

# The Religious Racial Integration of African Americans into Diverse Churches

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*Recent scholarship asserts that members of racial groups can transcend their ethnic differences, but other research asserts that ethnoracial identities must be reinforced in order to participate in multiracial churches. Analysis of field notes and interview data from a large, black-white Protestant congregation shows that while the core membership of African Americans come specifically for its ethnic and racial diversity, they also look for markers that affirm a distinctive African-American experience. Ethnic reinforcement attracts highly race-conscious participants who eventually move toward processes of ethnic transcendence and congregational integration. The value for researchers is that distinguishing ethnically transcendent and ethnically reinforcing processes encourages the discovery of subtle, racially specific, and continually reinforced affinities that would otherwise remain hidden in seemingly ethnically transcendent settings.*

## INTRODUCTION

The unique history of African Americans in the United States fuels much of the discussion on the relationship between religion and race in diverse congregations (e.g., Tranby and Hartmann 2008). Indeed, the impetus for much of the current research on multiracial churches began with Emerson and Smith's (2000) pessimistic assessment of the potential for black-white integration within American Protestant Christianity. Arguing that fundamental ideological assumptions between black and white groups operate at cross-purposes, they assert the possibility of black-white churches is remote as individualistic orientation toward social change, especially among evangelicals, keeps whites ignoring the structural inequality that further perpetuates the American racial divide. Follow-up work by Emerson (2006) and Edwards (2008b) continues to affirm the weakness of religion in the face of racial obstacles such that achieving true religious integration between blacks and whites seems nearly impossible.

In contrast, other perspectives argue that religious racial integration is achieved by redefining the bases of shared identity among members and focusing on idealized religious commitments (Becker 1998; Ecklund 2005; Jenkins 2003; Marti 2005; Stanczak 2006). We know that African Americans, like other racial-ethnic groups, negotiate their racial identities in differing contexts (Hutchinson, Rodriguez, and Hagan 1996; Young 2007). And even within Protestant multiracial churches when different ethnoracial groups exist in an uncomfortable alliance (Garces-Foley 2007), these congregations utilize distinctively religious resources to overcome racial obstacles and nurture religious identities to foster long-term, cross-ethnic relationships. Marti (2005, 2008a, 2009a) presents a process of "ethnic transcendence" that describes how the religious culture of Protestant congregations can foster integration. In this strain of scholarship all ethnoracial groups—including African Americans—are able to overcome their racial particularities by taking on a religiously based "master status" as a base of solidarity (see Bartkowski 2004; Ecklund 2005).

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In short, sociologists of religion are bringing new insights and new debates to the growing phenomenon of racially diverse congregations, and much of the most recent and extensive attention to these congregations has appeared in this journal (Dougherty and Huyser 2008; Ecklund 2005; Edwards 2008a; Emerson 2008; Emerson and Kim 2003; Garces-Foley 2007, 2008; Jenkins 2003; Marti 2008a, 2009a; Tranby and Hartmann 2008; Yancey and Kim 2008; other research includes Christerson, Emerson, and Edwards 2005; Dougherty 2003; Emerson 2009; Yancey and Emerson 2003). A persistent question in these and other studies remains articulating the relationship between religious identity and racial identity within these churches. The implicit debate wrestles with the relationship between processes of ethnic *reinforcement* and ethnic *transcendence* within congregational structures. The question is most accentuated in the case of African Americans. On one hand, scholars assert the importance of ethnic reinforcement by suggesting that African Americans require acknowledgment of the struggles and issues embedded within their own specific racial identity in order to foster authentic, cross-racial religious participation (Edwards 2008b; Emerson 2006; Emerson and Smith 2000; Yancey 2003b). On the other, research also asserts that it is possible to discern African Americans successfully deemphasizing their racial distinctiveness in multiracial congregations and accentuating shared religious identities as a base for integration (Becker 1998; Ganiel 2010; Jenkins 2003; Marti 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a; Stanczak 2006). Awareness of this debate adds an important nuance to our understanding of how religion relates to constructing ethnic identity, negotiating racial alliances, and overcoming racial oppression in the United States.

Following recent ethnographic research on black-white congregations in Emerson (2006) and Edwards (2008b), this article focuses the religious racial integration of African Americans into Protestant multiracial congregations through a case study of yet another black-white church, Oasis Christian Center. What is the relationship between religion and race for African Americans in this multiracial congregation? More specifically, does African-American religious participation in a diverse Protestant congregation require reinforcement of racial identity or does religious involvement move them toward transcending the idea of race? In the end, while religious imperatives can prompt members to participate in racially diffuse congregations, the distinctiveness of the African-American experience in white-dominant American society appears to require multiracial congregations to construct diversity-affirming “havens” such that blacks are affirmed, protected, and even entertained in ways that acknowledge a shared African-American heritage.

### **Ethnic Transcendence: Congregational Havens and the Negotiation of Racial-Ethnic Boundaries**

The analytical approach introduced by Marti (2005) explicitly frames the experiences of religious racial integration in Protestant churches as a process by which members of ethnoracial groups subsume their contrasting ethnic identities to a shared religious identity (see Ganiel 2010). Marti follows ethnic identity management theorists (De Vos and Romanucci-Ross 1975; Lyman and Douglass 1973), which extend insights from Goffman’s (1959, 1963, 1967) impression management theory and views race and ethnicity as one of multiple aspects of personal identity that is accessed and negotiated within organizations (Marti 2009a; see also Nagata 1974; Stryker 1981). Ethnicity (not “race”) among these theorists is a complex aspect of the self that can be highlighted or obscured, constructed or reconfigured, guided by interests involving social status and social mobility according to the demands and constraints of presentation; as circumstances require, other social statuses are emphasized (Alexander 1992; Conzen et al. 1992; Fenton 1999; Lacy 2007; Leonard 1992; McCall and Simmons 1978; Nagel 1994, 1996; Royce 1982; Sollors 1989; Stryker 1981).

