



# THE SKIN YOU LIVE IN



# THE SKIN YOU LIVE IN

*Building Friendships Across Cultural Lines*

DAVID D. IRELAND

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To my children,  
Danielle and Jessica Ireland

## **ALSO BY DAVID D. IRELAND**

Activating the Gifts of the Holy Spirit

Journey to the Mountain of God

Perfecting Your Purpose

Secrets of a Satisfying Life

Why Drown When You Can Walk on Water?



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# INTRODUCTION

**M**y wife, Marlinda, was expecting our first child, and her taste buds were all over the place. One night, I headed to the supermarket with one goal: to pick up everything she craved. As a twenty-five-year-old husband, soon-to-be father, newly employed environmental engineer, and pastor of a two-week-old congregation of eight people, I felt a bit inadequate. But I was willing to tackle every one of my new challenges.

As I walked through the electronic doors and started loading up my basket, the thought of encountering God in that supermarket was the furthest thing from my mind. I couldn't have imagined I would have an encounter that would set me on a lifelong trajectory of emotions, research, and spiritual passion during such a mundane errand.

Just as I was placing a jar of pickles into my basket, I noticed Caucasians, African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans at the other end of the aisle all shopping for their weekly groceries. While I stared, captivated by this snapshot of diversity, the Holy Spirit spoke to me, asking, "Why can't it be like that in My house?" Suddenly a whirlwind of emotions churned inside of me. Right there, in the middle of

the supermarket, I began to cry uncontrollably. Embarrassment was the last thing on my mind. At that moment, God had touched me with His feelings about racial diversity and His church. Tears were still rolling down my face when I reached the cashier, who probably thought I was trying to scam her for some free food. I was still an emotional wreck after handing her the money and walking out of the store with my bags.

That day I received more than groceries at the supermarket; I received a vision for my life. God's house was meant to be racially and culturally diverse. I had profoundly discovered it as the cry of His heart, and He had shared it with me in a personal way. I suddenly wanted to answer His question—"Why can't it be like that in My house?"—in every way that I connected with other people. The question gnawed at my heart, expanding from ideas about the church to hopes and dreams for society. Soon, the question became profoundly personal and I asked myself, *Why can't it be like that in my world?* That meant everything in my world had to change, and I had to make my personal, professional, and pastoral life reflect what God shared with me in that supermarket. Each of my personal relationships had to be examined and scrubbed to see if they measured up to my newfound value for living a multicultural lifestyle.

## WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

Personal relationships are the bedrock to all aspects of social life. They are also the gateway to the corporate boardroom, police force, and every place of influence in all sectors of society. Hence, if you can learn how to develop cross-race friendships on a personal level, the principles can be applied to

the other arms of your life, be they professional or social. The personal relationship is the laboratory where we research and learn how to get along with others.

The *New York Times* confirms my observation, reporting that whites have been a minority in New York City since the 1980s; the 2010 Census shows that trend has continued to the surrounding region including northern New Jersey—my home. This identical trend is also occurring across the United States. Although 49.6 percent of the area population of New York City is white, a persistent racial and gender gap still exists in executives and managerial positions. Interestingly enough, this gap is becoming narrower for white women.<sup>1</sup> The reason: White men—the demographic that largely occupies the boardroom and other places of decision-making—have personal relationships with their sisters, mothers, and daughters. They understand how to relate to white women because they are already relationally experienced in this area. So the idea of including them in upper levels of management was a natural progression.

If white males had healthy personal relationships with Asians, African Americans, and Hispanics, diversity would be easier to achieve in the workforce, in communities, in the church, and in other arenas of life. Equally important is the converse of this statement: If Asians, African Americans, and Hispanics learned how to cultivate and enjoy personal relationships with members of the white community, the racial gap would become narrower. It's a long-standing social fact that isolation anchors attitudes of prejudice toward other cultures and races.<sup>2</sup>

Since prejudice is everyone's problem, reconciliation must become everyone's responsibility.

