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Michael O. Emerson: People of the Dream

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CHAPTER ONE ■ Dreams

Michael O. Emerson and Edward J. Blum

THIS BOOK is an in-depth study of contemporary multiracial religious congregations. Its goal is to both understand religious life in the United States, and learn something about the future of race relations in the United States. “Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week.” This quip, or some version of it, is said so often that it seems many people have become numb to it. I have never been able to verify who first said it. Some say Martin Luther King; others attribute it to people much before his time. The saying’s meaning—that people are most racially segregated during the time of their religious gathering—is taken as such common knowledge that people usually do not give it much thought.

Despite a world in which racial separation in religious congregations is the norm, some congregations are racially mixed. I thought it would be fascinating to study these congregations, which are rare enough that for many people they are exotic. It seemed to me that by understanding such multiracial gatherings of religious people, we could understand much larger issues at the core of living in this complex and ever-changing place called the United States. This nation, like others, is growing increasingly diverse, both racially and ethnically. Much debate swirls around topics related to this growing diversity, such as the appropriate model for race relations and cultural continuity, and how new immigrant groups will fare relative to racial and ethnic groups already in the United States. Part of this debate is about the role of religious congregations for immigrant groups and group survival. Will they worship in ethnic congregations or in other types of congregations? How about their children? What will this mean for race relations?

Religious congregations are a specific type of organization—a private, volunteer organization—and together these organizations constitute a specific type of institution—what we may call a *mediating institution* between the small private worlds of individuals and families and the large public worlds, such as politics, the educational sys-

Edward J. Blum, a historian of race and religion in the United States, coauthored this chapter.

tem, and the economy. For these reasons and for reasons discussed in the next section, studying multiracial congregations provides an opportunity to better understand larger issues of race, religion, and American identity through organizations and institutions.

We have so many questions that need answering. How do racially mixed congregations come to be? How common are they? Who attends these congregations? How did their members get there? What are their experiences like? What contributions to and detractions from improved race relations and equality, if any, do these congregations make? Do these congregations tell us anything about the changing nature of race and ethnicity, or about religion?

In the chapters to come, based on extensive research, I seek answers to all of these questions. I find that multiracial congregations are atypical, more racially diverse than their neighborhoods, places of racial change, and filled with people who seem to flow across racial categories and divisions. They are filled with a different sort of American. As I explain later in the book, I call them “Sixth Americans,” and they may be harbingers of what is to come in U.S. race relations. I also find that multiracial congregations entail risks—such as the misuse of power to squelch cultural practices and, in some cases, to maintain inequality—and payoffs—such as providing supportive places for cultures to be practiced and taught to a variety of people and, in some cases, to reduce inequality. Whether one thinks multiracial congregations are a “good thing” rests in part on how one evaluates these risks and payoffs.

WHY CONGREGATIONS?

If we want to fully understand race relations in the United States, we must understand the role of religion.¹ If we want to understand religion in the United States, we must understand its core organizational form—the religious congregation. I use the term “religious congregation” to mean any regular gathering of people for religious purposes who come together to worship, have an official name, have a formal structure that conveys a purpose and identity, are open to all ages, and have no restraints on how long people may stay. A gathering of college students on campus every Friday night for worship is not a congregation, then, because, among other reasons, it is only open to students of the college, and its members must leave when they graduate. Congregations are typically associated with a place where the

¹ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith* (2000).

congregating occurs, but this place — a mosque, temple, church building, synagogue, or any other place of worship — can change as the congregation's size or resources change. There are over 300,000 congregations in the United States, making them the most common and widespread institution in the nation.² They are more common than all McDonald's, Wendy's, Subways, Burger Kings, and Pizza Huts, combined. (In an interesting twist on this fact, when a McDonald's closed a couple of blocks from my home, a Pentecostal congregation bought it. Now instead of serving one-minute hamburgers, the still-McDonald's-looking building serves up fervent three-hour worship services.)

The majority of Americans will regularly participate in or visit a congregation in any given year. In a fifteen-nation study, the United States scored highest in religious membership (55 percent), and had membership rates twenty or more percentage points higher than every other nation in the study except Northern Ireland.³ To varying degrees, more than one hundred million Americans are involved in religious congregations.