Marti analytically builds on ethnic identity theory through an understanding that American congregations are voluntary organizations. Individuals connect to congregations by taking opportunities for relational interactions that appeal to at least one aspect of their social selves. Diverse congregations are those that construct relational “havens” (defined as situationally specific arenas

of interaction) from the interests, beliefs, values, and life circumstances that ally people together regardless of ancestral heritages. Havens therefore exhibit an interesting dualism as self-selective mechanisms that draw certain people and repel others. Over time, member participation in havens obscures their ethnic identifications and bring out other valued aspects of their personal identity, and ultimately a shared religious identity becomes more important than their disparate racial identities (see also Marti 2008a, 2008b, 2009a).

The process of ethnic transcendence as originally developed depends on havens being racially neutral. And because Marti initially presented this process in a case study of a church with only 2 percent African American, the analysis is ambivalent as to whether the process is applicable for understanding the religious racial integration of African Americans. The church studied conducts its activity in the context of a popular American culture available to English-speaking immigrant children and achieves diversity by attracting both native whites and children of immigrants who acculturate into the segment of American culture most accessible to them. Among these second-generation ethnics, a generational passing of ancestral history is substituted with socialization into white dominant popular culture. Although a few African Americans in the church find affinities based on theology, artistry, or age, no “haven” acknowledges or affirms a black racial identity. And the few younger blacks in the church report either rejecting their parents’ and grandparents’ African-American expressions of spirituality or growing up immersed in white-dominant schools and neighborhoods (see Marti 2005:8, 10, 62, 141, 162–63).

### **Ethnic Reinforcement: African Americans and the Acknowledgment of Racial-Ethnic Distinctives**

Given the distinctive challenges of African Americans in white-dominant culture, defining the process of religious racial integration in terms of segmented portions of individual identity presents difficulties for understanding how multiracial churches connect with African Americans. In contrast to Marti’s (2008a) more “fluid” approach to ethnoracial identity, both Emerson (2006) and Edwards (2008b) draw on racial formation and critical race theories to underscore how “race” is more significant than “ethnicity” (which Edwards sparsely defines as oriented around “claims of shared culture, history, or common descent”) for understanding American society and to demonstrate how the structural advantages of being white extend to the structure of black-white churches (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Doane 1997; Lewis 2004; Lipsitz 1998; Omi and Winant 1994). For example, in his study of an interracial Protestant church Emerson (2006) argues that whites fail to acknowledge their dominant structural position and use their power to insist that churches operate in ways preferred by them. Edwards (2008b) similarly asserts that a proper understanding of “whiteness” and the racial hierarchies and boundaries that resulted throughout U.S. history indicates “race” to be a central and determining structural characteristic and argues that African Americans must adopt white-dominant cultural norms and practices in order to fit into this integrated church. For both these scholars, race is not viewed as a *particular* characteristic of African Americans but rather as a *dominating* one.

Both Emerson and Edwards extend research that supports being black in America is not simply one aspect of identity but rather overwhelms the identity of a person that religion largely fails to address. Everett Hughes (1945) classically constructed the concept of “master status” with particular reference to how racial stigma overwhelms other markers of prestige through observations of how whites treated African Americans in professional occupations, and black social theorists have described how their race dominates definitions of their identity and relations across society (Du Bois 2003; Fanon 1965, 1967). What W. E. B. DuBois called “the problem of the color line” remains evident in studies on the pervasive social consequences of segregation and stigmatization based on skin color, legal definitions of whiteness, and institutionalized racism (quoted in Lewis 1995:639; see also Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997; Drake and Cayton 1945; Freeman et al. 1966; Hunter, Allen, and Telles 2001; Keith and Herring 1991; Lopez 1996).

African Americans who attempt to assimilate into a white culture must make a cultural leap—and still experience prejudice and discrimination (Feagin and Sikes 1995). Because African Americans are “involuntary minorities” who are painfully aware of their disadvantaged status in comparison to native majority members (Kao and Tienda 1998; Massey et al. 2003; Ogbu 1978, 1981), Yancey (2003a) forcefully argues that African Americans experience an alienation that cannot be compared to other racial/ethnic groups.

Neither Emerson nor Edwards provides an explicit description of the process of religious racial integration through the ethnic affirmation that they believe is necessary for achieving truly integrated congregations; yet, both argue that religious communities need to accentuate the distinctive racial experiences of African Americans and create hospitable environments that explicitly welcome and incorporate them (see also DeYoung et al. 2003; Yancey 2003b). And both stress that nonwhites joining diverse congregations are not “race traitors” who wish to deny their ethnoracial distinctives; instead, these members want to affirm the “uniqueness” of their racial identity “while at the same time being around people from other cultures” at church (Emerson 2006:129). Emerson (2006:168–69) provides a list of ethnic reinforcement mechanisms found in multiracial churches (see also Yancey 2003b). He primarily argues that interracial churches must make a clearly stated institutional commitment to racial equity and create structures to ensure that equity. Emerson issues a two-fold call: whites should accede privileges for the sake of marginalized nonwhite groups, and blacks (as well as other oppressed minorities) should avoid victimization and take bold initiatives to create racially affirming, integrated religious communities. Furthermore, congregational leaders are said to be central to cultivating integrated congregations by personally committing to racial equity, creating forums where racial issues are actively discussed, and actively managing member commitment toward common religious goals. Edwards (2008b:137) similarly urges interracial church leaders to “select African Americans as key contributors to the process” of creating an environment of racial inclusion to counter white hegemony. In resisting “white normativity and structural dominance,” she calls interracial churches to create congregations “where the culture and experiences of all racial groups are not just tolerated, but appreciated.” Tranby and Hartmann (2008) also apply whiteness studies and critical race theory to the possibility of black-white congregations, specifically arguing that racial identity should be highlighted and affirmed rather than merely subsumed under the auspices of religion.

