

Let's Get It Together: Multiracial and Interethnic Congregations

BY KERSTEN BAYT PRIEST

If so many institutions have begun to integrate, why not congregations—especially since Christianity is held in common across racial and ethnic groups? To understand more about bridging racial and ethnic divides, read these four books and keep them handy on your bookshelf.

If so many of our nation's institutions have begun to integrate, why not congregations—especially since Christianity is held in common across racial and ethnic groups? With that simple question Michael Emerson and Christian Smith riveted the attention of both academics and lay people in their study *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (2000). Their persuasive answer was derived from national random survey data and extensive interviews. They discovered that although white evangelicals and African American Christians shared a great deal theologically, they diverged markedly in their social understandings. While African American Christians, believing socio-structural constraints are operative, had a socially and politically active faith, their white evangelical counterparts, believing in individualistic explanations and emphasizing personal faith, engaged social ills quite differently.

As many scholars explain, the painful reality of race in the United States emerges from a history of systematic socio-political preference for whites and those who assimilate Anglo culture. America's internal colonization of tribes, slave-based economy, and exclusionist immigration practices were undergirded by racist academic projects (e.g., the Harvard University crani-

ometry studies), public policies (e.g., eugenics), and bad religion (e.g., the Scofield Bible's "Curse of Ham" study notes). While it is true that mandated segregation no longer divides the army, public schools, and other civic arenas, de facto segregation still exists. The vast majority of white and nonwhite Christians remain divided in their life experiences and in their worship.



Michael Emerson, a white sociologist at Rice University who intentionally lives and worships with his family in interracial settings, was deeply disturbed by the findings of his research in *Divided by Faith*. In a follow-up study, *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, 240 pp., \$19.99), which he coauthored with Curtiss Paul DeYoung, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim, Emerson notes that "just 7.5 percent of the over 300,000 religious congregations in the United States are racially mixed" and "[f]or Christian congregations, which form over 90 percent of congregations in the United States, the percentage that are racially mixed drops to five and a half" (p. 2). White/black churches are especially rare.

For his second national research project entitled "Multiracial Congregations and Their Peoples," funded by the Lilly Foundation, Emerson invited Yancey and Chai Kim to form a multiracial team of sociologists. Together they created and administered 2,500 phone interviews and also located congregations "in which no one racial group accounts for 80 percent or more of the membership" (p. 3). Thirty congregations were finally selected for closer study. The project took six years and was nothing less than a labor of love!

In *United by Faith*, the first of two books to result from this research, Curtiss Paul DeYoung collaborates with Emerson's team as co-author. DeYoung is a black reconciliation theologian trained at Howard University School of Divinity. *United by Faith* is a clarion call for Christians to heal national racism by bridging racial and ethnic divides through formation of intentional worshiping communities. The book presents a systematic recounting of New Testament ethnic church history, early American racial church history, pre- and post-Civil Rights church history (the early reconciliation movement), along with narrative description of present day interracial congregations examined by the sociologists. Some of these congregations were relatively new, others had long rich histories. While they note that some church growth specialists favor the formation of ethnically and racially homogeneous congregations, the authors dismiss this stratagem for growth as quasi-racist. And although the historic safe haven of separate black churches is recognized in another chapter, it is path-breaking, race-bridging individuals who are commended to readers as exemplars worth following.

National interracial church data is summed up in a three-by-three table entitled "Characteristics of Multiracial Congregation Models." The researchers

propose that variable characteristics of organizational culture, race of leadership, and degree of social interaction across races combine to produce three distinct models: the "assimilated multiracial congregational model," the "pluralist multiracial congregational model," and the "integrated multiracial congregational model" (p. 165). The most positive scenario, according to the authors, is the "integrated multiracial congregation," which maintains aspects of separate cultures and also creates a new culture from the cultures in the congregation. Its leadership is representative of the different races in the congregation and has a high degree of social interaction across races.

United by Faith is strong in its biblical, historical, and sociological analyses, but its understanding of culture and ritual is weaker, being heavily reliant on a worldview approach not well suited for the study of ritual in worship. Worship involves culturally inflected, embodied markers of sacred identity. All churches must be particular in their ritual choices and therein is the dilemma: whose choice will get precedence, and why? And what are the stakes when those choices are conflated with the sacred (God's choice!).

