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COVER STORY

# The Multiethnic Church Movement Hasn't Lived up to Its Promise

Multiracial churches have not been good news for everyone. What can we do about it?

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Image: Illustration by Chad Hagen

Read the rest of our March coverage of multicultural churches: Erin Chan Ding looks at why some [children of immigrants](#) return to mono-ethnic worship communities, and Michael J. Rhodes unpacks [prejudice in the early Corinthian church](#).

Pastor Richard Johnson struck me as an affable person as he excitedly shared with me the journey that led him to start a multiethnic church. It was 2010, and we were meeting for lunch on Ohio State University's campus at his request. He was still in the early stages of church planting and reached out when he heard that I—a Christian and a professor who studied multiracial churches—lived in his town.

Over lunch, I listened to Pastor Rich tell me his story about why he chose to leave the black church and make his foray into the multiethnic church world.

“I was praying about a Latina worship leader because we’re going to be diverse, you know, in what we represent up front. We’re doing this because of (every nation, tribe, people, and language in) Revelation 7,” he recalls telling me. “We just have to do this differently.”

But I wasn't buying it. Having studied multiracial churches, I knew he was in for a rude awakening. I shared some of what I discuss in my book *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches*: Multiracial churches tend to mimic white churches in their culture and theology; whites are not comfortable with black church culture or addressing the elephant in the room, race; multiracial churches work—that is, remain diverse—to the extent that their white members are comfortable.

Pastor Rich remained undeterred. He told me recently: “I was saying all the right things, what we are taught typically when we plant multiracial churches. All of the boxes, I was checking off.”

Church-planting strategies like Pastor Rich's seem at first glance to be paying off. The number of multiracial churches has risen steadily in the US over the past two decades. A [recent study](#) reveals that in 2019, multiracial churches made up about 16 percent of all congregations in the US, compared to 6 percent in 1998. While Catholics have consistently had the largest percentage of multiracial churches—17 percent in 1998 and 23 percent in 2019—evangelical churches showed the greatest increase, moving from 7 percent in 1998 to 22 percent in 2019.

Moreover, we have seen a greater increase in the proportion of people of color not only attending multiracial churches but leading in them. This increase is most striking for black people. In 1998, 4 percent of multiracial churches were led by black people. In 2019, 16 percent were.

The recent growth in multiracial churches may be linked to changes in racial and ethnic demographics in the US. In 1990, the national census reported 84 percent of the US population was white. In 2019, it was estimated at 60 percent. We have also seen a parallel growth in megachurches during this same period.

With their relatively abundant resources, these congregations are disproportionately led by white men and are still largely white on average but are an increasingly attractive option for all people in metro areas. There has also been a multiethnic church movement growing over the past couple decades among a segment of conservative Protestants.

Such congregations are viewed as a recent development, but they are actually not new. Richard Allen, a black minister once with the Methodist Church, regularly preached to racially diverse crowds in Philadelphia in the late 18th century. Although noted for his exemplary preaching, teaching, and leadership gifts, neither he nor other blacks in the church were perceived as equal to whites. Whites in the church demanded that blacks be relegated to the balconies—treatment that ultimately led to Allen founding the African Methodist Episcopal denomination in 1794. Today, more than 200 years later, similar patterns of exclusion and oppression persist, albeit in different ways.

Multiracial church  
pastors are fighting an  
uphill battle.

Multiracial congregations have gained a greater share of American churches over the past 20 years, but as my colleagues and I have found, they are not delivering on what they promised. Multiracial churches often celebrate being diverse for diversity's sake. They aren't challenging [racial attitudes](#) that reinforce systemic

inequality. Rather, they either attract blacks and Latinos who already had attitudes that reinforced inequality, or blacks and Latinos over time begin to adopt whites' typical individualistic ideas about race in America.

Additionally, [studies show](#) that people of color in multiracial churches are often relegated to roles that are more symbolic, ones that people see (like usher or [singer](#)) but that have no real influence or authority in the church. This can even occur when racially homogenous [churches merge](#) to become a racially diverse church. Over time, whites end up occupying the roles in the church with the most authority. Racial diversity without power equality is not good news for anyone, especially not for people of color.



