

Building Diversity In Your Church

Sam Flores & Steve Ottley

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Bios

Sam Flores—

Steve Ottley – Originally from Belize, Central America, Steve migrated to North America in 1980 where he attended SNU. He felt a call to ministry and began preparing at Canadian Nazarene University, NTS and NTC in Manchester, England. After ministry in Toronto, he and a gifted group of people planted Gateway Community Church in Whitby, a suburb of Toronto. He and his wife, Patricia have been in ministry there 8 ½ years. They have three children.

INTRODUCTION

There is this move among those who are starting new congregations and those who want to see the church the way Christ meant it to be, to build local congregations where people from diverse backgrounds worship our Creator together. Some of you are no doubt here because you're one of those

Here's the challenge though. We are prone to get into some things because it's the in thing—it's the newest wave of church growth. Over the years there's been the homogeneous unit, the cell church, the purpose driven church, and the list goes on. The diverse church can be for some, just another church growth strategy.

What we're trying to do here today is not only give you some practical things that we have done to build diverse congregations in Toronto and Houston, but more importantly, to take a little time to be informed by sound theological reflection. Now—We can't possibly go too deep in the time we have, but we'd like to get you thinking about this from a theological perspective rather than simply a church growth perspective. This is why we're looking at what the Bible has to say about this. We're going to address two questions at the front end here:

1. What did Jesus say about diversity?
2. What did the early church do with regards to diversity?

What did Jesus say about diversity?

Sam's Info

What did the early church do with regards to diversity?

What I'd like to do for the next few minutes is to have us reflect on two snap shots from the early church that will help us to see the heart of God when it comes to diversity.

Snap Shot #1—Peter's vision (Acts 10)

To this point in Scripture, Peter's ministry is very homogeneous—to the Jews. That was his understanding of what his mission was. Its noon and Peter's famished. While his meal is being prepared, he heads to the flat roof of the house he's staying at to relax before eating. He falls into a trance and sees the sky open and a sheet let down by its four corners. There was a smorgasbord offered to him—all sorts of animals, reptiles, and birds. Peter hears a voice saying to him, "Get up, kill and eat." Being the upright Jewish man that he was,

Peter, flatly refuses, protesting that he has never and will never eat anything that is impure. The voice rebukes him saying, “Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean.”

Peter sees this vision three times—is perplexed by it but doesn’t have much time to reflect before messengers arrive asking for him. They had been sent from Cornelius, a Roman army officer, asking for Peter to come to visit him. Peter goes with the messengers and upon entering Cornelius’ home, here’s what he says:

Acts 10:28-29 (NLT) ²⁸ Peter told them, “You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean. ²⁹ So I came without objection as soon as I was sent for...”

As you read through the text you can see that God is writing a new law on Peter’s heart—one that is inclusive—one where diversity is the norm. Check out what Peter says in verses 34 and 35.

Acts 10:34-35 (NLT) ³⁴ ... “I see very clearly that God shows no favouritism. ³⁵ In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right.

Peter shares the Gospel and the Holy Spirit fell on that group and lives were changed for eternity. So the question is: “If God doesn’t show favouritism—and he accepts male and female from every nation, tribe, and tongue—then shouldn’t the local church, His church, reflect that?”

Snap Shot # 2—Antioch

Question for you: “Where were believers first called Christians?” ANTIOCH! Do you think that’s a coincidence that they coined that term for believers there? ABSOLUTELY NOT! The word Christian comes from the Greek word “Christos”—which means Messiah. Now—I know that today the word Christian is sometimes used very loosely: I’m not Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist—So I’m Christian; I was baptized when I was a child—I haven’t been to church since then—But I’m a Christian. However, back in the early church, the word Christian actually meant—“Follower of Christ”. It was reserved for those who were striving to live their lives according to the teachings of Christ. They were striving to live their lives in a Christ-like manner. Christians were those who loved God and loved others unconditionally

So back to the question, “Why Antioch—why where they first called Christians in Antioch?” Well—here’s what was happening in Antioch: Jews were loving Gentiles; Gentiles were loving Jews; They were worshipping together; This diverse congregation was generous—as we see in their financial support for the church in Jerusalem—so it just wasn’t about themselves—it was about the larger body.

What do we say about this local community of faith in Antioch? These folks were living out Jesus prayer in John 17.

John 17:21 (NLT) ²¹ I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.

Not one race over there and another over there. Not one social status over there and another over there. BUT ONE—TOGETHER! Thus they were called Christians—Christ Followers—because they were being Christlike!

