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**THE STEW VERSUS MELTING POT MINISTRY:
MULTICULTURAL/ETHNIC URBAN APOSTOLIC PARTNERSHIPS**

Parnell M. Lovelace, Jr.

abstract

The church today has an opportunity to explore opportunities of culturally and ethnically diverse apostolic missional partnerships. Is it possible that vanguard and strategic concepts of multicultural/ethnic church planting models are contextualized and expanded within the urban setting? Is it possible that such modalities may serve not only towards the unification of believers, but also provide a means of connectivity to empower the community as a whole? The assertion is there are connecting points of evangelism and church growth opportunities found within such strategic and intentional multi-ethnic/cultural models of apostolic partnerships.

“Then the word of God spread, and the number of disciple number of the disciples multiplied greatly.” Acts 6:7

A church growth and evangelism opportunity emerged as a result of cultural conflict among a segment of believers within the infant New Testament church. Grecian Jewish widows were being overlooked by those of the Aramaic-speaking community during the daily distribution of food. Most theologians suggest that the cultural distinctions were generally marked by the language differences and

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 2, Iss. 2 [2011], Art. 3 geographical origins. It is interesting to note that the church was experiencing initial growth. However, the tension of such growth and the cultural interpersonal conflicts that arose served as potential growth barriers. Therefore, it was apparent that the initial operative mode of ministry would not suffice to address both the problem and growth dynamics that were developing. It is my belief that often the modalities and means that bring particular seasons of success and growth are not sufficient towards facilitating additional growth and success; or as I often state, “What brought you here, will not take you there.” Thankfully, the insight and discernment of prayerful and Spirit-filled leadership provided visionary insight that would not only meet the presenting need, but it would set a healthy environment that embraced scores of more people drawn to the life-transforming message of the gospel of the kingdom.

Likewise, today the church has an opportunity to explore opportunities of such apostolic and missional partnerships. Is it possible that such vanguard and strategic concepts of multicultural/ethnic church planting models can be presented within the context of the urban setting? Is it possible that such modalities may serve not only towards the unification of believers, but also provide a means of connectivity to empower the community itself? I assert there is a plethora of connecting points found within strategic and intentional multiethnic/cultural apostolic partnerships. Three of these connecting points shall be identified within this review with the intent to encourage ministry paradigms that intentionally engage members of diverse communities with the purpose of evangelism and church growth. The three connecting points that shall be reviewed include missional-, connectional-, and devotional-minded approaches.

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embracing the apostolic paradigm

One example of diverse apostolic ministry model is found within the recent initiatives that have formed partnerships within the African American and Hispanic communities. Various congregations have begun to share in joint worship services and community development forums that capture an apostolic (sent out to reach) ministry paradigm emphasizing *missional-*, *connectional-*, and *devotional-minded* thinking, forging the flame of evangelism and growth. Other ethnic and cultural groups have shifted their view of the “mission field” by noting the urban center as the new evangelistic opportunity. Whereas foreign mission support has been a staple within the western evangelical church structure, the urban centers of America now reflect microcosmic communities. These communities thrive within the urban areas due to the need for people groups to retain values, societal

Lovelace: The Stew versus Melting Pot Ministry: Multicultural/Ethic Urban A customs, resources, social, and spiritual support systems present within the community of origin. Such is the case with the ministerial phenomenon that has occurred within the last three years at the Center of Praise Ministries, located in Sacramento, California.

The Center of Praise Ministries was formed in 1989, with a group of five African American households. The first worship services were held at an urban community known as Rancho Cordova, located approximately twelve miles east of midtown Sacramento. The area was known to be one of the most integrated communities, due to the primary population having close ties with the local Air Force Base. However, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s observation that the most segregated hour in America is Sunday morning rang true within the community as a whole. The Center of Praise Ministries reflected this thought by virtue of the fact that the congregation was 98% African American during the first ten years of its founding. The ministry leadership began to explore means by which more diversity could be observed, allowing the church to better represent the community. It was thought that the congregation could possibly serve as a modeling ministry demonstrating collaborative, creative, and diverse ministry within the urban context. It was carefully noted that many congregations were sharing worship space with developing ethnic congregations. Occasionally, joint worship services were conducted among these arrangements. However, there were few congregations in the Sacramento area that were presenting "one church-two or more expressions" as a modality of effective evangelism and church growth.

