

IMMERSE

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Real Southern Soul Food

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I was leading a group of 30 high school students and sponsors on our first spring break mission trip to South Carolina. This year was different. Over the years, our church has taken countless trips across the border to lead crusades, VBS programs, outdoor showings of the Jesus Film in Spanish and take in our fair share of fresh tacos. But my students needed something different.

Our youth ministry is comprised mostly of middle-class white kids. The majority of our senior high students have never been on a mission trip or even worshiped outside the walls of our church. They have an extremely limited and narrow perspective on life, culture and their own theology. And unfortunately, for most of them, this ignorance produces arrogance. Perhaps solely by fallen human nature or from other influences, this idea that we do everything the best, especially church, has become embedded in our thinking as we sit in our comfortable southern-style, Bible-belt pews.

Many months ago, I began discussing my frustration with my executive pastor. Having once been a young youth pastor with similar struggles, he knew exactly what I was talking about. As we began to brainstorm ways to teach our students and broaden their perspective, my pastor threw out an interesting idea. His best friend had relocated to Columbia, South Carolina, and had a remarkable story of friendship, brotherly accountability and racial reconciliation. They'd learned what it meant to truly be brothers and see life from each other's point of view despite the cultural influences and racism that are still alive and well today.

After months of many phone calls, texts and emails, we finally had a trip planned that I was sure would challenge our students. We were going to

help with service projects at retirement homes, nursing homes and church facilities. But even more importantly, in our planning meetings, I explained to my eager students that we were going there to learn. Taken from the illustration in 1 Corinthians 12 about the body of Christ that is comprised of many parts that effectively work together toward a common purpose, our campaign was appropriately named *I Am One Part*. I wanted my students to learn that the way we worship and the style of music or the methods of teaching we are accustomed to are just one small part of the larger Christian community.

Our first Sunday morning onsite, I scanned the worship service. There were my white students, clumped together on one side of the auditorium, and the members of the small black congregation on the other. This was a natural divide. We didn't look the same, dress the same, worship the same way. The expressiveness they observed was electrifying and exciting and a little uncomfortable. We looked like two different groups worshipping different gods. Our team wore *I Am One Part* shirts but were clearly too uncomfortable to step across the aisle.

The culture shift we were in the middle of caught me off guard.

Before we had a chance to correct our segregation for the evening service, the sweet people of that church were grabbing our students and pulling them in to sit with them. They lovingly began to teach them the rhythm of the worship service and how they could participate. When the evening service started, the place was beautiful. The auditorium became a checkerboard. We still didn't know all of their songs or how to express agreement and excitement during the sermon, but we were learning how to worship Jesus with family.

I think one of the most pivotal points on the trip for me was the next day, Monday morning, when we arrived at the retirement home. We were supposed to spend the day cleaning the yard, scraping the exteriors of the homes and repainting. When we arrived, we were greeted by the house director and the residents. Our sheltered church kids were overwhelmed by the sight of the minimal living conditions and appearance of these poor, elderly outcasts. I fully expected to give a brief greeting and then send our students off to work.

However, I was caught off guard when we spent more than half the day sitting in a circle with the residents, singing hymns, testifying and communing with each other. We had absolutely nothing in common with most of these people except one thing—our love for Jesus. Why hadn't I recognized that was more than enough?

As we wrapped up our long day at the home (complete with additional worship services at local churches), I gathered our students together for our traditional late-night debriefing of the day's activities. I always asked my teens to "listen to the city" throughout the day, and I wanted to hear about their sensory observations and what sorts of lessons they learned. That

night, even after a 15-hour day, they were gushing with observations and lessons learned from their new friends.

That's when it hit me. The greatest impact and lessons I so desperately wanted to teach my students were not happening like I expected. I thought it would come from leading services, doing a good painting job and picking up sticks. But the love that these people had for God and for each other was like nothing we had ever seen before. Did this community need our physical hands and feet? Maybe. But our presence there communicated more than our service did.

The more I talked with the local pastors and church members, the more my eyes were opened to how much racism exists today and how divisive it still is. Our mere presence in that community was healing and reconciling for so many people, providing for them a renewed hope in the young white community.

We went out there to serve and came away understanding more about our God, our Christian family and ourselves. Making new friends and worshiping with our new brothers and sisters gave our group a brand new perspective and appreciation for how the different parts of the body of Christ contribute to the larger working of the church.