

Imagining browner churches

Being faithful Christians in a changing society

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Demographic shifts and the secularization of white America are creating Christian churches that are increasingly minority and immigrant. Can white Christians see these browner Christians as an asset to Christian faith in the United States? How will churches work together through this shift toward browner churches?

Preparing for 2040—or 2030

The Association of Theological Schools, the accrediting agency for seminaries in North America, developed a program for member schools, called “Preparing for 2040.”¹ The basic premise was that, according to current estimates by the United States Census Bureau, sometime in the decade of 2040 the majority of people in the US will no longer be of white European background.² Seminaries were invited to participate in a three-year process in which they could analyze various aspects of their work and develop plans for their institutions to better prepare their students for ministry in this changing demographic reality.

As we worked through the learning and planning process, it became clear that some of the demographic changes were going to have an impact on churches and seminaries earlier than 2040. For example, given that “whites” are more secular and minority groups more religious than the general population, it is likely that the “2040 shift” will happen during the 2030s in the churches. It is already the case in places like southern


1 I participated in this program as a member (and chair) of the ATS Committee on Race and Ethnicity (CORE). I also served as a coach for one of the groups of almost forty seminaries that participated in this process.

2 Although my focus here is on realities in the US, some ATS seminaries are in Canada, where significant demographic shifts are also under way. Statistics Canada estimates that “together, immigrants and second-generation individuals could represent nearly one person in two (between 44.2% and 49.7%) in 2036, up from 2011 (38.2%).” Jean-Dominique Morency et al., “Immigration and Diversity: Population Projections for Canada and Its Regions, 2011 to 2036,” <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/91-551-x/91-551-x2017001-eng.htm>.

California that on any given Sunday the majority of people actually in church might be nonwhite. Because seminaries include international students, it is possible that the majority of students in ATS schools will be nonwhite by the middle of the 2020s decade.

Reflecting society's diversity

How are Christian churches adapting to this changing situation? One response has been to develop intentionally multicultural churches. Since



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the US is increasingly racially mixed, should not Christian churches reflect the diversity of their communities? Michael Emerson, who has done some of the most extensive research on these types of churches, uses the 80/20 rule to determine whether a church is multicultural.³ The logic is that if at least 20 percent of a church's composition is from a specific minority group, that group is more likely to influence change in the church.⁴ By this standard, only about 14

percent of churches in the US today are multicultural. According to Emerson, Mosaix Global Network's goal is to have 20 percent of US churches reach the 20 percent mark by 2020.⁵

Another place where change is happening is among denominations that have made a strategic commitment to attract people of different ethnic groups, usually through developing churches and ministries focused on those groups. Currently about 66 percent of the US population is white. Denominations consisting of at least one-third nonwhite members clearly have made the commitment to racial ethnic diversity within

3 See Michael O. Emerson, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), chapter 2.

4 Given the realities of power and change dynamics in the church, a congregation with an 80/20 reality may indeed be on its way to becoming more multicultural, but it is also possible that the 20 percent community may see itself as having a very limited role in the leadership and direction of the congregation.

5 Mosaix Global Network identifies itself as "a relational network of pastors and planters, denominational and network leaders, educators, authors, and researchers alike, that exists to establish healthy multiethnic and economically diverse churches for the sake of the gospel in an increasingly diverse and cynical society, throughout North America and beyond." See <http://www.mosaix.info/>.

their denomination. Currently, the Christian denominations that have a diverse membership or at least come close to reflecting US demographic realities are Seventh-day Adventists, Roman Catholics, Assemblies of God, Church of God (headquartered in Cleveland, Tennessee), and the Churches of Christ. All other denominations are predominantly white, except for historically black denominations and other smaller groups of Latino, Asian, or Native American denominations or church networks.

Black and white

Historically, immigrant groups from Europe formed many of the churches and denominations in the US, and these have maintained their predominantly white makeup even as they have expanded beyond their specific immigrant origins. Structural racism—including slavery and segregationist policies and attitudes—has led to the development of separate black and white churches, the background against which Martin Luther King Jr. famously observed that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in the nation.

The US in which MLK made that statement was predominantly white, with African Americans and other minority groups being a small percentage of the population. During the 1960s most people assumed the US would look like this into the foreseeable future. Race relations in the US have undergone many changes, but the fundamental divisions caused by racism have not healed. Nonetheless, changes in migratory patterns after the 1965 Immigration Act have altered the demographic makeup of the US. The current situation is still deeply affected by the black-white divide, but the US is much more diverse than Dr. King might have imagined it would be.


This increasing ethnic and racial diversity is reflected in US Christianity. Overall, the ethnic diversity of Christian churches in the US reflects the diversity of the population, with minority groups slightly overrepresented. That increasing diversity is seen in the denominations previously mentioned, and in multicultural churches. But overall, US churches and denominations are still largely organized around a predominant ethnic or racial group.

Profound challenges

The 2016 elections exposed how divided our country is and how our political divisions largely reflect our racial divisions. In the midst of a politically and racially divided country, how can churches be agents of change?

How can churches reflect the unity of the body of Christ in the midst of the nation's growing diversity? Will churches merely reflect our divisions, or will they be able to transcend them?

Clearly the challenges are profound. We have a multiplicity of churches because of linguistic, ethnic, cultural, social, and theological differences. But some of our separations are also reflections of our sins, nationally, as specific churches and as individuals. Some of our separate churches and denominations are the result of the legacy of racism, mixed with



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issues of privilege, power, and control. On top of that, the very real differences between us sometimes make even the best intentions to work together go awry. One wishes that we could easily separate out the first set of issues from the reality of our human sin. But they are often mixed together.

