

Multiethnic Congregations

BY KATHLEEN GARCES-FOLEY

Though difficult to achieve, there are healthy multiethnic churches flourishing in Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical spheres. They are neither perfectly inclusive nor immune from racial conflict, but they have succeeded in breaking through the racial barriers that have plagued American Christianity for so long.

Multiethnic congregations are not unique to the twenty-first century, but in American history they have been rare, short-lived, and have almost always perpetuated racial inequality and white hegemony. According to the 1998 National Congregations Survey, only seven percent of American congregations were multiracial, defined as having no more than eighty percent of one racial group. More specifically in the case of Christian congregations, fifteen percent of Catholic churches, six percent of conservative Protestant churches, and three percent of mainline Protestant churches were multiracial.¹ Four decades after the civil rights movement, these figures revealed how much had not yet been accomplished. Over the past decade a multiethnic (multiracial, multicultural) church *movement* has been taking shape and gaining momentum that is challenging the racial divide in Christian churches. The growth of this movement has been noted especially among evangelical Christians, but parallel movements have developed among Catholic and mainline Protestant Christians.

For evangelical Christians the turn toward multiethnic churches was due in no small part to a book written by two sociologists. Sociology books rarely find an audience beyond the halls of academia or make much of a difference in the real world, but Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith's *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (2000) quickly became a must read for evangelicals concerned about racism. Using survey

and interview data, Emerson and Smith argued that white evangelicals espouse a colorblind approach to race that severely limits their understanding of the causes of racial injustice and their ability to combat it. Furthermore, homogenous white and black churches “help perpetuate socioeconomic inequality of race, and generally fragment and drown out religious prophetic voices calling for an end to racialization.”² Coming after a decade of racial reconciliation actions, most notably the dramatic confessional statements by leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1994 and the National Association of Evangelicals in 1995, Emerson and Smith’s analysis changed the evangelical conversation on racism profoundly. Confessions and group hugs at Promise Keepers rallies would no longer be sufficient – institutional changes were needed and churches were an obvious place for Christians to start.

In a follow-up book, *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race*, a multiracial team of scholars boldly made the case for multiracial congregations: “Christian congregations, when possible, should be multiracial.”³ Assuming that only homogeneous churches could flourish, many evangelicals were skeptical that multiracial churches could work, but others had already taken up the challenge and were proving they could. In 2003 I began an ethnographic study of Evergreen Baptist Church in Los Angeles, which had done just that. Founded as a mission church for Japanese immigrants in 1945, Evergreen had morphed into an Asian-American church by the mid-1990s when Pastor Ken Fong began to reshape its identity into a multiethnic church. In less than five years, Evergreen had gone from ninety-eight percent Asian American to seventy-five percent Asian American and twenty-five percent black, Latino, white, and multiracial. I discovered that many members of Evergreen had become convicted by the need for multiethnic churches after reading *Divided by Faith*. Most significantly for future trends, I found that it was young adults, almost all of whom had been involved in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, that were most passionate about creating multiethnic churches.⁴ I concluded from my study of Evergreen and InterVarsity Los Angeles that young, cosmopolitan evangelicals will not be comfortable in “ethnic” churches (including Euro-American churches) contrary to the assumption of the homogeneous unit principle.⁵



As interest in creating multiethnic churches grew, scholars of American religion paid attention. Using survey data and congregational studies, they have identified key characteristics of vibrant multiethnic churches. Though there is tremendous variety among evangelical churches that meet the 20/80 definition of multiracial, there are several common features. Most are intentional about signaling that racial diversity is valued. Hiring racially diverse staff persons and mentoring a racially diverse team of lay leaders are common,

as is using a variety of musical genres in worship, but there are many other ways that churches signal what they value from the types of programs they offer to the images that appear on their Web sites.

The leadership of the pastor is crucial for successfully transforming the congregational culture or planting a new multiethnic church. There is no better example of this than Willowcreek Church outside Chicago. Founder

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Bill Hybels credited reading *Divided by Faith* in 1999 with a radical change of direction in his ministry.⁶ According to a recent *Time* magazine profile of Willowcreek, Hybels began to address the topic of racial divisions in his preaching and the church's small group discussions, books clubs, and larger seminars.⁷ He added people of color to the music and worship teams and a Spanish-language service.

By 2009 Willowcreek had become a multiracial church with whites accounting for eighty percent of the membership, Hispanics six percent, Asians four percent, blacks two percent, and eight percent other.

Willowcreek is part of a national trend: large churches are becoming multiracial faster than smaller ones. According to Michael Emerson's analysis of the latest National Congregations Survey, Protestant churches with over 1000 weekly attendance were *three times more likely to be multiracial in 2007 than in 1998, and evangelical churches of this size were five times more likely to be multiracial in 2007.*⁸

Ten years after *Divided By Faith* put the multiethnic church on the radar screen of evangelical Christians, there is little doubt that multiethnic churches are possible and becoming more common. A similar shift in thinking has occurred among many Catholic and mainline Protestants as well. Catholics and mainline Protestants are much more likely to speak of multicultural churches than multiethnic or multiracial, but they share with evangelicals the strong desire to overcome the long-entrenched patterns of segregation in their churches. Though there are significant differences in how they approach the goal of integration and envision the ideal church, these three Christian families – evangelical, Catholic and mainline Protestant – have intensified, both rhetorically and structurally, their focus on issues of racial diversity in order to achieve greater racial and cultural integration. Coming from very different polities and institutional histories, they share a strikingly similar goal.