Given the contradictory assertions between these two perspectives, the question remains: Do African Americans retain racially specific identities as a primary base of interaction and not “obscure” or “subsume” their racial specificity in order to participate in a multiracial community of faith? Or, does religious racial integration require transcending racial specificity in favor of religious unity? Dougherty and Huyser (2008:39) state that “the central challenge of race in the United States remains black and white. Correspondingly, the congregational identity necessary to unite blacks and whites may look different than an inclusive identity for other racial-ethnic groups.” Consequently, is there perhaps a more dynamic relationship between the processes of ethnic transcendence and ethnic reinforcement that remains to be uncovered?

## METHODS

To examine the manner in which African Americans in diverse congregations understand their own experiences in the context of interactions within their diverse congregation, I focus on interviews with attenders and field notes gathered during participant observation in a multiracial church. These data are part of a larger project (Marti 2008b, 2010). Between 2003 and 2004, I conducted an ethnographic study of a Los Angeles church, Oasis Christian Center, to understand the processes involved in joining and integrating racially and ethnically diverse people into multiracial congregations. Oasis is a large, broadly evangelical, Protestant nondenominational

congregation. I intentionally selected Oasis as a counterpoint to my previous study of Mosaic (Marti 2005). At the time of my study, Oasis had just completed a four-year growth spurt, leveling out at around 2,200 weekly attenders. The congregation's racial/ethnic composition is estimated using membership files and systematic observation at weekend services. At 45 percent, African Americans comprise the largest proportion. Whites are the next largest at 40 percent, followed by Hispanics (10 percent), Asians (3 percent), and other including Middle Eastern and non-native blacks (2 percent). In terms of leadership, founders and co-pastors Philip and Holly are both white. While the rest of the paid pastoral staff is racially mixed including white, black, and Hispanic, a majority are white. Yet it should be quickly noted that black and Hispanic staff members are equally prominent in both platform presence and backroom decision making. With respect to African Americans, it is consistently emphasized by long-time members that Oasis has had a significant proportion of African Americans from its founding, and the black presence in both membership and lay leadership has been significant throughout its 25-year history. Furthermore, Oasis attenders regularly interact across different racial and ethnic backgrounds through the church's weekly gatherings, small groups, and multiple ministry teams in addition to informal relational networks outside programmed church ministries. For example, the worship leader at the time of the study was a black woman; her team of singers and musicians both reflect the diversity of the congregation and often work and play together beyond church activities.

I spent 12 months doing fieldwork in the church. Rather than impose my understanding of social processes onto leaders, members, and attenders, I tried to attend very closely to the "lived" experience of the participants in the church and earnestly attempted to uncover the understandings of the attenders and bring conceptual order to what I found (Ammerman 1987; Bender 2003; Marti 2005; Orsi 2002). I also attempted to distinguish between "official" pronouncements advocated by church leaders and the everyday happenings of all congregants (leaders and nonleaders) to the actual operations of congregational life. I participated in church events regularly attended by members, new guests, and those in the process of joining the church, including both weekend and mid-week church functions. As part of being a participant observer, I went through its "membership process" and also attended various classes and seminars for highly committed volunteer church leaders. I reviewed available archival material and conducted personal interviews. Archived sources consisted of selected books published by leaders, sermon and seminar tapes, and pamphlets publicly distributed by the church. I randomly sampled individual membership records. The church utilized "oral tradition" to recall its history, so specific historical records were largely absent. Thus, personal interviews were used to reconstruct church history as well as obtain information on member experiences.

Semistructured, face-to-face interviews included leaders (both paid staff and nonpaid volunteers), long-time members, occasional attenders, and first-time guests. I formally interviewed a total of 50 people. Because Asians and Latinos were oversampled and because most long-time staff members were white, the proportion of racial-ethnic groups interviewed was slightly different than that of the congregation as a whole. In the interviews, 42 percent were white, 32 percent African American, 13 percent Latino, 5 percent Asian, 2 percent Middle Eastern, and 6 percent self-defined as some form of mixed/multiracial ancestry. Within this sample, I interviewed a wide variety of people currently attending the church including those who made commitments to become dedicated followers of Jesus Christ at the church and those who had made such commitments elsewhere, long-time members and recent attendees, and men and women. I interviewed a range of age groups from young adults to senior citizens, marital statuses from unmarried to married people, and, most importantly, people of all notable racial and ethnic groups. In the interviews, I focused on the process by which members came to join the church, reasons for staying (and in some cases returning), and their reporting about why others stay or leave the congregation. Interviews averaged around 90 minutes and were transcribed and themes, categories, and codes emerged from various levels of coding using NVIVO qualitative software. I also had

numerous conversations with blacks and nonblacks during my fieldwork, and these were coded using NVIVO as well.

### THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN A RACIALLY DIVERSE CHURCH

Looking through field notes from congregational observation and analyzing the interview responses and conversations with African-American participants in this black-white church, I find evidence of both ethnic transcendence and ethnic reinforcement among blacks in this congregation. I also find a nuanced interaction occurring between the two.

