

# Racial Discourse, Social Engagement, and Misalignment: Assessing the Impact of Multiracial Churches

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In 1969 then Evangelical Covenant Church President Milton B. Engebretson wrote an appeal to Covenant churches urging them “to give generously” toward “relief funds for black [sic] America.”<sup>1</sup> As my brilliant colleague Hauna Ondrey shows in her paper “The Covenant Responds to the Black Manifesto (1969),” the Black Manifesto, or perhaps more precisely the intentions behind it, was recognized by the Covenant on the whole as important and worthy of attention, even if many did not agree with it in its entirety.<sup>2</sup> The establishment of relief funds bears witness to this. Speaking of the significance of the fund and what giving to it would represent, Engebretson wrote:

This...could be the movement that would force open the gate to peace and understanding which is currently blocked by hatred, racism, and mistrust....We hold the key, in our small way, to share what we have been given, to demonstrate the love of Christ and to help improve the chances for peaceful, orderly development of the world, rather than for increased anger, rage, and violence. See that you excel in this hour of crisis.<sup>3</sup>

In researching Engebretson’s life and work, I have been struck not only

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<sup>1</sup> Hauna Ondrey, “The Covenant Responds to the Black Manifesto (1969),” *Covenant Quarterly* 77, nos. 2–3 (2019): 3–30.

<sup>2</sup> Ondrey, “The Covenant Responds,” 3–30.

<sup>3</sup> Ondrey, “The Covenant Responds,” 17.

by his passion for evangelism but also by the way he seemingly understood that justice and evangelism do not represent an either-or paradigm; rather, the two go hand in hand. I resonate deeply with this. In my work I am particularly interested in multiracial churches, believing steadfastly in their potential to be a powerful witness to God's reconciling work in the world and to be sites where racial justice and healing can happen. My research interests are deeply personal and grow out of my desire that all may know Christ and experience his promise of abundant life. I am delighted to be able to share my work with you in this installation lecture.

Today I am going to share some of the findings from my most recent study. At the outset, let me say this work centers on Protestant multiracial churches. Much of the research on such churches, especially the earlier work, has focused on three things: 1) describing them, 2) exploring how such churches sustain their racial diversity, and 3) understanding the racial attitudes of people who attend multiracial churches. In the first category, the work of Michael Emerson and Karen Kim<sup>4</sup> is a good example. Their work produced the 80:20 ratio that has come to be the baseline definition for characterizing a church as multiracial. Sustaining racial diversity is featured in the work of Gerardo Marti,<sup>5</sup> as well as Korie Edwards,<sup>6</sup> and more recently, Jessica Barron and Rhys Williams.<sup>7</sup> Understanding peoples' racial attitudes finds good exposition in the works of George Yancey<sup>8</sup> and Yancey and Emerson.<sup>9</sup>

Recent scholarship has turned a more critical eye toward the impact of these churches on the racial status quo. The work of Jemar Tisby<sup>10</sup> is a good example, and this is where my work is situated. Having been involved with many different multiracial churches over the past twenty

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<sup>4</sup> Michael O. Emerson and Karen Chai Kim, "Multiracial Congregations: An Analysis of Their Development and a Typology," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42 (2003): 217–27.

<sup>5</sup> Gerardo Marti, *A Mosaic of Believers: Diversity and Innovation in a Multiethnic Church* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Korie L. Edwards, *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> M. Jessica Barron and Rhys H. Williams, *The Urban Church Imagined: Religion, Race, and Authenticity in the City* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> George Yancy, ed., "Introduction: Fragments of a Social Ontology of Whiteness," in *What White Looks Like: African American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1–23.

<sup>9</sup> George Yancy and Michael O. Emerson, "Integrated Sundays: An Exploratory Study into the Formation of Multiracial Churches," *Sociological Forces* 36, no. 2 (May 2003): 111–26.

<sup>10</sup> Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2019).

years and helping to plant two of them, I have come to understand that these churches are not monolithic in how they treat race. Thus, it is reasonable to suspect that the impact they are having is also varied.

With this in mind, I came to this project with two research questions. First, how does a church's racial discourse shape its social engagement? Said another way, what is the relationship between the way a church represents race through talk, text, and imagery, and how does that church engage with the larger community in which it is situated? My second research question grew out of my understanding that churches can have a direct impact on their communities through their social engagement, but they can also have an indirect impact by influencing congregants who then directly engage with their communities. Drawing on the work of Gregory Stanczak, I am defining this indirect impact as what Stanczak names "engaged spirituality."<sup>11</sup>

Stanczak defines engaged spirituality as a spirituality that both motivates and sustains a person's social activism. My summary of his argument of the four ways one's spirituality can become engaged is: 1) as an inheritance from parents and family, 2) by learning about engagement, 3) by a social encounter with injustice, or 4) through a spiritual epiphany.<sup>12</sup> My second research question was: How effective are multiracial churches at sparking engaged spirituality?

