



This One New Humanity

Can Multi-Ethnic Evangelical Churches Be Spaces for Racial Reconciliation?

Richard Haesly and Liesl Haas, California State University, Long Beach

Abstract

The growth in multi-ethnic Evangelical churches (MECs) is a surprising phenomenon given the history of racial segregation in American Evangelicalism. Using interviews and ethnographic data, we delineate cultural, theological, political, and psychological obstacles MECs face in transforming themselves into spaces to confront racial inequalities in the congregation and the larger society. We argue that MECs find themselves in a “valley of transition,” where obstacles might create backlash from white and Black Evangelicals alike. However, opportunities remain for these churches to model for other Evangelicals and the larger American community how to do the difficult work of seeking racial justice.

Keywords: Multi-ethnic churches, Black Evangelicals, racial reconciliation, American Evangelicalism, valley of transition

Introduction

We don't actually want to be a Black church. We don't want to be a white church. We don't want this to be a Hispanic church. We want this to be something that has never been before. That's what we want. We want this to become something new. This one new humanity. (Santes Beatty, Mosaix 2019)

On June 9, 2020, with the nation engulfed in protests over the killing of George Floyd, a group of Evangelical Christians hosted a webinar on race and reconciliation (Q Ideas 2020). A racially diverse group of Evangelical leaders challenged listeners to acknowledge the history

of racism in the United States and in the church, to see the reality of systemic racism, and even to ponder arguments for reparations. Such a meeting poses a sharp contrast to what was happening in the more visible sectors of the Evangelical community over that summer, and it represents a striking departure from the public posture of Evangelical leadership, certainly since 2016 in its fervent support of Trump, but for decades before that as a conservative force in politics.

Yet, the Q Ideas conference is less an anomaly than it appears. It represents the efforts of a growing movement within Evangelical Christianity to play a proactive role in the broadening discussions about race in the U.S. What is unclear is the extent to which these efforts to pursue “racial reconciliation” constitute a rejection of white Evangelicalism’s close alliance with conservative politics or confrontation with Evangelism’s historical allegiance with segregation and white supremacy.

This paper focuses on the efforts of multi-ethnic Evangelical churches (MECs) to create diverse church communities that will provide spaces to confront racism, pursue racial justice and, ultimately, achieve racial reconciliation among their members. Over the last two decades, consciously multi-ethnic Evangelical churches have increased in number and internal diversity, but progress in most MECs has stalled after superficial diversification. MECs struggle to integrate top leadership positions, introduce theologies of color into formerly white churches, and foster the types of interactions among members that could motivate genuine racial reckoning.

In this paper we argue that, even in churches consciously created to be multi-ethnic, efforts to acknowledge racism in the church and in American society face obstacles. This is primarily because issues of race are inextricably tied to deeper cultural, theological, political, and psychological issues at the core of white Evangelical identity. Without a willingness to question mainstream Evangelical political alliances and their theological justifications, discussions about race can threaten the perceived unity within MECs and deepen rather than resolve racial divisions. If progress towards deep integration is allowed to halt or regress in the face of white discomfort, what remains are church spaces whose superficial diversity masks a capitulation to white Evangelical perspective and thus reproduces white privilege and white supremacy within the church.

In recent years, an increase in MECs led by clergy of color have encouraged renewed efforts to push these communities past this point of stasis. The development by Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) leaders in the MEC movement of “racial reconciliation workshops” have helped MECs facilitate conversations about race by grounding American race relations in historical context, focusing on structural causes of inequality, and providing opportunities for church members to hear one another’s experiences of racism and racial privilege. The successes and failures of such efforts illuminate the potential for and obstacles to progress on racial equality within Evangelical communities.

To highlight Evangelicalism’s struggle to confront racism and white supremacy is not to single it out, but to place it firmly at the center of American culture and politics. Politically and culturally, white Evangelicalism is reflective of large segments of American society beyond the religiously observant, and, of course, confronting racism is not a challenge confined to conservative spaces. In this sense, the efforts of a growing minority of Evangelical Christians

to grapple with these issues, while illuminating obstacles specific to the theology, history, and politics of American Evangelicalism, also reflect the challenges of the country in confronting the enduring racism at the heart of American society.

Data for our analysis was collected from 2015–2021, and it includes discussions with Evangelical leaders as well as rank and file Evangelicals, attendance at national and local conferences and roundtables, and content analysis of MEC and related materials as well as online sermons from a range of MEC churches. We held discussions with over 100 Evangelical congregants, representing churches in Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Northern and Southern California, Florida, Indiana, Illinois, Florida, Georgia, Oklahoma, Texas, Virginia, and Washington, DC. We used snowball sampling to identify a range of respondents, at conferences, regional roundtables and workshops, and at church functions. These discussions led to follow-up formal interviews with twenty-five who are active in MECs and racial reconciliation workshops in their churches. Additionally, we held thirty-five interviews with African American, white, Asian American, and Latinx clergy, representing a range of Evangelical denominations and geographical locations.¹ In addition, we attended major national conferences sponsored by Mosaix and Exponential and participated in numerous roundtables on race, diversity, evangelism, and church planting sponsored by Mosaix, Q Ideas, and Exponential between 2015 and 2021. We participated in racial reconciliation workshops. We also undertook content analysis of materials published by MEC organizations as well as loosely affiliated groups (Exponential and Q Ideas). Where interviewees asked for anonymity, we have identified them here by ethnicity, gender, and geographical region.²

Race, American Evangelicalism, and the Multi-Ethnic Church

(But) in the late '90s, I began to look at that church a bit differently and in conjunction with the 40th anniversary of Little Rock Central High School here in Little Rock, I took a good look around the church one day and realized the only people of color in this otherwise amazing church were janitors. That began to bother my spirit. I didn't know why at the time. This is 1997, '98. I didn't really understand why that bothered me, but something about that did not sit well and didn't seem right. (Mark DeYmaz in McDowell and Rae 2019)

