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Why Multicultural Churches Fail

Part One

MAY 31, 2018 BY CHANEQUA WALKER-BARNES 2 COMMENTS

"What kind of 'multicultural congregation' are you talking about?" I asked.

I was meeting with a pastor who was telling me about his dream of planting a multicultural congregation. Over the years, my experiences as well as my conversations with friends had revealed that "multiracial" and "multicultural" are not necessarily the same.



Sociologist Michael Emerson makes a similar – and unfortunately often overlooked – distinction in his book, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States*. Emerson defines a multiracial congregation as one where no single racial or ethnic group accounts for 80 percent or more of the membership. When you think about it, that's a rather low bar. A congregation could be 79 percent white and have all white leadership, but still count as multiracial. In the U.S., though, achieving 20 percent of racial diversity is a difficult feat for most congregations. As we recently commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we find that King's oft-stated observation is as true as ever: eleven o'clock on Sunday morning remains the most segregated hour in America.

In my experience, most multiracial congregations are far from multicultural.

If becoming multiracial is difficult for churches, becoming truly multicultural has seemed to be an impossible task. In my experience, most multiracial congregations are far from multicultural. A particular church may be diverse in its membership, but still lack true diversity in its leadership, its liturgy and worship, its theology and doctrine, and its approaches to mission and discipleship. In some cases, a church can be multiracial yet culturally homogenous because all power and influence in the congregation is held by members of the

same cultural group.

When I was in middle school, my family attended several churches like this in Atlanta and in Nashville. The congregations were filled with people from a diverse array of races and socioeconomic classes. There were whites, Blacks, and a few Latinx and Asian Americans from across the economic spectrum. Working class single mothers sat alongside wealthy two-parent couples in worship and in Bible study. That diversity did not, however, extend to other areas of the church. The core leadership – meaning those people who shaped the congregation's worship, theology, and programming – were all white. At most, they had a Black choir director or minister of music whose job was to infuse a little rhythm into the praise and worship.

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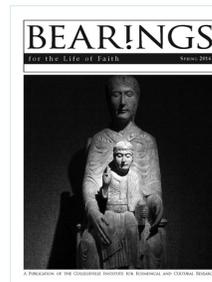
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Chanequa Walker-Barnes

Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes is a clinical psychologist, public theologian, and minister whose work integrates healing, justice, and reconciliation. She serves as Associate Professor of Practical Theology at the Mercer University McAfee School of Theology and utilizes her interdisciplinary background to write, speak, and teach about self-care, racial and gender justice, and reconciliation. She is the author of *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black*

Women and the Burden of Strength, which examines the myth of the StrongBlackWoman as a function of gendered racism. She is currently working on her second book, which focuses on racial reconciliation.

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Comments

Reggie Weaver says

JUNE 5, 2018 AT 8:30 PM



I read the following article last week, which makes a similar argument, but more bluntly. Namely, the following quote:

“When one removes the mask of multiculturalism, what does one discover? The illusion of inclusion and reconciliation at the expense of your racial identity; an appreciation of black culture, but only at white convenience; a Sunday snapshot of heaven while the marginalized members are still catching hell.”

<https://thewitnessbcc.com/the-mask-multicultural-churches/>

REPLY

Susan Sink says

JUNE 6, 2018 AT 9:49 AM



Thanks for submitting this link, Reggie.

REPLY

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