

A New Day for Multiracial Congregations

Author: Michael O. Emerson A decade ago my colleagues and I made a bold proclamation: *The twenty-first century must be the century of the multiracial congregation.*¹ Based on many years of study, several hundred thousand dollars of investment, careful analysis of data and trends, and biblical application to the modern day, it remains our claim that the costs of segregated congregations are too high, and the imperative and promise of multiracial congregations are immense. Anything less than a religious movement for multiracial congregations will lead to the decline of the U.S. church as we know it.² Congregations have long been hyper-segregated. As of 2007 (our most recent data with such detail), 85 percent of congregations in the United States were comprised of at least 90 percent of one group. As of 2010, just 4 percent of all congregations claimed to have no racial majority.³

This racial segregation in congregations in our modern, diverse nation has many costs. When congregations are racially segregated, there is less opportunity for intergroup mobility (such as through intermarriage) and more importance is placed on racial boundaries, separate racial identities, and other differences between groups. Though many in the religious community call and work for an end to racial division and inequality, the very organization of religion into segregated congregations often undercuts their efforts.⁴

Misreading Out-Groups

Racial segregation of religious groups affects how we see ourselves as well as others. The separate groups that are reified through religious division result in categorization. Research links this process of categorization to several biases in our thinking, including:

1. Identifying out-group members by their differences from the in-group, overly homogenizing the out-group.
2. Favoring our in-group.
3. Perceiving negative behavior of an out-group member as a characteristic of the entire out-group. (We leap from "Gerry of Group X shoplifted" to "Group X shoplifts.") We don't do this with our ingroup.
4. Recalling only information that confirms our stereotypes of out-groups, dismissing contradictory evidence as an exception.

Religion in the U.S. contributes to racial division and inequality, and, as I show below, to cultural and political conflict, because it creates the very condition – racial segregation in an important social setting – that feeds the practices of racial categorization and the errors in perception that follow from it.

Racial segregation of religious groups also affects how we interact – and with whom – by creating the ethical paradox of group loyalty. The paradox is that even if comprised of loving, unselfish individuals, the group transmutes individual unselfishness into group selfishness.

So in the more than 300,000 congregations in the U.S., members are busy creating group identity and forming moral persons. Those moral persons, acting morally, are aware of and help their families and the members of their own congregations first, making sure those needs are met before looking elsewhere to help. But racial segregation in congregations means we largely help people of our own race.

Ethical Ironies

The problem with this pattern is it maintains the inequality between groups. Members of groups with the most to share (white Americans currently have about *twenty times* the wealth of black and Hispanic

Americans⁵) do so with others of their group. Members of groups with the least are busy trying to meet the

needs of others in their group, which, because the group has less, are typically bigger needs, trying to be met with less. It is a nasty cycle, even though the people involved are themselves attempting to act morally.

We also have another problem. Because group members cannot understand and feel the needs of another group as completely and deeply as those of their own group, reliance on love, compassion, and persuasion to overcome group divisions and inequalities is practically impossible. For this reason, then, relations between groups are always mainly political rather than ethical or moral (reflect on the implications of this sentence!).

Involvement in multiracial congregations, over time, leads to fundamental differences. Friendships patterns change. Through national surveys we find that people in multiracial congregations have significantly more friendships across race than do other Americans. For example, for those attending racially homogenous congregations, 83 percent said most or all of their friends were the same race as them. For those not attending any congregation, 70 percent said most or all of their friends were the same race as them.

But for those attending multiracial congregations, there is a dramatic difference. Only 36 percent of people attending racially mixed congregation said most or all of their friends were the same race as them. And we found that those 36 percent were relatively recent arrivals to their racially mixed congregations.

We found this same pattern for every question we asked about relationships with other people. People not attending congregations are more likely to be interracially married, have best friends who are of a different race, and have more diverse social networks (acquaintances beyond one's circle of friends) than are other Americans.⁶

Interestingly, over 80 percent of the people in racially mixed congregations said that most of the racial diversity in their friendships came *because of* their involvement in their racially mixed congregation.⁷ Indeed, when we did a statistical analysis called logistic regression, we found that by far the most important factor in people having racially diverse relationships is whether they attend a racially mixed congregation. Representative of this finding, a Salvadorian immigrant living in Los Angeles and attending a racially mixed congregation said that perhaps 10 percent of the people she knew before she started attending her church were of different races, but now, "since I have been at this church the majority of my friends are of different races."

