

## District Organization in a Culturally Diverse Region

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With roughly eighty percent of the population of the United States categorized as non-Hispanic, White, and with the majority of people of color in the United States concentrated in a few urban centers, organizing district structures and ministry strategies on the taken-for-granted notion of cultural homogeneity appears to be a pretty safe assumption. After all, part of what the church does at any level is to bring people together who are united by faith, purpose—and culture. Right? But things are changing, and if current trends continue, children born in the United States today will live in a culturally diverse country with no majority ethnic population when they reach retirement age. And, of course, several of our key urban centers already enjoy the benefits and challenges of being multi-cultural cities. What are the implications for a district organization if the region of its jurisdiction undergoes major ethnic diversification?

### Los Angeles: A Case Study

It is no secret that Los Angeles is in the midst of a major demographic transition. The changing demographics present both a great challenge and a tremendous opportunity for the church. Every indicator suggests that the Los Angeles Basin will continue to explode with population growth especially among immigrant populations.

Consider the following...

Between 1980 and 1990, Los Angeles County grew by 17% (almost twice the national growth rate) to a population of over 8.7 million. The county is expected to continue its current rate of growth so that its population will be over ten million by the year 2000. Greater Los Angeles (a five-county area) is expected to grow from its current population of 14 million to 18.5 million in the year 2000.

—The ethnic makeup of Los Angeles is rapidly changing:

	<b>1985</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000 (projected)</b>
White	45%	42%	33%
Spanish Surname	33%	35%	39%
Black	12%	11%	11%
Asian	9%	12%	17%

Of the 600,000 plus students enrolled in the Los Angeles Unified School District, 65% are Hispanic, 14% are black, 13% are white, and 8% are Asian (and other). Forty percent of students entering kindergarten speak limited English. Students speak nearly one hundred different native languages. For all of Los Angeles County, the Hispanic enrollment has grown from 35% to 52% in the past ten years and the current kindergarten enrollment is 55%

Hispanic. The "Pacific-rim" enrollment has grown from 6% to 9% of the total. Missions have indeed come home to Los Angeles!

These changes and other influences are impacting the socio-economic makeup of Los Angeles' communities. Studies show a greater inequity in the distribution of earnings in Los Angeles than is true across the nation, and the inequality is growing. While there are many who are wealthy who certainly need the Gospel, and substandard living conditions of the poor represent a great opportunity and mandate for the ministry of the church.

Consider...

Fifteen percent of the population of greater Los Angeles now live below the poverty line. (Between 1981 and 1987 the number of children in California living in poverty rose 47% to 1.6 million.)

Best estimates are that over 180,000 people in the Los Angeles County spent at least part of the past twelve months homeless. That does not include an estimated 42,000 families who live in garages.

Service organizations in both the public and private spheres are in fiscal crisis as they struggle to respond to greater need with fewer resources. The Los Angeles Unified School District cut 275 million dollars out of their budget this year and still ended 130 million in the red. The district faces another 250 million dollar cut this coming year, all of this with rapidly expanding enrollments. Non-profits are experiencing financial challenges as income is down due in part to the recession, but more importantly to the changing leadership base in the community.

The Church of the Nazarene has responded to the changes by planting ethnic/language congregations (there are currently forty-four such congregations on the Los Angeles District alone) and opening compassionate ministry centers (a half dozen at last count). But in the meantime, a number of established churches are faced with uncertain futures as they struggle like the public and private service organizations around them to adapt their ministries to their changing communities. With the demographic transitions, some churches have lost much of their leadership and financial base. Those who are moving into the neighborhoods bring great potential with them including the zeal of new converts. (On the Los Angeles District last year, the ethnic/language congregations received one new member by profession of faith for every 6 3/4 members, For the rest of the district the ratio was 1 per 22 members. For ethnic/language congregations, there was one new member received for every \$3,248 raised. For the rest of the district the ratio was one new member per \$22,588 raised!) However, those who enter the fellowship of the church usually do not have the same financial resources as those who have moved on. They may not be as acquainted with the responsibilities of church administration. And, of course, many or most may be more comfortable worshipping in languages and cultural expressions other than those which our currently established congregations currently offer.