Approximately two and one-half years ago, there was a discussion that led a Hispanic pastor and me in initiating a partnership for a new Hispanic church plant in the Sacramento area. He was serving as the general manager of Northern California's only twenty-four hour, Spanish-speaking Christian radio station. He and I had met at the radio station while conducting business. He shared with me that it was his desire to be connected to a sponsoring church fellowship that shared a similar vision to reach the growing number of Spanish-speaking people in the Sacramento urban community. He and a core group of nearly twenty-five people were meeting in a small facility five miles from our worship venue. He and I agreed to pray and continue further discussion, believing that God was uniting our hearts and efforts to make an impact upon the community. Prayerful conversation revealed the need to be totally transparent and seek measures by which the Center of Praise Ministries would fully welcome the new core group as a part of the church family, supporting them in their efforts to address the particular and distinctive needs within the Hispanic and Latino communities. In April of 2008, we formally joined together to form Centro de Alabanza (Center of Praise Hispanic

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Ministry). He and his wife serve as the senior leaders of this dynamic and thriving congregation. The Spanish-speaking celebration is observed and acknowledged as the fifth of five total worship services (celebrations) of the Center of Praise Ministries. Therefore, the pastor and three other leaders of Centro de Alabanza serve on the general advisory council of the parent church. Key staff members of the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking celebrations meet on a regularly scheduled basis to discuss relational and church formatting constructs. The host church has also assumed a key role in providing financial support, enabling the new Spanish-speaking ministry to obtain resources without experiencing the budgetary strain that is common with many Hispanic start-up churches and most churches as a whole (particularly independent church congregations that are not affiliated with any formal denomination). This concept also provided a means by which Centro de Alabanza would be able to address the defined growth barriers with the addition of necessary full- and half-time paid ministry support staff.

The host congregation has financially subsidized the new congregation as it is becoming established. As a result, the new congregation is now presenting stewardship teachings that are resulting in significant increase of support revenue. Although the Hispanic congregation (representing nine nations) has a distinctive worship style and outreach approach, all facility and financial resources are shared between the Center of Praise and Centro de Alabanza. Joint worship services are held periodically with the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking congregations joining together in celebration of the unity and support that both groups are experiencing through the partnership of ministry. The Hispanic congregation has grown from twenty-five to four hundred people within the two and one-half year period and is now beginning to plant new congregations throughout the United States and abroad. Other congregations have now sought information on how this approach to ministry was effectively implemented. Clearly, there were hurdles that needed to be addressed and continue to be evaluated. For example, there was a need to counter a paradigm that suggests that the host congregation owns its property and resources (our stuff versus their stuff). As the sponsoring church, Center of Praise had to be willing to divest itself and invest its finances and facilities into what could be considered a risky venture. Frank confrontation regarding stereotypes, misconceptions, racial tension, racism, and overall misinformation was processed by leadership and shared with the congregation through sermons and communal activities. Trust factors had to be addressed within both groups. To aid the process of ministry assimilation expeditiously, bilingual signage was placed throughout the property (including the monument sign announcing the church property). Ministry teams were required to

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Lovelace: The Stew versus Melting Pot Ministry: Multicultural/Ethic Urban A intermingle and identify cohort activities and functions within the church. The senior pastor of the Hispanic congregation was presented as a senior leader within the church as a whole and pulpit exchange between the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking services were intentional and frequent. To date, the overall ministry team of Center of Praise Ministries reflects multiethnic presentation. This concept is further celebrated with one common website that hosts advertisement of both culturally distinctive ministries (www.centerofpraise.net).

