

**No. 9728**

Study Document

**Rethinking the Foundations of Christian-Diversity-in-Community**

ISSUED FOR STUDY by the General Assembly

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has affirmed through its Design, Statement of Identity, Mission and Mission Imperatives the strengthening of congregational life to serve in outreach ministries of reconciliation, compassion, unity and justice. Commitment to "Affirmative Action" is one of those justice ministries.

"Affirmative Action", however, is being defined differently by governmental, educational and business components of the United States making it important to clarify what the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has adopted regarding "Affirmative Action" in its internal life.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) acted to address inequality in racial ethnic and female employment and representation through:

1. setting a goal of 20% racial ethnic persons and 50% women in employment and representation on boards;
2. the development of plans to implement those goals by the general units, regions and institutions of higher education;
3. the appointment of an Affirmative Action officer to monitor the church's progress toward the achievement of those goals.

Governmental regulations through the Civil Rights Commission, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and growing litigation regarding employment practices has led the General Units to move aggressively, through a committee of the General Cabinet, to recommend personnel policies for the General Units that both affirm the church's Affirmative Action goals and establish employee grievance procedures within the units as alternative to EEOC and other legal actions. The "alternative" procedures are being refined and will hopefully be available to the regions and institutions of higher education when fully developed. The Associate General Minister and Administrative Secretary of the National Convocation is presently charged with facilitating the development of those policies and grievance procedures.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has historically formulated its foundations for Christian diversity in community through responses to immediate critical forces operational in society, rather than in relation to a clear sense of identity and mission.

The Civil Rights struggle of African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s led to:

- \* the "Merger of Staff and Services" of the National Christian Missionary Convention with the United Christian Missionary Society in 1960;
- \* the "Merger of the National Christian Missionary Convention and the International Convention of the Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ)" in 1969--Resolution No. 6844.

The 1965 riots by African Americans in major urban centers and the 1968 publishing of the "Black Manifesto" led the General Board to:

- \* send a message to Disciples congregations suggesting responses to the accusations of the Black Manifesto;
- \* set a 20 percent quota for employment of minorities by units of the Christian Church and a 20 percent quota for membership on the decision making boards of the Christian Church--1969 General Assembly Resolution No. 19, "A Message from the General Board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)";
- \* review and re-affirm its 1969 action in 1975 through action "GB-78-0475".

The 1965 Presidential Executive Order inaugurating affirmative action was responded to by the Christian Church in 1981 through the adoption of Resolution No. 8151, "Concerning Guidelines and Plans for the Implementation of Affirmative Action by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)".

The Christian Church's response to the 1989 Supreme Court decisions led the General Assembly to adopt Emergency Resolution No. 8956, re-affirming the commitment of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) "to affirmative action and civil rights...".

The realities that undergirded the initial responses of society to diversity can be understood in part by the application of Maslow's "Hierarchy of Need" to the conditions of society. Maslow argued that humans respond to needs hierarchically in ways that make them not able to achieve their higher needs until their basic needs are met.<sup>(1)</sup> When the society

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(1) Maslow's Hierarchy of Need can be demonstrated by ordering those needs as follows where on a scale from 1 to 7 with 1 being the highest, 1 = the most basic human need; 7 = Altruistic Need; 6 = Desire to Know and Understanding Need; 5 = Self Actualization Need; 4 = Esteem Need; 3 = Love and Belonging Need; 2 = Safety and Security Need; 1 = Physiological Need.

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focuses on its "safety and security" needs, such as its economic and status needs, it is not able to function out of its "altruistic" needs--its need to sacrifice its resources to liberate its disenfranchised.

Society's initial attempt to correct its racial ethnic ills in the 1950s and 1960s took place in secure times. However, American culture has experienced varying degrees of economic recession, change in world status and change in the nature of its immigrants over the past thirty years. These changes have raised serious issues about America's basic identity. Population projections have identified the probability that there will not be enough Anglo Americans in America to supply the needs of the labor force in the year 2010. Such indicators of American society's growing concerns about its "security" is most recently evidenced by the radical shifts in the Supreme Court on issues of diversity.

The present survival mentality of the American society will hinder repentance of its sin of exclusion and marginalization. If the church becomes clear about its identity and mission, and Christians live out of their identity and mission, these Christians can transform society regardless of the society's perception of its own needs.

The church can no longer base its foundations for Christian-diversity-in-community on societal perceptions of needs. Instead, it must rely on the Biblical image of the Christian congregation as principled in equity-and-parity with diversity, based upon spiritual gifts appropriated by God for the well being of the entire congregation.

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need (Acts 2:44-45).

