

**The Possible Church:
Stories of Those Who Have Led White Congregations into a Multiethnic Reality**

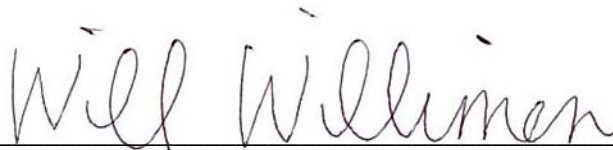
by

Brian Robert McCormack

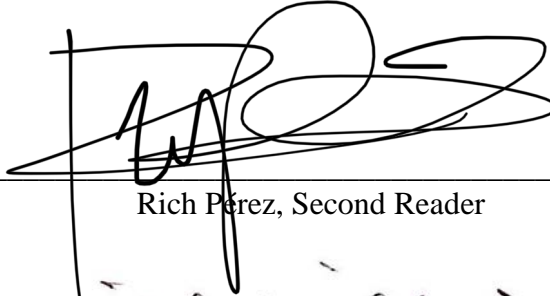
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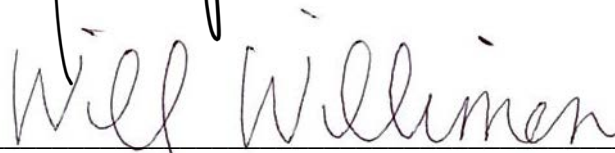
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the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

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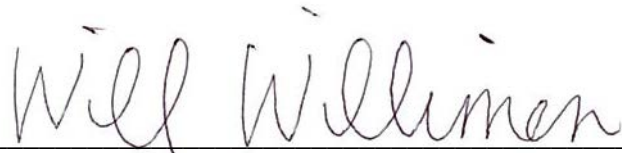
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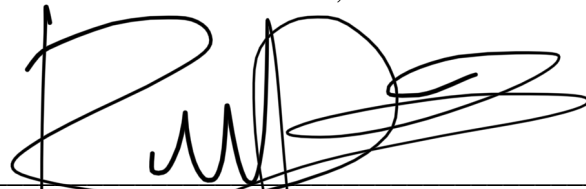
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Abstract

As the number of multiethnic churches in the United States continues to rapidly increase, predominantly white congregations perpetually struggle to contribute to this trend. Stories of formerly white churches achieving a multiethnic reality are few and far between, despite survey data indicating 70 percent of church leaders wish their congregations were more ethnically diverse.

From within this troubling scenario, a question and a need emerge. The question is why formerly white, now multiethnic churches are so rare. The need, is more stories—for while statistics prove change is necessary, stories prove change is possible—and many leaders who desire to transition their white churches into multiethnicity will not act until they know it can be done.

This thesis seeks to answer the question above, by addressing the need above. That is, by collecting and curating stories from leaders who already lead such churches, explanations for their rarity emerge, alongside footsteps for aspiring leaders to follow as they begin their own journeys.

The result of casual conversations with ten leaders at formerly white, now multiethnic churches from across the United States, this thesis presents stories that illuminate the uncommon leadership, robust theology, and intentional culture that makes them so rare.

To Emilie

My biggest fan and the strongest person I know, who refuses to settle for an ordinary life or an easy path, and shows me daily what full surrender to God looks like, regardless of the cost.

To Boston, Ryder, Banner, Scotlynn, and Arrow

My tribe of joyful chaos, who cheer the loudest when Dad chases big dreams.

To those considering the difficult road forward

May we count the cost, and stay the course. It will be worth it.

Every setback or failure is not final,
it's not fatal,
it's just part of the journey.

Keith Jenkins
Gresham, Oregon

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Acknowledgements

During my senior year of high school, my basketball coach decided to put me in the starting line-up instead of a superior player without any kind of explanation. That weekend I inexplicably played better than I ever had before, and went home with an offer to play for an NCAA division one college. My life has been a blur of wildly undeserved blessings ever since. My doctoral experience—and the opportunity to create this project with people I had no business learning with—are the latest examples of this embarrassing, wonderful trend.

No one deserves more recognition for their role in bringing this work into existence than my wife, Emilie. Nearly four years passed between “You should just apply and see what happens,” and “You’re almost done, just keep writing.” Thank you—for holding down the fort during my trips to Duke, joyfully enduring date nights at the coffee shop with laptops open, and believing in me far more than I believe in my self. I absolutely adore you.

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This thesis was dead in the water until Mark DeYmaz agreed to take a call from a stranger in Seattle. The generosity you showed with your wisdom and your relationships were a game-changer.

A project about churches became a project about leaders because ten incredible men stole the show. Thank you, gentlemen, for the time you gave me to hear your stories, and the trust you gave me to steward them well. Your collective voice has shaped me as a leader as much as any other. Yes, our conversations were for a thesis, but the poorly kept secret was they were really just for me all along. I will not be the same.

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To all of you, to the many others who have supported me over the years, and to those who prayed me across the finish line—thank you. May God bless you for blessing me.

Chapter 1 - Introduction & Review of Literature

Personal Introduction

I had recently heard a leader say it was impossible. They claimed if you want your white church to become multiethnic, and it is more than 18 months old, it's too late—you need to just blow it up and start over. My optimism immediately wanted to dismiss the notion outright, but couldn't. So, instead I went looking for a more credible voice than my own to dismiss it for me.

I was unaware I had come to lunch with the well-known, Korean pastor of a large multiethnic church confident I would get that dismissal, but clearly, that was the case—for after sharing my desire to lead my predominantly white church to more accurately reflect the shifting demographics of our suburban context just outside Seattle, I was anticipating something more uplifting than what he said:

“If I had to bet on it, I would say it's not going to happen.”

A few seconds passed like hours as he looked out the restaurant window, which I used to scan my brain for a playful comment that might conceal the embarrassment I already felt for my apparent naïveté. Before I could, he looked over at me. He had not completed his initial sentence. Hope was alive.

“...*unless* there is a legitimate move of the Holy Spirit. And not just in you.”

We kept talking—about the great cost of leading a multiethnic church, the rarity of white churches choosing to pursue such a transition, and his inability to recall any multiethnic churches led by white pastors, despite his prominent profile among Christian leaders across the country. He communicated his warnings well, but I was undeterred. He had said “unless,” which meant he was open to the existence of possibility, even if it would require divine intervention to come to pass. It was not the dismissal I had gone looking for, but it was enough to keep me moving forward.

Introductions are typically meant to establish two things—clarity and credibility. This thesis is about ten formerly white churches that became multiethnic. Perhaps more accurately, it’s about the leaders who counted the cost, went first, and stayed the course in order to guide those churches into a new reality. It’s about their commonality in regard to leadership, theology, and culture. It’s about the stories I was able to collect over months of books, articles, and mid-pandemic Zoom calls. It’s about how those stories reveal explanations for the rarity of such churches, and provide footsteps to follow on a path so infrequently travelled that many (including myself) have at some point doubted its existence altogether. This thesis is *about* those churches and leaders, but it is *for* those who want to see a similar story unfold in the churches they lead. So, there is your clarity.

That leaves the credibility part, and to be honest, I’m not confident I have much of that. I grew up in a suburb that was well over ninety percent white. Every church I have ever been a part of has been predominantly white. The church I co-founded ten years ago and currently lead has made meaningful progress, but is struggling to reflect the demographic shifts happening in our area. My efforts have occasionally served as unfortunate proof that one can act with sincerity

and still cause harm. If I do have credibility, it does not come from expertise within the area in question.

I did not dedicate several years of my life to this project because I was qualified to do so—my awareness of my *lack* of qualifications was the motivator. I, like many of my white colleagues and peers in ministry, felt the unmistakable conviction of the Holy Spirit to plot a course for my church and my life that might lead to joyful unity in the midst of beautiful diversity, messy as it may be. As my response, I sought and found voices—both inside and outside the Church—to confirm the need for this to come to pass in this specific cultural moment. What proved hard to find were documented stories from those who had already travelled the difficult road I was considering. I needed those stories, so I commit myself to finding them. If I am indeed qualified to write this thesis, it is only by my failures, my audacity to seek from strangers what I lacked myself, and the encouragement I received from those strangers when I did so.

Statement of the Issue to Be Addressed

Since Michael Emerson illuminated the lingering segregation within American churches in his 2000 landmark book, *Divided by Faith*, the proportion of all churches in the United States that qualify as multiethnic has nearly tripled.¹ However, as *statistics* about new multiethnic churches abound, *stories* of white churches becoming multiethnic are incredibly rare. The resistance or inability of white churches to contribute to the increase in multiethnic

¹ Churches in which no ethnicity represents more than 80 percent of the congregation qualify as multiethnic. Mark DeYmaz, “New Research on Multiethnic Churches.” *Outreach Magazine*. March 29, 2020: <https://outreachmagazine.com/features/multiethnic/53748-new-research-on-multiethnic-churches.html>

congregations is happening in a cultural moment marked by division, where unity across historical dividing lines of race and ethnicity is scarce. Robert Jones asserts that if white Christians commit themselves to punching holes through old boundaries, it would require uncomfortable conversations, even more difficult actions, critical self-reflection, and sincere humility, but “the payoff would be an enormous boost for white Christian’s communal health and for the country’s overall well-being.” He adds, “While such a shift is difficult, it’s not an impossible feat.”²

In 2014, Hawkins and Sinitiere commented on the enormous gap between the 70 percent of church leaders who expressed a strong desire for their congregations to become racially and culturally diverse, and the mere 10 percent of American Protestant churches who had actually achieved multiracial status at that time.³

If the cultural need and redemptive opportunity are both obvious, and the desire in many leaders is present and sincere, why are stories of white churches becoming multiethnic so rare?

