

Multiethnic Churches: Their Current and Potential Impact in a Time of Racial Reckoning

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Multiethnicity played a significant role in the original Jerusalem church as well as in the church in Syrian Antioch, the very first church to send out missionaries. In America today, multiethnic congregations account for a relatively small share of the religious marketplace, although that share has been steadily growing in recent decades. At a time when American society has been grappling with rising and increasingly violent racial and ethnic tensions, lessons being learned in multiethnic churches in terms of collaboration and mutual understanding and respect can potentially serve to guide non-multiethnic congregations in launching new multiethnic congregations, so they can become more effective in reaching people of color in America.

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Introduction

The commandment that the Lord Jesus gave to his eleven remaining apostles just prior to ascending to heaven is familiar to Christians as the “Great Commission.” Christians in every generation regard the Great Commission as applying not only to the Eleven but also to themselves in their own eras and circumstances.

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:19, NRSV).

English translations of Matt. 28:19 that render Jesus’ command as “go and make disciples of all nations” invoke an exclusively foreign focus, urging Christians to support foreign mission efforts through prayer, financial contributions, or direct personal engagement in some aspect of foreign missions to further the worldwide spread of the gospel of Christ. While such a foreign focus is a legitimate application of the Great Commission, it is not the only one.

Why not? Because *panta ta ethne*, the Greek phrase that is commonly translated into English as “all nations,” can be translated alternatively as “all people groups.” What is the significance of the distinction between these two alternative translations? Argentine missionary leader Luís Bush defines the term “people group”—specifically referencing the phrase *panta ta ethne* in Matt. 28:19—as “a significantly large grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another because of their shared language, religion, ethnicity, residence, occupation, class or caste, situation, etc., or combinations of these.”¹ Based upon Bush’s definition, the term “people groups” applies to ethnic or racial groups anywhere in the world, in any type of society or culture, including within the United States. In other words, the potential frame of reference for applying Jesus’ command encompasses all distinct racial or ethnic groups within societies anywhere in the world that qualify as being either multiethnic or multicultural.

The increasingly multiethnic character of the population of the United States is a case in point. The 2020 U.S. Census was the first time the combined population of “people of color” (a term that includes Black, Indigenous, Latino, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and other non-white peoples)² accounted for a larger share of the overall population than the shrinking white population.³

This statistical evidence for an increasingly multiethnic population residing within America’s borders should prompt church leaders to consider new approaches for reaching out effectively to a population that is undergoing such a significant transformation. Such rethinking will no doubt require the development of some new church models that differ significantly from currently prevailing models, particularly in terms of their ethnic makeup, the diversity of their worship styles, and their flexibility when it comes to accommodating a variety of cultural backgrounds. What better place to look for

¹ Luís Bush, “The Meaning of Ethne in Matthew 28:19,” *Mission Frontiers* (Sept. 2013): 35.

² Fernanda Zamudio-Suarez, “Race on Campus: Bipoc, Minority, or People of Color?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 8, 2021).

³ The “White alone” population was the largest single group in the 2020 U.S. Census, with 204.3 million people accounting for a 61.6 percent share of the total population. However, both of these figures actually *decreased* in comparison to the corresponding figures in the 2010 census: 223.6 million people and a 72.4 percent share of the population. Meanwhile, the overall “Multiracial” population, comprising numerous combinations of ethnicity (including “White in combination”), recorded a 276 percent *increase* during the same period, growing from 9 million people in 2010 to 33.8 million people in 2020. Statistical comparisons between the racial and ethnic data in the 2020 U.S. Census and the 2010 U.S. Census at a more granular level have been complicated by the addition of several new questions on the 2020 Census form that had not been on the 2010 Census form. Some of these additional questions allowed respondents to identify explicitly with more than one race, whereas respondents to the 2010 Census were limited to identifying exclusively with only one race. (In fact, the very addition of such questions in the 2020 Census reflects a recognition on the part of Census Bureau personnel of the need to reflect the increasing degree of multiethnicity of the U.S. population, which was previously mentioned.) See Nicholas Jones, Rachel Marks, Roberto Ramirez, Merarys Ríos-Vargas, “2020 Census Illuminates Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Country,” United States Census Bureau, accessed August 29, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3CSfsX6>.

inspiration and pertinent experience than America's multiethnic churches, an array of churches that have already been engaged in this type of ministry for several decades?⁴ Although multiethnic ministry in America has a relatively brief history that spans no more than a few decades, its roots, in a sense, can be seen as extending all the way back to the first century.

