



## Lifting Every Voice in a Southern Baptist Cooperative Church: Spiritual Formation by way of Multiculturalism at Sunrise Church of Rialto, California

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### Abstract

This study investigates how the recent celebration of the African-American Juneteenth holiday by Sunrise Church of Rialto, California, has benefited the spiritual formation of their multicultural fellowship, a church that remains in full cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention. While it is not uncommon for churches in the United States to celebrate extra-biblical holidays such as the Fourth of July or Memorial Day, there has been an increase in ecclesial observation of other culture-specific markers. Also, the study explores the deeper spiritual significance of their corporate singing of *The Black National Anthem* for the Juneteenth holiday, attempting to uncover any positive reflections, spiritual enhancements, and ecclesial encouragements that may have resulted from the practice. Moreover, consideration is given to the sensitivities involved in such cross-cultural endeavours while also evaluating what motivated this ethnic-specific holiday observance. A synthesised research approach of phenomenological observation, interviews, ethnography, ecclesiological perspectives, and cultural intelligence review has been employed, also considering matters of critical contextualisation and potential parishioner pushback.

**Key terms:** African-American Culture, African Spirituality, change-agency, ecclesiology, hymnody, racism.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Racial tension and division have unfortunately been a mainstay in the United States for far too long. Even more tragic is that American churches have not been spared from these negative social dynamics. While it is very difficult for contemporary churches in the US to overcome entrenched racial divisions, it is not entirely impossible to make successful conciliatory strides. That said, Sunrise Church of Rialto, California, serves as a shining example of benevolent reconciliation between ethnic cultures, most specifically that of white and black Americans. The Bible mandates that all Christians love each other regardless of race or creed (Deut. 15:7-8; John 13:34) while also fellowshiping with one another in multi-ethnic contexts (Gal. 3:28; Rev. 7:9). Therefore, this study endeavors, through academic research, ethnographic assessment, and key interviews, to evaluate the effective multicultural spiritual formation of Sunrise Church (via their Juneteenth congregational signing of *Lift Every Voice*) and apply it as a paradigmatic example for other American churches to follow.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Chandler (2017) has thoroughly assessed the racial tensions between African-Americans and Caucasians in the churches and has provided much insight toward conciliatory approaches. Maduagwu (2011) and Mburu (2019) stress the importance of including time-tested African cultural/spiritual practices in ecclesial contexts for the benefit of all ethnicities involved. Livermore (2009), Thomas and Inkson (2017), and Roberts (2007), employ emotional intelligence perspectives with regard to improving multicultural relationships. What is more, Heibert (1985) and Hesselgrave (1995) provide deep anthropological considerations that successfully support cross-cultural reconciliation. Selassie I (2022) and Spencer (1990) give specific examples of how African-American spirituals (such as the Hymn *Lift Every Voice*) are not only essential to past struggles, but beneficial towards a bright future for society and the church. Moon (2017) and Mandryk (2010) bring in global, missiological perspectives, and Pershey (2000) stresses the importance of African spiritual music in cultural and ecclesial contexts. Also, Howell (2011), Iorg (2011), and Whitesel (2014) give essential insights regarding multiculturalism and change-agency strategies in the American churches.

## 3.0 METHODOLOGY

While this study relies heavily on two key personal interviews (i.e., one with Pastor Anthony Riley and another with Sunrise parishioner, Miss Mildred), academic research discoveries are employed to provide supportive structure to the insights of Pastor Anthony and Miss Mildred. Furthermore, three overlapping spheres are traversed throughout the research: Political (Browning, 1996; Snow, 2006), Cultural (Sanders, 2013), and Ecclesial (Trull & Carter, 2004; Naidoo, 2017). Also, practical theory and ecclesial praxis coalesce with one another throughout the presentation (Browning, 1996), with active theological reflection continually at the forefront of the analysis. Moreover, the descriptive-empirical tasks of Osmer (2008) are implied as a methodological rubric along the way. Mburu (2019) expresses the African spiritual-songfulness that has culturally carried over to African-American communities, thus serving well in aspects of multiculturalism and reconciliation. Also, the selected journal literature (Graces-Foley, 2007; Magesa, 2013; Ikechukwu, 2019) lends further support to the overall articulations of effective multiculturalism and helps evidence the importance of incorporating African spirituality in American ecclesiology, as well as toward effective racial reconciliation in politics and society. Historically, the hymnody of Johnson (1900) and the civil rights ministry of King (1963) also play crucial roles in advancing the research.

