

Room for All—Myth or Reality?

*A personal reflection on engaging minority voices in the church
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As a new immigrant from Jamaica, adjusting to the Canadian reality was quite a struggle. Not only was there a need to adjust to changing seasons, new foods and tastes and ways of behaving—but I was also confronted with the reality that I was no longer part of the majority culture.

Becoming a “minority” was a psychological shock. My accent, ethnic origin, and skin colour became, I recognized, the things that defined me. To that point, I had simply been Peter to my family and Michael to my friends. Now I was the Black guy from Jamaica, with the neat accent, having to repeat everything I said so my Canadian friends could understand me.

It didn’t occur to my friends that they were the ones who were difficult to understand. Their way of speaking was normative, mine was abnormal—cute, sing-songy, exotic. In every way that I was asked to justify myself, the challenge was to fit in, to minimize my difference and maximize my sameness.

There seems to be an innate need to focus on similarities between individuals rather than on differences. Whenever we encounter the “other”—whether culturally or religiously—we seek to find commonalities rather than differences. In fact, we generally feel threatened by differences.

This is a real challenge to being welcoming. Differences often require that the other—usually the one in the minority—accommodate to the majority. In requiring this accommodation, we forget that the richness of a community, like a bouquet of flowers, is due to the diversity of the individuals making up that community, not just to what we hold in common.

The need for sameness also minimizes our appreciation for diversity within minority communities. Often, when they make an attempt to include diverse voices, communities will include only one minority voice. For example, a committee might include one Aboriginal person or one person of colour, expecting that individual to share for their entire community.

As I learned to accommodate myself to Canadian culture, and in particular the church culture, I became less different and more acceptable to my friends and community. As my community began to feel safe with me, I was given a number of opportunities to participate in places usually reserved for members of the majority culture. But in those places, I was often asked to represent my “people” or my “kind”—or simply to add colour. Once I was invited to serve on the Board of an institution. The person who approached me was clear that I was being asked to be the “diverse” person on the Board. This left me with a sense of bewilderment: was I being invited because I had skills, or just to make up a quota?

In reflecting on these and other experiences, I have begun to ask: Is it really possible to create a space where all are welcomed in the fullness of who they are? My sense is that full inclusion is more of a myth than a reality.

People who are different from the majority are asked to make accommodations to fit in. The more they are able to, the easier it is for them to feel welcome. But the majority community rarely appreciates the psychological stress this puts on the person who is different.

The notion of *hospitality* undergirds this process of accommodation. As the “other,” the minority person is invited into the space of the majority. Hospitality assumes a host and guest; it carries an implicit notion of what is “normal.” In a relationship based solely on hospitality, the “guest” is never really at home; rather, they are always being accommodated in someone else’s home. Further, this type of relationship implies that the host always has gifts to offer, and the role of the guest is simply to receive those gifts with thanks and gratitude. A mutual and dynamic relationship, where the notion of “norm” is disrupted, would look quite different.

It is generally understood that the majority defines the norm. Statements like “They are in Canada; they should learn to speak English,” “They are never on time,” or “We ask, but they never volunteer” reflect implicit norms. So does automatically asking a person of colour “Where are you from?” or assuming that because a person has an accent, they cannot be understood.

A friend of mine who is a member of a fairly diverse multicultural faith community shared a story of an audit that was done of their congregation. They were surprised to find that, as they examined the roles people played in the congregation, many ended up in their stereotypical cultural roles. Despite the appearance of racial and cultural diversity in this community, the notions of power still adhered to notions of what is “normal,” what is expected of people from minority cultures.

If we want to take seriously the desire to be inclusive of diverse peoples, it is crucial that we explore what the community identifies as being “normative,” and become aware of the unstated expectation for the other to make accommodations. Secondly, we need to find a new understanding of hospitality.

How, together, can we create a space that is defined by mutuality and transformation?