Multi-ethnic Evangelical churches, defined as a congregation where no one ethnic group comprises more than 80 percent, are on the rise in the United States. Between 1998–2019, “multiracial” Evangelical churches increased from 7 percent to 22 percent, now second only to Catholic congregations (23%) (Dougherty, Chavez and Emerson 2020, 655–56).³ Formal organizations of multi-ethnic churches have emerged but represent a small percentage of all multi-ethnic churches in operation. The Mosaix Global Network (founded in 2004 by Mark DeYmaz), is one of the earliest and best known MEC networks, but a wide range of MEC organizations have multiplied in recent years (Multiethnic.Church 2023). Beyond these formalized networks exist many multi-ethnic churches that are loosely affiliated with the movement, where members and clergy attend conferences and workshops, for example, but

¹ Primarily Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Little Rock, Los Angeles, Miami, Oakland, and Washington, DC.

² More specifics on our data set available on request.

³ Mainline Protestant congregations have seen the sharpest increase during this time, from only 1 percent of churches in 1998 to 10 percent in 2019.

whose church remain outside official MEC networks. In addition, a range of larger Evangelical organizations, like [Q Ideas](#) and [Exponential](#), remain outside the MEC community and are more ambivalent about the project, but still see the importance of creating spaces in which their members can educate themselves about racism and engage in cross-racial/ethnic dialogue.

Multiethnic Evangelical churches emerge for different reasons: demographic changes to existing churches, newly-created churches that begin with diverse membership because of the demographics of the church's location, and churches consciously created to be multi-ethnic. The lines between different types of MECs are not completely distinct. Often Evangelical church leaders who find themselves in an organically diversifying church will attempt to respond to the challenges that diversity represents, and over time this diversity may become more of a focus for the church. Regardless of how they come to be, all multi-ethnic churches represent a break with the historical tradition of homogenous Evangelical churches (Wadsworth 2014), and all face to various degrees a set of practical challenges that come with that. Our focus in this article is on intentionally multi-ethnic churches, as it is here where we see the clearest attempt to address the historical segregation within white Evangelicalism.

Founded during the time of slavery, American Evangelicalism has always been intrinsically linked to debates around race in the United States. As African American pastor Tom Skinner famously argued, "To a great extent, the Evangelical church in America supported the status quo. It supported slavery; it supported segregation; it preached against any attempt of the black man to stand on his own two feet" (quoted in Butler, 2021, 5; see further, Edwards 2014; Reimers 1965; Tisby 2021). Evangelicalism's power as a cultural force in American society means it has—actively at times and at other times due to its notable silence and inaction—both shaped and reflected larger national conversations around race. The historic racial division within American Evangelicalism has meant that these conversations have taken place within the church in very segregated spaces, with BIPOC Evangelicals bringing their experiences of racism to church, and with white Evangelicals remaining largely ignorant of the extent of their racial privilege. The discussions and activities stemming from a conscious consideration of racial inequality are thus mediated through these separate spheres, with profoundly different lessons taken by each community from its history. These segregated communities have charted divergent paths through the evolving racial politics of the past two centuries, often occupying oppositional positions on the major civil rights and racial justice issues, from educational equality, to the Civil Rights Movement, to Black Lives Matter and the struggles for voting rights.

The Religious Right's emergence in the 1960s and 1970s in defense of school segregation (Balmer 2021) provided ideological fuel and political resources for white Evangelicalism's opposition to racial justice movements in the latter part of the twentieth century. Since Martin Luther King's observation in 1960 that 11 o'clock on Sunday morning was the "most segregated hour in Christian America" (Haselden 1964), Evangelical churches have increased in racial and diversity, but racially and ethnically homogenous church communities remain the norm (Dougherty, Chaves, and Emerson 2020). A degree of broad agreement across Evangelical communities on some social issues (abortion, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights, for instance) masks its more fundamental racial divisions. *Divided by Faith*, a seminal book for many in the MEC movement, cites this segregation as the central unresolved "sin" within white

Evangelicalism: “Evangelicals desire to end racial division and inequality and attempt to think and act accordingly. But in the process, they are more likely to perpetuate the racial divide than to tear it down.” (Emerson and Smith 2000, ix).

Notwithstanding a genuine desire to break with Evangelicalism’s segregationist past and build multi-ethnic congregations that “reflect the diversity of heaven” (A. Smith 2019; Wadsworth 2014), the movement remains embedded in the larger world of white conservative Evangelicalism (Butler 2021; Tisby 2021). Along with much of the country, Evangelicals have been profoundly impacted by the larger national context of increasing political polarization, demonization of political opponents, and growing belief in conspiracy theories (Rozsa 2021). The larger conservative political milieu of most MECs, and specifically the fusion of white Evangelical theology with conservative politics (Butler 2021; Jones 2020; Margolis 2018; A. Smith 2019; Stewart 2019) make it difficult to move beyond superficial diversification of church membership.

Recent increases in the number of MECs being headed by Black and BIPOC clergy suggests progress towards fuller integration. However, a deeper look at these statistics reveals a less optimistic pattern: most of the increase in BIPOC-led multi-ethnic churches comes from new church “plantings” by clergy of color, not from their successful integration into the leadership of formerly white churches (Dougherty, Chaves and Emerson 2020, 658–60). In integrating their churches, MECs introduce more than racial and ethnic diversity. Fundamental differences in perspectives on the causes and extent of racism, different theological traditions that have evolved to support divergent understandings, and the contrasting political implications of those worldviews, mean that the integration of homogenous churches is a much more complex undertaking than many white proponents of MECs initially realize. The specifics of how integration plays out, and how the experience of church changes as a result—in terms of leadership, worship style, theology, political focus, and countless informal norms and practices—are fraught and complicated processes. Congregations are often not in agreement on these goals. Efforts to “supersede” racial differences by emphasizing unity as Christians, or arguing that multi-ethnic churches create a space to move beyond the racial divisions that characterize American society, function to suppress, rather than resolve, racial divisions. Such an approach will create communities where the symbolism of racial reconciliation replaces efforts to acknowledge and engage with the reality of it (Marti 2009).