Diversity management cannot be legislated by laws, quota systems, or even well thought-out campaigns by corporate diversity officers. Racial diversity and inclusion begins in the heart and becomes evident in your personal lifestyle. That is where I had to begin. *My* heart had to change and *my* lifestyle had to confirm the change.

Shortly after I arrived home with the groceries and shared my experience with Marlinda, I spent most of that evening on my knees before God. From the depth of my soul, amidst sobs and tears, came words of promise and obedience. She joined me in adopting this new worldview. We vowed to make it our lifestyle to follow Christ across the cultural divide. We realized that we would have to live counterculturally even within the Christian community. Because only 3 percent of churches in our nation have at least 11 percent of the congregation stemming from a different race than the majority, our churches are still largely monoracial—79 percent of the Christian church still gathers on Sunday mornings by race.<sup>3</sup> This statistics also reflects the cross-cultural practices of individuals since personal relationships are the doorway that leads to church growth.<sup>4</sup> While some may not see the need to appreciate diversity as a problem that demands our personal commitment to remedy, Jesus does.

Having had our first African-American president, it's easy for some pundits to dub this era as “post-racial” America. But our country's present racial realities suggest otherwise. Just take a look at some of the media headlines or the regularity that public apologies are demanded from some celebrity or political leader who spews racial slurs in the heat of anger.

Although it's clearly premature to label these contemporary times as “post-racial,” we cannot lose sight of the goal to

develop healthy cross-race relationships. We can only hope that our children and grandchildren experience life in a post-racial America where race will not be an issue. Certainly, the enemy called *prejudice* has been dealt strong blows over the past several decades through civil rights legislation, equal employment laws, the rise of the interracial church, emphasis on political correctness, and more. But giving people the desire to form healthy cross-race relationships is still wanting.

In the words of Thomas Paine, one of America's Founding Fathers, "These are the times that try men's souls."<sup>5</sup> And I piggyback on that statement by saying that these times require our complete obedience to answer Christ's call to cross cultures and love people. Remember, Jesus didn't teach easy discipleship! Neither should we. To become bona fide disciples of Jesus Christ, we can't simply *know* about the doctrine of reconciliation; we must *practice* it.

*Reconciliation* is a word that captures the social interaction of two people or groups that were formerly at odds with one another. We recognize that reconciliation has occurred because the issue is settled and the people or groups that were previously at odds are now at peace with each other. This peace is shown by their ability to get together socially, whether over a meal, in worship, or in another social venue. Paul explained this when he wrote, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:17-18).

The greatest example of reconciliation is when God chose to establish peace with sinful human beings through the sacrificial death of His Son, Jesus. Christ's atoning death reversed our former state of social alienation and disconnection

from God. We have been reconciled to God. Reconciliation unites. Reconciliation is a sign of a healed relationship. Likewise, if we are reconciled to other races, our relationships must demonstrate the fact that the alienation has been healed. One inescapable proof of a healed relationship is that peaceful social interactions can and do occur.

How does one become an authentic reconciler—a person who naturally forms cross-race relationships? This is the crux of the book, and I will answer this question by drawing from three areas of my life.

First, I answer this question with findings from my doctoral dissertation, titled *Minority Perspectives of Interracial Relationships in Large Multiracial Churches*.<sup>6</sup> As part of my research, I examined eight multiracial churches across America. My thinking was that if a congregation had 40 percent Caucasian members, 30 percent African Americans, 20 percent Latinos, and 10 percent Asians and other, something special had to be going on there. I wanted to uncover what that “something special” was. What were the reasons behind the formation and maintenance of healthy cross-race friendships within the church? I believe that these same principles can be applied to forming friendships across racial barriers within the other communal areas of your life (work, school, and so on).

