



LIVING DIVERSITY

Ask most of our students and faculty why they chose Palmer, and the terms “diversity” and “community” will usually come up early in the conversation. So *inMinistry* gathered a group of faculty members to explore what it means to “live” diversity—in the Seminary community and beyond. At the table were Al Tizon, Associate Professor of Evangelism and Holistic Ministry; Marsha Brown Woodard, Lecturer in Christian Ministry; George Hancock-Stefan, Associate Professor of Church History; Mayra Picos-Lee, Lecturer in Counseling; and Deborah Spink-Winters, Lecturer in Old Testament. The discussion was moderated by Phaedra Blocker, Affiliate Professor in Christian Ministries.

Let’s start with the term “diversity”—which can be a very loaded term, depending upon how it’s used. How do you think about the term, from your perspective?

Mayra Picos-Lee: For me, I guess it is the realization that though we are all part of the human race and so we share our humanity with each other, we are very different from each other. Being human expresses itself in different ways: gender is one of them, ethnicity is another one. That means I have a specific perspective about life that comes from where I’m standing. I have come to learn that that is the only place from where I may speak, and it may be a good place, but I need others who help me challenge my illusion that my perspective is the center of the world. I need to be in conversation with others who are going to be standing in a different place because they embody a different reality, because that complements mine and gives me a broader perspective of what God is like.

Marsha Brown Woodard: God delights in diversity. God is into difference, as we can tell just from the number of different trees God made! God just doesn’t do the sameness thing well. And so in hearing the word “diversity,” I often get frustrated, because it is

often used as a code for race and ethnicity, when it's really so much bigger. So if we're really talking about differences, it needs to be difference at every level and how we see that difference as a gift. But it's often hard to have the larger conversation, because in our society, when people hear "diversity," often the only conversation they want to have is on race and ethnicity.

Deborah Spink-Winters: I have come to truly believe we need all that diversity in order to even begin to understand the biblical texts. We need every possible diversity and every possible theology and difference to begin to wrestle with what the text has to say to us.

Al Tizon: When I hear "diversity," I hear fact of life. It's the way God made life. And that has to be the starting point for what it means to me to be committed to diversity. For me, what it means to be committed to diversity is to see what barriers are there that are not enabling me to engage in the diversity that is a fact of life. It's a fact. We are different in every way, not just ethnically, racially, etc. (those are just social constructs anyway). To be committed to diversity... [means asking] "What is it about our interaction that is stopping/preventing us from engaging/appreciating/celebrating what is absolutely true?"

Brown Woodard: There is a way that we can go to the text and ask the question, "How does God include?" and we can have nice theology of inclusion. And if we had it, we would teach people and generations, and it would be a norm to expect it. But that's the work, I don't think, in general, that we've done. And so we keep saying, generation after generation, "this ought to be."

Spink-Winters: I am a transitional pastor and so I walk into churches that are often in conflict. And one of the things we don't teach our churches often is how to deal with conflict. And part of that is being able to say, "You don't have to agree with me, but we need to talk about this and we need to confront this in a healthy way so that we bring all of the diverse ideas together and figure out where God is directing and how to move forward." We need to do a much better job of teaching this in our churches and even in the classroom, allowing students to talk about things in a safe spot where they can talk about the text from their perspective and be heard. I think that's part of my responsibility as a pastor and professor.

Brown Woodard: And what a difference it would make if we didn't label it "conflict" but labeled it "bringing these views together to see what we can learn."

Picos-Lee: When we talk about living in this tension—where there is conflict, there is going to be tension—you have to have a basic level of safety and security in who you are and the relationships that you have around you in order to be able to wrestle with people. Because if I don't know who I am, then you as the other represent a threat to me. But if I know who I am, you are not going to change me—you don't have the power to change me. We confer power on others when we are feeling insecure and anxious about who we are.

How did each of you come to a conscious place around your embracing of diversity?

