

Case Brief:

A Church for All People

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Bruce has found himself in the middle of a very tense ethnic conundrum. His congregation has desired to be a diverse community of believers and has discovered they are not as far along as they thought they were. Bruce and his congregation need to consider the reactions of the members as well as the challenges that diverse churches face in order to be successful together. They must also consider the theological grounds that led them to desire and strive for diversity as well as what it means to be one body of Christ that suffers and celebrates life together. The church has the opportunity to be intentional in creating a more congruent understanding and goal of diversity and to capitalize on the ways they have already been doing this. Bruce and his church have a challenge ahead of them to stay together as a diverse body but the challenge is not impossible if they can work together in love.

### **Analysis of the Situation**

#### **Reactions of Ansa and Church Members**

Ansa's losses seem to be magnified by the lack of response from her church community. The case study does not mention whether or not she has family members in the U. S. or even if other members of the church are from the same country as her so it is possible that she feels utterly alone. Her anger and hurt towards her church are very real; her expectations for community during bereavement have been shaped by her culture and family back home and the interactions of most of the church do not make sense to her as appropriate condolences. Her nationality is not specified but in many African countries the way of handling death "focuses on the spiritual/systemic/interactional nature of healing in grieving and the resources which the community makes available to bereaved persons";<sup>1</sup> community response was likely not just an expectation but a necessity for Ansa to process her grief as she had for much of her life. The

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine Nwoye, "Memory Healing Processes and Community Intervention in Grief Work in Africa," *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* 26, no. 3 (September 2005): 147.

church may also be an outlet for her emotions about the family deaths that she does not know how to express or who to blame, such as being angry at God for such tragic events and redirecting that anger towards the church; she may not have had to make sense of death with a Christian perspective yet and hoped her church family would help her walk through this difficult time theologically as well as physically and emotionally.

The other church members varied reactions to Bruce's sharing of Ansa's experience is not surprising. The guilt and sympathy from Fred and Susan is an expected reaction from someone who believes they missed an opportunity to show God's love to someone who really needed it, especially to someone who had shown God's love to him or her previously. Yet Jonathan and Ann's reactions of frustration and defensiveness also make sense if they feel attacked or singled out because they were not able to inherently know how other cultures address grief and did not act according to those customs. The diversity in the church is mostly represented in thirty percent of its members, which means that seventy percent likely share similar perceptions and customs of grief and that their ways are the norm in the church and consistent with the rest of the U. S. society which "has relied largely on the experience of the dominant white culture to explain how Americans grieve in general".<sup>2</sup> Most of the white members, as well as likely members of ethnicities who grew up in the U. S., are familiar with common grief practices among whites, such as baking and taking casseroles and sending flowers to the families. If the church members have not become familiar with grief customs of the other nationalities in the congregation, how will they know what to or not to do in members' times of need; however, they hold at least some responsibility in not preparing themselves and other church members to aid in these inevitable events for all their members..

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<sup>2</sup> Anna Laurie and Robert A. Neimeyer, "African Americans in Bereavement: Grief as a Function of Ethnicity," *Omega: Journal of Death & Dying* 57, no. 2 (2008): 174.

## Realities of Diversity in Church

Diversity is an often sought ideal in churches but is less often lived out successfully. Racial and ethnic tensions are realities in society and in churches. Society is being forced more and more to deal with ethnic differences as the population of ethnic minorities has increased over the past several decades yet many churches remain separate in race.<sup>3</sup> Minorities are often very aware of who else in the room is like them and who in the room is likely to accept or affirm them. Churches struggle to balance affirming the distinctiveness of all races and ethnicities present in congregations while simultaneously not focusing solely on racial and ethnic differences; or said another way churches struggle in “articulating the relationship between religious identity and racial identity”.<sup>4</sup> Those churches that dream of diversity may long for religious identity in Christ to be the first and main identifier of all members but they are called back to a reality where racial, sexual, socio-economic, and other identities are still reeling in pain. While focusing on religious identity may be a commendable goal and perhaps even a shift churches should move towards, it does not mean disregarding all other aspects of identity and the experiences that those carry with them.

Learning to balance this tension does not happen overnight but “it appears that in order to accentuate ‘diversity’ as a value it is necessary that congregational leaders emphasize ethnic specificity at the same time religious unity is being urged”.<sup>5</sup> Churches may even disregard or ignore ethnic differences in the name of religious identity but underneath it may stem more from fear and attempts to maintain power or the status quo as they have known it. When fear is in

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<sup>3</sup> John Kenneth Gibson, “A Pneumatological Theology of Diversity,” *Anglican Theological Review* 94, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 430-431. Gibson cites a 2011 study that notes American population has gone from being mostly biracial to multiethnic.

