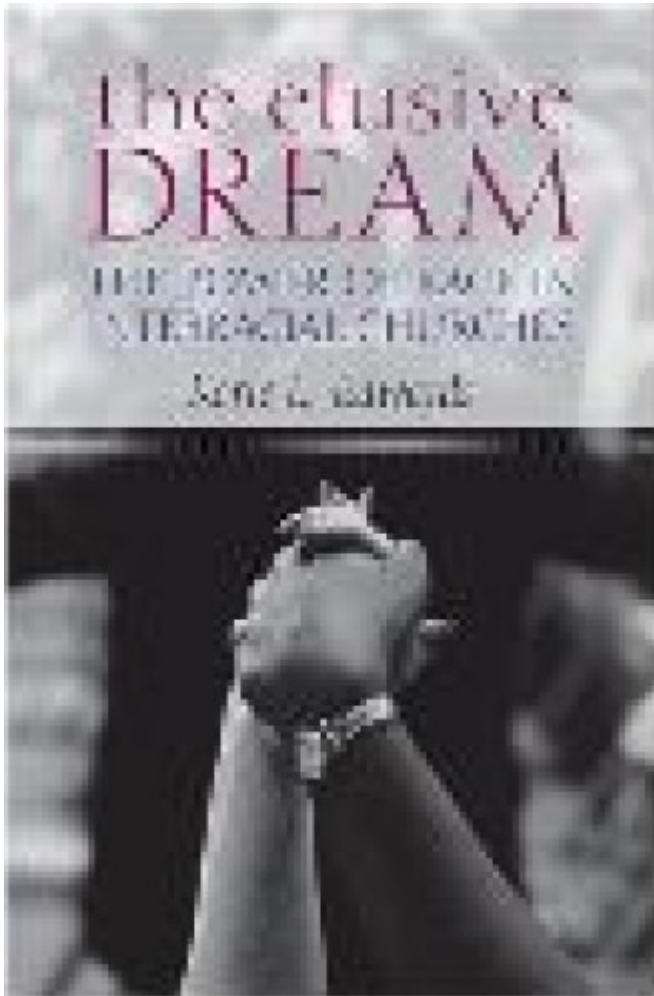


The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches

reviewed by [Jeremy Rehwaldt-Alexander](#) in the [January 13, 2009](#) issue

In Review



The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches

Korie L. Edwards

Oxford University Press

What happens when Christians develop congregations across racial lines? Korie L. Edwards examines this question, weaving together statistics about congregations across the country with an in-depth look at one multiracial congregation.

Contemporary analysis of race and Christianity is spurred, in part, by Michael Emerson and Christian Smith's *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford University Press, 2000). They argue that the dynamics of social groups and the history of racialization in the United States make multiracial congregations both rare and inherently unstable. A growing number of books published since then have examined the interracial congregations that buck the trend. Edwards's book is among the very few that focus particularly on the white-black divide, thus providing an important perspective on how multiracial churches function.

Edwards, an assistant professor of sociology at Ohio State University, argues that interracial churches will be successful—that is, will remain interracial—to the extent that the preferences of white members take precedence over those of people of color. As Edwards explains, her book “is a journey toward understanding how race manages to control, infuse, and reorganize human relations, such that whites remain dominant, even in places that embrace racial diversity.”

Connecting quantitative analysis of data from the National Congregations Study, which examines a representative sample of U.S. congregations, with qualitative analysis of Crosstown Community Church, a multiracial conservative Protestant church in a Midwestern city, is an effective strategy. The two methods are mutually supportive: the case provides texture and depth; the national statistics link the case to broader findings. For instance, Edwards highlights the experience of Lydia, an African-American woman whose emotional expression during worship creates controversy at Crosstown. Lydia is—in effect, though not explicitly—silenced, and for Edwards her silencing illustrates the reinforcing of white norms, a pattern also evident in the national data, where “interracial churches’ participation in [hand raising and verbal affirmation] is no different than that of white churches.”

Edwards's study traces the dynamics of race across the breadth of congregational life, from worship and civic activities to leadership, racial identity and motivation for participation. Using the concept of hegemony, “a form of rule where the dominant group's status is based primarily upon the consent of subordinate groups,” Edwards

describes how white and black members unwittingly cooperate to maintain white cultural norms. When there is the threat of change away from their preferences, whites are likely to leave; if a critical mass of African Americans is concerned about maintaining an interracial congregation, they are likely to collaborate with the whites who feel threatened and will return to practices with which the whites feel comfortable.

The book's clear, forceful and compelling argument raised several questions. For instance, what role does theology play in the construction (and perhaps undermining) of white privilege? Edwards provides some examples, such as Cross town members interpreting the Pauline idea of "decent and orderly" worship in a way that theologically justifies a particular model of worship life based on white cultural norms. Yet might theology also be harnessed to transform the racial consciousness of white Christians?

On a related note, does the level of participation in cross-racial interactions affect the extent of change? Edwards argues that "close, regular, voluntary interracial interactions" didn't affect whites' understanding of their own racial identity, but her description of whites' unwillingness to attend organized conversations about race and her comment that white and black parents did not frequently interact with each other makes me wonder about how close and regular the interactions across racial lines really were. Perhaps the concept of "aversive racism"—the idea that many white people who value racial equality have unconscious negative emotions toward people of color and seek to avoid interaction—could serve as a useful tool in unpacking this issue.

Finally, what about African Americans whose preferences do not fit black cultural norms? Are blackness and whiteness essential categories, and if so, of what do they consist? Gerardo Marti, in *A Mosaic of Believers: Diversity and Innovation in a Multiethnic Church* (Indiana University Press, 2005), argues that racial and ethnic identities are fluid and negotiated and that interracial churches can successfully create a model of "ethnic transcendence" in which a common identity as Christian transcends specific racial or ethnic identities. Edwards questions the effects of such a model: "The promotion of a broader, inclusive identity can end up submerging the real, everyday consequences of living life in the United States as a racial minority, reducing racial issues to personal prejudice or a problem of social interaction, rather than attributing them to structural realities."

This difference between the findings of Marti and Edwards may have much to do with the specific racial makeup of the congregations each studied. In *People of the Dream* (Princeton University Press, 2006), Michael Emerson argues that white and black communities have developed oppositional cultures that make black-white congregations particularly difficult to develop and maintain. While most of Crosstown's members are either white or black, the congregation Marti studied was composed primarily of white, Latino/a and Asian-American members. The contrast between these studies highlights the need for further analysis of the role specific racial differences play in the experience of multi racial churches.

The Elusive Dream poses a challenge to those who see the Christian tradition as a resource for creating a society characterized by racial justice. Edwards notes that interracial churches—"places where people could voluntarily interact across racial lines to build a religious community that worships God and challenges racialized structures"—are not accomplishing all they could. "Instead," she explains, "they embrace their religious diversity while at the same time affirming the status quo." They are inclusive, but within a structure of whiteness, thus highlighting the disturbing difficulty of moving beyond pervasive systems of white dominance despite the best of intentions.

Edwards points to a way forward: "A first step in rectifying racial inequalities . . . is exposing and addressing those latent ideologies and interests that sustain white hegemony." If white people are unaware of the effects of their privilege on their interactions with others, then turning the spotlight on that privilege is the first step in making real progress. Reading *The Elusive Dream* is one fruitful way to begin.