

Living and Serving in Cultural Diversity

How do we understand and handle diversity and conflict in the church? This was one of the main topics the LCC Joint Pastors' Forum dealt with at their annual retreat in Paarl on 11 September 2002. CCN was privileged to be invited to attend a workshop by Prof Jurgens Hendricks, Department of Practical Theology and Missiology, University of Stellenbosch, on the book Systems-Sensitive Leadership. Empowering Diversity without Polarizing the Church, by Michael C Armour & Don Browning, College Press, Joplin, Missouri 2000. ISBN 0-89900-814-3. I could subsequently read the book.

Diversity reigns supreme. The unprecedented range of personal options and highly individualised lifestyles of our times is taken as point of departure for a theoretical framework, based on research in pastoral psychology. The authors distinguish eight complex "thinking systems" which operate across the world, going back into ancient times, in the Bible, the church as well as in individuals, in a mix of a dominant & secondary systems, each with strengths and pitfalls.

Aware of the simplification, let me mention the systems briefly: System 1 sees the world as uncertain and threatening my existence, the compelling drive is for physical survival. For System 2, the world is ruled by unseen forces of good and evil that control our well-being. The compelling drive is for safety from the unseen. In the church God is seen as a protective presence for those who honour His ways. System 3 sees the world as a dog-eat-dog place where only the tough survive. This makes power over the adversary the prime driving force. System 4 believes the world is governed by timeless principles and eternal absolutes. Eternal truth and principle are the driving force. In the church God is seen as eternal rewarder of those who stay true to their calling. All mainline churches are viewed as S4 dominant. System 5 sees the world as teeming with unlimited potential for success and fulfilment. The drive is for personal achievement and recognition. The church growth movement and megachurches are rooted in S5. System 6 sees the world as so interdependent that every life-form and individual is a cherished treasure. S6 is characterised by egalitarianism and ecology. God is seen as the healer of an injured world.

In the main section, church leaders are challenged to be systems-sensitive and to structure ministries and functions around natural systems alignments, as there is no "one way" of doing things. Many practical applications are discussed (regarding worship, preaching, Bible classes, managing volunteers etc.), that is, how pastors and other leaders might deal sensitively with people and groups in a multi-system church, working for the health of, and giving space to every system, while promoting openness to accommodate new systems.

Systems 7 and 8 are described, in the final chapter, as emerging systems that are expected to impact more broadly in future: S7 seeks systemic health in a world seen as a vast network of complex, often paradoxical relationships and ever-changing realities that demand holistic approaches to life. S8 sees the world as a single planetary organism, an integrated whole in which boundaries between mind, matter and energy are elusive, and with convergence and holistic identity as the compelling force.

I found this a very stimulating book, providing concepts to understand more comprehensively many of the vexing complexities of our time, and inclusively, that is, not in polarised opposites like young-old, traditional-contemporary, formal-informal, believing-critical, German-English etc. I also liked the direct relevance to churches, and the thematic thread of affirming all systems.

My questions are twofold: Our sense of identity is based not only on doctrine, also on certain church traditions. How does one maintain identity if the way you are accustomed to do things, changes? And, how could one apply a multi-systems approach in, and with the limited resources of small congregations?

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