

Neighborhoods shape attitudes on race more than congregations

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WACO—Whites in multiracial congregations have more diverse friendship networks and are more comfortable with minorities, but that is due more to the impact of neighbors and friends of other races than to congregational influence, a Baylor University study found.

“Solving America’s racial problems may be hoping too much from religious congregations,” said Kevin Dougherty, associate professor of sociology at Baylor and co-author of the study. “Where people live is more influential than where they worship in shaping racial attitudes.”

While a small but growing number of congregations gather worshippers across racial lines and count diversity as a central part of their mission, most Americans who attend worship do so mainly with those of their own race or ethnicity. That is the case in nearly nine of 10 congregations, researchers said.

“The responsibility for moving toward racial integration still rests considerably with the majority group,” Dougherty and Edward C. Polson, assistant professor in Baylor’s Diana R. Garland School of Social Work, wrote in the article.

“People of color were historically excluded from institutions and areas of social life controlled by white Americans—including religious congregations and denominations,” Polson said.

“Changing this pattern is not an easy thing and generally requires that the

group who has historically done the excluding acknowledge the injustices that have led to the current reality and then take steps to foster more inclusive organizations. For predominantly white congregations or denominations in the U.S., this might mean acknowledging a history of racial discrimination and then taking steps to foster more diverse and inclusive leadership and membership.”

White non-Hispanics are the largest racial group in the United States, and the size and cultural prominence of white Americans continue to give this group a position of power in American society, Dougherty said.

The study—“Worshiping across the Color Line: The Influence of Congregational Composition on Whites’ Friendship Networks and Racial Attitudes”—is published in the American Sociological Association’s journal *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*.

Researchers analyzed data from Baylor Religion Survey’s second wave, collected in fall 2007. The survey was administered by the Gallup Organization to 1,648 respondents in a national random sample of English-speaking adults.

Researchers discuss findings

Q: You mention in your study that a unique strength of U.S. religious life is that we are free to choose whether and where to worship—but that freedom may contribute to continued segregation. Why?

POLSON: American religion has long been segregated by race and ethnicity. Much of this was the direct result of discriminatory practices and policies. As towns grew and religion spread early in U.S. history, separate congregations would often be established for black and white Baptists or Methodists or Catholics in an area.



When there weren't separate congregations, black and white congregants were often required to worship separate from one another in the same congregation; white congregants in the main sanctuary

and black congregants in balconies or meeting at separate times.

Eventually, however, many groups that were excluded from full participation in the mainstream groups of the day sought to establish their own congregations and religious denominations.

Among African-Americans, for example, we see the establishment of groups such as the Church of God in Christ and the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Ethnic and immigrant groups also often sought to maintain unique religious and social identities by establishing congregations identified with their religious and ethnic heritage such as the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches.

Fast-forward to today, and a legacy of religious segregation combined with Americans' freedom to choose their place of worship tends to reinforce the color line in American religion. People are free to choose where and with whom they want to worship. This freedom generally contributes to higher levels of commitment and participation.

However, in practice, it also means that people often choose congregations that reflect their own racial and ethnic background. Worshipers tend to be attracted to groups that appeal to their own experiences, preferences, and social networks. These still tend to be patterned significantly by race and ethnicity. Patterns of religious segregation in religious life continue then, often without much serious thought or reflection on the part of worshipers and religious leaders.

DOUGHERTY: At the most intimate levels of people's lives—family, friends and faith—the United States remains a racially divided nation. When people choose a congregation, they commonly choose to be with others they see as similar to themselves. The outcome is congregations are segregated by race, social class and now increasingly by politics.

Q: How do you define a multiracial congregation?

POLSON: A multiracial congregation is one in which the majority group represents less than 80 percent of the whole congregation and other groups make up greater than 20 percent. Eighty percent may seem like an arbitrary threshold. However, when the majority group makes up less than 80 percent, research shows that contact between attenders of different racial and ethnic groups is more likely to occur.

This is important because it is regular and sustained contacts between attenders in worship services, small groups and Bible studies that are likely to affect attenders' friendship networks and influence their attitudes and opinions about other groups.

Q: Your article notes that previous research shows that multiracial congregations tend to become less diverse over time. Why might that be?

POLSON: I think this is one of the most challenging realities facing diverse congregations or those that hope to become more diverse. We know that congregational growth typically occurs as a result of individuals inviting friends, neighbors and co-workers. We also know that those networks tend to be patterned by race.

White attenders are more likely to know and invite white individuals; African-Americans are more likely to know and invite African-Americans. As a result, the majority group in a congregation grows more quickly; there are simply more of them inviting others to come and participate.

The minority group doesn't grow at the same rate and over time tends to become a smaller and smaller percentage of the congregation. This may lead members to feel more marginalized.

This is not an easy cycle to alter, because it's often a result of the composition of worshipers' extended social networks. Congregations hoping to remain diverse must pay attention to how individuals and families are recruited into the group.

DOUGHERTY: Multiracial congregations can be difficult to sustain. Forging relational bonds across racial lines proves to be a challenging proposition for congregations. If a member does not feel integrated within a congregation, they may seek out a different place of worship.

Q: You found that the influence of worshiping with another race/ethnicity seems to be most pronounced for whites in congregations with Hispanics. Any theories on why?

POLSON: We found that, for white attenders, worshiping in a congregation with a larger percentage of Hispanic worshipers was related to having more friendships with Hispanic people. This was not the case, however, for friendships between whites and African-Americans or Asian people.

In other words, only for white and Hispanic people did worshiping together seem to significantly increase the prevalence of cross-group friendships. This is likely the result of both a long-standing pattern of segregation between whites and African-Americans in the U.S. and there being a smaller number of Asian-Americans in many U.S. communities.

Q: How can congregations "cross the color line" better?

POLSON: Our study suggests that congregations do have a role to play improving race-relations in the U.S. Positive contact in local congregations seems to contribute to improved cross-group relations generally.

However, our findings also highlight the reality that healing long-standing divisions between white Americans and people of color, especially African-Americans, will require more than simply worshipping together. It will likely require continued structural and policy changes in American life—changes that decrease racial segregation in other areas of life.

We found that the presence of African-Americans, Hispanic and Asian people in neighborhoods actually had a more significant impact on white attenders' friendship networks than worshipping together. Congregations hoping to cross the color line and improve race-relations in their communities may do well to consider tangible ways they can support such changes and foster connections between different racial and ethnic groups.

Q: Is that anything you want to explore in the future to further shed light on racial segregation?

DOUGHERTY: Future research should explore the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities in multiracial congregations. This is difficult to do with survey data. Researchers will need to oversample ethnic minorities in national surveys. Another pressing need is a national study of congregations over time. Researchers need to follow a national sample of congregations over five to 10 years to understand when, how and why a congregation's membership changes, as well as the implications of such changes.

Other findings from the study include:

- Religious whites, on average, report the most comfort with Asians; a comparable level of comfort with Hispanics; and noticeably less comfort with blacks.
- Older respondents and those who are married report having fewer non-white friends.
- Men, regular religious attendees and more liberal respondents

report having more nonwhite friends.

- Respondents living in the East and the Midwest reported having fewer non-white friends than those in the South, while people living in the West report having more.
- Whites in mainline Protestant churches report fewer cross-racial friendships than whites in evangelical churches.
- Older respondents, men and those who view Scripture as literally true are less comfortable with non-whites.
- Education, higher income, religious service attendance and political liberalism are positively related to comfort with non-whites.
- Southern whites are significantly less comfortable with non-whites than are non-whites in any other U.S. region.