Second, for the past twenty-five years, I have pastored a multiracial megachurch that my wife and I planted in 1986. Christ Church is a multisite church that represents more than forty different nationalities. I’ve learned many lessons from my failures and successes in challenging people to embrace God’s call to live beyond the safety of their own cultural walls.

Third, I spent time over the past several years functioning

as a cross-cultural coach to the National Basketball Association. My task was to help the more than eighty rookies who enter the league each year become more attuned to race and cross-cultural issues. This consulting opportunity arose because basketball is now an international sport. Effectively assimilating international players into the NBA has become a priority because it has both economic and relational implications.

I've helped many people develop strong cross-race friendships, and my hope is that this book will motivate and equip you to do the same. Becoming comfortable in cross-cultural settings and interactions will enable you to help others work through their strained cross-cultural encounters. I want to teach you what I have learned in answering the question the Lord put to me in the supermarket: "Why can't it be like that in My house?"

## THIS BOOK'S PROMISE

Quite a number of books on the market decry the ills of prejudice and give the plea for reconciliation, but few tell us *how* to build cross-race relationships. This book is for you if you desire to reach beyond your cultural walls into someone else's life. It will help you answer the following questions:

- Am I cross-racially attractive?
- Do I unconsciously reject people of other cultures?
- How do I develop strong interracial relationships?
- What skills are needed to have a safe interracial conversation on race?
- How can I lead a multicultural team?
- What does a healthy interracial friendship look like?

- How can I help others embrace diversity as passionately as I do?

I have also written a companion six-lesson study guide to help you apply what you learn from this book about developing cross-race friendships. You can access this study guide at **\*\*\*EDITOR: INSERT WEBSITE\*\*\***.

Bridging the racial divide between you and those who are different from you offers untold benefits. But before you can help others form healthy cross-race friendships or get through the pain of prejudice, you must become fully exposed to God's love for people, His multicolored people. You must live according to Jesus' value system: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). This command extends to matters involved with loving and living with your neighbors.

It will also help you fulfill the Great Commission, which is in peril of being ignored or mishandled. Jesus' command to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19-20) cannot be carried out if you lack the skills and willingness to connect cross-rationally. This command assumes that we are comfortable and effective in connecting across cultural and ethnic lines. It also assumes that Christians have Jesus' cross-cultural DNA, regardless of how well or how poorly we may be faring in that role right now. The skill can be brought out of its latent state because our Master is the consummate reconciler and His followers have been born into His bloodline.

The following story illustrates how our own personal commitment to developing cross-race relationships is valuable both to us and to members of other cultures. To complete his dissertation, a graduate student was required to live with a Navajo family for several months. The matriarch of the family,

a wise old grandmother, spoke no English, and this doctoral student spoke no Navajo. Yet a bond began to be forged between them, partly with the help of the old woman's children, who spoke English. The student and the grandmother grew to be very close.

Several months later, when the graduate student had gathered all of his data, it was time for him to return to the university. The members of the Navajo village threw a farewell party for him. After the party, he was getting ready to get into his car, when the grandmother hurriedly walked out of the house, tears streaming down her cheeks. She came right up to the student (the first white friend she'd had in her eighty-two years of life), tenderly placed one hand on the left side of his face and the other hand softly on his right cheek, looked him square in the eyes, and said in the best English she could muster, "I like me best when I'm with you."

At that, the young man lost it. He and the grandmother wept together because they had personally experienced how crossing cultures brings out the best in you. When we remain in our own cultural world, parts of us—good parts, lovely parts, culturally important parts—lie dormant. Consider *The Skin You Live In* as a safe place where you can let down your guard and receive cross-cultural coaching from a follower of Jesus Christ. My prayer is that you will one day be able to say, *I like me best when I'm with you.*



# LEAVING YOUR COMFORT ZONE

I can be a coward in some areas but adventuresome and insanely daring in others. One bright afternoon, I thought, *Why not compete in a triathlon?* You know, that sport that includes swimming in open waters, biking, and running—all in a row. The reason the idea was so far-fetched, at least to my wife, was because I was forty-six years old and had never learned to swim. Because I had competed in a few half marathons and an entire marathon, I knew the running part would be easy. The biking portion would be a challenge because the last time I rode a bike was as a teenager. Competing in the swimming portion bordered on ridiculous.