connecting points of apostolic mission

200 Today, in order to encourage *missional mindedness*, collaborative, team-building strategies provide a backdrop for congregations to share relative resources, expanding the sphere of influence and capabilities in addressing the various spiritual, social, and economical concerns shared by the whole of the urban community. Cox and Ratliff argue that many churches have abandoned the objective of church mission. Rather than an attitude that says, “We’re all in this together,” many churches develop an “us-versus-everybody-else mentality.” Such an isolationist attitude has occasional political attraction, but it most certainly has no place in the church. It cannot be upheld scripturally.¹ Multiethnic congregations are able to identify and target specific needs within the urban community and set a shared context by which these needs may be addressed. Usually, the pastoral leadership, along with focus groups or committees, help provide the research and exploration processes that determine the overall mission of such partnership. Emphasis is placed on what the anticipated outcomes of such partnerships are and how these outcomes will benefit the community as well as the ministry organization as a whole.

Secondly, the process of *connectional mindedness* opens communication and sensitivity towards cultural diversity. Paul the apostle presents strong support in Ephesians 4:1–16 regarding the importance of networking ministry, drawing from all aspects of community, cultural, and ethnic gifts. Denominationalism and ethnic and social barriers that once limited the ability of congregations to provide meaningful impact are becoming lesser concerns as bold initiatives draw the conscience of godly and progressive leadership. People are embraced as one race—the human race. Yet, there is an acknowledgement and appreciation for the myriad of cultural distinctive that make each person, and their culture, unique within the

¹ Michael J. Cox and Joe Samuel Ratliff, *Church Planting in the African American Community*, (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2002), 57.

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body of Christ. Olson states that varied expressions of worship show us one picture of the texture and completeness of multiethnic Christianity. Our faith is enriched as other cultures express their Christian faith.ⁱ Many examples are observed by regional campaigns, led by diverse church leadership teams, tackling broad outreach objectives. Multiethnic ministry partnerships may choose to address more complex evangelism and social concerns through collaborations that relinquish restrictive and exclusive cultural mores for the purpose of spiritual growth and empowerment of the community as a whole. Yet, each group provides cultural distinctive that attracts specific social groups. The urban setting, reflecting the complexities associated with various people groups, presents ample ministry setting for missional apostolic interface and spiritual/social intervention.

Third, the concept of *devotional mindedness* encourages joint worship experiences and training gatherings. This factor has proven to be important as relationships are developed through the leading and intervention of the Holy Spirit and His ministry among all believers. Like the early church, the presence of the Holy Spirit transcends the tapestry of cultural and ethnic distinction. Olson observes that a true, apostolic model of ministry must reflect pastors and churches that operate under the rules of the early church's mission to the Gentiles. It is clear from the inaugural presentation of the church that God's desire on the Day of Pentecost was to reveal Himself to a diverse crowd from throughout the Mediterranean region. Furthermore, it is clear from the New Testament that God intended the early Christian church to be diverse ethnically, signifying God's heart for all people.ⁱⁱ The goal is not to lose cultural identity, but to transcend cultural identity towards forming our true spiritual identity. Therefore, a metaphorical social "stew" versus an amalgamated "melting pot" concept is formed. Each component retains its uniqueness and yet contributes to the whole of the ministering community. The objective is not to tolerate one another but to celebrate one another. Therefore, individuals are encouraged to share meals and recreational activities together. Such interface enables and facilitates interpersonal relationships outside of the parameters of formal church services. Furthermore, it assists the process of dispelling stereotypes and other maligning behaviors that hinder effective ministry. The call of being "one church" with many parts solidifies the connecting factor and the aligning synergy that facilitates effective growth.

The fact that there are numerous urban clusters in America provides a landscape for assertive global and missional thinking. New emphases on the social

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ⁱ David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 170.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

Lovelace: *The Stew versus Melting Pot Ministry: Multicultural/Ethic Urban A* dimensions of urban mosaics, such as class, wealth, and power, are also appearing.

