***RACIAL UNITY IN THE CITY AND THE CHURCH***

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Racial unity. It’s a hot topic in the world today. Ask anyone if there is a racial divide in our world (or in the church), and you will likely enter a lively discussion evoking many different emotions. With recent unrest in places like Dallas and St. Paul, not to mention Ferguson, Baltimore, and many other places around the world, the tensions have intensified to epic proportions. In many of our big cities there are protests. There is anger. There is a cry for understanding. And there is a titanic struggle between love and hate in the individual heart.

Can people from different races get along? Can those with different colors of skin understand each other? Can individuals from different cultures and different pasts learn to listen to, accept, and interact with each other? The human heart says, “No!” The Gospel says a resounding “Yes”!

The world is desperate for this. The cities of America need to see a picture of unity and collaboration between the races. The Adventist church has a grand opportunity to paint this picture and be a conduit that shows the world what love will do.

I would like to share with you the story of St Louis. I want to take you on a journey of unity and collaboration that has been taking place in the Seventh-day Adventist churches of the St Louis metropolitan area. My hope is that our story will inspire pastors and churches in other cities to take the same journey. Then I will share some practical ways that churches can begin that journey.

St Louis is a metropolitan city of 2.8 million people. There are 15 Seventh-day Adventist churches scattered throughout thiscity—all different and unique. Some are pre-dominantly African-American. Some are pre-dominantly Caucasian. Some are multi-cultural. Others are Spanish, Korean, Haitian, or even some other ethnicity. They are filled with people as diverse as the snowflakes that fall from the heavens. Among these 15 churches, there are 11 pastors.

To complicate matters, there are four conferences that comprise the St Louis metropolitan area: the Central States Conference, the Iowa-Missouri Conference, the Lake Region Conference, and the Illinois Conference. (Technically the east part of St Louis extends into Illinois).

Typically, in a large metro area, the churches rarely fellowship together. The church on the north side doesn’t fellowship with the church on the south side. The church on the east side doesn’t spend time with the church on the west side. Many times the members do not interact with each other. And if they are from different conferences or cultures, the walls can be even higher in some places.

Many times the first step towards unity and collaboration is simply spending time together. The first step for St Louis began around 2011. I had a Sabbath where I wasn’t scheduled to preach anywhere. So my family and I decided to visit one of our sister churches from the Central States Conference and worship with them. We chose the Berean church. This church was from a different conference. It was pre-dominantly African-American. It was in a another part of the city. The worship was different. The songs weren’t familiar to me. And I didn’t know anyone there. It was a strange place to me. But we had a wonderful experience.

I met the pastor, and so began a cross cultural friendship and relationship that continues to this day. People appreciate when you are willing to cross boundaries and meet them where they are. It goes a long way in building trust and understanding.

Not long after this experience, the Iowa-Missouri pastors were considering bringing an initiative called Equipping University to the St Louis area. (Equipping University is a lay training and discipleship program designed to activate and mobilize members for ministry and outreach). So it was decided to ask the Central States pastors if they would be interested in partnering together to make this a city wide initiative. And they agreed.

So we all started meeting together on a monthly basis to get to know each other and plan for this initiative. The first session of Equipping University was a huge blessing. Over 220 members from 10 different churches and 4 different conferences attended the first weekend. It was extremely moving to see people from different churches, races, and cultures meeting together, worshipping together, praying together, and being trained for outreach together. There were African-Americans, Caucasians, Latinos, Koreans, Haitians, Caribbeans, and other ethnicities in attendance. The comment we heard over and over again was how much the people enjoyed fellowshipping with those of other churches. It was stressed that we must do this again.

Even when the first module of Equipping University was complete, the pastors decided to keep meeting together monthly. As these city wide pastors’ meetings progressed and we continued praying together, a strong bond began to develop between us. Over time a vision began to form within us—a vision to work together to impact the city for Christ. Yes, each church had their individual mission and territory, but if we were going to make a difference in a large city like St Louis, we knew we had to collaborate together in city wide initiatives and ministries. So this vision was twofold: 1). To begin developing unity by creating avenues where these ethnically diverse churches could start meeting and fellowshipping together regularly, 2). To start working together in collaborative initiatives to minister to the city of St Louis

Out of this vision grew the following activities:

**1). Monthly city wide pastors’ meetings.** The pastors formed a cross conference, cross cultural ministerial association called AMPS (Adventist Ministers and Pastors of St Louis). We meet on a monthly basis to share, pray, and plan city wide events and outreach. AMPS consists of 11 pastors from four conferences representing 15 churches.

**2). Quarterly city wide prayer meetings.** Once every quarter we invite all the St Louis area churches to come together for a city wide prayer meeting. This includes singing and worship, but mostly praying, private, corporate, and in small groups. We know that nothing of significance will happen and there can be no unity without the working of the Holy Spirit. Our first city wide prayer service had an attendance of over 200 people with diverse churches and ethnicities represented from throughout the city. Seeing people of various skin colors and cultures praying together has a powerful impact on the human soul. It was a moving experience.

**3). Metro camp meetings:** Just like every conference has a yearly camp meeting where all the churches in the conference are invited to gather together, we pastors felt it was important for the St Louis area churches to come together for a camp meeting as well. So we developed a yearly city wide camp meeting where all St Louis churches are invited to come for a special weekend of worship. We pick a specific theme, invite powerful speakers, and promote it heavily.

