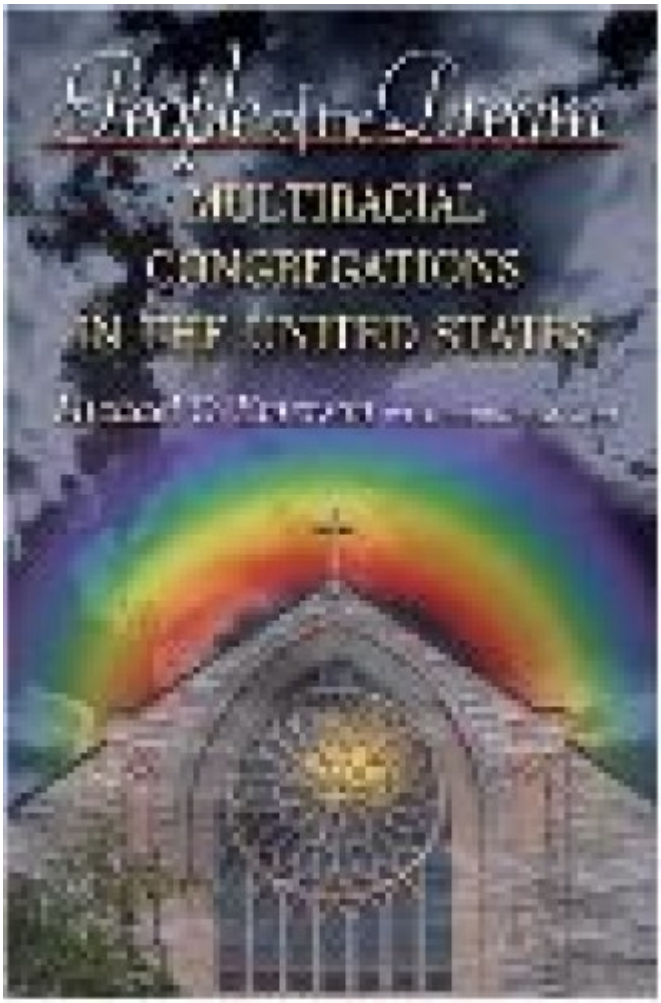
Choosing to be different

By R. Stephen Warner in the November 14, 2006 issue

In Review



People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States

Michael O. Emerson, with Rodney M. Woo
Princeton University Press

In their 2001 book *Divided By Faith*, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith developed a theory to explain why churches are racially exclusive enclaves despite Christians' high ideals about being inclusive: Americans choose where and with whom to worship; race is one of the most important grounds on which they choose; so the more choice they have, the more their religious institutions will be segregated.

Emerson has tested that theory and found that it works. Churches are more segregated than schools, workplaces or neighborhoods. The least segregated sector of American society is also the least governed by choice: it's the army. Because white Protestants are the largest religious community in the U.S., they (being one of them, I should say "we") have the greatest choice as to where to go. Ninety-five percent of our churches are effectively monoracial: 80 percent or more of their members are of the same race.

Though religious groups of smaller numbers in the U.S., including Muslims and Catholics, have fewer alternatives and cannot to the same degree indulge what sociologists call homophily, or the desire to flock with birds of a feather, their congregations also manifest ethnoracial particularism. The overall result is that only 7 percent of U.S. congregations can fairly be called multiracial.

Yet because there are over 300,000 local religious assemblies in the U.S., the multiracial fraction translates to thousands of congregations. *People of the Dream* (whose title alludes to Martin Luther King Jr.'s notable 1963 speech) reports on a lengthy collaborative research effort to map those congregations, learn how they swim against the current and discover why they matter.

The research involved a survey of the attitudes and behavior of 2,500 representative Americans; two derivative surveys of their churches, including Mark Chaves's National Congregations Survey; and on-site study of 22 multiracial congregations chosen from the larger surveys, including Wilcrest Baptist Church, an exemplary multiracial congregation in Houston with which Emerson was involved for five years. Wilcrest's pastor, Rodney Woo, is credited as a contributing author. (Full disclosure: in the book's acknowledgments, Emerson thanks me for recommending to him Karen Chai Kim, another of his collaborators.)

Emerson's story is complex. He clearly intends to convince his professional colleagues with his meticulous attention to statistical and methodological details, but he just as clearly wants to educate and inspire fellow churchpeople.