This thesis seeks to curate a collection of stories from formerly white churches who have already transitioned into a multiethnic reality, and to consider those stories in a way that causes explanations regarding the rarity of such churches to emerge. In doing so, it is the hope of this author that a path forward would come into view for leaders who aspire to lead their own churches into multiethnicity, but feel paralyzed—or at least ill equipped—due to their lack of exemplars.

² Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019), 179.

³ J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere. *Christians and the Color Line: Race and Religion After Divided by Faith*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2.

Defining Terms

Among academics and practitioners, there is little consensus regarding which terms should be used when referring to concepts central to this thesis. Multiethnic, multicultural and multiracial are used interchangeably by some, and with distinctly different definitions by others. When possible, this thesis will default to *multiethnic* to (1) recognize that many multiethnic environments are not multicultural, but still function under one dominant culture, and (2) employ words as closely tied to biblical terminology as possible. Since the call to “make disciples *of all nations*” (*panta ta ethnē*) is found in the Great Commission itself, using related words to discuss churches attempting to fulfill this charge is fitting (Matt. 28:19, NRSV, emphasis added). When other terms appear, they are mostly within or in direct response to quotes from the featured leaders or supplementary voices presented throughout the thesis.

Also, for the sake of clarity and brevity, “aspiring” leaders and churches refer to those specifically pursuing a transition into multiethnicity, and “transitioned” churches refer to those who have already achieved significant change. Lastly, “featured” leaders and churches refer to the ten pastors featured in this thesis, and the congregations they represent, who will be listed at the end of this chapter.

Outline of Chapters

The remainder of chapter one will review pertinent literature on the presence and role of multiethnic churches—formerly white and otherwise—in the United States since the turn of the century. The chapter will close by introducing the ten leaders whose stories will be collectively told for the remainder of the thesis. Each of the three chapters that follow will focus on a concept

derived from the collected stories that explains the rarity of formerly white, now multiethnic churches. The second chapter will examine the uncommon leaders present in the featured churches in regard to perceived calling, willingness to pay a profound cost, and atypical patience and persistence. Chapter three will present the robust theology that emerges from the collected stories, highlighting the unique combination of beliefs the featured churches hold in regard to the gospel itself, the role of the Holy Spirit, the centrality of mission, and a biblical understanding of unity. Chapter four will center on the culture of intentionality which permeates the featured churches, including the areas of vision clarity, cultural competence, hospitality, representation, and empowerment. And last, chapter five will offer concluding observations and implications for leaders, particularly those who aspire to transition a white church themselves, as well as denominational and network leaders responsible for supporting such leaders.

The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

When the findings of the 2021 National Congregations Study—championed by Mark Chaves and analyzed with Emerson and Kevin Dougherty—were released, there was reason for excitement among those who have longed to see a shift across ethnic lines in the American church. The number of multiracial churches had experienced undeniable growth since the landmark study of 1998. The share of churches with at least one out of five members from a minority background, had grown from 6% in 1998 to 16% in 2019.⁴ The proportion of predominantly white congregations had declined dramatically, from 71 percent to just 53 percent, and Americans worshipping in all-white congregations had dropped from 20 percent to

⁴ Tom Gjelten, “Multiracial Congregations May Not Bridge Racial Divide.” *NPR*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/17/891600067/multiracial-congregations-may-not-bridge-racial-divide>

just 6 percent in that same span of time. Even churches that remained predominantly white reported a greater representation of non-white members and attendees within their congregations, which Chaves and his team confirmed as “progress in a society in which race and ethnicity still divide us.”⁵

At first glance, one might assume that a large number of predominantly white churches became multiethnic in those two decades, contributing to the drastic shift in metrics. However, a closer look at other variables reveal this to be an unfounded assumption. One such variable is the growth of Asian and Hispanic congregations. In 1998 only 1 percent of congregations were predominantly Asian, or predominantly hispanic, rising to 3 and 5 percent respectively by 2019.⁶ According to Chaves’ team, record numbers of immigrants arriving from Latin America—some 20 million of them since 1965, many settling in hispanic churches upon arrival—contributed to these findings. These contributing factors explain in part how despite all the changes observed, four of five American congregations are still attended by an overwhelming percentage of one particular ethnic group.⁷

Assuming many white churches have become multiethnic is even more difficult when anecdotal evidence is considered. Rodney Woo, one of the leaders featured in this thesis, recalls being invited to an event for those desiring to lead multiethnic churches around the time the initial study above was released. There were 25 pastors present, and Woo was the only one trying to transition an existing white church, instead of starting from scratch with a multiethnic team.⁸

⁵ Mark Chaves, Joseph Roso, Anna Holleman, and Mary Hawkins. *Congregations in 21st Century America*. (Durham, NC: Duke University, Department of Sociology, 2021).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Rodney Woo, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

Similarly, around the time the National Congregations Study had been made public in 2021, I spoke with a former employee of an organization that trains hundreds of church leaders each year for multiethnic ministry. I asked if he could put me in touch with some leaders who came to their training from established white churches, and successfully transitioned their congregations after returning home. After reflecting on all the trainings he had been a part of, he could only recall one church that *might* fit my description.

Although these two anecdotes do not carry the statistical significance of formal studies incorporating data from thousands of participants, they are still important to consider for two reasons. First, they make the same assertion—that even among leaders in multiethnic ministry, those transitioning white churches are incredibly rare compared to those planting new churches. And second, the span of time that passed between them is noteworthy, as it implies this potential trend may have endured all the way through a twenty year period marked by progress in most other categories of multiethnic churches.

In the wake of these statistics and stories, key questions emerge. Has the multiethnic church proven to be an instrument of unity across dividing lines of ethnicity, or not? And more importantly, have white Christians demonstrated willingness to lay down comfort and preference to become such instruments together in a time where unity has been and remains so desperately needed?

The hard truth appears to be there is little evidence that points to established, predominantly white churches becoming multiethnic in significant numbers, and that this resistance to change has endured during the most unprecedented demographic change in the country's history. In 1960 the population of the United States was 85 percent white. That number

had dropped to 76 percent in 1990, and to roughly 60 percent in 2020.⁹ Along the way, in 2014, another milestone was passed when for the first time, ethnic minorities made up the majority of students attending American public schools.¹⁰ If there have indeed not been many white churches who have become multiethnic over the last two decades, it has not been due to lack of opportunity to engage with people from other ethnicities.

The regret of looking back at the last twenty years should only be eclipsed by the urgency of looking forward to the decades to come. Estimates project white Americans will barely represent half of the population (51 percent) in 2040, and drop all the way to 43 percent in 2060.¹¹ That year will also mark the first time the *number* of white people in America will decline for the first time (not just the percentage of their representation), and the approximate time those who identify as multiracial will have tripled and the number of Hispanics and Asians will have more than doubled.¹² Mark Mather, a demographer with the Population Reference Bureau, summarizes this cascade of statistics bluntly, saying, “No other country has experienced such rapid racial and ethnic change.”¹³

Sadly, the change—or lack of change—displayed by most white churches can not be described as anything close to “rapid.” According to research by the Public Religion Research

⁹ Paul Taylor, “The Next America,” *Pew Research*, April 10, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/next-america/#The-New-U.S>

¹⁰ Valerie Strauss, “For First Time, Minority Students Expected to Be Majority in U.S. Public Schools This Fall,” *Washington Post*, August 21, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp2014/08/21/for-first-time-minority-students-expected-to-be-majority-in-u-s-public-schools-this-fall>

¹¹ Taylor, “The Next America”

¹² U.S. Census Bureau Projections Show a Slower Growing, Older, More Diverse Nation a Half Century from Now,” U.S. Census Bureau Newsroom, December 12, 2012, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/population/cb12-243.html>

¹³ Sam Roberts, “In a Generation, Minorities May Be U.S. Majority,” *New York Times*, August 13, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/14/washington/14census.html>

Institute in 2014, the average white American’s friend network was 91 percent white, and 75% of respondents indicated they did not have a single close friend that was not white.¹⁴ These trends are tragically reminiscent of Emerson’s lament in *Divided by Faith*, that “while religion in America had proven capable as a moral force in freeing people when necessary, it was unable or unwilling to bring people together across racial lines, tragically serving as an embodiment of larger American contradictions.”¹⁵ There are echoes of his conflicted lament in his more recent words about white Christians in multiethnic congregations. While he has seen such congregations function as the harbingers he prophesied they would be years ago, he still has to report troubling trends from within them. One such trend is the predictable departure of white members from multiethnic churches once their ethnic group falls below 50 percent representation, or when their culture no longer sets norms for worship and community in the congregation as a whole. He shares more lament on behalf of the leaders of color within such churches, saying “The white brothers and sisters just won’t give up their privilege—and so we’ve been defeated in a sense.”¹⁶ It seems the Church—including the multiethnic church—needs to be reminded of its identity and purpose.

King and Jones: What the Church Could and Should Be (But is Not Yet)

¹⁴ Christopher Ingraham, “Three Quarters of Whites Don’t Have Any Non-White Friends.” *The Washington Post*. August 25, 2014: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/08/25/three-quarters-of-whites-dont-have-any-non-white-friends>

¹⁵ Michael O Emerson, *Divided By Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 18.

