

# RESEARCH NOTES

## *Findings from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0*

### Race and Indianapolis Congregations

On August 25, 1963, an Indianapolis pastor preached a sermon about race at one of the city's newer churches. The occasion was the March on Washington that would occur later that week. Dick Hamilton, who would become one of the most city's influential clergy, explored six questions with his parishioners. One was how the church, St. Luke's United Methodist, should understand the massive protest and what it should do in response. His answer: "The church cannot call it off. It can join it or it can stand aloof. As Christians, we cannot afford the latter." After noting the commonplace that 11:00 am on Sunday was the most segregated hour in American life, he continued: "I get rather tired of hearing it, but I know you and I are going to keep hearing it until it is no longer true."<sup>1</sup>

Almost sixty years later, it still is true but not as much as it was in 1963 or even in 2000. Our project has observed significant new initiatives among several of our participating congregations that suggest changes in racial attitudes and practices may be aborning. As with many congregational habits, these changes reflect broader cultural transitions.

One of the most important societal developments over the past two decades centers on the public understanding of race, especially related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. For congregations, the implications are clear. How do they deal with issues of race internally? What, if anything, do they teach about race and how it is discussed? Have congregations made changes in the past 20 years related to hiring, internal programming, or missions? These questions have been central to our efforts to understand how congregations have adapted to the dramatic social and economic changes of the past two decades.

Throughout much of American history, discussion about racism has centered on prejudice as more



a problem of individual character rather than a matter of systems and history. Racism was a moral failure, which is how most congregations have addressed the problem. The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and the subsequent protests under the banner of Black Lives Matter changed this conversation. At least for a moment, concepts of systemic racism entered our vocabulary, with the focus on laws and structures that embedded discrimination throughout society.

Even though strong political pushback occurred, public discussion, including policy discussion, has unquestionably moved in the direction of "systemic racism." The role of the police, concerns about Critical Race Theory in public classrooms, and questions about the role of states and the federal government in voting rights are all systemic ways of framing the issues. Yet much of what we have observed in the forty-odd congregations we are following is about personal racism, about personal character, and morality. Is this because most congregations avoid controversial political issues? Is it because

<sup>1</sup>As reported in *Rev-elations*, an email newsletter from St. Luke's UMC, January 28, 2022.



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congregations see their roles as character-building and assume political and economic questions are settled in political and economic institutions rather than religious ones? Or is it because the balance of what is personal and systemic, religious, or political, is very hard to manage and different congregations see it differently?

Most Black congregations would say without hesitation that the Gospel is inherently political and any separation between religion and economic or political justice is artificial. As an African American pastor observed during the interview, “the issue of race is central to the Black church in terms of empowering people, helping people understand their identity as children of God, and then providing the various support systems that society has systematically taken away [from them] and rejected.” Other congregations might be sympathetic to that view, but still see their mission as primarily character focused. There is a gulf between seeing religion’s role as primarily oriented to the individual, whether in a therapeutic or an evangelical mode, and seeing religion as first and foremost oriented toward social justice. The age-old question is as relevant here as it is elsewhere: Is the congregation’s goal to create good individuals who, together, build a good society, or is it to build a good society that will produce and sustain good individuals? The answer to that question is not obvious. Most congregations do some of both.