In this article we argue that the obstacles to Evangelical MECs serving as spaces for racial reconciliation fall into four broad categories: cultural, theological, political, and psychological. Below, we elaborate on each of these challenges and outline a potential reframing of the racial reconciliation project that we believe has the potential to mitigate these divisions.

Cultural Blind Spots: Church Planting, Gentrification, and the Marginalization of Black Evangelicalism

The urban hipsters are moving in. What church planting is doing, it is kind of complicit in a spiritual colonization...where they’re coming in and instead of—they are not thinking that there are already good churches here that I can maybe learn from, sit under, partner with. They are just catering to their constituency, setting up shop. And one of the best things to do from a church planting perspective is to get in on the ground maybe six months or a year early and just sit under minority leadership. (Loritts 2018).

A common origin for multi-ethnic Evangelical churches is through new church “plantings” in urban communities.⁴ The founding of these new churches is a response to demographic imperatives within Evangelicalism (see Pew Research Center 2015), but also reflects deep historical and theological Evangelical traditions. For white Evangelicals, moving from homogenous white churches into diverse urban church communities can feel like important progress toward racial reconciliation. However, when the growth of urban MECs comes at the expense of existing ethnic churches, particularly Black churches, they can reinforce gentrification dynamics in urban neighborhoods. Efforts by white pastors to create “welcoming” multi-ethnic church communities too often default to white Evangelical culture,⁵ reducing the incorporation of BIPOC Evangelical theology and traditions to stylistic elements, such as music. In so doing white-led MECs reproduce white privilege behind a veneer of racial diversity. For many BIPOC Evangelicals, the devaluing of the contributions and significance of the Black church, in particular, undermines the potential of the MEC movement:

We see Black church purposes being denigrated in the multi-racial church. We do not see the activism, the community centeredness—and if we do see it, it is called missional and not what the Black church has been doing for years . . . If we take the talents and the lifeblood of Black churches out and these people are coming into multiracial churches but you don’t replace any of the activism or the purposes that the Black church serves in the community, you are basically robbing a neighborhood community of a resource without replacing it with something else. (Oneya Fannell Okuwobi, Mosaix 2019)

When asked whether they considered cooperating with existing minority churches instead of creating a new church, white leaders of multi-ethnic churches consistently explained that they felt “called” by God to start a new church in that particular location.⁶ The claim to have been instructed by God to start their church, whether sincere belief or strategic calculation, cuts short any attempt to consider the broader impact of a new MEC on existing churches and on the local community. It is also an effective buffer against criticisms that creating MECs that draw much of their membership from outside the community contributes to dynamics of gentrification and displacement in BIPOC communities. A white-led MEC unaware of the role existing minority churches play in the community are unlikely to create a space that reflects theological and cultural diversity or that prioritizes the contributions of all its members:

The Black church is more than just a spiritual center; it is a cultural center. The Black church has created institutions of higher learning. It has the place of birthing of black businesses. It has been the place of social engagement and civil rights history. A bunch of what we have seen in the transformation in our

⁴ Some of these are colloquially referred to as “hipster churches,” which cater to young Evangelicals and those with more liberal leanings who feel alienated from traditional white Evangelicalism (see McCracken 2010). It is also important to note that not all such churches are white-led (see Lee 2011).

⁵ This was one of the most common criticisms of the MEC project in our interviews with BIPOC clergy.

⁶ There was a sharp ethnic distinction in responses to this question. Only one white MEC leader referenced coordination with existing BIPOC church communities. BIPOC clergy frequently also mentioned feeling a call to plant a new church, but none relied solely on that reasoning in their explanation of their choice of church location.

society has come—at some level the Black church has been at the table. It is so important that when we talk about the multi-ethnic movement that we understand the value and the vastness of the Black church. (Santes Beatty, Mosaix 2019)

The expansion of MECs into urban areas exposes white Evangelicals to racial diversity and its correlating issues, but that incursion risks being one more colonizing force in marginalized communities. Whether urban MECs play into that dynamic or overcome it depends on their ability to move beyond superficial racial and ethnic diversity. A church unaware of, or uninterested in, the wisdom of existing minority church communities, or the important role those churches play in the community, may expose white Evangelicals to greater racial diversity while simultaneously limiting the ability of these churches to bridge racial divisions. However, incorporating more equitably the contributions of BIPOC Evangelicals, even stylistically, is often met with resistance, including for white Evangelicals ostensibly open to more integrated church communities.

How comfortable a transitioning church community feels in equitably integrating Evangelicals of color depends on a few factors. The demographic balance of community is crucial, as is the larger cultural and political context of the community. A multi-ethnic church in coastal California will already likely be embedded in a diverse and politically liberal larger community, whereas a church becoming multi-ethnic in Alabama or Iowa may feel more countercultural. Higher levels of economic inequality in a congregation increases the importance of keeping major donors comfortable to maintain the solvency of the church. But we argue that the integration of church leadership is a prerequisite for genuine racial dialogue to be fostered in the church.⁷ A clear majority of multi-ethnic Evangelical churches are led by white pastors, and while, as noted above, the percentage of MECs created by pastors of color has increased over the last two decades, BIPOC clergy have struggled to gain senior leadership positions in white-led MECs. Santes Beatty explains, “It is a lot harder for white people to follow a pastor of color since they are not used to following people of color in other aspects of their lives, let alone their spiritual lives” (Mosaix 2019).