Congregations are the places where Americans most often go to seek the meaning of life, to worship, to find direction, and to receive social support. Major life events happen within these groups. Religious congregations are where very many newborns are officially recognized and welcomed into the human community, where Americans most often get married, and where people most often gather to say goodbye to deceased loved ones and friends.

But the role of congregations goes far beyond these essential functions. Clergy and congregations are the number one place Americans turn to when they have serious problems, more than the government or human and health service professionals.⁴ Professor Ram Cnaan of the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work found in his extensive study of congregations that they serve as one of the most critical safety nets for the nation's poor, with three-quarters of congregations having some mechanism for assisting people in economic need.⁵ In fact, in this same study, Cnaan and his colleagues found that congregations provide service in more than 200 areas, including recreational and educational programs, summer day camps for children and youth, scholarships for students, visitation of the elderly

² Cnaan et al., *The Invisible Caring Hand: American Congregations and the Provision of Welfare* (2002).

³ Curtiss, Grabb, and Baer, "Voluntary Association Membership in Fifteen Countries" (1992).

⁴ Cnaan et al. 2002; Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka, *Mental Health in America* (1981).

⁵ Cnaan et al. 2002.

and sick, counseling services, housing construction and repair, neighborhood redevelopment, clothing closets, food pantries, international relief, supporting neighborhood associations, credit unions, community bazaars and fairs, health clinics, and language training.⁶ Furthermore, in the United States more volunteering occurs in and through religious congregations than anywhere else.⁷

In one of the most important works in the study of religious congregations, scholar R. Stephen Warner convincingly argued that congregations are the center of religious life in the United States, and that even religions that are not traditionally congregationally based, such as Buddhism, become so as they adapt to U.S. life.⁸ The last phrase — “as they adapt to U.S. life” — is key to this book. Religious congregations have always occupied a central role in immigrant adaptation and support, the production of culture (music, for example), social network formation, and the production of norms and worldviews. In an impressive study of what congregations do, sociologist Nancy Ammerman shows that most congregations are linked into seven main national networks — Mainline Protestant, Conservative Protestant, African American Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox, Jewish, Sectarian, and Other.⁹ These traditions exist as almost independent worlds, producing their own educational materials, musical styles and songs, conferences, scripture translations, and worldviews. As Robert Wuthnow argued, in addition to race, these traditions, rather than denominations per se, structure the main religious dividing lines.¹⁰

Religious congregations are vital to understanding U.S. life and certainly U.S. race relations. If we want to understand the future of race relations, one place we must look is inside the multiracial congregations. For while the role of racially segregated congregations in race relations has been made transparent, no large-scale study of racially mixed congregations has until now been undertaken. One

⁶ See chapter 4 of Cnaan et al. 2002. Also see Chaves 2004; Cnaan 1997; Grettenberger and Hovmand 1997; Hodgkinson and Weitzman 1993; Silverman 2000. In his impressive national study of congregations, Chaves (2004, chapter 3) shows that while congregations are involved in social service and in a significant number of areas, the average congregation’s social service work typically is limited to short-term, emergency aid of food, shelter, and clothing. When congregations are more extensively involved, it is usually in partnership with secular and government agencies.

⁷ Nancy Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith* (2005); Robert Wuthnow, *Learning to Care* (1995); Wuthnow and Evans (eds.), *The Quiet Hand of God* (2002).

⁸ R. Stephen Warner. “The Place of the Congregation in American Religious Configuration” (1994).

⁹ Ammerman 2005, chapter 1.

¹⁰ Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (1988).

can find books that study a single multiracial congregation, comparative studies that look at three or six or even thirty or more multiracial congregations, practical how-to books, and theological books about multiracial congregations.¹¹ These are important works to be sure, but all of these studies rely on personal observation and reflection, or on nonrandom samples of a few congregations, or on qualitative data only, or are not systematically analyzed from a social scientific perspective. This study differs in that it uses both quantitative and qualitative data from a random sample of congregations—both multiracial and uniracial—and a random sample of people in congregations, plus in-depth study and interviews. Using these methods and data allow us to outline the contours of multiracial congregations, place them in the context of all religious congregations, and understand, at least minimally, their role in race relations and racial (in)equality. Yet, before embarking on a contemporary study of multiracial congregations, we first must understand the historical context. Have multiracial congregations existed in the past?

