

# Nurturing a Culture that Inspires Christian Growth

-Ernest Eby | 2021

I always enjoy getting together with believers who have assembled voluntarily to learn and grow. This makes for a very positive spiritual environment.

So how do we go about creating such a culture in our home communities? A culture in which everyone is growing and everyone wants to continue growing?

First I will share some observations about churches that inspire growth and then we will look at some ingredients that are found in cultures that inspire Christian growth.

***Churches with a culture that inspires Christian growth will have an impact on their community.***

A church that does not inspire Christian growth, may appear healthy and strong, and the people may be well known in the community, but it will not have much impact on the community. Eventually such churches may fossilize (continue going through the motions but not affect any real change in the surrounding community) or they may falter and die out.

Many churches are able to help their children and grandchildren or people from other Plain churches to grow in the Lord, but they are basically impotent when it comes to helping people outside their own sub-culture to grow and develop.

A church that helps its children and grandchildren and other plain people grow in the Lord can be self-sustaining or even growing numerically, and if they are teaching the word of God, this is good. There are many churches that find it difficult to accomplish anything similar to this.

But according to what I read in the New Testament, it would seem to me that a church that is only able to connect with its own subculture is at the very least a semi-dysfunctional church. Do you agree?

Jesus says in Matthew 5 that if we only greet or salute our brothers and sisters, we are no different from any other culture.

Having seekers become part of our churches should be so customary that our normal Sunday meetings should be seeker's gatherings. There should be no stares or turning heads when a visitor arrives at church. It should be very normal. I look forward to the day when Plain Anabaptists and other kingdom Christian are known for being some of the most welcoming and spiritually alive churches in the world. Between now and then, I think we have a lot of work to do.

One of the big challenges we face as Plain Anabaptists and other kingdom churches is the fact that we are a part of the subset of Christians called "conservative Christians".

An acquaintance of mine who did not grow up Anabaptist or kingdom Christian writes this:

*"There is a built-in propensity of conservative people to pick at each other to a detriment. I recognize this tendency to criticize in almost every church I have been in since I have started down the kingdom road. It is a subtle and dangerous tendency. We truth seekers devote our lives to being right. We develop devotion to the things we find along the way that make us assume if everyone would be faithful they would be right where we are, and see things the way we do."*

Conservative Christians want to be Biblical and hold on to values they don't want to lose. They may get a sizeable percentage of their children and grandchildren and other similar minded people to see things the way they do. But they find it very difficult to get people from other cultures to see things the same way they do.

So the question is, "Do conservative Christians need to change their views on some things?" "Do they need to find a better way to connect with and persuade people?" and "Do they need to be ok with greater diversity?" I think they need all three!

Firstly, there are some doctrines and views on things that most conservative Christians have that are not what faithful Christians have believed historically.

Secondly, once our thinking and our worldview is improved, we do need to find better ways to connect with and persuade people of what we believe.

Thirdly, conservative Christians like to separate into groups of people that think like them. This works against the very

thing that they need... that of more diversity. It is possible to have true unity in the midst of diversity as long as the diversity is in the right areas. According to one source, only 3% of the world's population enjoys being with folks different than themselves. The other 97% enjoy being with people like themselves. That is why Republicans in the USA are moving out of Democrat leaning neighborhoods and into Republican neighborhoods and vice versa. That is why Christian people are constantly moving from one church to another to find people who think more like them.

Everybody has a culture. Some cultures are more fine-tuned than others.

In Old Order and conservative Anabaptist communities, there are hundreds if not thousands of expectations and customs built into their subculture. Few people within the subculture think about informing newcomers of these things they may be unfamiliar with. Newcomers are not going to catch on to many cultural queues unless someone takes the time to explain.

Hutterite colonies are probably one of the most fine-tuned cultures around and one of the more difficult ones for a Westerner to adapt to. It is really hard for a person who joins a Hutterite colony to ever feel like they truly belong. However many conservative Christians are not far behind. If you interact with a conservative Pentecostal church or a conservative Seventh Day Adventist community or an independent Baptist church you will soon learn that there are many things built into their culture, even if they are not as separated as plain Anabaptists. Think about how hard it would be to learn the culture of such a group. Then add all the things that are assumed in a plain Swiss/German Anabaptist culture or a plain Dutch Anabaptist culture and the adjustments for a newcomer are formidable.

