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Author(s): Kathleen Garces-Foley

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New Opportunities and New Values: The Emergence of the Multicultural Church

By
KATHLEEN
GARCES-FOLEY

As Christians across denominations face increasing ethnic diversity in their cities and neighborhoods, they are forced to reconsider the purpose of church and what kind of church they wish to be a part of. Homogeneous churches are by far the norm, but there is notable interest in ending ethno-racial divisions among Christians, and a growing number of churches are finding some success in this endeavor. This article examines the multicultural church as a new social institution developing in response to the growing ethnic diversity in the United States and new attitudes toward diversity. Multicultural churches challenge their members to engage with the ethnically “other” and develop civic skills for living in a diverse society.

Keywords: multicultural church; multilingual church; assimilated church; ethno-racial congregations

Discussions of religious pluralism almost always begin with the recognition of increasing numbers of Buddhists, Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, and so forth who have come to reside in the United States in the past half century. This newly visible religious diversity requires us to rethink our understanding of religious life in America. At the same time, however, an equally significant shift in demographics has received much less attention by religious scholars—that is, the arrival of Christian immigrants from developing countries who far outnumber immigrants of other religious traditions. By some estimates, two-thirds of new immigrants are Christian (Warner 2004). For this reason, Stephen Warner (2004, 20) contends that “the new immigrants represent not the de-Christianization of American society but the de-Europeanization of American Christianity.”

Kathleen Garces-Foley is an assistant professor of religious studies at Marymount University specializing in religion in America. She is the author of Crossing the Ethnic Divide: The Multiethnic Church on a Mission (2007) and the editor of Death and Religion in a Changing World (2006).

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The staggering cultural, ethnic, racial, national, and linguistic diversity, which is now apparent among American Christians, is rarely included in discussions of religious pluralism, but it should be. For many in the dominant White Christian society, encounters with the Christian "other" are as potentially unsettling as encounters with the religiously "other." One might think that as brothers and sisters in Christ, their shared religiosity would be enough to overcome any initial unease, but historically Christians in the United States have developed their churches strictly along racial, ethnic, national, and cultural lines. This pattern appears to be changing, or at least it is being seriously challenged, as the post-1965 influx of new immigrants has prompted anew calls for integrating churches.

At the start of the twenty-first century, homogeneous churches are by far the norm. In the national Multiracial Congregations Survey of more than twenty-five hundred congregations, 92.5 percent were found to be monoracial, defined as having more than 80 percent of members identifying with a single racial group (DeYoung et al. 2003). Nonetheless, there is notable interest in ending ethno-racial divisions among Christians, and a growing number of churches are finding some success in this endeavor. According to the Multiracial Congregations Survey, 15 percent of Roman Catholic parishes and 5.5 percent of Protestant parishes are multiracial (DeYoung et al. 2003).

What these numbers cannot tell us is how many additional churches are trying to attract a more ethnically diverse membership or how many individual Christians would support such efforts. There are, however, many indications of a growing interest in overcoming ethno-racial barriers in Christian institutions. Looking specifically at evangelical Christians, sociologists Michael Emerson and Christian Smith (2000, 63) observe an explosion of activity from books and conferences to formal apologies, all seeking to bring about racial reconciliation. A similar array of books and conferences, as well as official denominational statements, promoting integration can be found within Roman Catholic and Mainline Protestant circles.

What this vigorous activity suggests is that beneath the apparent status quo of racial divisions in American churches, there is a good deal of discontent that Sunday morning continues to be the most segregated hour in America. This phrase, often attributed to Martin Luther King Jr., has become the wake-up call to a new generation of Christians intent on radically restructuring church boundaries.