Hancock-Stefan: I think where Mayra started is very important: the freedom that

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you have as an individual, and not being afraid who is going to see you in a particular context. I was at a meeting and introduced myself by saying, "I'm an evangelical ecumenist." The sister sitting across from me said, "There is no such bird, brother. You're either evangelical or ecumenist—you cannot be both." But I am really struggling to combine both. I am really sure where I stand theologically, but I am willing to go to a temple, to a mosque, and everywhere else because I believe in this community of faith.

Tizon: Learning who we are is the starting point of diversity work. I did my doctoral study in arguably the most diverse institution on the planet. And I had a great time there. But what I tell students who ask me about the school is if you know who you are and you know who you worship, then go and you will have an amazing time of

interacting with people of completely different backgrounds. If you don't, if you are a spiritual seeker, you're going to go in there and find nothing but chaos and you won't feel the safety of saying anything, you'll just water everything down for the sake of peace. That's not diversity, that's a melting pot, which is the opposite of diversity. What's jarring to me is when there's a lack of diversity. That's what I notice. "Hey, where is everybody? It's too bland in here."

How does what you've shared relate to how you think about diversity here at the Seminary?

Hancock-Stefan: I don't think anybody leaves this seminary the same way they came. (A chorus of "I hope not!" and laughter rise from the group.) I think that often we, as professors, think we are presenting neutral stuff, and I don't think we are. When I preach in the church, I preach under the power of God that people will change; I preach for change. And so when I teach at the seminary, I teach for change. As that old proverb goes: "as the university goes so does the country." I believe that as the seminary goes, so does the Church, in five or ten or fifteen years.

Brown Woodard: When I think of us as a seminary, I think its "both/and." On any given day, we can really build a case for how intentional we are and working at it. And on any given day we can build a case for how we're just not getting

it. And I think that they flow together and in that flow is the mystery where God does something in spite of us.

Tizon: Most of you are probably aware that there is a diversity committee at the seminary. So in that sense, there's some intentionality in bringing a representation of the faculty together to discuss best practices, how to dismantle structural, deeply rooted types of racism. And it's still here, as diverse as we are. We can't just say, "Let's just not do that anymore." There's still a lot of work to be done, but we have a place to think through those issues and present our findings or questions at faculty meetings. So, for instance, one of the things we've been looking at is the move to King of Prussia.

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This seminary has developed a diverse character, and yet it was decided to move out here. Fortunately, we now have a committee of faculty and administration looking to relocate us to somewhere other than St. Davids.

Blocker: I don't believe that there was a conscious decision, or that there were malicious reasons behind the decision to move, but when you don't have enough voices around the table who have these different perspectives, and who understand the nature of this work, then it's easy for those kind of decisions to be made, because the metrics that are being used to make the decision are only coming from one perspective.

Picos-Lee: But that's one of the discussions that we are having in the diversity committee, how racism nowadays is not so overt, but exists nonetheless in a very covert way. And whether we engage in it willingly or unwillingly, it doesn't take away the wounds and the painful way that it affects people's lives. And what I have observed about racism is that in many instances we do it unwillingly because we don't recognize our own prejudices, and we can't until we confront them. Until some other human being comes to us and says something. And that is often what I see happen in the classroom. It's more difficult to eradicate because we don't see it; we disguise it, and so it's hard to name. We are all committed to ministry. We are all committed to God's work. We don't intend to hurt each other, but nonetheless we abuse each other. Nice people abuse nice people. It's not like we're monsters, but we don't know better. So, we have to work on it.

Tizon: That's what's insidious about institutional racism—that as opposed to making intentional choices, you just participate in it. We participate in it and so perpetuate it. We say, "I'm not racist. I've got a friend who's... I wouldn't make a racist choice."

Hancock-Stefan: At which time you, as my brother, have to have the courage and love to say, "George, are you aware that that is racist?" And then you, in a way, become my mentor. That's what the faculty here is doing.