When the authors use key incidents from the data to exhort practitioners, the book is very helpful. For example, the data show that the first minorities to join a multiracial congregation tend to be those most like the dominant group, and the leadership tends to listen to these more assimilated people, ignoring other minorities who join later and are less like the dominant group. Bottom line, Emerson's team believes in a radical vision: interracial churches are the answer to America's race problem. These fragile communities are called to shoulder a heavy responsibility.



Emerson's second book, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006, 288 pp., \$21.95) is written with his pastor, Rodney M. Woo, and presents the bulk of the Lilly-funded data. Multiple perspectives are important in any examination of race and religion. Therefore, I appreciate the collaborative nature of Emerson's books. In *People of the Dream*, Woo and Emerson's Texas church serves as the engaging qualitative case study around which larger issues and findings from the national data are woven to understand how such churches form and who joins them.

The book begins with some good history which frames the issues involved. I would suggest reading the appendices immediately after the prelude and first chapter. Appendix A is an essay on the historical and political philosophy implicit in U.S. race and ethnicity metaphors. Appendix B presents five statistical tables, and Appendix C gives the rationale and methodology of the Lilly Project. Appendix D avails readers of the full instruments used for telephone and congregational surveys. These surveys give readers a peek into the interaction between researchers and their interviewees.

Woo's story as a pastor of a fledgling interracial church personalizes and charts the process of such a community. Bar graphs and pie charts present the relationship between congregational homogeneity/heterogeneity and many other variables such as age, race, geographic region, neighborhood demographic, and denomination. Predictors of multiracial diversity are

In American congregations, predictors of multiracial diversity are charismatic worship style, younger age, small group approach, heterogeneous neighborhood, and geographic space (beltway urban).

charismatic worship style, younger age, small group approach, heterogeneous neighborhood, and geographic space (beltway urban). Emerson found that racial diversity draws economic diversity.

The primary impetus for change varied. Some churches saw change as their mission either because their neighborhoods were changing or because they wanted to embrace a niche

group. Other congregations, after doing resource calculation, pragmatically embraced mergers or invited ethnic churches into their basement in a survival merger. In some cases change was mandated by external (denominational) authority structures. The stories of how interracial churches are formed can be surprising. In one instance black Christians began attending a white church in the south because it had air conditioning—and discovered the whites were friendly. Many congregations must move through stages—often painful—to arrive finally at a stable and reorganized new identity.



Given the challenges faced by congregations that wish to unite across racial boundaries, Kathleen Garces-Foley took her inquiry to the local level. As member of a multiethnic family in Southern California—she is white and her husband Filipino American—she recognized that many such churches are in fact multiethnic. Her *Crossing the Ethnic Divide: The Multiethnic Church on a Mission*, AAR Academy Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 192 pp., \$55.00) is a case study of an historically Japanese American church that over time embraced Chinese Americans to become a homogeneous pan-Asian congregation. Eventually they split: one group retained a pan-Asian identity and the other, recognizing their own emerging multiethnic/multiracial families, forged a strategically diverse community that sought to exemplify healing across multiple historic divides.

Bypassing race theory and emphasizing ethnicity, Garces-Foley shows how

concerned leaders and members at Evergreen Church used broader contextual factors and salient symbols as tools to create a milieu conducive to “ethnic boundary crossing.” They benefitted from factors such as increasing rates of mixed marriages and multiethnic offspring in the Los Angeles region, and broader acceptance of cosmopolitan multiculturalism. The key ideas they used as tools of persuasion were derived from InterVarsity’s college-based racial reconciliation movement and innovative evangelical theology and church growth strategies.

By tracking the congregation’s history, studying its Web site and published materials, and adding her observations from visits and interviews, the author shows the extensive work required for a racial/ethnic reconciliation church to survive. For example, one interviewee explained that it hurt her feelings when the majority Asian American members avoided her “healthy” bean salad at the potluck. Such incidents were common in a church aiming for ethnic diversity. Clearly, those with cross-cultural experience had an advantage. The senior pastor, an Asian American, made efforts to use self-deprecating humor to ease the inevitable misunderstandings.