But my mind was made up. I was going to venture into the open waters only to gain the personal bragging rights of having finished a triathlon. I set a date of one year to accomplish this feat. My first step was to take swimming lessons. I put on my best game face and drove to the local YMCA for swimming lessons. Even after the first two months, I could barely walk ten feet in the shallow end of the pool. It just wasn't working.

I bought a few books on the art of swimming and returned to the pool more determined than ever that I was going to learn how to swim, even if it killed me. I improved slightly. I used every fin and floater my instructor gave me to make it from one end of the pool to the other.

After a few more months, I was able to shed those accessories and reach the other end of the pool. Once there, I hung on for dear life, gasping to catch my breath. After my instructor coaxed me out of my comfort zone—the pool wall I was hanging onto—I made it back to the shallow end of the pool, where I was able to stand up. Each week I returned to the pool simply because I had vowed that I would compete in a triathlon.

To accelerate my learning, I registered for a weeklong swim clinic for beginners to the world of triathlons. Three times a day, we had to go into the Atlantic Ocean off the shore of the island of St. Johns to learn to swim in open waters. About a month before the race, I finally learned how to swim, float on my back, and move in the right direction in open waters without losing my navigational bearings. When race day finally came, I stood in front of the Long Island Sound wearing my wet suit with hundreds of other triathletes waiting for signal announcing when we should plunge into the freezing salt water. As soon as the gun went off, I raced to meet my fears. There I was, swimming in the open waters fed by the Atlantic Ocean. After thirty-four minutes or so, I staggered out of the Long Island Sound, one mile from the place where I entered. To my surprise, I had done it. The rest, though equally difficult—twenty-five miles of biking followed by about six miles of running—was going to be on land. *Praise God*, I thought. *Land sounds good. I'll finish this race. I may not*

*take first place, but I will finish.* And finish I did. They gave me my medal, proof that I had ventured out of my comfort zone and accomplished the task.

This experience taught me three lessons about comfort zones that can be applied to the world of diversity:

1. Comfort zones restrict your view.
2. Comfort zones limit your growth.
3. Leaving your comfort zone forces you to change.

## 1. COMFORT ZONES RESTRICT YOUR VIEW.

When it came to swimming, my comfort zone had a mental hold on me. The thought of learning to swim, especially in open waters, was unnerving. All kinds of mental images flashed before me, and they all had the same ending: *You can't swim! You shouldn't even try to learn how to swim. The idea of swimming in open water is preposterous! Give it up!* The thought of leaving the safe borders of my comfort zone was terrifying. Something similar happens to many of us when we envision living beyond the safety of our cultural walls. The thought creates fear that is designed to validate our non-cross-cultural choices.

This was the case with Peter when God tried to woo him beyond the safety of his Jewish culture into the world of multiculturalism, where multiple cultures peacefully coexist. As the account goes:

About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw

heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them." (Acts 10:9-20)

Peter's vision was not about food per se, but God was using the four-footed animals and reptiles as symbols of how Peter viewed the Gentiles. He saw them as impure and unclean people undeserving of God's forgiveness and cleansing through faith in Jesus Christ. In fact, the comfort zone of Peter's culture had created a huge blind spot in how he saw people who lived outside of his culture. Peter realized that his perspective, which was also a symptom of prejudice, was wrong the moment he set foot into Cornelius's house. "Talking with [Cornelius], Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: 'You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean'" (Acts 10:27-28).

