

Hues in the pews: Racially mixed churches an elusive goal

by [John Dart](#) in the [February 28, 2001](#) issue

When Rodney Woo became pastor of Wilcrest Baptist Church in Houston in 1992, the all-white congregation averaged 200 worshipers. Faced with a declining membership, and situated in a neighborhood that was changing its racial composition, the congregation set out to invite people of color to church.

That is a survival strategy that frequently fails. But Woo now looks out at nearly 400 people of various hues in the pews. A third are Hispanics, some are African Americans, and some are immigrants from more than a dozen countries.

“We have people coming in from long distances to be part of this experiment,” said Woo, who holds a doctorate from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. Visitors who have alternated between Wilcrest Baptist and their regular church tell him, “I can’t believe my church is so white when I go back home.”

Woo, 38, has a family profile that probably enhances his multiracial outreach in an urban setting. His father is half-Chinese, he grew up in an African-American neighborhood, and his wife is Hispanic.

But the racial or ethnic makeup of the pastor and spouse is but one factor among many contributing to a successful “mixed” church, according to a pioneering nationwide study by a team led by Michael Emerson, a sociologist at Rice University. Emerson coedited *The Sociology of Religion* and coauthored *Divided by Faith*, both books published last year.

The Congregations Project, based at Rice, is believed to be the first large study focused on racial and ethnic diversity within Christian houses of worship. Emerson and colleagues say the data show that mixed churches are a rare breed in America—counting for only 8 percent. The researchers regard a “mixed” congregation as one with at least 20 percent of its members providing racial or ethnic diversity.

Ironically, the poorest record on diversity—only 2 to 3 percent mixed on average—belongs to historic Protestant churches, which were among the first to trumpet the ideal of integrated congregations. Many mainline clergy were stirred by the civil rights movement of the 1960s to render obsolete the observation, usually attributed to Martin Luther King Jr., that “11 a.m. Sunday is the most segregated hour of the week in America.”

For many church leaders, an integrated sanctuary remains a goal, however elusive. “When we had interviews with pastors, we often heard them say, ‘The church ought to lead the way on this,’” Emerson said.

Emerson’s project, funded by the Lilly Endowment, began with a telephone survey of 2,500 Americans about their congregations. Nearly 500 of those churches, selected at random, were sent mail surveys. Researchers then visited 30 churches in four metropolitan areas—Houston, Los Angeles and unnamed cities in the Midwest and Northeast. “We considered 18 of the churches to be ‘multiracial’ as we defined it,” said Emerson.

Catholic churches “are almost three times more likely to be multiracial than are Protestant congregations” because the large parish boundaries normally embrace several neighborhoods, he said. Yet the Congregations Project found less socialization and interaction between ethnic and racial groups in Catholic parishes, which often have separate masses for different language groups.

The more integrated churches among Protestants usually were the more theologically conservative, nondenominational congregations. Overall, the study found that only 7 percent of Protestant congregations nationally could be called “mixed.”

The Congregations Project, which completed its field work this year but has yet to publish its findings, found fewer integrated churches than have some other recent surveys, apparently because it made some on-site checks of the estimates given by churchgoers and church representatives.

For instance, the 1998 National Congregations Survey, which also defined a racially mixed church as having at least 20 percent of members from minority groups, asked thousands of churchgoers about the makeup of their congregations. Mark Chaves, a sociologist of religion with the University of Arizona, said that survey showed that 4 percent of mainline churches and 11 percent of all U.S. Christian churches have

mixed memberships, compared to the Emerson study, which found a 2 to 3 percent figure for mainline and 8 percent for churches overall.

Emerson's survey also obtained higher figures when researchers asked individuals if they worshiped in mixed-race congregations. For instance, 11 percent of whites said they did. But when investigators visited these reputed multiracial churches, they found many respondents had exaggerated the amount of racial integration.

Another recent study confirmed the finding that there are relatively fewer integrated churches in mainline denominations and relatively more among Catholic and conservative Protestant churches. The Organizing Religious Work (ORW) project out of the seminary-based Hartford Institute for Religion Research in Connecticut surveyed 550 churches in seven areas of the country, mostly in 1998-99. The ORW survey, which asked church representatives to assess the mix in their churches, yielded higher estimates than the Rice-based study, but again indicated a relative lack of success in mainline congregations.

"Mainline folks, for all their talk about diversity, lag significantly behind," said Nancy T. Ammerman, ORW's project director. She said there are a host of reasons for this.

"One surely is the disproportionately upper-middle-class, highly educated character of traditional Anglo mainline congregations," said Ammerman. "Another barrier to integration, in many instances, is a 'high church' style of worship steeped in European literary and musical culture." Age too is a factor: "Their members are older and perhaps on average less inclined toward multicultural experiences." Even the actual churches are older. "Half of mainline congregations were founded before 1900," she said.

"This cluster of factors has made integration difficult for mainline and easier for conservatives and Pentecostals whose demographics and history situate them better for the task," Ammerman said.

Looking at independent, nondenominational churches in the Hartford study, research associate Scott Thumma said that nearly 25 percent of them had a substantial mix in which the dominant racial group was no more than 60 percent of the congregation. "A plausible explanation is that denominational labels create a cultural expectation of whether they are 'white' or 'black' churches," said Thumma, noting that, like Pentecostal churches, nondenominational congregations have more contemporary worship styles and flexibility.

Floyd “Butch” Gamarra, missionary for multicultural ministries in the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, put it another way: “In a lot of mainline churches the issues are race and class.” Liberal churches present the theological idea that “the world is supposed to be a rainbow,” but the upper-middle-class church members “want to be cerebral” about it, Gamarra said. The Pentecostal and independent churches “tend to attract more working-class people who are in the same social, economic class,” Gamarra said. “The mix is a lot easier.”