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In 2003, Bishop Fred A. Caldwell, pastor of Shreveport, Louisiana's Greenwood Acres Full Gospel Baptist Church, a large African American congregation, put forth a unique proposal. He was offering to *pay* non-blacks to attend his church. Adamant that his church should not be segregated, Bishop Caldwell said that for at least one month he would pay non-blacks five dollars per hour to attend the multiple-hour Sunday morning service, and ten dollars an hour to attend the church's Thursday night service. And he would pay this money out of his own pocket. Bishop Caldwell told the Associated Press, "This idea is born of God. God wants a rainbow in his church." He said the inspiration came to him during a sermon. "The most segregated hour in America is Sunday morning at 11 o'clock. The Lord is tired of it, and I'm certainly tired of it. This is not right."¹²

This story was first reported in the local Shreveport newspaper, but was soon picked up by papers across the country. The day the story

¹¹ For example, see Ammerman and Farnsley 1997; Anderson 2004; Becker 1998; Christensen, Edwards, and Emerson 2005; Davis 1980; Fong 1996; Foster 1997; Foster and Brelsford 1996; Gratton 1989; Jenkins 2003; Kujawa-Holbrook 2002; Law 1993, 2000, 2002; Marti 2005; Ortiz 1996; Parker 2005; Peart 2000; Pocock and Henriques 2002; Rhodes 1998.

¹² From the online article, "At Long Last, Going to Church Finally Pays," by John Boston (2003).

appeared in *USA Today*, ten people sent me on-line links to the article, many with an e-mail subject heading like, “You’ve got to see this!” The story was soon the talk on radio airwaves and television outlets, both locally and nationally. Internet chat rooms were talking about it, and people were debating it at the proverbial water cooler.

Pay people to attend worship services? To many, paying people to worship seemed outrageous. Others thought the idea was brilliant, highlighting the racial segregation in houses of worship across the nation. Still others thought the bishop should not focus on the race of the people who attended his church, but merely minister to whoever attended. They found his “religious affirmative action” deeply troubling. Discussion spread beyond this simple offer to pay people to attend one church, and turned to whether the racial makeup of congregations matters. Shortly after this story hit the national news, I was a guest on a two-hour radio call-in show in Baltimore. The show’s hosts opened by discussing Bishop Caldwell’s offer to pay non-blacks to come to his church, and featured the more general topic of congregational segregation and multiracial congregations. The issue touched a hot button among the listeners. The hosts kept commenting that their lines were lit up, jammed full. I could hear and feel that the callers were passionate about this topic.

When the first “post-pay-to-attend-offer” Sunday service was held, reporters were eager to see the results. The headlines told the story: “Few Take Pastor Up on Offer,” said one headline. A year after the offer, though, some effect could be seen. According to a report in one magazine, about two dozen whites were attending the congregation, and five whites had become members.¹³

Bishop Caldwell’s quest to create a multiracial congregation amid the strong norm of church segregation is part of a long history in American religious practice and life. Caldwell was accurate in identifying Sunday morning as a time when people of different races rarely joined together. But worship time has never been completely segregated. From the seventeenth century, when scores of British colonists first trekked into North America, to the beginning of the twenty-first century, some whites and blacks have worshiped alongside one another.¹⁴ Historically, racially mixed churches have often been marked by profound racial discrimination, as black men and women either were forced by their white masters to attend church

¹³ Olson, Ted. 2004.

¹⁴ Throughout this book, “whites” and “blacks” mean non-Hispanic whites and blacks. Hispanics/Latinos can be of any racial group, according to the present U.S. government definition, but in this work they are treated as a separate racial group.

with them during slavery or were separated from whites in balconies or back rows. Even after the abolition of slavery and the legalization of racial segregation, however, some whites and blacks continued to challenge racism and prejudice by joining together in churches and religious organizations.

