

RESEARCH NOTES

Findings from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0



9.5 Theses about Race and Congregations in Indianapolis (with apologies to Martin Luther)

Although we make no claim that this modest offering does anything other than emulate Martin Luther’s desire for discussion, what follows are 9.5 propositions we have reached after observing race and religion in Indianapolis congregations. They are generalizations based on what our researchers have discovered. We are requesting help in two ways:

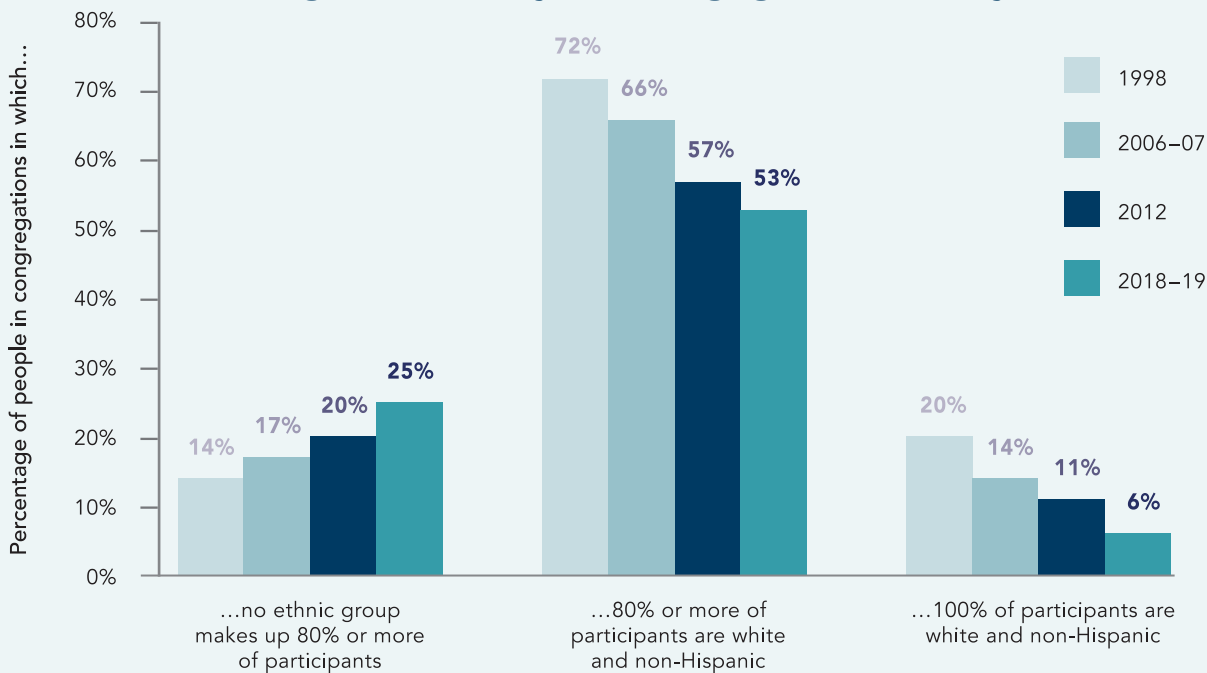
- A) Do our generalizations and/or the observations match your experience? We know what we have seen, but nobody sees everything. The question is never only, “What did we observe?” but also “What did we miss?” It is important to look carefully, but also important to look in the right places.
- B) Do our interpretations match your own? We might all see the same activity or event yet differ widely on what it means. Our perspective is never the only possible one.

We present each generalization directly, without qualification, and only with minimal context—which is something academics rarely do. There are, of course, counter arguments, or alternative interpretations, to be made for each one. This document is meant to state the propositions and prompt the discussion.

1. Congregations are more racially diverse than they were 20 years ago. Nationally, a much larger percentage of racially mixed congregations exist than was true two decades ago (see chart below). Also, the percentage of congregations with a substantial presence of a second race (no matter what the primary race is) has grown steadily. But this result is less apparent in Indiana, which is still more than 80% white, non-Hispanic.



Increasing ethnic diversity within congregations nationally



Source: *Congregations in 21st Century America, National Congregations Study, 2021.*

2. Congregational concerns around racial justice have strengthened over the past two decades, but actions have changed little. In some instances, interracial efforts are less evident than in our earlier study. In 2000, Indianapolis claimed a number of visible interfaith efforts led by large congregations to bring races together, for example, Celebration of Hope. Today, these efforts are still present but not as publicly visible. There are more intentional cross-congregational efforts to address racial injustice, but the number of participating congregations remains few.

3. Many Indianapolis congregations see racial justice as a matter of providing social safety net services to the poor or disadvantaged rather than as an ongoing effort to create systemic change. Programmatic efforts among the majority of our study congregations focus on food pantries, clothing closets, and the like rather than actions to reform laws and/or change practices that embody or perpetuate racism, e.g., reforming criminal justice. By their actions, most congregations appear to define their role more a matter of moral education than a need to build relationships among whites and people of color.

4. Denominational officials and clergy often view racial issues much differently than their members. Attempts to make systemic change, as opposed to racial reconciliation among individuals, are usually led from the top down. RUC 2.0 has observed that judicatories are alert to racial divides and have begun programs, some of them years ago, to spur congregations to address matters of race. Except for such special occasions as Black History Month or World Communion Sunday, these efforts do not reflect significant programmatic changes.

5. Many congregations welcome members of other races or ethnic groups but do not make concerted efforts to recruit or evangelize these groups. The National Congregations Study in 1998 reported that 90% of worshippers attended congregations in which the dominant race constituted at least 90% of attendees. Our earlier project found nothing to challenge that figure. Twenty years later, RUC 2.0 has discovered a somewhat larger number of congregations who have members of another race, but the percentage remains low.

6. Congregations in Indianapolis define race in terms of black and white, as they have for decades, rather than more broadly as ethnicity. Adding immigration or even anti-Semitism, to discussions about race creates tension. Descendants of enslaved people see their situation as qualitatively different from other forms of discrimination, even when they consider those other forms of discrimination important to remedy.

7. Mixing people from different cultures for specific purposes during limited time periods is relatively easy; mixing cultural expectations about things like music or preaching over extended periods is much harder. It is difficult to name local congregations who succeed at mixing cultural styles. RUC 2.0 has found few sustained efforts to develop worship practices or styles that draw from traditions other than what is customary for the dominant race of congregational members. We have found more instances of nontraditional services, however, that seek to appeal to a multiracial, generational culture, especially among younger people.

8. Educated, professional African Americans who move to the suburbs are sometimes willing to join suburban congregations that are majority white and led by whites. Thus far, white professionals who move downtown have not joined majority Black congregations that are led by African Americans. What is unclear from our observations is how many congregations are giving leadership opportunities to members of other races. We have observed several instances in which such leadership occurs, but most congregations are led almost exclusively by members of the dominant race.

9. Political polarization in an era of media saturation makes it more difficult for congregations to talk about race because economic justice, immigration, and the appropriate role of government always lurks in the background of any such discussion. Here, we argue from the absence of evidence—congregational worship and programs that embrace these issues are rare—and from clergy who report that they avoid such public conversations to keep from dividing their congregations.

9.5 The surest way to know a congregation's political leanings—more Republican or more Democrat—is to spend 3 minutes figuring out how they deal with the question of race.