



The Diversity Benefits Everyone INTERVIEW



Dr. Dwight Perry

DBE interviews prominent scholars and religious leaders from around the country and will be featuring these interviews to help Converge's readers stay current on the most pressing diversity issues impacting the church. This week Dr. Dwight Perry is interviewed. Rev. Dr. Dwight Perry is the Regional President and Executive Minister of Converge Great Lakes and is known and appreciated for his straight-talk approach to ministry. Prior to coming to the Converge Great Lakes, Dr. Perry served as a full time professor of pastoral studies at the Moody Bible Institute, a denominational executive with the Baptist General Conference and as a senior pastor and associate pastor in three different local churches in Illinois. He has published extensively in the area of practical theology. Dr. Perry speaks and consults on a number of topics across the country, including the area of racial and cultural diversity. He and his wife Dr. Cynthia Perry, a tenured professor in the College of Education at Edgewood College in Madison, Wisconsin, have four adult children and four grandchildren. They live in Madison, Wisconsin.

DBE: Dr. Perry, you're coming to the end of your career at Converge. As you look back, what stands out as the highlights of your tenure? What about low points?

Dr. Perry: I love Converge. Twenty-eight years ago I was at a crossroads in my ministry career. I had already accepted a senior leadership position with a different organization and was getting prepared to leave Chicago with my young family when a man by the name of Reverend Robert Boyd stepped into my life. I had met him in my responsibilities as the Midwest Regional Coordinator for the Moody Bible Institute, which at that time was the accrediting body for the Hispanic Bible Institute that Reverend Boyd helped to oversee for the Baptist General Conference. Over the course of several months, God used my friend Rob to lead and guide me to join the BGC as the first person of color in the national home office as the National Coordinator of Black Ministries. As a home missionary I needed to raise personal support for my position. Some, especially those in the African American community, did not totally understand why I was the only national staff person who had to raise personal support, but as I look back on those five years on staff it was a blessing that I had to assume this responsibility. Being new to the denomination, my having to raise support allowed me to meet people all over the country that I

never would have met if I had not. These same people, many of whom I would stay in their homes during my weekend deputation visits to their churches, fell in love with Dr. Cynthia and me and our family and, still to this day, pray for us.

Another highlight has been the love and care of the board of overseers of Converge Great Lakes. These men and women have not only allowed me to grow as a senior leader in our movement, but they also have been, along with literally hundreds of others, a great support to me when I went through my battle with throat cancer. I praise God for their prayers and for their encouragement and for their challenge in my life.

There are always low points in any situation. I feel I have been fortunate to be around good and godly people who have loved me and my family. I have unfortunately experienced at times racism and unwarranted criticism. For example, one pastor wrote a note to one of my staff stating that they do not call their Pastors by a title and that he does not know why I am trying to treat the Great Lakes district like a Black church. What hurt most about this comment was not that it obviously was rooted in some racial bias that this Pastor still needed to deal with, but that I barely knew this pastor as he had only been in the district a couple of years, along with the fact that I had personally reached out to him when his family went through a major health scare. Another low point is the fact that even after almost 30 years with Converge, I would have hoped we would have been further in eliminating some of the structural and systemic racism that is still present.

DBE: What advice will you give to your successor about managing the Great Lakes district?

Dr. Perry: Understand that in the role of an Executive Minister, you will be misunderstood and you will be attacked, because hurting people hurt people and hurting churches hurt people.

Second, make sure you take care of yourself and your wife emotionally. Find a good church home for yourself and your family and make sure you have relationships that can spiritually nurture both you and your wife.

Third, build a strong board that will not only hold you accountable but will also care for your soul.

DBE: Dr. Perry, part of your legacy will be the work you've accomplished in the area of diversity and inclusion. Indeed it is my understanding that the Diversity Assessment initiative that Converge is currently undertaking is your brainchild. Why did you think an assessment was important, and what do you hope it will achieve?