As you look at those snap shots, you can’t help but see God’s heart for diversity. Now, here are some practical ways we’ve strived to build diversity in our congregations.

PRACTICAL WAYS TO BUILD DIVERSITY

Sam Flores

Gateway Community Church—Steve Ottley

I. Be Intentional

One of the things I've found out over my years in ministry is: STUFF DOESN'T JUST HAPPEN BECAUSE YOU WANT IT TO! Unless you are intentional and you lay out a plan and execute that plan—more than likely you won't achieve your desired result. If you have no plan—You...plan to fail

Gateway's Story

When God called Pat and I to start a new congregation in Whitby, I was perplexed. Toronto is one of the most multi-ethnic cities in the world. However, at that time Whitby, located about 30 east of the city, was about 95 % white. The launch team God had given to us made up of 30 people, 95% black. In my mind I'm thinking Houston, we have a problem. I questions God whether He had this one right—or whether I'd heard him right. "Are you sure you don't want me to start a new church somewhere in Toronto—you know Lord, this multi-ethnic city?" But we became more convinced that Whitby was where God was sending us.

We came up with a plan that we would be intentional about making our congregation and healthy diverse community of faith. Part of that plan is found in the next point.

II. Be Inclusive

Part of what you need to be intentional about is that you need to be inclusive. That goes without saying when we're talking about diversity.

Many churches will say—"Everyone is welcomed to worship with us. We won't turn anyone away." The question is: "Are you making them feel welcome though?" It's one thing to not turn anyone away—it's another to go out of your way to make them feel welcome. Coupled with that question is another: "Are you intentionally reaching out to all people?"

Gateway's Story

I remember when we were preparing to launch Gateway with a very monoculture launch team, getting ready to move into this 95% white community, I asked some of my white friends to come and be a part of Gateway. Some lived a distance away and wouldn't be able to be involved in the life of the church except for our main worship service on Sunday morning. So I told them, just come and sit in the congregation if that's all you can do right now. We need some balance. We recognized that even though people in Canada for the most part tend not to allow race or colour to cloud the way they see or treat people, if a person walks into a room where there is no other that looks like them, whether consciously or subconsciously, they feel out of place.

One of the intentional things we did to be inclusive was that we made sure our up front faces were diverse. Those reading scripture, doing special music, praying, giving planned testimonies, on worship team, etc. were diverse in age, gender, ethnicity, and colour. We strived to do the same with our greeters and ushers.

III. Be Investing (Empowering)

Not only do you need to go out of your way to make everyone feel welcome, but you need to empower people for ministry, including leadership and staff roles.

Some believe that John Wesley's classes may have averted a British revolution, similar to the French revolution. Others would argue that wasn't the case. Regardless, Wesley gave those who were poor the opportunity to be in community and he also empowered them, male and female, rich and poor, to lead classes.

Gateway's Story

Over the years we have strived to empower all for ministry, regardless of gender, race, or economic status. Our current staff and leadership team reflects that.

Our Leadership Team:

- Chair—Colin—White South African Canadian
- Steward—Ellen—White Canadian
- Steward—Shauna—Guyanese Canadian
- Steward—Rona—Guyanese Canadian
- Steward—Brian—White Canadian
- Trustee—Geoff—White Canadian
- Trustee—Karen—Jamaican Canadian
- Trustee—Richard—Asian Trinidadian Canadian

Staff:

- Pastor—Steve—Belizean Canadian
- Office Administrator—Michalene—White Canadian
- Student Ministry Director—In the process of searching for someone who would complement our diverse team.

This diversity is reflected throughout the ministries of Gateway.

Remember the question I asked the Lord about whether He was sending me to the right town to start a new church? Remember I was concerned about the makeup of our launch team in comparison to the makeup of the community? In the 8 ½ years since we moved to Whitby, the town has seen a transformation. When we first came to this town, it had a population of 82,000. Now we are pushing 120,000. Many of those new individuals and families are from different ethnic backgrounds. God knew what He was doing after all as He put together the core group of people to start Gateway. On the street we live, our neighbours on the one side are of Italian decent, while our neighbours on the other side, the husband is from Jamaica and the wife is from St. Vincent. Our neighbours two doors down are from India, and three doors down we have Filipino neighbours. Across the street we have a family with Greek heritage and another Italian Family. That's just a slice of what Whitby is developing into.

Every day I walk out the doors of our home I'm reminded of a couple things. God sees the big picture around the bend and down the road, even when I can't. I'm also reminded there's a lot more work to do in reaching this ever growing multiethnic community.