

RESPONSIVE Congregations

Case Studies from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0

Racial Diversity and Congregational Leadership

When Rev. Ronnie Bell was moving boxes into his new office on his first day as pastor of Cumberland United Methodist Church (UMC) in 2019, a young boy who was taking part in a literacy program at the church asked who he was. A staff member with the program explained that Bell was the church's pastor. The boy dismissed that idea out of hand. "The pastor is an old white guy," he said. The staffer clarified that Bell was the church's new pastor. The boy, who was African American, was incredulous. "Wow!" he said. "He looks like me."

Cumberland UMC's membership has historically been nearly all white, as it continues to be. Only a handful of the 50 to 60 people who regularly take part in Sunday worship services are people of color. Bell, 32, is the first African American pastor in the church's history. It was founded in 1851—a time when, "in many parts of the country, an African American like me could be considered someone's legal property," Bell noted in a 2020 [essay](#) for the *Indianapolis Star*. The church is located on the city's far-east side, on Marion County's border with Hancock County.

Bell is part of a growing albeit still relatively modest trend toward increasing diversity within the leadership teams in multiracial and predominantly white congregations. From 1998 to 2019, the percentage of multiracial congregations with a Black pastor rose from 4 percent to 18 percent, according to [Christianity Today](#). In the same timeframe, congregations also became more racially diverse, with the percentage of multiracial congregations (of all faiths) rising from 6 percent to 16 percent.

It is too soon to know how the George Floyd murder and subsequent protests in 2020 will affect such trends, but they have had a clear near-term impact on antiracism efforts among religious organizations. For example, they motivated Bell's denomination, the United Methodist



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— Rev. Ronnie Bell

Cumberland United Methodist Church

Church, to initiate a new antiracism campaign—“Dismantling Racism: Pressing on to Freedom”—on June 19, 2020. It consists of townhall meetings, book studies, and various other initiatives. Bishop Cynthia Moore of the church's Western Pennsylvania Conference [said](#) that the “uncompromising action in dismantling racism” was the goal.

More diversity within the denomination's leadership was not explicitly cited, but it appears to be another important front in the United Methodist Church's antiracism efforts. The same is true, broadly, across a range of denominations and congregations. Trends already pointed in that direction before the Floyd murder.

Racially diverse leadership teams are a concrete and very visible step that organizations can take to manifest their commitment to greater equality. And the benefits flow both ways. As Bell observed recently, reflecting on the incident with the boy who marveled that he was the church's pastor, "Knowing that I can be a positive role model for kids who look like me changes everything. It makes the difficult and long days easier to endure. And it makes me feel like I'm making a difference."

As with the reading groups, workshops, and other antiracism initiatives that many congregations have initiated, however, creating positive change will be a long-term process. Diversity in itself can hardly solve racism. And it poses some formidable challenges. Recognizing that reality can help congregations navigate it more effectively.

BEHIND THE MASK

Bell's roots in the city of Indianapolis area are deep and strong. He grew up in the suburb of Carmel, attended seminary at Christianity Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, and served as a pastoral intern at University UMC (a historically Black congregation with roots dating to the 1870s) while at CTS. He then served as associate pastor at North UMC in Indianapolis before becoming Cumberland's pastor. In short, he has every reason to feel comfortably at home in his church and neighborhood.

Even so, the COVID-19 pandemic made him keenly aware of something unsettling about his relationship to his neighborhood and the city. In his *Star* essay, he noted that he normally maintains a friendly demeanor and gives passersby a big smile when he takes a walk. But when he started wearing a mask during the pandemic, he noticed that his neighbors reacted to him differently. "Is a smile a safety adaptation for a Black man in America?" he asked. "Does a smile and chuckle keep my white neighbors from calling the police on me?"

The idea that Black people are often treated differently because of their race is a truism of antiracism workshops and books. But that idea can register differently—more powerfully—when it is a story told by a person one knows, especially a person in authority. Bell believes it can make a real difference.

"I've noticed in any form of advocacy, the conversation changes when you personally know someone affected by an issue (be it sexism, homophobia, racism, xenophobia, etc.)," he says. "As a pastor (and Black

pastor of a white congregation), I realize that I have a unique power not only to have a pulpit to preach from, but also the power of hallway conversations and pastoral visits where I'm having important conversations with my members related to race."

Bell would have stories to tell even if he were not a pastor, of course. But that position gives him a pulpit that amplifies them—and helps people to actually hear them.

PERSONALLY SPEAKING

The experience of the African American pastoral team at St. Luke's United Methodist Church—the largest Methodist church in Indiana, with roughly 6,000 members—has been like Bell's.

The couple—Dr. Jevon Caldwell-Gross, pastor of teaching and guest experience, and Rev. Nicole Caldwell-Gross, pastor of mobilization and outreach—came to the church in the summer of 2018. Roughly 10 percent of the congregation is African American. Other minority groups account for another 5 to 10 percent of the membership.

