

Racial Reconciliation

We have a long way to go in eliminating racial disparities among Christians.

For a long time one of the most customary clichés about American national life has been that the most segregated moment of any given week is 11 a.m. on Sunday. It is certainly accurate to say that American churchgoers still stick very much with their own kind when gathering for Christian worship. It is also surely true that, historically, white churchgoing habits reflected overall white attitudes toward African Americans.

Those attitudes, if generous, were often patronizing; and if not, they were probably outright racist. In fact, it is one of the historical curiosities of American religious history that the Azusa Street Pentecostal phenomenon of 1906 was widely denounced at the time precisely because, as the Los Angeles newspaper of the day, *The Daily Times*, put it: “Whites and blacks mix in religious frenzy.” In short, when Pentecost came to North America big-time in the early 20th century, it was striking for its departure from conventional racial separatism.

Recent white evangelical movements in the United States have made determined efforts to turn back the clock on racism in the body of Christ. The men’s movement *Promise Keepers*, for example, has not only featured prominent African American teachers and speakers at its rallies, but it has also urged participants to seek out a person of different race at each rally and give him a hug. This experience is surely good for the white participants, because hugging a complete stranger is not only an act of some courage, but it also forces you to express acceptance of that person in a physical manner that is palpable.

There is clearly a long way to go in eliminating striking racial disparities among American Christians. One study showed that only 8 percent of the employees of the largest evangelical organizations in America were of nonwhite heritage, and that includes Hispanics and Asians as well as African Americans. Worse, most white American evangelicals, because they personally do not feel actual racial bigotry toward people of different color, are slow to accept how often African Americans, for example, are the subject of blatant prejudice in daily activities.

The wife of an African American associate pastor of a large church in Nashville, Tennessee—an exceptionally well-integrated church, by the way—described how she is routinely followed around department stores by store detectives. They don't know who she is, but they presume that, by being African American, she is more likely to steal things than other people.

Some American evangelical and charismatic churches have gone a long way to make people of ethnic-minority background feel not only accepted but also welcomed. One way has been to show that minority groups are visibly prominent in the church leadership. Another has been to integrate black and white worship traditions.

The Nashville church just mentioned—Bethel World Outreach Center of Morning Star Ministries International—often surprises first-time visitors by having a choir, racially mixed but still predominantly white, actually sway like a black church choir as it sings. The music at Bethel is intentionally blended from African American worship music and white American contemporary Christian music. A glance at the congregation shows that blacks seem eminently as comfortable

there as the whites, who are still a slight majority.

Morning Star's worship style is an excellent step in the direction of racial reconciliation. It has to be admitted, though, that ethnic groups often feel simply more comfortable in a worship style that comes across to other groups as either boring or just outlandish.

For example, I am personally far more moved spiritually by Renaissance polyphonic choral Christian music (Palestrina, for example, or Tallis) than by Caribbean hip-hop worship. But if, from time to time, I need to demonstrate my commitment to the level playing field of races at the foot of the cross, then I'm sure I should participate in hip-hop. It will demonstrate not just a genuine attitude of welcome to my Caribbean brethren but my willingness to experience a certain stretching of my own soul.

We who are white Christians need to cover more ground in our efforts toward racial reconciliation than our brothers and sisters who are of a different race.