

TEN ESSENTIAL STRATEGIES  
for Becoming a Multiracial Congregation

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# Introduction

*T*he fact that you picked up this book to see what it's about is exciting for us. We think multiracial and multicultural congregations are essential to heal the fundamental divisions in our nation. We believe communities of faith must lead the charge against racism and xenophobia. Growing diverse, inclusive congregations requires spiritual imagination, a vision for a healed world, and the willingness to address the ferment underway in our culture. When we worship, pray, and work together in diverse community; when we acknowledge and celebrate our differences; when we stay in relationship and stand together as justice-seeking people, we are modeling the world as God intended it to be.

Why is this important? Racism in America is a virus that infects most of us and impacts all of us. This virus is tenacious and resistant to treatment. We often deny we have this virus or that we have internalized it because facing racism tampers with our self-image, can cause a sense of blame and guilt in us, and requires us to change how we see the world. As a nation, we make strides toward a more perfect union only to watch the virus mutate. It goes underground, reappearing in uncivil discourse, showing up in the ways economic injustice tracks with ethnicity, in the ways the prison population is disproportionately black and brown, in the ways drug laws are written resulting in devastating incarceration rates for people of color, and in the ways policies like “Stop-and-Frisk” and “Stand Your Ground” impact people of color most profoundly. Because the virus is resilient, many of our schools and communities are being segregated again, and many of our housing patterns are also being resegmented.

As a result of immigration and birthrates, demographers anticipate that the United States will have no ethnic majority by 2040. This demographic shift is true not only for this country but also for other currently white-majority European nations as well, as migration patterns change and people are displaced by war, poverty, and oppression. This is both a challenge and an opportunity for all congregations, especially for majority white Christian faith communities. Without the capacity for meaningful engagement with growing diverse populations of color, white congregations will begin to decline by attrition. Many are already experiencing this challenge.

In his book *The End of White Christian America*, Robert P. Jones announces the passing of white Christianity. He observes, “The cause of death was determined to be a combination of environmental and internal factors—complications stemming from major demographic changes in the country, along with religious disaffiliation as many of its younger members began to doubt WCA’s continued relevance in a shifting cultural environment.”<sup>1</sup> He goes on to name two major issues at play in its demise: its inability to come to terms with its historical

failure to effectively address issues of race and its struggle to understand and embrace issues of sexual orientation and gender.

In a culture that has not yet “overcome,” we are convinced that our strongest defense against racism—the very best way to build immunity to virulent racial tensions in our nation and address the widening racial, ethnic, and economic divide—is the development of multiracial, multicultural communities of faith. In radically welcoming communities of faith where everyone is welcome just as they are as they come through the door, we can rehearse the reign and shalom of God here and now.

Many congregations of the first century were diverse. Once the movement of Jesus’ followers leaped the borders of Jerusalem and then Palestine, it entered a world of remarkable diversity. The early movement had to contend with divisions within itself about whether the Gentiles of the Greek and Roman world even qualified for membership in this movement. This question precipitated a crisis for the church at Antioch, which was culturally diverse and was being told by the elders in Jerusalem that they must first be circumcised and become Jews religiously and culturally before they could be saved and enter into the fellowship of the church. It was left to Peter and Paul to sort this out, and they did, acknowledging that the message of Jesus was for all people equally, not just for the Jews. This led to opening the door to a diverse world eager to hear the good news. Churches established from this point onward often reflected the diversity of their setting and were held together in unity by the faith that was taught and preached.

It was an all too brief period of amazing inclusion of diverse people forming faith communities in this fledgling Christian movement. Its growing prominence led to the co-opting of this fast-growing movement by the Roman Empire, when Constantine found it politically advantageous to become a Christian. This was the beginning of the domestication and “empir- ing” of Jesus, when his teachings became an instrument of the powerful. When this took place, the early church became the church of the elite, and cultural and class differences took a toll on congregational diversity. A crucial task confronts us now: reviving the model of the early church and opening the doors of the church to all.

