

*How can we be more inclusive?*

Steve Douty

I don't believe that we have had any significant debate about the need of service and professional organizations to be more diverse and inclusive. The members of most professional organizations are disproportionately white, male, middle-to-upper-class, baby-boomer (read old), born and raised in the USA, and Christian. Not that these are somehow objectionable demographics. We are comfortable. We share a common language and daily life experiences. We are dying.

Look around our own organization and compare our membership to the population outside the meeting room. Would you be surprised if somebody told you that we are not inclusive? That we're exclusive of those who are not of our race, gender, social status, or age? It certainly does feel that way if one decides to listen more attentively to the people who could but are not among us. Those who don't have a native's mastery of our language are discouraged to approach us for fear of ridicule; those who don't practice the same religion as us are suspicious of us—and we of them. And even though Attorney General Eric Holder got roundly criticized for his recent remarks, he was right: we're all [without exception] still most comfortable among "our own people."

Our organization's mission and goals were designed to be inclusive; and they are, but largely on paper. At every meeting I attend there is a discussion about how to attract more people to join us so that we can fulfill those goals.

We are quite clear on one demographic of the prospective new members. We want to attract younger people. That's good. They bring fresh ideas, energy, new knowledge, and a promise of a new legacy. But what if these young people active in our field—and equally important, motivated to become active in a professional society—



come from a different culture, different ethnicity, and different religion.

Yet, it is these people who are not like us who can see us more clearly than we see ourselves; they can offer ideas from totally new perspectives and so expand our knowledge and our world view. We must strive to include this different world knocking on our doors. Engaging the people of that world offers unique possibilities for everybody—more competition, more harmony, varied skills, more profitable business, steady reward for ingenuity and hard work.

We must think and talk about how we can include "those others" and what we might be doing that may not appear to be inclusive. If we don't examine ourselves, we will lose the ability to carry out our stated goals and mission. The oft repeated warning is, "If you're green you grow; if you're ripe you rot"! [Another fitting quote might be, "How can you turn a page if you haven't read it."]

Recently, I attended a meeting that started with an invocation requested by the president. Offered by a highly respected member of the society, the invocation included thoughts and requests that everybody in the room was in agreement with. Except for one little nagging fact; the invocation was couched in words that left nobody in doubt as to the presenter's beliefs.

To me, any unequivocal elevation of a particular set of beliefs—be they religious,

political, or whatever—as "the only right way" is a mistake. Playing the devil's advocate, I asked myself whether I would want to be part of that organization, even though I find much to admire in its professional agenda. The answer is I would not. I would not feel welcome in a place where only one way is the right way.

I have arrived at this conclusion despite having no doubt that the invocation was not offered to exclude or offend anyone in the room. And despite being of the same religion as the presenter.

Will you try to imagine how a totally different person from me might respond?

We are the descendants of the most courageous social undertaking on Earth. Let's not throw away the different strands of wonderfully different fabric we have woven into our national consciousness. We don't need to cling to one strand; unlike others, we have the luxury of building on many.

At that same meeting, the invocation was followed by a request to stand and offer our pledge of allegiance to the American flag. I am a veteran of a war and am always warmed by the pledge.

At this meeting I was sitting beside a lady who has been a contributing member of the organization for many years. Her membership, participation on committees, financial support and commitment to the organization's goals and missions have all helped make the organization what it is today. She is not an American citizen. She stood respectfully as we pledged the flag; her allegiance to our country comes in the form of her engagement in the organization.

I love our organization and the goals it is pursuing to enhance the understanding of the role surveyors play in the wider arena of the geospatial data sciences. The geospatial world is without frontiers; let's move freely in this world by tapping into its immense human resource. ■

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