## 4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Presented herein is an action analysis of a recent Juneteenth worship celebration held by Sunrise Church of Rialto, California, a large conservative/evangelical church that remains in full cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention. The focal research problem/question relates to the history of racial division existing in American Protestantism: How does Sunrise Church overcome cultural and ethnic partiality in their fellowship as America remains so divided along racial lines? In short response, part of their approach is peacebuilding by way of contextualised worship practice, as they corporately sang the *Black National Anthem* during services on Juneteenth. That said, some additional questions then arise: How can contextualised worship aid in the spiritual formation of the congregation? Can pushback be avoided when taking a large church into a multicultural space? Is cultural intelligence training for leadership useful? And, what discipleship strategies might be helpful towards cross-cultural congregating?

Toward answering these questions, research is presented that touches on three major spheres: Political, Ecclesiastical, and Societal. Methodologically speaking, a practical theological approach is employed, correlated with descriptive analysis, pastoral reflection, biblical response, and a resolve to be multicultural (Osmer, 2008). Select interviews were recorded to enhance the research, the key of which was conducted with Anthony Riley, D. Min., who serves as the Executive Pastor of Sunrise Church. Riley, an African-American, provided many keen insights, and here asks his own interpretive question: "How can we make every person thrive in who they are?" And, he then pointedly responds, "We are here to celebrate all of the ethnicities," and that Sunrise is "always thinking outside the box on how people can feel welcomed and loved."

### To March or Not to March

A remarkable increase in political involvement by clergy began in the 1960s. During the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968), many pastors packed their bags and headed to Selma or Jackson or Washington, D.C. – marching with Martin Luther King, Jr. in support of racial equality and justice. Some sought approval from their congregations to do so, and some did not. Unfortunately, more than a few pastors ended up in jail. Don Browning describes a church in a conservative Western community that, after its pastor had gone to Washington in 1964 to march for justice, had asked the pastor to resign, and he did resign. Browning wonders what might have led this conservative church to employ such drastic action, and how they thought theologically and practically about the circumstances (Browning, 1996). Basically, conservative churches criticised those who marched in support of aligning with a "social gospel," countering that the "true gospel" of Christ focuses on changing hearts, not on rectifying injustices in society (Trull & Carter, 2004).

Dr. King, himself a Baptist minister, wrote a letter to eight white clergymen who had publicly declared his strategies disturbing and his tactics inflammatory. While incarcerated in Alabama, MLK penned that his greatest disappointment was with the leadership of the white churches; that among them, as fellow ministers of the gospel, he had hoped to find his strongest support. Instead, he found the country "moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo" (King, 1963); that is, holding the existing condition of segregation and racial division. One might think, as MLK did, that as fellow ministers in Christ, shared faith would be enough to overcome divisiveness. Such was far from the case, though, as many evangelical revivals leading up to the Civil Rights era had required separate meeting spaces for black and white believers, which had reinforced inequality, leading to

segregated traditions (Chandler, 2020). The Southern Baptist Convention had also, unfortunately, developed its Anglo-dominant (post-Civil War) churches along racial, ethnic, and national lines (Garces-Foley, 2007).

## A Suppression of Spiritual Formation

Interpretatively, any such racism indicates the refusal to reconcile, which is detrimental to social and spiritual formation. Currently, in the US, even the pretence of a unified culture seems to be unreachable. Individuals with different worldviews are no longer able to respectfully dialogue with each other on amicable terms. This is serious for our creative, intellectual, and, above all, our normal social life. It leads us to interpret the past wrongly, to misjudge the present, and to deny our hopes of the future; also making it difficult or even impossible for us to take good action (Snow, 2006). The underlying paralysis in race discussions stems from focusing on cultural divisions and from the continued use of a narrow *liberal vs conservative* political framework. Moving beyond this flawed partisan structure is mandatory if we are to productively converse about race. There needs to be a normative reshaping of cultural perception and response to these issues (Williams, 2003).

