**Building an Inclusive Church in a Multicultural Society  
An address given at Nazarene Theological Seminary  
by Tom Nees, director, Mission Strategy USA/Canada**

**The Christian church is confronted with the greatest challenge facing American society in the 21st-century.**

How will it achieve unity out of the unprecedented diversity brought about by recent changes in immigration laws and the growth of minorities? From this nation's beginning, church and society have been divided by black and white racial strife.

As long as immigrants from Europe were easily assimilated into the English-speaking white majority, the so-called "American Dilemma" described by Gunnar Myrdal1 remained a black-white issue. According to writers such as Andrew Hacker in "Two Nations,"2 this racial divide continues to define American culture, creating a polarized confusing environment in which the new immigrants seek to determine to which side of the divide they have been relegated.

In the near future, Hispanics will become our largest minority group, even as Asians comprise the fastest growing group of immigrants. As a result, the lines defining majority and minority will be blurred, as it already is in most major cities. There are some among us who despair of living up to our national motto—”E Pluribus Unum”—“out of many one.” In their minds, cultural diversity has led to multiculturalism or ethnocentrism leaving us hopelessly divided and increasingly divisive. In David Shipler's words we—blacks and whites—remain "A Country of Strangers."3

The Church reflects this cultural diversity and corresponding division.

It is not surprising that we have black congregations and denominations. When Africans began to embrace the gospel, they were excluded from the white congregations of their slaveholders. That exclusion continued through segregation into the present. Eleven o'clock Sunday morning remains the most segregated hour of the week. The African-American church began, and to some degree continues, as a reaction to white supremacy in American Christianity.

It seems perfectly natural that immigrants from Asia and the Hispanic world would want to worship in their first, and for some (for awhile at least), their only language. Thus there are understandable historic and sociological reasons for culturally specific congregations.

What happens, though, when a denomination like the Church of the Nazarene identifies itself as an international, and thus multicultural, fellowship? How does a predominately English-speaking white Church of the Nazarene in the United States and Canada overcome history and challenge culture to become inclusive by welcoming, even celebrating, the cultures of people previously excluded and unwanted? Will the church really make a place for immigrant converts who came to know the Church of the Nazarene on mission fields?

Five years ago I was asked to organize the Multicultural Ministries office. Immigrant minorities had become by then the fastest growing segment of the church. During the past decade, there have been several years when more new Hispanic congregations than English speaking have been organized. The Multicultural Ministries office was intended to provide support to the 20 multicultural strategy committees made up of the leaders of the various minority leaders in the church.

We identify churches by ethnicity. By adding the membership statistics of these churches we project that the number of minorities totals near 12 percent compared to national demographics of near 40 percent. But we really don't know the numbers. We're still assuming that African-Americans go to black churches, whites to white churches, Hispanics to..., etc. This way of estimating is admittedly inaccurate. For instance, Steve Dottin, an African American NTS graduate, doesn't appear in our statistics because he is the pastor of a predominately white congregation. We really don't know how many minorities are members of white congregations.

However we count or estimate, the Church of the Nazarene in the United States and Canada is overwhelmingly white. Judging by our leadership ranks in the superintendency, the General Board, at Headquarters and our educational institutions, one would conclude that, with some obvious exceptions, the church is nearly exclusively white.

I fear that if we continue to do nothing different than we are doing, in the near future, when and where there is no majority group, this denomination will be marginalized as a predominately English-speaking white fellowship in a sea of diversity.

We should first change our objectives. Our objective should not simply be to organize more African-American churches, more Hispanic churches, or more Asian and Native American churches. The objective should be to include more people—African Americans, Hispanics, Asians and Native Americans—in the life of the church.

I fear that with our present approach we will spend a lot of money on strategies and five to ten years from now be no more representative of American society than we are now.

I don't believe that we can succeed in our desire to be an inclusive, multicultural fellowship by layering the church, that is, organizing separate jurisdictions and developing distinctive programs for each cultural group.

What if McDonald's in its desire to penetrate the market potential of minority groups decided to create a separate chain for African Americans, Koreans, Haitians, etc? What if General Motors decided to create cultural- and language-specific cars? Large companies would go bankrupt with that kind of strategy. They have to make their products appealing to everyone.

We have organized an African-American Leadership Development Committee to support a mission strategy that seeks to start churches in African American communities. But not all African-Americans live, shop, work and go to school in African American communities. Furthermore, if African-Americans perceive that the reason the Church of the Nazarene is interested in starting black churches is because they are not welcome in the white churches, the strategy is doomed from the start.