Why have so many multi-ethnic Evangelical churches, founded with a mission of bridging racial divisions, not made greater progress in integrating church leadership? Some of the hesitancy is stylistic: white Evangelicals often underestimate the difference in worship styles across Evangelical subcultures and have assumptions that BIPOC members of the church will assimilate to white church culture. These expectations often rest on an unexamined vision of “real” Christianity that is white and conservative. In multiple conferences addressing the challenges of leading an MEC, members of color frequently lament that white styles of worship, from music to sermons, reflected white Evangelicalism as the automatic “default.” In a typical exchange, an Asian American pastor of an MEC in Virginia posed the question to a conference panel of why our conception of American Evangelicalism could not include a broader range of American cultures. The response of the white panel chair was that churches

⁷ In our interviews, white MEC leaders were generally optimistic about the progress their churches were making under white leadership. By contrast most BIPOC clergy and BIPOC members of congregations felt that white leadership lacked the intentionality and the knowledge to push their congregations through difficult discussions around race and racial justice (see also Loritts 2014).

had to be careful not to “cater” too much to the demands of non-representative groups (Exponential discussion, Dec 10, 2020). Albert Tate, an African American founder of a MEC in Southern California and a consultant to racial reconciliation efforts in Evangelical churches, explains, “You wouldn’t believe how incentivized white Christian leadership are to staying where they are” (CRR 2021). In defaulting to white culture, MECs end up marginalizing their members of color and creating spaces of white privilege and white supremacy in what is meant to be a space celebrating diversity. Santes Beatty, at the 2019 Mosaix pre-conference argued, “In order for us to walk into our mainstream phase, we will have to admit that some parts of the MEC have traces of white supremacy and racism.” Oneya Okuwabi, at the same session, argued further that

Even if led by people of color, MECs only exist to the extent that they are spaces for white people to be... If whites are not completely comfortable, they are more than happy to leave and see things as alternatives. Whereas Black people, they have the burden of giving up things disproportionately, even it means talking about issues they want to talk about or music they want to listen to . . . ⁸

In addition, the desire to create a racially and ethnically integrated space may be limited by financial contingencies. The independence of Evangelical churches and the financial pressure to maintain a solvent church community mean that the loss of significant numbers of white members can threaten the viability of the church. Individual pastors must find a message that balances a desire to appeal to more progressive Evangelicals with maintaining the financial support of members who oppose more than superficial diversity. Conferences and roundtable discussions ostensibly focused on racism and racial reconciliation also include topics that appeal to Evangelicalism’s conservative base, such as exhortations to defend the tax-exempt status of churches in the name of religious liberty, warnings not to become “political” in the pursuit of racial reconciliation, and screeds against critical race theory.⁹ Albert Tate explains, “White leaders in white institutions are scared! . . . A [white pastor] friend in Arizona spoke about Black Lives Matter and 2,000 left the church . . . The ripple effect [is] you lose donors.” He concludes, “I spend a lot of time trying to get them to find courage” (CRR 2021).

Individualism, Structure, and the Challenge of Black Theology

When we talk about individuals, we forget that we live in a system...I think there was an article when Mike Brown or one of the other shootings happened, they said, someone is going to

⁸ The need to cater primarily to white congregants does not happen only in white-led churches. For example, Edwards (2008, 21–34) describes a Black-led, and majority Black, multi-ethnic church, where the Black lead pastor still felt limited in how much their services could incorporate traditional Black church norms—in this case white congregants were uncomfortable with spontaneous outbursts of praise from a Black congregant.

⁹ Understandably, financial solvency is a central focus of church planting literature and seminars. In addition, conference presentations by key white MEC leaders emphasize the urgency of defending churches’ tax-exempt status and tie “religious liberty” debates to the financial vulnerability of churches. As the Covid-19 pandemic took hold in 2020, the spreading of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories emerged as an additional issue at the *Q & A Conference* (*Q Ideas*, November 11-12, 2020).

have to shoot Jesus; that is the only person that we don't have anything bad to say about.
(Oneya Fannell Okuwobi, Mosaix 2019)

Evangelicalism is often characterized as individualistic in its theology (Emerson and Smith 2000; Wadsworth 2014), and this orientation is seen as explaining the struggle many Evangelicals have in acknowledging the broader context in which social, political, and economic problems occur. However, this belief, common in both academic work and among Evangelicals themselves, is overstated. An individualistic focus has never characterized Black Evangelical theology (Hughes 2018; McCormick 2005; Tisby 2019). Comparative research demonstrates that it also fails to describe Evangelicalism outside the United States (Bean 2016; Rawlyk and Noll 1994). Nevertheless, even if this individualism is neither inherent nor inevitable, to many white Evangelicals, it can *feel* theological. Thus, being challenged in these conversations on race can feel like a theological issue for them.

The Black church was born out of opposition to the segregationist white Evangelical church (McCormick 2005). This oppositional and forced separation of white and Black Evangelicalism had profound effects on the attendant theology of each. Richard Hughes (2018) argues that the oppositional relationship of Black theology has continued to provide a critique of the dominant white, American national culture and of the close ties that exist between American Evangelicalism and American nationalism. Jemar Tisby (2019, 19) argues, "The black church, in particular, has always been a bulwark against bigotry. Forged in the fires of racial prejudice, the black church emerged as the ark of safety for the people of African descent." Black theology, especially as it became tied to the Civil Rights struggle of the 1950s and the 1960s and Black Nationalism of the late-1960s and early-1970s, has retained its focus on speaking to the lived experience and suffering of African-Americans and for the explicit goal of providing the means for black liberation from racism (McCormick 2005, 43–46; Fields 2001, 12). Even more fundamentally, there is a core divergence in the role that politics plays in the Black church:

Black Christianity, as expressed in the Black church, can be said to be the same and yet different from the Christianity practices by white people...Because freedom was a core concept in the evolution of the black church, *because it implies political action*, the line between secular and the sacred, so precisely drawn in the white church, does not exist in the black church. (Bascio 1994, 59, emphasis added).