Racial divisions *have* received some ecclesial balm, though, as the enduring post-1965 influx of new immigrants has prompted new calls for integrating churches (Garces-Foley, 2007). While divisions are still ingrained in the fabric of congregations and denominations, division around racial and ethnic diversity need not define the future (de Leon-Hartshorn, 2010). There is hope that in the otherwise divergent cultural orientations of different ethnicities, one fact could serve as a point of convergence, *and that fact is faith in God* (Maduagwu, 2011). That said, Pastor Anthony Riley is dedicated to serving as a change agent in this regard. He explains that Sunrise Church pragmatically de-emphasises political divisions, stressing that a believer's identity is in Christ first, and they might also just happen to be white, or of African descent, and so forth. The telos of Christian spiritual formation at Sunrise is to love God and to love one's neighbour as oneself (cf. Mark 12:30-31).

Reconciliation brings together two persons or parties through forgiveness, after being distanced, separated, or conflicted. It entails the process of being conformed into the image of Christ for the sake of others. On the contrary, racial division is a sin, not only against individuals, but also against God. Anything relating to sin becomes a spiritual formation issue, so churches need to examine elements of spirituality and how they are able to unite or divide the different cultures (Chandler, 2020). Toward this, Riley emphasises the promotion of unity in the body of Christ by way of celebrating (rather than just tolerating) cultural differences; "So for us we thought it would be an amazing idea to celebrate our African brothers and sisters of the faith by singing the *Black National Anthem* on Juneteenth for the first time ever as a congregation." He further states that corporately singing *Lift Every Voice* this year is just a segment, along with Hispanic and Asian (and many other) heritage celebrations, of what Sunrise Church is all about.

## Emancipation, Celebration, and Song

Emancipation Day recognitions illustrate how African communities in California used ritualised celebration to construct their new civic identities as free black men and women. In 2021, June 19 (Juneteenth) became a federal holiday commemorating the emancipation of enslaved people of African descent in the United States. Prior to Juneteenth gaining official status, January 1 (Emancipation Day) was the *de facto* national holiday on which African-Americans celebrated the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation and the end

of slavery (Selassie I, 2022). Sunrise Church contextually selected this traditional celebratory song and incorporated it into a Juneteenth worship service (Moon, 2017).

Riley says that when the song *Lift Every Voice* was written, "it was written that all people should sing and then celebrate us [African-Americans]. It's very encouraging to me because of how far our people have come. So, in hindsight, I'm thankful for those who forged the freedoms that I might have today." He has also reflected on the song's following lyrics:

Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way,  
thou who hast by thy might lead us into the light,  
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.

Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met thee (Johnson, 1900).

And, that the specific line, "Lest our feet stray from the places," reminds him of his cultural/spiritual obligation to keep the integrational fight moving. Although "Not in a radical, violent type of approach," he clarifies, "But more of the Martin Luther King approach – to let freedom reign for all." With further regard to MLK's ministry, he says, "I think he was ahead of his time," and that it is shameful that the great civil rights leader couldn't be fully celebrated while he was alive. "When we read his writings, or his speeches, or his sermons – the words he used, the way he preached – it was captivating;" Riley also respectfully appreciates the dedication that MLK had to racial equality and the ultimate life-sacrifice that he had made.

Riley advances that, "for any church to be what God called it to be, it must reflect the community. If the community is multicultural and ethnic in its disposition, then the church should mirror that, especially in California." Emancipation Day celebrations provided black Californians opportunities to testify to their aspirations as members of the American polity, and to their vision of themselves as upholders of liberty and beacons of freedom (Selassie I, 2022). These public rituals legitimated black freedom and citizenship, honoured the memory of Abraham Lincoln as God's servant, and elaborated a political ethos powerful enough to unify African-Americans as members of the American society (Selassie I, 2022). Also, related spiritual music had served as a form of communication for slaves in the United States in the pre-Civil War era. Having few possessions and even fewer written documents, slaves had songs, stories, and dances that allowed them not only to worship but to interface in ways other than through written communication (Pershey, 2000).