<sup>4</sup> Gerardo Marti, “The Religious Racial Integration of African Americans into Diverse Churches,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 2 (2010): 202.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

control, there is little room for empathy for the other. This struggle of religious identity and racial identity appears to be present in Bruce's church; they may have become so focused on being a "church for all people" that they have overlooked how to honor what it means to be people, different people, and even have some fear about losing the dominant white voice to other ethnicities. They know what to say to sound diverse and even allow small opportunities for diversity but are not sure how to embody their words on a daily basis or larger scale.

### **Theological Considerations**

I learn towards the first option of a gospel for all people in the same church. I think diversity is inherent and beneficial to Christianity although not easily accomplished. One theological concept in support of this would be the Trinity. The Trinity is a manifestation of God as relational at the core; the nature of God is to be in relationship with the Godhead and also with the creation the Trinity has made.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the Trinity's relational nature, "the doctrine of the Trinity means that the one God is differentiated and hence is a diversity within unity".<sup>7</sup> Father, Son, and Spirit are all distinct yet still united in their divine identity. We, who are made "in the image of God," are created to be relational with God and with others and to be diverse as the creation of God and the body of Christ.<sup>8</sup> Diversity and unity were big concerns of the early church; theirs was also a world of ethnic tension yet somehow these different people were communing together in the name of Jesus.

Throughout the book of 1 Corinthians, Paul is concerned about the edification of the body. In 1 Corinthians 12, he discusses diversity and unity back to back; he begins the chapter by talking about different gifts that the Spirit gives out as the Spirit determines is best "for the

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<sup>6</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 78.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>8</sup> Gen. 1:27 (NIV)

common good”.<sup>9</sup> He then switches over to a comparison of the body of Christ to a physical body that cannot function as one body without the diversity of its many parts. The ideas of diversity and unity “may at first seem contrary or paradoxical, but in fact for Paul they are interdependent”.<sup>10</sup> The body of Christ needs diversity in order to be a functioning body; race and ethnicity may not seem like a spiritual gift yet each culture offers different ways of thinking, doing, and being that are relevant for other cultures to consider, witness, and experience. By only privileging one culture over all others for religious decisions, Christians become guilty of elitism and pride. When we fail to see the other and the blessings and opportunities that come with being in relationship with the other, we fail to see that all people have been created in the image of God; “The type of community that Jesus envisions is one that welcomes all, not discriminating people or groups based on social categories...for Paul it is the bond in and through Christ that makes neighbors into the Body of Christ”.<sup>11</sup>

Ansa asked a really great question about the purpose of the church. My response is that yes the church exists to be with those who are suffering in any capacity. Biblically this responsibility makes sense when one considers 1 Corinthians 12:26 (NIV), “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it”. The church exists to be community and to share in life, both the good times and bad times, with each other.

Theologically this is consistent with the idea that the purpose of humanity and the church is to glorify God.<sup>12</sup> The God we are to glorify is at his essence love; this is who he is and this is

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<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor. 12:7 (NIV)

<sup>10</sup> Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 33.

<sup>11</sup> Cahalan, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Grenz, 487.

what he does.<sup>13</sup> Love is also what he calls his people to do and it is through love that we glorify God; “As his essential nature is made manifest in creation, the triune God is glorified. Rather than a cosmic egotist who demands the opposite quality in his creatures, therefore, he is the triune God who desires that humans mirror his own holy character, which is love. As we live in fellowship, we bring honor to the one who is himself the divine community of love”.<sup>14</sup> If the church is not loving towards its members or towards the world, it is not mirroring God or glorifying God. Being with people in times of grief is one way to show and experience love.

Pastorally I also see a place for the church among the grieving. The church not only functions as a body but as a family. Families come from all different backgrounds and are composed of many different formations today. Whether people come from a loving family or an abusive family, the church has the opportunity to love people as its own sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. This is especially true for those whose families may not be present in times of need, such as may be the case for Ansa who does not live in her home country anymore; technology has come a long way in allowing families to communicate over distances but it still cannot substitute for having a living human being present in the moment to hug you, comfort you, and cry with you; “In an era of families often stretched across great geographic distances, congregations are in a unique position to offer family to those who are isolated by grief or distance or both. The love and nurturing that is naturally part of the spiritual family experience are the foundational pieces of congregations reaching out to those who are grieving”.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cahalan, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Grenz, 489.

<sup>15</sup> Helen Wilson Harris, “What Is a Congregation to Do? Grief in Family Congregational Life,” *Journal of Family Ministry* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 26.

