Discovering the Gifts of Diversity

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It is an honor to contribute an essay to this issue of the Reformed Review that recognizes Stanley Rock's contributions to Western Theological Seminary as professor of pastoral care and counseling, and to the Reformed Church in America as a General Synod professor of theology. As one privileged to serve with Stan on several committees, I have admired his gifted teaching and scholarly contributions, his sound and compassionate pastoral competence, his passion for justice, and his loyalty to commitments. Stan's presence in meetings always helped create a spirit of caring as well as an awareness of how each person present was connected to the other.

Currently a sabbatical leave has enabled me to study pastoral care among Korean Americans. Interviews with Korean-American pastors have given me insight into how Koreans understand pastoral care and how Korean pastors minister to persons struggling to adapt to their new cultural experience in the United States. This essay represents my thinking about cross-cultural issues in pastoral care and offers some preliminary reflections on methodology for doing pastoral care in a cross-cultural context.

In recent years, cultural diversity has had a particularly strong impact on the urban centers of both the East and West Coasts of the United States. In my New Jersey township, for example, more than sixty languages are spoken in the homes of students enrolled in the local school system. This diversity has also led many churches throughout the United States to share space with one or more congregations representing a variety of cultural backgrounds. In the New York/New Jersey metropolitan area, the most common sharing of church facilities is between Korean-American and European-American congregations, but this phenomenon is also present among many Taiwanese, Vietnamese, Laotian, Thai, and Spanish-speaking congregations.

The gathering of cultures and traditions within our churches is forcing us to ask some important questions: How can we relate to one another? How can we improve our understanding of one another? What can be gained from working together more closely? Finally, the question specifically addressed by this essay, What can persons from differing cultures learn from one another? As the cultural diversity of the classes of the Reformed Church in America increases, the denomination will need to become more knowledgeable about cultural differences and how they affect leadership, congregational life, mission strategies, and the experience of being in communion as members of the body of Christ.

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My interest in interviewing Korean-American pastors was sparked by the fact that many Korean students were coming to the United States to learn North American concepts of pastoral care. They explained that, while pastoral care was a neglected area of ministry in Korea, its theory and practice were far more advanced in the United States. My classroom experience with these students, however, suggested a gap in their perception. Frequently their class case reports drawn from their ministries in Korean-American congregations raised dilemmas inadequately addressed by North American approaches to pastoral care. For example, some North American approaches to patterns of relationships between men and women and between older and younger persons, especially among first generation Koreans, would be inappropriate. Consequently, I realized my need to learn how Korean pastors think about pastoral care and how they respond pastorally to situations that present pressing needs.

Several colleagues provided names of pastors who were both willing to share their thinking about pastoral care and to give me some examples of how they organize and carry out their pastoral work. Prior to these interviews, I thought through three questions. How might I work with the information and insights generated by these interviews? How could the learning gained from a study of Korean pastoral care benefit my students? What could that learning contribute to effective cross-cultural approaches to pastoral care?

**Developing a Methodology**

David W. Augsburger has done significant work in developing cross-cultural awareness in the area of pastoral counseling. Concerned to provide pastors with a thorough understanding of what is involved in ministering cross-culturally, he not only provides numerous descriptions of how culture shapes values, practices, and relationships, but he also demonstrates how cultural assumptions even shape the ways in which problems are perceived and defined.

Although Augsburger's analyses focus on the pastoral counseling setting, his insights can be applied to the pastoral care setting as well. This essay's concern is not so much to develop pastoral skills as it is to explore how persons from one culture can learn from persons of another culture, and how that learning can enhance the practice of pastoral care in a variety of settings. To that end I shall highlight a few of Augsburger's contributions and then indicate how they can further the purposes of this essay.