Therefore, *Lift Every Voice* was frequently performed in African-American schools, churches, and civic gatherings as a reflective testimony of the story of and struggle of black people, firmly woven into the fabric of African-American life (Lamothe, 2020). When interviewed, longtime Sunrise Church parishioner, Miss Mildred, who had been raised in a black denominational church, said, "I grew up hearing it, we had to learn it in school, so I knew the anthem;" also sharing that "coming to a multicultural church and hearing them sing it—I wouldn't have expected them to do it, but since I've been here, I've seen them do things that have been incorporated that I wouldn't have expected." When asked if singing the anthem had a positive effect on the congregation, Miss Mildred says that "It did, because I heard other people commenting how pleasantly surprised they were to hear them do that anthem. So, it wasn't a negative thing that I heard, you know, from the people."

Communal worship practices have become a means for Christian identity and theological understanding (Schröder, 2021). People not only have ways of collectively acting in accordance with determined rules of conduct and meaning, but they also have ways of interacting with each other on the basis of social conventions and understandings. The conventions of social structure dictate which channels of communication are open and which are closed, who talks to whom and in what way, and what kind of messages will be most prestigious and persuasive (Hesselgrave, 1995). Regarding the *Black National Anthem's* effective formation of cross-cultural communication for the congregants, Riley says, "By singing it we gave them permission to dream. We definitely gave freedom to the African-American voice. I also believe it gave the other minorities an opportunity to exhale." Many white parishioners even came to him after the Juneteenth celebration to say, "wow, it's about time."

## **Songful African Spiritualities**

Mburu (2019) explains that "Song is the genre that best represents the heartbeat of African peoples. Whether in our traditional or modern context, songs are never far from our lips." It is observable that African songs permeate every facet of African life, such that it is difficult to witness a social gathering that is devoid of songs and dances. There are sacred songs sung during religious festivals and at shrines for spiritual upliftment. The songs are sung to console a person who has misfortune befallen, geared towards giving the person hope, helping them to understand that all is not lost and new opportunities will present themselves (Kanu, 2019). In a culturally pluralistic context such as North America, it would only be logical to 'song-fully' adapt contextual principles among ethnically diverse peoples (Howell, 2011). Nevertheless, while Sunrise Church is an exception, Western churches have otherwise expressed a lack of sensitivity to African culture. A multicultural church thus needs increased sensitivity and contextualisation (Corduan, 2012).

Can ethnic-specific worship be a part of multicultural discipleship? Yes! It is an essential part of the development of healthy multicultural disciples. In African-American culture, there are "sorrow songs," spirituals that expressed lament to God in the midst of intense struggle and a confidence in God alone to render deliverance and justice (Chandler, 2017). Historically, this worship first developed from African chants, then to spirituals, improvised hymns, traditional and modern gospel, and now to a more contemporary style (Chandler, 2017). God gave humanity the gift of African-American music, and with it, we can inform and inspire. We can take truths about God that transform hearts and lock those truths into our souls by singing them (Barnes, 2005). Together, we can praise our God with diverse songs and devotion from the deepest places of ourselves; heart, soul, and mind (Harland, 2018). This is what worship is all about, and what Jesus Christ has called for from his church (Matthew 22:37).

*Lift Every Voice* is much more than an African-American anthem. In a sense, it is the embodiment of being black and American, and for this reason, it is of paramount historical and cultural importance. And yet, since it has also been used by the political left, many conservative evangelical churches have overlooked its contribution to the diverse entity known as 'black hymnody' (Spencer, 1990). Perhaps many church leaders errantly consider it to be a slogan of extreme liberalism or social justice radicalism. Nevertheless, Sunrise's bold, creative singing of the anthem served as a blessed expression of their core values. Cultures can be defined according to the fundamental values and beliefs that their people share about how things should be and how one should behave. The effective multiculturalism of Sunrise Church is a shared value, as such, one that stands to be passed on from this generation to the next (Thomas & Inkson, 2017).

