



Pastor Ricardo Tavárez

Step 1: Finding a calling

Tall Turf helped me understand my calling. I grew up in a church that was formed by first generation immigrant Latinos and Latinas. When I was about twelve, I began to notice something about our worshipping community. The leaders were doing their best to navigate complex cross cultural issues and matters of organizational development, but there were gaps in their skills that hindered them from living into their calling. I noticed challenges in literacy, public speaking, and facilitating meetings. I noticed similar things in my school, which was made up of mostly African Americans and immigrant groups. Lots of people in the community were willing to step up and lead, but the training was always in short supply. I started to feel that God was calling me to acquire some of these leadership skills and bring them back to my community so I could train leaders.

When Tall Turf asked me to be a mentor for teens, it took a couple of weeks for the reality to set in that this was the opportunity to live into my calling. I got to put into practice what I had been longing to do for years. I got to shape an upcoming generation of leaders—and in turn they shaped me into a better leader.

Step 2: Building a skillset

In my leadership position at Tall Turf, I needed to find relevant youth discipleship curriculum that reached across cultural barriers and added a focus on leadership development. To say there was a shortage of that is an understatement. I had to grow more confident in my ability to create that curriculum. Part of that was digging into hard questions with our kids, because they were dealing with heavy things! They were living with the realities of racism, economic hardships, and immigration struggles, so we had to develop a relevant curriculum that could speak to those things. We used activities and scripture to respond to topics like police brutality or funding for public education, because these things affected our kids' lives.

Now I'm a church planter and the executive director of an urban farm called New City Neighbors. Team building, examining scripture together, and interacting with current events all prepared me well for pastoral ministry and nonprofit leadership.

Step 3: Developing a heart for the multicultural church

Tall Turf was formed in response to the racial tension in Grand Rapids. It was meant to be a space where kids of different backgrounds could form relationships. That mission continues. Racism is a sin that permeates our culture, and our young people know it. At Tall Turf, we don't ignore it or pretend that becoming a Christian erases racism. Instead, we recognize that the Holy Spirit gives us the power to confront racism.



One way Tall Turf did this was by creating a multicultural worship environment. During counselor orientation, it's amazing to see all these counselors from different racial backgrounds worshipping together in the dining hall. No instruments, maybe only one or two people who could actually sing, chants as part of worship...it's a humbling, Holy Spirit-filled experience. Tall Turf thinks about how to make sure its message is not ethnocentric. That means bringing in components of worship that are relevant to the African American community, the Latino community, and so on.

Step 4: Enacting justice

Right now I'm forming workshops to help churches learn how to be cross cultural in their worship settings. That involves talking about how the Church has historically been one of the major vehicles of racism in the US. It involves understanding what white churches are asking people of color to leave at the door when they come in—language, expression of worship, sermon style, lament—and how that hinders churches from embracing diversity.

At New City Neighbors, we're trying to live out justice and shalom. We work with a diverse group of youth and staff in a neighborhood that's considered a food desert. We talk about what food justice looks like in our community.

Favorite tradition

At Tall Turf we do something called Fools for Christ. During morning exercises, the leader has campers do what she does, like jumping jacks. She'll take off her shoes, and then her socks, and you'll be wondering what the heck is going on if you're new. Then she'll say, "Go jump in the lake!" and everybody runs off the dock and jumps into the lake—except the new people. The idea is if you're going to be a leader, sometimes you have to do things that look foolish in order to lead someone else.