

Highland Presbyterian Church

"SHARING HOPE FROM THE HEART OF THE HIGHLANDS"

JANUARY, 2018



During my time as president of McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago (one of our ten Presbyterian seminaries), the composition of student body changed dramatically. Up until the 1970's, McCormick students (like every other Presbyterian seminary) were predominantly white and male. By the late 1990's, McCormick's student body was almost evenly divided between men and women and there was no racial majority. The plurality of our students was white, but we had strong representation of Korean, Hispanic and African Americans. I spent a good deal of my time explaining to our predominantly white, Presbyterian donors why this was a good thing.

My argument had basically two points. First, since all reliable studies suggest that by the year 2040 the United States will not have a majority race, what better way to prepare students for ministry than to learn alongside people from different backgrounds? Our classrooms were the "real world" that our graduates would enter. Second, I argued that this diverse student body (which was also denominationally very diverse) represented a great opportunity to share the strong tradition of Presbyterian theological education (which includes rigorous theology and study of the scriptures in the original languages) with people who came from traditions where such study was not yet the norm. The number of our students of color who went on to pursue Ph.D. studies and become a new generation of theological educators was evidence of how well this worked.

Working in a multi-racial context is hard work. Whether it is business or theological education, it is not a simple thing to create an institution where people of different cultural backgrounds work together as equals. This is especially challenging for those of us whose culture created the institution in the first place and who automatically assume that our ways will always prevail. But the benefits of this work are life-changing, and we could genuinely say that we were better together.

The demographic predictions about our nation have not changed; if anything, the year when racial plurality will be the norm is even closer. Sadly, this fact makes some (and I hope it is a minority) white people anxious and angry. Some have turned to white nationalist or "nativist" groups to take up their cause. Unfortunately, we have seen this before. In the 1840's a similar movement sprang up that eventually came to be called the "Know Nothing" Party. It began as a "nativist" secret society (hence the name) and morphed into a political party that in 1855 had 43 members in congress. The movement was largely anti-Catholic and fueled by fear of immigration – from Germany and Ireland.

Looking back, these fears seem ridiculous. Yes, the nation grew and evolved with successive waves of immigration, but we have proved over the years that we do not need one racial or ethnic group or even one religion in order to be a strong and vibrant democracy. Sadly, some of these forces have re-emerged. The only antidote is education and experience. Only as we come to understand the real diversity that has been part of the United States from the beginning and only as we come to know people from different cultures and backgrounds, will we be able to build the relationships that are the foundation of new communities. In January and February, Highland has several opportunities to engage in study and discussion that can help us embrace the future without fear and continue to be signs of hope. I hope you will join me in these important opportunities.

Cynthia M. Campbell, Pastor