

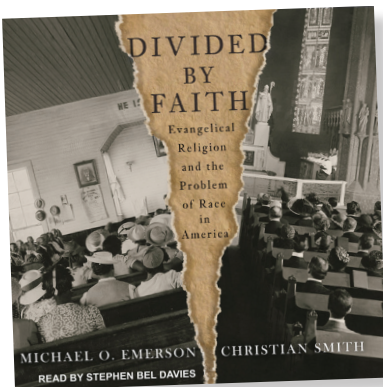
# RESPONSIVE Congregations

*Case Studies from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0*

## DOING THE RIGHT THING: THREE TAKES ON CONGREGATIONS AND THE WORK OF ANTIRACISM

Twenty years ago, Jeff Krajewski read *Divided by Faith*, a book published in 2000 by two scholars of American religion. At the time, Krajewski was a staff member at Traders Point Christian Church, one of the largest evangelical congregations in Indiana.

He was also beginning a journey that would transform his perspective on “evangelical religion and the problem of race in America,” as the book’s subtitle puts it. In a podcast that he co-hosts, Krajewski recently said that his youth had given him “a very white framework for understanding the gospel.” Books like *Divided by Faith*—and his experience of getting to know people of other races—were “a slow sunrise that illuminated the darkness of my homogeneous upbringing.”



*Divided by Faith* may have shone light on Krajewski’s path, but it offered relatively little in the way of hope. The book’s analysis is bleak. It begins with a passage from *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville’s masterpiece from the 1830s, which describes racial inequality as a

permanent feature of American democracy—precisely because of democracy. Although “an individual may surmount the prejudices of religion, of his country, or of his race,” Tocqueville wrote, “a whole people cannot rise, as it were, above itself.” In a democracy, he thought, “no one will undertake so difficult a task” as achieving racial equality.

The U.S. remains far from that ideal. A [2020 analysis](#) showed that the net worth of the median white family is 10 times that of the median Black family in the U.S. (\$171,000 versus \$17,150). And the gap is widening. “This matters,” the analysis noted, “because family wealth allows people (especially young adults who have recently entered the labor force) to access housing in safe neighborhoods with good schools, thereby enhancing the prospects of their children. Wealth affords people opportunities to be entrepreneurs and investors. And the income from wealth is taxed at much lower rates than income from work.”

## A STARK DIVIDE

One reason for the bleakness of *Divided by Faith*’s analysis is that there is little consensus on the nature of the problem—much less on how to solve it. Broadly, according to the data cited by authors Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, “conservative Protestants” were much more likely than “other whites” to attribute the wealth gap to qualities within the individual—their abilities and motivation levels—rather than “structural” factors in American society, like discriminatory lending policies by banks and limited access to good schools.

The divide was especially stark between liberal and conservative Protestants. Among liberals, 58 percent said education explained the gap; 43 percent said discrimination explained it; among conservatives, only 32 percent and 27 percent, respectively, said the same of those factors. Sixty-two percent of conservatives believed “motivation” explained the wealth gap; only 40 percent of liberals believed the same.

Disagreement about the causes of the wealth gap drives much of the ideological conflict in American politics. Liberals’ certainty that people of color have been systematically shut out of access to the levers of wealth and power in America is the nub of the current controversy over “critical race theory,” and of liberals’ support for redistributionist policies and programs.

On the other hand, conservatives' certainty that every person's fate depends on what they make of their opportunities—and that the U.S. provides abundant opportunities for people of all races who are willing to work—is the nub of their concern with freedom, individual initiative, and strict limits on the powers of government.

## SPACE, PLEASE

But for all the deep fissures the issues of race and racism create in American society, *Divided by Faith* holds out at least one ray of hope.

It reported that, in a survey of white evangelicals' opinions about potential solutions to racism, 89 percent of "strong evangelicals" supported getting to know people of another race. It was easily the most popular solution among those evangelicals. Support among moderate evangelicals and non-evangelicals was lower, but even so, solid majorities of those groups also supported that solution—79 percent and 68 percent, respectively. (Preference for structural solutions, rather than opposition to getting to know people of another race, presumably accounts for the difference.)