As Christians across denominations are faced with increasing ethnic diversity in their cities and neighborhoods, they are forced to reconsider the purpose of church and what kind of church they wish to be a part of. Welcoming in newcomers and becoming a multicultural church is only one possible outcome. Many churches choose not to respond and, in effect, become ethnic enclaves buffered from the rapidly changing society. Other churches open their doors reluctantly, often out of fear for their survival. At the same time, there are churches that embrace the opportunity afforded by the new immigration, as well as the increasing integration of whites, blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans in neighborhoods, schools, places of employment, and family life. Integrating churches can require a complete restructuring of the congregation, including hiring new staff, changing

the worship style and music, and developing special ministry programs, such as having services and religious education in several languages. Alternatively, some churches manage to attract a diverse membership without making any substantial changes. In this case, the burden of change falls on those in minority who are expected to assimilate to the cultural practices of those in majority. The multilingual church and assimilated church are only two of the institutional patterns for “managing diversity,” and new approaches are being developed all the time. These novel ways of doing church share in common a rejection of the long-held belief that a congregation ought to be made up of, in the words of Peter Wagner (1979), “our kind of people.”

This article examines the multicultural church as a new social institution developing in response to the growing ethnic diversity in the United States and new attitudes toward diversity. The first section considers what it means to call a church multicultural, what characterizes such churches, and what strategies they use to bring diverse groups together into a single church community. Next, I describe the common trajectories for developing multicultural churches as they take advantage of new opportunities for integration. The final section focuses on the significance of the multicultural church and what specific civic skills it offers for the development of a pluralistic society.

A Church for All People

In the current literature there are many names for this new kind of church: *multicultural*, *multiracial*, and *multiethnic* are the most common. While culture, race, and ethnicity are certainly not synonymous in the sociological literature, those in the pews often use these terms as if they were. Scholars studying the phenomenon have tried to sort out the differences by choosing one category as the most significant for analysis. For example, the Multiracial Congregations Project, and the many books and articles that were produced in conjunction with the project, uses race as the category by which to measure diversity. The rationale for this is that racial identity has been a much greater divide in American society than either culture or ethnicity (DeYoung et al. 2003). Other scholars steer clear of racial categories, which are ascribed on the basis of physical appearance and used to privilege one group at the expense of others (Marti 2005). Instead, they focus on how people choose to identify ethnically, which may include but is certainly not limited to identifying as white, black, Asian American, or Latino.

Despite these differences in nomenclature, however, it is commonly recognized in the literature that all three categories, race, ethnicity, and culture, are important for understanding the significance of this new social institution. If we focus only on difference defined in terms of race, then encounters among the diverse groups subsumed under these ascribed categories become invisible. At the same time, engagement across ethnic lines is most remarkable when it also crosses racial lines and includes blacks, whites, Asians, and Latinos. Culture

comes into play regardless because differences in cultural values, communication styles, family systems, traditions, and so forth are most difficult to resolve. Rather than choose only one category of analysis, then, it is valuable to proceed with all three in mind even if there is no succinct way to capture the multi-racial-ethnic-cultural church phenomenon. Perhaps a less cumbersome neologism will emerge that captures these multiple dimensions of diversity, but in the meantime I have settled for the term “multicultural church.”

What is most noteworthy about the multicultural church is not the mere presence of diversity within its walls, but the interaction between those inside. After all, integration is no guarantee that engagement with the “other” will occur. Public high schools are often noted as an example of failed integration precisely because students readily form subgroups along ethnic lines (Tatum 2003). A similar pattern of internal fragmentation can be found in many churches that are demographically diverse. This is especially true when the church is serving new immigrants who prefer to worship and have fellowship in their native language.

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The multilingual church

In urban areas, most Roman Catholic churches hold services in more than one language, just as they did one hundred years ago when large numbers of European immigrants arrived in the United States. Today Spanish and English masses are the most common, but in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, for example, mass is offered in more than fifty languages. While multilingual Protestant churches are less common because the Protestant pattern has been to form independent monolingual churches, they do exist and face the same challenge of how to integrate what are in effect parallel congregations (Numrich 1996). In some cases, there is no interaction between the groups aside from sharing a building and passing in the parking lot.

Even in churches that hold all services in English, internal divisions can become apparent. This was clearly happening in a large Assembly of God church in Houston where twenty-five hundred people from almost fifty different countries speaking fifty-nine different languages gather for worship on Sunday mornings (Dorsey 2000). After the service and during social activities many attendees form ethnic cliques and speak in their native tongue. Patricia Dorsey (2000)

notes that immigrants often dress in their native garments, which serves to reinforce their distinct ethnic identity and connection with coethnics.