If the Church of the Nazarene is to succeed in reaching out to African-Americans in Kansas City, for instance, the message cannot be: “We have a church on The Paseo for black people.” The only way we will reach our objectives is for every Nazarene congregation in the city to let it be known that African-Americans are welcome, wanted and needed in every congregation.

In multicultural America, we will always have cultural- and language-specific congregations. There is no "one size fits all" worship style. I don't have a problem with congregations that attract people of particular cultures and languages, as long as they don't use their culture and language to exclude. A missional church is one that seeks to bridge the barriers of language, custom and belief to communicate the gospel.

We cannot leave it up to our minority leaders to make the church representative and inclusive. They can't do it alone. I have listened to the passion as well as the frustration of our minority leaders. They may strategize, but they can't implement much without the support and empowerment of the majority group.

I see signs of hope. I am encouraged by people from all the minority cultural and language groups who, because they believe in the Wesleyan-Holiness message, stay with us even when the reward system doesn't always work well for them. I am encouraged by those leaders among us who have taken risks to be mission superintendents and mission pastors, understanding that you cannot preach an inclusive gospel from an exclusive church.

And there are more signs of hope.

Steve Johnson, a '97 NTS graduate, is pastor of the Memphis First Church of the Nazarene. His congregation was faced with a dilemma. As part of a long-range development plan, they took advantage of an offer to sell their property and were seeking some temporary place of worship. The Rev. Mrs. Albertha Rogers, the African American pastor of Eastside Church, invited the Memphis First congregation to meet in her building—but not as separate congregations. A few weeks ago, these congregations and pastors—black and white—merged their congregations, with Steve and Albertha as co-pastors. Steve said this is not an attempt to force integration, but rather to demonstrate the possibilities of racial reconciliation. He and Rev. Charles Tillman, the African-American pastor of the Memphis Friendship church, are co-teaching in a training program for other black leaders. I believe these cooperative efforts will go far to reach all the people of Memphis.

In the recent issue of our Multicultural Ministries newsletter, we featured two multicultural congregations—one of them in Salinas, California, where Tim King, another recent NTS graduate is pastor. In an area heavily populated by Hispanics, he invited Rev. Wilmer Guido from Nicaragua to be co-pastor. Rather than support the beginning of a separate Hispanic congregation in their building, these two men have become co-pastors. District Superintendent Clarence Kinzler said that Tim took the remarkable step of insisting that they receive equal salaries.

Only if all of our California congregations open their doors to Hispanics, Asians and African-Americans will we see the development of an inclusive church in that most diverse of all the states.

The Church needs more leaders like Steve Johnson and Tim King. While anecdotal, these stories are of symbolic, if not prophetic, importance. They point to a new way of building an inclusive church in a multicultural society.

In "Where the Nations Meet,"4 a book about his multicultural congregation, Stephen Rhodes concludes with this story.

At one of our Friday-night praise celebrations, during testimony time, Rich Ploch, a lay member of our congregation, stood to tell about his daughter's first-grade birthday party. Christy, like any six-year old, waited anxiously by the window for the first of her friends to arrive. When the first one came, she burst through the front door, rushing out to greet her friend, and they hugged one another, jumped up and down and then together came in to sit by the window to wait for the next guest. When the next car pulled up, Christy and first child rushed out together and all three children danced for joy, hugging one another, and then came inside. This pattern of hospitality continued until the eighth and last guest arrived, when all the children ran out to greet her, and the whole party hugged, screamed and jumped up and down together. Rich said that as he watched this unfold, he remarked to his wife, ‘Carol, I've been looking for this kind of feeling all my life. How neat it must feel to arrive at a party and to have everyone run out to welcome you, happy that you are there!” Rich concluded his testimony with this observation: “It wasn't until I came to this congregation that I felt as warmly and happily accepted as Christy and her friends must have felt that day.” The guest pastor followed Rich's testimony with this observation: “Whenever heaven is depicted, it's always described as this lonely image of St. Peter waiting by the gates, checking to see whether you are on the guest list or not. But I think heaven is far more like Christy's party, when all the saints will rush out to greet us, joyfully jumping up and down, hugging us, happy that we are there.”

Pastor Rhodes concludes: Multicultural congregations are the foretaste of this heavenly hospitality. "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God." (Eph 2:19)

Let the party begin. **--Tom Nees is director of Mission Strategy USA/Canada, Evangelism & Church Growth Division, at the International Headquarters of the Church of the Nazarene, in Kansas City, MO.**

**Dr. Bryan Stone Speaks Out on Multicultural Churches**

E. Stanley Jones Professor  
of Evangelism at the Boston University School of Theology

Christian disciples are made, not born, and becoming one is a lifelong process of discipline and spiritual formation.