## Important Biblical Considerations

In the ancient world, it was believed that the gods were bound by certain criteria, one of which was that god could not cross ethnic borders. The god of the Chaldeans, for example, could not be the god of the land of Egypt and the Egyptians. The gods were essentially segregated by ethnic enclaves. Conversely, the God of the Hebrews was challenging Abraham to break out of that belief system, declaring that he was the type of God who could travel anywhere and be over any people group (Sanders, 2013). When YHWH rescued the Israelites, he delivered the message that the God of Israel is the Sovereign God over all, regardless of ethnicity. As more and more non-Israelites recognised this, they switched allegiances. Consider Joshua and the story of Rahab (Joshua 2:1-24), read the story of Naomi and Ruth (cf. Ruth chap. 1), and also ponder God's message to the Israelite captives in Babylon (Jeremiah 29:4-7). Throughout the Old Testament, the message to the Israelites was clear that he was a God of ethnic inclusion (Sanders, 2018).

Here, Andrews (2002) provides an Old Testament parallel: "Just as God is revealed in the liberation of the Israelites, so too does the covenantal relationship with the Israelites reveal God's desires for the faith community and humanity." An important question then arises: How has the church historically appropriated justice? The tragically sad response is that Protestant culture has failed to recognise (and has, at times, even perpetuated) significant injustices, evidenced historically by many white Protestants being "largely absent from the Civil Rights movement" (see MLK's letter referenced at the beginning of this article) and engaging in personal and structural exclusion that exists to this day. If racism and injustice undermine the quality of others' well-being based on skin color, and if the church is to be a unified gospel witness to the world reflecting the love and grace of God, then Christians in the spiritual formation stream must address the race-related social gap in a manner that is more direct, sustained, sensitive, and inclusive (Chandler, 2020).

## The Imago Dei and Humanum

Anthony Riley attends to this call, declaring that "as a pastor and a shepherd, it's my responsibility to ensure they know where I stand. When it comes to every person and every race [at Sunrise Church], every nationality will be honoured and respected and loved." Thus, we should all better respond to what the Bible teaches regarding how to value and view others. Regardless of race or ethnicity, every person is created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). Every person is worthy of equal respect and dignity. The Scriptures teach that God "shows no partiality" (Deut. 10:17), nor favoritism (Acts 10:34; Rom. 2:11), and warns against cursing others "who have been made in God's likeness" (Jas. 3:9). It is a grave sin to be partial and discriminatory because it falls short of God's character (Chandler, 2020). Nancy Ammerman emphasises the communal recognition of the *imago Dei* that exists within a congregation, as churches are a human community (i.e., a collective *humanum*) filled with people whose lives must be treated with respect (Ammerman et al., 1998).

This *humanum* principle also has a much broader context, in that establishing a congregation's unique balance between gathering with one's own culture and remaining connected to a larger, more diverse community is at the heart of what it means to congregate (Ammerman et al., 1998). However, Ammerman warns of potential cross-cultural dilemmas "that can easily lead to unhealthy exclusion and conflict" (1998). Similar to the approach of Sunrise Church, congregations need to teach oneness and create activities to

experience unity through combined interpersonal fellowship. Churches will have to consider how to deepen social interaction as religious communities still have a key role to play in social transformation (Naidoo, 2017). We all need to treat every human being as a relative. We are of one blood. All of us are equal and valued before our Creator God. Any descendant of Adam can be saved because our mutual relative by blood, Jesus Christ, died and rose again (Ham & Ware, 2019). Furthermore, a comprehensive understanding of the gospel calls for the support of cultural rights and respecting the dignity of all humans and people groups (Magesa, 2013).

## Post-Colonial American Churches

According to Heibert (1985), there has been a collapse of the colonial system that dominated the mission and ministries scene for the past two centuries. In a sense, one age has died, and yet another is struggling to be born, as the future of Western ecclesial organisation is still obscure (Heibert, 1985). According to *Operation World*, from a descriptive outsider perspective, the tarnished image of Evangelical Christianity is associated with white, middle-class, right-wing sensibilities, and evangelicals are wrongly caught up in strident, resource-sapping culture wars over (justifiably important) secondary issues. The Evangelical community does not adequately demonstrate God's compassion for the poor, the homeless, for widows and orphans, for immigrants, and for society's most vulnerable. The good news is that emerging ministries are redressing the balance, addressing very real human needs as Scripture clearly commands, while also affirming biblical views on sexuality and the sanctity of life (Mandryk, 2010).