If the goal of the multicultural church is to erase the subgroup formation pattern, then churches with strong internal fragmentation are seen as unsuccessful or dismissed as not being “truly” multicultural (or multiracial or multiethnic) in the sense of forming an integrated community (Coleman 2002). But it would be a mistake to write off what is happening at churches like the Assembly of God church just described or the multilingual Catholic parish too quickly. By allowing and even encouraging internal subdivisions to form, these churches are aiding the formation of ethnic enclaves that provide numerous benefits to new immigrants. Writing on the benefits of subgroup formation, Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz (2000, 88) explain, “While cause for concern because of its potential to disrupt congregational unity, self-segregation allows immigrants the opportunity to communicate comfortably, exchange news and gossip from the old country and about the local ethnic community, and in general, to celebrate and reinforce their ethnic identities.”

The immigrant church, or mission church affiliated with a white church, has always been a space for ethnic reproduction and social networking, but it also has the religious appeal of allowing immigrants to worship in their own cultural idiom. Speaking from a Roman Catholic perspective in which the worshippers’ right to their own culture and language is affirmed, John Coleman (2002) is apprehensive about the trend toward multilingual churches because they may actually denigrate culture. He argues that some degree of separatism is essential in the multilingual church if the faith of the immigrant is to flourish.

The strong tendency toward separatism within the multilingual church undermines its ability to embody a value espoused by all churches: unity. Most Christians believe that the universal mission of the church is to create a community of believers, which makes visible the unity of Christ. Diversity of languages is the principal obstacle to achieving this goal, but some churches serving non-English speakers are willing to spend large sums of money on simultaneous translation to form a single community for worship. Multilingual churches, which provide separate services, can still work to achieve a sense of community through social activities. For example, Catholic churches typically hold an annual fiesta at which members are encouraged to showcase their ethnic food, music, and dancing, while at the same time appreciating those of other members. At one such event I attended in Orange County, Latino, Vietnamese, and Anglo members did attend and proudly displayed their cultures, but there was little cross-cultural exchange occurring beyond their interaction with the Anglo pastor. In practice, the absence of a shared language means that “community” in the sense of a “common bond of identity and caring” (Wuthnow 1994, 44) is rarely achieved.

The assimilated church

Churches that succeed in forming a single community for both worship and fellowship do so by being English-only. This precludes many recently arrived

immigrants from joining, but not all. Some bilingual immigrants actually prefer to attend what they often refer to as “American” churches. The diverse makeup of the church may be the primary draw, but the opportunity to develop social networks with people outside the immigrant community is also appealing. They may also join a multicultural church rather than an immigrant church to “Americanize” their children. To varying degrees, this means encouraging their children to reject their native language and cultural heritage and assimilate into the Anglo-dominated society. On the other hand, their American-born or –raised children may be the ones insisting on attending a multicultural church where they feel more at home than the immigrant church.

Perhaps the strongest argument against multicultural churches is that they push members to assimilate to a common cultural center. This requires them to reject their distinctive cultural and linguistic heritage—at least while participating in the church—and to adopt “American” cultural norms, which are inevitably those of middle-class Anglo-Americans. DeYoung et al. (2003, 139) wrote, “If multiracial congregations lead to assimilation, they sound the death knell of certain irreplaceable cultures and ultimately the loss of unique ways of understanding and worshiping God.” Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether multicultural churches are necessarily assimilationist, it is important to recognize that despite the current popularity of the ideology of multiculturalism, many Americans see nothing wrong with assimilationism and will applaud the “Americanizing” role of multicultural churches (Glazer 1997).

Multicultural churches that discourage ethnic ties or “un-American” cultural expressions do so on the grounds that as Christians their identification with Christ trumps all other commitments. Through the experience of dying to the unredeemed self and being born again, worldly divisions on the basis of ethnicity or culture are erased or subsumed within one’s identity with Christ. Frequently cited in support of this position is the New Testament passage from Galatians 3:28, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Applied to the problem of ethnic divisions, this passage declares that people are just people and should not be judged by the color of their skin. Moreover, it is argued that Christians ought to be color-blind even to the extent of refusing to acknowledge ethnic group affiliation.