Bringing people together in spaces where they can get to know each other is, of course, part of congregations' fundamental mission. And that reality presents a prime opportunity for congregations.

They may not be able to create consensus about the root causes of America's racial divides, much less how to heal them. But they can at least create spaces where people with different perspectives can be heard with kindness, and where understanding can increase. Which is the task that Krajewski and his congregation, Common Ground Christian Church (Midtown), have chosen.

The church began in the late 1990s as the youth ministry of Traders Point Christian Church. It became a spinoff with its building in 2001 and has been entirely independent for roughly 15 years. Krajewski was its founding pastor. Located at 4550 N. Illinois St., it averaged roughly 350 people at Sunday services—about 95 percent white—before the pandemic. It is one of three Common Ground churches in the city, each operating independently but remaining a "family" because of their shared values and history.



## NOT LOADED BUT LIVED

In May of this year, Krajewski and Clarence Moore—pastor of New Era Church, a predominantly African American congregation—began co-hosting a bi-weekly podcast called Shades of Hope. The introduction to the show calls it “a frank conversation between two friends who care deeply about the case for racial justice as it’s presented in the gospel.”

The podcast grew out of an initiative that Krajewski and Moore participated in with the Indianapolis Center for Congregations. The show’s initial run was four episodes but, based on the podcast’s success, the Center has committed to funding it through at least the end of the year.

Through its early episodes, Shades of Hope has had at least two consistent themes. One is Krajewski’s openness about his blind spots when it comes to the issue of race—and his willingness to be vulnerable in sharing his perspective.

“I’m not afraid of the work that needs to be done,” he says. “Because I know it’s good work. I know it’s Godward work, when I’m being instructed and mentored and corrected.”

In a recent podcast about how to start conversations on race, for example, Krajewski called it “potentially a loaded subject.” Moore gently pushed back. For Black pastors, he said, “it’s not loaded” but “lived”: “We live this every day, this environment of the racialization of America.”



*I'm not afraid of the work that needs to be done, because I know it's good work. I know it's Godward work, when I'm being instructed and mentored and corrected.*

Another theme is that both pastors situate the problem in a distinctively biblical framework. That is, both talk a lot about how faith motivates them to engage with the problem of race.

"I'm a Jesus guy," Krajewski says, "and I think that's where Jesus leads us—into that risky space. Because that's where we find redemption happening."

The relationship between Common Ground and New Era extends well beyond the podcast and the friendship between Krajewski and Moore. Both churches have created teams tasked with creating more opportunities for interactions between the congregations.

For example, groups from the two churches recently studied and worked through an antiracism curriculum called Be the Bridge. The bi-monthly meetings were held virtually, but the capstone was an in-person meal that the two groups shared in July.

"It was this beautiful expression of what the body of Christ is supposed to look like," Krajewski says, "as people from all different backgrounds, who would never find themselves around the same table at the same time, were—because of Jesus—able to share that meal."

---

## THE POWER OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

Few people have as much lived experience of racial tensions and divisions in America as Joseph Smith, whose personal history mirrors the trajectory of the civil rights movement in the U.S.

Smith's parents migrated to Indianapolis from the South in the 1920s. He grew up as the seventh of nine children in an African American Catholic family. In 1949, when he was entering third grade, his parents transferred him, along with some of his siblings, to an integrating Catholic school on the city's west side, Holy Angels.

After graduating from Cathedral High School, Smith did a four-year tour in the Air Force. Then he went to Marian College (now University) in Indianapolis, got a law degree from Indiana University, and became a civil-rights lawyer who served in the administrations of both Birch Bayh, a U.S. Senator from Indiana from 1963 to 1981, and Evan Bayh, the state's governor from 1989 to 1997. In the early 1970s, Smith was deeply involved in the court-ordered integration of Indianapolis Public Schools and in programs to protect the voting rights of minority populations.