¹⁶ Tom Gjelten, “Multiracial Congregations May Not Bridge Racial Divide.” *NPR*. July 17, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/17/891600067/multiracial-congregations-may-not-bridge-racial-divide>

There are few who are not familiar with the words Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. employed to call out the American Church after a lecture at Western Michigan University in December 1963. By demanding she recognize herself as the most segregated major institution in America and repent accordingly, King was continuing to prophetically plead with the same target audience he addressed from a jail cell in Alabama eight months prior.¹⁷ From his confines in Birmingham he reminded his readers of the power that marked the early church, and the way it flowed from the willingness of Christians to suffer for what they believed. King warned, “If today’s church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the 20th century.”¹⁸

We are more than two decades past the close of the century into which King spoke his warning, and the repentance he called for from the Church as a whole—but especially from white, nominal Christians—has been incomplete. As a result, much loyalty has been lost, and the church is often dismissed as irrelevant and meaningless as King foretold, too often a thermometer responding to worldly pressures, and rarely a thermostat setting the cultural temperature in which unity and justice can thrive.

And yet, more recent voices have recognized the promises that remain within his words. King warned that the Church may become “a tail-light behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice.”¹⁹ Vince Bantu echoes and repackages

¹⁷ Full transcript of speech and Q&A following it are at <http://www.wmich.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/MLK.pdf>, accessed January 9, 2022.

¹⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” *The Christian Century*, June 12, 1963, <http://www.christiancentury.org/sites/default/files/downloads/resources/mlk-letter.pdf>, accessed January 9, 2022.

¹⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” *The Christian Century*, June 12, 1963, <http://www.christiancentury.org/sites/default/files/downloads/resources/mlk-letter.pdf>, accessed January 9, 2022.

the warning as an exhortation, saying, “For the church to be a proleptic sign is for it to function as a forward-facing mirror—people should look at the church and get a glimpse of where the world is heading.”²⁰

Robert Jones is another voice who, despite being brutally honest at times about the shortcomings seen in the church of recent memory, still sees possibility in the midst of her mess. He aptly calls out the challenges of still-segregated American life as (1) insufficient cross-racial interaction because of geography, (2) the previously mentioned relational norms in which white Americans have very few friends from other ethnicities, and (3) there being virtually no American institutions positioned to resolve these matters of division.²¹ After declaring the insufficiency of corporate diversity training in the workplace, and lamenting that the the military’s cross-cultural effectiveness impacts just a fraction of the population, Jones asserts “that if Americans are going to bridge the racial divide, we are going to have to build something new—or at the very least, transform existing institutions.”²²

He then shares why he believes churches may yet have potential to be those transformed institutions, and bring transforming unity into places of division. He first points to the physical presence churches retain in every community in America, and the progress that would be made if they simply mirrored the demographics of their neighborhoods.²³ He then asserts that “forming communities that foster meaningful relationships over time is precisely the kind of thing that

²⁰ Vince L. Bantu, *A Multitude of All Peoples: Engaging Ancient Christianity’s Global Identity* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2020), 112.

²¹ Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, 161.

²² *Ibid*, 162-163.

²³ To “simply mirror” the demographics of their neighborhoods, churches must adopt initiatives that are anything but simple. Fluency in conversations about affordable housing and urban planning must come alongside proficient gospel contextualization. Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, 191.

churches—at their best—can do,” and that such congregations could break down barriers and facilitate ties across common dividing lines.²⁴

In brief, Jones believes churches can still provide access to transformed, redemptive versions of *people* and *place*, which is part of what Willie Jennings says Christianity must do to untangle itself from the mangled reality of division and injustice—“establishing places to be fully Christian.”²⁵

Tisby: Awareness, Repentance and Action

For multiethnic churches to be collections of such people and examples of such places, they will need to tune their ears to key voices of encouragement, equipping, concern, and at times, rebuke.

One such voice is that of Jemar Tisby, who in releasing *The Color of Compromise* in 2019 made revisiting Church’s role in America’s troubled past accessible to millions. In highlighting the apathy and opposition displayed by much of the the American church toward the civil rights movement,²⁶ and condemning common emphasis on individual conversion and piety at the expense of confronting institutional injustice,²⁷ Tisby brings many of those previously insulated from such perspectives into awareness. In doing so, he makes it possible for white

²⁴ Ibid, 191.

²⁵ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 248.

²⁶ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 132.

²⁷ Ibid, 50.

Christians to have meaningful conversations with brothers and sisters from other ethnicities where isolated incidents, patterns of injustice, and the human heart can all be discussed.²⁸

Tisby does not merely create awareness of historical perspectives that call for correction, but also of sin that calls for repentance. He challenges the church of today to agree with James 4:17 when it says knowing the good to be done without actually doing that good is sin—and to repent by refusing to perpetuate injustice through inaction and apathy.²⁹ As he does so, he also makes it clear that the unifying work of repentance and redemption must not be viewed as a one-time event. Since injustice never fully goes away—but rather adapts to changing times and contexts—the work of addressing brokenness in both the culture and the mirror must be viewed as an ongoing duty of the Christian life.³⁰

Throughout his calling of Christians to awareness, repentance, and action, Tisby still clings to the relational nature of reconciliation—both theologically and interpersonally—and insists his readers do the same. He points to the reconciliation accomplished through the incarnation of Christ as both the relational exemplar Christians should adopt, and our reason for hope as we pursue justice and unity together.³¹

Rah: Lamenting and Listening

²⁸ Ibid, 184.

²⁹ Ibid, 212.

³⁰ Ibid, 154.

³¹ Miles Wertz, “Jemar Tisby: Three Words Should Guide Our Pursuit of Racial Justice.” *Christianity Today*. June 10, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/june-web-only/jemar-tisby-how-fight-racism-three-words.html>

Soong-Chan Rah has proven to be another needed voice through frequent contributions spanning over a decade, none more timely than his aptly named *Prophetic Lament*. Rah is likely most known for two things—carrying the biblical concept of lament to the forefront with divine timing, and for the sharp rebukes he is willing to bring against the American church in areas where the need for correction is urgent. Rah does not merely champion the practice of lament as an essential spiritual discipline—particularly for those leading in multiethnic settings—but also as a means by which Christology itself is to be shaped. He is persistent in his assertion that theology shaped by praise alone is intrinsically imbalanced, certain to inevitably bring dysfunction and harm to any community in which it is held.³² Rah’s aforementioned prophetic sharpness is skillfully pointed to many key issues, including what he refers to as a “market-driven” approach to church that appeals to the materialistic desires of the individual consumer. He declares that such churches—which are defined by their comfort instead of Christ—are not biblical churches at all, but are far more committed to being consumers of religion than followers of Jesus.³³

As relevant as his work on lament, materialism and comfort is for leaders who aspire to transition white churches into a multicultural reality, Rah’s lesser-known insights on listening to and amplifying the voices of others may serve such leaders just as powerfully. He is quick to highlight how part of Christian witness is empowering the other to express to both God and God’s people the truth of a story that has long remained hidden.³⁴ He challenges his listeners to

³² Soong-Chan Rah, *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church*. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010), 192.

³³ Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Releasing the Church from Western Captivity*. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), 63.

³⁴ Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 180.

refrain from “seeing the problems of the world as laboratories where we apply our know-how and problem-solving skills,” instead imploring them to first seek to understand through listening instead of rushing to diagnose and fix.³⁵ Rah consistently seeks to protect the voice of the suffering, helping those who see themselves as advocates to clearly see their role for what it is—to help the voiceless gain and keep their own voice.³⁶

Swanson: It’s All About Discipleship

Largely through the recent release of *Rediscipling the White Church*, David Swanson has quickly emerged as an essential voice, calling the greater conversation about addressing race and ethnicity among white Christians back to a Christological center-point. At the heart of Swanson’s message is his belief that the heart of the issue is not a *diversity* problem, but a *discipleship* problem. He asserts that since it has been defective discipleship—which fails to connect God’s passion for unity across ethnicities and addressing injustice with following Jesus—that has led to white Christianity’s segregation, work should not begin by pursuing diversity, but by addressing the discipleship practices employed in most white churches.³⁷ From vocabulary, to liturgy, to worship styles, to conflict resolution, Swanson tethers every element of life in a faithful church to a Gospel commitment to make disciples of *all nations*.

Swanson’s ability to clearly and biblically present concepts common in other key voices (Tisby, Rah, and others) through the lens of discipleship is incredibly valuable, not just for

³⁵ Ibid, 199.

³⁶ Ibid, 124.

³⁷ David Swanson, *Rediscipling the White Church: From Cheap Diversity to True Solidarity*. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2020), loc 973, Kindle.

practical application in the life of a congregation, but also for its appeal to white Christians who have previously considered ethnicity a peripheral matter, likely to distract from what they consider to be essentials. He asserts that discipleship practices in white churches must account for racism beyond individual people and decisions, which he declares is the very things white Christianity has failed to do.³⁸ He asserts that “approaching racial segregation and injustice from the perspective of discipleship can move white Christians to a place we have rarely gone—to lived and sacrificial solidarity with our neighbors.”³⁹ He attacks the dangers of individualism head on, declaring its elimination as the top priority for those leading change, as a discipleship approach to racial justice and reconciliation depends on a *community* of Christians.⁴⁰ And he declares strongly that pursuing a discipleship to Jesus that leads from segregation to solidarity will require white Christians to become accustomed to the uncomfortable truths they have been insulated from, which he warns will *not* be easy.⁴¹

Swanson also highlights a concept that proves to be one of the most repeated among the leaders featured in this thesis—the need to *slow down*. He says:

We prefer not to linger. Yet the discipleship journey to redirect our desires toward the reconciled kingdom of God cannot be rushed. Our emotions must be fully engaged. After all, our discipleship paradigm is deeply concerned with our affections and loves. As desiring beings, it is our hearts that need transformation, and this cannot be accomplished simply by receiving new information. We need to feel the impact of our segregation on our own lives as well as on the lives of people of color and their communities.⁴²

³⁸ Swanson, loc 501.