I will highlight two notable examples of engaged spirituality that I saw in the field. The first was the confirmation service for five high schoolers at one of the churches that participated in my study. During the service, these young people made faith confessions before their community and shared written statements about what their faith meant to them. These were personal statements, and the students were given freedom in what they chose to write about. And yet, to a person, each student connected their faith concretely to a justice-related issue. And, to a person, each named their church as having been hugely instrumental in helping them make that connection.

Another example came from a Black man I spoke to from another participating church, whom I call Michael. He told me that he had "not really been the marching type" prior to coming to the church. He shared that it wasn't that he was against marching and other types of demonstrations; he just had never thought anything was important enough for him to participate in such an action. What changed him was, in his words,

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<sup>11</sup> Gregory C. Stanczak, *Engaged Spirituality: Social Change and American Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Stanczak, *Engaged Spirituality*, 15-20.

“hearing a white woman share one Sunday about the protests she had been participating in.” This woman had two young children, and she had been bringing them with her to the marches. Michael shared with me that hearing her conviction and passion sparked something in him and forced him to rethink his position on marching.

To answer my research questions, I did a qualitative analysis of four multiracial congregations located in Chicago, Illinois. The four churches that graciously participated in my study were: Revival City Church, led by Pastor James, located just outside the West Loop; Cornerstone Presbyterian Church, led by Pastor Nathan on the Southside of Chicago; Key Church, co-led by Pastor Jenny (lead pastor) and Pastor Freedom Warrior (executive pastor) located in the Near North neighborhood; and, lastly, Circle Church, co-led by husband and wife duo Renee and Richard in the West Loop. Revival City and Circle Church both identify as nondenominational churches, Cornerstone is a mainline church, and Key Church identifies as multi-denominational.<sup>13</sup>

Between October 2020 and May 2021, I conducted forty semi-structured, in-depth interviews, and more than twenty informal interviews with congregants. In addition, I spent a total of eighty-six hours in the field as a participant observer. During my time in the field, I spent at least one month at each church, attending all Sunday services and special services. I attended staff meetings when permitted and participated in other ministries when possible. There were months of overlap; for example, during the month of December I attended the Christmas services of all four churches, though I was officially at Cornerstone that month and had not officially started observing Revival City.

Included among the interviewees were the lead pastors, associate pastors, and executive pastors of each church, excepting Circle Church, whose lead pastors were on sabbatical during the period of data collection. The congregants I interviewed were either referred to me by their pastors or were people I connected with through volunteering at the church or attending service.

I focused my attention on interviewing members or regular attendees who actively participated in church-sponsored outreach or in ministries directly related to justice. The questions I asked centered on how they understood their service: whether or not they connected their service in the church to justice (social engagement), and what role, if any, they

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<sup>13</sup> All names in this lecture, including the names of churches, are pseudonyms. In the case of individual participants, each person I interviewed chose their pseudonym.

saw their church playing in helping to nurture or sustain their social engagement. Lastly, I did a historical analysis of each of the churches in my sample. Both Key Church and Cornerstone Presbyterian have long and rich histories in their respective communities.

All four churches easily met the 80:20 threshold to be considered multiracial. However, in selecting churches for this study I also paid attention to what I have called “presence.” In practice, most pastors do not know the exact racial demographics of their congregations unless those congregations are fairly mono-racial. This is true of my own church, and it bore out in my study. With the exception of Circle Church, which had recently had a professional group come in and do a survey of their congregation, none of the pastors I interviewed could give me precise breakdowns of the races of their members and attendees. Even in the case of Circle Church, though their estimates were more accurate, they were still estimates.

That said, the strength of the 80:20 ratio is that it points to the importance of that 20 percent threshold. Once a group of people makes up 20 percent of a population, be that in a neighborhood or a church, their presence begins to be felt. In my selection criteria, I paid attention to whether the presence of the ethnic and racial minorities in each church was felt. I took note of who the stakeholders were, defining stakeholders as those within the church who do not have any formal title and may not serve in a formal ministry, but who demonstrate ownership. This can often be seen in how they welcome newcomers or in the connections that they have with the various ministries of the church. These are the people who have the pastor’s or the leadership team chair’s ear.