#### More Than Just Black

In both formal interviews and informal conversations, nearly all blacks in the congregation express a desire to escape being religiously immersed in black racial enclaves. While all the African Americans I encountered had immersive experiences in the Black Church, not all spoke of these experiences in a complementary way. Ben, 43 years old, said: "My mom started us off early. The pinching ear stage, you know, when you're supposed to sit there and you don't." He joked about his experiences. "The preachers just barked at you, and you could barely understand them. And the breathing things that they would do. They go, 'Aaaand', [with a lot of breath]. That whole show. We would wake up when he got to that part because it was close to the end of the sermon." Like Ben, all black attenders at Oasis had been members of a Black Church at some point in their lives, and they would mimic "call and response" preaching or comment on long worship services. Cherise, 32 years old, said:

There were times I loved it, and then there were other times where I'm like, "We're going to church again?" We would get there at nine, and then we would leave this one service at three. So it was like six hours. And then we would go home and eat, and then we would go back for Sunday night. And then Tuesday would be rehearsal, and then Wednesday we would be at services. So for a child it was a bit much. It was constantly being there . . . . When I was a kid, I didn't really get into it. I was like, "Oh no." I'd get in trouble for playing tic-tac-toe on the back pew.

Their joking characterizations of the Black Church is one way in which African Americans at Oasis overall acknowledge their racial identities as "black" while rejecting an exclusivist black orientation. African Americans approach their memories of their Black Church with nostalgia, yet consciously choosing to leave the Black Church is a consistent aspect of narrating their past. Ben, who had spent most of his life in Black Churches, said: "That was okay back then, but this is now. I need something different."

Apart from their Black Church memberships, African Americans come to Oasis with an experience of diversity, looking for diversity, and appreciating diversity. Cherise said, "I was always the type of person where I wanted everyone in my life, every type of person in my life." Cherise speculated that young adults are attracted to Oasis because they "get the opportunity to be around different races." She discussed African-American involvement specifically, saying: "Because we have so many young people coming, they want and crave that type of environment where people look different, people dress different, talk different. But they are getting along. Different races having a good time together, that's like a drawing card for people." Other African Americans agreed, talking about their own attraction to the congregation. Franklin, 27 years old, said: "One thing I just loved about Oasis was it is really diverse. That's just the first thing I noticed. And that was something that would speak to me." Leron, 30 years old, said: "The part of this world that I love is the diversity . . . . I love the fact that you have a whole bunch of different couples that are interracial . . . . You see a lot of little kids running around, Black kids with red hair and blond hair you go, 'OK, what are you? What are you mixed with?' It's just such a neat expression of unity really." He added: "When you have so many beautiful people

together, so many different races together, it's hard for you to say that one is better than another, or these people are ugly. It really does make a huge difference." Ben said: "The younger Blacks are coming because they are into it. They can see the big picture is not about just being Black. That this is different than how they were brought up and that this is the way of the world. We no longer live in this bubble. We've got to get out and do this and do that. And mingle and whatever."

Rather than seek another ethnoracially homogenous church experience, African-American members at Oasis actively sought a church characterized by diversity. Franklin is among many who looked for diversity before committing to a congregation. "I started looking into churches that were more diversified—and that I felt were more open to this—because it was big on my heart, and I wanted to get more into it." For Franklin and others, they embrace diversity "because that's how church should be." Tia, 57 years old, told me:

I've always lived in ethnically diverse situations and I've always worked in diverse situations. I indeed refuse to do anything other than that. Because heaven is going to be diverse, all right? Everyone should learn how to get along, to work with, have a relationship with one another. So had Oasis been an all Black church, I would not have joined.

Monica, 33 years old, said with a tone of appreciation: "It was refreshing . . . people from different backgrounds and different races. I thought it was just great. I didn't even think it was an option." Brandon, 52 years old, said: "This is my heart. Because I imagine heaven being, you know, God just having everybody and that's where my commitment lies . . . I know when I get to heaven there's going to be some of everything and everybody and all that."

In these statements, the processes of religious ethnic transcendence appear to be most primary. For example, there is a profound, shared belief that the sermons preached at Oasis touch the deepest part of all humanity regardless of race. Julia, a 33-year-old white member, said: "When you come here, you see all these different types of people, and you listen to the Word in a practical sense and see how it applies to everyone on a personal level. . . ." The implicit belief is that a shared religious orientation is being cultivated and affirmed in the congregation that is more fundamental than ethnoracial distinctions. In another interview, Kiara, a 62-year-old long-time African-American church member, pointed to the entrance and said, "I remember walking through those doors, and all of my life I have never seen a church where there were Black people, White people, Hispanic people—I mean every race, every color of skin, tone, literally. I stood in the door, and I just gasped. 'Oh, my gosh'. And the next thought that came to my mind was 'This is what Heaven will be like'." Kiara continued: "When I walked into Oasis, I just saw all of these people as you see here, and it actually took my breath away. And I thought, 'How wonderful. We can actually be here on this planet and actually go to church together on a Sunday'. People didn't tell me the pastor and his wife were White. I'm like, 'They're White!'"

For some, this religiously based unity complements their past experiences of diversity. Otis, 33 years old, said he did not consider the diversity of the church either difficult or unusual because he is "used to" diversity. He said:

I never really noticed the diversity until people started talking about it. The pastor I had in college was a White guy, so I was used to going to a church that was mixed, White-Black or whatever. So that really didn't bother me. So when I came to the Oasis, everyone was talking about the diversity but it didn't really seem like an issue with me because I had been there before. I just kind of slipped right into a situation I was comfortable with.

Jerome, 34 years old, said: "Most of my upbringing has been among predominantly White communities." Sierra, 40 years old, is another who dismissed any struggle to participate in an integrated church and said, "I've always been around people with different backgrounds" even in her church experiences.