When I was 30 years old, I moved to a Midwestern state to an Amish-Mennonite church. I had come from a Mennonite church. The culture was very different, even though both settings were conservative Anabaptist. If there is a big difference between two different sub-cultures within conservative Anabaptism, we can expect adjustments to be greater and more challenging to navigate for folks not familiar with conservative Anabaptist culture.

Some culture expectations that feel very important are not essential. "Smooth operation" can feel really important in a church but any church that attempts to convert less churched people is going to need to give up their goal of efficiency. "One size fits all" does not work with folks who grew up in different cultures.

It is very hard for any conservative group to look at their beliefs and values objectively and sort out what parts are right for everyone, what parts are unhealthy for everyone, what parts are "good when possible", and what parts are neither godly nor ungodly. This inability to sort out only intensifies as people who think alike gather together at one place. Consequently, expectations that are not central to the Kingdom of God can become a source of offense that is completely unnecessary.

Next I will list some ingredients that I believe are part of any Christian culture that is effective in helping people grow and develop.

As we look at these, keep in mind that these ingredients are like the threads in a spider web. No one ingredient can stand alone. Each ingredient is held in check by other necessary ingredients.

Most of these ingredients will focus on relating to new believers. However, many of these points will have a similar application for relating to people who are already Christian but are new to our way of doing church.

### **Ingredients:**

If you want to develop a culture that inspires Christian growth...

1. *There should be an expectation that the church will be bringing in new people all the time.* Without this expectation, it is not going to happen.

2. *A culture that inspires Christian growth cares about the interests of the newcomers.*

If your topics of conversation center around your interests, expect newcomers to feel like they don't belong. Seekers are glad to talk about how the Lord has led them in life, but that isn't the only thing they want to talk about. They want to talk about normal subjects and be accepted just like the rest of us. What if everywhere you went someone asked, "Hmmm... Yoder that sounds like an Amish name. Do you know any Amish? Do all Amish drive gray buggies?" After about the third time in a week, you would be tired of this. Remember we said that we all need to be learners. Maybe you are a plumber and most of the folks in your church are plumbers, and so

you normally talk about laying pipes, unclogging drains, and the next building project. Well... you are going to need to expand your field of interests. Maybe you need to learn about electronic microscopes. When I moved to State College and attended the first prayer meeting, a brother asked that we would pray that the sensitive circuit boards on his electronic microscope would not get fried when the university turned the generators on that day. The year before it had fried the circuit boards and cost his department \$80,000. Completely different world, but one that I needed to get interested in.

3. *Everyone in the church should be learning and growing.*

There needs to be a sense among everyone that we have “not arrived” and that there is much to learn, even on the topics that we already know lots about. There should be no plateauing, individually or corporately.

4. *There needs to be a keen awareness that everyone in the church has something they can contribute to the body of Christ.*

What my brother has to contribute may not be the same thing that I have to contribute, but there is something each person has that can benefit me and others. We should be helping people identify what their gifts and contributions are.

5. *Everyone should have people who are discipling them, and they should have people they are helping to disciple.*

Teaching and admonishing one another in the context of trusting relationships should be the norm. This may happen on different levels. An elder may be discipling a young Christian. A young Christian may be helping to disciple a person who is not yet a believer.

(Finny Kuruvilla has an excellent message on this topic. Discipleship as the Foundation for Church Planting. You can listen to it online at [churchplantersforum.org](http://churchplantersforum.org))

6. *The distinguishing characteristic of the community should be their love for each other.*

Jesus says this is the way the world will know that we are his disciples.

7. *There should not be a culture of fault finding and judgment of others.*

(I mentioned the quote earlier that deals with this. Judging in the body of Christ does need to happen, but it should not be a distinguishing characteristic of a group.)

8. *There must be tons of empathy for people who are entering the Kingdom with broken lives and little understanding of the Christian life.*

The brother I quoted earlier says this...

