



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Multiethnic Congregations
(*Racism*, pp. 62-69)

Suggested Article:

📖 Let's Get It Together:
Multiracial and Interethnic
Congregations
(*Racism*, pp. 87-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

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Let's Get It Together: Multiethnic Congregations

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

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 133

Unison Response (Ephesians 2:14)

For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

Meditation†

God will use the emerging generation...to bring about spiritual healing and racial reconciliation. Today's young people... have seen the results of shattered relationships, family brokenness, racial and ethnic hatred, wars and terrorism. They want a different path—a path of reconciliation, mutual respect and understanding, a path that leads to connection. This longing lies deep with the next generation, and we believe that God will bless their desire.

Brenda Salter McNeil and Rick Richardson

Reflection

In 1998, only seven percent of American congregations were multi-racial—with no more than eighty percent of their members in one racial group. Yet “a multiethnic (multiracial, multicultural) church movement has been taking shape and gaining momentum,” Kathleen Garces-Foley observes, “especially among evangelical Christians, but parallel movements have developed among Catholic and mainline Protestant Christians.”

- ▶ *Evangelical churches* with large congregations (over 1000 weekly attendance) are becoming multiethnic faster than smaller ones. Just as large Protestant churches were three times more likely to be multiethnic in 2007 than 1998, large evangelical ones were five times more likely to be multiethnic. Confessional statements by the Southern Baptist Convention (1994) and National Association of Evangelicals (1995) set the stage, but the impetus for change arose in local churches. Evergreen Baptist Church, Los Angeles, for instance, morphed from ninety-eight percent Asian-American to a multiethnic congregation in less than five years. Its “young adults, almost all of whom had been involved in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship...were most passionate about creating multiethnic churches.” Garces-Foley concludes, “Young, cosmopolitan evangelicals will not be comfortable in ‘ethnic’ churches (including Euro-American churches).”
- ▶ *Mainline Protestant churches* historically created ethnic congregations for minority groups. All mainline denominations have issued recent statements in support of racial equality and inclusion.



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Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

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Some, like Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), are strongly committed to congregational diversity. Pledging in 1998 to increase overall ethnic membership to twenty percent by 2010, PCUSA created The Mission of Multicultural Congregational Support to promote new church plants and help existing churches become more diverse. By 2003, seventeen percent of its churches were multiethnic. American Baptist Churches USA has the highest overall diversity, but only four percent of its congregations are multiethnic.

- ▶ *Roman Catholic parishes*, reflecting the diversity of Catholics in the neighborhoods they serve, were three times more likely to be multiethnic than Protestant churches in 1998. Historically, immigrants and African Americans were given their own “national parish” or mission churches; but since 1965, immigrants have been welcomed into local parishes by adding masses in different languages. “The result has been internal segregation among various groups in the parish, leading to the co-existence of ‘parallel parishes,’” she notes. After this “balkanization” was criticized in the 1990s, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops urged parishes to find ways to honor cultural differences and overcome cultural divisions.

Study Questions

1. How are evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and Roman Catholics—with such different polities and institutional histories—creating healthy multiethnic congregations?
2. Discuss Kathleen Garces-Foley’s observation that “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.”
3. Kersten Bayt Priest writes, “Predictors of multiracial diversity in American congregations are charismatic worship style, younger age, ‘small group’ approach, heterogeneous neighborhood, and geographic space (‘beltway’ urban).” Why might these factors be important? To what extent do they characterize your congregation?

Departing Hymn: “The Spirit Binds Us to Our Lord” (vv. 1, 2, and 5)

The Spirit binds us to our Lord
but once in him we find
communion sweet, as oil outpoured,
with kindred hearts and minds.

Beneath his yoke, our easy tie,
we count as common store
our gifts and graces—rich supply
for those who need them more.

We, by our faith, are bound to meet
in worship of the Lord
and flood our Father’s mercy seat
with prayers in one accord.

Joshua F. Drake (2006), alt.