³⁹ Ibid, loc 593.

⁴⁰ Ibid, loc 599.

⁴¹ Ibid, loc 897.

⁴² Swanson, *Rediscipling the White Church*, loc 752.

Sadly, this call for a change of pace proves to confront the culture of American churches as much as any other concept discussed in this thesis. The need to slow down, as Swanson urges, proves essential in all areas of response and application for aspiring churches.

Edwards and Keller: Nuance and Concern

Voices of warning and nuance—that prevent zealous oversimplification and promote intentionality and care—are of utmost importance for those aspiring to lead meaningful change in multiethnic spaces. Tim Keller and Korie Little Edwards are among those who bring clarity and correction.

Keller is passionate about multiethnic churches, having pastored one himself in Manhattan for 28 years, and assisted in the planting of countless others in global cities across the world through Redeemer City to City, which he cofounded in 2000.⁴³ One might assume he would assert all churches should be multiethnic. However, he says:

It is more difficult for (African-American, Asian, and Latino churches) to become multiethnic, because in some ways they are community centers for their people, and could lose some of their power to represent their people to the broader culture...I would love to see a multiethnic, future church, but I realize (those) churches have a lot to lose, so I'm careful when I say that. I don't want to make them feel that somehow they're doing wrong to stay more mono-ethnic. I still see a role for that. I don't see much of a role for a purely white church anymore, but I do see a role for (those) churches.⁴⁴

Churches in truly homogenous areas, as well as those primarily consisting of immigrants, refugees, or ethnic minorities seeking to preserve and pass on their cultures are all examples of

⁴³“About.” Redeemer City to City. Accessed March 16, 2022. <https://redeemercitytocity.com/about>

⁴⁴ Timothy Keller, “Tim Keller on Churches and Race,” Youtube, April 23, 2012, educational video, 0:11 to 2:24, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5F2m1PepVb4>

congregations Keller would celebrate alongside the multiethnic churches of which he speaks so highly.

Despite being an African-American woman who has attended a multiethnic church herself, Korie Little Edwards is quick to champion the cause of those who opt for congregations of people from their own non-majority ethnicity. She offers a scathing review—from both her professional expertise and personal experience—that multiracial churches work only to the extent that their white members are comfortable.⁴⁵ Her 2008 work, *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches*—and recent podcast of the same name—provide perspective that leaders aspiring to establish multiethnic churches must consider if they wish to maximize flourishing and minimize harm through their efforts.⁴⁶

DeYmaz and Gray: Hope for a Way Forward

Few recent voices have had more fruitful impact on the leaders of multiethnic churches at the intersection of exhortation and practical equipping than Mark DeYmaz and Derwin Gray. DeYmaz cofounded Mosaix alongside George Yancey in 2004 after recognizing the need for a network of thought-leading pioneers pursuing multiethnic church planting, growth, and development at the turn of the century.⁴⁷ As equal parts prophet and practitioner, DeYmaz is uniquely positioned to declare that healthy, multiethnic churches can indeed be *places* in which

⁴⁵ Korie Little Edwards, *The Multiethnic Church Movement Has Not Lived Up to Its Promise*. Christianity Today, March 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/march/race-diversity-multiethnic-church-movement-promise.html>

⁴⁶ Edwards' work—particularly her concerns about multiethnic churches where people of color are expected to abandon much of their own culture and assimilate to the dominant one— is deserving of consideration far deeper than what this thesis is capable of providing. The work of Brenda Salter McNeil is also of great value in this area.

⁴⁷ "About." Mosaix Church. Accessed March 16, 2022. <https://mosaix.info/about-mosaix/>

people are comfortable being uncomfortable, recognize they are part of something much bigger than themselves, and actively embrace a spirit of inclusion beyond the predictability of homogeneity.⁴⁸ In such communities, people and norms can and do change—including white people and white norms. There is hope for a way forward.

DeYmaz is also adept at properly warning those interested in leading a multi-ethnic church about the certainty of being misunderstood, misrepresented, and misjudged by friends, colleagues, and those across cultural lines.⁴⁹ He also warns younger leaders about the discouraging lack of mentors available to coach younger leaders since so few to date have realized the dream.⁵⁰ This latter warning only further confirms the need for the stories featured in this thesis.

Similar to DeYmaz, Gray has also created a space for connection and equipping among those seeking to lead multiethnic churches. Several times each year, the Multiethnic Roundtable is hosted at Transformation Church—which he planted near Charlotte with a multiethnic team in 2010—and has invested in hundreds of leaders since its inception. Also similar to DeYmaz is Gray’s hopeful optimism about what the multiethnic church has the potential to be. He says, “Partnering with the Holy Spirit in creating multicolored, Jesus-exalting, missional congregations that can reach a changing America and give a foretaste of Jesus’ eternal kingdom will result in the American church not merely surviving, but thriving in the twenty-first

⁴⁸ Mark DeYmaz, *Leading a Healthy Multiethnic Church: Seven Common Challenges and How to Overcome Them*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), loc 110, Kindle.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, loc 705.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, loc 915.

century.”⁵¹ He adds that the diversity among the members of these congregations—and the diversity of gifts within those members—will catalyze unprecedented amounts of innovation and creativity as they live out their mission together.⁵² Again, there is hope for a way forward.

The Precious Few

As helpful as the voices above are, exemplars specific to the focus of this thesis are still lacking. It has been established that although there has been a significant increase in the number of multiethnic churches, very few of them are formerly white churches. There are some *statistics* pointing to the existence of these churches—what is lacking is accessible *stories* about their experiences. This makes existing, published accounts of transitioned churches—regardless of length, age, or thematic focus—incredibly valuable.

Meadowridge Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas

In July 2020, NPR posted an article titled, *Multiracial Congregations May Not Bridge Racial Divide*, by Tom Gjelten.⁵³ Although its focus is primarily on the troubling tendencies of some multiracial churches, in the middle is a brief profile of a congregation that has accomplished something meaningful.

Gjelten recounts how Pastor Randal Lyle, inspired by Emerson’s aforementioned work, led his all-white congregation in a largely African-American neighborhood toward change. He

⁵¹ Derwin Gray, *Building Multiethnic Churches: A Gospel Vision of Grace, Love, and Reconciliation in a Divided World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2021), loc 636, Kindle.

⁵² *Ibid*, loc 2,342.

⁵³ Gjelten, “Multiracial Congregations May Not Bridge Racial Divide.”

shares how Meadowridge’s first expression of commitment was starting a basketball league for youth from the neighborhood, and how invites to worship services were rebuffed by league participants who said the church was clearly intended for white people. He tells of the sign that was hung outside the building that said, “All races united in Christ,” the gospel choir that was started, and the toys that were replaced in the children’s ministry to reflect racial diversity. He includes quotes from African-American members of the church, one saying the initial stares were worth the chance to worship with the many kinds of people she works with, another sharing how the church was a perfect fit for her multiracial family, still another recalling how she dealt with inevitable, awkward encounters in the early days—hugging as many people as possible.⁵⁴

Meadowridge Baptist is now one third African-American, and has a growing Latino representation as well. It remains one of the few intentionally multicultural churches in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.⁵⁵ Gjeltén’s retelling is inspiring—even though brief—and is precisely the kind of story many aspiring leaders long to hear, featuring a formerly white church who successfully navigated the challenging road to a multiethnic reality. It also highlights the willingness of aspiring leaders to take risks, the inevitability of discouragement, the various ways a culture of intentionality must be present, and most importantly, the need for brave people outside the dominant culture to lead the way by entering a congregation still learning how to care for them well. However, it is unlikely aspiring leaders would read this article and encounter the story of Meadowridge Baptist while looking for encouragement, as its title implies belief in multiethnic churches as redemptive forces may be unfounded.

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Ibid

Mosaic in Los Angeles, California

Another helpful account is found in *A Mosaic of Believers: Diversity and Innovation in a Multiethnic Church*, by Geraldo Marti. Published in 2005, the book is an academic presentation of Mosaic, a well-known church in Los Angeles, and focuses on the creative, artistic, and pioneering traits that help it attract and retain its ethnically diverse population.⁵⁶

Marti retells the greater story of Mosaic largely by gathering oral accounts from long-time church members, admitting that only small glimpses of the church's sixty-year history are documented through surviving pamphlets and bulletins dating back to the mid-seventies.⁵⁷ He shares how First Southern Baptist Church of East Los Angeles had been established in 1943 by 35 transplanted white Midwesterners and Southerners, steadily grew, and even acquired a small church building and some surrounding land before nearly closing its doors during a season of decline that stretched through the 1960's.

