Shaping a Culture of Spiritual Formation

THE WAY WE EMBRACE DIFFERENCES



Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." - Genesis 1:26

When Genesis 1:26 sinks in, we can't help but notice the "us" and the "our" as describers of the creator and the creation. God in plural? The Holy Spirit and Jesus from the beginning! All people in the image of this diverse God? An intentionally beautiful tapestry of diversity from day one.

So what do we do with God's love for diversity and what seems to be the world's yearning for uniformity? The love of God and the need for humanity to organize into "like" skin color, gender expression, sexuality, socio-economic groups, language groups, generational groups, and all the other ways we organize humans into groups are NOT aligned. And this is not a new problem.

In **Acts 8,** with the scattering of the disciples after the stoning of Stephen, we see God lead Phillip's life into an encounter with an Ethiopian (read as Black, African) Eunuch (read as Queer), who is asking questions about scripture and ultimately asks to be baptized. Phillip welcomes him to Jesus in the waters of baptism, and the Eunuch births the oldest known Christian Church in the world, in Ethiopia. God knows the gift of diversity.

Start with humility and respect.

1. Recognize that good intentions don't erase harm.
We can unintentionally hurt people even when we mean well. Be willing to hear how your words, assumptions, or actions affect others without immediately defending yourself or explaining your intentions.

2. Get comfortable with being uncomfortable.
Learning across differences means recognizing that you won't always know what to say, how to respond, or whether you got it right. Resist the urge to retreat, shut down, or make the other person responsible for easing your discomfort.

3. Don't assume one person represents a whole group.
People are individuals. Avoid assuming that one person's experience, perspective, or story tells you everything about their culture, identity, or community. Keep listening and learning.

4. Pay attention to power and privilege.
We don't all experience the world in the same way. Some people have greater access, influence, safety, and opportunities than others. Consider where you have advantages you may not recognize and how you can use your influence to make room for others.

5. Move from understanding to action.
Listening and awareness matter, but they aren't the destination. What might you do differently because of what you've learned? Whose voice might you amplify? What assumptions might you challenge? What barriers might you help remove?

One more thought: Make room for repair. We will make mistakes. We will say things that don't land as intended, misunderstand someone's experience, or fall back into old patterns. What matters is how we respond. Can we listen without becoming defensive, apologize without making excuses, and make a genuine effort to do better? Building relationships across differences requires a willingness to repair and try again. Your overall framework could become: Notice yourself. | Stretch yourself. | Listen to others. | Recognize power and privilege. | Be willing to be changed. | Practice repair and take action.

GET CURIOUS - NOT ANXIOUS

I imagine that your family and friends gathering for the holidays are of various views when it comes to loving your neighbor as yourself. Maybe there have been a few heated conversations in the past. Rather than let the fear of conflict hang out in the room like a monster waiting to attack, lead your family forward.



How? In their book, *3 Practices for Crossing the Difference Divide*, Henderson and Hancock recommend three agreements that are game changers that work with ordinary people like us:

1. Agree to be unusually interested in other perspectives.
2. Agree to stay in the room (or at the table) with differences in a listening posture.
3. Agree to stop comparing your best with their worst.

Now ask the question above all other questions: “I would be curious to know....” and listen to each other. Really listen with genuine curiosity.

The Disclaimer:

For most people, being heard without being attacked or made to feel defensive is a new experience. Even children are ready to stand up for themselves by the time they go to school. It takes practice to shift this culture of genuine love.