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another (Romans 12:4-5).

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone (1 Cor. 12:4-6).

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ... we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love (Eph. 4:11-12, 15b-16).

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This system of equity-and-parity was based on the recognition, the care and, the eventual liberation of the poor as principled in the Old Testament, with a clear admonition against their oppression. The book of Leviticus has very special directives regarding this issue.

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the LORD your God (Lev. 23:22).

And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family (Lev. 25:10).

If anyone of your kin falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property, then the next of kin shall come and redeem what the relative has sold (Lev. 25:25).

If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens (Lev. 25:35).

If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves (Lev. 25:39).

Therefore, one clear conclusion is that sociological "isms" (such as classism, racism, sexism) grow out of the human sin and propensity to perpetuate oppressed/oppressor relationships. That propensity is not consistent with the scriptural foundations and identity of the church.

The General Board adopted "The Inclusive Church" in 1991 as a document that offers Biblical/theological foundations for an Inclusive Church--a church that practices Christian Diversity-in-Community. Reflection on and application of the principals reflected in the "Inclusive Church" will aid the church in its struggle to implement Christian Diversity-in-Community.

### **THE INCLUSIVE CHURCH**

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:20-21 NRSV)

## Introduction

We are not one. Our credibility as church, as bearers of the Good News, has been diminished by our visible divisiveness. We have been broken so long that we hardly feel the pain. We have been broken so long that we have learned to function with our distortions. As a recent document of the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) puts it,

The most racially segregated hour in American life is still the Sunday morning hour of the church's worship. Opportunities for leadership in the church are in many instances still effectively closed to more than half its members, who are women. Persons having physical disabilities often find that houses of commerce are more accessible and inviting than the house of God. And the cultural and economic aspects of our separations continue to be of primary importance in perpetuating misunderstanding and distrust between churches.

We know God intended for the church to be an inclusive community. We know we are not what we should be. We know that we must do more than practice a comfortable inclusiveness, more than simply write "all welcome" on our church signs. Yet, faced with the cost of obedience, we repeatedly fall short. If we wish to be healed, made whole, then we must act on our convictions.

The Committee on Racial Ethnic Inclusiveness and Empowerment carries as one of its mandates the explorations of means of correcting our sin of exclusion. That exploration became more critically focus as the committee determined that its acronym, C.R.E.I.E., would not be pronounced "cry" but "cree" (cray e). Marginalized people do not want their dialogue regarding the sins of exclusion to be imaged as tearful pleading to a dominant culture to elicit sympathy, pity, understanding, appeasement or paternalistic welfare. The dialogue must be focused on what has been believed thus the pronunciation "cree"--"to have believed" from the Spanish word "creir", to believe.

The 17th plenary of the Consultation on Church Union assembled in New Orleans on December 5-9, 1988 approved the document, Churches in Covenant Communion: The Church of Christ Uniting, and commended it to the participating churches for adoption. One of the elements of that covenant is "Commitment to Seek Unity With Wholeness". Some of the critical observations made in the description of that element are:

- \* Inclusive is not an adequate word for it is easily heard as a patronizing invitation to become part of the dominant group that continues to be dominant.
- \* Inclusiveness is not just a matter of goodwill, mission or justice but

fundamental to the churches nature as a living communion in Christ.

- \* Oppression, exclusion, degradation or diminution of one Christian by another are not consistent with Christ's mission expressed in Luke 4:18-19.
- \* If the actualization of inclusiveness is inclusion, inclusion does not mean the entering of another's reality through the surrender of one's distinctive identity. Inclusion is not a homogenization of all differences into a new sameness. An inclusive community is one in which differences are affirmed, accepted and celebrated as the gifts of God.
- \* Racism, sexism, handicapism and classism continue to divide demonstrating the church's disobedience to the will of Christ "that they may all be one"--a theological issue.
- \* Correction requires a change of heart enabled by repentance and commitment to seek a unity that is inclusive of all who are baptized into Christ while rejoicing in the diversity of persons and gifts the Spirit has given to the church.

"Commitment to visible unity," says COCU, "entails a willingness to change, and to be changed of God - not for the sake of change itself, but for the sake of that visible communion among us for which our Savior prayed and still prays."

### **Theological Foundations of Inclusiveness**

Any attempt to develop an image of the inclusive church, an image that will convict us of our sin of divisiveness and enable repentance and conversion, must be rooted in critical reflection on scripture and on evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in the world. The following "propositions" are intended as an invitation to such reflection throughout the church.