Fellowships implementing a multicultural church model should facilitate Christ-like benevolence for members through a robust commitment to remembering the conflicted past while also working towards a reconciled present and future (Adiprasetya, 2017), doing so with a value-based, dialogue-driven approach to conflict resolution, one that is very optimistic towards cross-cultural human relationships. It is here again that Sunrise Church has organically risen to the occasion, as according to Riley, "The multiculturalism of Sunrise has a natural flow to it based on relationships. That's what pushes multicultural ethnicity in its finest. If you look through the life of Jesus, he was always multicultural. He always pushed the envelope. He said, 'I'm not here for those who are healthy, I'm here for the sick'" (cf. Mark 2:17). What is more, Jesus consistently related to people on the fringes of society, lepers, tax gatherers, Samaritans, and sinners. He was even crucified outside of the city with two robbers (Heibert, 1985).

## Cultural Intelligence and Spiritual Maturity

According to Livermore (2009), the normative commitments of digging into our own souls, viewing the 'other' as an image bearer of God and seeking the kingdom first may shape everything else we do in the pursuit of living and relating in culturally intelligent ways. This allows us to more fully live as God intended in relationship with those from all different cultural backgrounds (Livermore, 2009). Leadership needs to learn, practice, follow through, and monitor this development while also teaching congregations the same regarding why inclusion is important to faith formation. Asking and seeking answers to the following questions: What does the Bible say about inclusion? (cf. Prov. 31:8-9; Acts 17:26; Gal. 3:28; etc.): Why does it matter to the body of Christ? (de Leon-Hartshorn, 2010). The affections and attitudes of a congregation are altered by Christ's call for us to love each other, to welcome diversity, to help the marginalised, to engage in attentive listening, and to reflexively guard against encroaching prejudices. Reconciliation with God is always linked to social reconciliation—this is the grace and work of spiritual formation (Branson & Martinez, 2023).

What is more, there is no way to engage with the gospel independent of culture, because our interaction with the gospel relies on human language, worldviews, and lived realities. So, the recovery of the Christian cultural imperative is not just for Sunrise Church, but their model also ought to be emulated elsewhere. It is here that a basic theological understanding of how the gospel penetrates across cultures is required (Gitau, 2018). The Western church would do well to incorporate properly contextualised spiritual practices that have shaped African-American spirituality, as such practices have been "forged in the fiery furnace" (Chandler, 2017). Hence, focusing on how we might celebrate cultural differences in an attempt to bring unity to the body of Christ by honoring African-American Christian faith traditions and lived experiences (Chandler, 2017), thus doing so with respect to the extent of the pain of our country's past, including what African-Americans have endured and the ongoing struggle for true equality and justice (Chandler, 2020).

## **Multicultural Change-Agency**

A congregational culture is constructed out of theological and denominational traditions, expectations from the larger culture, patterns of social class and ethnicity, and the like. These characteristics are carried over into the congregation by its members and leaders. Whenever any of those elements changes, the congregation will inevitably change as well (Ammerman et al., 1998). Once leaders become intentional with multiculturalism, they get excited about making necessary changes. They realise the need to address issues in a way that involves the perspectives of all ethnicities. Different life experiences give us different perspectives on racialisation. These differences can be addressed, but they have to be engaged correctly. Godly character must abound as changes happen. The job as a leader is to show patience, provide clarity, and give encouragement. If they do these things, most people will respond with humility, listening, and a willingness to learn (Sanders, 2013).

Multiculturalism at Sunrise has become a natural lifestyle, although the structure of the experience is relationally intentional. When members or visitors enter the campus, they will see banners in English and Spanish; when they park their car and come to the front door, they will always have different ethnicities greeting them. As they go in and get seated, and the worship team comes out on stage, they will see cultural diversity represented there as well. Moreover, if the preacher is Hispanic that day, they will see a Black or Caucasian person doing announcements, and so forth. Riley proclaims that ethnic diversity is thus interwoven into the fabric of who they are as a church. This exemplifies the leadership's ability to envision and form a way of church life consistent with biblical convictions (cf. Lev. 19:33-34; Rev. 7:9). Such skillful re-visioning leads to a moral creativity that is formational in as much as it transforms by displaying the virtues of the church's commitment to witness to God's rule (Williams, 2003).

