



LINDA JOHNSON  
LEADERSHIP SOLUTIONS LLC



# EVERYTHING I NEEDED TO KNOW ABOUT D.E.I. I LEARNED IN CHURCH

---

LINDA JOHNSON

Executive Coaching and Leadership Development, Strategic Planning, Diversity Strategist  
15 articles, LinkedIn, October 27, 2021



The most well-known and pointed commentary about race and the American church was made by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1963: “11:00 am Sunday is the most segregated hour in America.”

Here we are, 58 years later, and we have come a long way: we now have a radically divided church split not only by race and nationality but by vigorously separatist political affiliations. Within certain well-publicized quarters, a person’s political opinions have become a litmus test of fidelity to Jesus. This battlefield plays out in the news daily, especially in the last four national elections. Fortunately, there is an “and” here: AND immigrant churches are thriving, thank you very much, AND we have more multi-ethnic churches in urban communities than ever. Across the nation, community churches have cooperated and collaborated across denominations and across cities for prayer, service to the poor, and solidarity.



I am sharing my observations as someone who has provided programs on diversity and inclusion for organizations professionally, as well as someone who grew up in one particular Black church tradition but has been part of non-denominational churches with the diversity and perspectives reflective of my New York City homestead for nearly 40 years as a Believer. I also visit churches and parachurch ministries and have seen how things play out beyond the Greater New York region, even to the Midwest.

The summary principle is this: There is no one way to “do DEI” simply because every organization’s circumstances are unique. I’ve spoken to white pastors in white communities who literally have no one of another culture in their vicinity. So, they band together with pastors from various backgrounds once a month for prayer and to build personal relationships and alliances between their churches. A Black church in Jamaica, Queens, for example, which I had an opportunity to visit one Sunday, does congregation exchanges where (and I witnessed one) a group from a Korean church will come to a service or event and a group from the Black church will do the same. Some monoethnic churches periodically “swap preachers” with each other periodically, to mention another example.

But certain factors must be in place in business or any other context. There must be a building of genuine relationships and an analysis of every system, from recruitment to hiring, promotion, development, grievances, career ladders, and training. There must be an ongoing effort; DEI is not a one-time event. There must be a diverse team of dedicated stakeholders; even if you have to bring in someone from the outside to make it diverse, do so. And it must be treated as essential as air.





Who does DEI better? That depends on where you look. Black women have been preachers in churches large and small ever since there were Black churches. Still, businesses across the board must follow guidelines set forth by federal, state and local mandates (although, if it happened perfectly, we wouldn't even need to be talking about DEI). On the other hand, the faithful use the Bible as their inspiration, rooting their commitment far deeper into their souls and spirit.

The Black church spearheaded the civil rights movement, but the white-dominated evangelical denominations that identify as conservative rarely acknowledge civil rights issues or are outright afraid of them. Controversial televangelist Pat Robertson once said that while he supported the principles of the Black Lives Matter movement, he felt it had been hijacked by "radicals seeking to destroy Christianity." Meanwhile, the Pearl Milling Company retired Aunt Jemima as a mascot and gave her a gold watch in respect. (For more background, see the complicated history of the Aunt Jemima brand). There is a Nike ad supporting Black Lives Matter, and thousands of CEOs have created a network where they act together and apart to strengthen DEI in the workplace and beyond.

Internationally known revivalist and Bible teacher Randy Clark (who is white), in his first statement on race after the George Floyd murder, denounced racism and police brutality, showing solidarity with communities of color. Meanwhile, Dove Award-winning Maverick City Music and artist Israel Houghton seek to erase the racial boundaries between the Contemporary Christian and Gospel music industries.



Here is just a small slice of what I've learned and observed:

1 “Diversity is a matter of makeup and composition. Inclusion is a matter of belief and behavior.”

Timothy Clark

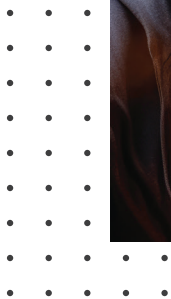
CEO of LeaderFactor, Forbes magazine, 3/17/21

I currently attend one of the nation's most ethnically diverse churches, in one of the planet's most diverse zip codes, in a diverse municipality. In New York City, you can step into a subway car, satisfy your hunger at Mama's Empanadas, or stroll down Harlem street and find yourself among a panoply of human tapestry.