## **What RUC 2.0 Has Learned So Far**

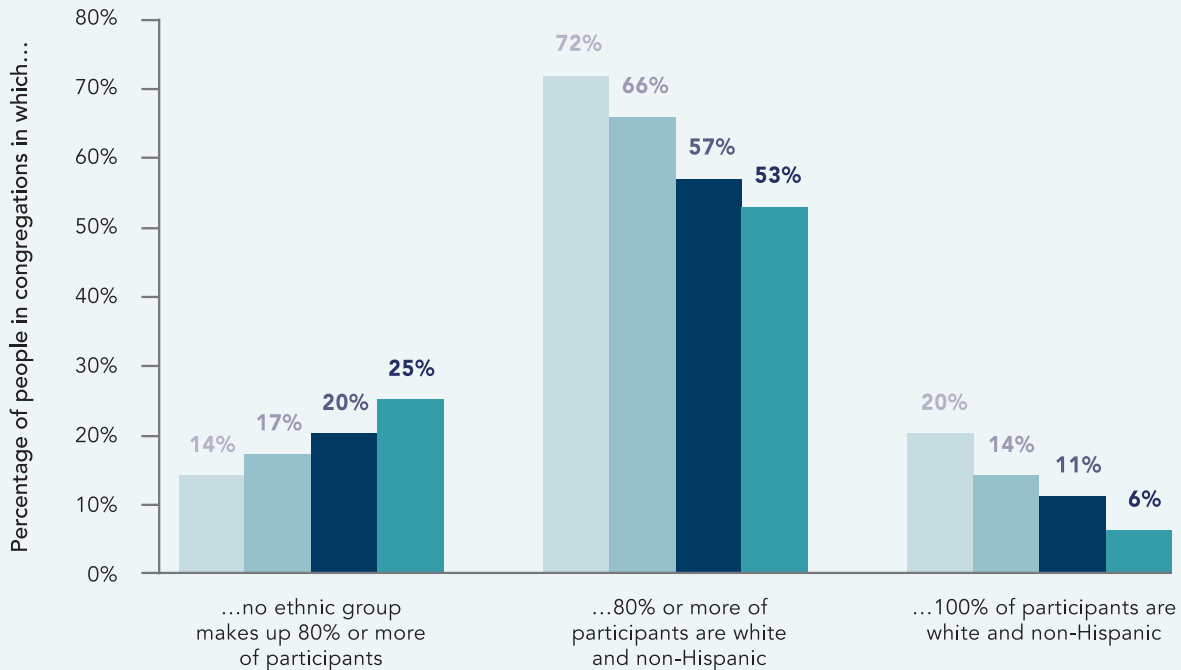
The September 2021 issue of *Responsive Congregations*, part of the project’s series of case studies, was about anti-racism work being done in three different parts of the city. It cites the conversations between Dr. Clarence Moore of Northside New Era Baptist, an historically

African American congregation, and Rev. Jeff Krajewski of Common Ground, a Midtown congregation that seeks racial reconciliation. It also cites Joe Smith, a member at St Thomas Aquinas Catholic, and Dr. David Hampton, former pastor of Light of the World Christian Church, a large Black congregation on the near Westside and now president of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC). Each of these cases provides an example of “doing what you can, where you can,” as Hampton puts it. They show that some congregations are taking on the systemic political and economic issues at the root of racial problems. Although these examples are excellent, they are also well-trod ground in American religion.

The November 2021 *Responsive Congregations* also was about racial diversity and congregational leadership and included the stories of Rev. Ronnie Bell, a young Black pastor at the historically white and small-town Cumberland UMC, Dr. Jevon Caldwell-Gross and Rev. Nicole Caldwell-Gross, an African American couple who serve as associate pastors at the predominantly white St Luke’s UMC, and Bishop Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows, the first African American bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Indianapolis. These individuals show that some religious bodies, including some congregations, have sought intentionally to address racial diversity by changing the structures of leadership.

The question is clearly not, “Is anything happening,” because many changes are underway. The right questions are instead, “How representative are these efforts?” and “What is the narrative arc for the bulk of congregations?” The good stories are out there, but how are they related to the rest of the data gleaned from observation?

## Increasing ethnic diversity within congregations.



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

1998 2006-07 2012 2018-19

**Small Steps Toward Inclusion:** None of our study congregations are intentionally or consciously racially exclusive. Few congregations are in 2022. Moreover, some of our congregations that do not spend much time talking about race from the pulpit or in social media have made some public effort to be more inclusive. A downtown Southern Baptist church housed in an historic building is almost all white, but the worship leader is African American and his entire African American family attends. A Restorationist megachurch in Center Grove that is almost entirely white recently elected an African American man to its Board of Elders. These developments may not sound like much, but we saw fewer examples twenty years ago when we conducted the first phase of this project, and they are a far cry from Rev. Hamilton’s observations at the beginning of the modern Civil Rights movement

The *National Congregations Study* led by sociologist Mark Chaves at Duke University confirms the change at the national level. Congregations are more diverse in two important ways. First, white, non-Hispanic congregations are a smaller slice of the pie. In fact, the percentage of majority-white (or all-white) congregations has fallen steadily during the four rounds of the survey. Second, the percentage of “second” or “third” races compared to the majority race—whatever that majority might

be—within congregations has also increased steadily. Congregations are more mixed than they were twenty years ago. Today, only 6% of congregations have 100% white membership. This percentage is certainly higher in Indiana because Indiana is much “whiter” than the country at large—the U.S. is about 58% non-Hispanic white while Indiana is about 84%. But in Indianapolis, these percentages look much more like the national landscape.