## **Top-Down Implementation**

According to Riley, such intentionality has to be top-down, though, as a leadership variable for sustainable success is whether or not major decision-makers embrace ethnic diversity. Many other pastors ask Riley for advice on making their own churches multi-ethnic. Pointedly, he first asks them the following crucial questions: "Why do you want to do it? Is that what God called you to do? Did you have this conversation with the elders?" The last question is a vital one, as Riley emphasises that "if you don't have the buy-in from the head down, it's not going to work." Basically, although the grassroots level is important, if anything of significance is going to be accomplished, it will be because the church's main decision-makers

are contributing their time, energy, and resources to making it happen. It has to be all in. The top of the organisational chart has to drive change, although the grassroots level plays a significant role (Iorg, 2011).

An intentional process is therefore necessary—one that unleashes the talents of the congregation's critical stakeholders. Significant diversity development only takes place when those who care most about the organisation are committed to bringing it to pass. The more people of different ethnicities who are passionate about the church and the values of their ethnic community, the better (Sanders, 2013). Change cannot be affected without agreement by the whole and a commitment to spiritual formation and learning, follow-through, monitoring, and evaluation. These are key elements of the change and sustaining process (de Leon-Hartshorn, 2010). Leaders must learn to breathe slowly in the midst of theological and social tensions and even contradiction. They should be reflexive and remain comfortable with the (non-essential, cultural) preferences of others, always looking for convergence in every area of networking, knowledge, information, and domains (Roberts, 2007).

Churches are to be communities of people united around fulfilling the mission of God's diverse kingdom (Osmer, 2008). Leaders who will connect in a cross-cultural manner are going to realise they have been called to do a lot more than just preach or teach. Many people went into the ministry dreaming of changing the world; they should not lose that dream. However, the current format of what a leader is and how they gauge their effectiveness will have to change (Roberts, 2007). In order to spiritually develop in a multicultural context, parishioners need overseers who are competent in cross-cultural practices in order to help them, to be their role models, mentors, teachers, and partners in development. They need leaders who will include congregants in cultural activities (such as singing the *Black National Anthem*) as they themselves are engaged in them, exemplifying to them what the practices require (Dykstra, 2003).

When we continually connect the significant ways that various multicultural practices are related to one another, then we come to take increasing personal responsibility for initiating, pursuing, and sustaining these practices, and for including and guiding others in them (Dykstra, 2003). Being mindful of other cultures is important in the form of an active awareness that links knowledge about culture to appropriate behaviour in cross-cultural situations (Osmer, 2008). The culturally intelligent member of the "Priesthood of all believers" (1 Pet. 2:9) also needs to increase his or her repertoire of skilled social behaviours and to be able to deploy these appropriately and in different cultural, ecclesiastical settings. The elements of social knowledge, being mindful of others, and having good emotional skills enable the practice of cultural intelligence that is effectively adapted to the particular congregational settings the individual faces (Thomas & Inkson, 2017).

This holistic approach also reveals that discipleship is a long-term process of community growth, which may not be evident in a short-term individualistic culture clamouring for instant results. Racial exclusion does not exist in isolation; rather, there is a problem within the family system. The key is to focus not only on the individual, but also on the whole system. Healthy, mature disciples often arise from healthy, maturing communities. This requires the holistic discipler to look at the larger community growth process that leads the community towards wholeness (Moon, 2017). Effective multiculturalism always occurs within the context of social relationships and takes place between people who are involved in regular, enduring relationships in the context of a social community (Heibert, 1985), all the while working past the

stereotypes formed by a superficial understanding of cultural values and avoiding the divisions that so often attend (Livermore, 2009).