Historically, mainline Protestant denominations have been predominantly white but have reached out to minority groups by creating ethnic churches. In the last two decades all the mainline denominations have made official statements in support of racial equality and inclusion, but there is considerable variation in the level of institutional commitment to congregational diversity. An example of a highly committed mainline Protestant denomination is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which committed in 1998 to increasing its overall "racial ethnic membership to 20 percent" by 2010. The PCUSA created The Mission of Multicultural Congregational Support with a full-time director, staff support, grants, and significant Web resources to support new church plants and help existing churches become more diverse. Of all the mainline denominations, the PCUSA appears to be offering the most institutional support for creating multiracial/multicultural churches and there are signs of success. In 2003 one in six Presbyterian churches described their church as being a congregation with one cultural majority (at least eighty percent of membership) and a significant influence from other cultures.⁹

In contrast to the PCUSA, some mainline Protestant denominations have only minimal institutional structures to support multiethnic congregations. An interesting comparison can be made with the American Baptist Churches USA, which is by far the most racially diverse of the mainline Protestant denominations with forty-seven percent African American membership and no racial majority.¹⁰ Like the other mainline Protestant denominations, American Baptist Churches USA has made racial justice and reconciliation a priority in recent years and worked to include more people of color in the decision making processes of the governing bodies at the regional and national levels. However, though calling itself "the most racially inclusive Protestant body," only four percent of ABC USA congregations are multiracial.¹¹ ABC USA has a long history of supporting ethnic church growth, but recently it too has turned its attention to multiethnic congregations. In 2008 ABC National Ministries launched the Intercultural Ministries Initiative by forming an Intercultural Ministries Team and Web resources to help members build bridges among cultural groups and create multiethnic churches. The other mainline Protestant denominations fall somewhere between the example of PC USA and ABC USA in terms of support for ethnic church growth versus multiethnic (multiracial, multicultural) church growth. As the multiethnic church movement continues to build momentum, we can expect more energy and resources will be put toward multiethnic church growth in the future.

Because Catholic churches are organized by local territory, they naturally reflect the diversity of Catholics in local neighborhoods. This organizational structure is reflected in the 1998 National Congregations Survey finding that Catholic churches were three times more likely to be multiracial than Protestant churches. Historically, American bishops allowed new immigrant groups to have their own "national parish" or mission church, and the same

rationale was used to create African American parishes, whether black Catholics wanted them or not.

Since 1965 the American Catholic church has been experiencing its largest immigration growth, but rather than create separate churches for new immigrants they have been absorbed into their local parish by adding masses in different languages. American bishops have strongly supported the right of immigrant groups, as well as black and Native American Catholics, to maintain their own cultural practices as one aspect of Christian hospitality. The result has been internal segregation among various groups in the parish, leading to the co-existence of "parallel parishes."

In the 1990s, some church leaders began to criticize the "balkanization" of the parish, while others defended the necessity of separate language masses and cultural communities. Taking a middle path, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral letter in 2000 urging parishes to find ways to honor cultural differences and overcome cultural divisions. While recognizing that "immigrants must guard their cultures for the enrichment of the world," the bishops insisted that "Knowledge of cultures cannot just come from books, but must come from the concrete efforts of individuals to get to know their neighbors, in all their diversity." Therefore, they urged pastors to learn "effective models for accommodating multiple cultural groups within a single parish structure."¹² As a result, multicultural parishes have been working to create more opportunities for cultural exchange and collaboration among parishioners.

Because it is difficult to assess the degree of exchange and collaboration occurring, it is hard to judge what progress has been made. What we can observe is the increasing number of events and publications produced to help Catholics create truly inclusive multicultural parishes. Conferences and workshops are held in parishes, dioceses, and at the national level regularly. Perhaps the most important change occurred at the national level when the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops was re-organized to create a Secretariat of Cultural Diversity.



All of this activity from Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical spheres feeds into what I am calling a multiethnic church movement, but in many respects there are really three independent movements. While they share the goal of overcoming the historical racial-ethnic-cultural divisions that have kept Sunday morning segregated, these three Christian families are working largely in isolation from each other. With the exception of the few mainline pastors who attend evangelical conferences, there is little awareness of what other Christians are doing to form diverse churches. This lack of awareness helps to perpetuate falsehoods that I hear frequently, such as "multiracial churches are impossible," "we are the only church doing this," and "we are holding the first national conference on multiracial churches

in the country.” In my own research I have been surprised by the degree of convergence among these three Christian families on the goal of racial inclusion. Coming from very different polities and institutional histories, church leaders are facing similar challenges in similar ways.