In their study of the racial attitudes of evangelicals, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith (2000) find that this color-blind perspective is the dominant one among white evangelicals. They attribute this to the limitations of their cultural tool kit (Swidler 1986). Specifically, the emphasis upon individualism and personal responsibility make it difficult for white evangelicals to recognize the reality of discrimination based on racialized groups. In contrast, Emerson and Smith found that black evangelicals do not share the color-blind view; nor do they attribute the effects of racism to personal sin. Though Emerson and Smith focus their study on evangelicals, the color-blind view is certainly not limited to evangelicals but is pervasive among White Americans in general (Christerson, Edwards, and Emerson 2005).

A clear example of the color-blind perspective within the multicultural church can be found in Mosaic, a large, evangelical church in Los Angeles. Using popular culture and the arts, Mosaic has become one of the most diverse churches in the United States. It draws an attendance of more than fourteen hundred people each week made up of roughly one-third Asian American, one-third Latino, and one-third Anglo attendees. Sociologist Gerardo Marti (2005) studied Mosaic in depth and was surprised to find that diversity is of little importance to the congregational culture of this remarkably diverse church. Ethnic identity is purposely reconstructed or co-opted by Mosaic's church leaders to form dedicated followers of Jesus Christ (p. 165). Marti named this process "ethnic transcendence" (p. 172). Through the strategic promotion of ethnic transcendence, Mosaic effaces the distinct ethnic identities of members and integrates members into the congregational culture of Mosaic, which stands in sharp contrast to the secular world. This culture is not created *de novo*, however, since it rests squarely on the white popular culture of middle American culture (p. 188). The shared culture of Mosaic, then, derives from the members' common identity as evangelical Christians and consumers of American pop culture.

Conspicuously absent in Mosaic's remarkable diversity are African Americans, and Marti (2005) acknowledges that white American popular culture has little appeal to them. It is not only the music that they find off-putting, however. Because the color-blind, ethnic transcendence approach insists that race does not matter within the Christian community, there is no basis on which to address racially charged conflicts either within the congregation or in society at large. In fact, Penny Edgell Becker (1998) argues that in such settings, discourse predicated on the existence of subgroups with conflicting interests is regarded as hurtful and divisive. By not recognizing social divisions as valid, especially those based on ascribed racial categories, assimilated churches are ill equipped to respond to racialization. Since few black evangelicals share the color-blind view, it will be difficult for churches relying on an ethnic transcendence strategy to attract African Americans or, for that matter, members of any ethnic group who likewise reject the limitations of the color-blind view.

Moreover, assimilated churches do not allow for diverse cultural expressions but expect members to conform to Anglo American cultural norms. In this way, they mirror the pressures to assimilate that immigrants and indeed all people of color face in the public sphere. One important difference, however, is that this so-called "Americanization" process is not acknowledged in the assimilated church but subsumed under the guise of creating a Christian community. Despite the diversity of their members, then, the assimilated church is not multicultural in its congregational culture but monocultural (Marti 2005). As such, it has little appeal to those who wish to have their cultural heritage affirmed or are seeking a truly multicultural experience of church life.

The multicultural church

Is assimilation to the dominant culture the only possible outcome of the multicultural church? Does the diversity that makes the multicultural church possible

actually undermine the cultural heritages of its members? Many multicultural church leaders across confessional traditions insist the answer is no. Echoing the secular language of multiculturalism, they maintain that the ethnic and cultural differences within the Christian community have been created by God and thus have intrinsic value that must be affirmed within the church.

