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Introduction: Why a Forum on Racially and Ethnically Diverse Congregations?

MICHAEL O. EMERSON

As far back as 1899, in *The Philadelphia Negro*, W. E. B. Du Bois spoke about the “Negro Church” and the “White Church.” He continued to do so throughout his long career, one that extended into the 1960s. Though he had his critiques, he largely praised the Negro Church as an adaptive institution that empowered African Americans in a racist nation.

Curiously, when he attended church as an adult, Du Bois almost always attended racially/ethnically diverse ones. This was no accident. Because Du Bois held that religion was at the core of the creation of whiteness and racial inequality, he considered segregation in religious congregations to be an abomination. Segregation in houses of worship “legitimated racial division by strengthening the conflation of whiteness with godliness” (Blum 2007:16).

He found hope in diverse congregations, beginning with his involvement in New York’s Community Church in the 1940s.

“I had come to expect from churches and ministers well-bred evasion of all real human problems.” But Community Church was different; it was a church that refused to bow to the color line or genuflect to greed. “The Community Church welcomed Negroes,” Du Bois cheered. It “discussed the Negro Problem, and evidently did not believe that the white race was the only race on earth worth saving.” . . . “The final triumph of his long-deferred dream of a Community Church in New York knowing not sect, class, nation, or race is not merely local nor purely personal,” Du Bois concluded, “but a great step towards making a disillusioned world regard religion as honest, true, and capable of courage and daring.” (in Blum 2007:187–88)

When Du Bois and his wife Shirley Graham Du Bois moved to Brooklyn in the 1950s, they found another church, an Episcopalian congregation that defied segregation by including blacks, Puerto Ricans, immigrants, and the poor (see Blum 2007:188).

That Du Bois was able to find a few diverse churches beginning in the 1940s also was no accident. As outlined in *United by Faith* (DeYoung et al. 2003:ch. 4), the 1940s marked the onset of experimentation and attempts at integration in U.S. congregations after a long period of nearly complete separation. These diverse congregations remained always a small percentage of all congregations, but they did exist. Although almost certainly a higher percentage than in the past, as of year 2000, only about 7.5 percent of the nation’s congregations were multiracial, defined as no one racial group more than 80 percent of the congregation (Emerson 2006:ch. 2).

GROWING INTEREST IN THE STUDY OF RACIALLY/ETHNICALLY DIVERSE CONGREGATIONS

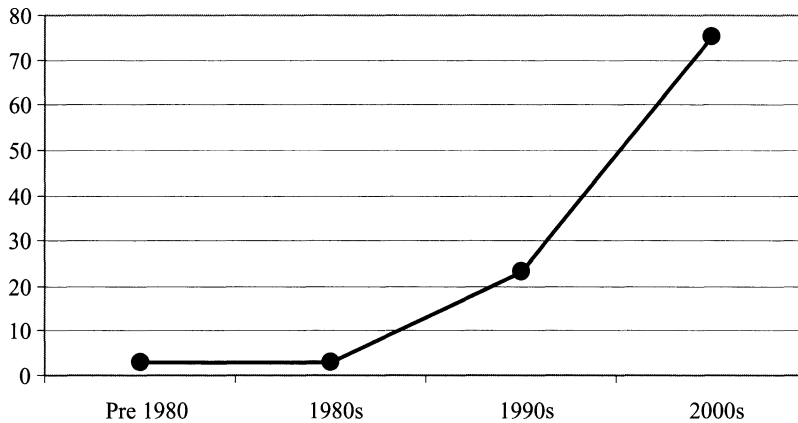
I conducted a literature search of publications and dissertations that were specifically about racially/ethnically diverse congregations. The publications included academic books and articles, and also what might be variously labeled as applied/how-to/self-help/advice publications on creating, maintaining, improving the functioning, or telling the story of multiracial congregations. The results of the literature search suggest dramatic growth of studies on racially/ethnically diverse

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FIGURE 1
NUMBER OF BOOKS, ARTICLES, AND DISSERTATIONS ON
RACIALLY/ETHNICALLY DIVERSE CONGREGATIONS, BY DECADE



congregations in the 1990s, and then, compared to the 1990s, more than a tripling in the number of studies and publications in the 2000s.

The first publication I was able to find was a short piece published in 1947 entitled, “The Emergence of the Interracial Church” (Jack 1947), noting the new beginning of congregations such as the ones Du Bois attended. Then in 1959, Howard University Professor Howard Thurman published *Footprints of a Dream*, a book about the interracial Fellowship of All Peoples Church in San Francisco, of which he was the pastor for nearly a decade. Perhaps the first academic article on the topic appeared in the late 1960s, examining the extent of interaction between blacks and whites in an integrated church (Parker 1968).

