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U.S. NEWS

How Churches Are Slowly Becoming Less Segregated

Pastors Seeking Racially Diverse Congregations Cope With Culture Clashes; Should Children Be Shushed?

By **LAURA MECKLER**

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CINCINNATI—As voices and music swelled on a recent Sunday morning, bringing a traditional 19th-century hymn to an arena-rock crescendo, hands of all hues reached toward the heavens.

“This is beautiful,” said pastor Chris Beard, looking over pews filled with African-American, white and Asian worshipers in a church service that opened with a prayer for two dozen Ethiopian babies and closed with a benediction in Korean. “To be one church family pleases the heart of the Lord.”

The faces were nearly all white in 2001, when Mr. Beard took charge of the century-old First Christian Assembly of God. Today, half its members are white and a quarter are black; 30 nationalities make up the rest.

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. famously said that Sunday at 11 a.m. was the most segregated hour in America. Today, pastors like Mr. Beard are working to change that, with some success. The proportion of churches in the U.S. with mixed-race congregations—where no single group tops 80%—has grown from 7% in 1998 to 13% in 2012, according to an analysis of the National Congregations Study, a survey run by Duke University.

“I just began to wonder about our being so mono-ethnic in a multiethnic city,” said Mr. Beard, the senior pastor of what is now called Peoples Church in Cincinnati. “If the church is segregated, no wonder the city is segregated.”

Pastors who seek more diverse congregations—whether motivated by theology or changing neighborhoods—quickly discover that such diversity is easy to conceive but hard to execute. They report clashes over politics, musical tastes, whether children should be shushed during services, how best to talk about race and even how to address pastors.

In Cincinnati, one man said when Mr. Beard began work, “We were all under the same roof, but we weren’t mixing.” One Sunday, the pastor asked people to sit with someone they didn’t know, preferably of a different race. With that, a white member said she met a black woman who became one of her closest friends.

Theology pushed Mark DeYmaz while he served as youth pastor of a 5,000-member nearly all-white, suburban megachurch outside Little Rock, Ark. In search of diversity, he left in 2001 to start his own multiethnic congregation. He said he was directed by a passage in the New Testament’s book of Revelation—Chapter 7, verses 9-10—that describes how “every nation, tribe, people and tongue” will stand before the throne of God.

“If the kingdom of heaven isn’t segregated then why on earth is the church segregated?” said Mr. DeYmaz, who is white.

He now directs the Mosaix Global Network, a nonprofit group that helps churches seeking to integrate. A common complaint from white members, Mr. DeYmaz said, is that churches do too much to accommodate the preferences of black members. African-Americans, meanwhile, say white members of their church don’t understand their point of view.

Jaddie Edwards, a black member of the Sanctuary Covenant Church in Minneapolis, recalled a white woman in a Bible study group asking, “Why do we need to talk about race?”

Mrs. Edwards said she explained ways race affects her life. She never puts her hands in her pockets or her purse while shopping, for instance, because she worries someone might think she was stealing. “I didn’t make the rules,” she told the group. “This is reality for me.”

Outside Grand Rapids, Mich., the once-all-white Kentwood Community Church began diversifying about 15 years ago. During a men’s group meeting this spring, one white man confessed he had grown distant from his daughter after she started dating a black student.

Listening was Eddie Ward, who is black. “Everybody won’t be that honest,” he recalled thinking. Mr. Ward hugged the man as the group prayed.

When race and politics collide—as in Ferguson, Mo., this summer following the fatal shooting of a black teenager by a white police officer—multiracial churches often tread a narrow path, hoping to offend no one.

Often pastors divorce themselves from politics altogether, or stick with bipartisan causes, a major change for many churches. White evangelical congregations have long served as a rallying spot for Republicans, just as African-American churches have for Democrats.

Efrem Smith, a black pastor, said he would have preached freely about the importance of Barack Obama’s candidacy if he had been at a predominantly black church during the 2008 presidential election. But as pastor of a multiracial church in Minneapolis, he discouraged members from wearing Obama T-shirts to services. “Politics unfortunately is something that tends to divide the races,” he said, “not unite them.”

Chris Williamson, who is black, grew up in a black church and imagined that someday he, too, would lead one. Instead, in 1995, he founded Strong Tower Bible Church, a multiracial congregation in Franklin, Tenn., outside Nashville. Mr. Williamson said he discovered how easily some members were rattled when he talked about race.

After black teenager Trayvon Martin was fatally shot in Florida in 2012, Mr. Williamson, whose own son was about the same age, was shaken. He wrote a sermon on the killing, he said, but decided not to deliver it. Some parishioners got upset nonetheless when he discussed the case on his Facebook page.

“Some will say, ‘He’s not black enough,’ or they’ll say, ‘Oh, he’s too black,’ ” Mr. Williamson said of church members and other black pastors. “As a practitioner of racial reconciliation, after nearly two decades, it’s lonely. It’s lonely.”

After the Ferguson shooting, Mr. Williamson addressed the matter from the pulpit—softening the racial tensions by urging compassion for the mother of Michael Brown, the victim, as well as the mother of the police officer who killed him.

Consultants who advise churches in transition say most conflicts arise not from welcoming people of different races. Rather, resentments surface when these new groups ask for a stronger voice in how the church is run.

Pastor Beau Hughes, who is white, started transforming the all-white Village Church in Denton, Texas, in 2007. The church initiated a musical diversity month, he said, and members thought “it’s kind of neat” to try something new.

“But what if that is more than just a once a month thing or once a year thing, but year-round thing?” he said. Now, he said, his church is 21% minority, and some white members complain the music—which has added gospel and jazz overtones to its Christian pop-rock mix—is too black.

