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## Diverstiy Question

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# Diversity Question

## **Abstract**

"If I live in a small town, and all the people there are white, and I look around at my church and see that we're all white—is that really a bad thing? Scripture's vision from creation through Pentecost to the New Jerusalem is a diverse vision—it includes all tribes, nations, and languages and that inclusion is by design. But what do we do in small town Midwest churches about diversity?"

Posting about diversity and how Christians should engage with it from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/the-diversity-question/>

## **Keywords**

In All Things, diversity, racism, church

## **Disciplines**

Christianity

## **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

# The Diversity Question

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 [inallthings.org/the-diversity-question](https://allthings.org/the-diversity-question)

Howard Schaap

The question seemed like a good one: *“If I live in a small town, and all the people there are white, and I look around at my church and see that we’re all white—is that really a bad thing?”* We were discussing diversity in the church in a group of twenty-five seniors and had agreed that scripture’s vision from creation through Pentecost to the New Jerusalem was a diverse vision—it includes all tribes, nations, and languages and that inclusion is by design. But what do we do in small town Midwest churches about diversity?

We found a number of ways to answer this question, some of them perhaps better than others.

**1. We can agree that there’s nothing we can do, except be sure to be hospitable to others who are different than us when they pass through town and if they happen to wander into our churches.**

This is a tricky enough answer to the question as it will certainly test our hospitality. Hospitality as a spiritual gift is easier aspired to than performed. It’s not easy to approach a stranger, especially one who might be very different than us. As far as it goes, practicing radical hospitality is a good answer to the problem of diversity; hospitality is a spiritual gift that might take root in our lives and renew our minds as we consider the stranger, the alien, and the fatherless in our communities or throughout the world.

**2. We can also define diversity differently, more broadly, more intentionally, and this will help us toward greater diversity.** If we’re looking for it, we can find that significant diversity already exists within any congregation—diverse backgrounds and stories, diverse political ideas and economic levels, diverse genders, and, perhaps most importantly, diverse gifts. Rethinking our definitions of diversity might also help us to see our communities differently. Socioeconomic levels, for instance, can be hard to see if we’re not looking for them, hidden as they often are behind appearances.

Still, this answer begs the question, “How narrowly or widely do we dare define diversity?” Isn’t counting as diverse those who share most of my own characteristics a cop out to diversity?

**3. A further answer to the question takes into account the efforts of the Church as a whole. As an entire Church Universal, we are diverse. This answer, too, is comforting and hopeful. We are not called to do the work of the entire Church in our one church; we are called to do our part, both in our communities and by supporting missions in specific locations in the world.** We will not have a mix of all tribes, nations, and languages until heaven, and we should not expect it before.

Yes, this God’s-eye-view is hopeful and the reality of our calling is comforting, but why not keep the New Testament reality in mind now? The fact that Paul tells us in Galatians 3:28 that “[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” means that a diverse vision of the kingdom of God was breaking into our world already today.

*Caveat:* Social satires like [South Park](#) and others have also taught us that simply looking around and finding adopted children and one minority family in our own congregations may also not really signal that our train has pulled in at diversity junction. Rather, biblical visions of diversity suggest a deeper complexity, one that in Midwest towns—and in many places for that matter—seems almost impossible to achieve.

**So how do we finally answer this question about diversity?** And is it really important that we answer it more fully than the answers above? Recently, I had the chance to ask [Dr. Christena Cleveland](#), author of

the book *Disunity in Christ* just this question: “*What if I simply live in a place that isn’t diverse? Is it then okay that I really don’t have any diverse friends?*”

Her answer? “No, it’s not okay.” When we don’t have friends that are significantly different than us, social science shows our attitudes and actions towards people suffer in kind. On the other hand, when we have even one relationship with a person significantly different than us, our understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God expands.

There’s a simple test case for Dr. Cleveland’s answer, I think: *Ferguson*. If our churches were at least twenty percent African-American, how might our perception of Ferguson change? How might our perception of immigration reform change if our churches were thirty percent Latino? How would our perception of reservations change if we worshiped alongside Native American Christians?

I am not suggesting that all our positions on these topics would immediately flip 180 degrees. All of the above groups are as diverse in their views as any other segment of the population. However, were our churches more diverse it would lead to deeper, more complex perspectives on many topics in our world.

“Yes, but I like the way we worship and they like the way they worship, so isn’t it okay to have separate churches?” Certainly, there is strength in “manyness,” a term that Abraham Kuyper used to talk about the diversity in the Church that comes through different denominations. However, this does not excuse us from divisions and even segregation between brothers and sisters in Christ, and from the injustices in society that persist alongside those divisions and that segregation. It is not okay to know Christians only like ourselves.

So what do we do? I think it’s rather easy. And hard. First, we must look around with new eyes; we must see barriers. Then we must find ways to cross those barriers. We must each begin with one relationship, and then build that relationship, slowly, year by year. Then, as Christena Cleveland promised in answer to my question, we had better get ready, because relationships like these will change us more into the likeness of Christ—the one who, in his incarnation, made the ultimate cross-cultural connection.

## **Dig Deeper**

This week at iAt we will be focusing on the topic of diversity. Return tomorrow and the rest of the week to read and listen to stories from students representing different minorities and the challenges that are faced while living in the community of Dordt College.