, to be sure, but such norms are not absolutes! [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. George Yancey’s One Body, One Spirit: Principles of Successful Multiracial Churches would be an excellent source for this church’s leadership to examine. In this book, Yancey’s seven principles for building a healthy multiracial church are: inclusive worship, diverse leadership, an overarching goal, intentionality, personal skills, location, and adaptability. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Philippians, then, would be a good resource for a sermon series or a discussion group. For more on how kenosis is present throughout Philippians (and not just in the Christ hymn in Philippians 2!), see my exegesis paper on Philippians 3, posted on my portfolio blog. Also, for a good, brief introduction to the idea, see the first chapter of Sarah Coakley’s Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)