Raleigh Washington, an African-American pastor who has helped lead multiracial churches in Columbus, Ohio, and other cities, set up meetings to help his congregations sort through such tensions. First, he said, he gathered black members, “our chocolate meeting,” and then met with white members, the “vanilla meeting.” The groups would later join in a “fudge-ripple meeting” to work on issues together, he said.

Over and over, Mr. Washington said, African-Americans would complain about white members calling him by his first name. “ ‘You don’t respect our pastor. His first name is ‘Pastor,’ ” Mr. Washington recalled people saying.

Black members also would complain that white parents let their children run around during services, he said. White parents, meanwhile, didn’t like how some black parents would tell their children to “shut up” during worship.

American churches were rooted in ethnic identities, with services often held in immigrants’ native tongue: Dutch immigrants gathered around the Reformed Church in America; Germans to Lutheran congregations. In the late 1700s, African-Americans began building their own congregations. During the mid-19th century, Irish-Catholic immigrants gathered in parishes and churches.

Multiracial congregations gained spotty traction in the 1960s, inspired by the civil-rights movement. David Mains, a white pastor in Chicago, established Circle Church, which connected white families moving to the suburbs with black families who remained behind. Mr. Mains said he clashed with the associate African-American pastor over preaching style. And the Sunday school struggled to integrate more affluent white children with black urban youth.

The church collapsed after eight years. “Race was the biggest problem,” Mr. Mains said. “It surfaced all the time.”

There was little effort at integration until Michael O. Emerson, a Rice University



Pastor Chris Beard chats with members after a service. The pastor has worked on diversifying the congregation at Peoples Church. 'I just began to wonder about our being so mono-ethnic in a multiethnic city,' he said. *AARON M. CONWAY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

sociologist, published “Divided by Faith” in 2000, a book that argued evangelical churches were deepening racial segregation among Christians.

Many pastors began rethinking their mission, and some took action. Data from the Duke survey showed the number of all-white churches fell from 39% in 1998 to 24% in 2012.

Catholic churches are the most diverse. In 2012, 26% were multiracial, compared with 15% in 1998, according to an analysis by Mr. Emerson. He and other experts say the shift largely reflects the rapid growth of the Latino population during that time.

More direct efforts came from evangelical pastors like Mark Hearn in Duluth, Ga. He arrived at First Baptist Church in 2010 to a congregation that was nearly all white despite dramatic changes in the city’s demographics. His own neighbors included Korean, Indian, Zimbabwean and Kenyan families; 49 languages are spoken at Duluth High School, which once had a nearly all-white student body.

“I kind of sounded the battle cry,” he said in an interview. In 2012, First Baptist elected its first nonwhite deacons, and nonwhite membership is now about 30%.

But not everyone is on board. “The priority has to be God,” said Reggie Harrell, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Easton, Md., who is white. He described active efforts to integrate as political: “Don’t mix politics and faith.”

Eboni Marshall Turman, director of the Office of Black Church Studies at Duke Divinity School, and who once led a black church in Harlem, said, “Many black churches are not particularly enthused about forming multiracial congregations, either.”

Ms. Turman said such effort threatens traditional black churches that have long provided spiritual shelter and leadership for African-Americans. “There are black bodies that assimilate into white culture,” she said, “but there is an erasure of black Christian tradition.”

In Cincinnati, the neighborhood around the First Christian Assembly of God had already changed when Mr. Beard, now age 47, was promoted to senior pastor about 15 years ago.

He incorporated messages about race into his sermons right away, sparked in part by local riots that broke out after a 2001 police shooting of a young black man. Mr. Beard soon swapped traditional hymn music for a faster-paced style familiar to the church’s newer African-American members.

The changes were too much for such longtime members as Gary Hassman, who attended First Christian Assembly of God for more than 30 years. He met and married his wife there. Mr. Beard, he said, “preached racial equality back in those days on a weekly basis.” Mr. Hassman, who now worships elsewhere, said, “It just got tiring.”

Mr. Beard later removed the U.S. flag from the pulpit, saying no nation should be put above Jesus Christ. That was the last straw for longtime member Glenn Perry, 64 years old. He quit. “I decided at that point, whatever they’re trying to teach their people there I don’t want it,” he said.

At Mr. Beard’s urging, the church in 2012 changed its name to Peoples Church, another decision opposed by those who for years had attended First Christian. The church also stopped handing out conservative voter guides and inviting Republican politicians to speak.

Twice in recent years, the church organized small-group discussions on race and Christianity. In one session, a white man, Jason Scott, recalled being attacked by several black students after a flag football game in college. Since then, he told the group, he had been afraid around African-Americans.

Dele Okuwobi spoke to Mr. Scott. “I am an African-American, and I want to say I’m sorry this happened to you,” he said.

That apology extinguished the “hate in my heart,” Mr. Scott said later. Recently, he met an older African-American man from church for coffee. The man told Mr. Scott how as a boy he wasn’t allowed to attend a nearby white school.

Mr. Scott said he, too, felt moved: “I said ‘Herb, I’m so sorry that happened. I just want to apologize that people who look like me did those things to you.’”

Since Mr. Beard took over, 62% of the church members in 2000 have left, some from natural attrition. But average weekly attendance has grown, he said, from about 550 people to more than 600.

In retrospect, Mr. Beard said, he doesn’t regret raising race as an issue Christians



Part of the service at Peoples Church when members of the congregation can take time to meet fellow members. *ARON M. CONWAY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

should discuss in church. He said, however, he should have done a better job explaining why.

“We didn’t talk about it all the time, but when you go from never talking about it to including it as a central theme,” he said, “it feels like you’re talking about it a lot.”

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