*There is a difference between privilege and incarnational empathy. Privilege says when it encounters someone with struggles or someone different “if you were like me then...”. Empathy says instead of that, “what is it like to be you?” This is I believe deep at the heart of Jesus’ incarnation. If I were to assess what may be amiss in many conservative Christian groups, I would say it is this heart of empathy...”*

If we have empathy, we will think about what people don’t know or weren’t taught and try to understand them accordingly.

9. *In order for there to be a culture of Christian growth, there must be tons of patience for those without a New Testament cultural heritage.*

The church must be glad to extend room and space to folks who did not have good biblical teaching, good examples of Christian living, and good family values. There must be tolerance given to those who have a much smaller tool box and fewer Christian skills. Can you imagine being told to build a house from scratch, and the only tools you have are a hammer, a tape measure, and a screwdriver? Besides that, you have no construction experience. Imagine trying to build a house.

(When you are raising children, how many times do you have to tell them something before they learn it? Many times! Be prepared to patiently explain to people over and over the things that you’ve known for a long time.)

10. *Showing forbearance for people who are not very sanctified should not become a license for others in the church to aim for the lowest common denominator.*

Many conservative Christians like when everybody looks and acts the same way and there isn’t too much variety. This mentality is especially prevalent in a church where most everyone is of the same ethnic background

and grew up in the same church. To think of incorporating someone who doesn't fit the mold can make them feel very insecure. Their reasoning goes like this, "If we allow the newcomer with no Christian training to do this, then we are opening the door for everybody in the church to do this."

Who says? Why would we need to throw away everything we've learned just because we decided to give some individuals a chance to learn and grow?

Churches must hold their own children and young people to a high standard, but give those new to the faith time to learn and grow. Such a mentality would require a metamorphosis for most conservative churches.

11. *We should expect a wide range of maturity in the church.*

In the typical plain church, there is not a wide range of spiritual maturity. However, the Apostles seemed to expect a wide range of maturity. Paul talks about master builders and about novices. He talks about the strong and the weak. If there are weak people in the church, this should not be embarrassing or viewed as a problem to get rid of. This is the way a church is going to look if it is discipling people from all walks of life.

We may need to do some new thinking on how to make new believers feel like they are fully part of the body of Christ for a period of time while they get to know us. For some reason conservative Anabaptist churches typically have an all or none policy for membership. A person needs to be in compliance with the full order of the church and then they can get baptized, practice the Holy Kiss, participate in communion, vote on church matters, teach Bible studies, etc. Does this all need to happen at once? Could there be a way of doing this in increments? One church I am familiar with is working at a provisional membership for those who are new to the plain churches. Another church is trying a gradual entry process. Both are expecting submission to the church but they are not expecting everything at once. The Bible doesn't really outline a method for how to do this, but it does teach the principles that we need to follow for relating to those who have fewer advantages.

12. *Those who have been taught the ways of Christ for many years should be held to higher expectations than those who have not.*

To whom much is given, much is required.

13. *Those with more influence in the church should be held to higher expectations than those who are not.*

If it is understood that some in the church will have more influence, there is not an expectation that everyone who is part of the church should be given equal influence in the church. Otherwise the Apostles would not have given instructions for how to choose leaders and teachers and shepherds.

When I use the term "higher expectations", I'm not thinking that these people should wear longer coats or sleep less hours per week. I'm thinking that those with more influence in the church should have more compassion, more ability to work through conflict, less love for the world, more love for God, less love for themselves, more love for people, etc.

14. *The leaders of the church should explain to the church, who it is in the congregation that they can follow or look up to. Otherwise the newcomer may follow people in the congregation who are immature and those who are not headed in a good direction.*

The Apostle Paul told the Philippians that they should mark those in the church who live like Jesus and then pattern their lives after these people.

If a church is going to have a wide range of maturity in attendance, the newcomer is not going to know who he should be following and what the end goal is and where the church is headed unless someone tells him.