Like many congregations, St. Luke's UMC sponsors an antiracism campaign, with a separate section of its website devoted to it. The various elements include links to videos and recommended readings for both children and adults; a page where people can contribute to the church's "minority business incubator," which helps people launch businesses in the neighborhood; and a sign-up page to volunteer with "Freedom School," a literacy program that seeks to teach students the values of the civil rights movement. Nicole Caldwell-Gross leads the Freedom School.



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— Bishop Jennifer Baskerville-Barrows



Rev. Rob Fuquay, senior pastor at St. Luke's, says the two years between the couple's arrival in 2018 and George Floyd's murder in 2020 were crucial in preparing the church to move toward a much more aggressive antiracism stance—largely because the church had a chance to hear and learn from their stories.

“They did not shy away from speaking very honestly about their experiences,” Fuquay says. “So, the Sunday after George Floyd's death, we had a panel, and both Jevon and Nicole were part of it, and Jevon shared that they had just moved into a house in a predominantly white neighborhood in Indianapolis. They didn't even have curtains on the windows downstairs yet. And Jevon said, 'I'm just conscious not to put a hoodie over my head. Or, if I'm walking the dog, not to put a hoodie over my head. This is the way I have to think.'”

“Now that the congregation likes them, they're sitting there in disbelief and thinking, 'I can't believe Jevon would have to do that.' They see him as this smart, highly educated pastor they've come to love. How could this person have to be concerned about that? So that is a practical way that has changed the church. It has had a huge impact. It grabbed people in a way that nothing I could ever say would do.”

“It raised the level of consciousness for our congregations that this is not just a far-off national crisis,” Jevon Caldwell-Gross says. “It made it personal.”

From his perspective, though, the Floyd murder—not the fact that the congregation knew him well—was the crucial factor. It made people receptive to absorbing his and other people's stories and experiences. There had been some movement at the church toward engaging with racial issues prior to that, he says, but “I don't think as an organization we were really committed to becoming antiracist. There was something about the

death of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd [in February and April 2020, respectively] that made white people believe what Black people had been saying all along.”

DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS, DOUBLING DOWN

The authenticity that African American leaders bring to these conversations often comes at a high personal cost. Sharing their stories and lived experiences with white audiences can have a powerful effect. But it can also be a daunting one in the context of this highly charged political moment.

“You remember [in the past] people would say, 'You don't talk about sex, religion, and politics. And now we're talking about them all the time,'” says Bishop Jennifer Baskerville-Barrows. In 2016, she became the first African American woman to be elected as a diocesan bishop in the Episcopal Church, when she was elected as the 11th bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Indianapolis.

“That's a shift,” Baskerville-Barrows says. “And not everybody thought they were signing up for that. Now the church is trying to say, 'No, actually, these are the kinds of things that Jesus talked about, and that we should have been equipping our people to talk about as good citizens.'”

Bell feels the weight of that responsibility keenly. He notes that Black people in the U.S. have long experienced what the African American sociologist and historian W.E.B. DuBois dubbed a “double consciousness”—that is, they view the world both through their own eyes and through the eyes of white people. “It is a peculiar sensation,” DuBois wrote, “this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”

Black clergy who lead white or multiracial congregations often are obliged to analyze and interpret that dual consciousnesses for the sake of their white congregants—in a way that would not be required of a Black pastor leading a predominantly Black congregation.

“Sometimes you just want to be a pastor, so it can be exhausting and a lot to carry,” Bell says. “I think I give challenging messages, and I’ve been asked to tone things down before, but I’m always considering what the gospel looks like through both my African American eyes, and the eyes of my white congregation (as much as I can). The beautiful thing is that a gospel of social liberation sets both Black and white people free.”



At St. Luke’s, Jevon Caldwell-Gross says that for him and his wife, Nicole, “our real commitment is to be who we really are—culturally and spiritually. We didn’t want to lose ourselves or our voices or our unique perspectives, because those pressures are there. Being an African American person on staff, there is a temptation to lose yourself by blending in. We decided, hey, they called us here for a reason, and we are going to be our authentic selves.”

“I can’t put the education of white individuals as a goal, because that’s something that I don’t have control over. So, the best exposure I think is just to be ourselves.”

“ANOTHER SURVEY”

The weight of the responsibility to translate Black experiences for white audiences feels even heavier when there is doubt about a congregation’s or a denomination’s commitment to genuinely listening and changing. It is often difficult to distinguish tokenism from true progress.



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Many of the public reactions to the antiracism efforts initiated by congregations and denominations after the George Floyd murder reflected that sort of skepticism and frustration. Public reactions sometimes contained more than a hint of anger and suspicion that the efforts would fade as soon as the moment of crisis had passed. Those reactions sometimes came from within the denominations themselves.