First, Augsburger observes, "One who knows but one culture knows no culture." One needs to recognize that there are other cultures in order to understand that one lives within a culture oneself. His point may be illustrated by the story of a fish that when asked, "How's the water?" replied, "What is water?" Augsburger maintains that one cannot understand one's own culture without the awareness that it exists alongside other cultures with both similarities and differences. Thus, some acknowledgement of other cultures, even at a rudimentary level, is necessary to understand one's own cultural experience.
Augsburger has also contributed the concept of "interpathy." If empathy is feeling or sensing with another person, then interpathy is feeling or sensing between realities.

Interpathy enables one to enter a second culture cognitively and affectively to perceive and conceptualize the internal coherence that links the elements of the culture into a dynamic interrelatedness, and to respect that culture (with its strengths and weaknesses) as equally as valid as one's own. 3

Augsburger envisions a pastoral counselor exercising interpathy when working with persons from different cultural backgrounds. For our purposes, however, the concept of interpathy suggests that something new can emerge when one engages another culture with this kind of knowledge and respect. When one knows one's own culture and one other culture (or more), a unique third culture always forms on the boundary between the two. Augsburger notes that one can develop freedom to cross back and forth between cultures as well as the ability to interpret cultural conflicts. 4 A bit later, I shall discuss a parallel insight from Charles V. Gerkin in his use of Hans Georg Gadamer's concept of a "fusion of horizons of understanding." 5 This sense of something new emerging out of cross-cultural engagement is intriguing, and offers promise for enhancing the understanding of pastoral care across cultures.

Augsburger's third contribution is his description of Paul Harvey's four levels of cross-cultural awareness. These move from the very superficial level, where one is only aware of very visible traits or stereotypes about another culture, through awareness of the more subtle dimensions of a culture and recognition of its significant elements, to the level of awareness that recognizes the meanings of those cultural traits in a given culture that differs sharply from one's own. Harvey's fourth level is the awareness of how another culture feels from the standpoint of an insider through cultural immersion, that is, living in that culture. 6 For our purposes, the third level of cultural awareness (in which one learns the meanings that underlie certain traits of a culture) seems most useful. Although these traits may contrast sharply with one's own culture, one understands their importance and value to the other culture.

These points from Augsburger suggest that to learn about or from another culture, one needs to be firmly grounded in one's own. Beyond that, one must be curious and open to understanding the differences between cultures and able to explain the meaning of those differences. Here then the possibility of a new understanding, or of a "third culture," may emerge. It is a new understanding both of one's own cultural experience and of the other culture.

As noted above, Charles Gerkin has developed a parallel concept to interpathy. Utilizing Gadamer's "fusion of horizons understanding," Gerkin employs hermeneutics to develop a model of pastoral care and counseling that works with a parishioner's personal life story. When the pastor enters the worlds
of the parishioners by listening to their stories, the pastor's own story enters into the interpretive interaction. Gerkin says that

when we attempt to understand another, . . . we take with us into that attempt our prejudices, our "pre-understandings," our biases. They are part and parcel of the world in which we live and experience the other; they make up the horizon of our understanding.\(^7\)

Furthermore, he says that our understanding of another person is limited because we cannot see beyond the horizon of that person in the interaction. Care for the other is the means by which we enter that person's world.

Care involves the opening of the horizon of our understanding to admit the intrusion of the world of the other in the hope and expectation that something truly new may be shared in the encounter—a "fusion of horizons" in which the other is permitted to speak, to question our understanding and vice versa.\(^8\)

I propose to utilize the concepts of interpathy and of "fusion of horizons of understanding," in particular, to suggest their usefulness in the development of cross-cultural understanding.

Among the themes emerging from my interviews with Korean-American pastors, there are three that point to significant contrasts between Korean-American culture and my own cultural understanding. They are the spiritual grounding of pastoral care, pastoral authority, and gender issues. I shall explore these themes by a dialogical process that raises questions of each culture from the other cultural perspective. I hope this process will illustrate how interpathy and a fusion of horizons of understanding can occur.