The value for diversity is so strong that some members reject Black Churches simply because in their judgment the Black Church reinforces segregation. Ben said: "It comes out of experiencing

it as a kid throughout my whole life . . . . The prejudice was so prevalent . . . . When I was a young kid, we got bussed to a White school.” The bullying, group conflict, and racial tension affected him deeply as he consistently remained committed to diverse relationships. Ben “hates” prejudice, and his attempt to maintain diversity in his relationships keeps him invested in a diverse church for his religious involvement. Ben said: “If I had to put it into words, the mission of Oasis is e-racism [short for “erase-racism”]. Just the prejudice side of it, man, I just hate it. It’s crazy. But that’s how I see it. One step at a time. E-racism. Just getting rid of it.” He was passionate. “The church is missing it. You have pastors that are missing it. And that bothers me. That’s huge with me.” Ben said, “I would hope that this would be a springboard. I would hope that it would start infiltrating other churches and that people would really grasp that. Because that’s how Jesus was. And it’s like we miss it. We miss it.”

Franklin believes African Americans are not stigmatized in this church. “We’re really great about not recognizing minorities,” Franklin said. “When I walked into another church I felt like a minority because somebody pointed it out. Somebody made me aware of it, so then that’s why I was aware of it. Well, here I can honestly say I’m not aware of it.” Franklin continued:

People will sometimes say, “Your church is so diverse.” And it reminds me that my church is so diverse. You know? Oh, we are diverse . . . . It’s at a place where I don’t know. You know, it’s like I really do forget, “Oh, you are Black, and I am not.” You get at a place where family is family. We are really diverse, and so I think that minorities might come in and go, “Wow! There are people like me, and everybody’s here.” But that quickly fades because you are just family.

Others also remarked that the diversity of the church made it welcoming to guests of all racial and ethnic groups.

Finally, in addition to the appreciation for diversity some African-American members refuse to be categorized or labeled by race or ethnicity. In my interview with Jerome, he began to muse on the issue of “blackness” philosophically by asking:

Is Black a definition of pigmentation differentiation or is it an attitude? Is it a physical characteristic, or is it a social characteristic? And me, I think it’s a social characteristic. What defines a person who is Black is completely independent to the observer and the observed. What the observed decides is what they are going to be.

In a more pragmatic approach, Dakota, 59 years old, said, “I am, you know, multicultural. I’m mixed. I’m multicultural. I’m Black, Irish, Filipino, Chinese, French-Canadian, and American Indian. So I never really felt comfortable with all one or the other.” Dakota had attended Black Churches but felt uncomfortable. “They were both all-Black churches, and I just didn’t feel like I belonged there. So when I came to the Oasis and saw all the different cultures and all the different races, I was just ecstatic. I felt like I had come home.”

### **Recognize Black Distinctives**

Although black attenders do not want to be exclusively black in their church community, they appreciate that Oasis provides recognition for blacks and want this aspect of the church to continue. African Americans at Oasis appreciate diversity, but they do not express ambivalence about their own racial identity. (In contrast, 29-year-old Andrew of Middle Eastern descent said, “I don’t feel completely Assyrian, and I don’t feel completely American. I feel like I’m somewhere in between.” Although Andrew was embedded in Middle-Eastern social networks, he was born in the United States.) African Americans at Oasis always note their distinctives as “black Americans.” For example, 34-year-old Steve is an African American who grew up in a white community. Although he does not want to be “black exclusively,” he values being “black” and spoke about aspects of the church, including music and racially explicit discussions, that resonate with affinities found among African Americans. So while the social settings at Oasis are

diverse, the congregation retains aspects recognizable to blacks like Steve as being especially for themselves.

Interviews with African Americans reveal a deep connection between musical styles in congregational worship and their connection to the church. More specifically, blacks in the congregation universally talked about the worship music of the congregation as having a “black sound.” While talking about growing up in her Black Church, Cherise said she appreciates “the R&B-gospelly-Black sound, if that is what you would term it” at Oasis because “that’s what I grew up with in church.” The music style at Oasis is consistently described as a mix of funk, gospel, and R&B with a heavy bass and strong, danceable rhythm that invite people to stand, clap, move, and “groove” as they worship. Louie, a long-time Latino member, said, “[b]asically it’s gospel,” and went on to call it “full gospel” and “kind of like Kirk Franklin.” Members believe the R&B and the “soul” element of the music is distinctive to African-American musical taste. Steve described the sound further, explaining:

There are forms of [musical] expression in what would be considered Black churches . . . We have certain elements of those things. Every now and then we can do one of those little double-time things with the band, and they will do it just for fun because it brings back some memories of people, and people will remember something they don’t normally get in our church. And that makes them feel more connected . . .

In short, while the diverse membership of Oasis incorporates racially diffuse arenas of religious interaction, the congregation also includes racially specific markers in its worship music, markers that are not readily evident to nonblacks. The incorporation of what black members recognize as racially specific symbols helps sustain the incorporation of African Americans into the membership of the congregation over time.

Beyond music, processes of ethnic reinforcement are also evident in how the leadership of Oasis holds a clearly stated institutional commitment to racial equity. Pastor Philip said: “We thought [racial diversity] was something God was doing, but we should protect it, or nurture it.” In pursuing this, they went against a basic church growth principle touted by their mentors—“The Homogenous Unit Principle” (McGavran 1955; Wagner 1976, 1984, 1987). The Homogenous Unit Principle states that churches must target racial and ethnic groups that share a homogenous culture in order to succeed. In contrast, they pursued an explicit orientation toward racial diversity. References to the racial demographics of the congregation by both leaders and long-time members regarding its founding and history frequently affirm that Oasis has always been an integrated black-white congregation.