At the same time, an African American friend of mine told me once of a white pastor of a multiracial church in Long Island who looked around at his rainbow congregation from the pulpit and actually said, "We're all Italian here." (My friend never returned.) Many churches led by white pastors warmly and sincerely welcome their congregants of color but can't seem to find a way to bring them from the pews into the boardroom or onto the pulpit.

I have also visited an Indian-majority church whose pastor decided to expand beyond Indians in the congregation and leadership and strategically and prayerfully seek out qualified and "anointed" Black, Hispanic/Latino, Caucasian, and other underrepresented people reflecting the neighborhood to take key, visible, decision-making roles. In Indian churches, this is radical.

The lesson: you can be in a diverse organization that is not automatically inclusive.





2

Treating a church or a nation like a family dynasty guarantees that only one dominant group will hold power indefinitely.

In the business world, we have long talked about the “Old Boys’ Network,” that unspoken hierarchical artifact that has kept women and people differentiated by ability, race, and other superficial differences out of visible, decision-making, power-wielding roles. Its counterpart is the church that is run like a family dynasty – one started by Pastor Swift and requires that every pastor thereafter be another Swift until Jesus returns in the flesh.

There are four families in the US with famous political dynasties (think Kennedy and Bush) and another forty families that hold prominent roles in a wide swath of political office. While this isn’t all bad, it isn’t necessarily good, either. Capability, integrity, and “calling” are not rooted in DNA, yet nepotism reigns throughout companies as well as some churches, large and small.

We must go outside our comfortable circle to bring in the best talent to succeed those in leadership now, wherever they may lie. Leadership pipelines are a necessity, not an option.

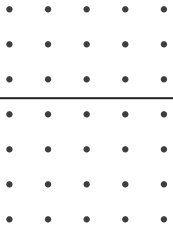
3

We are way past “my best friend is a \_\_\_\_\_” as a standard for racial inclusiveness.

I have seen and visited churches with a multi-racial “first family” that still couldn’t or wouldn’t develop a pipeline of leaders outside of their representative ethnic group. I’m not judging them as people because unless you have a broad affiliate group and share the responsibility for broadening the leadership team, you will just have (maybe) your token friend and no one else outside of your own group.

Many American executives have no associations in business outside their own ethnic group. Notice I said, “in business.” It’s nice if you’re in a community softball team that is diverse, but if there is a board meeting where names are bandied about for open positions, and the names called out spontaneously are only those of the dominant majority...in 2024...there is no excuse. Your network is too small, and you haven’t bothered to know the emerging talent that exists on every level.

It was an embarrassment when then-presidential candidate Mitt Romney said he had to ask women’s organizations for a binder full of women’s names and resumes because he didn’t know any to nominate for his cabinet. He was a lifelong politician and former governor. He knew not one qualified woman?!





I once registered for a national religious conference, and when I saw the roster of speakers, I was appalled that even in 2010, they were all white. (That is still the case today, by the way.) I wrote to the famous person in charge to ask for an acknowledgment of this and a correction. Three months after the conference, I got a response from an intern. For real! He said, “We never noticed it. I guess that [he] only invited people with whom he was familiar.” I won’t record my reaction here, but I let him know how unacceptable that was. Now, they have one person of color at some of their conferences. The same one each time.

We must do better. If you see that all your affiliations and associations look and think like you, treat it like a gaping, open wound. Get help closing that gap. Today.

## 4 Claim no easy victories and tell the people no lies.

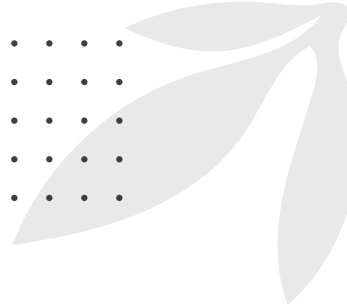
This is a summary quote from Amilcar Cabral’s book *Revolution in Guinea*. It’s one of my favorite quotes from the Pan-African liberation movement of the 1980s because it speaks of integrity.

Doing DEI is hard! It’s messy! It’s not for the thin-skinned or chicken-hearted! Being integrally involved on a church’s pastoral team for 15 years, I experienced the good, the bad, and the ugly. Having ongoing conflicts with a Korean American intern and not knowing if it was because he was male, Asian, or just racist. (It turned out that it was somewhat cultural, but mostly that we were both broken in ways that cut each other.) Watching senior pastors regularly accused of favoritism by one racial group or another and leaning on the rest of the multicultural team for the best way to respond or provide redress. Trying to do the right thing in creating ministry teams but having unaddressed tensions causes groups to explode or implode. Years of strife trying to get male leaders to put women in the pulpit more regularly. Watching talented leaders sidelined while I tried to advocate for them to be seen, pushed to the foreground, and used. Seeing where my own racial insensitivities lay, just when I thought I had it “together.”