Everything changed in 1971, when the church unanimously voted to call a young, white student from Fuller Seminary named Philip Bowers to be the next pastor of the church. Bowers, who was trained as a missionary, had a two-fold goal of reaching the people of East Los Angeles, and sending as many missionaries to the nations as possible. He removed their denominational affiliation from the church's name (the first Southern Baptist pastor in the country to do so), moved into a house in the immediate neighborhood in which the church was

⁵⁶ Gerardo Marti, *A Mosaic of Believers: Diversity and Innovation in a Multiethnic Church* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005) loc 62, Kindle.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, loc 501.

located, and planted himself into the life of the community. Under his leadership, the church grew from 45 to over 200 within three years, peaking at nearly 600 in 1981.⁵⁸

As the people of the church became more intentional engaging the community, and as demographics rapidly shifted in their area, the ethnic composition of the church changed drastically. By the mid-seventies, the majority of attendees were English-speaking Hispanics, with smaller representations of Asian and white members as well. Marti tracks the many ministry expressions that changed along with the make-up of the church itself, highlights the introduction of large stage performances attended by up to 1,500 people at a time, and shares the challenges the diversifying congregation faced as young, white seminary students were given leadership roles inaccessible to dual-income Hispanic families due to limited amounts of free time.⁵⁹

Marti follows the church's narrative all the way through the arrival of Bowers' chosen successor, Erwin McManus, who has since grown the church into a multi-site, multi-city family of congregations with a combined weekly attendance of over 5,000 people. The empowerment of McManus, a gifted leader and church planter born in El Salvador, was a fitting next step for the church that has since been renamed "Mosaic," which refers to the broken people of many colors who make up the church body together.⁶⁰

In the book's opening pages, Marti shares how the present-day question always being asked at Mosaic is "What must we do to reach Los Angeles for Christ?"⁶¹ This enduring value

⁵⁸ Ibid, loc 529.

⁵⁹ Ibid, loc 561.

⁶⁰ Ibid, loc 673.

⁶¹ Ibid, loc 76.

echoes Bowers' supreme commitment to reaching his community from decades prior, and is prominent among the leaders featured in this thesis.

Hope Church in Memphis, Tennessee

Most would not consider a white, Evangelical Presbyterian megachurch, with a white staff, in a southern city with a racially-charged history, to be a likely candidate for successfully transitioning into a multiethnic reality. And yet, that is precisely what has transpired at Hope Church, just outside Memphis, Tennessee.

Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra shares the story of Hope Church in her 2017 article, "How the Country's Largest White Presbyterian Church Became Multiethnic."⁶² Founding Pastor, Craig Strickland started the church in 1988, which became the largest church in Memphis within 20 years, regularly drawing 7,000 worshipers each weekend. However, despite being located in a city where 60 percent of the population was black, less than one percent of the church was African-American.⁶³ Strickland decided this problem needed to be addressed rather than ignored.

The role of senior pastor is central to Hope Church's story of unlikely transformation. Strickland was resolute in his conviction that the multiethnic vision his team had embraced together would only come to pass if his eventual successor was African-American. So, he started a year-long sequence of conversations with Rufus Smith, the well-known pastor of a healthy multiethnic church in Houston. Smith was initially not at all interested in Strickland's proposal.

⁶² Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, "How the Country's Largest White Presbyterian Church Became Multiethnic." *The Gospel Coalition*. November 2, 2017: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/countrys-largest-white-presbyterian-church-became-multiethnic/>.

⁶³ Ibid

Hope was a long-established megachurch—making it far less adaptable than a smaller, younger congregation—and was located in Memphis, a city damaged by racial division long before Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated there in 1968.⁶⁴

Still, Smith eventually felt compelled to accept Strickland’s invitation, moving to Memphis for a two-year succession process that would result in him being the senior leader of a church that was less than one percent African-American when he arrived. He recalls all that was required to see change start to happen—his introduction to the preaching rotation, relationship building with various people groups within the church, the creation of an eight-week cultural competency class, representation on stage, the exploration of music styles, community meetings on racial unity—all contributing to an eventual reality where African-Americans constitute 22 percent of the church and 50 percent of the new members class.⁶⁵

As Smith attempts to expand on just how this came to pass, he starts with the Gospel itself, insisting that churches who feel called to move from mono-ethnic to multiethnic must start with conviction that what is typical in churches today is not aligned with the actual gospel of Scripture, which compels Christians to make disciples of every ethnicity. He also speaks of the risk that was required, which did not remain hypothetical, but rather became real cost when 10 percent of the congregation—totaling over 700 people—left the church during the transition, taking a million dollars of revenue with them.⁶⁶ He admits patience was also required, insisting

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Ibid

that “the transition would have been worse if we hadn’t eased in,” but adding, “Even though it took a while, the results have been worth the wait.”⁶⁷

The results Smith speaks of are not merely the results of what the leaders of Hope Church have done, but also by what they have *not* done. He clarifies how they “do not deify or idolize multiethnicity,” and only discuss race from the pulpit during one short sermon series every year, believing “that more is caught than taught.”⁶⁸ He also does not use common “melting pot” metaphors to describe Hope Church, opting for a salad bowl instead. In a 2020 interview with *Outreach Magazine* he says:

I use that example all the time. We maintain our distinctions and celebrate them. We don’t leave all our cultural differences behind to become homogenous. Our individual differences and identities contribute beautifully to the larger whole that God is building. That’s not easy. But it is so worth it.”⁶⁹

He concedes it is not easy because he remembers what it was like to feel called to something he had not seen demonstrated before. Smith recalls a conversation in 1998 with George Barna—founder of *Barna Group*, in which he asked for information models on churches who had become multiethnic. Barna replied, “Young man, when you find out what works, you let me know—it’s not even a blip on our radar.” As Smith reminisces on that exchange 20 years

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Paul J. Pastor, “Hope Church: From Toleration to Celebration—Part 2.” *Outreach Magazine*. June 5, 2020, <https://outreachmagazine.com/interviews/41652-hope-church-from-toleration-to-celebration-part-2.html>

⁶⁹ Paul J. Pastor, “Hope Church: From Toleration to Celebration—Part 2.” *Outreach Magazine*. June 5, 2020: <https://outreachmagazine.com/interviews/41652-hope-church-from-toleration-to-celebration-part-2.html>

later, he admits how clueless he felt, saying, “I simply didn’t have a blueprint. I’m sure there was one somewhere, but I didn’t know where to look.”⁷⁰

Now, largely because of Smith and Strickland, a blueprint of sorts *does* exist for transitioning a white church into a multiethnic reality, and other church leaders have taken notice. Sandy Willson—a pastor at another local Memphis church—has never seen any other church accomplish what Hope Church has achieved, saying, “It is an unusual story, and it does need to be told, because those of us who pastor traditional churches have to figure out how this can be done.”⁷¹

Eekhoff’s 2017 article for *The Gospel Coalition* and Paul Pastor’s two-part interview with Strickland and Smith for *Outreach Magazine* in 2020 have made the story of transformation at Hope Church compelling and available, a gift to those still wondering if such stories exist. It is possible. Established white churches *can* change. Even if large and no longer nimble, and even if surrounded by haunting history that should make real progress nearly impossible.

Finding the Ten Featured Leaders

The story of Hope Church was the first I became aware of as I began research for this thesis in 2019. I would not find Marti’s work on Mosaic or Gjelten’s *NPR* article featuring the brief profile of Meadowridge Baptist until much later. So, for a significant amount of time, the voices of Craig Strickland and Rufus Smith were the only ones offering me any assurance that my desires for my church—and for this thesis—were not over-ambitious. I knew more stories

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ Eekhoff Zylstra, “How the Country’s Largest White Presbyterian Church Became Multiethnic.”

must exist, and would offer similar inspiration and insight from different cultural contexts, so I broadened and intensified my search.

It did not take much time or effort to find two leaders who had transitioned white churches into multiethnicity, and had written books about their experiences. One was Rodney Woo, who wrote *The Color of Church: a Biblical and Practical Paradigm for Multiracial Churches* in 2009, largely focusing on his time as Lead Pastor of Wilcrest Baptist Church in Houston. The other was Mark Hearn, Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church in Duluth, Georgia, who has released two books on the topic—*Technicolor* in 2017, and *Hearing in Technicolor* in 2021—which together recount his experience guiding a century-old, Southern Baptist church toward a multiethnic reality. I was able to spend time in conversation with both Woo and Hearn, and their words—written and spoken—are featured prominently throughout this thesis.

And then, nothing. For months, the hunt for books, articles, churches or leaders that fit the criteria of this thesis was mostly fruitless. My searching confirmed that while there are many multiethnic churches in this country, there are *not* many multiethnic churches that used to be white churches—and finding leaders of the latter kind was far more difficult than expected.