**The Spiritual Grounding of Pastoral Care**

My training in pastoral care was powerfully influenced by the use of clinical method. Theology and concerns about how theology shaped and informed clinical practice were present, but most candidates trained in the North American pastoral care and counseling fields have, as E. Brooks Holifield has observed, tended to hone their pastoral skills clinically and psychologically while leaving spiritual concerns on the periphery.\(^9\) Given that North American contextual influence, I have often reacted critically to Korean students and pastors for what seemed to me to be a simplistic spiritualizing of complex issues in their ministries. I believed that they felt their pastoral skills to be inadequate to analyze a complex situation, and therefore they resorted to spiritual language and moral instruction, rather than to a clinical analysis that could inform their pastoral practices with a clearer sense of what was wrong and how it could be addressed.
This perception was challenged by a fuller understanding of how pastoral care for Korean-American pastors is grounded in a strong spiritual awareness, and of how their thinking about pastoral care begins with the spiritual reality in which they want their parishioners to participate. One pastor taught me how important it is for his parishioners in business to have their pastor visit them at their offices, to have a liturgical blessing of their workspace, and to receive a blessing on themselves and their associates for their sense of Christian vocation.

From another pastor I learned the importance of leading worship in the homes of new church members. He outlined the procedures his congregation follows to welcome new members and emphasized the care structure of organizing the congregation into geographic units with lay leaders responsible for drawing people together. These lay leaders then join the pastor for worship in the new members' homes. The use of worship to welcome and include people as well as to bring a spiritual blessing to their homes made me newly aware of how central the spiritual base is for Korean-American pastoral care, and of how people are folded into the Christian community.

From another pastor I learned that his spiritual consciousness provides his parishioners with a sense of God's presence with them in their situations. He described his feelings when present with a couple having problems in their relationship. Although he sensed their anguish, he did not speak to them about it directly. His intense awareness of their pain enabled his prayers and Scripture reading to convey to them that he sensed their dilemma and had asked God to be present in their lives to help them. The pastor so thoroughly entered into their suffering that they sensed his joining with them without suffering the shameful exposure of having to name their problems. They experienced God's presence through the pastor's spiritual sensitivity and were helped to look beyond themselves to a transcendent reality. While not yet fully understanding this way of pastoral care, I do see its effectiveness in its cultural context.

My appreciation for this spiritual grounding of pastoral care leads me to wonder how it might relate to my own cultural context. How might home visits be more effective? How can a deep, thorough, spiritual awareness be fostered in my cultural context? Must pastoral care be as concerned with insight and understanding as my training suggested, or can change and healing take place apart from rational understanding? The North American model of care implicitly values insight and understanding; the Korean model presumes a representational participation in people's lives that carries a sense of authority that renders insight and understanding less necessary.

At the same time, however, a few additional questions can be raised from the Korean side. In a given situation, what might be gained by adding to their deep spiritual sensitivity a more informed understanding of clinical issues? Does a clinical understanding necessarily conflict with the spiritual connections Korean pastors have established with their people? In what ways can more clinical understanding be helpful to Korean pastors in their spiritual caring, and how are the cultural differences sorted out in this process? Under what circumstances
might a clinical approach become necessary? Are there extremely urgent situations that require the setting aside of concerns about shame or saving face? Such questions begin to explore the horizons of understanding between persons of different cultures.

**Pastoral Authority**

Under the influence of Confucianism, there is perhaps nothing more central to Korean culture than authority. Social relationships are defined hierarchically: subjects have duties in serving sovereigns, sons are obliged to respect fathers, younger siblings must defer to older siblings, and wives must be dutiful to their husbands. The Korean language also reflects this hierarchical reality in that different levels of civility are used in both grammar and vocabulary when one is speaking to a child, a servant, a neighbor, a stranger, a scholar, an official, or an older or younger person.

The high degree of authority given to pastors in Korean culture makes them tremendously influential in the lives of their parishioners. Some items in the above discussion of the pastor's spiritual influence need to be seen in the context of this pastoral authority. Indeed, there is a dynamic relationship between spirituality and pastoral authority. While Korean pastoral authority does indeed owe something to the hierarchical thinking of Confucianism, the degree to which pastors are held in high esteem is largely dependent upon the depth of their spirituality.