While some of the largest interracial/interethnic churches succeed by an “ethnic transcendence strategy” which is color-blind and does *not* pursue a pro-racial/pro-ethnic reconciliation mission, this tends to attract only the subset of people assimilating to a shared dominant culture. Mosaic Church – with its booming, hip, young, artsy Hollywood crowd – is an example of this. By contrast, Evergreen attempts to minister to those who retain a sense of ethnic identity while simultaneously uniting with others. This commitment is expressed in a theology of discomfort, which stresses that members choosing to join must sacrifice their own comfort and exercise sensitivity towards one another. For many individuals and families – especially young biracial/multiethnic couples and their children – ethnic inclusion and ritual inclusion are worth institutionalizing.



Ethnography, a methodology which depends on intensive participant observation in a delimited face-to-face setting over time, allows researchers to document *how* social change occurs. Although it is difficult to turn the researcher’s eye on one’s own church, ethnography can capture important contextual data beyond surveys and interviews. Using ethnography and statistics, African American sociologist, Korie Edwards, provides an up close telling of her Midwest interracial church’s disappointments in *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, 240 pp., \$29.95).

Drawing on national congregational data (Appendix C), Edwards shows that statistically white/black interracial churches evidence white mainstream religious practices (e.g., praise music) as opposed to black church mainstream

traditions (e.g., call and response) and activist socio-political commitments (e.g., government-supported social programs). Furthermore, *all* interracial churches studied were closer to white mainstream practices than to African American church practices. Edwards set out to discover whether white mainstream practices predominated in her interracial church which straddled a gentrifying neighborhood and a neighborhood in economic decline.

In order to overcome deep cultural divides in congregations, we must intentionally educate ourselves on how to become good neighbors in both the private and public arenas of socially relevant Christianity.

Her church presented a good case study because it had shifted numerically from mostly white members, led by a white senior pastor committed to reconciliation, to mostly black members led by a black senior pastor. By documenting congregational interaction over a period of several years, she discovered that “whiteness” still dominated because when white mem-

bers were disturbed by expressive worship, withdrew from racial reconciliation efforts, or complained, black members self-censored and adjusted. The capitulation to white norms was achieved with the support of a core group of black sympathizers while the rest grudgingly dampened emotion and ceded power. Edwards found that as long as white members were young, without teenagers, and willing to experiment with worship, there was flexibility on their part. However, this changed the older their children were. White families with teens were likely to leave.

The book is rightly entitled *The Elusive Dream* because those with power do not easily see it or relinquish it. Edwards’ findings support my own research and analysis of an attempted interracial church merger.¹ Her book is such a painful read that I could only absorb it in small doses. But, like medicine, it’s good to take.

Given Edwards’ quantitative findings about rituals of worship, it would seem that worship itself is an area requiring further research and analysis of a qualitative and theoretically nuanced sort. Embodiment in joint ritual practices is closely linked to preconceived ideas about class and, by extension, race.²

To overcome deep out-of-awareness cultural divides, we must intentionally educate ourselves on how to become good neighbors. As we have seen, this can be difficult in the most sacred domains—in the public and the relatively private aspects of socially relevant Christianity. Any religion scholar or pastor who desires to understand more about bridging racial and ethnic

divides in the American context should read these four books and keep them handy as references on their shelf. The research is excellent, but even more importantly, all the authors care deeply about how future generations of believers will be able to live together in harmony and diversity.

NOTES

1 Kersten Bayt Priest and Robert J. Priest, "Divergent Worship Practices in the Sunday Morning Hour: Analysis of an 'Interracial' Church Merger Attempt," in Robert J. Priest and Alvaro L. Nieves, eds., *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity and Christian Faith*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 275-292.

2 See Timothy Nelson, "Sacrifice of Praise: Emotion and Collective Participation in an African American Worship Service," *Sociology of Religious Research* (1996), 379-396; and Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).



KERSTEN BAYT PRIEST

is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Indiana Wesleyan University in Marion, Indiana.