Black theology, therefore, poses significant challenges to white Evangelicalism, particularly since white Evangelicals fail to see the whiteness of their own theology—they view it simply as Evangelical theology. Alumkal (2004) argues that white Evangelical Christians have a view of race and racial reconciliation that emphasizes individual acts. This allows the dominant racial group to avoid confronting their white privilege and the myriad ways that both the congregation and the larger American society perpetuate white supremacy:

Defining racism as a spiritual problem that is immune to secular solutions gives whites license to oppose affirmative action, welfare, and other divisive government programs. Furthermore, whites who are nostalgic for a sense of ethnic attachment can treat evangelical Christianity as a quasi-ethnic identity, a move that is encouraged by evangelicals' sense of themselves as an embattled

religious minority in the contemporary United States. Finally, whites can respond to their history as “oppressors” by cathartic acts of repentance, as well as by assertions that Christian identity transcends race, while fully retaining the fruits of white privilege. (Alumkal 2004, 205)

Wadsworth (2014) investigates early attempts by MECs to confront racism in their congregations. Pastors and congregants in the MEC she observed acted in good faith, and they sought the support provided by Mosaix and other larger organizations in making the transition to an MEC. Nevertheless, their attempts remained incomplete because there was a desire—particularly by the white congregants and pastors—to rush to reconciliation as quickly as possible. Forgiveness and reconciliation were seen as key endpoints of congregational integration. White Evangelicals would create a space for African Americans to share their truth about how they experience racism in the larger American society as well as in the congregation, but there was pressure for each session to end with forgiveness offered to the white Evangelicals.

There has been continued growth in the MEC movement since the early 2000s, when Wadsworth collected the data for her study. In recent years, frustrated with the resistance of white Evangelicals to deeper conversations about race and racism, BIPOC, especially Black, Evangelicals have developed “racial reconciliation” workshops to help guide interested church members through more productive discussions about racism. There are a few different versions of these workshops, but one of the earliest and the best known is *Be the Bridge*, developed by LaTasha Morrison in 2016.¹⁰ The primary goal of these workshops is to foster deeper inter-racial dialogues among Evangelicals. This requires educating white Evangelicals about the history of racism in the United States and the ways racial inequality continues to be perpetuated through socio-economic structures and political institutions. The curriculum is challenging and enlightening, even for those who considered themselves knowledgeable about racism. Additional resources suggested by *Be the Bridge*, for example, include literature and media explaining redlining, affirmative action and educational inequality, the impact of racism on health disparities across ethnic communities, and racism within the criminal justice system. After participation in a series of seminars, interested church members can then train to lead the workshops in their communities. Workshop leaders emphasize biblical mandates to address racism and combine lecture with prayer and personal testimony (CCR 2021; see *Be the Bridge* 2023). In recognition of the need to move beyond a focus on individual conversion and to address endemic structural inequality, some workshop leaders have chosen to rename them “racial justice” rather than racial reconciliation workshops (Pastor John Williams, interview, June 18, 2021).

Even allowing for self-selection bias among those who voluntarily choose to participate, racial reconciliation workshops are profoundly challenging, for both white and BIPOC participants. BIPOC participants are asked to recount their personal experiences with racism and to explain the enduring nature of racism to white participants who may be defensive or skeptical. For white Evangelicals resistant to the idea of “structural sin,” the obvious political

¹⁰ In the years since its founding, *Be the Bridge* has expanded beyond workshops into broader educational efforts on race within Evangelical churches (see also Morrison 2019).

implications of such a shift in thinking can cause significant confusion and opposition. It is not uncommon for at least some white participants to reject the premise of the workshops, or for the workshops themselves to be a source of division within a congregation (Pastor John Williams, interview, along with interview with white and Black Evangelical congregants who started a Be the Bridge workshop in their home church in Florida, June 18, 2021).

From Racial Reconciliation to Racial Justice: The Theological is Political

I stood in front of the congregation and said, “Not all of you will understand why many of your brothers and sisters feel the way that they feel right now. And even that is cultural . . . When Michael Brown gets shot that is me, that is my uncle, that is my cousin, that’s my brother . . . Weep with those who weep; let’s mourn with those who mourn . . .” These are babies I have baptized and christened, these are weddings that I did . . . these are dead parents in the hospital; these are dead kids in the ground. But the work of the spirit through the Gospel had not permeated enough that when I made that statement, they heard political posturing and not Biblical . . . So over the next several months, there was a trickle, three or four here, eight or nine there. And it was one of the most painful things I experienced. But what it did do, though, was it opened up the floodgates for all these other people that would backfill. And I look back now and see the solid hand of God in that obviously. (Leonce Crump, *Mosaix* 2019)

Clergy and congregants of color bring more than stylistic changes to MECs; the substantive theological and political perspectives they introduce to mainstream white Evangelical communities can be profoundly destabilizing. Opposition to a church focus on racial justice is frequently framed in terms of the need for the church to remain “nonpolitical,” or “nonpartisan,” and to concentrate on spiritual issues. The diversity in perspective that clergy of color often bring to MECs, and the political implications of their focus on issues of social and racial justice, challenge white Evangelicals to recognize that their churches’ “non-political” posture is actually a reflection of their political homogeneity. Evangelicals have long been politically involved in a range of conservative issues, from opposition to abortion and LGBTQ equality, to arguments about “religious liberty” in defense of discriminatory policies. Issues of social and racial justice are labeled political because they are issues more closely linked to the Democratic Party and more progressive secular political groups. After decades of close alliance between white Evangelicalism and conservative politics, many white Evangelicals remain convinced that the right-wing policy issues they actively support are uncontested reflections of Christian faith, rather than political issues around which different groups of Christians disagree.

