

Systemic distortion

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A Somali

community meets every week to worship together. It's a vibrant body, with over three hundred members in attendance. Yet, the denomination has not recognized them as a "church."

Why not? They don't have enough members. The people who attend worship do not have the same notions of membership that the prevailing American denomination has. A person might absolutely consider him or herself a member of the congregation, but would be reluctant to give up membership in a former congregation. The worshipers find it odd that they would have to stand up in front of the congregation, profess their faith, and have their names written in a book in order to become members. To them, worshiping together makes them members together. The dominant denominational culture has different ideas.

A Mexican

community gathers in a living room, praising God. As they work and worship together, they grow in numbers and vitality. Then they visit their local governing body and ask if they can become a part of the denomination. Then the pastor (who may have been ordained in Mexico for many years) faces numerous roadblocks—he must learn Greek and Hebrew, he must pass the ordination exams, and he must have a Masters of Divinity. Eventually, the church gives up on being connected with the denomination, because it will cost the pastor and community too much to meet the requirements.

A Portuguese community worships together. When they outgrow the living room of the pastor's house, they ask their local governing body if they know of a space where they

can worship. The denomination leads them to a wonderful building, the home to an aging Caucasian congregation. The Portuguese fellowship begins to "nest" in the white church.

At first, the situation works out well, as the Portuguese community grows into its new space. The immigrant community gives a portion of its income to the white congregation.

Friction

arises over the shared space, and the white congregation begins to complain about the mess that the children make, the additional electricity costs, and the wear and tear that the extra traffic in the church causes. After a couple of short years, the

white congregation no longer sees the situation as a ministry partnership, but they see themselves as landlords and the immigrant community as tenants. They begin to pressure the emerging congregation fly out of its "nest" and find another home.

An

immigrant pastor begins a congregation in her neighborhood. She asks if she can become a part of the denomination, and the denomination welcomes her with open arms. As she continues to work in her congregation, she notices that she is well below the minimum salary with which her colleagues work--including the other new church development pastors.

She notices that when the denominational body is planting a white church, they call it an "intentional new church development"--but her community is an "immigrant fellowship." She smirks when she sees the designation. With all of the work that she has been putting into the church, she knows that her community has also been "intentional." The only thing that is not intentional in her situation is the level of commitment and resources that the denomination allots. The difference between what the denomination puts into a white church plant versus her immigrant congregation is substantial.

Not many people in our denominations would admit to being a racist. And yet, we hear stories of systemic discrimination on a constant basis. What are we going to do about it?