Much of the energy behind the push for multiethnic churches comes from white Christians who are uncomfortable with all-white churches, fearing that the absence of people of color in the pews is a conspicuous indictment of their racial sins. But white Christians are not alone in their assertion that a multiethnic congregation best reflects God’s intention for the Church. The heightened urgency surrounding the goal of diversity within the three largest Christian families reflects a broadly shared value for diversity and desire to improve race relations in America.

These are laudable goals to be sure, but before all churches take up the diversity goal it is important to consider the trade off. Ethnic churches have been extremely important for racial minorities and immigrants in the United States. They provide physical and social spaces for mutual support in the face of racialization and pressures to assimilate to middle-class white American norms. Moreover, ethnic churches provide spaces for sharing cultural traditions with co-ethnics and American-reared children. Ethnic churches have benefited white Christians as well, but as the racial majority, whites have many spaces in which their cultural norms dominate. In comparison, the costs of leaving an ethnic church for a multiethnic one or transforming an ethnic church into a multiethnic one are much greater for people of color.

As minorities in a white-majority multiethnic church, they will likely face pressure to assimilate to the norms of the majority group.

Churches that take pride in being “color-blind,” which are more common among evangelicals, are especially likely to pressure members to hide their ethnic identity and to discourage discussion of

racial issues for the sake of church unity. Even white-majority churches that genuinely want to embrace differences will reproduce the norms of whiteness if members are unaware of their own taken-for-granted norms and values. A recently published study by sociologist Korie Edwards reveals how white normativity can become dominant even when whites are in the minority.¹³ Edwards studied a black-majority multiracial church in the Midwest led by an African American pastor. Despite their minority status, the congregation

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accommodated the wishes of the white members to keep them from leaving. Edwards's research serves as a cautionary tale reminding us to take seriously the costs of creating a multiethnic congregation in a society marked with racial inequality.



Given the costs and dangers associated with the multiethnic church, the multiethnic church movement should not be lauded uncritically. Some observers are skeptical that a truly inclusive multiethnic church is even possible in the United States, while others insist that multiethnic churches only work if they efface difference and operate as mono-cultural. I disagree. Though difficult to achieve, there are healthy multiethnic churches flourishing in Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical spheres. They are neither perfectly inclusive nor immune from racial conflict, but they have succeeded in breaking through the racial barriers that have plagued American Christianity for so long.

More ethnographic research is needed to identify what makes them work, though the number of pastoral books offering advice is growing quickly. In my own research I have found a combination of knowledge, attitudes, and skills to be essential: understanding racialization and the implicit operation of cultural norms, delight in the cosmopolitan, and humor in the face of cultural discomfort. With these ingredients, multiethnic churches can avoid the all too common traps of reproducing racial inequality and promoting white normativity.

NOTES

1 Michael O. Emerson with Rodney M. Woo, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 40.

2 Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 168.

3 Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim, *United By Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2.

4 Kathleen Garces-Foley, *Crossing the Ethnic Divide: The Multiethnic Church on a Mission* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

5 The homogenous unit principle—that unbelievers prefer to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers—has been influential among church planting strategists. For a biblical critique of this principle, see Damian Emetuche, “Avoiding Racism in Starting New Congregations,” *Racism, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics*, 35 (Waco, TX: Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2010), 75-81.

6 “Harder than Anyone Can Imagine: Four working pastors—Latino, Asian, black, and white—respond to the bracing thesis of *United by Faith*. A CT forum with Noel Castellanos, Bill Hybels, Soong-Chan Rah, Frank Reid,” *Christianity Today*, 49:4 (April 2005; accessed January 18, 2010), www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/april/23.36.html.

7 David Van Biema, “Can Megachurches Bridge the Racial Divide?” *Time* (January 11, 2010; accessed January 18, 2010), www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1950943,00.html.

8 Emerson, foreword to J. Mark DeYmaz and Harry Li, *Ethnic Blends: Mixing Diversity into Your Local Church*, Leadership Network Innovation Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 13.

9 "What is a Multicultural Church?" Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Web site (accessed February 5, 2010), www.pcusa.org/multicultural/what.htm.

10 "American Baptist Churches USA today is the most racially inclusive Protestant body," according to an ABCUSA brochure, "10 Facts You Should Know about American Baptists," American Baptist Churches USA Web site, (accessed February 21, 2010), www.abc-usa.org/portals/0/ABC10FactsBrochure.pdf. A press release from American Baptist News Service notes that African American members represent "close to 47% of the denomination's total membership. This is followed closely by European American at 45.5%. The remaining 7-8% is comprised of Hispanic, Multi-Ethnic, Asian, Haitian and Native American members" ("ABCUSA Responds to Recent Pew Survey," April 3, 2008). These claims are in response to the 2008 *U. S. Religious Landscape Survey* by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life which reported the denomination's demographics as eighty-one percent white and four percent African American. The discrepancy, in part, is due to a number of congregations from historically black Baptist denominations being dually aligned with the ABC USA.

11 David Cushman, "Diversity in the American Baptist Churches and the United States," *The Christian Citizen: Voices for Biblical Justice*, 2 (2009), 3.

12 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity" (November 15, 2000; accessed February 21, 2010), www.usccb.org/mrs/unity.shtml.

13 Korie Edwards, *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).



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