Smith is currently a member of the Race and Culture Committee at St. Thomas Aquinas (STA) Church—located directly across from Common Ground, at 4600 N. Illinois—where he and his wife have been members for nearly all their 55 years of marriage. The committee formed in the late 2010s as a forum for channeling the congregation's energy for antiracism work. "We know that Jesus was and is deeply radical and revolutionary in the call to absolute love, compassion, and equality, as we are all God's children," the [STA parish council](#) has observed of the committee's work.



Joe and Brenda Smith, St. Thomas Aquinas Church





*“For me, it is inextricably bound with economic inequity, if we don’t address that, everything else we talk about is kind of a moot point.”*

Its programs have been limited by the pandemic, but the Committee has organized several initiatives at STA, including a weekly column in the parish newsletter, called “Race Matters”; a survey to measure parishioners’ “intercultural development”; marches in the wake of the George Floyd murder; a talk by an anthropologist about race; a monthly “prayer for racial healing” during STA’s mass; and discussions of several books and TED Talks. Most recently, it organized a discussion of the book *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson.

In the summer of 2020, it also organized a virtual antiracism workshop for STA parishioners. The material was drawn from *Dismantling Racism* (a curriculum by Crossroads Antiracism Organizing and Training) and *Intercultural Competencies* (a program of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops). The workshop consisted of six sessions of about two hours each. Roughly 40 people enrolled, and an average of 30 people participated in each session.

Groups of participants were tasked with doing their research, going back to the 1600s, on how racist policies were embedded and reflected in U.S. institutions and systems—including the educational, legal, criminal justice, financial, and housing systems. Each group then reported back to other workshop participants about their findings.

“One thing that working with STA has affirmed for me is that a majority of people are just unaware,” says Pearlette Springer, one of the workshop’s co-presenters and the coordinator of the Black Catholic Ministry for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis. “And that’s not just whites. A majority of people—period—are unaware of how racism works in our society, and how it’s historical. And when they become aware, it’s shocking. They realize that they have chosen—especially educated

people—have chosen to ignore the obvious.” One of Smith’s roles on the committee is to be a voice of lived experience, relating stories from his own life, which can help make the abstract ideas in books and lectures more “real.”

“I love it because I get to give a [five-minute] history lesson every meeting,” he says. “I try to explain what my life has been and why we, as a church, need to struggle to bring about education of racial inequities in our society.”

Smith sees his antiracism work and the work of building a stronger, more democratic nation as part of the same project—and both, in turn, as integral to the Church’s fundamental mission.

“It’s a lot of work within our own church and parish, trying to get people to understand that this is what a Catholic community and democracy can be,” he says. “That’s been my life’s dream—to bring equity for my children and grandchildren and our whole nation.”

## ANTIRACISM AS A WIN-WIN

Like Krajewski and Smith, David Hampton argues for the work of antiracism from a place of faith and based on morality. But he also puts concrete, economic realities—and direct political engagement—front and center.



*David Hampton, Executive Director, LISC Indianapolis*

“The beginning point is—we absolutely have to address the economic impact of racism,” says Hampton, who is currently the executive director at Local Initiatives Support Corp. (LISC) Indianapolis, a community development organization. He served as senior pastor at Light of the World Church in Indianapolis from 2012 to 2019 and was deputy mayor of neighborhood engagement for the city from 2016 to early 2021. Before his ministry at Light of the World, Hampton pastored a church in Brooklyn. He now teaches a class at Christian Theological Seminary on “the church and community activism.”

“For me, it is inextricably bound with economic inequity,” he says. “If we don’t address that, everything else we

“

**AMERICA COULD BE  
IN A BETTER ECONOMIC  
SHAPE IF WE WERE  
MORE INCLUSIVE AND  
EQUITABLE.**



talk about is kind of a moot point. Free labor for several hundred years—that has never really been addressed.

That, for me, is the root of the problem.”

Hampton also notes, however, that the point of antiracism work is to build a better and stronger society by broadening access to resources and opportunities—not “guilting” white people.

