



CROSSING THE ETHNIC DIVIDE

The Multiethnic Church on a Mission

Kathleen Garces-Foley

Crossing the Ethnic Divide



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*To Anthony,
with all my love*

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Introduction

Looking for the Promised Land

The year 2004 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that ended legal segregation in the public schools. While some celebrated this achievement, many wondered what had become of the Promised Land that Martin Luther King, Jr., believed was not far off. What happened to his dream of a country in which all Americans would have equal rights and equal opportunities? Five decades after the civil rights movement, the dream remains alive for many Americans, and it is experiencing a resurgence in Christian churches. Churches remain overwhelmingly homogeneous, but the desire to change this historic pattern is strong and growing.

Like many churches, Greenwood Acres Full Gospel Baptist Church wants to be a multiethnic church.¹ This five-thousand member African American church in Shreveport, Louisiana, wants to be a gathering of all the tribes and all the nations, as described in the New Testament Book of Revelation. After joint ministry projects and pulpit-sharing with White churches failed to bring any non-Blacks through his doors, Bishop Fred Caldwell decided to take more drastic measures. He announced one Sunday morning in 2003 that he would pay White people to come to services. He was willing to give two thousand dollars from his own pocket to pay them to come to his church during the month of August: five dollars an hour on Sundays and ten dollars an hour on Thursdays. When word got out, many people, especially neighboring pastors, accused him of trying to buy

souls, but he explained his actions in this way: “Our churches are too segregated, and the Lord never intended for that to happen. It’s time for something radical.” That month Greenwood Acres had 125 White and six Native American visitors, many of whom refused to take the money. I imagine this was a very exciting time at Greenwood Acres, culminating in the decision by one White couple to sign the membership book. The euphoria could not have lasted long, however, because this couple quickly faded out of sight, as did the rest of the visitors. One month and over one thousand dollars later, Greenwood Acres was still a Black church.

There is much more to this story than failure. After his bold announcement, Bishop Caldwell was inundated with requests for interviews. He spoke on fifty talk shows, including an interview on CNN that was broadcast globally to more than a billion people. He received letters of support from people all over the world, which have prompted him to write a book on creating multiethnic churches. When I spoke with Bishop Caldwell six months after the experiment, he shared with me how exciting it has been to receive so much encouragement. This attention does not surprise him, since, in his words, “It was God’s idea, and God knows what He is doing.” The outpouring of support from all over the world is, in Bishop Caldwell’s assessment, a sign that the world is ready for multiethnic churches.

Fifty years after the civil rights movement began, are American Christians ready for multiethnic churches? Despite the energy and resources that churches like Greenwood Acres, as well as denominational bodies and church-related organizations, are putting toward the creation of multiethnic churches, success stories are hard to find. According to the most comprehensive study on the subject, the Multiracial Congregations Project, only 5.5 percent of Christian churches are multiracial.² Nonetheless, I encountered the desire for this new kind of church everywhere I looked. There is clear evidence, from books to sermon series to conferences on the subject, that many Christians have a strong interest in bridging the historic ethnic divisions between Whites and Blacks, as well as the more recent divisions among Christians of Latin, Asian, and African heritage. In fact, it has become increasingly difficult for any Christian organization to find legitimate grounds on which to oppose ethnic diversity. As I researched the subject, I was told repeatedly that my topic is quite timely; everyone wants to know how to create a multiethnic church. But the more I encountered this desire, the more I wanted to understand it: Who wants to know, and why? Why now?

Obviously people find the *idea* of multiethnic churches attractive, but they seem to be more attracted to an imagined ideal rather than to joining the real multiethnic churches that already exist. Those few churches that do succeed in

crossing the ethnic divide are doing something quite exceptional in the history of American religious life.³ While Christian theologians and ministers from across denominations have written extensively in recent years on the subject of the multiethnic church, it has not received much attention from a sociological perspective.⁴ We know very little about this emerging social institution and its inner workings. What does it mean to describe a church as multiethnic? How does ethnic diversity affect congregational life? What kind of people are attracted to multiethnic churches, and why?

While it seems quite plausible that an ethnically diverse group of people can form a community around shared beliefs, in practice shared beliefs have not been enough to overcome historic ethnic divisions within Christianity. For the multiethnic church to exist, individuals must literally cross these dividing lines by walking into the religious space of the ethnically “other.” However the ideal multiethnic church is imagined, it most certainly means more than occupying the same physical space, which can so easily replicate the divisions of the surrounding society. Internal divisions must also be crossed by literally walking from one side of the room to another. To understand the multiethnic church as a new social institution, then, we must look concretely at how real people live out their values in congregational life.