In desperation, I reached out to the aforementioned Mark DeYmaz—whom I had never met—figuring if anyone could provide a list of leaders who had already walked this road, it would be the president overseeing a network of multiethnic church leaders. He graciously agreed to a Zoom call, which I left with many notes taken, a few leads, and permission to use his name for credibility as I attempted to set up conversations with more strangers. When I thought the list had stalled at five names, personal relationships came through in a big way. Two leaders fitting the desired profile were in the Seattle area, where my own church is located. New friends from a

cohort of pastors my wife and I had recently joined graciously introduced me to three others. In the end, my list had ten names on it:

Rock Dillaman | Allegheny Center Alliance Church | Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Mark Hearn | First Baptist Church | Duluth, Georgia
Beau Hughes | The Village Church | Denton, Texas
John Jordan | Village Church | Beaverton, Oregon
Phil McCallum | Evergreen Church | Bothell, Washington
Rick McKinley | Imago Dei | Portland, Oregon
Keith Jenkins | East Hill Church Family | Gresham, Oregon
Tyler Sollie | Life Center | Tacoma, Washington
Bryan Wilkerson | Grace Chapel | Boston, Massachusetts
Rodney Woo | Wilcrest Baptist Church | Houston, Texas

Nature and Method of This Thesis

Over the course of several months, I was able to have casual conversations with each of the ten leaders listed above.⁷² There were no surveys issued for them to complete, nor were they asked to prepare answers to a sequence of scripted questions. Rather, these were times for sharing stories of counting the cost, paying the cost, and staying the course while leading a white church toward a multiethnic reality. Clarifying the nature of these interactions creates an opportunity to also clarify this thesis is in not an attempt at statistical significance of any kind. It is not intended as a contribution to an existing field of research based on quantitative or qualitative analysis, nor is it an exercise in formal ethnography—although I hope others will undertake such meaningful projects in the future. *It is* a collection of stories, gathered through

⁷² It is important to acknowledge who is not represented among the 10 participants, namely, women, or voices from outside what most would consider theologically conservative circles. Some on the list identify as evangelical, others do not. Had I become aware of female or mainline leaders who fit the criteria of this thesis, they would have absolutely been invited to participate.

informal conversations, supplemented by additional voices of expertise in leadership, theology, and multiethnic ministry, and curated to highlight the explanations the stories themselves provide for their own rarity. The selection of these methods was guided by a simple conviction—that although statistics prove change is needed, stories prove change is possible.

As previously stated, the chapters that follow will present the stories of the featured leaders, while attempting to provide explanations for the rarity of the churches they represent. Stated simply, it will be demonstrated that the churches in question are rare because of the uncommon leadership, robust theology, and intentional culture found within them.

Chapter 2 - Uncommon Leadership

If the question is why are the churches in question so rare, then an accurate response must center around just how uncommon the leadership in such congregations must be to make any amount of progress possible, or sustain any measure of success. One would assume the cost of championing such change would be high. In reality it is exponentially higher. One would assume a felt sense of calling would be beneficial to the initial leader. In reality a leader without such conviction simply does not last. And one might assume patience and perseverance to be helpful traits. In reality anything less than a supernatural dose of these attributes proves to be a fatal insufficiency, regardless of the sincerity or strategy that mark a leader's efforts.

A Clear Sense of Calling

A single-hearted, single-minded ambition for the gospel will eventually ask one fundamental question of us all: Is there any group, any place, any people that you see as so important and beautiful in the economy of God that you are willing to bury your heart in that place, among those people, as together you pursue the beauty and excellence of God?¹
Dr. Gregory Jones

When I first spoke to Mark DeYmaz—president of Mosaix, a relational network supporting the planting and development of multiethnic churches—I asked him what common traits I would find among leaders who had transitioned white churches into a multiethnic reality. His first answer, without hesitation, was a sense of calling. That is, regardless of the terminology employed, each leader would somehow articulate their belief that God wanted them to help build

¹ Gregory L. Jones and Kevin Armstrong. *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006.), loc 2201, Kindle.

this specific kind of church. After conversations with the featured leaders, I can unequivocally say that DeYmaz was correct in this regard, and that every leader embarking upon this journey must say, “this is my point of no return,” and then immediately begin walking those in their contexts toward similar proclamations of their own. Anything less proves woefully insufficient.

There is no shortage of pastors who have never felt a specific calling to a particular place or people, but still demonstrate faithful and fruitful commitment to the Gospel and the Kingdom of God. Still, it seems that taking on the challenge of transitioning a church into a multiethnic reality requires an increased sense of divine assignment. This dynamic is similar to what is often observed among church planters—they walk with certainty as they pursue the work they believe they have been compelled to do.

While every leader who has transitioned a white church can point to at least one pivotal moment or realization that served as the starting point of their own journey, Phil McCallum appears to have always been on a path preparing him for this particular calling, in this particular cultural moment. He lives in daily conviction that his very namesake, Philip the Apostle, was a foretelling of the road he would walk in his life and ministry. His successes and failures in different churches, on different continents, within different cultural contexts, all look like stepping stones to his present post as Lead Pastor of Evergreen Church in Bothell, Washington. His story is compelling evidence that God occasionally ushers certain leaders into nearly immediate awareness of a specific calling, then steadily equips them for the unique work to be done in due time.

While only one of the stories I collected features a leader who spent much of their early life in awareness of their multicultural calling, none feature someone who cites curiosity or experimentation as the reason they pursued transitioning a white church. Their efforts sprung

from intense feelings and pivotal realizations where they knew obedience to God, faithfulness to the mission, or even the survival of the church itself hung in the balance.

John Jordan has served as an associate pastor at Village Church in Beaverton, Oregon for nearly thirty years, having arrived in the early nineties when suburban Portland was diversifying more rapidly than most existing residents realized, largely through refugee resettlement. He speaks about the church's decision to orient their entire ministry around being a church of and for the nations as if it were no decision at all, saying, "We felt like we didn't have a choice—it was clear this was what God was leading us to do, and our community was changing so much." He adds, matter-of-factly, "Did we really want to reach them or not?"²

This sense of a pivotal choice already being made clear is present when Beau Hughes—pastor of The Village Church in Denton, Texas—recalls similar realizations around missional integrity from the era in which his congregation moved into a building next to the University of North Texas.³ "We were an all-white church, with an all-white staff, meeting right across the street from one of the most diverse colleges in the nation." Hughes and his team looked each other in the face, and said what needed to be said, "We all say we want to reach our neighbors, and *these* are our neighbors."⁴ For them, being called to the mission of God was synonymous to being called to the nations, not because they had long-known they were supposed to be in multiethnic ministry, but because the nations were in their backyard.

² John Jordan, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

³ The Village Church Denton is in the Dallas area, and is not affiliated with John Jordan's church of the same name in Oregon.

⁴ Beau Hughes, conversation with author, Zoom, January 6, 2022.

Shortly after Mark Hearn accepted the role of Senior Pastor at First Baptist Church in Duluth, Georgia, he accepted an invitation to attend a “State of the City” gathering, mostly to show support to the mayor, who attended Hearn’s church. While at the event, Hearn was rattled after hearing of a recent public school survey that revealed 57 first languages being spoken in students’ homes throughout the district. The church he had just assumed leadership of was ninety-seven percent white, and exclusively english-speaking. His newly adopted city was far more diverse than he and his congregation could have imagined. For the century-old church to be faithful to its mission, for them to have any kind of opportunity to serve the people represented by those 57 languages, drastic change would be necessary.

As admirable as is to make paradigm shifting adjustments in the name of missional faithfulness, this is not the initial motivation for all churches who commit to a multiethnic trajectory. For some, their decision-making comes not from a place of strength, but rather one of desperation, not proactively seizing opportunity, but reactively addressing weakness. For the people of Wilcrest Baptist Church, it was a matter of survival. By the time Rodney Woo arrived as the new senior pastor in 1992, the demographics of the surrounding neighborhoods in West Houston had been shifting for years, from mostly white to black and hispanic, and the church had done little to adapt to or even acknowledge the changes. Woo committed himself to helping his community realize they needed to change, or manage a slow, inevitable demise. It was starting at this place of urgency and honesty that sparked Wilcrest’s story of transformation over the years that followed.

Rock Dillamon inherited a similar situation when he was unanimously voted to be the new Senior Pastor of Allegheny Center Alliance Church (ACAC) in Pennsylvania. The year was 1984, and the neighborhood of Pittsburgh in which the church was located had already shifted

from mostly white to almost entirely black over the previous decades. Still, every Sunday an all-white congregation from surrounding areas would commute in for worship service. The houses that members drove past on their way to church were inhabited by people who believed they were not invited—and they were right. The congregation had a reputation for bigotry, and sadly, they had earned it. It was obvious to Dillamon that the church could not (and must not) endure in the reality he inherited. Yes, it was a matter of survival, but much more so, it was a matter of conviction—that division must give way to unity, forgiveness must come to bear on wrongdoing, and animosity must give way to a new family, no matter the cost. That sense of calling endured all the way through the 36 years Dillaman led the people of ACAC toward redemptive change.

Every leader I spoke with can point to a moment or season where their own sense of calling was created, revealed or amplified. For Rick McKinley (Imago Dei, Portland), an unlikely friendship with a fellow church planter from a different ethnic background in 2002 brought awareness, and awareness quickly turned to passion.⁵ Bryan Wilkerson (Grace Chapel, Boston) recalls looking out on the congregation during his first sermon, being struck by how few people looked different than him, and immediately putting plans in motion to see meaningful change come to bear on his new church.⁶

The leaders featured in this thesis all have predictable attributes in common. They are educated, well trained, talented, and widely respected—but a primary trait they share is a deep sense of calling, regardless of what words they would use to describe it. None of them backpedaled into this vocation, nor wandered into this particular initiative by happenstance. None of them had it thrust upon them unwillingly by a denominational leader. They sensed an

⁵ Rick McKinley, conversation with author, Zoom, December 6, 2021.

⁶ Bryan Wilkerson, conversation with author, Zoom, January 6, 2022.

unmistakeable, inescapable command to do something different and more difficult than what is typical, for a purpose higher than themselves.

Counting the Cost

It's more complex. It's more difficult. It puts you in a different league of spiritual warfare. The current cultural and political climate has exacerbated it horrifically. I tell people it's not for the faint of heart. If you're not willing to have your best efforts questioned and misunderstood, if you aren't willing to work hard without applause, if you aren't willing to have people walk away from you even though you know you're trying to serve God, don't do it.⁷
Rock Dillaman

The decision to begin this thesis with the necessity of a felt calling was not arbitrary. Why do the featured leaders inevitably discuss this concept early in their writing or early in their conversations with me? Because transitioning a white church is costly, more costly than any of them anticipated, and certainly more costly than anyone who has not walked the path themselves can imagine.