## Let Every Person Sing

The anthem *Lift Every Voice* was written so that all people should sing. "But every race is not singing," says Riley, "Most importantly, the white race isn't singing it." While he is very encouraged by how far the African-American people have advanced in society, he reminds us "that the work isn't done." For example, while the contemporary Anglo-church generally respects and values the different cultures and races, missiologist Bob Roberts, Jr. reflexively expresses deeper convictions to the contrary; "I do believe we have ignored them. We see them as less than ourselves; otherwise, white guys would not primarily fill our ministry meetings. I grieve that I myself was so 'white' in my perspective for so many years" (Roberts, 2005). Nevertheless, Pastor Anthony also admits to having his own partialities that he has to keep in check "You have to point the mirror back on yourself," he says, "Because we all have some biases, some predispositions, suppositions, everything that stops us from being who God wants us to be."

With all of this in mind, Riley recently received some sour-note parishioner feedback regarding the implementation of Spanish language announcement videos (with English subtitles) shown in the main sanctuary during Sunday services throughout Hispanic Heritage Month. Nevertheless, he simply took the pushback in stride, stayed composed, and even welcomed the challenge. As Iorg (2011) instructs, "Wisdom is required to sort out these matters. Don't expect it to be a clean or simple process. Prepare to be second-guessed and criticised by well-meaning brothers and sisters who don't see things the way you do." And, the more we work together through these issues, the more God can use us for that future kingdom look, that glimpse of Revelation 7:9.

One way that Sunrise Church has tracked multicultural spiritual formation is through their popular Celebrate the Nations event, where they had many diverse ethnic cultures represented in their outside venue with their foods, their countries, and their flags. The event had around 2,000 people in attendance, and it featured a cultural talent show. According to Riley's recount of the event, the show had Africans who did their dancing, and then Tongans who did cultural dancing, and then Samoans; there were Spanish language people singing; there was one glimpse where the Africans were singing and dancing, and every ethnicity went up and danced with them. Riley surmises that this glimpse is a beautiful reminder of how culturally blended activities are needed. This was an ideal venue for creating unity and conciliation as people grew in their appreciation for other cultural differences (Whitesel, 2014).

## The Greatest of These is Love

The Southern Baptist Convention has, unfortunately, had a history of racial prejudice and segregation. That is why Sunrise Church's celebration of Juneteenth is a huge stride in the conciliatory direction, as it lovingly embodies both emancipation and revival; a resurrection spirituality that calls us beyond self to concern and compassion for others. The truth, then, is that Juneteenth is a celebration of the church's "oneness." It is what might eventually bring back old-fashioned togetherness: the unity, the equality, the fraternity of all humans irrespective of race, ethnicity, creed, ideological and religious orientation. It is not just about freedom, but the resurrection of all the ideals that came into the concept, dream, and formation of America (Maduagwu, 2011).

We were designed to interact with those who see the world differently from us, not merely to cloister ourselves with those who look, think, and act like us. Love is lived out up close. Effective multiculturalism is not just a cerebral understanding of different cultures; it is authentic, *bona fide*, cross-cultural love. In our world of loneliness and broken relationships, there is an enormous need for men and women with hearts that only want to give love; a love that has no bounds (Livermore, 2009). According to the philosophy of Sunrise's Lead Pastor, Steve Garcia, the heart is that it would be a church that lovingly impacts lives, regardless of ethnicity or status, "a body of people who step outside our walls and impact the community." As Garcia (2023) concludes, "I want Sunrise to be the kind of church that meets people in the most desperate and broken places and walks with them as we share the hope of Jesus Christ." So let it be written, so let it be done. *Sola de Gloria*.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study finds that the spiritual formation (and multicultural change-agency) approach of Sunrise Church would serve to be widely beneficial, not only to the Southern Baptist Convention (USA), but also for other denominational churches (and non-denominational ecclesial movements) throughout America. Sunrise's corporate signing of *The Black National Anthem*, while admittedly risky, appears to have reaped great rewards regarding multi-ethnic cooperation and fellowship in worship, thus setting a paradigm for other churches to follow. Therefore, the recommendation of this writer would be for diverse fellowships to consider corporately signing *Lift Every Voice* and/or other ethnic-specific hymns for the betterment of the church in the United States and (hopefully also) the broader American society at large. Moreover, Pastor Anthony Riley's heart to advance spiritual formation by way of multicultural practice is a modus that other pastors and leaders could greatly benefit from, not only here in the US, but also globally toward alleviating the ethnic and tribal tensions that so often abound in societies around the world.

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