Image: Courtesy of Richard Johnson  
Pastor Richard Johnson

## The need for equity in diversity

In a [national study](#) on religious leadership and diversity, my research team and I examined what it takes to lead multiracial churches. We interviewed head pastors of multiracial churches across the country—from Catholic and mainline Protestant pastors to conservative Protestant pastors. We talked to church planters and pastors who came to already-established multiracial churches. We talked to pastors of small churches and megachurches. The pastors in the study came from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, too, with 40 percent being people of color. About 10 percent of the head pastors were women.

What we found: No matter the religious tradition, racial composition of the church, race or gender of the head pastor, or church size, multiracial church pastors are fighting an uphill battle. All pastors, of course, have to navigate conflict in their churches.

But the challenges that multiracial-church pastors face are heightened because people who are ethnically similar share similar ideas of how church should look: the length of worship services, the music sung, the preaching style, the appropriate clothing, the languages spoken, and the food served are just some examples. Without this commonality, more conflict arises, and those with more power set church culture and structure.

One white Catholic priest in our study, whose parish consisted of mainly black and white members, highlighted the kind of conflict that can come up in multiracial churches. One Sunday, the choir was singing “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” also known as the black national anthem, in celebration of Black History Month. A white male member, a former World War II commander, stood up in the middle of service, marched up to the podium, and grabbed the microphone.

“He goes, ‘Wait a minute. There’s only one national anthem. What is this black national anthem stuff?’ ” according to the priest. “Well, the choir . . . just kept singing. I didn’t try to run up and stop it or anything else.” The choir was singing, the man was ranting, and the priest said he was thinking, “This is an unbelievable scene.” He later asked the choir if they were okay. “ ‘Oh, that’s Jack. You know the way Jack is,’ ” they told him. “They just kind of dismissed it. ”

I suspect having the support of an established, older, white male head pastor greatly empowered that gospel choir that day to ignore the “rants” of another older white man in the church and continue, undaunted, singing the black national anthem.

The greatest strain for pastors of multiracial churches and their members is the topic of race. The social construct of race has deep historical roots and is systemic, woven through every part of American society. It is based on the beliefs and norms that say white people’s lives are more valuable than those of people of color. Whiteness is the default or standard to be followed. That white people occupy nearly all positions of power in society is taken for granted, accepted as just how things are and perhaps ought to be.

### **‘I assumed we would feel the same things’**

Two years after Pastor Rich and I first met over lunch, I received another email from him. Trayvon Martin had just been murdered, and the Black Lives Matter movement was gaining momentum.

“I’ve been bothered all week about the Trayvon Martin case to the point of not being able to eat today,” Pastor Rich wrote, adding that many of his church’s attendees were angry or frustrated as well. “I don’t want [our church] to just gloss over this issue with a prayer or a sermon or a blog post. We need dialogue, not another sermon.”

Pastor Rich’s young church, Sanctuary Columbus Church, was well underway. The Martin case disrupted the unspoken contract upon which, unbeknownst to him, Pastor Rich’s multiracial church was established: Don’t talk about race, racism, or racial injustice, and do not talk about white supremacy. But race could no longer be pushed under the carpet. The honeymoon was over. Pastor Rich felt it was time to address the topic.

## Multiracial churches often celebrate being diverse for diversity's sake.

“We hadn’t really talked about race. We hadn’t talked about what people of color have largely experienced in America, what I had been experiencing largely in America,” he recently told me about that season in his church. “I was promoting diversity, you know, how beautiful it is to be this diverse community who all love Jesus and we just love one another. . . . I assumed that people were going to feel the same things.”

