

UM & Global Blog article

Bong, bong, bong....

Zzzt, zzzzt, zzzzt...

Each August morning of the Institute for Multicultural Ministry, we were awakened by the bells of a nearby church and the arrival of a construction crew to an adjacent worksite. For our group gathered at the Germany UMC's Educational and Training Center (BBZ) in Stuttgart, these two recurring sounds -- the chimes of tradition and the buzz of construction -- provided an appropriate audio background for our group's discussions.

Do old models of church fit emerging congregations? What dismantling, what building needs to be done to offer the Gospel in today's changing world? Does the *Missio Dei* include building plans for an increasingly diverse church? What is the church's role amidst rising ethnocentrism and populist politics? For those searching a homeland, what kind of home does the church of Jesus Christ offer?

We'd come to Germany from some twenty countries -- pastors and lay leaders of multicultural congregations, representatives from the GBGM (who organized the Institute), GBHEM and GBCS, theologians from Reutlingen, Boston and Wisconsin -- all bound by a vocation that makes us "fellow builders" (I Corinthians 3:9) of new types of Christian community. For many of us, the call to "offer hospitality to the stranger" (Hebrews 13:2) comes often and urgently, the line between guest and host is not always clear, the stories of Babel and Pentecost are being re-interpreted and re-experienced. Sweden is meeting Syria. Lampedusa is impacting Linz. A Sierra Leonian pastor serves in Ireland. Ghanaian Twi echoes in a church in Parma. The Spirit is stirring things up.

As an alternate metaphor for the church in changing times, one speaker reminded us of the ancient image of the tent. Our God is no stranger to uprooting and transplanting. Abraham and Sarah would have known the disorientation and uncertainty of pulling up stakes and setting up camp in a new land. But even on the road, the doors of their own tent became a place of encounter with the very strangers who would bring them a message from God. Ours is a God who "pitched his tent in our midst" (John 1:14, adapted), and from the heavenly *modus operandi*, we get some clues for our own marching orders.

Tent-builders need to be agile, flexible, light on their feet, and creative. They are called upon to choose the essentials to be carried from place to place, and the baggage which simply weighs them down. If mission, as the theologian David Bosch suggests, is not so much about expanding the church as it is rebuilding the church in every culture, how is that done? In multicultural Christian communities, these decisions are complex and arise almost daily, often without blueprints or prior training. It is no accident, one participant reminded us, that 70% of all international ventures fail because of inter-cultural mistakes. Tent-builders may have been taught their trade in Tarsus or Tottenham, but they continue to learn and grow by sharing counsel with one another around the campfire.

Part of our group's education was to meet congregations around Stuttgart who have had to shift, pivot, and be willing to risk everything when strangers have appeared at the door of their tents. Some opened help-centers. Others have provided sanctuary. Others run cafes or work ecumenically to offer hospitality. Many long-time church members belong to congregations their parents would no longer recognize. Bi-lingual reading of scripture, animated cross-cultural conversation, quick Google translations from Farsi to German, an uncommon combination of lunch dishes, all are commonplace. And often, what began as an act of mercy has completely transformed the ministry of the entire community. God's Mission has found them, and they are not the same.

All these changes do not come without difficulty. To the jarring rattle of the jack-hammer from the nearby construction, the group grappled with the issues of intercultural conflict, shared case-studies of how gestures and words can be misinterpreted, how distant civil wars can erupt in church council meetings, how past trauma becomes an acute pastoral care need. We named some of the potential pitfalls and blessings of 'shared space', how hosts and guests can be both generous and jealous, how church structures can both support and inhibit emerging realities, how the necessary sharing and shifting of power do not come without friction. We acknowledged that pastors of multicultural congregations can feel the exhilaration of a vibrant community, and at the same time feel socially isolated. That we could talk about all these things over coffee, on walks, and around the table was a true blessing.

Each morning we gathered for worship, singing in different tongues, learning new blends of music and screen, symbols and senses, movement and stillness. One day, somewhere into our sung prayers of intercession, our worship leader paused, touched his ear, and pointed towards the sound of concrete being chiseled. Instead of hearing a cacophony of sound, he asked, how might we incorporate a new rhythm into our song? And with a little encouragement, a bit of adjustment, and some creative thinking, we did.

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