Key Multiethnic Developments in the Early Church

At its inception in the first century, the church was multiethnic. When the Holy Spirit was poured out on the apostles on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, Jews from fifteen different nations heard the message in their own native languages (Acts 2:1-11). It is for this reason that theologian Kathy Black claims that "the story of Pentecost is about a multicultural, multiethnic, multiclass, intergenerational community. . . . It is filled with images that can truly sustain a multicultural community that takes native languages, gender issues, class issues, and justice issues seriously."⁵ Many of the nonresidents of Jerusalem who had been eyewitnesses to the dramatic, miraculous events of Pentecost likely returned soon afterwards to their respective homelands. On the other hand, the total Pentecost experience was very likely overwhelming and awe-inspiring for many of those Jewish visitors from the far reaches of the Roman Empire who had been among the three thousand people who were baptized after Peter's Pentecost sermon. It is certainly conceivable that many of them ended up deciding to remain in Jerusalem in hopes of witnessing and possibly even personally experiencing more of those supernatural occurrences.

Perhaps a number of those Hellenistic Jews who resided at some distance away from Palestine ended up staying on even longer and witnessing or even directly participating in the potentially divisive episode that ensued within the new Christian congregation in Jerusalem, as recounted by Luke in Acts 6:1-7. Here, ethnically Hellenistic members of the Jerusalem church protested to the apostles regarding what they perceived to be an instance of discrimination within the congregation. Greek-

⁴ Three similar terms are used more or less interchangeably in the literature that is germane to the central focus of this article, namely, "multiethnic churches" (or "congregations"), "multicultural churches," and "multiracial churches." "Multiethnic churches" is the preferred designation in this article. Why? One consideration is that the term "race" has long been deemed in the social sciences to have no scientific validity, hence the preference for "multiethnic churches" rather than "multiracial churches." In addition, the term "multiethnic" conveys the notion of collective social identity more directly than "multicultural" does. Religious Studies scholar Kathleen Garces-Foley observes that mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics tend to favor the term "multicultural congregations" while evangelical Christians manifest a clear preference for the term "multiethnic congregations" (see Garces-Foley, "Multiethnic Congregations," in *Racism*, ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics (Waco, TX: Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2010): 62-69. Cf. Mark DeYmaz and Harry Li, *Ethnic Blends: Mixing Diversity into Your Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 39.

⁵ Kathy Black, *Culturally-Conscious Worship* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 39.

speaking disciples noticed that the Hellenistic widows were receiving less than their fair share in the overall food distribution among all the church's widows when compared to the portions received by the Hebraic widows. For this reason, representatives of the Greek-speaking disciples earnestly presented their grievance to the Twelve, who were Hebraic Jews.

Under such circumstances, the apostles might have chosen to reject their complaint out of hand as inopportune at best, or, at worst, as insubordinate, perhaps even rising to the level of a direct challenge to their divinely established authority. But the apostles decided to respond to their complaint in a different manner altogether. They treated their Hellenistic brothers with the utmost respect, giving their case due consideration. In fact, the Twelve responded by proposing a genuinely innovative approach that could potentially have ended up having profound implications for multiethnicity in churches being established far afield in relation to the Jerusalem congregation, were it not for certain extenuating circumstances beyond the apostles' control.

So what was the apostles' response to the complaint lodged by their Hellenistic brothers on behalf of the Greek-speaking widows? What the apostles proposed was that those members of the Jerusalem congregation of non-Hebraic cultural heritage select men among their number who were full of the Holy Spirit to become responsible for supervising the distribution of rations for all the church's widows. This would ensure that the entire distribution would be carried out with scrupulous fairness. An important consequence of that innovation in supervision proposed by the apostles was the effective equalization of the two principal ethnic groups' spiritual status within the Jerusalem church. Predictably, the seven men selected to shoulder this responsibility—Stephen, Philip, Procurus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas from Antioch—all had Greek names, a telltale indication of their Hellenistic ethnic and cultural heritage. With prayer and the laying on of hands, the apostles signified their approval of the entire process by promptly installing all seven of the chosen Hellenistic brothers in the newly created leadership positions in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:5-6).

