

Ethnic Tension: How Do We Lean In?

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Intro

In the summer of 2000, when I was RD for NY/NJ, we planned and held our Regional Staff Conference on the theme *Loving God's People of Every Ethnicity*.

I was especially pleased with the design of the program: a veteran staff would open with an invitation to the journey, not without cost, of seeking racial reconciliation at the personal and structural levels; Neil Rendall, former RD, would rehearse the region's history and progress in this area; then three former or current staff— an Asian American, a Latino (Orlando Crespo), an African American —would speak in turn on *The purposeful journey*, *The difficult journey*, and *The grace-filled journey* finally, the closing liturgy would be led by the head of the South African IFES movement with whom we were twinning as a region: *A Hopeful Journey*.

Without going into detail, I will simply say that the conference kind of blew up. The three ethnic minority staff actually did as I had invited and spoke freely; I just had not counted on so much pent up anger and pain and frustration to come pouring out, sending the region into a swirl of turmoil.

As you can imagine, I experienced a range of feelings and thoughts: everything from hurt to defensiveness to shame to discouragement. This was not the conference that I had envisioned. This seemed to be having the exact opposite effect that we intended. It was hard.

How would I respond? Or to generalize: how do leaders respond in situations where ethnic tensions arise and seem to threaten the stability of the community or the progress of the mission?

Acts 6:1-7

([Read text here](#) or on page 5 of this PDF)

A familiar episode early in the narrative of the emerging Christian movement. Let me simply walk us through the text pointing out a number of interesting and instructive elements.

Under the apostolic leadership of The Twelve, the young church is growing.

But then a problem arises, one which holds the potential to disrupt the community and hamper the mission.

Here's the situation: there are two distinct cultural groups within the community:

- Hebrews, who are Jews native to Palestine who speak Aramaic, the local Semitic language.
- Hellenists, who are Jews from the Diaspora who have returned to Jerusalem, who speak Greek, many of whom are widows who've made pilgrimage to Jerusalem to live out the rest of their lives in the precincts of the Temple.

Evidently, these distinctive groups of Jews who are now disciples of Jesus, continued to live in their linguistic and cultural enclaves. Perhaps they have been kicked out from the distribution lines at the Temple such that the new Christian church has undertaken to provide for their care.

But somehow, a pattern has developed in which the Hellenist widows are being neglected; they are not getting their fair share. Some kind of cultural inequity has come about, either because of overt prejudice on the part of some or, more likely, an inadvertent discrimination arising from cultural blind spots or entrenched structural patterns that favor the majority Hebrews.

When the Hellenists begin complaining, think of all the ways the leaders could be tempted to react.

We don't have the details, but it seems clear that the leaders chose to *lean in* (if I may use this now ubiquitous phrase). They did not treat the complaints as an unwelcome

distraction or an implicit insurrection, as though the complainants themselves were the problem. Rather they *listened* and then *legitimated* the real problem, which was of course, the actual injustice in the food distribution and what this said about the value and dignity of the Hellenists being neglected.

How did they address the situation? How did they *lead change*?

Note:

- the full leadership team of 12 seemed to get involved
- they called the whole community together to address the situation openly,
- the Twelve had a clear sense of their leadership priorities but knew it was important that others be appointed to lead (serve) in the care for the poor
- they invited the community (by some means) to select a group of seven leaders to solve the problem and oversee the program going forward
- The seven were gifted spiritual leaders whose character gave them standing and credibility in the community
- The seven all have Greek names suggesting that the people empowered those from the cultural group most affected by the injustice
- Finally, the apostles *looked to* God by spiritually commissioning and publicly affirming the Seven

Luke, in his simple narrative, implies pretty clearly, that because the apostles and disciples addressed this internal situation the way they did, the word of God continued to spread, the church increased greatly, and the evangelistic fruit included a great many priests! Thanks be to God!

To Finish the NY/NJ Story

Going back to NY/NJ in 2000: How did I respond to what felt like a torrent of complaints that seemed to undermine the morale and momentum that I so earnestly wanted to be true of our region on the multi-ethnic front.

Well, I can't give the whole story, but suffice it to say: there were tears (and a few private rants), many conversations (perhaps the most painful extended conversation was with my brother Orlando Crespo, which ultimately led to growth for both of us

and a deeper mutual respect and friendship), some humbling confessions, and in the end a decision to lean in and press forward.

We committed ourselves to hold our next RSC in the summer of 2001 essentially on the same topic but with a more outward focus: *Seeking God's Shalom on Campus* in which we explored themes of wholeness, reconciliation, justice, and hope. Dolphus Weary, an African American leader and InterVarsity Board Member was our speaker. Needless to say, I was quite anxious

Well, we had an amazing conference that brought healing and hope and renewed vision. I vividly remember Dolphus saying at the end: You all could not have had such a positive conference this year if you had not gone through the painful conference last year and then done the work that it called for. Thanks be to God! Joy followed the mourning.

Invitation for Us

I think the Acts 6 speaks pretty clearly to those of us who have leadership roles and to all of us who share in communal responsibility: when ethnic tensions arise, when structural injustices get exposed, when some among us are suffering neglect (or any form of indignity), we have the challenge, or better said, the opportunity and invitation to lean in. Don't red-line (to use the term in our Approaching Differences paradigm), don't react with anger or defensiveness, don't retreat into silence and passivity. **Lean in. Listen & learn. Legitimate** the actual problem or issue underneath the complaints or unrest. **Lead a change process** or cooperate with the change that our leaders might be initiating. And finally, keep **looking to God**—for grace, patience, insight, wisdom, power to change, and hope.

And that is what we will be doing this morning: looking to God together, asking his mercy for us here at the NSC as we seek to be reconciled teams and a flourishing community and interceding for the leaders across our movement to have Acts 6 wisdom as they build and lead their multi-ethnic teams for the sake of our mission: to serve students in all their ethnic and cultural diversity and to be salt and light in the university, which so urgently needs agents of shalom. Amen.

Acts 6: 1-7
NRSV

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.

²And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables.

³Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, ⁴while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.”

⁵What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.