The comfort of his culture had limited Peter's personal and social experiences with Gentiles. Like any other

first-century Jew, Peter dealt with members of the Gentile world in the marketplace, courthouse, and other places of commerce. But he lacked experience that was social and personal—experience that could lead to the expansion of his perspective and appreciation of diversity. Peter obviously found his culture safe and secure and the Gentile’s culture potentially harmful, unimportant, and without value. His comfort zone caused him to unconsciously develop a restricted and negative view of the Gentiles, much like our comfort zone confines us to the social borders of our own culture and race.

## 2. COMFORT ZONES LIMIT YOUR GROWTH.

One Chinese proverb says, “If you don’t step out of your comfort zone and face your fears, the number of situations that make you uncomfortable will keep growing.” Fear of leaving my comfort zone seriously jeopardized my aspirations to the ranks of a swimmer—a triathlete swimmer, no less. Had I not ventured out into the waters, literally, I would not have learned to swim.

Similarly, because Peter had developed relationships exclusively with members of his own culture, his growth as both a person and an apostle was limited. Had Peter ignored or disobeyed the promptings of the Holy Spirit, he would have become a prisoner to his own culture. The opportunity to learn that he ought not to “call anything impure that God has made clean” (Acts 10:15) came when his cultural comfort zone was shattered by the vision. Peter was so entrenched in his cultural perspective that God had to present the vision three different times to help him consider that there was life beyond his culture.

Leaving your comfort zone is no small feat; it calls for you to take a risk. But if you don't venture beyond your comfort zone, your personal growth is at stake. If Peter hadn't embraced the vision, Cornelius and the other Gentiles would not have had the opportunity to receive Christ as their Savior, at least not through Peter's ministry. Peter grew as he became an eyewitness to the workings of the Holy Spirit in other cultures. He grew because he ventured into the home—the personal and social space—of a Gentile. He saw with his own eyes how they lived, ate, and interacted among themselves.

Peter also learned that Cornelius did not hold the same view toward Jewish people that the apostle held toward Gentiles. Cornelius did not consider Jews impure or unclean. In fact, the Scriptures point out that he fell at Peter's feet in reverence (see Acts 10:25). Cornelius was honoring toward Peter despite the difference in their cultures. Peter, on the other hand, had to work through his cross-cultural issues. He didn't question whether there were decent and God-fearing Gentiles. He knew that from walking with Jesus. Peter was there when Jesus healed the centurion's servant of a life-threatening illness. The Jews said this centurion—a Gentile—"loves our nation and has built our synagogue" (Luke 7:5). But I suspect that Peter's thinking, even moments before venturing into Cornelius's home, was, *Just because a Gentile is a good person does not mean I can or should befriend him.*

Many people equate professional behavior toward people of other cultures with reconciliation. It's not the same! Reconciliation requires personal association with another person. It's not enough to simply have good thoughts about a person or even to merely show them respect. You have to venture into their social world as if Jesus' command to "love

your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27) really matters to you. This was exactly what the Holy Spirit was challenging Peter to do. He had to enter the personal world of Cornelius. Peter could not maintain a comfortable distance and wish the best for Cornelius and his group. Cross-cultural growth demanded that Peter go beyond the walls of his own culture.

My friend Bob always talks about his burden to reach Muslims for Christ. When he moved some two hours from where he used to live, one of the first things he did was visit the neighborhood mosque. Talk about being brave. Bob was brave. Not only is Bob a strong Christian who is on fire for the Lord but he’s white. In fact, he’s on the paler side of white.

Despite the color of his skin, Bob has lots of Middle Eastern friends, and their relationship is not stilted by a religious overture that says, “Let’s get to know one another as Christians and Muslims.” No, Bob has genuine friendships with black Muslims, Persian Muslims, and Muslims of every other shade and type. His passion to see Muslims won for Christ breaks down cultural walls, shatters empty professional relational associations, and gives Bob access into their homes and lives as a real friend. Bob told me, “I feel like I have a personal responsibility to help unreached people get access to the gospel. I’ve asked God to use me, and my heart became full of passion and love for the Muslim people.”