A great example of this happened during my first visit to Revival City. Standing in the lobby before service was a table with a book by Tony Evans (a widely recognized African American pastor of a large congregation) about race and racial reconciliation that was labeled “Book of the Month.” The table was unstaffed when I arrived. Captured by the title of the book, I stood at the table for a bit reading the inside cover and was soon approached by Dave, who greeted me and commented on the book I was holding. I assumed he was a greeter, so I asked him how to purchase the book. I soon found out that Dave was not a greeter, nor did he serve on any ministry team. He was simply a congregant who had arrived early for church. Dave didn’t know the answer to my question, but he knew who would and where to find that person at that time. He graciously walked me through the lobby to a side corridor and introduced me to Ann, who was on staff and was able to assist me.

This interaction showed me that Dave was a stakeholder. He had organizational knowledge, and he felt a sense of ownership in this church. At that moment, though not serving in any official capacity, he became a representative for the organization and took it upon himself to do his best to make me feel welcome.

NAME OF CHURCH	LEADERSHIP	LOCATION	SIZE	RACIAL COMPOSITION (in order of most to least)	APPROXIMATE MEDIAN AGE OF CONGREGANTS
REVIVAL CITY	Pastor James (Black)	Outside West Loop (Chicago)	Midsize (120–200)	Black, Latine, white, Asian	27
CORNER-STONE PRESBYTERIAN	Pastor Nathan (white)	Southside (Chicago)	Small (70–120)	Black, white (almost even), Asian	50
KEY CHURCH	Lead Pastor Laura (white), Executive Pastor Freedom Warrior (Black)	Gold Coast (Chicago)	Midsize (120–200)	White, Asian, Black, Latine	50
CIRCLE CHURCH	Pastor Renee (white), Pastor Richard (white)	West Loop (Chicago)	Large (200+)	White, Black, Latine, Asian	30

As you can see in the table within my small sample, there is diversity with regard to denominational affiliation, congregational size, racial compositions, and the median ages of each church's congregants. So, while the sample is too small to allow me to make broad generalizations, the consistency of my key finding across all four churches, despite this diversity, points to its significance.

As stated previously, one underlying assumption I had in designing this study was that multiracial churches are not monolithic in their impact. With that in mind, I created a framework to help me better analyze what I expected to see. Here I drew on scholarship from the fields of social discourse and whiteness studies and identified racial discourse as an important variable for my study. I also drew on the work of Fred Kniss and Paul Numrich where they introduce the concept of moral projects.

Moral projects are directly related to how the congregation understands its role in the larger world. Moral projects can be collectivist or individualistic. The individualistic orientation emphasizes individual moral goods (e.g., personal piety, enlightenment, etc.). Conversely, the primary focus of the collectivist moral project is collectivist social goods, as understood by the congregation. Importantly, these are not mutually

exclusive.<sup>14</sup> I think a healthy church will attend to both collectivist and individualistic moral projects, though most churches tend to emphasize one over the other.

Racial discourse is the whole of how people communicate around race (through text and speech). More precisely, racial discourse represents the “negotiated meanings [that] provide a context for thought and action.”<sup>15</sup> Scholars in the field of discourse and whiteness studies such as Ashley Doane argue that racial discourse is not passive. In other words, it is not simply a reflection of the larger social context; rather, it actively shapes the meanings people assign to racial difference and, by extension, their actions toward racial others.<sup>16</sup>

My study broadened discourse to include not only talk and text but also the aesthetic of the church. I paid attention, for example, to the art that was displayed and other ways leaders intentionally shaped the feel of both the physical (or virtual) space and the services. All these factors were important signals of what each church stood for and who each church understood itself to be.

In this framework, racial discourse can be either transcendent or oriented toward justice. Transcendent racial discourse centers the end of the story. It emphasizes our oneness in Christ with little to no acknowledgment of the sinful barriers to that oneness. Multiracial churches oriented toward racial transcendence tend to minimize or ignore racial injustice. They may talk about race but only as it relates to creating or celebrating a diverse worship experience. Conversely, justice-oriented racial discourse is in line with a structural orientation toward race. This discourse emphasizes unmasking and dismantling racist systems as a way of living out our oneness in Christ.