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This position is clearly articulated in the 2000 statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference, *Welcoming the Stranger among Us: Unity in Diversity*. While beckoning Catholics to form multicultural parishes, the bishops make clear that they are not calling for assimilation but “continuing cooperation in pursuit of the common good and with proper respect for the good of each cultural tradition and community” (p. 60). As Catholics are encouraged to overcome existing divisions within a single, multilingual, multicultural parish, they are expected to do so with the recognition that every person’s unique cultural heritage is a “gift” to be celebrated. The parish is charged with creating opportunities to nourish and express this heritage. The point, however, is not merely to affirm each subgroup within the parish, but to provide space for encountering the “gifts” of other Catholics. In addition to the annual fiesta mentioned above, parishes hold multicultural masses that feature diverse styles of worship, including music, dance, and oratory style. These services have met with mixed results because translation extends the length of the service and interrupts the flow of the liturgy. Multicultural masses are better appreciated when they happen infrequently, such as on important feast days like Pentecost. John Coleman (2002, 503) cautions that since the multicultural liturgy can easily become “that mishmash and inorganic liturgical polyculture Power eschewed,” an alternative for the multicultural parish is to have one ethnic group host the entire congregation for liturgy and fellowship.

The multicultural language of “gift” and “celebration of diversity” is common in mainline Protestant churches as well, but much less so in evangelical churches. In part, this is because evangelicals avoid multicultural discourse, which they

associate with secular liberals. The absence of multicultural language also reflects, however, the importance of the “born again” experience for evangelicals. If ethnic identity and cultural heritage are valued from an evangelical perspective, it is not because such differences are in themselves praiseworthy, but because they have been redeemed through Christ. Theologically the same point is made by Catholic scholars (Coleman 2001), but it is overshadowed in the literature on multicultural parishes by the emphasis on celebrating cultures. Writing from an evangelical perspective, the authors of *United by Faith* contend that the ideal multiracial church is one that reflects aspects of the represented cultures, as well as “a new and unique culture that transcends the worldly cultures” (DeYoung et al. 2003, 171). This new, transformed congregational culture is described as *mestizaje*, reflecting the mixture and interactions of cultures, an idea developed by Catholic Bishop Virgilio Elizondo (1978). DeYoung et al. (2003) endorse the *mestizaje* model, which they called the “integrated multiracial congregation,” over both an assimilationist model and a pluralist model, which affirms diversity but fails to integrate members in any meaningful way into a genuine community.

Unity and diversity in tension

The various models apparent within the burgeoning number of multicultural churches reflect two important differences, one theological and the other sociological. From a theological standpoint, multicultural churches must take a stance on the significance of ethnicity and culture within the Christian community. Are ethnicity and culture affirmed in the church’s theology, or are they erased by the transcendent identification as Christians? To a large extent, how churches answer the first question will determine the kinds of people who will be drawn to it and its broader social impact on ethnic relations in the United States.

The possibilities for either affirming cultural diversity or transcending it via assimilation, or the creation of a redeemed *mestizaje* culture, are limited by the social identities of the people in the pews. For example, multilingual churches serving newly arrived immigrants have no chance of forming a monocultural congregation like Mosaic described above. And conversely, a church serving middle-class Americans of diverse ethnicities will only be able to “celebrate diversity” to the extent that its members have retained some connection with their cultural heritage. In this case, members may even be pressured to “act ethnic” to create the appearance of multiculturalism.

The church’s theological stance toward culture will also draw some to it and push others away. As we saw in the case of Mosaic in Los Angeles, this intentionally assimilated monocultural church attracts second- or third-generation Latinos and Asians, as well as whites who enjoy ethnic diversity, but very few African Americans. Marti (2005) argues that this pattern will be replicated in other multiethnic churches since second- or third-generation immigrants easily assimilate into white culture while African Americans do not. Marti, along with Yancey (2003) and Alba and Nee (2005), see in this pattern the future assimilation

of Latinos and Asian Americans who will be redefined as whites, just as southern and eastern European immigrants were in the past century. Their prediction of Latino and Asian American assimilation is ardently rejected by those who see no hope that Latinos and Asian Americans will be afforded white status in the near future, as well as those who intentionally resist the pressure to assimilate.