1. God's purpose, set forth in scripture and confessed by countless generations, is "to unite all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10 RSV). As Christians, we proclaim that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" and, thereby, reconciling humans to one another. As followers of him, we are called to be "ambassadors" of this reconciling love (2 Cor. 5:19-20).
2. The revelation of God's nature and purpose in Christ has brought into being a new community - the church. The church is called to reveal God's purpose by showing to the world a way of living beyond the barriers which artificially divide the human family. Christ is "our peace who has made us one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility . . ." (Eph. 2:14). The church is called to be an embodied message of shalom which witnesses to the gospel of reconciliation not just by what it says and does (important as these are), but by what it is. To the extent that the church allows itself to be conformed to the divisions of the world, it betrays its calling and, in fact, is idolatrous (see I Cor. 1:10-13, 3:1-4). Followers of the God who was in Christ are

admonished to "welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God (Rom. 15:7)."

Why welcome one another--Jew and Greek, male and female, black, white, Hispanic and Asian, disabled and able-bodied, Russian and American, liberal and conservative? Because we have already been welcomed - accepted, forgiven - by God beyond all deserving; and because our willingness to embrace all those whom Christ has embraced gives glory to God--so different from the way of the world!

3. The oneness which is our gift and mandate is not a matter of homogeneous uniformity. As COCU warns, the very call for inclusivity could be a trap if meant or heard "as a patronizing invitation to become part of the dominant group," thereby giving up that which is distinctive about one's identity. Both scripture and the world around us show that diversity is part of God's gracious purpose for humanity. Separation and mutual exclusion contradict God's purpose precisely because they stem from the insistence that others must be like us. To put it another way, at the heart of the gospel is a common commitment to, and experience of, God-in-Christ that enables us to live with diversity in community (racial, ethnic, cultural, sexual, theological, liturgical diversity). Paul spent as much time in his letters (e.g., Rom. 14) telling diverse kinds of people how to live together "in Christ" as he did telling them how to preach the good news - precisely because this new kind of community is the good news they are to proclaim. The church should be characterized by a solidarity, a growing together, that neither negates our differences nor permits them to be the basis of mutual rejection.
4. There are various kinds of diversity which must be not simply included but welcomed in the faithful church. The following three are exemplary but by no means exhaustive:
- \* The church must be a community in which people of different racial and ethnic groups visibly claim each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, commonly created and blessed by God. One recent COCU document puts it succinctly: "God abhors racism!"
  - \* The church must be a global fellowship in which people of different cultures and nations are visibly related. Our community must include not only those we see but be imaginatively inclusive of those we do not see. A central meaning of baptism is that through this act the black Methodist woman in Nairobi becomes our sister, the Russian Orthodox man in Moscow becomes our brother, the Roman Catholic child from the Manila slums and the Pentecostal youth in Havana become part of our family--with all the joys and obligations of family life.
  - \* The church must be a theologically inclusive community in which liberals and conservatives, "ecumenicals" and "evangelicals" find a common home. The Jewish-Gentile division which Paul labored so hard to bridge was not simply a matter of race and culture. It involved ideological camps, people who truly saw the world from different perspectives. There are at least three kinds of diversities: a) those that

are God-given (e.g., race) and should be celebrated as part of God's diverse creation; b) those that are products of human activity but, again, are cause for celebration (e.g., culture); and c) those that are human-wrought but need to be opposed for the sake of the gospel (e.g., great economic disparities). For the present, our churches must include rich and poor. (A congregation should not determine its leadership, for example, on the basis of economic privilege.) Faithfulness to the God who is "good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18, Luke 6:20, 24) demands that we move beyond this kind of "inclusivity" through the struggle for economic justice. 5. In line with the previous point, a church committed to the truth of God's purpose must acknowledge that there are limits to the diversity which the church can legitimately welcome. It would seem that "inclusiveness" itself helps to define these limits or to put it another way, the limits of tolerance are intolerance. Given the primacy of love (I Cor. 13:13), we dare not allow it to be subordinated to other principles. Indeed, we must abhor that which thwarts it. Since love for all of God's children is the glue which holds the community together (I Cor. 13), and the nutrient which causes it to grow (Eph. 4:16), the subordination of love or the denial of its universality is a denial of our very identity.

6. The church exists between the kingdom and the world, compelled by the vision of the former yet marked by the corruption of the latter. It is both saved and in desperate need of salvation. We affirm that the church is an inclusive community. It is also an institution ravaged by the defensive prejudice and self-centered arrogance of all humanity. Worse, for much of its history the church has given theological sanction to policies of slavery, racial segregation, sexual exploitation, and/or colonial domination. The first step toward realization of our true nature is confession of our true sin.
7. Our sinfulness has led to the marginalization of groups within the church. Racial and ethnic minorities (minorities in the American context), women, the disabled and others have long been denied full participation in the life and leadership of the church.