This is no easy task. Such a task assumes that the church has leaders who don't make judgments based on the outside. (This is really difficult for conservative Christians. Even godly people like the prophet Samuel found it easy to look on the outside whenever he went to Bethlehem to anoint one of Jesse's sons)

15. *Newcomers should have the opportunity to observe how more mature Christians live their lives, how they have family worship, how they interact with others in the church and outside the church. We need to invite people to do these things with us!*

16. *The church should provide safe places for people to ask any question they wish and be able to hear a mature answer. Questions about faith. Questions about church practices. Questions about relationships. (Why do people look at me strangely whenever I...???) Why does that brother treat this other brother this way???)*

17. *We should expect the spirituality of those from less churched backgrounds to sometimes surpass the spirituality of those who grew up in the church.*

We should expect that newcomers will have things to teach us. We don't have it all figured out. Why would that be or how could it happen that a person from an unchurched background would surpass someone with a church background?

Examples: Some first generation Christians may spend much more time reading the Bible and praying. First generation Christians may know where they came from and not want to have anything to do with the works of the flesh. First generation Christians often pay a higher price for their faith as compared to someone who grew up in the faith. People in the church may have lost their first love.

*Would you be happy if your converts surpassed you in spiritual maturity?*

I believe that all of our congregations would be blessed if at least half the people in the church were new to the faith. Every church needs these new believers. Not just one or two, but at least a few each year. If there are just one or two newcomers in a ten year time span that join the church, the newcomers will feel like they are living in a fish bowl. Everybody wants to know all about why they chose an Anabaptist church and other nosey questions. The way to solve the fish bowl problem is to be interacting with and discipling new believers all the time. When people are focused on discipling new believers and seekers, they soon discover that there are much more important things to give one's attention to.

***We've talked about the variety of maturity that should be expected in a church that is inspiring growth in people from all walks of life. Now let's talk about equality.***

18. *There should be equality in the body of Christ.*

There should be equality when we come to the communion table. There should be equality when we think about our position in Christ and our contribution to the body of Christ.

When we study the Bible together, anybody should be able to ask a question or volunteer a thought, or share an insight that has come to them. We should be providing settings where it is easy for people to do this.

If we see new believers as being equal in Christ, it will not be hard to give new believers involvement in the church. We might have to change some roles, change some job descriptions, change some expectations, etc. but this is the way we show that everyone is equal in Christ. A weaker member or person new to the faith can break bread and pour grape juice and carry basins of water and set up chairs just as well as a mature person. They might do it differently than how we always did it but so what?

There should be something worthwhile for everyone in the church to do. Some people may not be able to help sing at nursing homes because they can't sing. The Bible doesn't say we have to sing in nursing homes. Could we do less singing and broaden our ministries to include things that the new believers can help with?

Maybe a new believer from another country does not feel comfortable teaching. But perhaps he can translate someone else's teaching to others who speak his native language! Find a way to use their gifts!

There are many more ingredients that could be added to this list.

Next is an exercise that may help us see things from a new believer or a seeker's point of view.

Mark 16:16 – *“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”*

For people who grew up in a Christian home, it is often easier to believe and be baptized than not.

This verse has huge implications for a person from Asia or the mid-east or even here in America who will be persecuted experience rejection for becoming a Christian.

I Corinthians 11:4-6 - Many Christians have read I Corinthians 11 many times and then one day, a light bulb came on and they asked themselves, *“Why don't we practice head-covering?”* But the social implications are huge. Many women will experience rejection from their family members and *“Christian”* friends if they adopt this practice.

Matthew 5:44 – *“But I tell you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you.”* Again, many Christians have read this verse often, but never thought about it applying to war or self-defense until suddenly one day it became clear.

Luke 14:12-14 – *“He said also to the man who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers[a] or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”*

Chances are that you have read across these verses and assumed that Jesus certainly didn't mean that we should not invite relatives and friends to our house for dinner... and instead invite those who can't repay us.

Perhaps you have read these verses and subconsciously thought, “I'm not sure what to make of these but it probably means something different than how it reads.”

Most of us like comforting verses about God's plans for us. “In my Father's house are many mansions.” “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son.” “Let not your hearts be troubled.” “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you.” These are the types of verses that we like to put on our mottoes.

But getting back to Luke 14...

Certainly Jesus doesn't mind if we invite relatives, well-to-do people, and people who can invite us to their house for dinner. Jesus certainly doesn't expect us to take him literally in these verses. Maybe this was just for that time period. Maybe this instruction was for this particular Pharisee. Maybe this applies to feasts and not ordinary meals. Maybe Jesus is teaching a principle here. Perhaps the principle is that we should be willing to invite people who are not our friends and relatives for a dinner when we are host family and strangers show up at church.