By the way, when Bob walked into that mosque, he struck up a conversation with the imam and other men curious as to why this pale-looking white guy was interested in talking about Islam. Once again, Bob began making new friendships across racial, cultural, and religious lines. Bob doesn’t have a comfort zone, at least not with Muslims. His starting point in becoming a reconciler occurred when he decided that

reconciliation was his responsibility and not just the anonymous and invisible *everybody's* responsibility.

### 3. LEAVING YOUR COMFORT ZONE FORCES YOU TO CHANGE.

The third time the Holy Spirit sent Peter the vision of four-footed animals, it was becoming very uncomfortable for him to stay within his cultural comfort zone. He had a major decision to make: He could either remain a monocultural man, which would be an act of disobedience to God's call for him to accompany Cornelius (see Acts 10:20), or he could break out of his comfort zone into the world of cross-cultural discipleship. Peter's personal value toward obedience to God became his passport into the land of diversity. It wasn't easy, but he obediently followed Christ outside of his culture. God calls us to do the same.

Breaking out of your cultural comfort zone requires that you become a true reconciler. A reconciler is one who believes in the doctrine of reconciliation and incorporates the habit of building cross-race friendships as an important value in their lifestyle. A reconciler is one who does not have to be forced to develop healthy cross-race friendships. The term *reconciler* is used to describe one who easily forms and maintains cross-race relationships. Authentic reconcilers:

1. Are at peace with people of other races
2. Know how to build bridges across other cultures
3. Value people of different races living in community

#### 1. Reconcilers Are at Peace with People of Other Races

Ruthie, a white American friend of mine, is a single parent

by choice. When she adopted an African-American baby boy, she wasn't prepared for the sideways glances and scrutinizing stares she and her son would receive almost daily. "The looks range from curiosity, sort of 'Hmmm, that's odd,' to outright indignation and disapproval, like 'How could you?'" Ruthie said. "It makes me so angry; I could just strangle these ignorant people!"

Recently, Ruthie and her son, Jack, now seven years old, boarded an airplane. She was warmly greeted by a flight attendant who, like Ruthie, was an attractive blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman. The flight attendant, who was serving Ruthie's section of the plane, was very accommodating, until she heard Jack call Ruthie "Mom." That's when the flight attendant's friendly smile took a distinctive turn. Clearly uncomfortable with the unlikely pair, she subtly but insistently tried to persuade Ruthie to give up to a white couple the choice seats she had selected for herself and Jack.

Ruthie stood her ground, demanding that she and Jack stay put. She won. The flight attendant moved to another section of the airplane, but her inability to interact even on a professional level with interracial passengers made her culturally insensitive and unattractive.

Unlike this flight attendant, authentic reconcilers choose to embrace a lifestyle of peace with other races. They hold no hostility toward other ethnic groups.

After all, can you build a healthy relationship with people of other cultures when you're constantly on guard? I don't know of any relationship that can survive a nonverbal but clear attitude that says, "I'm watching you out of the corner of my eye to make sure you always treat me right, racially. And if you don't, I'll put you in your place in a split second!"

If you find yourself becoming uncomfortable or irritated around people who are racially different from you, perhaps you need to spend time analyzing this area of your life. Just as your blood pressure is a measurement of your medical health, the disturbance of your sense of peace is a measurement of your emotional health. It should not be ignored. Don't dismiss the value of walking in peace toward members of other races.

In the Bible, the apostle Paul wrote that true love—the humanitarian kind of love—is “not easily angered [and] keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Corinthians 13:5). It is also true that false love is easily angered and keeps all records of wrongs. No one can live under the pressure a hypersensitive life creates. Real love and peace toward others is achieved only when you keep no record of wrongs they've committed.