While it is true that the most common multicultural church today is made up of Anglos and Latinos, with Anglo-Asian congregations being the second most common, it is not clear what role these churches play in assimilation processes. Certainly, assimilated churches pressure members to “transcend ethnicity” by imitating the majority (which is not always white), but what about churches that affirm diversity? Even intentionally multicultural churches have trouble bridging the racial divide between whites and blacks, but that has not stopped churches from trying. There is not enough data available yet to know whether multicultural churches will inevitably push members toward the majority culture, but some ethnographic evidence shows that assimilation is not inevitable. For example, in her study of the Assemblies of God church in Houston, Dorsey (2000, 245) concludes that “ironically, the context of a multi-ethnic church functions to reinforce ethnic identity because members can simultaneously experience their ethnically rooted differences and find others of the same ethnicity.” In a society that strongly pressures people of color to conform to “whiteness,” a genuinely multicultural church may be one of the few spaces in which people can maintain their ethnic heritage within a larger community of diversity (Emerson 2006).

All multicultural churches must grapple with the tension between the real and perceived differences among their members and their goal of creating a community based on shared Christian ideals. What is clear in the ethnographic studies available is that no single strategy is used by multicultural churches to resolve this tension. Some churches clearly emphasize the commonality of members, while others emphasize their diversity. The possibilities are further multiplied when we look beyond the rhetoric used by churches to how they actually institutionalize their values for diversity and unity. For example, even with a stated emphasis on affirming diversity, a church that makes no intentional efforts to diversify its leadership structures or worship style will reflect the culture of the majority group, as all assimilated churches do. This sort of superficial nod toward difference is noted often in the ethnographic studies of multicultural churches (DeYoung et al. 2003; Christerson, Edwards, and Emerson 2005). To understand the many forms that ethnically diverse churches take, it is important to look at the stated goals of the church as well as its institutional practices.

Making a Multicultural Church

How do churches become multicultural? Many ministers would like to know the answer to this question, but it is also of interest to social scientists. It has long been noted that people naturally gravitate toward people like themselves, and it

has even been argued that churches should conform to this homophily principle rather than challenge it (Wagner 1979). Multicultural churches are interesting sociological because they challenge a well-entrenched social pattern of separation along ethnic lines. Whether these churches lean more toward the assimilation model or the pluralist model, they have found some way to overcome this strong social pattern. In this section, we will look at the ways churches have succeeded in becoming multicultural, what changes this necessitates institutionally, and what kinds of people are drawn to this new kind of church.

New opportunities

Some multicultural churches are born when opportunity knocks. That is, when new kinds of people move into the neighborhood and show up at the door, the church welcomes them. For example, Light of the World Church in Minneapolis was an evangelical Asian American church until an immigrant from Africa walked in one Sunday morning (Garces-Foley and Jeung 2005).¹ He came because it was the closest church to his house, and he stayed because of the hospitality of the members. In fact, he brought his large extended family, and soon this small church had a sizeable African membership, which it embraced. Light of the World made this transition with relatively few difficulties, but becoming a multicultural church is rarely as easy as answering a knock on the door.

Even though many churches (and all Catholic parishes) see their mission as serving those in the neighborhood, churches do not always welcome the ethnically other. Some will “kindly” direct the newcomers to another church down the street where they will supposedly be more comfortable. Many churches simply ignore the newcomers in the hopes that they will not stick around, which they rarely do. Other churches are thrown into chaos when their members flee the transitioning neighborhood to avoid living with those who are ethnically different. As their pews and coffers grow empty, these churches may decide to close their doors and sell the property to a new church (or mosque/gurdwara/temple) that is willing to serve those in the neighborhood, or to follow their members to a new location. The number of churches that choose to do nothing in the face of certain death or that choose to move to a new location at great expense speaks volumes about how hard it is for institutions to accept change and the depth of their resistance to integration (Ammerman 1999).