Partly due to the greater relationships across race, involvement in multiracial congregations leads to attitudinal change – change toward closing the racial gap in racial attitudes.

Our research has identified several other benefits from involvement in multiracial congregations – from the creation of a new group identity that crosses racial boundaries, to the reduction of socioeconomic inequality, to an expressed deeper sense of who God is. The implication for a racially divided but changing nation is clear. In contemporary times, multiracial congregations offer a promising path forward.

The 20 Percent Rule

Research on a variety of organizations has shown that it takes 20 percent or more of another group to have their voices heard and effect cultural change on an organization. Short of that percentage, people are largely tokens. Part of this 20 percent or more rule is mathematics. At 20 percent of another group, the probability of contact across the groups is 99 percent.⁸

For these reasons, I define a multiracial congregation as one having *less than 80 percent of any single racial group*. Since the Civil War, multiracial congregations in the U.S. have been rare. But it was not until 1998 that we had our first scientifically systematic survey of U.S. congregations. At that time, just 7.4 percent of all congregations were multiracial.

These types of congregations were rarer among Christian congregations than, for example, Muslim congregations. Within Christianity, multiracial congregations were rarer among Protestants than Catholics. The key factor to understanding the level of racial segregation across religious traditions, I have found, is quite simple. The more choices people have – for instance, a larger number of congregations within a religious tradition to consider – the more people choose to worship with people who are racially like themselves.

But I suggest we are witnessing a religious movement toward multiracial congregations. Fifteen years ago, the resources for multiracial congregations were few, networks almost unheard of, and institutional support

essentially non-existent. It was very much a case of isolated, unconnected lone rangers – usually the head clergy – attempting to manage the few multiracial congregations.

A Dramatic Shift

This has changed, dramatically so. Since 1998, an explosion of materials, networks, and organizations has appeared claiming the need for, rightness of, and necessity of multiracial, multi-ethnic, multicultural churches. As best I can tell, in 1998 there were perhaps ten books on the topic (scattered across fifty years and multiple religious traditions) and a couple of denominational offices that tangentially had some materials on becoming more inclusive congregations. Today there are literally thousands of materials on the topic, including books, articles, blogs, workbooks, denominational offices, conferences, undergraduate and seminary courses, workshops, websites, podcasts, Facebook pages, networks, and formal organizations.

Take for example the Mosaix Global Network, founded in 2004. Its vision is clear: to see 20 percent of all local churches achieve a minimum of 20 percent diversity by the year 2020. It does so, as it says, by “Casting Vision, Connecting, Conferencing, and Coaching.” It is a relational network meant to bring people together, grow the movement, and equip local congregations. They produce books, videos, sermons, teaching guides and workbooks, host conferences, conduct two-day visits to existing multiracial congregations, do surveys, create plans to help local congregations incorporate and manage diversity, and they serve as a node in helping people in this movement connect with each other. Most of the resources are available at the Mosaix website.⁹

Our latest data suggests the overall movement is having an impact. The 2010 Faith Communities Today Survey, which randomly sampled over 11,000 U.S. congregations across all faith traditions, found significant growth in multiracial congregations since our first nationally representative survey in 1998.

Whereas 7.4 percent of U.S. congregations were multiracial in 1998, in 2010 that figure had grown to 13.7 percent.¹⁰ Admittedly, this recent figure is still a tiny fraction of all congregations, but at the same time, it represents significant change in but a little over a decade.