Congregations today can be diverse, too. In fact, the authors of *United by Faith* suggest that our congregations must be racially and culturally diverse in order to be faithful. In their opening argument they declare, “The explosion of racial and ethnic diversity in the United States has introduced dramatic tensions within faith communities. How should they respond to a pluralistic society?” Their answer: “The twenty-first must be the century of multiracial, multicultural congregations.”<sup>2</sup>

We believe *we* are the ones we’ve been waiting for to make it happen. We can dismantle and “re-story” the prejudices and unconscious biases that segregate our houses of worship and become communities of hope and reconciliation. We come to this task with our own particular stories, having traveled on our own respective journeys of risking and learning, dealing with challenges and celebrating victories. Along the way, we have both ridden the roller coaster of highs and lows and discovered the joys and complexities of ministry in diverse settings.

Jacqui’s story includes starting a new congregation in an urban setting that was intentionally multiracial and multicultural from its beginning; studying diverse congregations as the focus for her PhD dissertation; and serving the remarkably diverse congregation of Middle Collegiate Church in New York City for the past fourteen years. John’s story includes serving a white congregation in an unusually diverse, culturally transitional urban neighborhood that had waited too long to adjust to demographic change; serving as senior interim minister in

a large multicultural, multiracial congregation; and consulting with congregations to create strategies to expand their outreach to become more welcoming and diverse faith communities.

There is no way to sugarcoat it: this is challenging work. Creating authentically welcoming and inclusive faith communities that offer safe and brave space for all; helping people hear one another across borders of ethnicity and culture; and building trust and setting norms for sharing power and influence is hard work. Though the work is difficult, this is some of the most deeply rewarding work in ministry that we have ever experienced. The payoff? Offering God's people the opportunity to build communities that dismantle racism and xenophobia as we model the radical love of Christ to a broken world.

And this is urgent work. Unless we can finally come to terms with the brokenness of racism and effectively navigate cultural difference in this society, we will continue to be a nation divided against itself, with no end in sight. Can the church become a real force for healing? Will the church muster the courage to bring people together across ethnic, class, and cultural difference, congregation by congregation, and model the good community both in the sanctuary and the public square? We think it can. We have seen it work, and we have seen the energy, hope, and spirit that are released when it happens.

In this book we will explore how this transformation can happen and ten strategies that are essential for this journey, beginning with the call and commitment we believe is issued to all of the church as an urgent mandate to do this work.

## **Recovering Pentecost**

The miracle of Pentecost is that, somehow, people heard the stories of the good news of God's power on the earth in ways they could understand. Those Aramaic-speaking disciples preached the good news through their personalities to the personalities of those who were gathered. The reason the gospel caught fire is because those souls were eager for a story that fit, told in a way they could understand it. It was a story that made sense, one that gave their lives meaning and purpose. The gospel landed on them, meeting them where they were, and then lit them on fire with a vision of God's dream. The church was born in a cacophony of racial/ethnic and cultural diversity. Our churches simply have to be this way, too, in order to thrive in a rapidly changing world. The Spirit is at work to call us to these communities of faith where the diversity of Pentecost is again a reality.

Here are what we consider to be stages of congregational development toward the multiracial, multicultural future about which we both dream. These stages are not linear: a congregation might repeat a stage more than once due to the dynamics of change. Do you recognize your congregation in these descriptions? Determining your current stage will help you see what comes next and what steps will help your church move forward on its journey toward the love revolution needed to heal our souls and heal our nation of the scars of racism.

### Stage 1: Awareness and a Growing Sense of Call

- Something happens. There is a racial or cultural shift in the community or an event on the national stage that calls attention to race and culture as issues with which to wrestle. This event might be a shift in school enrollment or a change in the "color" of the neighborhood. Perhaps there is a rash of violent events toward Muslims or people of color. There is a

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growing sense of either opportunity or threat in the congregation. Even leaders who have been in denial about the changes awoken to a sense of calling and commitment.