While there were whites in his church who stood in solidarity with African American brothers and sisters, there were also whites who were, as he explained, “waiting for the facts.” They questioned everything, he said. “‘Why was Trayvon Martin there? Why wasn’t he home? Why was he holding his hand in his pocket? Why didn’t he just stand down?’ ”

A Korean American pastor from our study shared similar sentiments about how difficult it is to respond to race in racially diverse churches. In a homogenous culture—black or white—tragic events like the killing of Martin or Michael Brown can unify the community. But in a diverse church, “you’re thinking, ‘Man, how is this person going to take it?’ ” the pastor said. “You say, ‘You’re going to offend someone, most likely.’ So, it’s really hard.”

Yet for Pastor Rich, as a black pastor and the leader of a multiracial church, the response by some of the white congregants to the Martin murder was a turning point. He didn’t just learn of the existence and depth of racialized division and racism in his own church. He learned that people who he thought saw and embraced him as a brother in Christ perhaps actually saw him as “just another black man.” This was an affront to his belovedness as a child of God who was created in God’s image.

After some soul-searching, Pastor Rich realized that he had downplayed his own blackness and the richness of what he gained in the black church tradition in order to be a pastor of a multiracial church. He did what so many of us who live in a society where white supremacy is ubiquitous do when in contexts with whites. Without giving it a second thought, we default to whiteness—even sometimes in contexts intended to be inclusive of all people.

After gaining what we sociologists call a sociological imagination—which is, simply put, becoming aware of social patterns and habits—Pastor Rich knew he had to pastor differently, not only for his congregants but also for himself. He began preaching more directly about race. But his sermons “offended” some whites in the church, he said, such as when he mentioned the Confederate flag.

He also tried to bring his staff along on the journey. But he felt alone. “They weren’t resisting, but they weren’t buying into it either,” he said. Finally, Pastor Rich was drained. “I just got tired of having the same conversations with white people at the church. It’d be people that I had been walking with four, five, and six years. And they still didn’t get it. I was tired.”

He recalls one particularly frustrating and transformational moment when he and several people from his church went with others in his Evangelical Covenant Church denomination on a Sankofa trip—a pilgrimage

where whites and blacks travel throughout the South to visit historic civil rights sites. A white person on the trip noticed a cotton field across the road and announced: “Oh, look, a cotton field! Let’s go pick some.”

The pain, grief, disappointment, and exhaustion that accompanies heading a multiracial church pushed Pastor Rich to the point of considering leaving the church to pastor a black church, somewhere he could “feel free to name what is really dividing us racially.” But he stayed. As hard as it may be, he believes he has a divine call to “minister to people from different ethnicities and denominations” and remains committed to the church he planted.

Now, he says, he is “reclaim[ing] the theology that was so rich within the black church.” When he left the black church to plant a multiracial one, he said he felt he “needed to join a predominantly white church in order to learn how white people see God and read Scripture” in order to be successful.

“But in that eight-year process, I didn’t look at their theology critically. I accepted it and I received it, and in the process of receiving it, I actually became more critical of the black church and the black theology that I had grown up in,” he told me.

And if he could start all over again, he says he would start a multiracial church from a black church, because a black church “has greater clarity on naming what the injustice is and how to speak the truth to that power of injustice”—specifically, to identify white supremacy and to “call it out.”

## **Returning to the multiracial church**

A couple of years ago, I decided to visit Pastor Rich’s church. By this time, it had gone through many ups and downs. People had come and gone. The congregation had moved from space to space until finally, a little over a year ago, it found a building where it could put down roots—at least for a while.

Pastor Rich’s journey is not uncommon for pastors of color of multiracial churches. Social, material, and financial resources are [harder to come by](#) for them compared to their white counterparts.

Pastor Rich was no longer the same pastor I met nine years ago on Ohio State’s campus. He was different. As the calculus of spiritual growth often happens, that change came by much pain and racial trauma. He was more confident of who he was in Christ and surer of being beloved as black man created in the image of God. And it seemed his church was now different, too. Having traversed many challenges over the years, it had grown, at least by my estimation, in the ways that matter most—spiritually and in unity.

For my part, after more than a decade in the black church, I felt a tug in my spirit to jump into the multiracial church world again. Admittedly, it took me some time to listen to that tug. I grew up in the black church. It feels like home to me. But while Sanctuary Columbus Church is still on a journey, it is a journey that I have chosen to join and share with others who choose to do justice, walk humbly, and love mercy as we work out our salvation together.