In the wake of neighborhood integration in the 1970s and 1980s, many churches did flee to white suburbs, but not all. Some stayed and saw in their new neighbors an alternative future. While this decision is clearly reactive and pragmatic, it could easily be justified from a Christian standpoint (Becker 1998). In her study of two Chicago churches, Penny Edgell Becker (1998) finds the pastors very carefully used the church’s theological and institutional histories to present the church’s pragmatic response to neighborhood diversification in a framework of Christian ideals. For the fundamentalist Baptist church, the new multicultural identity was framed in terms of the biblical mandate of building up a New Testament Church; and in the case of the liberal Lutheran church, its new mission was justified in terms of tolerance and the positive valuing of diversity.

While less frequent today than in the 1980s, it is still the case that some churches are motivated to embrace the newcomer as a means of survival. Using the data collected in the Multiracial Congregations Project, Michael Emerson and Karen Chai Kim (2003) find that "resource calculation" was the primary impetus for change for about one-third of the twenty congregations studied in depth. Though resource calculation is typically used by churches trying to survive declining numbers and budgets, it is also possible that a viable institution would welcome new neighbors as an opportunity to expand its resources. Like Becker (1998), Emerson and Kim note that changes to the church mission followed the pragmatic decision to become multiracial/multicultural.

This kind of reactive, pragmatic "resource calculation" is disturbing to those who expect religious institutions to be primarily value-driven. Elsewhere I have argued that religious institutions do not act on solely pragmatic or ideological motivations but weigh possible pragmatic responses to their changing social context through the lens of their ideals (Garces-Foley 2007). In the case of churches that choose to relocate or close rather than welcome newcomers who are ethnically different, what is valued most is maintaining segregation. Churches that choose to stay and open their doors, on the other hand, are affirming the value of integration. While ample evidence shows that in the 1980s most churches preferred relocation or death to integration, there is a much greater acceptance today to welcoming the ethnically other. This new appreciation of diversity, in addition to the opportunity provided by greater diversity among potential members, accounts for the development of multicultural churches.

New values

Forty years after the civil rights movement, attitudes toward integration have changed dramatically, and today many Americans positively value diversity. This value is actively pushed in public schools through the ideology of multiculturalism, but it is also promoted in marketing images and more generally in the media of popular culture namely movies, music, and television. One of the most telling signs of changing attitudes toward diversity is the growing number of exogamous marriages noted in the 2000 census. The increasingly prevalent "value for diversity" does not mean that racism is a thing of the past or that all Americans readily embrace integration when it hits as close to home as church or family life. If that were the case, much more than 7.5 percent of American congregations would be considered multiracial.

Attitudes toward diversity have changed dramatically but not uniformly among all Americans. Most multicultural churches are developing in large urban areas. Here they have not only a diverse population to draw from but also a greater number of people espousing a cosmopolitan appreciation for diversity (Hollinger 1995). In particular, young, middle-class urbanites appear to be the strongest supporters of multicultural churches (Marti 2005; Garces-Foley 2007). Growing up after the tumultuous transition to integrated schools, Generation X and Generation Y have been exposed to greater diversity than previous generations

and are the first generations to be schooled in a multicultural worldview that advocates appreciation of cultural differences. Even in evangelical settings where talk of multiculturalism is rare, young people are taught to appreciate diversity and look for opportunities to develop cross-cultural friendships. Young adults who are already comfortable in diverse settings seek out churches that reflect their social networks. If this new value for diversity continues to spread, we should expect to see fewer churches relocating or closing in the wake of demographic shifts and more churches embracing their diverse neighbors, not out of necessity, but for the sake of their values.

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There is already some evidence that the positive valuation of diversity is playing the principal role today in the development of multicultural churches. Emerson and Kim (2003) find that mission was the primary impetus for change for more than half of the twenty congregations studied in the Multiracial Congregations Project. For example, if the mission of the church is to serve all those in the surrounding neighborhood, as the demographics change the local church will reflect these changes. This is clearly what happened at Light of the World Church in Minneapolis (Garces-Foley and Jeung 2005). When new immigrants from Africa began attending, it never occurred to the pastor to direct them to another church or to welcome them only as long as they conformed to the existing Asian American culture of the congregation. Instead, Light of the World began to make institutional changes to incorporate the cultural heritage of its new members. Among other things, the church sought out and trained leaders among the African members and formed a gospel choir. None of these changes happened overnight, but gradually Light of the World began to think of itself as multicultural and embody this new identity in its institutional practices.