Scripture repeatedly contends that God is implacably opposed to all that diminishes or marginalizes human beings and is with the victims of such faithlessness (e.g., Ps.103:6). The church must align itself with God in this struggle through active, passionate commitment to inclusive community - in the church and the world.

### **Personal Response to Inclusiveness**

Faithfulness to the mandate of inclusiveness demands continuous, critical review and evaluation of personal as well as corporate life. Individuals, congregations, regions, and general units must live in the tension caused by the fact that God's creation is good, that Christ commands us to love one another, but that our behavior is undergirded by prejudices and biases which often cause exclusive discrimination.

The local congregation is a community of individuals, each having his or her own sense of

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culture, sociology, organization and theology. The challenge for the members of a congregation is to become community, establishing behavioral norms and practices that express the reign of God.

The problem is that far from seeking diversity, individuals often look to justify "the way we are" by surrounding themselves with people who are "like us." Human beings long for acceptance. We are anxious about our own worth and so we attempt to increase our sense of self-importance by restricting the circles in which we move to those who agree with us or look like we do or value the same things we value. Tragically, this is often coupled with a disparagement of those who are different.

It can be difficult to open oneself to other ways of seeing the world. It can be more comfortable to keep to that which is familiar - our way of worship, our kind of people. Such narrowness is sin, frustrating the church's attempts to be a community that shows forth God's intended reign. To live in faith that we are truly loved by God is to be freed from the cramped life of prejudice and self-confirmation. The good news is that we are objects of a divine "love that casts out fear" (I John 4:18), freeing us in turn to love even those who are unlike ourselves.

The realization of an inclusive church must, therefore, begin with the continuous conversion of individuals. What is needed is regular reflection on one's identity - one's development, one's relationship, one's fears and hopes - in light of the demands of the gospel. One proven way of assessing identity toward the end of transformation is through story. Personal identity stories might contain the following elements:

- \* Description of my faith development. When, where and how did my faith begin? What progression/set backs has it encountered? Where is it now and where is it going?
- \* Description of turning points in my life. What have been the significant turning points? What were the forces that precipitated major change? What were the joys/sorrows connected with that change? What were the learning gleaned from the process?
- \* Description of my behavioral journey. What major behavioral patterns can I identify in my life? How comfortable am I with these patterns? What are the desired behavioral responses? What will those desired behavioral responses cost?
- \* Description of my familial relations. What familial relationships have I experienced? What strengths/weaknesses have emerged from those experiences? What are the desired relationships? What is the cost of achieving those relationships?

- \* Description of my cultural orientation. How has ethnicity affected my perception of self or the way I am seen by others? How has geographic location influenced those perceptions? How have socio-economic factors affected those perceptions?
- \* Description of my gender roles. What are the stresses/gifts associated with other gender relationships? Where are the points of vulnerability? How are the fears/opportunities of that vulnerability to be addressed?

Personal assessment described in story enables persons to experience uniqueness as well as specialness. Such an assessment tends to identify our perceptions of the world and the systems of inclusion/exclusion that order our responses to the world.

The personal story alone, however, is not enough; it must always be juxtaposed to the gospel. How do we understand God's love to embrace the estranged? How do we respond to the communication of that love by the Holy Spirit? How does God's love enable us to move beyond ourselves? How are we constantly re-created through commitment to the love of the other? How do we see our lives in this imperfect world as Christian vocation? Genuine self-assessment demands that we wrestle with such questions.

Such personal assessment is, of course, always undertaken within the context of the church. It, therefore, involves both commitment to the church as the body of Christ and commitment to work against the church when, as a human organization, it reflects the divisions (e.g., racism, sexism and classism) of human society.

Congregational Application of Inclusive Theology Congregations, like individuals, must establish a continuous assessment and conversion process in order to break their exclusive self-protective identity. Many congregations are homogenous enclaves which are called church but in reality violate the essence of the gospel. Congregational assessment, for the purpose of identifying and changing non-inclusive behavior, is therefore essential. Such an assessment might contain the following kinds of questions:

- \* How open is our congregation to persons of different races, cultures, or theological perspectives?
- \* What are the congregation's limits on openness?
- \* How is diversity expressed in our prayer?
- \* Are there intentional efforts by our congregation to reach diverse persons in the surrounding community?
- \* How is the building used to enable multi-cultural activities?