After that publication, there was a nearly complete absence of publications on racially/ethnically diverse congregations until the 1980s, when there were at least three publications, including one examining the correlates of interracial church participation (Hadaway, Hackett, and Miller 1984). One of the first academic books on the topic also was published during this decade by Rev. Virgil Elizondo. His book, *The Future is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet* (1988), lays out a theological treatise for the bringing together of different people groups.

Like other types of publications, social scientific work on mixed congregations was rare before 1990, but since then much has changed. At least 10 social scientific works were released in the 1990s, and in the in the years 2000–2008 at least 42 social scientific works have appeared, including the articles in this issue of *JSSR*.

Undoubtedly, a major factor in the growth of studies on racially/ethnically diverse congregations is the changing demographics of the country. For most of its history, the United States was a black/white nation with quite small percentages of “others.” And these percentages stayed fairly stable. The change in immigration law in the 1960s coupled with global economic and social changes led to the much discussed dramatic change in the number of immigrants to the United States, and the diversity of their national origins (these patterns can now be found in many nations).

In the 1960s, only about 12 percent of Americans were people of color, mostly African Americans. As of 2008, it is estimated that that percentage has tripled, to about 35 percent of Americans who are people of color, only about a third of whom are African Americans. The growing diversity, and the changing neighborhoods full of people not part of the centuries-long black-white division, are changing our understandings of race, ethnicity, and their relations to religious gatherings. Most interracial/ethnic congregations currently are not filled with blacks and whites. They are filled with Hispanics and Asians and either black or whites (Emerson 2006:

ch. 6). These factors and others are leading to the assumed increase in mixed congregations and the dramatic rise in research on these congregations.

WHAT WE DO AND DO NOT KNOW

From what we have studied, we do know that these diverse congregations face unique challenges, have different but limited ways in which they both become and continue to be diverse, and are filled with people who are in important ways different from other Americans, though we need panel studies to yet determine why people of these congregations differ. We know that diverse congregations sometimes work and sometimes do not—and many of the factors associated with each. We know that mixed congregations shape individual and group identities (though we need to understand much more about this process), and influence civic participation (see, e.g., Ecklund 2005). We know that some traditions and denominations have a higher percentage of congregations that are mixed, and we know some of the reasons why. We have begun to develop theoretical approaches for studying and interpreting diverse congregations, but we have no clear, dominant theoretical approach, and we have not even begun to mine the theoretical lessons that can be learned. We do conceptualize and measure mixed congregations, but uncertainties continue to exist over how best to do so—for example, are there mixed congregations and homogenous congregations, or is it a continuum? (see Garces-Foley and Dougherty and Huyser, this volume).

It is clear in reviewing the literature that we do not have agreement on what term to use for these types of congregations. Multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural, and interracial are the most common. As will be made clear in reading the Edwards, Marti, and Garces-Foley pieces, we do not have agreement on the term because the terms are intimately linked to theoretical perspectives, conceptualizations, and for much applied work, theological positions. Some say the driving factor of the United States always has been and remains race. Others say that ethnicity has superceded what they often view as an outdated concept (“there is only one race, the human race” they often say). Still others say neither race nor ethnicity is at the root of what should be and is being studied. Rather, culture is at the core. In short, the terms are not interchangeable. Each has important meanings and implications for research.

Of all the publications and dissertations I could find on mixed congregations, only a couple focus on traditions other than Christianity. The most extensive one, an ethnographic dissertation on a racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse mosque, is not yet finished at the time of this writing (Wang 2008). Although reasons certainly exist for this nearly complete focus on Christian traditions, we simply cannot continue to ignore the mixed gatherings in the other religious traditions.

Finally, as Garces-Foley shows us in her piece, we have relatively few comparative studies of mixed congregations across religious traditions, even across Christian traditions. As such we miss much of what we can learn about social scientific processes and patterns and risk underestimating the role of theology. Garces-Foley’s article shows us the value of comparative research.

MOVING FORWARD

W. E. B. Du Bois spent most of his time being ahead of his time. Well before the modern-day whiteness studies, well before systematic studies of congregations, well before the scientific study of religion was common, and well before a focus on racially and ethnically diverse congregations, Du Bois was writing about such things, laying the groundwork. As the 20th century was the century of the color line, for the reasons discussed in this introduction, so the 21st century may be the century of the diverse congregation. That is why we need a forum on racially and ethnically diverse congregations.

The thought pieces and two full articles on mixed congregations in this issue raise vital issues and help advance our knowledge. The authors represent many of the newest and brightest

studying this topic, as well as one of the pioneers of this line of research (George Yancey). It is our collective hope that other scholars—current and those yet to come—will consider this topic important enough that they too will bring their unique abilities and insights to its study.

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