A parish priest for 33 years, Gamarra has—like Rodney Woo in Houston—a mixed heritage himself. “I am half Chinese, part black, part Indian and I have a white great-grandfather, but my native language is Spanish,” he said.

Episcopal parishes in the heavily Latino Los Angeles area attract many former Catholics who see similarities in the two worship traditions. In addition, “We get a lot of people because we are doing social justice—on immigration, housing, education, language learning and after-school stuff,” he said.

Identifying the signs of a successfully integrated congregation—regardless of geography and denomination—is a major purpose of the Congregations Project at Rice. One key conclusion researchers reached may be surprising. It was, in effect, “Stop looking at yourself in the mirror all the time.”

In other words, few churches are going to grow because they have made integration for integration’s sake a primary goal. “Almost none of the multiracial churches that were successful had [integration] as their goal,” said co-investigator George Yancey of the University of North Texas. “Something else was the goal that united them,” Yancey said. “For evangelicals it was reaching the neighborhood and urban areas, and maybe for liberal mainline churches it would be the environment or social justice issues.”

Among other project findings:

- Congregants in mixed churches typically were those who already socialized with people of different backgrounds at work, school or in recreational activities. “By becoming part of the [racially mixed] church, their social networks became even more diverse and extensive,” Emerson said.
- Three strategies for building a diverse congregation rarely work: a church merger, renting space to smaller ethnic congregations, or placing ethnic congregations under

one roof with occasional joint services.

- Conflict and controversy do not usually beset integrated churches; strife occurs more often in racially homogenous congregations than in mixed ones. The reason: If the ratio of minority congregants rises enough to make some members uncomfortable in a mixed church, “the people who are disgruntled simply leave and you are left with people committed to that vision,” said co-investigator Karen Chai, a postgraduate fellow at Rice.

In a preliminary report on their project last year at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Chai, Yancey and Emerson said that many congregations see a quiet exodus of the onetime majority when the balance shifts. Nevertheless, a few changing churches become dysfunctional. “They spend so much energy engaged in a power struggle that they lose sight of the other aspects of church life,” the researchers reported.

They listed several characteristics of successful mixed churches:

- A strong, charismatic pastor who prepares the congregation well for change. The pastors are often nonwhite or part of an interracial marriage.
- A “something for everyone” approach to worship services and music. Larger churches may have a better chance to make this work.
- A core membership with common theology, lifestyle or upwardly mobile values, especially in the same generation—usually people in their 20s and 30s. A common evangelical identity often overcomes racial differences. Liberal churches may celebrate varieties in theology that enhance cooperation at the institutional level, they said, “but we did not find them to be well integrated at the individual or social level.”

Told of the project findings about mainline churches, Carnegie Samuel Calian, longtime president of the Presbyterian-related Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, said that the study matches “my own impression that we talk a better game of inclusivity than we practice.”

There are “good examples of our mainline churches that are truly multicultural and multiracial,” Calian said. But he conceded that mainline denominations do a better job at creating a mix of people running institutions and sitting on commissions

“where we have more control.” He suspected that mainline congregations have an improved chance for success when the demographics are favorable in their area.

That may be a factor in a “multicultural” United Methodist Church in ethnically diverse Culver City west of Los Angeles. The Culver Palms UMC, one of 300 “excellent” U.S. churches recently publicized by writer Paul Wilkes, celebrates its ethnic mix but doesn’t target percentages. “What we are very serious about is spiritual growth and spiritual challenge” in the Methodist tradition, said pastor Terry Van Hook. “We feel that everyone whom God has brought here has a chance to strengthen their faith and their passion for a ministry that God has given them,” he said.

The Culver City church’s membership of 266, a figure gaining nearly 10 percent a year, has 69 percent Anglo members, most of them over 65 years old. The younger, most active segment of the church are the 22 percent Asian Americans, 8 percent African Americans and some Hispanics, Native Americans and Pacific Islanders. Sunday attendance averages 180, divided between a “praise” service early Sunday, a somewhat traditional choral service at 10:45 a.m. and a 6 p.m. Taizé service.

In Seattle, a newly formed United Church of Christ congregation opened its doors in December for standing-room-only services featuring eight languages and music that included a Celtic harp and African drums. Sitting on the site of a church that had closed its doors, Bethany UCC is pastored by Angela Ying in what she called “the most diverse neighborhood in Seattle, if not the U.S.,” according to the denomination’s Web site.

“A lady came up to me in tears and said, ‘Angela, people talk about being multicultural and multiracial, but you and all these people live it,’” said Pastor Ying.

The Congregations Project had other observations pertinent to new opportunities for growth. Pan-Asian or multinational Latino churches might work when enough second- and third-generation families want to converse and worship in English without fully embracing the Anglo-European culture. Rice’s Karen Chai said that a pan-Asian congregation near Los Angeles illustrates that. “Over and over again, I heard interviewees saying, ‘I can’t remember who is Chinese and who is Korean,’” she said.

Another intriguing finding was that about one-quarter of mixed-race congregations “said the new converts and the unchurched were the single most important source

of new growth for them.” That compares with 8 percent of white churches and 14 percent of black churches that say that is the “most important” source.

Certainly that is the case with Rodney Woo’s church in Houston, which was part of the study. Nine years ago, that Southern Baptist congregation adopted a self-definition: “God’s multiethnic bridge that draws all people to Jesus Christ and transforms them from unbelievers to missionaries.” A placard with the mission statement is visible at the church entrance and found in the congregation’s literature.

Woo said that increasingly fewer of its new members come by transfer from another church. “If you grew up in a homogenous church, you may be fascinated with our mixture but you are more likely to leave,” he said. “Unchurched people who come in by conversion think this is normal for a congregation.”