Black theology, developed over centuries of largely segregated worship and with a focus on social and racial justice, poses a direct challenge to conservative white Evangelical politics. White Evangelical members uncomfortable with these perspectives can easily opt to return to a more homogenous, traditional white church. Santes Beatty explains,

But here’s the thing, there are socially acceptable justice issues in a predominantly white MEC. This happened with a leader—they got pretty upset with me and they said, “I don’t think you should say it that way.” And I said, “Why shouldn’t I say it that way?” And they said, “Because white people are going to leave.” “Ok”, I said, “But have you thought about the fact that if I don’t say it people of color are going to get up and leave? Why are you always

so concerned about white people getting up to leave? . . . We are losing credibility with our silence” (Mosaix 2019)

For many white congregants, the complex and inherently political nature of real racial dialogue detracts from their enjoyment of church and their vision of what church should be. Corey Hodges, a Black Evangelical pastor of a Black church that became multi-ethnic, explains that Black clergy are expected to meet the expectations of members of color, who are accustomed to church leaders linking spirituality and social justice, particularly after a traumatic event in their community. At the same time, white members often find such a focus politically partisan and may feel implicitly criticized by the focus on racial injustice. Hodges explains that Black clergy have struggled to strike this balance particularly in response to police violence against the Black community:

If I were a white person, I would assume that it would be a tedious conversation. I just want to worship Jesus. I didn't come here—I feel bad for Michael Brown, I can relate to his pain, I can see injustice, I can agree that it was unjust. But I just want to say “How Great is Our God.” I don't want to sit here and deal with the guilt of my white ancestry, when I am supposed to be at church...I am not racist, I am not a bigot, I have empathy for Michael Brown. I know all of that. I just want to hear church. (Mosaix 2019)

Many white MEC leaders speak with pride about their politically mixed congregations (interviews with authors). The fact that conservative Republicans and progressive Democrats could attend the same church together was seen as proof that the congregation was transcending the larger national political divide. When pressed, they admit that Democrats make up a small minority of the population. Avoiding contentious discussions therefore leaves intact the tacit support of most Evangelicals for Republican politics. However, at the most recent 2019 Mosaix conference, several BIPOC Evangelical speakers directly decried the tight connection between Evangelicals and the Republican Party. At the same time, BIPOC clergy work to downplay the partisan implications of their positions and to ground their political critiques in biblical references, portraying Jesus as fundamentally concerned with social justice.¹¹

Salvation for Whom? The Psychological Barrier to Racial Dialogue

“We can only do this work if God empowers us.” (Mark Chase, CRR 2021)

Many church conversations about race begin and end with members of color relating their experiences of racism, and white members asking for forgiveness and reconciliation. Such an abbreviated approach undermines the goals of racial dialogue. For Evangelical of color, discussions of race, racial injustice and white privilege are exhausting and potentially triggering since they are asked to re-live painful personal experiences of racism. If the process is cut

¹¹ For example, participants in Fellowship Church's racial reconciliation workshop were told, “Jesus was all about justice. He flipped that table with righteous anger. Christians need to flip systems of injustice with righteous anger” (Albert Tate, CRR 2021).

short, or this trauma is replayed time and again without any substantive change, this dialogue becomes, yet again, a process of white privilege.¹²

For white Evangelicals, more than theological or political, this is at its root a profoundly psychological challenge, one that forces a confrontation with their very identities as Evangelical Christians. Genuine racial dialogue challenges them to rethink their faith and politics in fundamental ways. Being an ally in racial justice work requires white Evangelicals to relinquish leadership roles they may inhabit in other spaces and be led by their BIPOC brothers and sisters.¹³ Most significantly, white Evangelicals must confront the ways they remained on the sidelines of urgent racial justice issues, or may have been on what they now recognize as the wrong side of these issues. They must acknowledge the fact that secular groups and other faith communities have been involved in anti-racism work for many years. These groups may hold positions on other issues, like LGBTQ+ equality or reproductive rights, that are anathema to most Evangelicals. Where does this leave a faith that believes it has a message of salvation for the world?

Placed in this context, the reticence and even resistance in some Evangelical sectors to deepening the MEC project should not be surprising. Even well-intentioned white leaders and church members willing to acknowledge the entrenched racism in American society may resist transforming their church communities, their politics, and their faith enough to engage positively in racial justice work. The resistance to full integration creates a dilemma for many clergy of color, who have left behind the support of ethnically homogenous churches but find themselves marginalized in white-led MECs. Korie Edwards calls these pastors of color “estranged pioneers” (Edwards and Kim 2019) and explains that many BIPOC leaders in MECs struggle with depression and traumatic stress (Oneya Fannell Okuwobi, Mosaix 2019; see also Edwards and Kim 2019, 15–16). Frustrated with the lack of progress, BIPOC clergy are increasingly leaving white-led MECs to start their own multi-ethnic churches (Banks 2020). Elizabeth Rios, an Evangelical whose work focuses on church planting, argues that there comes a time when you have to stop “asking for the blessing” and go create the community you envision (Exponential webinar, January 11, 2022). We argue that what may appear as a failure of the MEC project can, in fact, point the way forward, as new MECs are created that may more fully reflect the goals of interracial dialogue and justice work.

We argue that the MEC movement and its attempts to build a “new table,” finds itself stuck in what Adam Przeworski (1985, 1991) terms a “valley of transition.” Referring to democracies in Eastern Europe, transitioning from socialist economies into free market economies, he argues that periods of systemic change are precarious because, whatever the eventual benefits of transformation might be for individuals and the larger community, there will inevitably be an initial, profound period of upheaval. If this period of instability is

¹² The burden placed on BIPOC to make themselves vulnerable as a means of teaching whites about the ongoing existence of white privilege is not unique to Evangelical congregations (see, for example, Kendi 2019; Oluo 2019; Roberts-Miller 2021; Saad 2020; Sue 2015).