Through an ethnographic study of one congregation, Evergreen Baptist Church, this book takes an in-depth look at why and how a community of people in search of an ideal Christian community transformed their relatively homogeneous church into a multiethnic one. This book tells their story—the pitfalls they have encountered and the measures of their success—but their story, like Bishop Caldwell’s, is only a starting point for understanding a much larger narrative of the changing ethnic dynamics in America and how religious institutions are responding to and shaping these changes. By looking closely at the efforts of one community, while also examining the broad social context in which these efforts are embedded, we can come to understand not only what is unique about the multiethnic church, but also what the desire for this kind of community reveals about who we are as an ethnically diverse country and who we desire to become.

Evergreen Baptist Church and the Evangelical Racial Reconciliation Movement

In 2001, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a full-page article, titled “Building on the Gospel of Inclusion,” describing Evergreen Baptist Church of Los Angeles.⁵ Like many other evangelical churches in Southern California, Evergreen offers

worship services with dynamic music, technological aids, and great preaching, as well as a smorgasbord of programs on topics ranging from financial advice to parenting skills. Situated in one of the most diverse cities in the world, Evergreen has allowed itself to be shaped by the surrounding cosmopolitan milieu. Founded in 1945 as a mission church for Japanese immigrants, Evergreen became a mixed Japanese/Chinese church in the 1980s, growing to over a thousand members. In 1997, Evergreen split in two, and the Evergreen Los Angeles branch took on a new identity as a multi-Asian/multiethnic community. Since then, its Asian American membership has shifted from 98 percent to 75 percent of the total, and has broadened to include people of seventeen distinct Asian and Pacific Rim ethnicities. By 2001, 25 percent of Evergreen's members identify themselves as Black, Latino, White, or multiracial.

There are dozens of other multiethnic churches in Los Angeles that could have easily served as the focal point of this study, so why Evergreen? The region is predominantly Roman Catholic, with an Archdiocese actively promoting multiculturalism in parish ministry, so focusing on a multiethnic parish might have seemed an obvious choice.⁶ Instead I chose to study a Protestant church for the simple reason that while Catholics are expected to attend their local parish church, Protestants are not restricted by parochial boundaries and thus have much greater freedom in choosing a church. In practice, some Roman Catholics do church-shop, and diversity of membership is certainly a factor in their decision, but the process of church-shopping is much more transparent for Protestant Christians, and I wanted to know if diversity is a significant factor in choosing a church.

Beyond this criterion, Evergreen Baptist Church made an appealing case study for two reasons. First, this congregation is intentionally and publicly addressing diversity issues, while many multiethnic churches do not. By addressing diversity issues through theological reflection in sermons, the church newsletter and Web site, and programs and discussion groups, Evergreen makes public, and thus accessible to the researcher, the inner workings of its multiethnic efforts. These arenas of ongoing internal dialogue were an invaluable source of insight into the institutional culture of Evergreen, which served to supplement the formal interviews I conducted with forty members of the church, including six of the paid ministry staff. Second, as a predominantly Asian American church Evergreen stands outside the White/Black divide that has dominated the study of race relations in the United States. Important as this framework is for understanding how race functions in America, it is inadequate for understanding the development of multiethnic churches in areas of the country, such as Los Angeles, where the dynamics of diversity are far more

complicated. Too often books on multiethnic churches have focused on the dynamics between Whites and people of color, forgetting that relations among people of color are also negotiated and fraught with tension.⁷ Rather than focusing on a White church that has opened its doors to people of color, I chose to base this study on a non-White multiethnic church in order to learn how the dynamics of privilege and power are similar to and different from those in White-dominated churches.

The fact that Evergreen identifies with the evangelical subculture makes it a valuable case study for another reason: it affords an opportunity to examine how evangelicals are responding to the growing ethnic diversity in America. While data on religious affiliation is not as precise as one would wish, somewhere between one-fourth and one-third of all Americans identify themselves as evangelical Christians or share the characteristics associated with this group: belief in biblical inerrancy, commitment to spreading the Christian message, personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and the experience of being born again.⁸ In the twentieth century, evangelical Christians were not known for their leadership in the area of race relations. They sat on the sidelines during the civil rights movement, while liberal Christians marched in the streets. However, in recent years major evangelical organizations have made race relations a top priority under the name of “racial reconciliation,” a term first used in the late 1960s by Black evangelical activists.

In their book *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith note that since the late 1980s there has been an explosion of racial reconciliation activity, including conferences, books, study guides, videos, speeches, practices by organizations, formal apologies, and even mergers of once racially separate organizations.⁹ This promotion of racial reconciliation has had a wide-reaching effect on evangelical churches, prompting some to make minor gestures toward inclusivity and a few churches—like Evergreen—to apply these ideas intentionally to the formation of multiethnic churches. Since this flurry of activity has been well documented in print and on the Internet, I was able to develop a rich understanding of the evangelical context out of which Evergreen’s commitment to diversity has grown.