Pastors Philip and Holly intentionally highlight racial issues and train for racial awareness in public and in private, and both black and nonblack members consistently affirm that the church’s leaders are personally committed to racial equity. Mike, a 26-year-old Caucasian member, is among others who said: “They very proactively address those issues and talk about ways to overcome them.” And 55-year-old Helen, another long-time Caucasian member, said: “He brings it up, and he keeps it in front of our faces.” The discussion of prejudice is not to educate blacks, but rather to create a proactively protective environment for blacks. As Helen points out: “When you talk about diversity, the people of color understand the situation. It’s the White folks that need to get the clue.” The pulpit regularly addresses issues often left unspoken between blacks and nonblacks in congregations. Pastor Holly said: “We never take it for granted and we don’t just assume it happens. We talk about bigotry. We talk about it, and we don’t just talk about it on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day either. You know, we talk about it all the time. We will say things like, “If all your friends look like you, then you are in trouble . . .” According to Pastor Holly, “We say, ‘Don’t ask if you are prejudiced, just ask where am I prejudiced?’” Philip said: “No matter what topic I’m teaching on, that usually comes into play. We will use an example because it just affects so much of our lives. So, I find myself making racial comments—not slurs, but racial comments—pretty regularly.”

Black members also believe that their church leaders adjust ministries in response to needs to protect racial equity. Ben pictures Pastor Philip as actively navigating the racial composition of the church. "Philip is like with reins. He won't let it go all Black or all White. He'll come right out and say it, 'Okay, now, we need to have something else because we're not just Black'." Open church discussions on and off the platform highlights to blacks that racial issues are not being ignored and alerts nonblacks that any form of prejudice is not acceptable. I often heard references to racial prejudice during my time at Oasis as well as direct confrontation of different forms of interpersonal discrimination. On becoming aware of racial issues in their congregation, Holly said: "We don't hide. We get on the pulpit and go, 'That is so stupid'." Again, Holly said: "We'll tell them to turn to their neighbor and say, 'I'm prejudiced', or whatever. We try to deal with it straight on." Leaders openly confront racial issues, and one public manifestation is at the "Welcome Table" where greeters regularly give away free CDs with a message from Pastor Philip on racial harmony.

So, in developing attitudes to create a hospitable environment for African Americans Oasis incorporates messages, ministries, and counseling sessions that regularly focus on prejudicial attitudes. Here we see processes of ethnic reinforcement. Oasis accentuates discrimination against blacks and the recognition of their oppression. In other words, racial awareness at Oasis centers on issues of African-American alienation. I found it especially significant that the "Application for Ministry" form, which dates from the late 1980s and is completed by those who desire to volunteer or lead in the church, includes the question: "Are you racially prejudiced or do you have struggles in that area?" The same form lists prohibitions against drugs and sex outside of marriage that are typical of church ministry applications, yet few churches (if any) include such an explicit prohibition against racial prejudice. The form essentially acknowledges that racism is a "sin" to which one must be accountable. This helps to maintain a viable "haven" for diversity in which African Americans can participate.

Finally, the presence of African Americans on staff signals to other blacks the affirmation of a distinctive black identity. When black members began to critique the lack of black staff members, the leaders of the church took notice. One long-time African-American member in her mid 50s said: "Once that was brought to Pastor's attention, it was addressed. They have been very responsive. As things have come up, they've worked to determine the validity of the concern and been responsive to those issues." While the pastors insist staff members are hired on the basis of qualifications rather than racial quotas, respondents noted with appreciation the current presence of black staff members. All assume that the hiring of "black" staff is an intentional response to the black presence of the congregation. Thus, even if the hires did not occur in response to grousing among members, the perception that leaders were responsive furthers the sense not only that blacks are protected and respected but also that their concerns are heeded.

### **Not Black Enough**

For many African Americans, Oasis is simply not "black" enough. Several black members told me their black family and friends ask: "How could you go to church with a White pastor?" Angela, 52 years old, said: "People hate the fact that I come here. [They refuse] to come because the pastor is not a Black man. They say, 'There is no way those two people understand anything about us. They have no clue. They could not really empathize or sympathize with an African American'." Angela was dating a black man who would not come to the church. He said to her: "Never. I'll never sit through his preaching and pastoring me." Ben explained: "It's sad but true. It has to do with 'There's this White man up there. He can't really relate to the struggles that I've been through'." Another African-American member in his mid 30s said: "Some people grew up in a Black church or just grew up in a different time before this whole MTV side to it" will have problems fitting into the church, especially "if you are a Black man who is 40 and above and you grew up in a Black church in a family that considers itself Black." He went on to say:

There are still people who are I'd say 50, 60 years old who still might have issues with something as superficial as taking advice or listening to the word of a White pastor. I've actually heard that quite a good number of times over the years. "I just can't be under a White pastor. I need to be under a Black pastor." And these are things that are built into people, and there are some people who have become self-aware enough or independent enough to decide, "That's not what I'm going to base my decision on where I'm going to church." But there are some people who just can't get past that, and that's what makes them comfortable.

In short, Oasis "might disturb some very old school people who are on the old side or the Black side or both."

Black members say that what keeps these older blacks away is concern for the racial knowledge of the pastor: "There is a white man up there. He can't really relate." Ben said the church provokes reactions because "it's too white." His black Christian friends say to him: "Oh, I've got to go to my Black church." And the concern about white pastoral leadership is not limited to older blacks. One black woman invited her 20 something year-old daughter:

And she said, "Really? Oh my gosh. What kind of music is it? I can't imagine that the music could be great." And I said, "The music is great." And for a while she wouldn't come. . . . But she finally came, and she was blown away—so much so that she actually sat down and wrote [Pastor Philip] saying, "I didn't want to come because my mom said that you were White."