Dr. Perry: As I contemplated my retirement, I began to ask myself the question what I could do to help the movement I love to advance further in the area of diversity. I was and still am fearful that if this area is simply built on the voices of a few leaders like myself and not institutionalized into our core values and systems, once people like me leave the movement, it will retrench. I felt strongly that bringing in someone with outside eyes who did not have "any skin in the game" and implementing a systematic assessment process that could not be accused of some type of

personal bias or agenda would help us to take an honest look at ourselves. Some have marveled (this even happened this past weekend at a church I was at in my district) at how God has miraculously brought me through my cancer and that my voice is so strong. Well, that would not have happened if I had not been willing over ten and half years ago to listen to my wife to go and get that outside assessment done. As I said often early in my tenure in Great Lakes, when we found out we were thousands of dollars in debt and no one knew anything about it, quoting John Kotter from his book *Leading Change*, " Reality is our friend."

DBE: Do you think diversity matters to God, and what is your message to pastors who may think the organization shouldn't be focusing its attention on diversity?

Dr. Perry: Many years ago, while on faculty at the Moody Bible Institute, I heard one of the best theological treatments on this subject I had ever heard from my dear friend, Dr. John Piper. Speaking from Revelation 5, the title of his message was "Racial Reconciliation Is a BLOOD Issue." The thesis of this talk was that racial reconciliation is not ultimately a politically correct issue or a social issue, but a theological issue that breaks the heart of a God, who for all of eternity will be worshipped by people from every nation, every tribe, every tongue. In other words, we had better figure out how to love one another on this side of heaven, because we are going to be standing next to one another for all of eternity on the other side in heaven.

The mission of Converge Great Lakes is to glorify God by strengthening local churches so they may reach people for Christ locally, nearby and around the world. As conservative evangelicals, we have focused on the local (those who look like us) and the around the world (those who do not look like us but do not live near us), but we have neglected those who are nearby (those who do not look or act or think like us, but who live in proximity to us). This is the American evangelical church's hidden sin and, in my opinion, the number one reason why the culture around us has engulfed us instead of us penetrating and influencing it. What did Jesus say in John 17? "They will know that I have come by our mega churches." No. "They will know that I have come by wealthy schools." No. "They will know that I have come by our fancy and big conferences." No. They, meaning those outside of Christ, will know that Jesus is real by our unity. Unity is not uniformity, it is not every-church-must-worship-like-my-church or do things the way I do things. It is demonstrating to the world that as Christ-followers we live differently, not just by the fact that we worship a living God, but that we are genuinely seeking to be reconciled and enter into relationship with those who are different than us.

DBE: Dr. Perry, some of your peers may not be familiar with all of the scholarly work you've done over the years. Can you talk about some of your writings and share with us some of the books you've written on a number of religious topics?

Dr. Perry: God has been very gracious to me in this area. My area of specialty has been in the area of pastoral theology. I have written and researched on a number of topics beginning with an historical analysis of the African American Church. My first book, written many years ago, entitled *Breaking Down Barriers: A Black Evangelical Explains the Black Church*, looked at the

influence not only of racism but our African roots and how the Black church literally was the means God used to help an entire people survive not only slavery, but Jim Crowism and systemic and structural racism. My book *Building Unity in the Church in the New Millennium*, a Moody Press publication, is considered one of the more comprehensive volumes written from an evangelical point of view on the area of diversity. Written with several other scholars and practitioners from across the country, it looks at the issue of diversity from a racial point of view and also through the lens of class, gender and other forms of bias within the evangelical church.

I also have written books on such topics as homiletics. My book *Connect* is being used all over the country and was written for those who do not have formal training in preaching. *Turnaround* is a book on organizational change and strategic envisioning. A more personal reflective work, entitled *A Hole in My Soul*, addresses the need for mentoring in the church. It is set against the backdrop of my own broken experience growing up in the inner-city of Chicago. My latest work is called *Finish Well: A Guide to Leadership Succession and Organizational Transition*, which came out in January 2016. These are just some of the resources I have been involved in researching and producing. All the books mentioned above are available on Amazon.