¹³ “There has to be a willingness to [be] self-emptying . . . To become an ally, you have to be willing to put down your power, put down your privilege, put down your preferences” (Santes Beatty, Mosaix 2019).

significant, the commitment to the longer-term project may falter, as individuals calculate that they will lose more than they stand to gain.

BIPOC Evangelicals find themselves in a valley of transition, as they are repeatedly expected to do the hard, emotional work of teaching white members of their community that racism, microaggressions, and white privilege are prevalent, not just in the larger society, but in their congregation.¹⁴ For white Evangelicals, the familiarity and comfort of their place in their church is threatened by the expectation that they rethink long-accepted assumptions about themselves and their faith. Both groups feel caught in an uncomfortable stasis, and neither has a clear sense where racial reconciliation efforts may lead.

In a valley of transition, the long-term goal—a new government, a new church—is impossible to envision fully, and the path to the final goal remains unpredictable and full of risk. Here, Przeworski sees the role of trustworthy leadership as critical to maintaining unity of purpose. Similarly, BIPOC Evangelical leaders emphasize the need for authentic, “prophetic” leadership (Leonce Crump, Mosaix 2019) as MECs shepherd congregations through the valley of transition—the period of deep discontent—toward more genuine racial integration and dialogue (Salter McNeil 2020). Ideally, (although the precise outline is unclear) the other side of the transition is a new church community that has confronted and started to reconcile with its racism (the “new table”).

Przeworski’s theory is helpful here because racial justice work, and eventual racial reconciliation, is, of course, not merely the task of the Evangelical church, but of the country as a whole. Racism is endemic in the U.S. There is a space for a religious, and arguably for a specifically Evangelical, approach to these problems. While this will require a confrontation with Evangelicalism’s racism (past and present), it still allows for psychological frameworks that work—that help evangelize, that help provide an identity for the community—to still be employed. To want to do racial justice work requires an individual transformation and “conversion” to the anti-racist cause. Anti-racist work is structural and institutional, but it is also profoundly individual. What does “checking your privilege” mean if not that we need, as individuals, to profoundly change our mindset? Some of the elements of white Evangelical identity that can feel undermined in the short term—the self-perception that they are a besieged minority battling for a society that reflects Christian ideals (C. Smith 1998), a belief that they have a message of salvation for those outside the faith—could potentially be reframed and repurposed in the effort to pursue racial reconciliation. The work of racial justice is the work of the nation.

Conclusion

[Racial justice] is slow, hard, long work . . . We won’t see the end of it but must pursue the work.” (John Williams, CRR 2021)

¹⁴ One of the most common emotions expressed by BIPOC participants in the racial reconciliation workshops and roundtables we attended was exhaustion with the need to prove the existence of racism by relating their traumatic experiences of it. One African American woman explained, “I’ll keep talking about it in my church. But I don’t expect anything to change” (Exponential Roundtable on Race, December 10, 2020). Another concluded that the only way she could talk about racism in her church and still be happy in her life was through the Holy Spirit (CCR 2021).

Multi-ethnic Evangelical churches have attempted to confront a long history of racism and segregation within their faith, and in so doing, to forge a new Evangelicalism that transcends racial divisions. As many in the MEC movement have come to realize, the easy growth of the “pioneer” phase of the movement has now transformed into something more challenging. In some respects, due to MECs early growth, expectations have been raised about the results that can be delivered in attempts to forge multi-ethnic congregations, where all members feel equally part of the community. Attempts to promote “racial reconciliation” among MEC members have revealed stark divisions in the way white and BIPOC Evangelicals view racial justice issues, divisions that touch on theological and political differences with deep historical roots.

Whether founded through a new church planting or the transition of a formerly homogenous church community, if an MEC fails to incorporate clergy and members of color on an equitable basis, and if it is unable to move from an individualistic understanding of racism to a recognition of structural inequality, its efforts will fail to eradicate white supremacy from the church. An MEC that shies away from genuine racial dialogue reifies white fragility and, in so doing, cements the structures that perpetuate not just material inequalities but hierarchies of human worth. At a theological level, characterizing discussions about racism as political posits a Christianity that is in opposition to racial justice and a faith that prioritizes superficial coexistence over the disruptions that come from addressing injustices.

The current period is marked by both conservative backlash and the frustration of many BIPOC leaders and congregants in MEC, who are leaving out of frustration because the changes being made are not significant enough. Attempts to address racial justice issues within MEC communities have alienated many white members, while leaving BIPOC congregants frustrated with the slow pace of change. We have argued here that Evangelicals of color leaving to start their own multi-ethnic churches is not a failure of the MEC project but may be a way to realize its potential more fully.

Despite rapid growth since the turn of the twentieth century, the MEC movement represents a minority movement within the faith. Yet it models for Evangelicalism and for the larger society the ways that faith, and Evangelicalism in particular, bring particular tools and talents to the building of integrated communities that aim to bridge racial and ethnic divides. These parts of Evangelical identity could be repurposed to get their “buy-in” to a process that needs all parties to remain engaged in the MEC project. A particular benefit of this would be that this sort of search for authenticity and tolerance of difference are precisely the issues that matter most to younger Americans. Reaching this demographic, especially those Evangelicals who have been leading the move away from Evangelicalism, could also be a way of reversing membership decline in the Evangelical church. It is unrealistic to expect, on the part of the church or the part of the larger political culture of which they are a part, a large-scale transformation. But the fact that these efforts continue demonstrates their commitment to the struggle.

The multi-ethnic church movement is unlikely to ever become a majority movement within Evangelicalism. There remains too much resistance on the part of white Evangelical churchgoers, as well as on the part of national Evangelical leaders, who have amassed enormous political influence through their alliance with Republican politics. But as a growing

minority movement, it can still have a significant impact within Evangelicalism and in the larger society, as the conservative political and cultural values that animate white Evangelicalism are shared by large segments of Americans outside the faith. The concerted effort to pursue racial reconciliation, despite challenges in practice, model a way to address racial inequality within these conservative spaces.