In other instances, churches begin with the stated intention of being diverse. Increasingly, young ministers in urban areas are starting churches with the goal of breaking the traditional ethnic divisions among churches. For example, Emerson (2006, 167) describes Bridgeway Community Church in Maryland, which began with the mission to be “a multicultural army of fully devoted followers of Christ.” Beginning with this mission, Bridgeway avoided the difficult processes of institutional

change facing churches transitioning into a multicultural identity. Whether the original focus of the church or a later development, a multicultural mission serves as a niche identity (Ammerman 1999), which can attract people from outside the local neighborhood who want to be part of this new kind of church. For example, Evergreen Baptist Church of Los Angeles, which is also an Asian American–dominant multicultural church, attracts Asians and non-Asians from all over the Los Angeles region who have learned about it through evangelical networks like InterVarsity Christian Fellowship or media coverage in local newspapers (Garces-Foley 2007). The success of churches like Bridgeway and Evergreen suggests that contrary to the assumption that ethnic churches are always preferred, in a region where many individuals embrace a cosmopolitan ethos, a multicultural mission can serve as a mechanism of church growth rather than an obstacle to it.

Many of those attracted to Evergreen are young, cosmopolitan adults who have been inspired by their college bible studies to seek out opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and, in evangelical discourse, racial reconciliation. These “boundary crossers” are most comfortable in diverse settings and bring to multicultural churches not only enthusiasm for cross-cultural exchange but also experience at negotiating diverse settings (Garces-Foley 2007). The enthusiasm and experience young adults bring to the multicultural church are vital to its success. Like all diverse institutions, multicultural churches have their share of conflicts but in the religious setting conflicts are often cast in terms of absolute and transcendent meanings and take on what Christerson, Edwards, and Emerson (2005, 175) call “religiously charged ethnocentrism.” Even more common than outright conflict is the sense of discomfort members feel in the ambiguity of cross-cultural exchange. The feeling of not being at home is especially strong for those in the minority group who must work harder to form social bonds and, thus, are more likely to leave the congregation (Christerson and Emerson 2003). For this reason, Christerson and Emerson (2003) maintain that those in the minority disproportionately bare the costs of making the multicultural church work. If not for their strong desire to be in a multicultural setting, few of these boundary crossers would stay the course. In addition to the value they place on the multicultural experience of church, however, boundary crossers bring skills for negotiating the ambiguity and discomfort that arise in the multicultural setting. By their willingness to be in the minority, boundary crossers enable churches to become arenas for cross-cultural exchange and for the cultivation of skills necessary to make these exchanges positive ones.

The Multicultural Church in Society

The growing trend toward multicultural churches clearly reflects changes within the larger American society. As neighborhoods become more ethnically diverse, some churches take advantage of this opportunity and follow suit. As

Americans have become more tolerant of cultural differences, Christians likewise have shown a greater willingness to tolerate diversity in church life. Similarly, debates in the public sphere on assimilation versus multiculturalism and how to create a shared American identity reverberate inside the walls of multicultural churches. But churches do more than reflect societal norms; they are also producers of culture.

As new attitudes toward diversity are carried into churches by their members, multicultural churches sanction these values within a theological framework. In other words, tolerance and inclusion of difference become more than civic values; they become Christian values. Multicultural churches challenge their members to engage with the ethnically other within an ideological framework that ascribes transcendent meaning to their efforts. Charles Foster and Theodore Brelsford (1996) argue that diverse congregations “engage in a public hermeneutic, a hermeneutic of multiplicity, negotiation, and change, both within and beyond their walls” (p. 157), and through this engagement they develop a “praxis of multiplicity” (p. 115). Indeed, multicultural churches are valuable arenas for cultivating the skills for negotiating cross-cultural exchanges, such as the ability to live with ambiguity and discomfort. In forming members as tolerant and inclusive Christians, multicultural churches are also forming citizens with civic skills necessary to flourish in a complex society replete with not only cultural but also religious differences.

Notes

1. The church's name has been changed.

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