

Workshop Summary:

**“DIVERSITY AND MULTICULTURALISM: A TRANSFORMATIVE JOURNEY
IMMANUEL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, LOS ANGELES**

This workshop was led by the Rev. Frank Alton, pastor of Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles, a congregation that is multicultural in many ways: ethnicity, national origin, economics, gender, age, education, sexual orientation, immigration status and others. See also “When Love Trumps Borders,” the opening sermon for the conference (Thursday, April 15), which also speaks of the New Sanctuary Movement that is part of Immanuel’s ministry in its diverse immigrant community.

The Rev. Frank Alton, pastor of Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles, shared several stories about various aspects of his journey as the pastor of a multicultural congregation. The most important thing, he feels, is that there is no “right way” to do it. Every circumstance is unique, and he has found that trial and error is the most efficient way of working through each challenge. He stated that it was important not to be afraid of making a fool of oneself as one travels down this road.

In dealing with immigrant situations, it is often the innocent children who present the largest challenges. Children, who either have been born in the U.S. or brought here as young children, often bear the biggest burden when a parent is forced to return to a native land. The children are unfamiliar with the country to which they are being sent and don’t know the “family” with whom they will be living.

The New Sanctuary Movement, of which Immanuel is a part, is an example of radical hospitality. The church has become the home of Yolanda, a woman who is facing deportation and doesn’t want to leave her U.S.-born daughter here alone or force her to accompany her. The woman cannot leave the church property for any reason, and the church has furnished a small room that has become their home. The congregation feels that this is a case of the superiority of love over the law. He compared the movement with the story of Naomi and Ruth. Immanuel feels that it is imperative for laws to be viewed culturally in time and space for there to be justice in the community; “new occasions teach new ways.” A documentary video has been produced telling the story of Yolanda and her daughter.

Frank shared that things have not always gone smoothly for Immanuel along their journey into being an authentically multicultural church. The congregation was already multi-ethnic when he became pastor; now it has become multicultural, which means that members differ not only with their ethnicity but with age, gender, political inclination, orientation, etc. They originally had an overlapping series of worship services (Spanish, bi-lingual, English), but now they have gone to a plan wherein they have simultaneous services in Spanish and English followed by an “All-Together Time,” when they celebrate communion, baptisms, children’s times, etc. The twelve-person session includes three Hispanic/Latinos and two people from the Philippines, in addition to reflecting the church’s other diversities. He describes their discussions as resulting from being of the “same mind with different opinions.” Immanuel has four statements that demonstrate who and what they are and what they believe. The statements represent covenants in force dealing

with being a More Light and a New Sanctuary Church, supporting inclusive language and being a Safe Church. The latter was adopted when two convicted sex offenders were accepted as members. One of the men sings in the choir of the English-speaking service, but when children are present, he has to remove his choir robe, which might be construed as a symbol of authority by a child, and take a seat in the congregation. While some people may consider these various positions as contradictory, Immanuel Church sees them as resources for equipping people to live in confusing times.

Another ministry of the church is its healing center, which brings together a variety of disciplines (e.g. yoga, raki, acupuncture, various stress-relieving therapies). During the communion service on the first Sunday of the month, they have healing prayer couples in the back of the sanctuary with healing oil. They sought and received a grant to provide a parish nurse program. Many of these programs are open to the neighborhood.

Immanuel has a very large building that they use to their advantage by renting out space for a variety of programs, including three churches, a charter school, a preschool, and a filming business. They bring in between \$400-\$500,000 in rent, which supports their entire program. The church's theory is that a building should be used all week...not just on Sunday.

Frank ended by saying that he and Immanuel's leadership didn't have a clear plan when they began, but they tried a variety of things and found what worked ... and what didn't. They started with the vision of being biblically-based, with strong relationships, and being supported by three elements: spirit, justice and culture.

Workshop description developed by Mary Lynn Walters