



Leading Diverse Churches

AGTS Alumni Talk About
Struggles and Triumphs



The Price of Diversity

In 1985, Dr. Steve Allen accepted a pastorate in West Columbia, South Carolina. Over the next 15 years, the church grew from about 40 attendees to over 600. Allen graduated with a Doctor of Ministry in 2001.

Although our church was above average in size, ministries and influence, we were stymied in a comfort zone—going nowhere.

Academic research for my D.Min. at AGTS helped me see that our church was not addressing our city's postmodern culture or responsibly reflecting the growing ethnic cultures around us. While the population around our church is 33% African-American, 15% Hispanic and Asian, and 52% Caucasian, our church was primarily Caucasian, with only 15% African-American and 5% other ethnicities.

We began our transition by implementing three key components:

1. **Intentionality.** To increase the proportion of minorities in leadership, we decided persons from more than one ethnic group had to lead every ministry. Some congregants began to feel unsettled. One

Caucasian man said, "Pastor, we are not used to being in the minority."

2. **Sensitivity.** We asked each ministry to evaluate its fundamen-

tal approach, procedures and results through the eyes of a non-Christian. Paul gave us a precedent in 1 Corinthians 14:11: "If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker and he is a foreigner to me." We focused on reaching, teaching and training the unsaved, unreached and church dropouts. Some accused me of being non-Pentecostal.

3. **Biblical Training.** I studied Acts 1-15. When the leadership of the Acts church was stagnated by its inability to accept non-Jews, James summarized the final ruling: "We should not make it difficult for the gentiles who are turning to God" (Acts 15:19). I realized we had to remove barriers for the church to truly grow.

The process has taken five years. We have retrained or replaced nearly all of our ministry personnel. Our church is now 50% African American, 30% Caucasian, 15% Hispanic and 5% other ethnicities.

What did this transition cost?

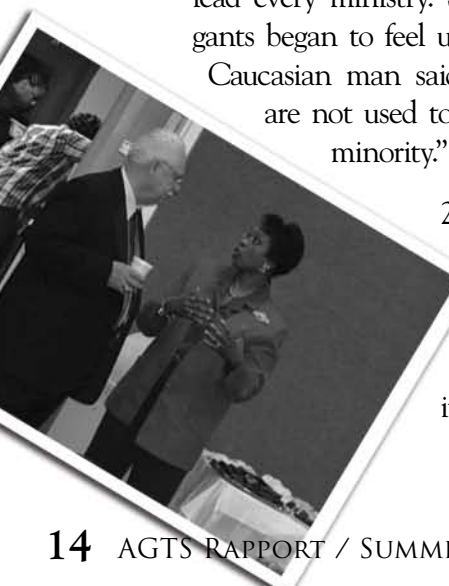
- over \$500,000 in lost income the first year
- 300 people, although now attendance has grown back to nearly 400
- 85% of ministry workers

Has it been worth it? Ten thousand times, "YES!"



Today I have the full support of the leadership team, congregation and community. Our church changed its name to reflect who we are. Anyone who enters our church with prejudice either won't stay for long or will be overpowered by the warmth of true acceptance and love.

One visiting Caucasian person said, "I just love this church, three African-American believers came up to me and welcomed me with a hug. I felt accepted." Today, we are experiencing what a postmodern Pentecostal church in the south should be and are still striving for excellence. We will not turn back!



The Supernatural Brings Uncommon Results

Maria Khaleel-Gilleland pastors New Life Assembly of God, Pembroke Pines, Florida. She graduated from AGTS in 2002 with a Master of Arts in Biblical Literature.

New Life started in 1992, and approximately 80% of our congregation was saved here. Ministry in south Florida is exciting because the world has come to us. Our community is about 40 percent Hispanic with large Caribbean and growing Asian populations. I believe that if a church is effectively fulfilling the Great Commission to preach the gospel to all people, it will reflect all ethnicities in its community.

We have over 30 nationalities represented in our church. Many are from Latin America and the Caribbean, but some come from Asia and Africa. Since the Hispanic and Caribbean cultures are expressive, our services are passionate. These cultures also have a strong belief in the supernatural, so as Christians they have a natural receptivity to the power of the Holy Spirit. As a result, we see many miracles and healings in our services.

My greatest challenge is a limited knowledge of Spanish and, although our services are translated into Spanish, I still desire to communicate effectively with individuals in Spanish.

Latin and Caribbean people are relational. Therefore, we approach ministry differently. Simply giving a class or having meetings on leadership cannot train or develop leaders. There must be a relational connection. Thus, I do a mentoring ministry in which new leaders come to my home and share a meal. Then teaching and interaction occur.



Also, in both Latin and Caribbean cultures, men tend to be “macho.” Many have stated that when they first saw a female pastor, their minds protested. However, experiencing the presence of God through the church ministry silenced their objections.

People, regardless of ethnic background, respond to genuine love, and this has become the atmosphere of the entire church. The diverse membership has helped to expand our life experience and increase our appreciation for other cultures. In fact, since the church began, we have had over 4,000 salvations. Truly, the anointing makes the difference.



Florida

Pembroke Pines



A Unique Commitment to Diversity

Felicito Bagunu (M.Div. 2004) is the teaching and creative design pastor at Sheffield Family Life Center (SFLC) a multi-racial, 6,000-member church in downtown Kansas City, Mo. Dr. George Westlake Jr., senior pastor, is a member of the AGTS Board of Directors.

In 2001, our church dedicated its new 3,200-seat worship center in the same downtown location it had been since 1952. In an article in the *Kansas City Star* entitled, "Urban Miracle," our senior pastor, Dr. George Westlake Jr., said, "I can't find anywhere in the Bible where it says to run to the suburbs and leave the city to the devil!"

We never considered building anywhere else. Church growth experts told us that a project of this size was not feasible in the inner city or that the church would need to be made up

of either all white or middle-class black congregants. Nevertheless, half of congregants come from the community and half from the suburbs. (People drive from as far as 40 miles away.) Forty percent of the congregation is white, 40% is African-American and 20% is Hispanic.

The community has taken notice of SFLC's commitment to diversity as well as its commitment to the inner city. The *Star* article quoted Ed Schober, a senior vice president with Bank of America, the church's lending institution, "The easiest thing for Sheffield to have done was to have abandoned that

site. We felt it was a courageous thing for them to do to stay. We were struck by the fact that Sheffield has made a strong commitment to the inner-city community."

Moreover, SFLC has made a unique commitment to diversity. By building in the inner city, they proved to the entire community that God is neither Jew nor Greek, white nor black, Hispanic nor Asian, rich nor poor educated nor uneducated.

"We have Ph.Ds sitting next to people who come from housing projects," said Pastor Westlake.

We are continually amazed at what God is doing!

