

# Community in Diversity

BY KIKANZA NURI ROBINS

I was raised in the Spirit, in a family where love and music and God were all mixed in together. When I was very young, I lived in my great-grandmother's house with my grandparents, my parents and my brother. We lived across the street from the Methodist church that we attended. My grandmother played the organ, and my mother directed the choir.

My great-grandmother could also play the piano, but everyone would tease her because she played everything in the key of C. My parents are musicians and music teachers, so when they talk about my great-grandmother, they make it sound like she was a lesser musician. I am one of their student failures—I was barely able to play with both hands at the same time—so from my perspective, it took quite a bit of talent for Nana to transpose the music she played to the key of C.

At church, my great-grandmother was in the Altar Society. She was one of the ladies who always wore a white dress and a funny white bonnet and sat on the first row of pews. Her job was to prepare the Communion trays at home and carry them across the street to the church. She would pour Welch's grape juice into those tiny little cups, and, in my young mind, she did some kind of magic to turn that juice into Communion wine.

I was born in Boston. My mother and grandmother were true Boston ladies. My mother taught me to cross my legs at the ankles, to wear a hat and gloves when I went downtown, and to never raise my voice or my arms in public. My grandmother would never drink from a mug; she would only take her coffee in a china cup and saucer. She was very beautiful, smart and not one of those huggy, kissy grandmothers. She wouldn't kiss us kids, because she didn't want to mess up her make-up. But she would say, "You may kiss me right here," and point to her cheek.



"Rejoice" by Christine Adams

My great-grandmother was very different. She was our pal. She played with us. She let us climb all over her, and comb her hair and sit in her lap. And that is where I learned about God. My nana would hold me so that I could feel her heart beating, and she would sing to me, "Jesus bid us shine, with a clear pure light, like a little diamond shining in the night."

And she would point to the light streaming in from a window and she would sing, "Jesus wants me for a sunbeam, to shine for him

each day." To this day, when I see dust motes dancing in a stream of light, I think of my nana and I know I am loved, and I know that somehow her songs and that light are connected to the Mystery we call God.

So I grew up knowing God in a very personal way. My experience of God wasn't tied to doctrine, or creed or dogma; it was tied to my nana's love.

## Living with Questions

My family was Methodist, but the cool kids at the high school I attended went to the Baptist church down the street from our house. So, my mother let my brother and me walk to the Baptist church, while the rest of the family went to the Methodist church across town. We would go to Sunday school, and after that, we would have the rest of the day free.

That worked well for a while, until one day the Sunday school superintendent called my mother and asked her to please keep me home. "What happened?" my mother asked. In typical adolescent verbosity, I said, "I don't know."

"What did you say to the class?"

"Nothing."

"Well the superintendent said your questions were disturbing the other students and she asked me to keep you home. So I guess if they can't answer your questions, you don't have to go."

This is an excerpt of the presentation Kikanza Nuri Robins gave during Saturday morning's plenary session at the 2006 Churchwide Gathering of Presbyterian Women. The complete version is available on the Gathering Web pages, [www.pcusa.org/pwgathering](http://www.pcusa.org/pwgathering).

## **Every day, we are invited to make room at the table for people who are not like us. Making room at the table requires dismantling historical resentments, releasing emotional baggage, acknowledging personal biases and deconstructing institutionalized forms of oppression.**

That was my first rejection by organized religion, but I didn't mind, because my understanding of God was tied up in music and sunbeams and Nana's love for me. I didn't need a church to tell me about God.

From the time I was a child, I had an intuitive understanding and ecstatic experiences of the mystery we call God. That freed me from attachment to any particular dogma. I am comfortable with mystery and I am certain that I am a child of God. I am clear about the ambiguities of life and I rest in the knowledge that I will never understand it all.

So, as an adult, the only problems I have had with spiritual differences have been the problems people had with me, because I didn't agree with them, or because I questioned what they believed to be nonnegotiable, capital T, Truth. After I describe how I experience the mystery, people have said to me, "God is no mystery, you just don't have any faith. Who is your God anyway? Your God can't be the same God I worship. You must be from the devil to say things like that. Are you really ordained?"

### **Staying at the Table**

Over the years, as an organizational development consultant, I have done a lot of work with people about staying at the metaphorical table. In negotiating and problem-solving, you can't get anywhere if you don't stay at the table. You never get heard, and you never win, if you grab your marbles and go home, or if you stomp away from the table complaining. Whether you feel marginalized or silenced, you will never have a voice if you don't stay at the table.

It's hard and it often takes courage, but it's important to develop the communication and conflict resolution skills necessary to do that. And now that I am well over 50, it is still hard, but I have learned to stay at the table.

What I am working on now is making room at the table. Making room at the table is easy when the people you invite to the table don't challenge your boundaries, your values, your practices or your authority. Making room at the table is easy when you don't invite people who are outside of your box of comfortable paradigms.

Think about your experiences in ecumenical or interfaith work, or some of the experiences in your own congregation. Think about the times you have participated with someone in a faith tradition that was not yours. I am talking about going to a house of worship that is not like yours or having a conversation with someone whose faith tradition is different from yours. Or trying to understand what it means when someone says they are agnostic or atheist. Or understanding persons who call themselves Presbyterian, but whose understanding of God is totally different from yours.