Pastor Philip is aware of how blacks may distrust white leaders. He said: "We get a lot of colors in there, but there are a lot of people who are untrusting of me. So we try to address that."

Although people who refuse to join the church believe the lead pastors could not possibly understand the black experience, those who stay emphasize that the founding pastors not only understand certain critical elements of it (like musical styles) but also consciously raise awareness of issues in the black community by actively working against racial prejudice and discrimination. And while Pastor Philip is adamant that there is no consideration of racial representation in hiring, the presence of black staff accentuates for black members the belief that the pastors of the church compensate for their lack of complete racial understanding by bringing other blacks on church staff. In addition, the younger, middle-class, and upwardly mobile African Americans in the congregation are less likely to discuss racially based injustices or exploitation embedded in broader society in comparison with older African Americans in the congregation. Young and upwardly mobile blacks in the church see themselves as responsible for their own destiny and able to control the circumstances such that any experiences of frustration in work, housing, or education that could be interpreted as stemming from racial discrimination are connected to stories of those who are not African American yet seen as sharing similar troubles. In short, younger and upwardly mobile blacks rely less on racial explanations for their social and economic circumstances and connect with whites (as well as other groups in the congregation) on the basis of perceived shared frustrations of living in a complex, urban society (see Marti 2008b: Ch. 7).

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The core black membership of Oasis come specifically for its ethnic and racial diversity and describe their experience of coming to church as an anticipation of "what heaven will be like" (see Christerson et al. 2005). These black members have interracial social networks, want to escape the encapsulation of the Black Church, and seek to participate in a diverse congregation. Among these members, Oasis's intentional focus on diversity and programs to promote intergroup contact to foster an "inclusive identity" indicate processes of ethnic transcendence (as described by Marti 2008a, 2009a; see also Dougherty and Huyser 2008). At the same time, African-American members also recognize and appreciate the markers that affirm a distinctive African-American experience. Ethnic reinforcement is achieved in this church by recognition of blacks up front,

by race-specific practices (e.g., musical styles), and by racial awareness preached from the pulpit rather than by specific race-targeted ministries and subgroups within the congregation. While Oasis accomplishes such racial affirmation adequately enough for many blacks through its history, music, messages, and staffing, the church does not appeal equally to all blacks. For these other African Americans, Oasis is “not black enough,” and this failure to adequately incorporate all blacks on racial grounds further indicates the importance of ethnic reinforcement. So, while other studies have argued for the importance of mixing musical and preaching styles as well as providing an awareness of racial issues from the pulpit to keep a multiracial congregation together (DeYoung et al. 2003), this case study suggests that the exceptionalism of African Americans plays itself out in the interaction between reinforcement and transcendent and prompts a closer understanding of the importance of these practices.

It appears that in order to accentuate “diversity” as a value it is necessary that congregational leaders emphasize ethnic specificity at the same time religious unity is being urged. In other words, an emphasis on both ethnic transcendence and ethnic reinforcement is required to attract and retain African Americans into this multiracial congregation. The congregation must reinforce the distinctive culture of African Americans as a racial group as many among them value their racial specificity more than diversity and fail to see the emphasis on diversity in the congregation as a haven but rather as ignoring aspects of the black experience they believe should not be neglected. This is the group for whom ethnic transcendence does not naturally appeal—at least initially.

In one sense this analysis essentially agrees with Marti (2005; see also 2008a, 2009a) that racially diffuse arenas of interaction are required in order to sustain any multiracial congregation. Because diversity is central to the congregation, we may view the congregation as constructing a “diversity haven,” a place of unique inclusion for people who value diversity, for both blacks and whites. These are the “sixth Americans” that Emerson (2006) identifies who know diversity, appreciate diversity, and welcome participation in a diverse congregational setting. Emerson points out that certain groups of Americans have developed a multiracial lifestyle in which they no longer socialize with mostly those of their own race. Race does not disappear as being important for these church members, but it does not become a master status for those who join diverse congregations like Oasis. Although Emerson suggests there are lower percentages of black “sixth Americans” than of other racial groups, these individuals may be the mainstay of the future growth of multiracial churches. African Americans who fall into this status as sixth Americans can be drawn toward the haven of diversity in multiracial churches since they value racial diversity in their relationships. Following the homophily principle, it is possible blacks are drawn to multiracial churches but just not in as large of numbers as other races since racial identity is more strongly embedded within African-American social networks in comparison with other races (Judd et al. 1995; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Quillian and Campbell 2003). This is also consistent with Edwards’s (2008b:85) unconfirmed hypothesis that “African Americans who attend interracial churches will have a relatively weak racial identity, while simultaneously possessing a high regard for their racial group.”

However, by demonstrating that African Americans participate in multiracial congregations in ways that highlight both ethnic reinforcement and ethnic transcendence, this research supports a more nuanced understanding of the relations between religious and racial identity that accommodates the exceptionalism of the African-American experience. We must be cautious about homogenizing and overgeneralizing the African-American experience and instead accentuate the manner by which individuals navigate their racial identities in various contexts (Hill and Thomas 2000; Lacy 2007; Thompson Sanders 2001; Williams 1995). Identity management and the various hierarchies of salience within the self occurs even among ethnoracial groups that are supposed to be overwhelmed by their racialized status (Rosenberg 1979). As demonstrated in how some Oasis attenders find their racial identity affirmed while others find Oasis not “black” enough, African Americans have varying degrees of closeness to their “black identity” (Demo and Hughes 1990;

Oyserman et al. 2003; Rosenberg and Simmons 1972). As Thompson Sanders (2001:163) states: "In practical everyday life, African Americans live with a variety of stances and attitudes with respect to their racial group affiliation."