Buttressed by supporting research in the strength of ethnicity and complexity of social assimilation patterns, we now see these mosaics as continuing urban bridges. The urban gates of the community serve as the threshold of understanding commonality and shared spiritual purpose. Daily interface with diverse people provides an opportunity for evangelism that is relational, yet through means that are organizational as well.

the challenge

202 The most outstanding issue observed with presenting multiethnic/cultural ministry partnerships is within the area of communication. Leadership serves as the key factor in addressing the interpersonal conflicts that arise due to individuals and groups inadequately addressing many of the internal biases and maladaptive traits that are formed through limited interface, or in some instances, racism and prejudices that have been fostered through people's own internalized, interpersonal experiences. Furthermore, factors related to a sense of entitlement and control prove to be obstacles to the process of shared resources, as observed in the account of Acts Chapter 6. The church in Acts had to evolve into a movement of open versus closed social network systems. Steve Addison observes that successful movements develop strategies to remain open, social networks that are able to reach into new, adjacent social networks and sustain exponential rates of growth. For a church movement to grow rapidly, it has to spread both within social networks and between social networks.^{iv}

Consistent and transparent interface is essential towards the dynamics of multiethnic/cultural ministry, particularly in urban settings. Social issues such as homelessness, HIV/AIDS, healthcare disparity, and family support are common concerns found within the context of all people groups of the urban setting. Those that make up the plight of such societal representation are themselves diverse in so many ways—ethnically, culturally, and economically. The systematic ministry of intentional missional partnerships serves the community by intrinsic understanding, modeling the language, look, and custom of each representing group. Yet, a spiritual community is formed that presents the rich tapestry of diversity and the uniqueness of communal commonality. The church that looks most like its community of service is the church that will serve the community. Such ministry may experience growth due to its strong connectivity towards the

^{iv} Steve Addison, *Movements that Change the World*, (Smyrna, DE: Missional Press, 2009), 77.

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various groups that form the urban culture. Malphurs contends that there is tremendous growth and opportunity of evangelism within the urban cities of America. He shares that if the church of Jesus Christ envisions reaching North America and the world, it will have to reach its cities. He further states that the problem is that few churches are reaching the cities and even fewer are thinking about it.^v

Interestingly, however, Conn counters Malphur's observation by stating the following: "As we have passed through the last half of the twentieth century, massive urban growth has shifted into high gear everywhere except North America and Europe."^{vi} Whether or not the urban setting in North America is as fast paced in its growth as other countries, the fact remains that it maintains a thriving seedbed for effective ministry that interfaces with all people groups. Such ministries provide effective connecting of apostolic modalities to other developing countries.

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conclusion

Dynamic ministry gifts emerge among people that face and confront maligning missional challenges with resolution strategies that not merely maintain personal agendas, but that utilize and expand the resources of the whole community. Multiethnic/cultural partnerships that fully embrace the mandate of being "sent out" provide aid and overwhelming support towards interpreting traditional and shifting cultural mores that are influenced by postmodernism and eclectic paradigms consistent with the urban community. The possibility of reaching the "many" becomes less of an imaginable concept and more of reality as diversity of approach and people groups is celebrated versus tolerated. This reality demonstrates not only an effective strategy of outreach, but also God's pleasure and presence with His church. Effective ministry is consistently reinvented and re-evaluated by partnership processes that embrace collaborative and exploratory modalities that cross homogeneous lines for the sake of evangelism and growth. True multiethnic/cultural apostolic partnerships will experience "great" increase. This increase will not be at the expense of losing distinct ethnic and cultural identity. Rather, it will be by the willingness to embrace our fulfilled identity through the Great Commission—our identity as given through the Lord Jesus Christ.

^v Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 247.

^{vi} Harvie M. Conn, "Urban Mission," in James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote, eds., *Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 319–21.

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