That particular Spirit-led response on the part of the Twelve in the Jerusalem church introduced a noteworthy innovation into the congregation's ecclesiastical structure—one that might well serve as a first-century textbook example of the contemporary "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" principle being applied within a church setting. (This phrase "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" is a tripartite principle that has gained considerable traction during recent decades within American corporate, academic and, to a lesser extent, ecclesiastical contexts.)⁶

Returning to the first-century case, the diversity component was evident in the Hebraic Jewish apostles' unmistakable acceptance of the Greek Christians as fully

⁶ "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion," *University of Michigan Office of Diversity and Inclusion* (March 3, 2022), accessed February 9, 2022, <https://diversity.umich.edu/>.

participating members in the Jerusalem church. The equity component was exemplified by the apostles' clearly stated concern that each widow would receive her fair share of food in the regular distribution, no matter which of the two principal ethnic groups within the Jerusalem congregation she pertained to. Finally, the inclusion component was reflected in the Hebraic apostles' demonstration of sufficient confidence in the spiritual qualifications of the brothers in Christ who had been duly selected by their own peers to confer a significant degree of spiritual responsibility and authority upon the new leaders within the congregation, their Hellenistic Jewish background notwithstanding. That endorsement of the Hellenistic brothers by the apostles effectively validated the status of those brothers in Christ in the eyes of the entire congregation as legitimate holders of the newly created leadership positions within the church—indeed, a fundamentally important aspect of a multiethnic congregation in any era.

Unfortunately, that significant equalization of the two principal ethnic groups in the fledgling Jerusalem congregation turned out to be short-lived. This did not occur because of internal developments within the Jerusalem congregation. Instead, it was a consequence of an external wave of persecution unleashed against the church at the order of the Jewish leaders of the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:8–8:2). Once all the members of the Jerusalem congregation except the apostles had been forced to flee from the city, the bold innovation that had been introduced within the Jerusalem congregation—that of appointing Hellenistic Jews to leadership positions—was nullified.

Insofar as multiethnicity in the young first-century church as a whole was concerned, however, multiethnic harmony was very much alive and well in the congregation in the booming coastal city of Syrian Antioch located some 250 miles north of Jerusalem, where both Jews and Gentiles were becoming Christians and flourishing together within the same congregation. Before long, in response to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the Antioch congregation became the first church in Christian history to commission and send out missionaries: Saul of Tarsus and Barnabas (Acts 13:1–3).

Mark DeYmaz, the influential cofounder of the Mosaic Global Network of multiethnic churches in the United States, highlights the strategic significance of the Antioch church's multiethnic membership:

So why did the church at Antioch care about the world? Because the church at Antioch reflected the world! They were a multi-ethnic people who considered it essential to send their money, their men, and the message of hope abroad to family, friends, and countrymen in obedience to Christ. . . . In fact, the awareness of global needs is one of the more refreshing characteristics of a healthy multi-ethnic church. Indeed, leadership in such a place will not have to work as hard as some to develop within the congregation a heart for others beyond its walls. Rather, such understanding is inherent in the DNA of a

church populated by diverse individuals who have chosen to walk together as one in Christ for the sake of the gospel.⁷

Hence, in DeYmaz's view, while the Holy Spirit was the primary agent of missions in the early church, it was the thoroughly multiethnic character of the church in Antioch, which mirrored the demographic makeup of the city, that made it an ideal candidate to serve as the very first church in Christian history to send, support, and oversee the work of the first Christian missionaries. Through their actions and activities, those pioneer missionaries—Saul/Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, and others—played a key role in exemplifying the nature of the missionary enterprise for the tens of thousands who would follow in their footsteps in succeeding centuries as they engaged in the challenging task of cross-cultural evangelism and church planting.

A Potentially Transformative Role for Multiethnic Congregations Amid the Racial Turmoil of Twenty-First Century America

In recent years, a deeply disturbing succession of high-profile, tragic incidents in which non-white Americans or non-white foreign nationals have lost their lives as the direct result of acts of racially motivated violence perpetrated by white Americans has convulsed American society. Several cases even involved violence perpetrated by law enforcement officers against non-white individuals. Of course, the most consequential case of all, the one that ended up reverberating around the world, was the videotaped murder of George Floyd, a Black man, at the hands of white Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin in May 2020.