When the first wave of British settlers and African servants arrived in the New World, there was little church interaction between them. Very few of the British colonists attended church services regularly, while even fewer of the Africans were Christians. The vast majority of imported Africans either maintained their traditional tribal faiths or maintained the Muslim beliefs to which they had previously converted in Africa. Because of prior missionary activity, a few were Catholics.¹⁵ The first Great Awakening during the middle of the eighteenth century, however, drastically altered this pattern by bringing blacks and whites together in a religious context. Evangelical preachers such as John Wesley and George Whitefield highlighted the individual's relationship to God, proclaiming that each individual is tainted with sin and each has the opportunity to experience new birth in Christ. Whitefield, who led massive revivals along the Eastern seaboard and became a national celebrity, maintained that since whites and blacks were equally mired in sin, they were both "naturally capable of the same improvement." John Wesley assured one elderly slave that in heaven, she would "want nothing, and have whatever you can desire. No one will beat or hurt you there. You will never be sick. You will never be sorry any more, nor afraid of anything." To these evangelicals, one's place in the kingdom of man bore no relation to one's place in the kingdom of God—rich or poor, white or black, master or slave, all would be equal in Heaven.¹⁶

The egalitarian implications of evangelical teachings were not lost on many slaves. John Wesley and George Whitefield marveled at the numbers of African Americans who flocked to hear them preach. Poet Phillis Wheatley, a New England slave who had converted to Protestant Christianity, acknowledged the ways in which African Americans heard a racially radical message in Whitefield's teachings. In a poem to honor the evangelist, she imagined Whitefield as specifically calling to African descendents:

¹⁵ Jon Butler, *Awash in the Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (1990); Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (1998); Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (1997).

¹⁶ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (1978); Frey and Wood 1998, chapter 4.

Take him, ye Africans, he longs for you,
 Impartial Saviour is his title due:
 Wash'd in the fountain of redeeming blood,
 You shall be sons, and kings, and priests to God.

To Wheatley and other African Americans, evangelical Protestantism taught that an “Impartial Saviour” represented a God who called all of his followers to be “sons, and kings, and priests.”¹⁷

The number of African American members of Protestant denominations rose impressively in the wake of the revivals. (The number of black Catholics was minute during this time.) In 1786, there were slightly fewer than 2,000 African American members of Methodist churches, equaling about 10 percent of the total Methodist membership. More than 12,000 African Americans had enlisted in Methodist churches by 1797, comprising about 25 percent of the denomination’s total membership. A similar pattern existed in the Baptist churches. By 1793, blacks made up about one quarter of Baptist congregations.¹⁸

After the American colonists won their independence from Great Britain, the revolutionary ideology that all men were created equal, coupled with a reduced need for slaves, led the northern states to gradually abolish slavery in their states. This helped create a substantial group of free African Americans, many of whom continued to attend churches with whites. In the South, whites, slaves, and a small number of free blacks also participated in religious communities together. In both regions, however, some whites chafed at worshiping alongside African Americans. In Philadelphia in the 1790s, for instance, free African Americans who worshipped at St. George’s Methodist Church found themselves mistreated by white leaders. Richard Allen, a free black Methodist minister, vividly remembered the encounter where whites forcefully sought to move the black congregants:

[T]he elder said, “Let us pray.” And we had not been long upon our knees before I heard considerable scuffling and low talking. I raised my head up and saw one of the trustees, H—— M——, having hold of the Rev. Absalom Jones, pulling him up off his knees, and saying “You must get up—you must not kneel here.” Mr. Jones said, “Wait until prayer is over, and I will get up and trouble you no more.” With that he beckoned to one of the other trustees, Mr. L—— S—— to come to his assistance. He came, and went to William White to pull him up. By this time prayer was over, and

¹⁷ Phillis Wheatley, “Elegiac Poem, on the Death of That Celebrated Divine, and Eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the Reverend and Learned George Whitefield (1770).

¹⁸ Raboteau 1978, p. 131.