**4). St Louis Lay Mission Committee:** The purpose of coming together is not just for the sake of unity by itself. The fruit of unity should be evangelism and a working together to fulfill the Gospel Commission, not just standing around singing Kum-ba-yah and boasting that we are unified. True unity should propel us to work side by side to minister to the city. So we developed a unique lay mission committee made up of lay people from all the area churches.

Their job is to find and/or develop 1 or 2 mission projects a year within St Louis that members from all the area churches can participate in. At some point, unity has to leave the walls of the church and be seen on the street. It has to transition from being inward-focused to being outward-focused. Imagine the city seeing Adventists of all ethnicities, red and yellow, black and white, working side by side to minister to others and making the city a better place!

This journey of unity and collaboration still continues in St Louis today. But this same journey can happen in other large cities throughout North America. Perhaps there is a vision welling up inside your heart to see this journey happen in your city and in your church. Maybe you are a pastor, or a lay leader, and God wants to use you as catalyst to bring the churches and ethnicities of your city together.

Here are some steps you can take to begin the journey:

**1). Pray for a vision.** Ask God to give you a vision of unity and collaboration between the churches and ethnicities in your city. Ask Him to place this passion on your heart and to plant this seed in the hearts of other pastors or lay leaders in the city. Working together with other cultures is not an easy task. There will be challenges and obstacles. The devil will try to erect strongholds and cause misunderstandings. So you need a passion and determination that is willing to patiently work with people and move beyond the difficulties. However, the blessings of unity and collaboration far outweigh the challenges.

**2). Start visiting with other pastors.** Make contact with the pastors in other conferences in your city. Connect with the churches of other ethnicities. Visit them one at a time and begin a friendship with the pastor or lay leaders. This could be on a Sabbath, or some other event they may be hosting, like concerts, and other social events. Invite the pastors to preach at your church. When possible, take a Sabbath off and worship at their church and make an acquaintance with them. If you can’t break free from your Sabbath responsibilities at your own church, then visit one of their functions during the week, like a prayer meeting. Be willing to meet them on their turf, and watch the walls come down.

**3). Begin a city wide pastors meeting.** After you have visited with them and shared your vision for unity and collaboration, invite the pastors to form an Adventist ministerial group and begin meeting together on a monthly basis. In your meetings, get to know each other. Pray together. Dream together. Vision together on what unity and collaboration would look like in your city. Begin planning city wide activities and ministries. If necessary, write out your vision and create a mission statement. Choose a chairperson and vice chairperson, preferably from two different conferences or ethnicities. Organize it so that the movement continues long after you’re gone.

Don’t worry if some pastors do not initially come to the meetings. As the group gains momentum and positive results are seen, they will come. Give them time. Stay in touch and have the other pastors continue to invite them. Give God a chance to move on their hearts.

**4). Plan some city wide events where people from different churches can fellowship and mingle with each other.** If the pastors are fellowshipping together in the monthly pastors’ meetings, then members need to have the opportunity to experience the same. Fellowshipping together enables them to develop friendships and bonds with members of other churches and ethnicities. If you want the members to adopt the same vision of unity and collaboration, this step is critical.

These city wide activities may include socials, picnics, international food fests, a parade of nations, or any number of things. Be creative. Be intentional. There are hundreds of possibilities.

You might want to consider something that we do in St Louis—a quarterly city wide prayer meeting. Each quarter, plan a prayer service that members of all the area churches are invited to come to. Take turns hosting it in different churches. It may start small, but remember God’s promises:

“For nothing restrains the Lord from saving by many or by few.” (I Samuel 14:6, NKJV)

“If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” (2 Chronicles 7:14, NKJV)

**5. Start an annual metro camp meeting.** Set aside a special weekend once a year where all the metro churches can come together for a joint worship. In St Louis this involves Friday night, Sabbath morning and afternoon, and a Sunday morning prayer breakfast, and even a parade of nations. This takes a lot of planning, but is well worth it. Try to include programming and singing that represents the diversity of ethnicities in the churches. Invite the area churches to close for this special Sabbath so that all members can come to the joint Sabbath morning worship. Some churches will do this. Some will not. All the area pastors should commit to being present at the camp meeting. They should not preach in their own churches that Sabbath. By doing so, it would communicate that the camp meeting is not important and coming together is not a priority.

**6). Find a mission project in your city that members from all the area churches can participate in.** It could be a one-day project like an extreme home makeover, cleaning up a park, or a community VBS in a poor neighborhood. Or it could be an ongoing project like after school tutoring, assisting refugees, or some kind of community center.

What’s the purpose of this? When members of different churches and ethnicities are working side by side in collaborative ministry, the natural result is unity. Conversation happens. Friendships are formed. Experiences are shared. Understanding takes place. God is there. The Holy Spirit creates a tie that cannot easily be broken.

Imagine what the city will see—Adventists of different races, ethnicities, and cultures working together to make a positive difference in their city. You see a picture of Christ shining through in all the races. It will be a picture not soon forgotten. This is true unity. Your city desperately needs to see this picture.

All it takes is one person with a God-given vision. One person to be a catalyst. Are you that person? Is God calling you to begin a journey of unity and collaboration among the churches in your city? Is God calling the churches of your city to be a light upon a hill?

“Also, I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us.’ Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me.’” (Isaiah 6:8, NKJV)

Postscript: I would like to recognize those pastors, past and present, who inspired this article and were part of St Louis’s journey toward unity and collaboration.

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