I appreciate that, as a fellowship, we’ve been pretty open about how difficult and rewarding the commitment to what we call racial reconciliation is. But one can never rest on their laurels. I have also heard many a pastor boast about their multiracial church like they did something great when I know how hard it is to really go after inclusion with intention.

It’s OK to be publicly truthful. That won’t scuttle your efforts. It might just move things forward.





# 5

## It's tempting to give up before the baby is born.

I've seen churches split or lose a significant number of their members when they hired a pastor of a different race than the majority congregation. I've seen white parents whose children no longer wanted to be under the leadership of Black youth pastors once they reached middle school or high school. I've watched in real time the racial attitudes of children change once their outside, monocultural peer group influence outstripped the church's. A multi-ethnic church can seem normal to children until the outside world smacks them in the face with the realities of a stratified society.

Likewise, I have spoken to organizational leaders who are jaded about "that diversity thing." I have often been told, "We tried diversity training. It didn't work. All it did was make everyone mad at each other."

My response is often internal; I don't want to invalidate their experience. But while having a trainer come in and do a workshop might satisfy EEO compliance measures, that is not doing a "diversity thing." It's a vital but small part of the comprehensive strategic response that is actually needed to make a change.

Just because an organization tries the wrong way (and the wrong consultants) to address the issue, it doesn't make the change hopeless.





## 6

### The leader goes first.

Start somewhere. Your authority goes from you down, so even if the CEO doesn't budge, you can get the conversation going on whatever level you're on. You can even be very effective where you are. I mentored and raised up a lot of women leaders long before we started to see more in the pulpit. I ensured they had visibility, authority, and missions that came from their hearts, whether the mission took them out of the church or even out of the country.

However, systemic change must involve the decision-maker-in-chief. If their close counterparts are the ones understanding the need for systemic change, at some point, they must involve the person who signs off on things, from new hiring practices to policies and protocols for redressing grievances and authority to start a DEI committee or Employee Resource Group.

Howard Schultz, Starbucks' executive chair and former CEO, took the bold move of shutting down thousands of stores for one day and hosting racial sensitivity classes after an incident in which two Black men were arrested for asking to use their bathroom while waiting on a colleague. He also immediately instituted a store-wide policy of giving the bathroom key to any patron who asked. He led the way without hesitation.

If leaders wait until a groundswell of protest is rising from the grassroots, they might still respond, but it will be a very different process.

## 7

### Not having a conversation about race is a statement all by itself.

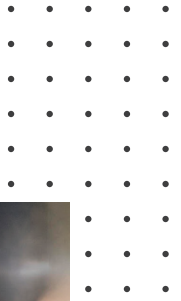
A LinkedIn member once proudly posted news about his graduation from law school, including the fact that he was joining the only five percent of American lawyers who were black. Ninety-five percent of respondents said a simple congratulations. A few mostly white respondents said, "Why does it always have to be about race?! Can't we just be proud he's a lawyer?" I have no doubt they meant well in their hearts. But then the firestorm began.

The upshot was: Why can't we talk about race? It can feel like violence to shut that discussion down. We, as people of color, aren't the ones who make everything about race. Up to a generation ago, we were all racially labeled on our birth certificates by the government! (Hi, my name is Linda. According to official records, I'm a Negro.)

It can be tricky to open a dialogue without precedent, but there are also people such as myself qualified to lead you through it. The worst thing you can do is stick your head in the sand.

# 8

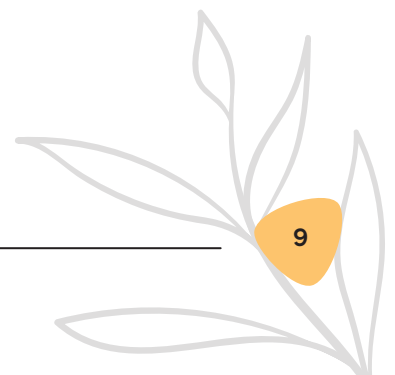
## Our stories can be an essential point of departure.