The distinctives of the African-American experience in white-dominant American society appears to require multiracial congregations to construct relational havens in such a way that blacks are affirmed, protected, and perhaps even entertained ("the band . . . will do it just for fun"). Rather than conceptually allowing only for racially neutral havens (even if it is a "diversity haven"), it is important to expand on Marti's notion of havens to allow for racially affirming havens (see Marti 2009b:xii–xv). Thus, the congregation does not merely practice ethnic reinforcement; rather, the congregation places the value of diversity at the center of the congregation in a way that recognizes the unique experience of African Americans. Recently, research has shown African-American worship practices like spontaneous physical worship are ethnically distinct (Edwards 2009). Historically, much of the Black Church's ministry involved political mobilization and corporate empowerment since the oppression of blacks in American society is what prompted the development of the Black Church (Harris 1999; Patillo-McCoy 1998). Although we should not assume these churches are homogeneous, scholars of African-American religious history have long argued these churches have a shared tradition within Christianity and are fundamental to the collective experience of African Americans in the United States (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990:45; Pinn 2002:xii). The experience of racism led to a collective solidarity and obligation to support one another. Moreover, research supports that black identity is stronger for African Americans involved in traditional black denominations (Ellison 1991). For this reason, distinctions within the African-American experience cannot be ignored.

In sum—in multiracial churches that promote the value of diversity, ethnic reinforcement (or racially specific acknowledgment and incorporation) functions to attract race-conscious participants who eventually move toward processes of ethnic transcendence and congregational integration. This presents a more comprehensive understanding of both processes of transcendence and reinforcement. The issue of "race" is openly acknowledged at Oasis, yet the races at Oasis come together through corporate initiatives that emphasize the religious, nonracial aspects of their identity. Oasis creates racially diffuse arenas of religious involvement that encourage interaction and identification apart from racially specific group membership such that the "integration" of races at Oasis occurs in the act of creating religious affinity in ways supplementary to their racial identities. Yet, Oasis also highlights racial markers and accentuates racial issues in their pursuit of racial equity. More generally, I anticipate that congregations that successfully integrate African Americans have racially affirming havens centered on the value of diversity; however, in order for these congregations to become and remain multiracial, they must harness their religious resources to move members to adopt nonracially based identities as well (Ganiel 2010). Accommodating for the racial distinctiveness of African Americans through such havens affirms Edwards's (2008b:99) finding that "people of different races can worship together, even when the salience of racial identity drastically differs across racial groups."

In short, analytically separating ethnically transcendent from ethnically reinforcing dynamics accentuates that racially specific identity can be affirmed in a racially diverse setting and may even be necessary for sustaining cross-ethnic relationships. Christerson et al. (2005) arrive at a similar conclusion. The numerical minorities in the multiracial congregations they studied were more likely to remain if they had safe social spaces within the congregation to connect with people of their same race/ethnicity. This suggests that ethnic reinforcement is important for any ethnic group that is in the numerical minority in an organization, not just African Americans. Even more, researchers may observe a plurality of ethnoracial groups interacting in a common setting yet be misled in thinking only commonalities are being affirmed (only ethnic transcendence is operating) without seeing racially specific affirmations. For example, at Oasis a Kirk-Franklin-style gospel song is played (racially specific) at the same time that worshippers are encouraged to reaffirm their common identity as children of God (racially diffuse). Members of all ethnoracial groups

may “love” the music, but African-American members resonate with the music as connected with their racial identity as worshippers in the Black Church.

The complexity of multiracial congregations, therefore, includes the manner in which racial specificity is negotiated within the constraints of calling forth broadly shared religious connections that attempt to be racially neutral. Researchers have long argued that certain ethnoracial groups like African Americans constitute distinct cultural groups in America as their stigmatization based on phenotypical type-casting constrains members to develop their own heritages in the context of a Eurocentric American society (Hunter et al. 2001; Porter and Washington 1993; Sanders 2002; Takaki 1979; Tuan 1998; Vigil 1998). Black-white congregations cannot escape the power dynamics still operative in the larger society. Perhaps truly integrated black-white churches are not possible in the United States. By truly, I mean that these churches equally acknowledge, equally assert, and equally value the distinctive ethnoracial backgrounds and experiences of each group.

Combining this research with others, it appears that the ever-present issue of race for many African Americans makes *pluralism* (inclusion of separate and distinct elements of all racial cultures present) a more likely outcome for black-white Protestant congregations than *integration* (maintains aspects of separate cultures while creating a new culture; see the conceptualization of DeYoung et al. 2003:164–69). And while DeYoung et al. (2003) offer alternative models of a multiethnic church, it may be more appropriate to say that too strictly isolating the dynamics embedded within these ideal-type models fails to adequately account for the intersecting and interwoven (rather than merely contrasting and mutually exclusive) dynamics that occur in diverse congregations. While this article emphasizes the interplay between religious and racial identity in the experience of African Americans at Oasis, certainly there are other factors that may shed light on the dynamics observed in this congregation. Demographic characteristics of age, class, neighborhood, and percentage of mixed marriages are examples of important variables that may affect the integration of African Americans into multiracial churches, yet external social factors alone are not sufficient to accomplish diversity (Dougherty and Huyser 2008). This research therefore emphasizes that by employing a more varied conceptual lens researchers may discover subtle, racially specific arenas of interaction and recognition being continually reaffirmed among members in diverse congregations that would otherwise remain hidden to observers, particularly when they are not members of that ethnoracial group.

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