Bibliography

- Alumkal, Antony W. 2004. "American Evangelicalism in the Post-Civil Rights Era: A Racial Formation Analysis" *Sociology of Religion* 65 (3): 195–213.
- Balmer, Randall. 2021. *Bad Faith: Racism and the Rise of the Religious Right*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing.
- Banks, Adelle M. 2020. "More Multiracial Churches Led by Black, Hispanic Pastors" *Christianity Today* (January 17). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/january/more-multiracial-churches-black-hispanic-pastors-mosaix.html>
- Bascio, Patrick. 1994. *The Failure of White Theology: A Black Theological Perspective*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Be the Bridge. 2023. "BTB Youth Booklist." <https://bethebridge.com/btby-booklist>.
- Bean, Lydia. 2014. *The Politics of Evangelical Identity: Local Churches and Partisan Divides in the United States and Canada*. Princeton: Princeton University.
- Butler, Anthea. 2021. *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Center for Racial Reconciliation (CRR). 2021. Workshop, Fellowship Church, Monrovia, CA, June 17.
- Dougherty, Kevin D., Mark Chaves and Michael O. Emerson. 2020. "Racial Diversity in US Congregations, 1998-2019" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 59 (4): 651–62.
- Edwards, Korie L. 2008. *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2014. "Role Strain Theory and Understanding the Role of Head Clergy of Racially Diverse Churches" *Sociology of Religion* 75 (1): 57–79.
- Edwards, Korie L., and Rebecca Kim. 2019. "Estranged Pioneers: The Case of African American and Asian American Multiracial Church Pastors" *Sociology of Religion* 80 (4): 456–77.
- Emerson, Michael O. and Christian Smith. 2000. *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fields, Bruce L. 2001. *Introducing Black Theology: 3 Critical Questions for the Evangelical Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Haselden, Kyle. 1964. "'11 AM. Sunday Is Our Most Segregated Hour'" *The New York Times* (August 2). <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1964/08/02/109567664.html?pageNumber=165>.

- Hughes, Richard T. 2018. *Myths America Lives By: White Supremacy and the Stories that Give Us Meaning*, Second edition. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Jones, Robert P. 2020. *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Kendi, Ibrahim X. 2019. *How to Be an Antiracist*. New York: One World.
- Lee, David. 2011. "The Hipster Pastor." *Character Media* (October 11). <https://charactermedia.com/october-issue-the-hipster-pastor>.
- Loritts, Bryan. 2014. *Right Color, Wrong Culture: A Leadership Fable*. Chicago: Moody.
- . 2018. "The Gospel, the Church, and Race." Exponential Southern California Conference, October 3.
- Margolis, Michele F. 2018. *From Politics to Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Marti, Gerardo. 2009. "Affinity, Identity, and Transcendence: The Experience of Religious Racial Integration in Diverse Congregations" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48 (1): 53–68.
- McCormick, Robert Eugene. 2005. "The Theological Presuppositions of Evangelical Black Pastoral Leadership in Relationship to Conservative Evangelical Theology." Dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2005. 3167910.
- McCracken, Brett. 2010. "Hipster Faith." *Christianity Today* (September 3). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/september/9.24.html>.
- McDowell, Sean and Scott Rae, Hosts. 2019. "The Coming Revolution in Church Economics with Mark DeYmaz." October 11. In *Thinking Biblically*, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University. Audio podcast. <https://www.biola.edu/blogs/think-biblically/2019/the-coming-revolution-in-church-economics>.
- Morrison, Latasha. 2019. *Be the Bridge: Pursuing God's Heart for Racial Reconciliation*. Colorado Springs: WaterBrook.
- Mosaix. 2019. "Multi-Ethnic Church and the Black Church." Fifth Annual Conference Preconference, November 5.
- Multiethnic.Church. 2023. "Resources." <https://multiethnic.church/resources>.
- Oluo, Ijeoma. 2019. *So You Want to Talk About Race*. New York: Seal.
- Pew Research Center. 2015. "America's Changing Religious Landscape". Accessed: <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.
- Priest, Kersten Bayt, and Korie L Edwards. 2019. "Doing Identity: Power and the Reproduction of Collective Identity in Racially Diverse Congregations." *Sociology of Religion* 80 (4): 518–41.

- Przeworski, Adam. 1985. *Capitalism and Social Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Przeworski, Adam. 1991. *The Democracy and Market*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Q Ideas. 2020. "Q Sessions: Race & Repair." June 9. <https://vimeo.com/427890423>.
- Rawlyk, George A. and Mark A. Noll, eds. 1994. *Amazing Grace: Evangelicalism in Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States*. Vol. 13. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University.
- Reimers, David M. 1965. *White Protestantism and the Negro*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Roberts-Miller, Patricia. 2021. *Speaking of Race: How to Have Antiracist Conversations That Bring Us Together*. New York: The Experiment.
- Rozsa, Matthew. 2021. "Survey: Religion, Right-Wing News Consumption Are Strong Predictors of QAnon Beliefs." *Salon* (May 27). <https://www.salon.com/2021/05/27/survey-religion-right-wing-news-consumption-are-strong-predictors-of-qanon-beliefs>.
- Saad, Layla F. 2020. *Me and White Supremacy: Combating Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor*. Naperville: SourceBooks.
- Salter McNeil, Brenda. 2020 [2015]. *Roadmap to Reconciliation 2.0: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness, and Justice*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: InterVarsity.
- Smith, Andrea. 2019. *Unreconciled: From Racial Reconciliation to Racial Justice in Christian Evangelicalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Smith, Christian. 1998. *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stewart, Katherine. 2019. *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Sue, Derald Wing. 2015. *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race*. Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons.
- Tisby, Jemar. 2019. *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Wadsworth, Nancy. 2014. *Ambivalent Miracles: Evangelicals and the Politics of Racial Healing*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.