A regular part of church culture is to supply opportunities for people of different measures (racial, ethnic, age, nationality) to share their stories. Baptism, testimony times, and other venues are where we hear stories of trial and triumph, whether of surviving a civil war in Sri Lanka where several times their children went without food, a woman being rejected by their Pakistani Muslim family, recovery from drug or alcohol addiction, or rejection by fathers. Our stories unite us – we need proper context, humility, and vulnerability.

I have seen distrust disappear in a large company like a bubble in the wind when first-person stories and feelings about George Floyd and other racially motivated murders have struck a chord with the listeners.

People don't care about what you know. They want to know who you are and if you can be trusted with who they are.





9

People notice even incremental change but do something big and bold to kick off momentum and visibility. Make it real.

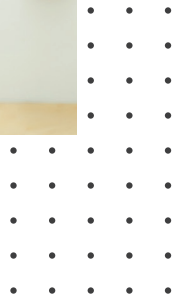
Hiring Asian American and Pacific Island (AAPI) pastors, having women preach (depending on the denomination), holding cultural celebrations, praying for Nepalese earthquake survivors, and making in-pulpit references to migrant or Palestinian brothers and sisters in Christ; all of these things matter. To visit a church recently and hear the white pastor say that racism is demonic changed everything for me.

When you're a minority of any kind somewhere, it's natural to "count heads." Am I the only one here? If I am, do I matter? Will I be accepted?

I love the expression, "If you can see me, you can be me." When people in your organization hear publicly that your company leadership acknowledges the pain of a local community or see people running meetings, in company portraits and newsletters, and speaking from the boardroom, they believe it can one day be them. Knowing that you can reasonably expect your hard work to be rewarded in career advancement will inspire you to stick around long enough to see it happen.

One of my sons used to come home from work in his business suit and then wear it around the house for hours. Knowing his preference for casual wear, I was bemused and curious about this. One day, he told me that seeing a suit-wearing, dignified Barack Obama in the White House implanted an intangible beam of pride in his heart.

Actions speak louder than words. Do the big thing.



10

You might eventually work your way out of a job if you're successful.

The woman who succeeded me in my old women's ministry is Filipina. The new pastor is Puerto Rican. The worship pastor is female. The church succession process is far from perfect. Still, when we see examples of people of all backgrounds constantly being groomed for leadership as the norm, it is just as likely that someone from Bolivia will emerge as the next leader as someone from the local neighborhood, wherever that neighborhood is.

As of 2024,, only four Black CEOs are still in the Fortune 500. That's less than one percent. Did I mention it's 2024?

If you tightly grip your power, you are weaker than if you hold it with an open hand.

11

Young generations have so much hope and promise if we do the hard work.

I once told a child he would meet another child from a different country and ethnicity. His concern was, "Is he fun?" Now, that was the perfect question. "We have a new swim coach." "Can he swim?"

Millennials are coming into the workplace with a very different view of the world and of equity. They didn't live through the civil rights movement, but they lived through George Floyd and gay marriage. Dress codes are optional. Their tech-savvy gives them an enormous advantage and makes them invaluable. We must work with and learn from them.





Because of the ingrained value of multiculturalism, there was a constant tension at my church between keeping everybody together and having a place where ethnic groups, nationalities, or language groups could coalesce. At the church's inception, it seemed ungodly to have an all South Indian small group or an all Afro-Caribbean small group.

After our pastor asked some Indonesian members if they were connected to any small groups, they said, "No. It's hard because one speaks our language, plus we're homesick."

Finally, years into our church's existence, they decided not only that culture-designated groups were welcome but were essential as another expression of the commitment to diversity, not just for the mental respite they provided to those whose second language became a burden after hours at an untranslated church service (except for Spanish speakers who make up 30%). It provided a haven for homesick immigrants who longed to meet and bond with their fellow compatriots. Also, it provided a way for all of

us congregants to visit other countries and continents figuratively; we all regularly stop by the Latino gathering for good food, good music and fun or visit the Chinese group for bubble tea. Everyone goes to each other's gatherings, and it has actually strengthened, not weakened, the fellowship.

In the business world, organizations have started not only more and more DEI committees but also Employee Networking Groups (also called Employee Resource Groups, or ERGs), representing employees who share race, nationality, gender, gender identity, disability, or other commonalities. These groups are, in fact, essential ingredients in company-wide strategies to increase inclusion, pay equity, and equal opportunity.