I am not suggesting that people should be allowed to get away with racial injustices. They should be penalized appropriately if found guilty of wrongdoing. But authentic reconcilers have peace in their hearts toward members of other races. This peace is evidenced in their demeanor and in the way they express themselves in racially unpleasant moments. They don't feel the need to police others in their cross-cultural interchanges. Their attitude says, “I'm at peace with you and members of other races.”

Can you imagine the awkwardness and tangible disconnect you would experience if you held the people in your life personally responsible for all the wrongs their race committed against your race throughout history? It would be impossible for you to live your life to its fullest while lugging around this burden. By acknowledging that every human heart harbors the potential to harm others—those who look like you as well as those who look different from you—you will be at peace

with other races. Understanding that we all have the same potential to do evil can keep you from blaming others for the injustices caused by members of their ethnic group.

But being a reconciler requires more than holding to a perspective that sets peaceful coexistence as the goal to achieve. In the same way it took more than one swim in the ocean for me to qualify as a triathlete, it takes more than one visit to a Gentile's home or one missions trip abroad for a person to qualify as a reconciler. Cross-race relationships won't form unless you build bridges across cultures through regular expressions of love, compassion, and acceptance.

## 2. Reconcilers Know How to Build Bridges Across Cultures

At a fund-raiser I attended recently with my daughter, Danielle, a guy whom I'll call Henry greeted us warmly. He was a middle-aged, jolly white guy who would turn every stranger into a friend in short order. It looked as though Danielle and I were to be next on his list of new friends.

After a few pleasantries, Henry whipped out his wallet, featuring family photos. He was a proud husband, father, and grandfather. He told us that he and his wife of thirty-two years had never had children of their own, so they had become foster and adoptive parents. What was unique about Henry's family photo was that it resembled a general session at the United Nations. Talk about diversity. The world's races were fully represented. Henry's words, friendly attitude, and multiracial family demonstrated that he was a reconciler and knew how to build bridges across cultures.

I asked Henry a few questions, beginning with, *What made you decide to adopt kids of different races?* Henry eagerly answered as if he'd been asked this question many times over

the years. “My parents were very prejudiced against everybody. You name it, they hated it. So when I became an adult, married, and discovered we could not have children of our own, my wife and I decided that if the world was going to change people like my parents, it would start with us. We took on the fight against bigotry by becoming cross-cultural even when it wasn’t fashionable some thirty years ago,” he said. “And our love for people evolved into opening our homes and hearts to children in need.” Henry saw reconciliation as a personal responsibility and consequently built a bridge of love into other cultures.

To be a reconciler does not mean you have to take in racially diverse foster children, lead public marches holding up “We are the world”-type placards, or become a spokesperson of multiculturalism. Some may choose those paths, but people who choose to quietly effect change within their own social circles can be just as impactful. When you are in the business of connecting with people across racial and ethnic lines, you are a cross-cultural ambassador, a reconciler. Being at peace with others is a core value that flows out of your life. You build bridges by modeling diversity, not by just giving verbal assent to it.

When you model diversity, others around you will learn *how* diversity is to be lived out in a way that is genuine, open, and honest in light of the thorny problems that often arise in race relations. Modeling diversity allows the power of influence to take effect. Your actions will empower others to develop a cross-racial appeal in their own personal and professional lives.

Reconcilers go beyond the point of peaceful coexistence and build bridges by embracing diversity as a lifestyle value

they openly defend, if needed. The groundbreaking work by famed behavioral scientist Milton Rokeach on human values provides a wonderful working definition for *values*. Values are “interests, pleasures, likes, preferences, duties, moral obligations, desires, wants” of human beings.<sup>1</sup> They are directional; they affect our preferences and behavior in social ways. For that reason, reconcilers are in the habit of building bridges across the cultural divide based on such things as interests, preferences, and duties rather than forming relationships solely based on race. They love their neighbors as themselves and want to connect socially with them.