Congregations become multiracial, he explains, either because they see it as their mission and follow through on that vision or because they calculate that becoming multiracial is their best hope for survival. Wilcrest, an originally white congregation situated in a changing neighborhood on the edge of the city, combines both types.

In 1991, Wilcrest members voted down their pastor's suggestion that they sell their building and move closer to their own kind of people. That vote and what many members consider the guiding of the Holy Spirit led them to fire the pastor whose vision they rejected and to hire another, Woo, who could lead them along the uncertain path they seemed to have chosen.

Since 1991 some members have left in sadness or anger, but many new members have been added, staff have come and gone, and a great deal of effort has been expended. Now Wilcrest, still pastored by Woo, firmly embraces its multiracial identity. It is in the 99th percentile for American religious racial diversity; the congregation is 42 percent white, 30 percent Hispanic, 20 percent black, 5 percent Asian and 3 percent "other."

From Wilcrest and the 21 other cases, we learn how crucial are decisions about music styles and hiring. Each racial group must feel that it is represented, and dominant groups must be willing to forgo privilege and others' deference to their dearly held but ethnocentric standards. Everyone must be open to changing in unanticipated ways and listening for unexpected misunderstandings. For example, Anglos tend to see being on time for meetings as a sign of respect, whereas some Hispanics regard it as arrogance, as if people who arrive on time believe that nothing can happen until they arrive. Conflict is inevitable.

It's actually easier to start a multiracial church than to become one. But the results are worth it. Mixed churches actually mix people. White people become more open-minded. Nonwhites tend to move up the educational and occupational ladder, and they don't have to sacrifice their cultural identity to do so. People who feel out of place in more conventional churches are likely to feel accepted. As Christians might expect ("Those who find their life will lose it"), these results should not be the goal of change. Rather, multiracialism is a necessary means to the higher end of doing God's will.

Who are the people who worship alongside racial others? The questionnaires and interviews provide answers. Some come to a multiracial congregation out of

conviction, and others come because of some aspect of their personal situation, such as their home's proximity to the church. Relative to their numbers in the population, Hispanics and Asians are overrepresented in multiracial churches, while whites and blacks are underrepresented. Children of immigrants are more commonly found in such churches than immigrants themselves.

Emerson calls people who attend multiracial churches "Sixth Americans" to distinguish them from the five racial groups recognized in official statistics: whites/European Americans, blacks/African Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, Asian Americans and Native Americans. Sixth Americans come to life in Emerson's stories of Wilcrest leaders who grew up in racially mixed neighborhoods, were born to parents of different races or married someone of another race. They are accustomed to meaningful conversations and intimate encounters across racial lines. They go to multiracial churches because they're this way; they become more this way because of their church involvement.

One of the hopeful signs—a reason that Emerson can speak of a "swelling momentum" of multiracial churches—is that Sixth Americans are becoming more numerous with increasing rates of interracial marriage. Younger Americans are less likely than older ones to invest racial boundaries with emotional meaning. In these respects, Mosaic, the youth-oriented multiethnic Los Angeles church depicted by Gerardo Marti in *A Mosaic of Believers* (which I reviewed in Christian Century [July 26, 2005]), is the wave of the future.

But as was true at Mosaic, the hardest case, the rarest interracial mix, is that between European Americans and African Americans. According to Emerson's analysis of Chaves's data, only one-third of multiracial churches have as many as 20 percent each of blacks and whites. Because the blacks in these churches may be immigrants, "even this small figure of 2.5 percent [of all U.S. churches] is likely an overestimate" of real religious integration across America's deepest racial gulf.

In multiracial churches, whites stand to lose the racial privilege they can take for granted in society at large. Any time they feel slighted or disappointed, they don't have to look far to find a predominantly white church to fill their needs. African Americans also have much to lose. Unlike most other minority groups, they have their own distinct and treasured religious enclave in churches whose leadership and cultural style they have controlled for generations.

Emerson presents the voice of an African-American visitor to Wilcrest who was bitterly disappointed with and sharply critical of what she perceived to be the very white music she heard there. Korie Edwards, one of Emerson's collaborators (and my own student), argues that whites and blacks will be found in the same church only to the extent that the church maintains a white worship style. The issue is profound. Yet despite this intractable problem, Wilcrest and churches like it are changing their members and the world around them for the better.

People of the Dream is filled with individual stories sympathetically told and quantitative data competently analyzed; it faces tough issues and offers reasonable grounds for hope. It is by far the best book on its topic that I know of.