

**Racial Integration in Religious Organizations:
Struggles, Hopes, and Looking to the Future**

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In the United States, about 10% of congregations are racially integrated, where racially integrated is understood as no one racial group comprises more than 90% of the congregation.

- Non-Christian congregations are most likely to be racially integrated.
- Among Christian congregations, Catholics are most likely to be racially integrated. Liberal Protestant congregations are least likely to be racially integrated.

Understanding American Religion

- Religion is voluntary in the United States and functions as a marketplace.
- Congregations “compete” for members in this marketplace.
- “Successful” congregations tend to specialize in one kind of potential member. This ultimately leads to a greater likelihood of homogeneous congregations.

Race and Ethnicity in the United States

- Race is a very salient identity in the United States. Arguably, race is the principal sociodemographic characteristic responsible for organizing people in the U.S. along several dimensions, including religion.

Race and Religion

- Religion is often the only social space available to persons of color, including immigrants, for sustaining their culture and purporting their own ideas about the world.

These social processes combined make racial integration a rare occurrence among religious organizations.

Against All Odds: The Struggle for Racial Integration in Religious Organizations

(by Brad Christerson, Korie L. Edwards and Michael O. Emerson)

Six case studies of evangelical religious organizations

- 4 churches, 1 college campus religious group, 1 evangelical college
- 3 Los Angeles, 2 Houston, 1 midwestern city
- Various racial compositions

Internal Organization Dynamics

- Belonging essential: Racial majority (numerical) members benefit the most.

Racial minority (numerical) members more likely to leave.

- ◆ Racial integration sustained with a continued introduction of racial (numerical) minority members.
- ◆ To counter costs of being a racial numerical minority, racially homogeneous subgroups are formed. This is particularly relevant for people of color.
- ◆ Symbols and structures (leadership, worship practices, etc.) that encourage a sense of belonging among racial minority (numerical) groups are important. Individual prejudice is less of a concern.
 - Diverse leadership
 - Diverse worship styles and practices
 - Mission statement emphasizing importance of diversity

External Socioeconomic Factors and Retaining White members

- Neighborhood effects: Racially diverse local community facilitates racial and ethnic integration in neighborhood congregations.

- ◆ Challenge to sustaining White members – changing neighborhoods often mean Whites are moving out of the neighborhood.
- ◆ Dependence upon neighborhood for members restricts racially integrated religious organizations' strategies for maintaining racial diversity.

- Multiracial Families and People: Racially integrated congregations seem to be havens for these groups of people.
- Whites Leaving: Whites are more likely to leave racially integrated religious organizations because of...
 - ◆ Greater opportunities for geographic mobility.
 - ◆ Worship style and religious practice preferences not met.
 - ◆ Strong, dense ties of people of color.
 - ◆ Youth and children's programs majority nonwhite.
 - ◆ Maintain legitimacy among their racial group.

Internal Religious Dynamics

- Religiously charged ethnocentrism: Ethno-cultural differences are given transcendent meaning and make compromise difficult.
- Color-blind ideology: This translates into downplaying differences and a reluctance to address racial issues.
- Theological justification for racial integration leads to greater stability.
- Racial diversity is spiritually enriching.

Potential Strategies for Racial Diversity

It is important to remember that fostering racial diversity does not come easy. It is something that congregations must work at. So, do not be discouraged when you encounter challenges. There are strategies congregations employ to encourage racial diversity. Each of these strategies aim to create an environment that let's people feel and know they belong.

- Mission statement that reflects a commitment to racial diversity. It is important that the mission statement be based in theology, or a common belief system.
- Accommodate a diversity of worship styles and perspectives.
- Racially diverse leadership that is reflective of the congregation.
- Create opportunities for racial and ethnic minorities to connect, such as in small groups.