Bryan Wilkerson (Grace Chapel, Boston) tethered the necessity of calling to the inevitable hardships intrinsic to the call, saying that “there has to be something internal—a grounding, a commitment, a sense that you *have* to do this—otherwise you *will* give up, or you’ll get angry.”⁸ Every leader aspiring to bring this level of change to a congregation must count the cost, and the cost is steep—taking its toll in more ways than aspiring leaders realize.

It Costs You Your Preferences

⁷ Rockwell Dillaman, conversation with author, Zoom, December 20, 2021.

⁸ Bryan Wilkerson, conversation with author, Zoom, January 6, 2022.

The focused, shared, missional purpose of the church or organization will trump every other competing value. It's more important than my preferences or personal desire. It's more critical than my leadership style, experience or past success. It's the grid by which we evaluate every other element in the church. It's the criterion for determining how we will spend our money, who we will hire and fire, which ministries we will start and which ones we will shut down. It's the tiebreaker in every argument and the principle by which we evaluate every decision we make. Denominational affiliation? Mission partnerships? Financial commitments? Staff decisions? Worship styles? The key question is: Does it further our mission? The mission trumps all.⁹
Tod Bolsinger

The preferences of church leaders determine more of their congregations' realities than they realize. Order of service, worship styles, vocabulary, missional partnerships, and conflict resolution methods all naturally take on the shape of the senior leader's preferences. Choosing to no longer default to one's own desires as the primary decision-making filter for the church is a counterintuitive exercise, especially in a previously homogenous church where the preferences of the pastor are more likely to reflect the those of its members. When the preferences of those not yet part of the church are given priority, things start looking and feeling very different, very quickly.

Woo (Wilcrest Baptist Church, Houston) helps articulate why signing up to lead such an effort will not appeal to many. He says, "We have to give up our music, we have to give up our control, we have to give up our preferences, we have to put the other person's needs above our own, we have to wash people's feet, we have to serve them...and even then the success rate is still just not that high."¹⁰

⁹ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2015), 125.

¹⁰ Rodney Woo, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

The sentiments put forward by Bolsinger above prove valuable for leaders struggling with the loss of their preferences. If the mission truly trumps all, then things they are partial to will naturally give way to those best aligned with declared purpose.

“I cannot and will not please everyone.”

The gauntlet of 2020 and 2021 seemed to throw every hardship imaginable at church leaders—global pandemic, civil unrest, economic uncertainty, political division— all striking with the force of a wrecking ball. Then, aftershocks came through the pointed words of scared, confused, and often angry people. Any communication about sensitive topics would provoke fifty percent of listeners to anxiety, and the other fifty to anger. Choosing to lead strongly in this season cost church leaders applause, but on a deeper level, it cost many the illusion they could faithfully shepherd people without facing criticism. Although a difficult realization, it is a necessary one, as many leaders are unaware of how much they value the unanimous approval of their people, which was never meant to be theirs in the first place. Many pastors are now forced to speak something over themselves for the first time; “I cannot and will not please everyone.”

To embark on the journey of leading a white church into transition is to sign up for frequent disapproval—that is to be expected. However, many aspiring leaders do not anticipate complaints and critiques coming from the very people they are trying to serve as they make bold changes. Well intentioned, clumsy efforts to lead something redemptive will inevitably cause discomfort, confusion and even anger among those who were meant to feel seen and valued. Where some featured leaders foresaw the possibility of appreciation, there was often silence. In places where they used to operate freely in their congregation’s indifference, they found themselves inundated by concerns and even accusations—of having false motives, harboring

political agendas, abandoning the Gospel, adopting false worldviews, or bowing a knee to contemporary culture. Only a strong leader fueled by a strong conviction will continue to put right foot in front of left and press on as the pendulum of public opinion swings swiftly.

In my conversation with McKinley (Imago Dei, Portland), he recalled what it felt like to navigate the path toward change in an uneasy congregation, and a volatile, politically charged city. He spoke of being among the first to establish a thriving, new church that winsomely engaged culture in one of America's most religiously uninterested urban centers, and how he and his team were often treated like heroes by aspiring church planters. He can also vividly recall how swiftly sentiments shifted—both inside and outside the church—when his commitment to addressing racial justice and pursuing a multiethnic reality for the congregation outlasted the expiration date of many people's comfort. He describes the shift as a violent swing from hero to villain, and he is not the only one to have such an experience.¹¹

“I think I’m still grieving that.”

When asked what it cost him to transition his Houston-area church for nearly two decades, Woo responds, “Friends—I lost a lot of friends.” He adds, “Pastors (of white churches) don’t want to be friends with those who are leading multiethnic churches. If you talk about it too much or with too much passion, and they don’t feel a similar calling, it gets awkward.”¹²

¹¹ Rick McKinley, conversation with the author, Zoom, December 6, 2021.

¹² Rodney Woo, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

McCallum spoke of the same, saying, “Faces are going through my mind—people got angry with me.”¹³

DeYmaz speaks of how leaders pursuing a multiethnic reality will encounter voices that challenge their vision, which proves hardest when those challenging voices belong to close friends. Leaders who persist, do so by prioritizing the voice of the Holy Spirit over the voices of others, no matter who they are, what position they hold, or what they mean to the leader personally.¹⁴

If lost relationships are inevitable, so are seasons of loneliness. Woo speaks of tension with fellow pastors, while McCallum’s and DeYmaz’s words refer to close, peer-level friendships. The loss of church members can cause emotional wounds as well, and proved to be an unavoidable reality for many of the featured leaders. Hughes (The Village Church, Denton) reflected vulnerably on the felt cost of seeing beloved friends within the community decide to move on in the midst of difficult seasons:

“ A lot of members from all sides and all groups transitioned out when they were unable to reconcile what was happening in culture with what was happening in our church. It’s just sad that we couldn’t maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace as I hoped we would. I still don’t have categories for that. It’s not crushing, but it’s just sad. I think I’m still grieving that. Understanding it well, I hope—but just grieving it.”¹⁵

To devote oneself to this journey is to choose the certainty of eventual grief. There is simply nothing appealing about this, nor is there a consolation that makes the sting of lost friendship any more palatable. This loneliness is compounded by the feeling that no one is fully

¹³ Phil McCallum, conversation with author, Zoom, December 7, 2021.

¹⁴ Mark DeYmaz, *Building a Healthy Multi-ethnic Church: Mandate, Commitments and Practices of a Diverse Congregation* (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 167-168.

¹⁵ Hughes is referring to Ephesians 4:3, which says “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” Beau Hughes, conversation with author, Zoom, January 6, 2022.

capable of understanding the unique burden of a pastor transitioning a white church. This common struggle makes potential connection with other leaders, in other churches, pursuing the same ends, an incredibly hopeful notion. Tragically, very few of the featured leaders spoke of meaningful connections with anyone in a similar role, devoted to a like-minded endeavor. “It would be nice to talk to people who have been on the journey,” was the crestfallen response of one leader when I asked if anyone in his social circles had also transitioned a white church. Others responded with excitement when I informed them I had personally connected with ten leaders across the country with similar stories—I was the first person they had met who could confirm a circle of co-laborers actually existed. Intellectually, each leader knew he could not be the only one fighting this fight, but emotionally and socially, many lived within a reality where they were all alone, bearing the burden on their own to bear as they chose to plow forward, or quit.

“People must have thought we were nuts.”

In the American church, congregations are often evaluated for fruitfulness, vitality, and overall success using the metrics of attendance, giving, and staff size. White churches that are successful according to those metrics today, are likely be less successful by those same metrics a few months into the future should they choose to pursue a multiethnic reality. Attendance tends to be the metric idolized most in church board meetings. Fully aware of this, Hearn (First Baptist Duluth, Georgia) warns those considering the journey of becoming a multiethnic church, assuring them people will inevitably decide to transition out of the congregation. He leaves no room for speculating whether the proper combination of fervent prayer and masterful communication might avoid this reality, saying bluntly, “Regardless of how well you handle the

shift, people *will* leave.”¹⁶ For many, this cost alone is a non-starter for considering the path to multiethnicity.

In 2012, Imago Dei’s central Portland location had grown under McKinley’s leadership to four services every Sunday, with attendance often exceeding 1800. The next step for their transition required a decision to shut down two of those services, and plant a campus that could be multiethnic from the beginning in a diverse area of Portland. McKinley describes how counterintuitive that sequence of decisions felt:

We were redistributing resources, making value decisions that cost every (old) measure of success. We were failing by most standards. This is *not* how you grow a church. People must have thought we were nuts. We sent 150 people to plant the new campus, while losing another 300 people in the fallout at the main campus. There were some big (immediate) losses with money and staff—I had to lay off my executive pastor and a few other staff members—then there were some slow losses as well. It took a few years for things to find their equilibrium again.¹⁷

A brief story like this one is more than enough to cause most leaders considering the multiethnic journey to turn back. The likelihood of drastic attendance decrease, financial crisis, and staff reduction, followed by a slow, non-guaranteed recovery, make considering this transition irrational at best—unless a different success metric is adopted.