Suggested Tunes: ST. PETER (Reinagle) or DUNDEE

† Brenda Salter McNeil and Rick Richardson, *The Heart of Racial Justice: How Soul Change Leads to Social Change*, expanded edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 26.

Let's Get It Together: Multiethnic Congregations

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Unison Response	Unison Response
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review how evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and Roman Catholics in America are creating healthy multiethnic congregations.
2. To consider the trade-off in moving away from ethnic congregations.
3. To discuss the social factors which characterize emerging multiethnic congregations.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Racism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "The Spirit Binds Us to Our Lord" locate the familiar tunes ST. PETER (Reinagle) or DUNDEE in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with an Observation

"Human beings were made in the image of God—distinct from other earthly creatures—to be in a self-aware relationship of union and fellowship with God. As an expression of this divine intimacy, the human vocation was to fill the earth and subdue it and to be God's representative or 'image' in the world," Brenda Salter McNeil and Rick Richardson observe in *The Heart of Racial Justice*. "To fulfill God's command, human beings had to become creators of kinship networks, diverse cultures and ultimately many nations. As human beings spread and diversified, racial differences also emerged. These racial differences were a part of God's intention from the beginning. They were intended to be a part of the beauty and variety of the image of God on the earth" (Brenda Salter McNeil and Rick Richardson, *The Heart of Racial Justice: How Soul Change Leads to Social Change*, expanded edition [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009], 34-35).

Multiethnic congregations can be a wonderful witness to God's beauty—if they avoid the common pitfall of pressuring minority members to assimilate to the majority group's norms.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking and praising Jesus Christ for reconciling members to God and to one another.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 133 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

The previous study in this series, "Christian Practices on the Journey toward Shalom," explores why it is difficult to talk about race in church, and point to resources in the Christian tradition and in worship that foster

racial reconciliation within congregations. In contrast to that theological approach, this study surveys how contemporary social factors – such as features of church polity and institutional history, congregational size and demographics, location and styles of worship – influence the formation of healthy multiethnic churches. For a Christian community that God is leading toward greater racial and ethnic diversity, the information in this study is a helpful preview of the road that lies ahead as the congregation moves toward that goal.

Study Questions

1. If your study group members have extensive personal experience or strongly identify with one of the three Christian families, emphasize that tradition's approach, but look for helpful resources in the other two. Otherwise you might sort members into three smaller groups (based on their interests or backgrounds in the three traditions) to report on and amplify Kathleen Garces-Foley's survey.

Some differences may be traced to distinctive church polities. Garces-Foley notes that efforts among evangelicals often depend on the individual congregation's leadership, physical location, and opportunities for outreach. Nevertheless, confessional statements issued by national denominations, influential books from evangelical publishers, and the programs of parachurch organizations may play important roles in training and motivating members. The actions of large and influential congregations have an impact as well.

In mainline Protestant churches, official statements and organizational restructuring may play a larger role. A denomination's ethnic background and regional location of its congregations are important. In her discussion of the Catholic tradition, Garces-Foley focuses on the official statements and policies of the American bishops, especially in response to changing patterns of immigration. She traces the changing ways that the local parish has been encouraged to deal with the ethnic diversity of Catholics living in the neighborhoods it serves.

Encourage members to discover the strengths of the three Christian families and what they can learn from one another.

2. Garces-Foley notes that ethnic congregations "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." Therefore, she warns that "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."

All of the white/black interracial churches that Korie Edwards studied in *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in 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)," Kersten Bayt Priest notes in her review. "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." Priest challenges us to "intentionally educate ourselves on how to become good neighbors" to diverse ethnic and racial groups in church.

3. Relate these predictors to the point that Brenda Salter McNeil and Rick Richardson make in the meditation – that the younger generation of Christians (in their late 20s and 30s) hunger for spiritual community that transcends racial and ethnic divides. Use these "predictors" to suggest factors for your congregation to prayerfully evaluate. But do not let the proverbial tail wag the dog. Changing things just to make one's congregation more attractive to a particular "target group" reduces life-giving worship and community to marketing strategies.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.