

Pastors at conference address racism in their churches

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NORCROSS, Ga. (RNS)—As Josh Clemons, the executive director of OneRace, an anti-racist Christian organization, kicked off its racial reconciliation conference, he compared efforts to clean the church from the sin of racism to an ancient Japanese art practice, kintsugi.

The centuries-old method consists of mending broken pottery by welding pieces with liquid gold. Once repaired, the new ceramics are embellished by shining golden cracks, proudly displaying what once were flaws.

Similarly, congregations that reckon with racial divides and engage in bold efforts to dismantle racism in the church end up embellished and more unified, he explained.



Josh Clemons (Courtesy Photo)

“Our racial past is marred and scarred,” Clemons told Religion News Service. “It’s steeped in racism and ethnocentrism and cultural divide. The church is often on the wrong side of that conversation. We believe that the church should show up credibly in these conversations.”

The Aug. 14 conference, themed “Change the story, redeeming race, reconciliation and the mission of the church,” invited faith leaders to engage in discussions on race from a gospel-centric perspective.

Five years after George Floyd’s murder at the hands of a Minnesota police officer, which shocked the country and prompted a racial reckoning in American society and the church, much of the conference’s discussions noted how the momentum spurred in 2020 progressively has faded.

In total, 402 faith leaders, from 18 states, attended the event hosted at Norcross’ Victory Church, a megachurch 20 miles north of Atlanta. According to OneRace’s data, 42 percent of participants were white, 42 percent Black, 5 percent Asian and 5 percent Latino.

In panels and small group sessions, guest speakers, including Christianity Today COO Nicole Martin and National Association of Evangelicals President Walter Kim, discussed topics ranging from ways to clear theology from racist bias to the challenges that come with leading multiethnic congregations.

‘Speak less to foolishness’

The political context—as the Trump administration rolls back diversity, equity and inclusion commitments and undermines efforts to teach Black history—was front and center in discussions.

As race-related issues become increasingly polarizing, Clemons urged attendees to remain steeped in the work of racial reconciliation and “speak

less to foolishness and more to the faithfuls.”

Reminiscing over the support he received from white congregants after Floyd’s murder, Pastor Albert Tate of Fellowship Monrovia in California noted how few voices mounted to denounce current blows at DEI and the erasure attempts of Black history.

“As a Black man, my tears weren’t ignored,” he said of the general reaction to Floyd’s killing. “I didn’t have my white siblings in the Facebook comment section questioning whether it was wrong. We all knew it was wrong. What’s hurtful and discouraging is the silence of my white siblings watching the dismantling and not saying anything.”

Still, nearly 10 years after OneRace’s creation and despite the political shifts affecting its efforts, the organization remains dedicated in its attempts to absolve congregations from the sin of racism. The group’s priority, explained the 37-year-old director, is to remain helpful to those still passionate about the cause.

“Are the folks as loud as they once were? Are there as many? No. Have we seen a falling away? Yes. Is that challenging? Yes. But that isn’t a reason for retreating,” Clemons said.

Clemons led the attendees in prayer. Seated around tables in the church’s main chapel, participants bowed their heads as he encouraged them to listen with open hearts and minds.

Call to conduct courageous conversations

The first panel, about the “11 o’clock hour” still being the most segregated hour in America, a reference to Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1960 speech on segregated churches, featured Pastor Lee Jenkins of Eagles Nest Church in

Roswell, Georgia; former Fellowship Bible Church Pastor Crawford Loritts, also of Roswell; and World Relief's Liliana Reza, as well as Martin of *Christianity Today* and the NEA's Kim. All shared insights on how racism shows up in theology but also in church life.

As he shared closing remarks, Jenkins, who leads a nondenominational Black church, urged attendees to beware of any theology "that still preaches difference, separation and anxiety."

Another panel touched on the consequences of initiating discussions about race in churches. Drawing on their own experience, speakers encouraged attendees to become comfortable with ruffling feathers when engaging in racial reconciliation efforts from the pulpit.

OneRace aims to engage faith leaders in such discussions throughout the year. Created amid the 2016 anti-racism protests, the organization seeks to train "reconcilers" or faith leaders trained on race-related issues in their ministry.

The training events, meant for faith leaders and local churches, cover the history of racism in the U.S., the role the church has played in enforcing white supremacy and how to improve racial equity and identify solutions to rid churches of racist bias.

One training, Reconciliation 301, invites participants to reflect on their own racist behaviors. The "Southern Justice experience" takes faith leaders to Alabama's historic sites. After visiting Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge, where peaceful activists demanding civil rights were beaten in 1965, the training cohorts go to Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church, where four Black girls died in a bombing orchestrated by Ku Klux Klan members in 1963.

And starting this year, OneRace added another training to its offerings. In partnership with World Relief, the "Southern Border Experience: San Diego

“ & Tijuana” takes faith leaders to the U.S.-Mexico border to observe border issues and meet activists advocating for migrants’ rights.

Speakers address reality of fatigue

The conference also served as an occasion for faith leaders to discuss the fatigue that comes with tackling race-related issues in their congregations.

Dennis Rouse, the 67-year-old founding pastor of Victory Church, formerly Victory World Church, a nondenominational megachurch with multiple Georgia locations, shared candidly about losing touch with white Christian friends when he established the multiethnic congregation in the 1990s. Still, the desire to create a truly unified church surpassed those challenges.

“If you’re going to be a true Christian, you can’t hold prejudice in your heart against another people,” he said before urging leaders to rely on God when feeling discouraged by the work.

Similarly, Loritts, who became pastor of Fellowship Bible Church in 2005, when the congregation was majority white, reflected on the fatigue that comes with being perceived as a “token” and “sellout,” as the Black pastor of a white congregation.

Though multicultural congregations embody the unifying message of the gospel, Christians shouldn’t fixate on multiethnic congregations as a “strategy” or a “brand,” he said.

“I didn’t come to Fellowship as a racial experiment,” Loritts said. “I came to do the Lord’s work.”

The speakers also noted the importance of multiethnic churches representing the congregations’ diversity in leadership, pastoral staff and worship teams.

Not about taking sides politically

At the core of OneRace's approach to racial reconciliation is rejecting political etiquette, which many speakers drew attention to throughout the day. Though the movement centers racial justice, it is adamant about not taking sides politically.

Derwin Gray, founding pastor of Transformation Church in Indian Land, South Carolina, and author of the 2022 book "How to Heal Our Racial Divide," urged leaders to preach boldly on issues—even if it means antagonizing "Democrats and MAGA."

The AND Campaign, a nonpartisan civic organization that invites Christians to transcend partisan polarization, is a OneRace partner and sent representatives to the conference. AND Campaign Director Justin Giboney said from the stage that racism has wrongfully become politically polarizing for Christians.

"The race debate in much of the church has become a battle between those blind to the sin of racism and those who believe racism and sexism are the only sins," he said.

Kim, of the NEA, told RNS that racism is not a political issue but a sin that "breaks the heart of Jesus" and that it has been a challenge for the church for millennia.

The conference also drew attention to similarities between how the church has handled racism and how it handles anti-immigrant hatred.

Reza, director of U.S./Mexico border engagement for World Relief, a Christian humanitarian organization, urged attendees not to turn a blind eye to the fate of Latino Christian communities impacted by the federal government's crackdown on immigration.

Noting the hurt racism has caused Black Christian communities mirrors the experiences of Latino Christians who feel abandoned by fellow Christians now, Reza implored attendees to stand in support of those communities.

"We, I, need you all to be the church," said Reza, as she shed tears. "Black brothers and sisters, do not turn a blind eye."