Well... you've just experienced what an unbeliever or non-plain person experiences when they study the New Testament and seek to obey its teachings. These are the kinds of thoughts that go through their mind when they read a “hard saying”.

When an unchurched person or a nominally churched person reads something about forsaking the world and getting baptized it has huge implications for their life. If a “God and Country” Christian realizes what Jesus is saying about loving one's enemies, obedience to this teaching carries huge social and personal implications. Christians who have been told that literal obedience to the teaching in I Corinthians 11:2-16 is for the first century, and then conclude that it is not just a principle but there is a literal application for today, it is going to have huge implications for their social life.

I'm quite sure there is a principle being taught in Luke 12, but I think Jesus also had a very direct application in mind. He said we should not invite relatives and rich neighbors and instead we should invite the poor and blind and those who can't return the favor. It is easy for us to “principle a thing away” if we don't like the direct wording.

Now it is possible that Jesus was addressing this to the Pharisee and that he wanted this Pharisee to stop inviting his relatives and friends for awhile. And it is possible that this command to not invite relatives and friends could be read as “not only, but also”.

However...

Someone has said that even though there is much in the Bible that is hard to understand, there is much that is painfully easy to understand. Perhaps this is one of those painfully easy things to understand.

You have just read some verses that have huge implications for your life if you take this teaching quite literally. If you take this teaching of Jesus seriously, your social life is going to be turned upside down. Even if you don't invite the blind and maimed, but instead invite strangers, foreigners, and folks you don't normally host, your application of these verses are still going to have huge implications for your social life.

I can almost guarantee you that if you take this command very seriously, that most of your relatives and friends are not going to understand or appreciate your choices. You may feel some rejection. And when you feel this, remember that many new believers and seekers experience something very similar from their relatives and friends when they act in obedience to the word of God. Often they experience this rejection to a much greater extent.

Did you know that it is hard to be a serious Christian? Did you know that it is hard for all Christians, including Anabaptists, to practice the “all things of the Bible.” We like to think of ourselves as teaching the all things of

the Bible but did you ever hear a sermon on Luke 14:12-14? (I did a number of years ago. If it was not for that sermon, I maybe wouldn't even care about this.)

Did you ever see this on a motto in a conservative Anabaptist home that was based on Luke 14:12-14?

If we are thinking of excuses for why we shouldn't take this seriously, we are no different from people who look for excuses as to why they shouldn't get baptized, cover their heads, or love their enemies.

I'm not sure what excuses are coming to mind right now. Maybe it is not suitable to invite people to your house. Maybe you don't enjoy cooking. Maybe you don't enjoy cooking for strangers. Maybe you feel overly busy right now as it is. There many excuses we could come up with if we are looking for some.

But we don't have to have a very big house. We can always take dinner to the park and invite people to eat with us there. If you can't cook, that is no problem. You can buy bread and meat and lettuce and cheese and eat sandwiches and chips with people.

You see... when Christians start looking for ways to actually take a command of Jesus seriously, the applications start becoming very obvious. The applications are hidden from those who don't take the command seriously. This is true whether it's loving enemies, women covering their heads, or inviting the disadvantaged and stranger to eat with us. When Christians want to obey Jesus, and begin obeying Jesus, then they wonder how they could have been overlooked a teaching of Jesus for so many years.

And by the way, there ARE Christians who have been taking this teaching of Jesus seriously for many years.

Can you picture in your mind what would happen if all born-again Plain Anabaptists, (all 200,000??? of them) would take this teaching of Luke 14 seriously? Making dinners for people is something we already know how to do. We can do it almost better than anyone else, yet we rarely make dinners for people outside of our social group.

Can you imagine how many people did not become part of the Kingdom of God, or how many families did not become part of church that teaches the Two Kingdoms, simply because no one ever befriended them and invited them for meals?

And what if we would not just apply this teaching to our formal dinners but we would apply this teaching to all of our social interactions? Rather than getting together with people like us, we expand our social circle to include mostly people not like us?