This trend toward diversity, however, seems to run largely in one direction in our study congregations. Groups that are majority white have seen growth in non-white members. However, we see relatively little growth in white membership among congregations where the majority is of another race or ethnicity. Not to put too fine a point on it, but suburban, and even younger urban, African Americans will join a white congregation with a white pastor, but there are not many examples of white people joining African American congregations. Or Latino, Asian, or African ones, for that matter. It happens, but not very often.

Not surprisingly, congregations with much younger members seem to have an easier time managing racial diversity. The Traders Point campus downtown on Delaware Street has an African American campus pastor and many young African American members,





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although it is worth noting that the sermons are provided by the senior pastor speaking from the Zionsville mother-church. Also not surprisingly, congregations often achieve diversity through marriage. Even at the Sikh gurdwara we are studying, there are spouses who are not Punjabi.

### **Are Congregations Reluctant to Discuss Race?**

Discussions about race are difficult for most congregations, as for most organizations, but many congregations conduct these discussions just the same. The pastor of a small, majority white, evangelical church on the city's east side talked about his role in making his congregants 'uncomfortable' in trying to talk about race. He said, "there is a great diversity on the east side of Indianapolis ...I've told our folks, if you are 100 percent comfortable with everything that we're doing [then] something is wrong because we all need to be a little bit uncomfortable."

This idea of 'being uncomfortable' is one that we see majority white churches, especially evangelical churches, grapple with on several issues, notably race and sexuality. Some leaders mitigate this discomfort by focusing on the mission services they provide rather than the internal workshops or active conversations they are not having. For example, a pastor from another predominantly white church noted, "We don't have a lot of African American families in our community or in our church, but still, we do have neighbors and people in the further north, and the more we go into the city, the more we see some of that. Where we've seen the biggest impact is in [one of our mission sites], because it is, I think, I look at it and see for sure, but definitely demographically with white being a minority of that church." This is not a conscious anti-racism program. It is, instead, a subtle claim that supporting

a congregation where whites are a minority is evidence of the absence of racism.

### **The Systemic vs. Individual Divide**

There is a large divide, a gulf really, between those who frame racism as a problem of systems, laws, and economic practices on the one side, and people who frame racism as a matter of individual actions, thoughts, and conscience on the other. The current debate in Indiana and nationally about "critical race theory" highlights the nature of this division. No academic would call what is taught in Indiana schools "critical race theory," but at the level of retail politics, such theoretical distinctions do not matter. The question becomes, "Can we teach that discrimination is built into parts of the system and must be changed through political and economic action, or must we teach that discrimination is a personal matter, and we cannot assume that anyone is 'racist' because of their skin color or their culture's history?" Is it possible even to discuss this difference between historical patterns and personal opinions?

Seen in this way, discussions about what racism is and how to fix it break down along the same lines as discussions about the pandemic. Progressives see conservatives as unwilling to admit the truth about history or science. Conservatives see progressives putting "identity" ahead of individual character. Congregations follow similar patterns.





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All congregations think the individual is important. All congregations think the community is important. But the relationship between those two concepts varies widely and that variation shapes nearly all congregational social interactions.

### **What Do These Changes Mean?**

We still are gathering and analyzing evidence from our study congregations, but at least two changes seem both clear and lasting. First, the conversation about race has shifted. Even among groups that seek to place responsibility on individual change, few people speak seriously—or are taken seriously—about the lack of racism in American society. It may not be easier to talk about race and inequality, but most congregations appear to acknowledge the problem.

The second lasting change is demographic and generational, and it comes from trends that Indianapolis shares with the county-at-large.

By 2050, if not earlier, the United States will be what demographers call a majority minority nation. We can already see these changes in Indianapolis, where the non-white population in 2020 was almost 40%. Now, three generations of school children have attended integrated schools and interracial and interethnic marriages are much more common than even two decades ago. For all the disparities that exist in American society, these developments appear irreversible. As with so many of the other changes we are examining in RUC 2.0, we expect them to reshape congregational life. But, as always, how they will reshape it remains in question.

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