Brown Woodard: Part of the challenge is that we get forced to try to stay at the personal level. And for me, part of the harder work is to move it out of the personal and to help people look at systems and how do systems maintain—and how do we get new systems? At the personal level, it's good and it's important to do the work, but the decision that's overarching is a system decision that's made somewhere totally different than what's happening personally. And that's the harder work. The people who make decisions about what people are going to pay for their gas and electric—those tables aren't diverse. If we could send a generation of folks out of here committed to work on the system, it could make a difference.

How do you deal with the challenges of diversity in the classroom? Whether it be their learning styles, or just the way that sometimes peoples' "stuff" starts to bump up against one another—what do you do with that? How do you use it as a teachable moment?

Spink-Winters: In one of my first semesters here we got into a discussion in Old Testament about what a pastor should look like. And there were two different theologies in my class that came from two very different groups at Palmer. One group believed that you should have the best suit and you should drive the best car and show people that you are in authority; and the other group said no, you should sell your car, you wear the worst clothes, etc., and they almost came to blows in the classroom. I say if we can't discuss it here, where are we going to discuss it? One of the things I do is create groups, and make it a requirement that they have to learn from someone who's a different age, and different ethnic group, and different denomination. And they do learn—they learn how to at least talk to each other enough to get assignments done.

Tizon: At least in one of my classes, I have each student tell their story, an ethnic autobiography. That sets the stage for safety, for identity, and that seems in that class to create a much more open spirit to talk about differences.

Brown Woodard: I think that at least two of the courses benefit from students having been in other classes. TFE (particularly the second level) and Integrative Seminar have space for conversation... sometimes confrontation. It's not because we're special; it's the way the course is designed. Students would likely have had one of the instructors before or as an advisor, and they've all had prior interaction with one another, so there's a level of safety that has grown out of the relationships they've developed along the way.

Tizon: I once had a student look at me on the first day of class, and say, "You don't meet my expectations of what a professor looks like." And I responded, "Well, you don't meet my expectations of what a student should look like." And she started to laugh, and so did I. And we were able, in that particular case, through humor, to disarm one another and create that space of safety. And so there are a lot of tools we can use.

Blocker: It sounds like we organically push our students to live the diversity. Whether or not they come in honoring it, or honoring what they assume to be diversity, part of it is expanding their definition... but also pressing them to live it. Because they have to live it with their professors, they have to live it with their classmates and staff and that sort of thing. We aren't the only seminary that sees itself as diverse. So do you think there's a difference in the way that we think about what that means?

Brown Woodard: I think in some ways we have the gift of numbers. If you don't have enough warm bodies around the table, the work only goes so far. And then there's a place where you can have bodies, but it's tokenism. Because they're there, but it's easy to accept because they're not enough to make a difference. We have enough bodies that we cannot not do it. To exist, we have to do some dealing with it. That's a gift and I think it makes us more intentional. At another seminary I know, they have professors who want to do something, but they can't do it in the classroom because they don't have the bodies there. They can't get natural conversations going among the students, because they don't have the bodies. They have to bring in people to help have the conversations. For us, it's natural. So, it's a gift that we can give to the larger educational community.

Picos-Lee: What we do is try to be mirrors of reality. So as we see that communities are changing, we try to mirror that. Faculty changes, and the student population changes. Or the student population changes and the faculty changes. So we become mirrors. And the leadership changes... that's what we're still struggling with to some extent. Even in churches, they speak about embracing diversity and bringing friends so we can fill in the pews, but the ministers remain the same. We have to mirror reality and then reality is going to mirror us. So I see what we are doing as unique. Even my experience of seminary has changed. Just the other day, I was realizing that I was hearing Spanish more often in the hallways. I'm used to being primarily among English speakers, but now I'm noticing more Spanish. And also neighborhoods are changing,

there is more integration, more voices. I notice more Arabic being spoken. It's not that I didn't hear it before, but now that I can speak it, I am aware of it more. I can connect with people who speak Arabic. And it's nice. I don't think the reality changes, but your perception of the reality changes.