One of the things that Anabaptist used to do more of was to feed and befriend tramps and poor people. Quite a few came into our churches because of this.

There is a whole lot more to this teaching than just giving food to someone. Just like there is much more to non-resistance than not going to war and there is much more to head-covering than wearing a piece of cloth.

There is much more to inviting folks to dinner than just eating food. Sharing our food with others and eating together is an ideal way for building friendship and it will give you a way to introduce people to the Gospel. It is an ingenious method (thought up by Jesus) that is effective in building his Kingdom. It was His idea.

(Caution/Disclaimer: I don't want the men reading this to overwhelm their wives with more work. The men need to help the women or do it themselves if she is already worn out. If you overtax or overburden your wife, the Bible talks about that also.)

We have a long ways to go in creating and nurturing cultures that inspire Christian growth, not just among new believers, but among all people in the church.

Let's not be faint hearted. Let's take courage. Let's strengthen our hands in the Lord. Let's strengthen each other's hands for the work.

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## **Interview with Anabaptist Perspectives in 2020**

**Interviewer:** *A few years ago you gave a presentation and wrote an article with the title, “Nurturing a Culture that Inspires Christian Growth”. What is “Christian Growth” as you use the phrase?*

I’m talking about growing in knowledge of the scriptures, growing in wisdom, growing in holiness, growing in love, and growing more useful and useable in the Kingdom of God. I believe that diversity of cultures in a church helps a church grow.

**Interviewer:** *What kind of diversity are you calling for?*

In the book of Revelation we read about people from all tongues, tribes, and nations being gathered around God’s throne. I believe that our churches here on earth should be a taste of heaven. If we are living in a region where they are multiple ethnicities and cultures present, I believe that our churches should reflect that diversity. If we can only attract and keep people of our own ethnic bloodlines, we are not giving our communities a very good picture of what heaven is going to be like.

It seems to me that there are three ways to build strong church communities.

The first way is for a community to somewhat isolate themselves from the rest of the world, and develop a strong teaching program aimed at convincing themselves and the younger generation that of all the different church options, their way of doing church is the best. The younger generation is taught to pass this same worldview on to the succeeding generation. The majority of people in these churches are relatives or distant relatives.

The second way to build strong communities is to bring Christians together who are agreed on certain values and ideals. This may be a group of people from similar Christian heritage, or it may be a group of people with very different growing up experiences but ones who have arrived at similar ideals. This is a “birds of a feather flock together” type of community. Again there is a strong emphasis on convincing themselves that their way of doing church is the best. In these churches those with minority viewpoints tend to get pushed to the edge of the group, and those who affirm the vision of the leaders are given positions of influence. These types of communities almost always implode at some point or else succeeding generations wander away from their original values and ideals.

I have visited and interacted with a wide variety of old order and conservative churches in both of these types of communities.

There is a pattern I have observed in both of these groups. People from these churches will visit another church slightly different from their own. When they return to their home church they will comment on their visit to this other church and then say something like, “I am so thankful for what we have here at our church. We don’t have....” and then they will name something they observed at the other church that they did not like. Or they may say, “I am so thankful to be part of a strong church community...” and then they will give an example of what they like about their church.

Seekers who join these kinds of churches either adopt the proud spirit and begin repeating the same rhetoric themselves, or else they become repulsed by this attitude. And it is not just seekers who are repulsed by these attitudes, often there are thinking young people who are also repulsed.

Now there is a kind of gratitude that is good and healthy and I am not dissing this at all. It is possible to be humbled by ones community and not puffed up by it.

But most of the comments that I am referring to do not come from a healthy attitude and spirit. Most times the comments come from an attitude and spirit that is very toxic. This toxic spirit is characterized by pride and arrogance. As you know, most people do not like being around proud people, (unless the arrogant person is saying the kinds of things they like to hear). Well God doesn’t like proud people either. That is why he says he resists the proud and that is why he says that pride and arrogance are an abomination and something he hates.