For example, a “[Racial Audit of Episcopal Leadership](#)” released in January 2021 sought answers to two questions: “Who comprises the leadership of The Episcopal Church, and what is their experience of race and racism in their leadership roles?” The audit “attempted to magnify the voices of People of Color (POC) in the Church, while also maintaining a spotlight on the systems and structures created and maintained by the white dominant culture.”

The Episcopal Church is an especially interesting case of a denomination trying to diversify. African Americans comprise just 4 percent of its membership, versus 13 percent of the general population. And, because of its position as one of the best-resourced and oldest denominations in the country (11 former U.S. presidents identified as Episcopalian), its history is also tightly intertwined with the racism that it is now attempting to confront.

More than 1,300 leaders of the Church responded to the project’s survey questions. Seventy-seven percent were white, and 22 percent were people of color. One person, identified only as a POC and diocesan leader (respondents were anonymous), wrote that



"I don't feel like clergy. I feel like a commodity. . . I'm on these leadership groups so I can check a box or the leaders can check a box. It is 'diverse' because a Black person is here." Another person of color identified as a "churchwide leader" wrote that "what we're doing is filling out another survey. We're going to talk about it for three years, and nothing is going to change unless we are willing to have honest conversations about it."

Findings in a 2019 article in the journal *Sociology of Religion* provide some context and grounds for such frustrations. The article—titled "Estranged Pioneers"—was based on interviews with Asian and African American pastors of multiracial congregations. It found that they are often denied the privileges that are routinely granted to white pastors and are blocked from access to the levers of power within denominations. The "profound implications" of that fact, according to the authors, included loss of opportunities for mentorship, the loss of relationships, the devaluing of their cultural capital, high levels of stress, and low self-esteem.

The upshot for many of the pastors interviewed for the study was a destabilized sense of identity: "Alienation characterizes their journey."

"DIFFERENT AND BETTER"

The shift toward more racial diversity within leadership teams is being driven partly by moral concerns: It is the right thing to do. But there are also very pragmatic motivations: It can help congregations "look like" the neighborhoods they are situated in, and thus reach out to them more effectively.

This has been true of both Cumberland UMC and St. Luke's UMC. The demographics of Cumberland's zip code are among the most diverse in the state—43 percent white, 47 percent Black, and 7 percent Hispanic, with a median household income of \$52,000. The demographics of St. Luke's zip code are similarly diverse—47 percent white, 32 percent Black, and 13 percent Hispanic, with a median household income of nearly \$49,000 (versus \$55,000 for Indianapolis as a whole).

"I think that I bring a new perspective and energy to the position, and the fact that I look like the people in the neighborhood that the church is trying to reach is a bonus" Bell says.

Having the new energy and perspectives of a diverse leadership team can also help congregations recognize their blind spots, and become better versions of themselves, by forcing conversations about their responsibilities to each other and to their communities.

"We're at a location where it would be not that hard for us to lean our heads away from Indianapolis," Fuquay says. "We're one mile from Carmel [which is roughly 80 percent white and has a median household income nearly \$113,000, or more than twice that of Indianapolis]. It would be easy not to talk about what goes on in the city. But I'm really pleased that a lot of our people care about this and want to be engaged in it."

Of course, congregations are always located within big-picture social contexts and cultural currents, which shape both their own efforts and the responses to those efforts. The push for more racially diverse leadership in



congregations is taking place alongside fierce national debates and contests over the very identity of the country. Those debates and contests are, in part, what make being at the forefront of this trend so exhausting—yet also so promising—for individuals and congregations. How those tensions will play out remains to be seen.

“We still get people who say they don’t want their congregation to be talking about politics,” Jevon Caldwell-Gross says. “We do have people leave. We’ve had people say, ‘We don’t want the congregation to focus on that.’ As progressive as [St. Luke’s is], there is still a lot of pushback.”

“What we’re seeing is that there is resistance—particularly given our history in this country—to the notion that we would be as diverse as we actually are,” Baskerville-Burrows says. “That resistance is showing up in what I hope won’t be catastrophic ways. But we would be naïve to not expect resistance to that kind of shift and change in the demographics of the country. I’m not demoralized about that most days. I think that

gives us some real clear guidelines and direction about how we’re called to show up and about normalizing love over hate.”

The hiring of an African American pastoral team at St. Luke’s, the appointment of Baskerville-Burrows as bishop of the diocese of Indianapolis, and Bell’s pastorship at Cumberland UMC— set against the scope and scale of the challenge of overcoming racism, these are small steps in themselves. Even so, step by step is how positive, truly transformative change often happens.

“It’s kind of like looking at the spouse who you see every day,” Fuquay says. “You don’t always realize how much both of you have changed until you look at pictures from five years ago, 10 years ago, 20 years ago. I feel like that’s what’s happening to us as a church. We are becoming a very different community. We are becoming different and better.”

Written by Theodore M. Anderson

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