Hancock-Stefan: The other question we need to think about is, "At which point can the seminary's diversity be seen in our churches?" One church I know has over thirty ethnic groups, but the worship service is as Anglo-centric as anything. The diversity seems to primarily show up in the times of fellowship, with food. And so the issue is how do we take the diversity and reflect it in our worship? What is it going to take for our congregations to start being as diverse as the community we have here?

Blocker: At the end of the day, diversity comes down to issues of power. Who gets to sit at the table where power is being shared and exercised? So you can have a congregation that is multi-ethnic, but if the leadership is homogenous, if the whole tone of worship is homogenous, if what's going on in the life of that community is oriented toward only a certain culture or tradition, then you're not multicultural.

How do we capture Christians' hearts and minds with the glorious vision of the multiethnic gathering presented in Revelation 7:9?

Picos-Lee: My commitment is to love. Love one another. Love one another. Especially that is challenging when you don't like each other. For me, it's trying to love my students, even the difficult ones.

Tizon: Revelation 7:9 is to me the picture of final reconciliation and that really is what we need to aspire toward when we do diversity work. It's finally about reconciling. And it's such a rich image of the tribes and nations working together. Reconciliation is based on redemption in Christ and worship of God, and another aspect that is so rich to me in this passage is that in this future worship service, diversity is retained. The seer still continues to see the differences. We're not thrown into a heavenly cauldron to come out bland. All of these differences and languages are still going on. It is about reconciliation. This has implications for me today. No one is on the outs with God, even those in the dominant center. If I'm doing diversity and reconciliation work today, it's not excluding anyone, anyone. God likes us, all of us. It's a practical implication of how we do diversity and reconciliation work today. When we do diversity today, we're practicing for this. To the extent that we can truly be diverse, we're practicing for this vision.

Brown Woodard: To get that, we have to learn to be in community in a new way. There are things we have to unlearn. It's a new thing to learn that God is not on the outs with anybody. That's the work that we're called to do.

How did your experience at Palmer prepare you to live diversity in your community and church? Drop us a line at PalmerAlum@eastern.edu and we'll print your responses in the Spring issue!

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Whether you are considering pursuing a degree or simply taking a course or two, Palmer offers a number of educational opportunities that may fit your needs:

- Two Doctoral degrees (one in conjunction with Eastern's Campolo College of Graduate and Professional Studies).
- Two Master of Divinity programs — our traditional on-site program delivered in Pennsylvania and West Virginia, as well as the new OpenSeminary™ blended delivery program.
- A Master of Theological Studies program with four concentrations to fit your particular calling and passion: General Studies, Biblical Studies, Christian Counseling, and Public Policy.
- A high-quality, non-degree program, the Eastern School of Christian Ministry. Courses are taught at an undergraduate level, and students who earn a grade of "B" or better are eligible to transfer credits toward the completion of any Eastern University undergraduate (bachelor's) degree.
- A unique educational program for women serving on the frontlines of ministry. The Priscilla Institute offers women the opportunity to engage in a program of biblical, pastoral, and organizational education that leads to a Bachelor of Arts in Organizational Leadership.

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Our yearly lectureships honor theologians and pastors who have been significant in the life of the Seminary, and feature diverse voices that challenge and inspire the Body of Christ. The Frank B. Mitchell Lectureship was established in 1981 to honor Rev. Dr. Mitchell, who, during his long tenure as pastor at Pinn Memorial Baptist Church in Philadelphia, was a faithful mentor to seminary students. The Orlando E. Costas Lectureship was established in 2008 to honor the work of the late missiologist and theologian. It also serves as a way for Palmer Seminary to build relationships with Latino/a churches.

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Each year, Master of Divinity students arrive at the point in their program where they are required to enter Theological Field Education, a practical internship that allows students to explore and enhance their call to ministry within local congregations and para-church organizations. Qualified Pastor/Mentors and supportive placement sites are always needed to provide quality experiences for student interns. You can find out more about becoming a TFE site by contacting our Supervised Ministries Office [semsupmn@eastern.edu].

Host

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