## Pursuing oneness

God has not called the church to “diversity.” God has called the church to oneness. I have no better solution than the gospel of Jesus Christ for this, and there are a few biblical principles that I believe are essential for the journey toward oneness.

To begin, we should mourn with those who mourn (Rom. 12:15). People of color in this country have experienced great trauma that stems from pervasive racism and racial oppression—historically and today.

There are many examples. I will highlight just two: The systemic pattern of killings of unarmed black children, women, and men by white authorities that receive no justice is deeply painful; and the marked increase in racist and xenophobic harassment of Asians during the pandemic, as [documented](#) by my colleague Russell Jeung of San Francisco State University, causes trauma. Oneness means that we share in the grief of our spiritual siblings. Are we hearing and acknowledging the pain people of color are sharing? Are we mourning with them?

But white supremacy is more than an attitude. It is a system, one that rewards both whites and people of color for maintaining the status quo and for staying silent. There are also consequences for everyone, regardless of race, who choose to rock the boat.

White Christians who speak out or take action against white supremacy, or advocate for people of color, experience loss of relationships or their jobs. I by no means am equating this loss with the systemic trauma and pain people of color experience. Nevertheless, oneness means we share in one another’s suffering, no matter how big or small.

Another way we live in oneness is to advocate for the freedom of everyone. It is for freedom that Christ set us free (Gal. 5:1). Jesus says that he came to set the oppressed free (Luke 4:18), offering us not only spiritual freedom but also freedom of our emotions, minds, and bodies—the freedom of the whole person. When people are fully free, they can best live out their purpose as beloved children of God. There are many barriers to freedom for people of color; the [grossly inequitable](#) criminal justice system is one that is particularly oppressive. How will we and our church organizations advocate for people’s true freedom?

We are all called to a life of repentance (for the kingdom of God is at hand). We—both white people and people of color—must turn away from our support of white supremacy. But repentance is not simply an apology; it is an about-face. It is openly acknowledging how we were going in the wrong direction. In America, that means actively resisting and dismantling white supremacy in our own organizations as a first step to practicing mutual submission and shared power.

Another step is learning and actively incorporating the orthopraxy and orthodoxy of leaders and communities of color, from the first-century church to institutions today, not just those that arose out of white Western religious leaders and communities.

Oneness is not about checking the boxes or parading a diverse representation up front during services. This kind of diversity is what scholars call “cheap” or “thin” diversity. It masks white supremacy. This is no gospel.

It causes people of color considerable harm.

As Jemar Tisby has shown in his [book](#) *The Color of Compromise*, the white church in America actively ensured that the long, deep roots of white supremacy took hold in the country. We are living in a moment where these roots are more clearly exposed. We are facing what Martin Luther King Jr. often referred to as the “fierce urgency of now.” The choice faces us: Will we who call on the name of the Lord Jesus confront the American church’s white supremacist past and present, or will we yet again turn a blind eye to it? Know this: To choose not to repent from white supremacy is to reinforce white supremacy.

Multiracial churches have a unique opportunity to confront white supremacy and work out the Good News in intimate community—not merely in theory or in principle, as an ethnically homogenous congregation might. To succeed, however, multiracial churches cannot be places where people of color are expected to sacrifice who they are to belong, where they have to accommodate white people’s predilections, comfort levels, and expectations for the sake of diversity.

Rather, multiracial churches are to be places where every person’s belovedness is embraced and celebrated; where every person is able to come to the table with their gifts and skills as leaders and contributors to advance the Good News of Christ; and where no form of supremacy other than the supremacy of Christ reigns.

A multiracial church that turns white supremacy on its head, that is a high call indeed. This work must be embraced as a spiritual discipline. It requires putting on the whole armor of God as Paul talks about in Ephesians. It means taking Jesus’ yoke upon us, being meek and humble, and choosing to rest in the power and strength of God and not on our own. Everything about a society like America is working against this. But this is what I do know: All things are possible with God.

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