I argue that these two variables (moral projects and racial discourse) intersect to produce not only different types of social engagement but also different rationales for that engagement. In my analytic framework the intersection of these variables creates four distinct quadrants. The top two quadrants (Collectivist/Transcendent and Collectivist/Justice) represent churches that have a collectivist moral project but whose racial discourses emphasizes transcendence (quadrant 1) or racial justice (quadrant 2). The bottom two quadrants (Individualistic/Justice and Individualistic/

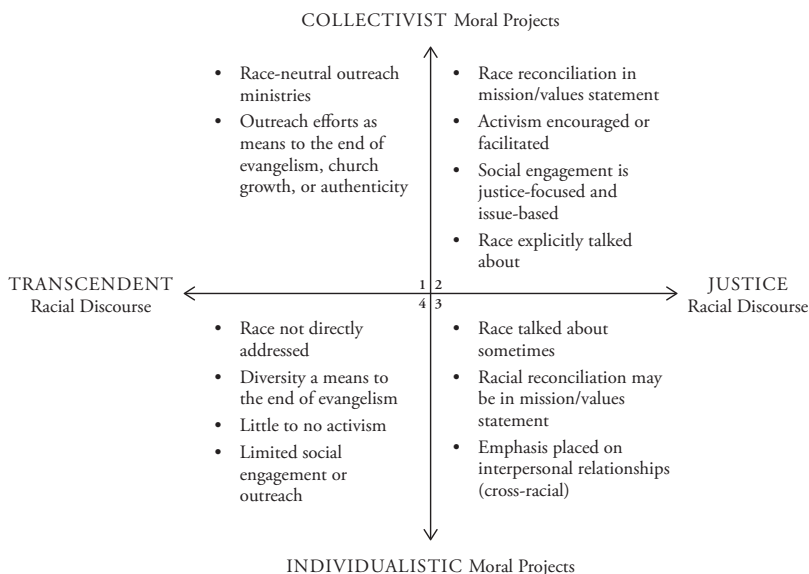
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<sup>14</sup> Fred Kniss and Paul Numrich, *Sacred Assemblies and Civic Engagement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Ashley W. Doane, “What Is Racism? Racial Discourse and Racial Politics,” *Critical Sociology* 32, nos. 2–3 (2006): 255–74.

<sup>16</sup> Doane, “What Is Racism?” 255–74.

Transcendent) represent churches whose moral projects are more individualistic and whose racial discourses emphasize racial justice (quadrant 3) or transcendence (quadrant 4).



The type of social engagement and the rationale for that engagement will differ across these four quadrants. So, for example, think about two multiracial churches that both tend toward collectivist moral projects but have different racial discourses, one that emphasizes transcendence (quadrant 1) and the other justice (quadrant 2). In a church with a transcendent racial discourse, social engagement will primarily be aimed at creating opportunities to directly share the gospel. Conversely, the church whose racial discourse is one of justice will be more likely to engage in social action aimed at directly addressing issues related to injustice.

Notably, the distinction here is not whether or not a multiracial church is interested in social justice or evangelism; these are not mutually exclusive aims. All of the churches in my study were deeply committed to evangelism. What is at issue is how a church interprets what it means to “go and make disciples” (Matt 8:28). For churches that emphasize racial transcendence, being able to invite people into a body that is ostensibly free from racial division is viewed as the best way to accomplish this. On the other hand, churches that emphasize racial justice understand Jesus’s command as a call to address systemic issues that cement those divisions.



I found that in all four churches, there was a relationship between their racial discourses and the form their social engagement took. I was pleasantly surprised to see that all four churches engaged in actual (vs. aspirational) representation on their websites. By this, I mean none of the churches used bodies of color in their digital material to signal a level of diversity that was not present in the congregation.

The racial discourse in each of the four churches was one that I have called a discourse of inclusion. This is a justice-leaning racial discourse that demonstrates through talk, text, imagery, and aesthetic genuine concern for the lived experiences of people of color within the church and a willingness to be challenged by those experiences. In each church, the shape of their particular discourse of inclusion was reflected in their social engagement.

Cornerstone Presbyterian is a great example. Pastor Nathan used art in intentional ways as a means of reflecting to the congregation who they were. In his response to my question about why he uses art in this way, he said that he was:

Sort of running with this vague intention that the aesthetic of the service should reflect the aesthetic of the congregation. So, if sixty percent of the congregation is Black then sixty percent of the hymns and art we encounter in our services should come from Black traditions. And if I think thirty percent of our congregation are first-generation African immigrants, then we should have some African hymns and African art. And we also have European immigrants and some white people in our congregation. So, I...am trying to vaguely reflect those properties.<sup>17</sup>

This theme of reflecting back was evident in the church's approach to outreach, and more specifically, how they chose what kind of outreach to engage in. While the church's outreach ministries were greatly reduced from former years, more than any of the other three churches the ministries they were involved in were closely tied to the expressed needs of the community.

Furthermore, those ministries were in service *with* the community and not just *to* the community. For example, one of their largest initiatives was led by a church committee, composed mostly of community members who did not attend the church. Speaking of this Pastor Nathan said:

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<sup>17</sup> Pastor Nathan of Cornerstone Presbyterian Church.