Lessons So Far

What have we learned about successful multiracial congregations? Though I cannot offer the final word here, based on a variety of sources we do have an emerging agreement on the core ingredients of successful multiracial congregations:¹¹

- Intentionality. Although congregations do become multiracial without intentionality, they don’t stay diverse without focused intentionality. For congregations to remain diverse, they must desire to do so.
- Diversity as a necessary means to a larger goal. Diversity cannot be an end in itself – this is not sufficient motivation to sustain the difficulties of being diverse. Instead, diversity must be a path to a larger goal. This is often communicated in vision and mission statements. For example, the vision of River City Community Church in Chicago reads, “We are on a quest to become a multi-ethnic community of Jesus followers that transform the city of Chicago through worship, reconciliation, and neighborhood development.”¹² The mission of Riverside Church in New York is “to serve God through word and witness; to treat all human beings as sisters and brothers; and to foster responsible stewardship of God’s creation.”¹³ In both cases, diverse congregations view their diversity as a means to a larger goal.
- Spirit of inclusion. This can be done in many ways, including through worship, small groups, diversity in who is seen “up front,” structures that encourage cross-racial relationships, and mission statements.
- Empowered leadership. Leaders of multiracial congregations need to be diverse, be truly empowered (not “token” leaders), and be experienced in managing diversity.
- Adaptability. Leaders and parishioners must develop skills of adapting to change, to each other’s racial and ethnic cultures, and to each other’s religious traditions and histories. Grace is essential.

Undergirding these steps of course are much faith and prayer. Nearly all leaders of such congregations say the challenges and opportunities are too big to rely merely on themselves and their own understandings.

The U.S. is racially and ethnically diversifying at a rapid rate, yet it remains dramatically unequal on so many fronts – economic outcomes, incarceration rates, home ownership rates, mortgage rates, educational levels, health, and life expectancy, to name a few. For too long congregations have contributed to these inequalities

through their racial segregation. Multiracial congregations offer a new way forward for a new time in America. This century must be the century of the multiracial congregation.

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Notes

1 Curtis Paul DeYoung, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim, *United by Faith* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

2 I use the term “multiracial” because of the absolute meaning race has had in the United States (and most other places): It means ranking, hierarchy, and inequality. Other commonly used terms – multiethnic, multicultural – do not have such meaning. So while it is indeed an achievement to have a Mexican-Guatemalan congregation, a Chinese-Korean-Filipino congregation, or an American black-Nigerian-Kenyan congregation, these congregations are filled with people who, over time, via the power of the U.S. assimilation approach, will meld into a racial group. I could say much more about why I use multiracial (and why I want to focus on addressing inequality and the ranking of people groups rather than simply the differences between people’s cultures) but space is limited. I ask that the reader who prefers other terms either to allow me grace, or substitute one’s preferred term.

3 2010 National Survey of Congregations, a project of Faith Communities Today. Summary data taken from <http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/faithcommunitiestoday.org/files/2010FrequenciesV1.pdf>, accessed Feb. 25, 2013.

4 See Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

5 Rakesh Kochhar, Richard Fry, and Paul Taylor, “Wealth Gaps Rise to Record Highs Between Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics.” Accessed Feb. 25, 2013 at <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/07/26/wealthgaps-rise-to-record-highs-between-whites-blackshispanics/>.

6 All of these data are from the 2000 Lilly Survey of Attitudes and Social Networks (LSASN), a survey my colleagues and I conducted. It is a nationally random sample telephone survey of 2,546 Americans eighteen and over, and includes both churchgoers and non-churchgoers.

7 This finding comes from our approximately 200 in-person interviews with participants of multiracial congregations around the nation.

8 See *People of the Dream* (Princeton, 2006), Chapter Two for a more complete explanation and list of sources.

9 Visit <http://mosaix.info/> for more details.

10 My special thanks to Scott Thumma and David Roozen for their tailored analysis of the 2010 Faith Communities Today data. The data can be found at <http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/fact-2010>.

11 See for example George Yancey’s *One Body, One Spirit* (IVP Books, 2003), Emerson’s *People of the Dream*, Chapter 7 (Princeton, 2006), David Anderson’s *Gracism* (IVP Books, 2007), Mark DeyMaz and Harry Li’s *Ethnic Blends* (Zondervan, 2010), Soong-Chan Rah’s *Many Colors* (2010, Moody Publishers), and Derek Chin’s *1+1=1* (Pickwick Publications, 2012).

12 Taken from <http://www.rivercitychicago.com/aboutus/the-essence-of-river-city/>, accessed March 5, 2013.

13 Taken from <http://theriversidechurchny.org/about/>, accessed March 5, 2013.

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