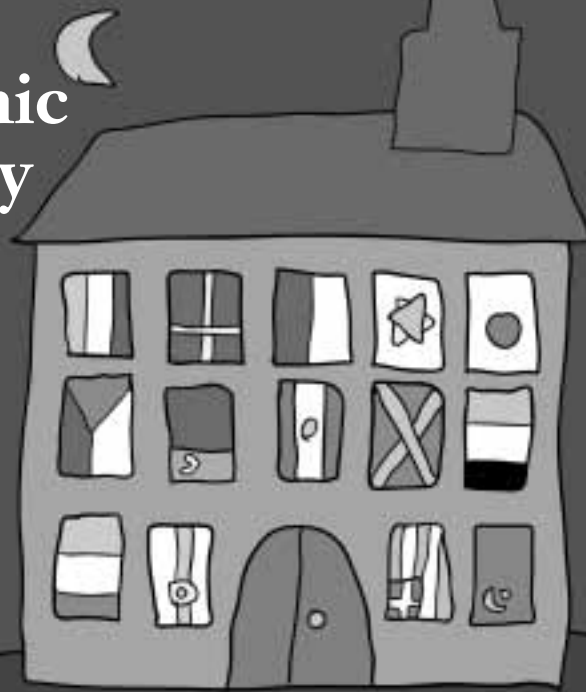


Under One Roof: Opening Our Doors to a Multi-Ethnic Community



By Bill Gates

Every weekend is Pentecost at Parkrose United Methodist Church.

When you pass by our doors, you may wonder, “Who are these people?” At times you will hear the spirit-filled harmonies of African chants driven by the steady rhythm of slapping hands, or hear the wailing of a rock guitar soothed by gospel vocal harmonies. It might even sound a little ‘churchy’ as you hear the organ and choir crank up. If that doesn’t confuse you, you will be totally bewildered by the distinctive Latin beat casting a festive aura of Spirit and Spanish-language praise over the neighborhood. Who are these people, anyway?

Parkrose United Methodist Church has had a wild ride in its 50+ years of existence. We still have several “charter” members of what was, in its infancy, a small house church. I sometimes catch them glassy-eyed, deep in memories of the 1950s and 1960s wonder-days when Sunday school rooms were bursting with children and the sanctuary was packed full of neighborhood families.

Well, it’s happening again... only differently.

The World at Our Door

Several years ago, two young Hispanic men showed up at our door. They had started a prayer meeting in their rented apartments and were looking for a place for their expanding ministries. They now number between 15 and 30, and half of the weekly worshipers are children. Noe Rodriguez is their lay pastor and an emerging friend of mine. They have Pentecostal roots. As do we. Ours, however, are buried beneath a couple of centuries of Protestant stoicism. Most of their constituents are from Mexico and most have family still there. They struggle with our country’s post-9/11 immigration quagmire, but also with raising families in a fast-paced, omni-directional culture, as the rest of us do.

I worship with them when I can and they are always quick with a request for a message. So, I have learned to get right to the point (a hard-learned technique for us preacher-types) and to speak in short sentences so our translator can relay the message effectively. Language doesn’t seem to be an issue—the universal language of God’s Spirit is real and powerful. Their music is lively and upbeat. Their prayers seem to come from a sacred place deep in their being. I can see in the bright eyes and ear-to-ear smiles of their young and old alike an abundance of courage and hope. It is contagious.

About a year ago, we were approached by Valentyn and Olesya, a young couple that had recently arrived from the Ukraine. They and a couple of their friends had started a Bible study in their home but quickly outgrew the space. From the Seventh-Day Adventist tradition, young and old alike worship by singing along with recorded contemporary music. Their efforts to start a faith fellowship have been difficult—as all new-church starts are—and Valentyn and Olesya have been preoccupied recently with the birth of their first child, but they clearly feel a calling as organizers of the local Ukrainian community.

The most recent of our sojourner guests is the Oromo Seventh-Day Adventist congregation. I remember well the media imagery of Ethiopia in the 1980s, and how famine and hostilities left a wake of devastation. What I don’t remember hearing much about is the famine of 2003. The latter of the two disasters displaced tens of millions of people and caused a recent migration of young people finding their way elsewhere. The ethnic Oromo were affected not only by the famine but also political persecution, and for many, their exodus led them to Portland, Oregon.

The Oromo folks came with a well-defined sense of organization, complete with a board of directors and a professional pastor. The local building they were originally using for worship was sold, the building’s purpose changed by the new owner, and the Oromo church was without a home. A community organizer friend of mine linked us

together. Pastor Alaka Anota seems very serious and proper. But when I look into the sparkling eyes and smiles of their young folks, I see the same joy and playfulness that I see in our Hispanic friends.

We're Not a Landlord

PUMC's fellowship hall, where our smaller gatherings of worship and prayer and countless outreach ministries are held, was built in the 1950's. Our sanctuary was built in the late 1960's. The number of our white-faced worshippers has declined since then, just as our neighborhood has changed. Our buildings are aging (that is, falling apart) and money is constantly short. It would seem practical to get "market-value" rent from our new guests, but that is not part of the calling God has given us.

Across the ethnic divides in our area, most young families are low-income, some even living in marginal poverty. Most of the newer folks we're connecting with—white, black, or brown—have little money. So far, we have arranged our shared facilities around the premise that God has called us all to be good stewards of our resources. We teach the blessings of tithing and believe in the investment of changing lives for Christ. We expect the same from all who worship in and around Parkrose. We're all in this together.

We all like to worship and pray in the language and customs of our culture. This tendency may be at the heart of the maxim that 10 a.m. Sunday is the most segregated hour of the week. Despite our desire for cultural specificity, however, I see a genuine yearning for real relationships across those lines. Pastor Noe confessed to me the other day, "My Hispanic brothers and sisters and I too often keep to ourselves. And we don't serve the wider community as God would have us do. Would you help us?"

His request was music to my ears and fresh wind in the sails of my soul. 'Together' is always better than 'alone'. We have a tremendous

opportunity not only to worship together, but to pray together, serve together, and work for justice together. We see a lot of promise, though much of it goes unfulfilled right now. But there is promise nonetheless.

Pastor to Pastor

I have to confess that my call to ministry is primarily to be a community organizer, not so much a church chaplain. Bringing economically and ethnically diverse people together to honor each other's stories and find ways to act together toward the common good seems very natural to me, and such efforts have made Parkrose a more diverse place, more reflective of the body of Christ as a whole. A few years ago, Parkrose committed itself to a broad-based organizing effort where institutions of labor, faith, and community development work in long-term relationship toward issues that press on our households.

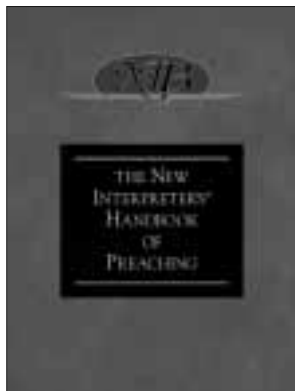
So often, I hear pastors say things like, "What a blessing it is to serve the church." While my heart is full with thanksgiving for the blessings of ministry, I always find myself wincing in disbelief that "serving the church" is what Jesus intended when he sent disciples into the four corners of the world to heal and demonstrate God's Good News. I am less interested in serving the church than equipping the church to serve in community. Relationships of love, compassion, and justice build God's kingdom, plain and simple.

So back to my original question: Who is Parkrose? Mostly we are works-in-progress. But whoever we are becoming, we are all pursuing God under one roof, and are called forth from there to serve a world in need. □



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Abingdon Press.

RX4-9780687055562. Hardcover, \$55.00



Published by
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