

Right or Wrong? ‘A living experiment’

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Calls for “homogenous church growth” are being replaced with pleas for multiethnic and/or multicultural congregations. But most churches operate independently of each other and seem to agree skin colors, economic status and organizational styles cannot be mixed, blended or negotiated. What do you think?

Since stepping aside as executive coordinator of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, I have served a historic church in Atlanta as interim pastor. Like so many urban congregations, Peachtree Baptist Church has experienced decline because of demographic changes in its neighborhood, denominational deconstruction and internal struggles. What became clear is the ministry methods designed for homogenous, program-based churches were inadequate to reach people for Christ, particularly in a polarized and increasingly secular culture.

A missional church

In the past three years, Peachtree has set its heart on becoming an interracial, intercultural and intergenerational church. We don’t want to become a megachurch, a seeker church or a contemporary church, but rather a missional church that reflects the community in which God has placed us. We want to honor those parts of our Baptist tradition that are worth honoring and preserve the institutional structures that should be preserved, but we want to look and feel radically different when it comes to racial and cultural composition.

This vision is rooted in the reconciling gospel of Christ and the ultimate goal of that gospel when people from every culture, nation, tribe and

language will gather before God's throne in worship. We realize the mystical body of Christ transcends any one congregation, but we want our congregation to reflect the richness and diversity of Christ's present and coming kingdom.

So, how are we doing? First, the vision of an interracial and intergenerational church is compelling and life-giving to our "little flock" and those who participate with us. I repeatedly hear someone say, "I really like the diversity here," or, "There is love in this place." Even though our numerical growth has been slow and the changes are incremental, we are experiencing spiritual vitality and genuine community. People are coming to Christ. People are coming back to Christ.

Requires humility

Ministry in a multicultural context is not easy, and it requires intentionality in worship planning, leadership development and mission engagement. But most of all, it requires a great deal of humility and absolute dependence on God. We put a lot of emphasis on caring for one another across our differences and on the word of God and the Spirit of God that both unite us and empower us. We talk a lot about unity in diversity and diversity in unity.

Relationships are important to us. Being together is central. We don't spend a lot of time fretting about our future or the cultural currents that swirl around us. We work hard at being attentive to the individuals who make up our fellowship, as well as those individuals who walk in our doors, live in our neighborhood and struggle in our streets.

At our Thanksgiving dinner this past November, 75 people gathered in spite of a terrible rain storm to eat turkey and dressing. There were 15 nationalities represented. Children were laughing and singing. Testimonies of gratitude were offered. I presented a brief gospel message. Afterward, a

60-year-old African-American man who was visiting said to me: “I’ve never seen anything quite like this. It feels a bit like heaven.” A few weeks later, I baptized his best friend, and 30 of his family members attended worship to celebrate the baptism.

All glory be to God.

Daniel Vestal is the distinguished professor of Baptist leadership and director of the [Eula Mae and John Baugh Center of Baptist Leadership](#) at Mercer University in Atlanta.