Most of the fatal victims in these tragic episodes were Black individuals. But other non-Black victims were of Latino/a, AAPI (Asian-American or Pacific Islander), Native American, or other non-white ethnicities, including non-white U.S. residents who were citizens of other countries. Several incidents touched off public outcry, outpourings of outrage on social media, and massive protests—whether under the “Black Lives Matter” banner or under similar standards brandished by other aggrieved communities demanding justice. Taken altogether, such incidents—both the initial assaults themselves, as well as the subsequent street demonstrations that broadened and intensified the public impact of each horrific case—served to further ratchet up racial tensions throughout the nation with each new instance of hostile provocation by white Americans assailing non-white individuals and communities.

In the face of such challenging circumstances, how might churches in America best contribute toward bringing about meaningful, long-term change when not even the most skillfully conducted interracial dialogue or focus sessions, or the most earnest public-relations statements crafted by the most media-savvy church leaders, or even the loftiest

⁷Mark DeYmaz, *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church: Mandates, Commitments, and Practices of a Diverse Congregation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 22.

sermons about peace, love, and harmony could be expected to make any significant, lasting impact in that regard?

This is where intentionally multiethnic churches have much to offer after having spent years—or, in some cases, decades—developing approaches aimed at strengthening and deepening interethnic relationships, not only among their own members but also with people of various ethnicities outside their congregations. DeYmaz, a veteran multiethnic church planter, characterizes the evolving phenomenon of multiethnic churches in the United States as a pace-setting “new paradigm” in contemporary American Christendom:

In the 20th century, words alone were enough to evangelize the lost. . . . Today, however, a mere explanation is not enough, especially in words that proclaim God’s love for all people from otherwise systematically segregated pulpits and pews. Apart from the demonstration of diverse people actually walking, working and worshipping God together as one beyond the distinctions of this world that so often and otherwise divide, the gospel is undermined. . . . [I]f we want to reach the masses of millennials and their children, the Nones and Dones, and others like them in an age of wide-spread cynicism directed at evangelical Christians and churches, we need to do more today than explain the gospel—we need to demonstrate the *power* of the gospel. In the 21st century, demonstration with explanation should be our primary evangelistic strategy.⁸

Nevertheless, by no means have multiethnic churches managed to attain perfection from the standpoint of fostering harmonious relationships among their members and guests from various ethnic backgrounds. Researchers completely lacking ties to the leadership of multiethnic churches have pointed out shortcomings in this regard, but researchers from the inner circle of multiethnic church leadership have also done so. An example of the latter is prominent white sociologist Michael O. Emerson, who first became interested in multiethnic churches after having co-authored the influential book *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* with Christian Smith in 2000.⁹ Afterwards, Emerson undertook multiple research projects that focused on multiethnic congregations. In addition, he and his family consistently sought out multiethnic congregations to serve as their church home while Emerson was moving from one university to another. Emerson’s personal involvement in multiethnic congregations has not kept him from giving voice to concerns about certain intractable barriers hampering multiethnic congregations’ progress in some key areas, to wit:

⁸ Mark DeYmaz, “3 Issues That Stunt Our Multiethnic Growth,” *Outreach Magazine* (January 20, 2020), accessed February 8, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3qiUuvA>.

⁹ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University, 2000). See also Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim, *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford University, 2003), 3-4.

The path to diversity seems to be a one-way street, with people of color joining white congregations but very few whites joining Black churches. Until congregations confront the historic structures that keep racial groups divided, diversity inside congregations may function mainly as superficial performance.¹⁰

A similar criticism comes from another scholar who started out being attracted to multiethnic congregations early on in her career, though not with nearly the same depth and longevity as Emerson. Dr. Korie Little Edwards, a Black sociologist at Ohio State University, is not at all part of the inner circle of multiethnic church leaders. However, after attending Black churches exclusively during her youth and teenage years, as an adult she joined a multiethnic congregation out of genuine personal interest and commitment. Eventually, she became part of the Religious Leadership and Diversity Project, which conducts research exclusively on pastors of multiethnic churches in twelve cities across the United States. Based on the research that she herself had conducted in several congregations, Little Edwards has expressed a concern quite similar to the one expressed by Michael Emerson:

People of color weren't able to be who they were, and they weren't fully included in the culture and power system of the church. . . . They have to give up how they worship or the culture that really is important to them. They have to give up how they understand authority and how authority works, how they do family . . . how long the services are, when the services start, what [to] wear when [they] go to church, what does the sermon look like, what are the topics of the sermons, do [they] emphasize the New Testament or the Old Testament.¹¹

It would be quite intriguing to see dozens and dozens of new multiethnic churches emerging in America in the coming decades to reinforce the contribution that those already in existence have been making to help reconcile people from distinct ethnic groups through the blood of Christ. However, as the foregoing criticisms expressed by Michael Emerson and Korie Little Edwards indicate, true reconciliation between people of different ethnic heritages depends upon more than mere physical proximity to one another. Far more important is how well individual multiethnic congregations succeed in not just creating but, even more importantly, sustaining environments and cultures wherein BIPOC individuals or groups can readily perceive that individuals and groups of all ethnic heritages are not just welcome to enter but encouraged to give full expression to their gifts and talents in the functioning of the body of Christ. This entails not just being

¹⁰ See the announcement in the December 2019 Mosaix Global Network Newsletter, "Released! New 2020 Statistics on Multiracial Churches," Multiethnic.Church: Church Resources for Reaching All People, accessed December 8, 2021, <https://bit.ly/34TCUXh>.

¹¹ From an interview with Chris Karnadi, "Korie Little Edwards: Multiracial Churches Don't Challenge Racism until They Challenge White Supremacy," *Faith & Leadership* (September 29, 2020), accessed December 15, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3ueQf50>.

accepted but also being invited to participate fully in the life, ministry, and decision-making of the church in concrete and meaningful ways, rather than just simply serving as mere token representatives of inclusivity.

Paving New Pathways: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion as Key Principles for Multiethnic Congregations

Revisiting the aforementioned criticisms of multiethnic congregations expressed by Emerson and Little Edwards, they highlight how crucial it is that multiethnic congregations seriously strive to live out the principle of “diversity, equity, and inclusion.” In his 2021 book *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey toward Racial Justice*, Jemar Tisby points out how all three elements are necessary for building a healthy organizational culture in a multiethnic Christian context:

If diversity focuses on who is present, equity says who has access to a community’s resources and on what terms, and inclusion speaks to the sense of welcome and belonging extended to each person or group. . . . Too many people of color have entered majority white spaces only to find out that they are valued for their presence but not for their perspective.¹²

Achieving this transformation is a delicate undertaking that requires ample doses of patience, flexibility, and humility on the part of everyone involved—and success is not at all guaranteed.

Even giving due consideration to the caveats already raised regarding existing weak points where the full potential of multiethnic congregations has yet to be fulfilled, clearly the need exists for many more effective and dynamic multiethnic congregations in addition to those that currently exist in America, with its ongoing racial turbulence. Two principal pathways exist through which such a development can most readily be realized: (1) through mergers between existing congregations that are characterized by distinct predominant ethnicities; or (2) through deliberate planting of new congregations that are projected to be multiethnic from the beginning. Both pathways have the potential for launching new multiethnic congregations, significant challenges notwithstanding. The key is for the majority group to display a willingness and openness similar to that displayed by the apostles in the Jerusalem church to foster and encourage full participation in decision-making on the part of the minority groups in the congregation with the goal of forging a new and unique culture that adequately reflects all the ethnic diversity represented in the congregation.

¹² Jemar Tisby, *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey toward Racial Justice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021), 121.

Final Words of Appreciation for Dr. Lynn McMillon

Throughout a long and varied career in academia, journalism, church leadership and counseling, Dr. Lynn McMillon has consistently advocated for stronger interracial and interethnic relations in all spheres of life. As dean of the College of Biblical Studies at Oklahoma Christian University, Dr. McMillon hired the first full-time Black faculty member, Dr. Alan Martin. When Dr. McMillon stepped down from the deanship a few years later, Dr. Martin became the College's first Black dean. In his role as an elder in a local Church of Christ, Dr. McMillon has taken a leading role in coordinating initiatives designed to foster greater diversity, equity, and inclusion within that congregation.

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