While it may seem counter-intuitive, you will strengthen your DEI efforts by strengthening everyone's sense of belonging within and outside of these autonomous formations. They are your think tanks and idea incubators.



13

You're probably doing it right if everybody's a little uncomfortable.

Emphasis on everybody. If the people who have always been in power still feel secure in their power and privilege and don't expect any change to inconvenience them, there's a problem. If minorities who are advanced into new positions don't feel any more challenged than when they were in the old ones, there's a problem. If there are decorations up for Christmas, Kwanzaa, Hanukkah, and Diwali, and everyone is a bit ill at ease, you're heading in the right direction. Why?

Because in the business world, unity isn't uniformity.

14


Those who represent the church as well as the corporation have a major role to play, whether in unity or division.

What should our Kingdom mindset be in the midst of nationwide racial strife?

“It's my contention that the Church helped cause this problem by not being the Church of Jesus Christ that He created, not having Biblical unity, and often endorsing illegitimate disunity. Therefore, the Church needs to be the cure for this problem by modeling unity.”

\_\_\_\_\_ **Dr. Tony Evans**

Oak Cliff Bible Church



**CEO Action for Diversity and Inclusion** is a network of over 2,000 CEO signatories representing eighty-five industries. They are committed to promoting diversity and inclusion by being examples and encouraging other companies in their unique expression of equity and advocacy in the wider society. They are not waiting for the politicians to decide to do the right thing when they have the people's power and capital in their hands to drive inclusion forward. Their website shares what they are doing individually and collectively, delving into police reform and voter rights.



## MANY LESSONS REMAIN

There have been many lessons learned and more lessons to come, but even I was surprised at how comprehensively this issue in churches mirrors the trajectory of DEI in the marketplace. As a diversity trainer and strategist, I have seen the stark difference in progress among the two sectors as well as within each sector. Female preachers have been endemic in the Black church from its inception while being shut out of the liturgy in other church traditions. A particular swath of Christian churches has joined with forces that support white supremacy. Meanwhile, groups across the nation have marched, prayed, and peacefully protested racial injustice, seeking systemic change.

It will take 95 years at the current rate for there to be a representative number of Black CEOs, not to mention CEOs representing Native Americans, Latinos, etc. Yet thousands more corporations than ever are stepping up and reorganizing how they hire, develop, and retain talent from underrepresented minorities.

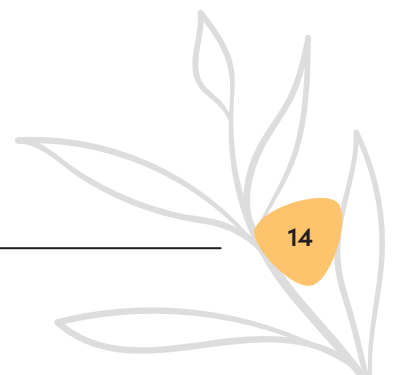
## A FINAL WARNING

Something else I have seen, both in my consulting work with organizations and in ministries, is the law of entropy. My unscientific take on this second law of thermodynamics played out in an organization is this: regardless of the organization, if you do nothing and continue to fail to address the outside-world issues that deeply impact the organizational stakeholders, your organization will slowly descend into chaos.

You may already be experiencing it, such as when all of the Black parishioners at a Long Island church walked out at once when they felt diminished yet one more time by the pastor’s all-white leadership team; when white parishioners left after feeling ignored when a church’s racial balance tipped; when tensions broke out among law enforcement officers of all races and church members after a high-profile police shooting of unarmed minorities occurred; when there is splitting off of one language group from a multicultural church.

In the business world, you might put off dealing with the emotional trauma suffered by your staff when they feel continually berated and victimized by the outside powers-that-be and also ignored by the inside powers-that-be. We see “brain drains” all the time when qualified, talented employees are ignored for promotion in favor of white candidates brought in from the outside...who then have to be trained by the very people passed over for the position!

We have a way to go, but looking deeply into the progress and setbacks in both sectors gives us a pathway to finally get it right.





“ As we stand at an inflection point in the arc of history, we are experiencing another great awakening. All at once, institutions, companies, leaders, employees, and citizens collectively recognize an urgent need for change. Now comes the hard work of depoliticizing conversations about race at work, applying systems-based thinking, and committing to move from empathetic and active listening to swift and meaningful action. ”

---

Kai D. Wright