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Isaac Villegas: I long for the church of many identities

A young Latino pastor celebrates the church that allows everyone to be whoever they happen to be, working together to create communities of abundant life.

by [Isaac Villegas](#)

May 21, 2013

A few years ago, I was asked to preach at an annual board meeting for my denomination, Mennonite Church USA. Then 28, with barely three years' experience as a pastor, I was honored to be invited. But I was also nervous about the prospect of speaking to an assembly of 200 respected church leaders.

Not wanting to look out of place, I asked a friend who was familiar with these sorts of meetings for advice about what to wear. Suit and tie? Tie but no coat? Coat but no tie?

He told me not to worry and to wear what I had on -- a T-shirt, jeans and my Chuck Taylor All Stars.

"They're asking you to preach to them because you're young and they're old, so look as young as you are," he said. "They want to see youthfulness."

After much deliberation, I went with the tie-but-no-coat option -- and left the Chuck Taylors at home. When I arrived at the conference center, I was relieved to see that I had managed to satisfy the unwritten dress code.

But even so, wardrobe aside, I knew immediately that I still stuck out: I was in my 20s; the church leaders were not. In fact, virtually the only other young people in the crowd were two women who, I soon found out, were the other speakers.

The three of us, I discovered, were there to speak for our generation, to share our youthful hopes for our denomination. We were the eventual heirs of the church; the 200 of them were God's faithful servants who had spent decades building and sustaining a church that they would one day entrust to a new generation. The three of us spoke with unearned confidence, but the crowd received our words

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GO

with warmth and grace, respect and gratitude.

Afterward, I realized that my friend was right. They wanted me because I was young. They would have loved my Chucks.

As you can probably guess from my age and my surname, I fit at least two underrepresented demographics among church leaders in many denominations: pastors under 35 and pastors who are Latino (especially those who happen to be acculturated enough to write and speak in English).

So whenever I'm asked to write or speak or join a committee, I can't help but wonder, Why? Is it because I am, at least for the next few years, young? Is it because I'm Latino? Or is it because I am -- to borrow the phrase that Jack Donaghy on NBC's "30 Rock" uses to describe his African-American, Harvard-educated employee -- a "toofer," a "two-for-one," one person who satisfies two desired demographics?

As the child of Latino immigrants and a member of a generation that is by all accounts heading out the church door, I confess that I sometimes wonder whether I am valued only because I am a "two-for-one." I can't help but worry that I'm wanted only to the extent that I fit someone's stereotype of an authentic minority or a bona fide young person.

In her book "Sister Outsider," the late African-American writer and activist Audre Lorde wrote about how all of us want to "be seen as whole people in our actual complexities." The problem, Lorde said, is that "we come to each other coated in myths, stereotypes, and expectations from the outside, definitions not our own."

Inevitably, those expectations will not be met. People who are invited to participate because they fill a missing demographic category or otherwise satisfy someone's definition of a minority are ultimately "going to be found wanting in some way," Lorde wrote.

Lorde, for example, noticed how some did not find her black enough or womanly enough. In my case, I worry that I won't be brown enough or young enough to meet others' expectations about what I am supposed to look and sound like. Does my accent sound Latino enough? Does my beard make me look older than they want me to be?

But as Lorde explained, we are at our best only when we act out of wholeness, when we can call upon all the pieces that make up who we are as individuals.

"My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly," Lorde wrote, "allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definitions."

I understand what Lorde is saying, and I want what she wants. I want to be invited to participate and to join in the struggle for hope. I want myself and others to be free to wander in and out of stereotypes and to offer our minority identities, our difference, "not in order to be used, but in order to be creative," as Lorde put it.

I want to be part of a group that allows each person to be ordinary and strange, to be the same and different, to be whoever we happen to be and whoever we have to be, as we work together to create communities of abundant life.

"I came that they may have life," Jesus said, "and have it abundantly" (John 10:10 NRSV).

[I've found such life among my Mennonite sisters and brothers](#). That's why I welcomed the chance to speak as a young adult to our denominational leaders. I knew that we -- both the leaders and the young people they had chosen as speakers -- were committed to the same work, the abundant life of Jesus, here and now.

Yet I know what it feels like when a group wants me to play a part, to use me to legitimate a project unrelated to my hopes and the hopes of the demographic I'm supposed to represent. I'm wary of tokenism, where people want to use my otherness for their own purposes, regardless of how that would affect me and my people.

There's always a risk that a group might try to use my identity, my difference, to make their project

more valuable and more appealing to a wider public. Even with suspicion in the back of my mind, I take the risk, because I long for the church that the apostle Paul described in 1 Corinthians, where the body of Christ “does not consist of one member but of many” -- a church full of many identities, not of sameness, all working together in the movement of the Holy Spirit for the sake of all of us (1 Corinthians 12:14).

The only way to discern what is good for all of us is for all of us to risk working together, to experiment with the creative power that comes from putting our different identities in conversation.

For, as Paul wrote, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7). The common good is something we discover along the way, as we make room for the Holy Spirit to manifest God’s presence in the midst of our differences.