If immigrant groups moving in mass into a region speak new languages, bring new world views, and/or are economically disadvantaged, we will obviously need to explore new strategies in ministry if we are to reach them (e.g. multi-congregational churches, cross-

cultural church planting, and compassionate ministries.) If so, where do these strategies fit into a district organizational structure? If we are successful in our outreach, how are cross-cultural ministries best supervised? How are non English-speaking members assimilated into district programs and leadership structures? If many or most of the newcomers bring little in the way of economic resources, how are these new ministries financed, especially if the demographic transition includes the "white flight" of the established leadership and financial base?

## **Recommendations for District Organizations in Culturally Diverse Regions**

I. District boundaries should be drawn where possible to encompass a multi-ethnic urban center. Division of major urban centers but district lines may inhibit the development of a comprehensive strategy and the deployment of scarce resources.

Example: District boundaries cut metro Los Angeles in half. One of the districts (Los Angeles) employs a coordinator of Hispanic ministries. The other district (Anaheim) has ten Spanish-speaking congregations with no district coordinator. If boundaries were inclusive of the region, presumably the Spanish coordinator could serve the whole area.

Another example, three ethnic training courses (Armenian, Spanish, and Southeast Asian) and an urban ministry training center (Breese Institute) are sponsored by the Church of the Nazarene on the two districts. Even though these training centers are intended to serve the larger region, they would likely be more effectively used if district boundaries were not a barrier.

II. District organization must go beyond the established auxiliaries to include cross-cultural and compassionate ministries. In major multi-ethnic centers this may require specialized staff, standing committees, and/or departmental organization.

Example: I have already mentioned the coordinator of Hispanic ministries on the Los Angeles District. He is currently responsible for supervising twenty-five Spanish-language congregations on the district. The need for such a staff position must be obvious. It is not practical to expect the district superintendent of a district in this kind of setting to effectively develop and personally supervise all the cross-cultural congregations. Without staff assistance, the ministry potential represented by the various immigrant populations could be severely limited. In Los Angeles, additional staff is probably needed to supervise the development of churches among other ethnic groups (besides Hispanic) and to develop and coordinate compassionate ministries.

Further, district organizational structures may need to be adjusted to accommodate and reflect the ethnic diversity on the district. The Los Angeles District has established but not yet implemented a district multi-cultural coordinating council. The council is to be accountable to the District Advisory board. Its membership is to include representatives from each of the ethnic/language groups represented with congregations on the district as well as sponsor church pastors of multi-congregational churches. The council is to give attention to and make specific recommendations concerning the multi-congregational organizational guidelines.

III. Where urban centers are in demographic transition with an accompanying economic instability, district overhead should be minimized and financial resources kept relatively fluid.

Example: On the Los Angeles District, future budget projections are increasingly difficult to make. With uncertainties accompanying the transitions in Los Angeles, it may not be advisable to commit to things as the district office relocating to available space in a church facility could minimize maintenance overhead and free up additional funds to be designated for ministry.

## **Concluding Remarks**

If these recommendations sound like they fall somewhat short of solving the mystery of ministry in major urban centers, it may be because hard and fast answers are difficult to come by. There is a sense in which no one has been this way before. There are few, if any, models to follow. We are in uncharted territory. But, we do know that "Jesus loves the little children of the world." And we are discovering that the "red, yellow, black, and white" who are His passion are also ours as His church. We can only trust that He will give us the wisdom, the resources, and the will necessary to fulfill His calling.

## **Our New District Superintendent's Qualities**

The study of characteristics of the District consisted primarily of responses to 14 qualities in the questionnaire. Each item carried a certain significance and even the lowest overall score included some scores at the highest value. As was predictable, "Spiritual Leadership, a person of prayer and in the Word" out ranked all the others. The next three highest ranked characteristics were: "Administrative expertise," Flexibility,"and Cross-cultural sensitivity". The three lowest qualities were "Influence with denominational leaders", "Pastoral experience on the L.A. District," and "Previous experience as a District Superintendent". [This graph](#) shows

the ranking of the 14 characteristics.