The work of unity

It is clear that the work of unity has to happen at several levels. At the congregational level, several things can be done. Intentionally intercultural churches and multicongregational churches are models that can provide concrete ways forward. Of course, these models will only provide spaces for all if they seriously work at intercultural relations and regularly speak into the issues of sin that mar efforts to work together.

Local churches of all types can also develop projects to work together with sister congregations that are significantly different. These types of relationships will also need to account for the issues already mentioned, because often ethnic and/or working-class congregations are the only setting in which otherwise marginalized people find a place where they can use their gifts for the glory of God and the service of others.

One thing that stands out when looking at the most diverse denominations in the US today is that those denominations are growing, while those that are predominantly white are shrinking. Clearly, ethnic diversity is not the only reason this is so. But these denominations and churches may be pointing us toward one of the futures. Not all individual churches should become intentionally multicultural, but churches can work together across ethnic and cultural lines.

Sharing power

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are heard and accounted for. As non-whites become a larger percentage of the membership in churches and denominations, leaders have to address what it means to give power to those who have not had a voice in the past. This is particularly crucial because whites have held power in most of these structures. We have yet to see how they will respond.

The growth of nonwhite congregations means that browner voices will need to be at the center of many of the

intercultural conversations among churches and within churches. No longer will the only significant conversation be the one about how white Christians create spaces for others. Minority churches will need to think about how they interact with other minority congregations. Some of these immigrant churches have a mission mindset toward the US. Are we ready for a mission effort toward secularized whites that is led by nonwhite congregations?

Developing multicongregational networks


These changes also call us to broaden our sense of how to express the unity of the churches in the midst of our increasing diversities. The most diverse denominations are already showing us the way. They are, in a sense, developing multicongregational networks. Churches of various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds are working together toward a broader vision. We need to be more intentional about developing these types of networks. Some churches will link under a common theology and others under a common mission, while still others will come together because they share geographical space. Some of them will look like denominations, while others will cross denominational lines and still others will be looser networks.

Minority and immigrant churches are showing us other models of networking. Some of these networks cross national boundaries, following the lived experiences of the people who are a part of them. These networks are expanding the mission of the churches, but also the sense of

the church as a global network. These types of connections will usually be dynamic and may not have a strong structure to support them. But they will help expand the way that churches in the US look at mission.

Stepping aside and stepping up

Building these types of networks will be difficult for many of the reasons already mentioned, not the least of which are issues of power, authority, and control. Given the power differentials in our society, white leaders will tend to take positions of leadership as intercultural relationships develop. People who are part of cultures that naturally defer to others, those who



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do not have as much education, who do not speak English as well, who are bi-vocational, or who are part of smaller movements will find it hard to create a space for themselves at the table. There will need to be an intentional process of empowerment in which those who are finding a space will be encouraged and those who easily take leadership will need to consciously take a secondary role. The book of Acts shows us that this will not be an easy process. But we believe in the power of the Holy Spirit and know that God is doing new things.

Those who are ready to participate in these types of intercultural relationships will need special training and special grace. In *Churches, Cultures and Leadership*,

Mark Lau Branson and I invite readers to address the complexities of intercultural life, but always within the realities of grace and sin.⁶ It is only as we recognize that we live between these realities that we can begin to take steps toward that browner church that is our common future.

Seeing with other eyes

Part of the solution will point us toward looking at our current reality through different eyes. For example, many—if not most—US Latino and

6 Mark Lau Branson and Juan Francisco Martínez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011).

Asian-American churches are multicultural, though they are usually not seen in that frame because of how we think about “minority” groups in the US. A growing number of traditionally African American congregations include immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean as well as other peoples of African descent. Outsiders might look at these churches and assume that they are monocultural. But they are also working at crossing important divides within communities that have been placed under a common umbrella by the US census.

These demographic changes are also changing how we think about race and the future of the US. On the one hand, the majority of children born in the US today are no longer white. Also, the number of intercultural marriages with intercultural and multiracial children is changing how we define races in this country. The five “race” categories used by the US census bureau are starting to blur into each other and into something new.

Changing the face of the church


As we look toward the future, it is clear that our current categories for thinking about intercultural church life are quickly changing. The churches in the US will continue to diversify. That does not mean that each individual church will reflect the ethnic diversity of the country or even

of its own community. It will mean that denominations and church movements will address the increasing diversity successfully or they will slowly fade away. Also, local churches of various ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds will need to find new ways to work together.

Minority and immigrant groups are changing the face of Christian churches. But there is also a sense in which they may be the salvation of Christian churches in the US. Some white Christians fear that the US is losing its Christian

core. What it is losing is its white Christian majority. Minority and immigrant Christians may help the US keep its Christian core.

Given current patterns, we can anticipate that the churches that will be thriving in ten or fifteen years will have learned to navigate these changes, and many more that are coming, in creative ways. Various types



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of intercultural and multicongregational models will continue to develop. The newer and growing minority and immigrant churches will need to find new ways to interact with churches outside their ethnic communities.

But the demographic changes will only make some of the existing challenges more acute. Will we finally be able to break the chains of the legacy of slavery and racism that continue to bind churches in this country? Will we make peace with being a multilingual church in the US? Are we ready to see ourselves as part of the global church that is much larger than our nation-state? Are we ready to follow Jesus Christ together as the church in the US becomes browner? That is our challenge and the opportunity that God has placed before us.

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