“You have an entire group of people who have been economically excluded from certain aspects of our society,” Hampton says. “And it really costs America more money to continue in that path of exclusion than it would be to say, hey, let’s be more inclusive.”

In 2020, for example, a [Citigroup economist](#) calculated that the U.S. had forfeited \$16 trillion in potential economic output since 2000 because of racial inequality. There would have been 6.1 million jobs,

annually, if Black entrepreneurs had equitable access to loans, she found, and 770,000 more Black homeowners.

“That says to me, it’s not just Black and brown people who are losing out,” Hampton says. “America could be in a better economic shape if we were more inclusive and equitable. The larger issue is probably not even black and white but the haves and the have-nots. We’re missing the larger reality that those who are wealthy are becoming wealthier, and those who are middle class and poor are becoming more middle class and poorer.” Hampton notes that the momentum in this arena has largely shifted away from congregations, which were central to the civil rights movement through the 1960s and 70s. The recently founded organizations tend to be largely or wholly secular.

Even so, Hampton points to a group like [Faith in Indiana](#) as a sign that there is still energy for organized, faith-driven racial equality work. Faith in Indiana focuses primarily on reforms to the criminal justice system, including an end to cash bail and other policies that lead to the mass incarceration of minorities and poor people.

Although direct action and concrete policy reforms are his ultimate goals, Hampton believes that the kind of book groups and talks that many congregations and laypeople have organized over the past few years can be a good first step.

“If the extent of their engagement is a book group, hey, that’s a great start, and I don’t want to knock that,” Hampton says. “I think education and awareness is one step, and it’s an important step. I just don’t want to exclude the necessity to engage in direct impact, to the extent that a congregation is able to do that.”

---

## **FAITH LIKE A MUSTARD SEED**

For anyone concerned with achieving racial equality, Tocqueville’s analysis from nearly two centuries ago is a haunting one: Perhaps racism is so ingrained in the American experiment that the two are inextricably linked.

The wide and growing wealth gap in America is a striking reminder that racism persists. And Joseph Smith, for one, believes that little has fundamentally changed





Photo courtesy of Michelle Johnson, WBAA

across his 80 years of life experience and his six decades of involvement in the civil rights movement.

In his work with the Race and Culture Committee at St. Thomas Aquinas, Smith still sees what he considers a shocking level of ignorance about “racism 101,” like the history of how Black people were intentionally excluded from the benefits of the GI Bill after World War II. The bill’s housing, job, and educational policies were a powerful engine for creating a broad and rising middle class in the second half of the twentieth century. Black veterans were systematically shut out of it. Maybe one of the great advantages of bringing faith to this work, though, is that it lends a long-term perspective and a conviction that—with divine help—all things are possible.

“Four hundred years of intentional and systemic racism doesn’t get overturned because a church does a series

on whatever,” Krajewski says. “This is long-term work. And I always say that the church goes as the leaders go. Your organization will only be committed to the work to the extent that you’re committed to the work.

“Antiracism work is a commitment that has no end in sight. I mean, this is going to take time beyond our lifetime. We’re just trying to set it up so that the people beyond our lifetime, who come after us, can carry it on.”

With that big-picture perspective in mind, history offers some excellent examples to draw on.

“Jesus changed the world with 12 disciples,” Hampton says. “It’s daunting, but we’re not saying we’ll change the world overnight. Do what you can, where you can.”

---

*Written by Theodore M. Anderson*

*Responsive Congregations* is a publication of the Project on Religion and Urban Culture 2.0, a joint initiative of the Polis Center and IU School of Liberal Arts, both at IUPUI. RUC 2.0 examines how Indianapolis-area congregations have adapted to rapid social and technological changes since 2000, using findings from an earlier project (RUC 1.0) as a baseline. Both projects have been supported by a grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc. Subscribe to future research highlights [here](#). Read past issues [here](#). For more information, contact [polis@iupui.edu](mailto:polis@iupui.edu).