### 3. Reconcilers Value People of Different Races Living in Community

Remember Rodney King’s now infamous cry for unity, “Can’t we all get along?” King was desperately trying to add his voice to the rallying cry of many to stop the 1992 riot in Los Angeles. This African-American man had been the victim of police brutality at the hands of four white Los Angeles policemen in March 1991. When the officers were acquitted, the verdict set off six days of fiery and violent unrest. Looting, assault, arson, and even murder occurred. Property damage topped fifty billion dollars, and dozens of people lost their lives. Later, at a federal trial, two of the officers were found guilty and sent to prison. But the damage had already been done. The state’s decision had triggered racial unrest within the Los Angeles community, and it quickly swept across the country.

King’s question may have come across as rhetorical to many cynical late-night comedians, but to those who live out Jesus’ command to love your neighbor as yourself, King’s question, “Can’t we all get along?” is one they answer every day of their lives. Reconcilers live by the uncompromising

perspective that racial unity will happen only when each person takes full responsibility for improving the world. Imagine that: Rodney King—the victim—saw peacemaking and reconciliation as *his* personal responsibility. Until you take ownership of the global problem of racial justice and bridge building, you will not be motivated to leave your comfort zone.

I was able to formulate two penetrating questions about community building from reading the book *A Different Drum* by M. Scott Peck.<sup>2</sup> They are: “Why are we together?” and “How are we to be together?” These questions recognize that the bedrock of any just civilization is the strength of its community, which rests upon the strength of its citizens.

The question *Why are we together?* calls us to individually examine our mission as a community. It forces us to dig down to the core of our collective identity to understand that every human being searches for meaning and value in life. The common values of security, health, opportunity, shelter, and a sense of belonging must be made equally available to all, despite racial or ethnic differences. Living in community with one another ensures that these common denominators are safeguarded.

The question *How are we to be together?* addresses the ethical and moral side of our actions. We cannot experience true community with one another without creating and maintaining fair and equitable rules that guide our treatment of one another. If our treatment toward one another favors one ethnic group over another, we cannot achieve true community.

This is the very reason why many within the African-American community of Los Angeles rioted in response to the state court’s ruling. The public viewed the evidence as

indisputable and felt that no one should have been treated the way King was, regardless of the crime. The videotaped recording of the beating by a private citizen showed that the police officers used excessive force in arresting King, and the ruling in favor of the officers' acquittals sent the message that it was acceptable for white police officers to brutalize members of the black community. The rioters *and* the federal court overturned the state's ruling.

### WHAT'S YOUR ROLE IN ALL OF THIS?

Rodney King's 1991 beating may seem far removed from your life today, but it's important to note that the riot was caused when the individual's view became the collective view of many. One person's view snowballed with another person's until their individual views became the singular view of the community.

Riots and injustices begin with individuals, not communities. Similarly, living in community with others begins with individuals and not communities. Your cultural comfort zone can become a dangerous place for you and anyone who is different from you, as it isolates you from them. Our comfort zones can prompt us to change if we recognize their limitations and do something about them.

A world without reconcilers who value people living in community means a world without fully practicing disciples of Jesus Christ. Our individual values form the foundation of how we portray the Christian faith. Racial reconciliation is everyone's responsibility. It starts with you and me! Your view can help shape our collective view. Breaking through your comfort zone will cause others to do the same.

This is exactly what Roger Bannister's triumph did for

other runners. In 1954, Bannister broke the world record by running the mile in less than four minutes. No one had ever done that before. This was a feat that most people had considered impossible, although some runners came fairly close. Surprisingly, within six weeks of Bannister's breaking this psychological and physical barrier, the four-minute mile was broken again by another runner: John Landy of Australia. And within a couple of years, it was broken hundreds of times.

This story affirms my point: When we break through barriers, whether cultural or racial, it will help others do the same. This will ultimately lead to global change. I am convinced that if every Christian took personal ownership of the call to become a reconciler, we could change the world. Global reconciliation starts with individuals who assume personal responsibility for change.