DBE: As you wind things down and look ahead, what two or three things would you like to see Converge accomplish in the next three to five years?

Dr. Perry: Number one: Greater diversity among our senior executive leadership within Converge and Bethel University. Currently, I am the only full-time senior executive who is voted in by the churches. Within our context the leadership team of the denomination is made up of all the District Executive Ministers, the President of the denomination and the President of Bethel, with two of his Vice Presidents, the Seminary Dean and the Executive Director of Church Ministries. Everyone is Caucasian except for me, and I am stepping down within the next few months, which will mean they will all be white. This to me is unacceptable, especially in light of the fact that over one-fourth of our U.S. congregations are churches of color.

Number two: An honest dialogue about how we can move past our presuppositions about one another in the area of race, and understand this is not a minority issue but an all-of-us issue. Our communities, even in places like central Wisconsin where I serve, are becoming more and more diverse. Jesus' command is to "Go and make disciples of all nations" (*ethnos*) is the Greek word transliterated into the words "race, nation or people group." Thus the Great Commission given by Jesus Matthew 28:18-20 cannot be fulfilled unless we break down the assumption that if I am a mono-cultural congregation within a community of diverse persons, but my church does not represent that diversity, there is something inherently wrong that needs to be fixed—not so I can be politically correct, but so that I can fulfill my mission.

Number three: I would like to see the funding question addressed within our denomination. The implementation of a strong planned giving structure, the development of a comprehensive funding and development plan, a change in our church planting support model, which excludes many in communities of color and increasingly even those from majority communities from being successful in individual support-raising.

Number four: I would like to see Converge become more systems-driven without losing our entrepreneurial spirit and practice. Over the past 30 years it has been leaders of vision who have helped us to become one of the few evangelical denominations that is continuing on a growth, not plateau, trajectory. It is that same entrepreneurial, visionary strength that is also one of our biggest weaknesses, which in the end hurts people as we fail to execute what we say we are going to do.

DBE: Given the changing demographics that will impact churches in profound ways, what cultural competencies do you think church pastors will need to help them minister to multicultural congregations?

Dr. Perry: First and foremost I genuinely think we all need help in listening. As preachers, our natural disposition for many of us is to tell instead of hear. Understanding of another's situation and true empathy, however, cannot take place unless we first are willing to take the time to walk in their shoes.

Second, I believe strongly that we need to build intentional and open relationships with those of another culture so that we can enrich one another. Relationships take time, and they are hard at times due to our differences. However, it is within the context of a relationship that we can gain insight not only into the person but their worldview. The question I always like to ask people. Who comes to your house for dinner? This little question is very telling in terms of your cross cultural and cross racial relationships.

Thirdly, we need to help our pastors grow in their understanding that cultural competencies cannot be addressed unless we develop a good theological framework in the area of diversity. As long as diversity is positioned as a political or social construct, and not a theological and biblical mandate, we in this movement, which is still very bibliocentric, will push back.

Finally, we need to help our pastors and other leaders understand that diversity is not just personal, it is structural and systematic. Just because you have a black or brown friend does not mean you, as a leader, are growing in your cultural competencies and fulfilling Christ's command to reach all people for Christ.

DBE: Any other comments that you would like to share with Converge readers?

Dr. Perry: I just want my brothers and sisters to know that how much Dr. Cynthia and I love and thank God for Converge. You took a chance many years ago on someone who was outside your circle, and my wife and I have been deeply blessed by your love and friendship.

DBE: How can readers contact you? **Dr. Perry:** I will not be transitioning for a few months. So they can email me at dperry@convergegreatlakes.org or contact me at dwrightperry51@gmail.com, my personal email address.