- Leaders openly discuss possibilities and implications for ministry, within their congregation and with stakeholders in their communities. These stakeholders might include educators, service providers, or other clergy.
- Leaders might invite outside expertise to assist in assessment, readiness, and capacity building.
- A call and vision is articulated to the congregation, and a decision is made to proceed.

### Stage 2: Steps toward Readiness

- Using the *Force Field Analysis* and *A Process for Visioning*, leaders articulate vision and goals and test feasibility.
- Congregants are invited to tell their stories in structured conversations; this begins to excavate formative attitudes on race and culture. This can be a programmatic focus in Black History Month, Asian History Month, or Hispanic American Heritage Month.
- Leaders and congregants read articles and books, like Ta'Naehesi Coates' *Between the World and Me*,<sup>3</sup> that open hearts and minds to the realities of racism. They discuss them in small groups.
- Structured conversations about the congregation's identity are happening.
- Staff and laity create new experiences in adult education and retreat settings, using films like *Crash* as a way to deepen conversations about race and culture.<sup>4</sup>
- Worship is planned to include guest preachers, choirs, and musicians of different cultures and ethnicities.
- Continuing education for clergy and staff focus on leading in multiracial, multicultural settings. Leaders work with a coach or spiritual mentor of a culture or ethnicity different from their own.
- Using resources like *Race: The Power of an Illusion* at PBS.org, leaders openly discuss the dynamics of *white privilege* and the power dynamics at work in diverse congregations. A culture of welcome is taking root among the leaders of the congregation.

### Stage 3: Leading for Strategic Change

- Worship is routinely fashioned to educate, celebrate, and *story* the racial/ethnic and cultural diversity in God's creation. A wide range of musical genres is introduced, and worship becomes a celebration. Church school curriculum includes images and stories that encourage appreciation for diversity. There is intention about welcoming people of color to worship, and they are beginning to come.
- The congregation addresses racial and economic justice issues based on Scripture and its own vision and identity.
- Partnerships are formed with others in order to address concerns for the common good of the community.
- As efforts are initiated to reach new constituents, current members are held with care and compassion. Some signs of congregational discomfort are noticed.
- Greeters and ushers are trained in hospitality and cultural competencies.
- A Healing Racism Task Force is formed to study race more deeply and recommend strategies to leadership about changing congregational culture.

- Congregational identity begins to change, and a new identity emerges. The new identity of diversity and inclusion is reflected in the congregation, on the Web site, in social media, and in the public square.

#### Stage 4: Dealing with Disorientation or Disequilibrium

- Some members express discomfort with the changes occurring in the congregation; it is feared that those members might leave the church.
- More personal care and conversation are needed about what is changing and what is not.
- There are new expectations for clergy, staff, and lay leadership about how they prioritize their time.
- Laity are encouraged to rethink their role as leaders and refocus their energies; an attitude of experimentation is encouraged.
- Conflict may increase and will need to be addressed quickly. The vision for a diverse and inclusive faith community is continually rehearsed.

#### Stage 5: Achieving 20 Percent Nonmajority Critical Mass

- Multiple strategies are in place to tell the congregation's story to its members and to the larger community.
- Power sharing and leadership development are normative in the congregation. People of color are in key leadership roles, and cross-racial, cross-cultural relationships are well established. New members of color share their stories, which are welcomed; they change the congregational story.
- Staff, lay leadership, organizational structure, and budget reflect new priorities.
- The congregation has become antiracist in its mission. Members participate in addressing issues of common concern in the community. They attend public meetings and have a working relationship with local government and the school system.
- The congregation has a public reputation for innovation and welcome. The congregation is seen as a brave and safe space in which all are welcomed. It is known as a place of convening for the larger community.

We hope you will use this book in conversation with other leaders in your context and consider it a roadmap to the future to which our God calls us. We can only build the reign of God on earth and break down the walls that divide us while being in community together across the human-made boundaries of race and ethnicity. Writing this book has been a challenging yet joyful undertaking. We welcome you to the conversation.