## Prescriptive Strategies

### Response to Ansa

In order for Bruce to minister to Ansa, I believe he needs to find out more about her culture's way of handling grief. Richard Osmer points out that "unless preachers attend to the culture of their congregations, as well as the diverse groups in these communities, they are likely to preach abstract sermons to a generic humanity that do not address the real-life situations of their hearers".<sup>16</sup> This could be applied to not only preaching but also to pastoral care; the best way to express to Ansa that she is loved and valued as a member of this church is to offer expressions of love and condolences that she culturally recognizes and understands. Some parts of this may be similar to helping other ethnicities grieve but Bruce should allow for the unique ways Ansa's culture grieves and not automatically dissuade her if something does not seem to line up with a Christian value or practice. Bruce should embrace a stance of not-knowing and invite Ansa or another member from her culture to help him understand the practices and their significance to her grieving process. I would also recommend that he invite other members of the congregation, especially those that expressed regret on their part for not attending to Ansa before, to join him or help her on their own. They should all remember that their role in Ansa's grief may not be over in a few weeks but could be important at least throughout the first year as birthdays, holidays, and other markers or memories surface.<sup>17</sup>

### Response for the Future

When I consider what I would recommend to Bruce about his congregation as a whole and their future with diversity, I see it through the lens of narrative therapy. Narrative therapy

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<sup>16</sup> Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), Kindle Locations 478-479, Kindle.

<sup>17</sup> Harris, "Family Congregational Life," 12.



takes the stance that realities and stories about life and experience are socially constructed, especially through language.<sup>18</sup> Not only has each culture in the church created an understanding of life based on its own societies, but each person in that culture has also created an understanding of his or her life through that societal lens. Yet while stories are socially constructed, that does not mean they are automatic; people have the opportunity to choose how their stories progress and to make changes. Bruce's church has the opportunity to change its story; they believed their church was diverse but are coming to learn a fuller story that displays moments of great tension and discord over ethnic differences. As they move forward, they have the power to construct a story that more fully encompasses diversity and unity, which is their preferred story.<sup>19</sup> There are not many examples of diverse churches that function well together so perhaps Bruce and the church could see themselves as pioneers; they get to decide what diversity looks like and adjust it if something does not work and then leave their experiences and lessons for the next generation to continue.<sup>20</sup>

A key aspect of narrative therapy is the concept of externalization, which is seeing that “the person is not the problem, but the problem is the problem. Externalization is a practice supported by the belief that a problem is something operating or impacting on or pervading a person's life, something separate and different from the person”.<sup>21</sup> It is an attitude that separates the problem from the person, or in this case the people. The attitude of externalization is extremely important for Bruce's congregation in order to prevent an attitude of we vs. them; it

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<sup>18</sup> Jill Freedman and Gene Combs, *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities*. (New York, NY: Norton, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Freedman and Combs.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

would be easy for the seventy percent to believe the problem is the thirty percent and that the thirty percent just needs to assimilate to American culture or for the thirty percent to stay angry at the seventy percent and believe the seventy percent to be condescending and arrogant. If such an attitude takes root in the church, it would be incredibly hard for them to overcome and achieve their dream of diversity together. The problem is not the people but rather expectations, misunderstandings, tension, or even another phrase that I would let Bruce and the church use to describe what is going on among them.

As the church externalizes the problem, Bruce could have them begin to look for unique outcomes, which are “exceptions to the problematic story”.<sup>22</sup> Unique outcomes that I see so far are the church picnics, forums, and World Communion Sunday. These could be starting blocks for building more and more diversity. Part of looking for unique outcomes is looking for the actions and for the meanings behind the actions; the church picnics are times when Ghanans lead worship and what does it mean to the Ghanans to do this and what does it mean to other members to have them lead.<sup>23</sup> By exploring actions and their meanings, Bruce can help the church focus in on the meanings that do line up with their dream for diversity and create other actions and experiences that share those meanings.

Bruce’s role in the church is multifaceted. He is one who affirms the work in diversity the church is already doing and the efforts of both the majorities and the minorities in this dream. As a minister of the church, he also has the opportunity to help the church shape their theology of diversity.<sup>24</sup> A theology of diversity would be similar to the story they desire to create for

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<sup>22</sup> Freedman and Combs, 127.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 78-82.

<sup>24</sup> Gibson, “Theology of Diversity,” 429.

diversity but it would help them focus on the whys and hows of diversity according to their spiritual beliefs and could be something for them to measure decisions and interactions with if they are not sure how they are doing. He is one who holds all members accountable to this theology of diversity and to their preferred story they are working towards. He also can help remind each member that the people are not the problem, but the problem is and that they need to work together to defeat the problem and not each other. And one of the most important responsibilities Bruce has is to model a loving diversity in unity for the congregation; “Servant leadership is leadership that influences the congregation to change in ways that more fully embody the servanthood of Christ”.<sup>25</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Love is a central attribute of the one whose image we bear. God is and desires for us to be relational and diverse and love is an essential part of the relationship among the Trinity, between the Trinity and its creation, and among the creation. Bruce’s church is struggling to love each other and each others’ differences. The idea of diversity is easy to desire but difficult to live out in church. The situation Ansa has experienced is not a proud moment for the church but it could be a turning point if they seek to consider their future and press on to write out a story of God’s love that more fully reflects the varied backgrounds of the congregation. They have the opportunity to remember that “knowing and loving God leads us to love those he loves and to think and write theology accordingly”.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Osmer, Kindle Location 2282.

<sup>26</sup> Kelly M. Kapic, *A Little Book for New Theologians* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2012), Kindle Location 487, Kindle Edition.

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