In the simplest terms, racial reconciliation means the reconciling of the races or, to put it another way, the overcoming of racial divisions in society. This innocuous definition avoids the contentious issues that plague the racial reconciliation movement: What causes these divisions? How do we overcome them? Who needs to do the reconciling? Is racism a personal sin or a societal injustice? Can’t we just be color-blind? Are all ethnic-specific churches bad?

Why can't we just be Christians? Given the diverse ways these questions are answered by those committed to a theology of racial reconciliation, there is no single approach to racial reconciliation among American evangelicals. While it has become common to speak of the growing interest and efforts being made toward racial reconciliation as a movement, I use the term "movement" loosely in the following pages. The racial reconciliation movement is not a unified agenda but rather an umbrella under which evangelical Christians are addressing racial tensions and striving for racial integration in—and beyond—their institutions.

While many evangelicals have heard of racial reconciliation in one context or another, it is unusual to find a church that embraces the racial reconciliation theology as explicitly as Evergreen.¹⁰ What makes Evergreen even more unusual among evangelical institutions focusing on racial reconciliation is its Asian American majority. Because the movement has focused primarily on the reconciliation between Blacks and Whites, little is known about how Asian American or Latino evangelicals are involved in it. This is not surprising, since there has been little published on the relationship between evangelicals of color and the White, mainstream, evangelical subculture in general. Though I did not set out to study how Asian American evangelicals relate to White evangelicals, it became obvious in the course of studying the racial reconciliation literature that the Asian American members of Evergreen Baptist Church do not share the racial attitudes of their White evangelical coreligionists.

As a predominantly Asian American, evangelical church, Evergreen should not be taken as a "typical" multiethnic church, if indeed there is such a thing. Nonetheless, this congregation provides a fascinating case study and starting point for trying to understand the multiethnic church as a unique social institution emerging in diverse urban social contexts. Through this growing, young, vibrant church east of Los Angeles, we can learn a great deal about the challenges multiethnic churches must contend with to form an ethnically diverse, inclusive community, and about the social and theological values that compel members to face these challenges. While there are many things that I, as an outsider to the evangelical subculture, came to admire about Evergreen, I do not perceive it as an ideal multiethnic church, nor do I present it as a model for other churches to follow. In fact, throughout this study I wrestle with the very idea of what it means to be a "successful" multiethnic church or, for that matter, a successful multiethnic institution of any kind. By allowing themselves to be studied, the members of Evergreen offer us an opportunity to grapple with what an ideal multiethnic community ought to look like, while examining the challenges that a real multiethnic community faces.

Race Relations Have Never Been Better . . . or Worse

Bishop Caldwell is not the only person who thinks the current social climate is fertile ground for the multiethnic church. In the course of my research, I was told many times by both Christians and non-Christians that multiethnic churches make sense now, given how tolerant Americans have become regarding diversity. There is a strong connection between the desire for multiethnic churches and the belief that the current climate in the United States is conducive to their success. To understand the social factors compelling churches to make diversity a priority, we need to begin by examining the social context out of which this movement is emerging. Have Americans really reached a new level of racial tolerance and equality, or does racism continue to profoundly impact one's life opportunities in the United States? There is no simple answer to this question. The current climate looks very different from the vantage point of the Asian-majority San Gabriel Valley, where Evergreen is located, or the crime-ridden neighborhoods of East Los Angeles, than it does to racially privileged, middle-class Whites. The supposed tolerance of Americans may not be so visible to a new immigrant, a non-English speaker, a person of color, or a person struggling to survive economically. As I wrote this book, I grappled with the disparity between these vantage points, as well as how my own vantage point has shaped my optimism for the future of ethnic relations in the United States.

From where I stand as an educated White woman, married to an immigrant from the Philippines and raising two multiethnic children while living in a very diverse, middle-class neighborhood in Southern California, the climate for ethnic relations looks encouraging. While doing this research I lived in Oxnard, located on the coast fifty miles north of Los Angeles. According to the 2000 census, Oxnard is 66.2 percent Latino, 20.6 percent Anglo, 7.4 percent Asian, and 3.8 percent African American. My neighborhood is home to extended families of immigrants from Mexico, Korea, India, and the Philippines, as well as a number of American-born Latino families, Anglo families, and multiracial families. A trip to the local park reveals children of all shades speaking various languages while playing side by side and occasionally, if they can overcome their shyness, interacting. In many ways diversity in Oxnard is "working." That is to say, people mix here. Many neighborhoods, schools, and families are ethnically mixed. Latinos are in positions of power in all aspects of city life, from the mayor to school principals. Oxnard does not have racially-motivated hate crimes or race riots. I am often surprised that there is not more racial tension