- \* Are all of the populations of the congregation evident in the congregation's leadership?
- \* How does the church school curriculum image inclusiveness?
- \* Are non-English language resources available in the congregation?
- \* How has the congregation responded to the Reconciliation program?

Each congregation is, ideally, a "sacrament" of the universal church. We can not affirm that the national and international church is to be inclusive while remaining exclusive at the local level. History argues against immediate realization of this ideal. The past and present imbalance in power relationships in our denomination, the past and present denigration of certain cultural forms and liturgical styles, and the numerical superiority of white, European-background Disciples provide justification for minority groups to cultivate their distinctive contributions to the church in identifiably distinctive congregations.

While more reflection is needed on this difficult issue, several observations can now be offered:

- \* It is possible to distinguish some legitimate reasons for separate congregational identity from illegitimate ones. Language differences (e.g. Spanish and English) would seem to justify separate congregational development; "class" differences do not.
- \* Congregations should welcome diversity even if they are attempting to build up a particular minority identity.
- \* Given the divided character of our society, congregational differentiation may be necessary and justifiable for the sake of the church's mission in some places. The work of the church is furthered by those who know the needs of their particular place and are able to communicate effectively in that context.
- \* Where culturally, racially or linguistically identifiable congregations exist, deliberate attempts must be made to relate the congregations of that community in as many ways as possible. This would seem to be a particular responsibility of areas and regions.

### **Regional Application of Inclusive Theology**

The study booklet, *The Nature of the Church: Ministry Among Disciples*, declares that Regional Ministry is "one of the clearest areas where the ministry of oversight (episcopate) finds expression within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)." Regions are charged to re-present the Gospel and to manifest the given unity and inclusiveness of the Church "in all places and all ages."

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Through teaching, sacramental life, pastoral care, mission interpretation and ministry programming, regions are to model in regional life the global ecumenical consciousness and presence mandated by the Gospel, and to strive for ethnic and cultural diversity as a sign and symbol of faithful inclusiveness. Regions thus have a particular calling and opportunity to go beyond the current sociological patterns of society in the servicing of congregations.

Unfortunately, regions and the whole church continue to be culturally patterned and conformed. Much more can be done that is intentional, that re-evaluates the ministry of episcopate in light of God's inclusive love for the whole creation.

For example, the following aspects of regional ministry might be evaluated according to the concern for inclusivity expressed in this paper:

- \* the spirit, language and content of all regional mission priorities;
- \* the processes for calling, and the ministry portfolios of regional staff persons;
- \* the processes for selection of all regional non-staff leadership; and
- \* the nurture of congregations in inclusive patterns of church life, witness and mission.

In addition, regional ministers might commit (or recommit) themselves:

- \* to follow CAN guidelines for the establishment of ethnic minority congregations;
- \* to seek out cross-cultural worship and program experiences for regional events;
- \* to establish an inclusive assessment task force to review total regional life in light of church-wide criteria.

### **General Unit Application of Inclusive Theology**

General units are instruments of the church, called into being by the church, to address those ministries whose scope and affect are beyond the gift resources of the congregation or the regions. The specific focus of each unit's ministry, the process of development and the length of application, make general units most open to expressions of inclusive ministry and at the same time most vulnerable to "just like us" exclusivism. CREIE will review programs offered by General Units. The General Nominating Committee will review Unit and General Board membership. The purpose of these reviews is to help General Units to comply with the

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mandates of the General Assemblies regarding affirmative action in both employment and board membership. Reviews will also assist General Units in developing programs and services for the poor and disenfranchised.

It has generally been recognized that ministry in the United States and Canada has undergone globalization. As the percentage of the various ethnic minority populations increase, the church in North America will increasingly find itself struggling to understand, serve and financially support its global/domestic ministry. The church will no longer be able to justify a mono-cultural/lingual ministry. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) must therefore develop policies similar to those presently implemented by the Division of Overseas Ministries as it implements its administrative, programmatic and personnel guidelines. An "Inclusive Church" must be prepared and trained to implement a domestic/globalized ministry.

The reviews of the General Nominating Committee, CREIE and the Affirmative Action Officer must be an important ingredient in the operation of the General Board as it fulfills its role to "review and evaluate the program of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in accordance with its recognized mission, and make appropriate recommendations to the General Assembly' [Par 21 d The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)]. Only then can this church that has the most aggressive, progressive and enlightened affirmative action/personnel policies of any national church body be its full self.

### **Conclusion**

"For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.  
Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (I Cor. 13:12 NRSV).

It is our prayer that, in that day of full disclosure, we will be found as full recipients of the gifts present in our diverse populations.