You see, it is human nature to be drawn to people like yourself and to feel threatened by people who are not like you. And it is human nature to feel that if someone believes something that is very different from what you believe, you and your beliefs are somehow threatened and in danger. Even if intellectually you know it is not true, it is human nature to feel that way. So as humans, we try to



simplify the world. We say, "This is right and that is wrong. This is black and that is white. This is the way and that is not."

Most of you have probably taken a class, had a workshop or had some personal experience where you have been confronted with your personal biases and prejudices around some issues of diversity—race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, nationality, age, geography, physical ability. These things all challenge us in some ways, but not the way that spiritual diversity does.

### **Getting Comfortable with Diversity**

When I was growing up, I was told to never engage in conversations about sex, politics or religion, because those are issues that are not necessarily tied to reason and rational thought. They are tied to feelings and values, the things we believe in because deep in our hearts, at the bottom of our souls, we know them to be true.

Well, we don't live in a world where we are surrounded by people who are just like us. So whether we are willing or not, every day, we are invited to make room at the table for people who are not like us. Making room at the table requires dismantling historical resentments, releasing emotional baggage, acknowledging personal biases and deconstructing institutionalized forms of oppression.

You may call yourself a peacemaker, a mediator, a pluralist or a good person, but if you aren't

doing these things, you will not be comfortable with diverse spiritualities or diversity of any kind. God invites us to recognize our similarities and differences, and to learn from both.

Getting comfortable with spiritual diversity starts with doing some internal work. You can't make room at the table for anyone else if you haven't done some work on yourself. Here are five things you can do.

**1. Assess spirituality in your environment. Become aware of the spiritual diversity around you.**

- Know your own beliefs and practices.
- Be willing to question and challenge yourself.
- Ask people about their spiritual beliefs and practices.

**2. Value diverse spiritualities and accept that someone else's path is as valid for them as yours is for you.**

- Be willing to be stretched and challenged.
- Share your practices and beliefs with others.
- Take advantage of opportunities to learn about others' practices and beliefs.
- Assume that God did not reveal all that there is to reveal to Christians.
- Assume that even if we know all that God has revealed to us

Christians, there may be more to know that we will never know.

- Remember that you can only see what is behind your eyes.

**3. Manage the dynamics of difference in religious beliefs and spiritual practices.**

- Hold conflicting thoughts, without requiring resolution.
- Seek common ground, accept when there is none and learn from both.
- Be willing to see the failings in your own traditions and practices.
- Christianity is not neat. It does not answer all questions. Consider, for example, the Trinity, the fact that bad things happen to good people and how both a faithful believer and a blatant sinner can end up in the same heaven if the sinner confesses and asks for forgiveness on her death bed.

**4. Adapt to spiritual differences.**

- Make space at your table for other paths, not just because they are interesting or curious, but because they may be plausible and wise.
- Acknowledge them as good for those who hold them.

**5. Internalize what you learn.**

- Start simply—read other

spiritual books, use prayers from other traditions.

- Integrate the learning and practice of other traditions with yours.
- Publicly acknowledge that there are many plausible paths, and that yours is one of them. Others are not wrong, just different.
- Leave your boundaries strong and grounded; you don't have to deny your spiritual path.
- Leave your boundaries flexible and permeable so you can continue learning and growing.

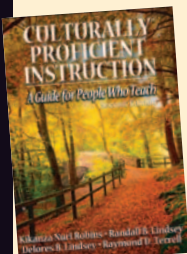
Whatever path you are on, wherever you sit at the table, the responsibility lies with you. Slow down and share your story. Accept an invitation to learn and grow. Open the door, place a chair, and make space at your table for one more person, one more idea, one more perception of the wondrous mystery that we call God.

The Spirit of God blows where it chooses. We may hear the sound of it, but we don't know where it comes from or where else it goes. 🍃

Kikanza Nuri Robins is a consulting pastor in the Presbytery of the Pacific. She wrote *Suggestions for Leaders for the 2006–2007 Horizons Bible study, In the Beginning: Perspectives on Genesis* by Celia Brewer Sinclair and is the author of the 2008–2009 *Horizons Bible study, Insiders/Outsiders: A Study of the Gospel of Luke*.



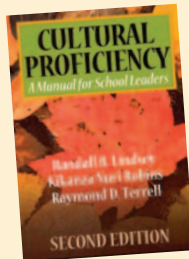
**Resource**



**Culturally Proficient Instruction: A Guide for People Who Teach**

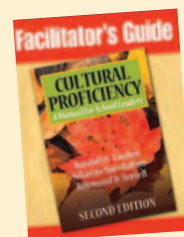
Cowritten with Randall Lindsey, Delores Lindsey and Raymond

Terrell Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin, 2005  
ISBN: 141292430



**Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders**

Cowritten with Randall Lindsey and Raymond Terrell Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin, 2003  
ISBN: 0761946446



**Facilitator's Guide to Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders**

Cowritten with Randall Lindsey and Raymond Terrell Thousand Oaks,

Calif.: Corwin, 2005  
ISBN: 1412916577