



Sharing the Good News!

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

MORE ALIEN SIGHTINGS

You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

-God (Leviticus 19.34 NRSV)

I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

-Jesus (Matthew 25.36 NRSV)

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.

-Paul (Ephesians 2.19 NRSV)

You know, there is a reason why growing churches grow, and why some congregations become really BIG congregations. And it's not simply because of their "faith."

In my last *STGN* piece I mentioned that many of the largest churches in America are making a very serious and successful effort to incorporate ethnic minority faith-seekers and Christian-believers into their weekly worship and fellowship. They are becoming a blended membership in part because that is what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all about (*see verses above!*); but also because the demographic handwriting is on the wall: by mid-century there will be *no* ethnic majority in the United States.

Homogeneity is quickly giving way to heterogeneity (and I'm not talking sex here!) throughout our society. It's time for the Church to catch up!

More and more it will be the case that the churches that are growing in our country will be growing in no small measure because they are welcoming people of different backgrounds and viewpoints into their membership mix. Those that remain closed to outsiders will find their numbers shrinking and their financial base dwindling. Does this sound familiar?

Becoming more than just "politely friendly" to folks of other backgrounds isn't easy—at first, anyway. There is so much unfamiliarity to acknowledge, then to learn about, next to appreciate, and finally to celebrate. It takes time to overcome the subtle little prejudices we all harbor in regard to the "other."

Many people never get to the celebration stage. Some don't even make it to the learning phase. But others do. And with God's reconciling power, it is possible to become more truly welcoming than we think we can be!

A couple of months ago, at my home church in Laurys Station, there was a festive wedding between the single mother of a refugee family St. John's UCC helped to sponsor about five years ago, and a gentleman from her native land (Ivory Coast and Liberia). The wedding was supposed to happen during the morning service, but limousine connections were delayed and so the wedding took place about a half hour after the worship service had ended.

But a good number of the (largely German) members stayed for the wedding ceremony anyway, and then we walked with the wedding party and their sixty or so West African guests into the fellowship hall for a nice lunch and dessert. The room was beautifully decorated, and the homemade wedding cake was both gigantic and delicious!

A number of the church's members, young and old, served as waiters and waitresses for the event—just like the way it happens on every other occasion. The only real difference between this and other wedding receptions was that about half of the folks in the room were African, and about half were German/English (I was one of the few English, I guess!).

About a week later, my wife spoke with the new bride about the wedding. She asked Benorah: "What did your guests from Liberia and Ivory Coast think about the wedding at our church?"

Benorah (who, by the way, is a member of St. John's herself) replied, "The thing that impressed them the most wasn't the limousine, the wedding dresses and tuxes ... not even the service itself. You see, this was the first time since they had come to America that they had had the experience of white people waiting on *them*. It was a very moving experience. They felt truly welcomed."

A moment of welcoming grace. Unrehearsed. Natural. Hospitality from the heart.

The Gospel of John says that Jesus performed his first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. Could it be that he just performed another little wedding miracle ... this time at St. John's of Laurys? What would happen if we let God do this sort of thing through us more often?

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