Dr. Bryan Stone, professor of evangelism at United Methodist-related Boston University, discussed the politics of discipleship and growing multicultural congregations during the March 12-15 meeting of the United Methodist Board of Discipleship.

"The politics that discipleship embodies does not come naturally," he said. The shape of this politics is "revealed" in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. "To be made into a disciple is to be formed into disciplines and practices that provide us the resources to resist rival powers and heretical forms of social imagination, such as the nation-state or the market that would rule our lives and render us incapable of truly worshipping God."   
Politics also impacts the birth, growth and sustainability of multicultural congregations, he said.

Stone said the church is both for and against culture. "Just because a congregation contains a gathering of diverse cultures, doing a lot of diverse things and singing diverse songs and eating diverse food, is no guarantee that what is happening there should be thought of as discipleship."

Baptism, he said, is the central tenet of making disciples. The theology of baptism was not born in a seminary but in the living context of multicultural congregational life, as missionaries and church leaders sought to determine how Christians are "called to pull off interethnic inclusion before a watching world."

The politics of baptism shapes several callings, all working toward the ministry of reconciliation, Stone said. The apostle Paul focused on religious and ethnic diversity, while today's Christians talk about culture, a word used as a "catch-all place-holder for just about every imaginable difference in gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and age." The use of the term "culture" muddles the distinction of "multicultural" and "multiculturalism," he said, making it unclear what is being talked about.

People have been operating for some time with a neutral understanding of culture as a diverse, but universal feature of human existence, he said. In reality, the thought of culture as a self-contained way of life is being challenged, and the lines between cultures are increasingly being blurred so that the meaning of culture is becoming less absolute and cohesive, he said.

Immigration, ethnic patterns, technology and mobility have affected culture tremendously in the last 50 years, producing changes in sources of diversity. "Probably the biggest cultural change for the United States in the last 30 years is the extent of diversity," Stone said. Multicultural congregations are those that noticed changes in the community around the church and adapted - instead of dying. "Necessity is not only the mother of invention; it can be the mother of mission," he said. He added that some congregations become multicultural by accident.

Multicultural congregations vary, and Stone said they are worth examining and learning from. One congregation calls itself multicultural but worships in separate cultural or language groups, coming together monthly for a multicultural worship service. Another congregation is multicultural because the members are of different races, ethnicities and cultures. In most cases, the worship services are traditional euro-American and the multicultural representation adapts to that style. In other cases, the church attempts to blend styles to embrace the diversity in the congregation. "Issues of reconciliation are more likely to be confronted and dealt with in these types of congregations," Stone said.

The fastest-growing multicultural congregations are "neo-Pentecostal in style" and something about that style has been successful in uniting people from across cultures. Pentecostal and charismatic churches have been the most multicultural, Stone said.

He provided 10 of the most important practices he has discovered about multicultural congregations that take Christian disciple-making seriously today. These congregations:

Practice inclusion. This goes beyond having a mission statement that touts inclusiveness but engages in inclusive worship, cross-cultural understanding - the ability to speak, work, play, and interact across cultures - and inclusive preaching.

· Are proactive in practicing inclusion. They have adopted a mindset where "their very existence is not only to serve the diverse group of people who make up the congregation, but to be a church (that) exists for those who are not even there yet."

· Tolerate ambiguity. The leaders work in the margins where there are cultural blunders and misunderstanding, racism, few established rules for how things are done and little denominational guidance. They employ hope as a strategy.

· "Work rhythmically" with unity and diversity in establishing and constantly renegotiating the identity of the church. Such a congregation successfully moves back and forth between the particular stories of its groups and the story of the church as a whole.

· Are unambiguous in the way they affirm the centrality of cultural diversity to their identity and mission. They do more than assimilate minority or immigrant cultures into the dominant culture. They understand their mission and work toward interethnic and intercultural reconciliation - the mission at the heart of the gospel.

· See education as an event, take seriously the voices from the margins, and educate in and through a restructure of power dynamics. "In other words, education is not imagined as transmission but processes of reconciliation. Education is what happens in the encounter between two groups who have been included into one social reality. Both groups have to learn new rhythms."

· Know that faith formation happens in encounters with the other.

· Employ and develop leaders who have a distinctive set of multicultural skills. The leadership is shared and is intergenerational, the leaders practice hospitality and have the ability to embrace strangers and are gifted at practices of "gathering" the church.

· Practice a diversity of giftedness within a common ministry of reconciliation. The congregations· emphasize forgiveness.

· Eat together. "This practice is one of the most interesting features of multicultural congregations." The centrality of food is not just about fellowship but about inclusion and reconciliation.

One of the greatest challenges facing the church today is to find ways of practicing evangelism and making disciples without playing by the rules of the "post-Christendom culture," Stone said.