Well... there is a third kind of strong church communities who have sprung up all over the world in the last 2000 years. These are churches that are comprised of a cross section of people living in the same geographic area. The people in these churches are not necessarily of the same family or cultural background (although they may be). Neither are they

folks who have congregated together in one location because their values and ideals are all the same. The thing they have in common is their love for God and their love for their neighbor. They don't necessarily consider their church one of the best expressions of Christianity here on earth, (that isn't necessarily a concern of theirs). They don't need to convince each other of their strong points. Everyone in the group has a sense of what their strong points are and they don't need to convince themselves or others that they are doing quite well in these areas.

At the same time, these church communities have the confidence that they are being the hands and feet of Jesus in accomplishing the work that He placed them here to do. They don't see everything alike, (Some observe special days, others don't. Some eat meat. Others eat vegetables.) So they aren't all riding the same band wagons, yet they bless each other as each one strives to fulfil the purpose for which God created them.

This is the kind of diversity that I believe a church community needs in order to be fully functional according the New Testament pattern. And it is the kind of unified church community that I believe Jesus prayed for in John 17.

**Interviewer:** *Won't the close presence of people who don't share our values harm our integrity?*

If our integrity is based on what those around us are doing, then I suppose people with other values could threaten our integrity. But if our integrity is rooted in the truth of scripture and is guided by the Living Word of God, then we should be able to pass our values on to others. Some of our values are very good. Others have very little value. And some of our values have no real value at all. People from other cultures help us identify values that have little to no value as well as values that are actually toxic. They can help us get rid of these values or at least help us put them where they belong.

**Interviewer:** *What do you mean when you talk about equality in churches and does the New Testament provide a basis for this?*

Churches should not have "caste systems" like we find in Hinduism. Unfortunately many churches have something very similar to a caste system, but the "castes" are not as pronounced.

In India the caste system is quite obvious. In Christian churches, you may need to attend the church for awhile in order to understand the social dynamics that are going on within the group. If the core group of a church is primarily people of similar ethnic or cultural background, they will tend to put themselves at the top of the tier and look at believers from other backgrounds as being slightly inferior. Much of this is subconscious.

Here is an example: Those of us who are raised in strong Christian communities have many connections and skills and investors who make it easy for us to start a business or find a job. Most people in the world who need to leave father and mother to cast their lot with the people of God are not going to have these advantages.

Some time ago I heard a brother from a "higher tier" make a negative remark about a brother of different ethnic and cultural background. He said, "Why doesn't that man have a job!"

The brother from the "top tier" didn't take the time to learn what the other brother was doing with his time. He didn't ask whether the other brother is looking for a job and couldn't find one. He didn't stop to think whether the other brother might need help in finding a job. He didn't inquire whether there are health issues and family needs that keep this other brother from taking on certain jobs. The "higher tier" brother just quickly rushed to judgment of the other brother based on his own limited cultural perspective.

Many "higher tier" people lack compassion for people of certain nationalities or people from unfamiliar cultural backgrounds. Higher tier people tend to look at those who are not as well developed in certain areas as being needy people in need of help, and they tend to treat them as a "project" rather than as friends. What many "higher tier" people don't realize is that they have needs that are just as great as those they consider "beneath them". When there are social tiers in a church, most everybody in the church remain spiritual dwarfs.

The New Testament has lots of instructions about not despising or looking down on others who are part of the body of Christ. In fact the writers of the New Testament tried every way they could think of to teach believers to view themselves as deficient people who really do need the gifts of many others in the body of Christ.

**Interviewer:** What does equality have to do with a culture that promotes Christian Growth?

Equality in the body of Christ helps us see that we need each other to develop those undeveloped parts of our lives. Practically speaking this means that we readily and willingly humble ourselves before each other.

Some people need help with finances and finding employment. The same people, though, may be full of compassion for others. They can teach “higher tier” people about being compassionate. When this kind of dynamic is happening in a church, top and bottom tiers are torn down and everyone becomes brothers and sisters, one of another. When the tiers are removed, brothers and sisters do not view themselves as being above others but rather fellow heirs of the riches of Christ. This is the kind of church that newcomers will want to join and the kind of church where newcomers will want to stay. It is the kind of environment where seekers can flourish and grow.

**Interviewer:** Speak to the Christians who wish to implement your vision but who are members of churches that, on an institutional level, seek Christian growth in a manner that differs from your proposal.

Well... that is a very legitimate question.