This high esteem also opens up significant potential for the guidance and encouragement of parishioners. In speaking with pastors, I observed their impressive capacity for interpreting North American culture, especially to parents of teenagers. For example, several pastors described their concern to help parents understand the pressures their young people experience in adapting to their school environments, negotiating cultural differences with peers, and managing parental expectations for academic excellence. The pastors encouraged parents to attend meetings at school to support their children, and to learn about North American music, television, and films in order to understand the influences of this culture on their children. They also tried to model for the parents how to maintain their parental authority while being understanding of the intense pressures their children experience. The parents' high regard for pastoral authority opened them to engage in learnings and adaptations that, while stressful for them, were important for maintaining good relationships with their children.

This kind of pastoral authority is surely appealing in a North American culture that is confused about authority. Because many American parents are more focused on their own needs and interests than on parental responsibility, respect for authority in general seems to have been swallowed up by cynicism toward government and repeated challenges to Christian values.

Although it is unlikely that the Korean culture's respect for authority will ever assume a similar status in North American society, one wonders how we
might learn from Korean-American pastors about the use of pastoral authority in other church contexts. How might the task of assessing secular culture and interpreting Christian values to our young people be done more effectively? Are there parallels between an immigrant people's experience and other North Americans who are also alienated from aspects of their culture? An exploration of these questions and others might widen our horizons of understanding.

There are also potential problems when the valuing of authority puts certain individuals in positions of power. The abuse of power is well known. Some Korean-American seminarians express distress over the long hours and heavy duties demanded by their supervising pastors. How is justice obtained in a cultural context weighted toward the rights and perspective of the people in authority? Perhaps such a question can widen the horizon of Korean-American pastors.

**Gender Issues**

Here my experience has been largely influenced by work with several highly competent Korean-American women students who have not been encouraged to consider leadership roles in their churches. The Confucian thought that assigns specific roles to men and women in Korean culture carries over into their congregations in ways that continue to prevent gifted Korean women from assuming leadership roles.

In this area my interviews provided little help appreciating how Korean-Americans understand and deal with gender issues. While interviewing a group of social workers, I met a young woman who had come to the United States with her parents when she was ten years old. Increasingly assimilated into American culture through her school experience, she became disconnected from her parents, particularly because they spoke no English and she had lost her Korean language. Her pastor met frequently with her, her siblings, and her parents to encourage them to communicate their concerns to one another and to negotiate their differences. This woman was very appreciative of the care this pastor had provided for her family. Perceiving her sensitivity, the pastor encouraged her to consider a career in social work. To his credit, he perceived the problems immigrant people have in communicating across generations and saw how social workers could be helpful to them. While acknowledging that, I do wonder if this pastor ever thought about encouraging this woman to consider a career in pastoral ministry.

Lest I be accused of giving up on what I can learn about gender issues from the Korean context, I do have some questions to address to my own culture. The Confucian perspective is clear about relationships between men and women and about their roles. Although the North American context does not have a well-defined philosophical framework for prescribing gender roles, women in North American culture continue to be somewhat limited in opportunities, income, and status. How is it that without a clear philosophical system such as
Confucianism, the North American culture continues to keep many women in positions inferior to men? How might we make sense of this?

In conclusion, I acknowledge that my commentary on these three themes has been limited. Nevertheless, I hope it has been suggestive for how cross-cultural dialogue might proceed. Engagement in cross-cultural exploration raises many hard questions and, at times, painful awarenesses. The possibilities for new and transforming learnings, however, call us to continue this engagement.

ENDNOTES

2 Ibid., 18.
3 Ibid., 14.
4 Ibid., 13.
6 Augsburger, Pastoral Counseling, 25f.
7 Gerkin, Living Human Document, 44.
8 Ibid., 45.
11 Ibid., 25.