It's important to me that there's a reciprocal exchange of gifts with the community so the church isn't saying, "This is something this community needs, let us give it to you," but rather opening up and saying, "Who here has gifts and wants space to expand them and use them?" So, it's...people in the community giving back to the community what they have to offer.<sup>18</sup>

In all four churches, I saw a clear relationship between their racial discourse and social engagement. However, while their racial discourse did impact the form that their social engagement took, there was not a clear relationship to congregants' rationales for understanding that engagement.

This brings me to my most important finding and here I invite you to turn your attention to the graphic. Going into the field, I expected that a church's outreach efforts would largely occupy one of the four quadrants in my analytic framework. In other words, I thought that a shared racial discourse would intersect with a shared moral project to produce a particular type of social engagement and a shared rationale for that engagement. Further, I thought, based on having visited each church once or twice before selecting them for the study, that they would all fall within the second quadrant of the framework, which is the Collectivist/Justice quadrant; these are churches that have a collectivist moral project and a racial discourse that leans toward racial justice. However, this was not always the case.

What I found was a much more complicated picture. In all four churches, I found some level of misalignment between church leaders and congregants. For example, Key Church's weekly food distribution program, Christ's Table, was, from the perspective of the church leaders, a product of a justice-leaning racial discourse intersecting with collectivist moral projects. It was started because the lead pastor noticed an increase in the homeless population. She saw this as a social injustice and wanted to address two components of the problem: food insecurity and the dehumanizing stigma of homelessness. However, very few of the congregants I talked to named addressing a social injustice as a motivating factor for their service. Several people who served with their children talked about the importance of teaching them about service. Others spoke of serving out of gratitude for what they have. But few talked about food insecurity or the growing homeless population. The one exception was Christine,

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<sup>18</sup> Pastor Nathan of Cornerstone Presbyterian Church.

who was a long-time member of Key Church and who had been present when the ministry started. She had the institutional memory that allowed her to connect Christ's Table to its origin story. She also had been raised by socially engaged parents and had inherited an engaged spirituality from them.

This misalignment between pastors and congregants meant that if one were to categorize each church based solely on sermons and conversations with leadership, one would say that all four were collectivist/justice churches. But if one were to attempt to categorize these churches based on conversations with congregants, where the church landed would depend upon who you talked to.

In multiple interviews across all four churches, congregants told me that the reason they served in the various outreach ministries of their church was to share their faith with people. And what they loved about their church was that those kinds of opportunities were provided, and this was true across racial lines.

Comparatively, Revival City's commitment to "seeking the welfare of the city," which is itself a commitment to justice based on their framing, came up in some way at every service I observed and in almost every archived service I was able to listen to. One key place it came up was in their mission statement, which they regularly referenced during services. Thus, it was unsurprising that in my interviews with congregants many named loving their neighbors as a motivation for their service in the church and that they associated love of neighbor with a justice-oriented evangelism.

This brings me to the second distinctive between Revival City and the other churches in the study framing. In addition to consistently reminding the larger church of their mission to "[seek] the welfare of the city," the pastoral staff of Revival City also regularly clarified what they mean by this. Seeking the welfare of the city was regularly named as how the church actively loves its neighbors and witnesses to Christ, and that was further clarified as being involving the pursuit of justice.

In closing, I want to touch on why my study is important. First, the focus of much of the research on multiracial congregations has been on internal factors that contribute to churches becoming or sustaining their racial diversity, or on analyzing the changing landscape of multiracial congregations in the field of congregations overall. One important contribution of my research is that it adds to the growing body of work that is exploring the success these churches are (or are not) having in challenging the racial status quo.

Secondly, another important contribution of my study is that it offers a way of analyzing multiracial congregations that centers not on what they are but on what they do. Multiracial congregations are not a monolith. These churches vary in how they understand and engage race and other issues of justice. The analytic framework I have created provides a way of analyzing and categorizing these churches based both on how they engage with these issues and how they engage their communities.

Finally, as a pastor/scholar, I feel a dual commitment to both the academy and to the church, and specifically to these types of churches. While my analytic framework may be most useful in furthering scholarship, my work also speaks to the issue of how the attitudes and commitments of people who attend multiracial churches are being formed or, more to the point, not being formed. It highlights an important gap between what leaders of these churches desire to do and what is actually happening with regard to formation. Current research suggests that multiracial congregations may not go as far as many of us hoped in deconstructing racial stereotypes or challenging the types of racial attitudes that undergird the racial status quo.

My research suggests that this may be because these churches are not adequately inculcating in congregants the values held by those in leadership around race and justice. In this way, my work makes an important contribution to those of us who are doing this work and may serve to help us be more effective in those efforts.