I will start by saying that I have been members of such churches for most of my life. I’ve often wondered why? And I haven’t come up with an answer.

There are probably different ways to grow the body of Christ. In my article, I am simply explaining it the way I understand it. If a church can help people grow in a different manner, may God be praised!

However, if a church is not doing well at growing people spiritually, I do believe it is still possible for an individual to grow spiritually, even if others in the church seem to stay dwarfed, spiritually.

It is good to realize that we are not just part of a local body, but we are also part of the larger church of Jesus Christ. If we don’t get the help we need to grow spiritually in our local church, we can be inspired and disciplined by others in the body of Christ who are not part of our local church.

Val Yoder also reminds us in his book, “I Will Build My Church” that we may not be viewing our local church the way God views our local church. There may be more gold there than what we realize, and it may take some effort to dig beneath the surface and uncover the gold. We shouldn’t be too quick to discount what God is doing in our church.

But, realistically, some churches are going to reflect Jesus’ blueprint for the church more than others. This is evident in Jesus’ letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. If you are trying to bring someone into your church and the person is not able to flourish in your church – (maybe there is a social caste system in the church or various social tiers in the church, maybe there is not much appreciation for diversity – whatever the reason) you may need to help the person find a church where they can flourish. But at the same time, you can be gently nudging people in your church toward greater wholeness and greater fruitfulness in God’s kingdom.

I don’t often encourage people to leave their church and go to another church where they hope to have a more fulfilling church experience. In His letters to the churches in Revelation, Jesus did not encourage the faithful to leave their lukewarm and troubled churches and join the churches at Philadelphia and Smyrna. He encouraged the faithful to strengthen the good that remained.

My observation is that many people who change churches, end up losing more than what they gain. Perhaps that is why Jesus did not recommend changing churches in his letter to the churches.

However, there were people who moved around in the New Testament churches, according to the call of God, and it was a blessing to the work of God. So I think there are times and places for people to change churches, if they have first learned what God wanted them to learn, at the church where He placed them.

**Interviewer:** You talk about the need for diversity. Somebody from our audience asked, “...destroying churches by forced integration is not scriptural. Nations are not a result of the fall and nations will exist intact in the eternal state: Revelation 22:2 “down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

*This was specifically a promotion of ethnic homogeneity. What kind of diversity are you talking about, and what does it have to do with racial inclusivity in the church?*

Churches should not be forcing anyone to do anything. Coercion always results in destruction of something. No one should be coerced into going to church with someone else. On the contrary, the Kingdom of God is all about volunteerism and altruism.

However, the scriptures tell us that if we know to do good and do not do it, it is sin. Sin has consequences, So if God calls us to be part of a multi-cultural church, we had better do it or we might get swallowed by a whale. ☺

In the New Testament, we read about struggles between the Jews and Gentiles in the Asian churches. There is no indication that Paul expected the Jews in these Asian cities to form separate churches from the Gentiles. When Peter ate at a separate table with the Jews, Paul rebuked him for it.

I've read that only about three percent of people enjoy cultural diversity. The remaining 97% of the world's population prefer interacting with people who think and act like they do. Church planters tell us it is much harder to start a multi-cultural church than it is to start a monolithic one. Naturally people are going to be separating into clans and tribes.

I believe that one of the changes that will happen when we take on the mind of Christ is that we will start appreciating diversity, even if we aren't naturally inclined this way. This has happened over and over in the church of Jesus Christ. People who didn't think they would enjoy cultural diversity got converted and came to love and respect people in the church of other cultures. The love of Jesus formed a spiritual bond between people of different cultures that far surpassed any bond they had previously.

Having said this,

I would rather see a number of ethnic churches started in a multicultural city than no churches at all. I would rather see a number of ethnic churches started in a multicultural city than have churches where people are coerced into integrating. Sometimes there are language and communication hurdles that new believers are not prepared to deal with. However, these churches should love each other and respect each other and treat each other as fellow citizens of the household of God.

Regardless of which way it is done, someday we will all be gathered together at the marriage supper of the lamb, and I am looking forward to the diversity that will be present at that supper.

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Other recordings that further address some of the topics in this article. Find these online at [www.ChurchPlantersForum.org](http://www.ChurchPlantersForum.org).

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