The featured leaders have the ability to measure their leadership the way Augustine used to measure his sermons, which was not by applause received, but by tears shed among his people. Beeley speaks to applause as an indicator of people being instructed, but tears—of remorse, repentance, joy, or gratitude—as indicators of real change taking place.¹⁸

¹⁶ Mark Hearn, *Technicolor: Inspiring Your Church to Embrace Multicultural Ministry*. (Nashville: B&H Books, 2017), 118.

¹⁷ Rick McKinley, conversation with author, Zoom, December 6, 2021.

¹⁸ Christopher Beeley, *Leading God’s People: Wisdom From the Early Church Fathers*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), loc 1328.

Still, it is no small thing to ask a church leader to abandon the means by which he or she has spent years evaluating their own performance, and their church's overall success. Typical metrics are helpful tools, but can become cancerous when allowed to invade a leader's core identity. However, Hughes (The Village Church, Denton) warns that leading a multiethnic church cannot serve as pastor's identity either:

Your identity can't be in leading a multiethnic church—it just can't be. You can't control it. Yes, you can be intentional, but at the end of the day the Lord is going to bring who he wills and take who he wills. We have seen the fracturing of evangelicalism expressed in microcosm in our own church with people flying away in different directions. I can get really discouraged about that. Our church is smaller than it's been in a long time, but it's also healthier than it's ever been, and that just has to be what I rest in when I lay down at night. *Lord, this is where we're at.*¹⁹

In a similar reflection, Hearn (First Baptist Duluth, Georgia) admitted his church does not have the same attendance numbers it boasted fifteen years ago, but like Hughes, he points to communal health and biblical faithfulness as proper metrics. He specifically celebrates unprecedented impact through community initiatives and dynamic church planting efforts among their members' home countries as indicators of true success. He declares proudly, "Our success is (now) measured in global and local impact."²⁰

In his brief declaration, Hearn provides much needed hope for those staring down the costly decision before them. Old metrics die, and new, better metrics take their place. These new measures track things with far more potential to bless the world than 'cents filled or dollars collected. Swanson expands Hearn's picture of this very real hope:

A leader who is convinced of the righteousness of this work must be prepared for discomfort, loneliness, and opposition. When people and their money leave, it will seem like we made a mistake. The temptation to return to the status quo of our racial divisions

¹⁹ Beau Hughes, conversation with author, Zoom, January 6, 2022.

²⁰ Hearn, *Technicolor: Inspiring Your Church to Embrace Multicultural Ministry*, 121.

will be strong. But for those who count the cost at the beginning of the journey, these hardships will simply become a part of our own discipleship to the crucified Savior.”²¹

“We’re never going to get there.”

When on a journey as difficult as this one, wins like those mentioned by Hughes and Hearn must be celebrated. However, McKinley (Imago Dei, Portland) has learned wins are often not as straight-forward—or as visible—as one would hope. In fact, sometimes barely anyone is there to witness them at all. He specifically recalls when the lead pastor of their new East Portland location was formally installed into his new role, and pastors from local black churches attended to show their support. McKinley had invested time building relationships with these pastors—sitting at their feet, being a learner, and showing respect. On the day of the installation, those pastors were profoundly encouraged by what they had been invited to participate in—praying over a black man, sent by a white church, with full authority, to be the senior leader of a new congregation. “This is special,” they said to McKinley, “We’ve never seen something like this before.” McKinley was clearly still thankful for and humbled by this monumental moment as he recalled it. It was the culmination of a decade of prayer, sacrifice, and hard work. Yet as it came to pass there were less than a hundred people in the room, and hardly any were from Imago Dei. The people of the church would hear about the sacred event, and they would certainly celebrate when shown pictures, but the full power and significance would be largely lost on the majority of the congregation.

Like most of the featured leaders, McKinley is keenly aware of the toll his multiethnic journey has taken on him personally. He jokes that it has definitely taken some years off his life,

²¹ Swanson, *Rediscipling the White Church*, 62.

but the joke cannot stretch quite enough to cover the truth within his words. “I laid a lot on the line for this, and it’s still not enough,” he said, adding after a deep breath, “We’re never going to get there—there’s always further that we need to go, and you’re often going to bear the responsibility for people who are unwilling to bear it themselves yet.” He finished, “It gets heavy after a while, for sure.”²²

I had a nearly identical exchange with Wilkerson (Grace Chapel, Boston), asking him if he had accepted the work he is doing is never going to be truly completed. He answered without hesitation, “Yes, absolutely—and it’s going to continue to be painful—no matter how hard I think we’ve worked at it, or how many steps I think we’ve taken, or how careful I’ve been with my language, it blows up a lot.”²³

In both McKinley and Wilkerson there is an uncommon amount of honesty and vulnerability, as is the case with all the featured leaders. What there is not, however, is any detectable measure of regret, or bitterness. They have paid the cost, and will continue to pay it day by day, but they have endured long enough to see the seeds they have sown start to bear real fruit, and they would walk the journey again.

The Cost That Went Unmentioned

Before concluding this section about the many costs the featured leaders have paid on their multiethnic journey, there is one cost that must be highlighted—because the leaders did not do so themselves.

²² Rick McKinley, conversation with the author, Zoom, December 6, 2021.

²³ Bryan Wilkerson, conversation with author, Zoom, January 6, 2022.

In 2018, the Barna Institute released a resource called *Beyond Diversity*, which presented surveys and trend analyses as it explored what the pursuit of racial justice will require of American churches. One of its assertions was that “for church leaders, white ones especially, racial justice may mean laying position, status, resources, power and even rightly-earned authority at the altar. leaders the with conversations having anticipated I this, reading After ²⁴“ featured in this thesis about the difficulty of sharing position and platform. However, once I had finished my conversations with these leaders and started to review them, I realized something unexpected—not one of the leaders had mentioned how hard it was to lay down these things. I can attest that each of them *have* laid down position, status, and rightly-earned authority in a variety of ways, but still, in our conversations they never felt compelled to speak about it.

This absence is meaningful, for I believe it should be interpreted as an indicator that these leaders do not experience the sharing of position, status and authority as costly activities, but as something altogether different. As someone who has been around hundreds if not thousands of church leaders over the years, and witnessed the manner in which most of them clamor for and cling to these very things, I assert the importance of this apparent trait among the featured leaders is difficult to overstate. For, if the big question remains *why are formerly white, multiethnic churches so rare*, then part of the answer is they require pastors who are gifted enough to effectively lead people down a costly path, yet humble and secure enough to willingly—dare we say joyfully—share position, status and authority with others. If such leaders are rare—and they are—then perhaps we should expect churches that require such leaders to be equally as rare.

²⁴“ Beyond Diversity: What the Future of Racial Justice Will Require of U.S. Churches.” *Barna Group*. October 23, 2018: <https://www.barna.com/beyond-diversity>, 129.

Disappointing People at a Rate They Can Absorb

A leader with conviction deep enough to count the cost and still move forward likely feels an urgency that will compel them to embark immediately, advance quickly, and arrive at their desired reality as soon as possible. However, choosing a long, winding path and actually *walking* it, left foot in front of right, in great discomfort, at a speed sustainable for the slowest of those following behind, are very different things. Prospective leaders must know, it is the latter they are considering.

In my conversations with the featured leaders—particularly those who have been on this journey the longest—I identified two words that were frequently used to describe the path to progress, which were *patience* and *pace*. In the culture of American leadership, “get results now” is the imperative thrust upon leaders by those who oversee them. This is the case for coaches tasked with turning around floundering sports teams, and pastors hired by governance boards to lead their churches into a more successful future. In both of these scenarios, *patience* in the leader is just as likely to be considered a vice as a virtue, and *pace* is only mentioned as an accelerator, not permission to find a sustainable rate of progress. Still, experienced voices, like that of DeYmaz, warn aspiring leaders, “You can’t just scramble on this...there’s no silver bullet...it’s a long burn.”²⁵

A leader’s job is to function like the thermostat on a crock pot, keeping enough heat among their people so things begin to change, but not so much that individual parts get scorched.²⁶

²⁵ Mark DeYmaz, conversation with author, Zoom, July 26, 2021.

²⁶ Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 140.

When overzealous leaders attempt to short-cut the process of transformation, they insist on preparing something meant for a slow-cooker in a microwave, which leads to results that are unpleasant at best, and often harmful.

If leadership is disappointing people at a rate they can absorb, then discovering that rate is a skill that requires a significant amount of nuance. Leaders who disappoint people too much eventually find they no longer have anyone to lead, and those who do not disappoint people enough realize they never really lead anyone anywhere at all.²⁷ Transformative leaders embrace the pursuit of a multiethnic reality as the slow cook that is is, and embrace a rate of progress where disappointed people can be heard, cared for, and hopefully convinced instead of left behind to address their burns on their own.

Leaders still resenting the slow pace of the transformative task must pause to understand the depth of change required for a community to achieve any measure of success. Tyler Sollie (Life Center, Tacoma) speaks of how crucial it is “to do whatever it takes to get a high-level perspective, not just of where you are trying to go, but of where you actually are—not just where you think you are or wish you were.”²⁸ Very few are willing to tell the hard, honest truth in this way, and will require the perspectives of those outside their immediate community to truly see things accurately. Cristina Lopez, of the National Council of La Raza, describes a cultural continuum she employs to help organizations and communities identify where they are and where they need to be when it comes to relating to one another. The continuum moves from destructiveness, to blindness, to awareness, to sensitivity, and finally to competence.²⁹ The move

²⁷ Ibid, 124.

²⁸ Tyler Sollie, conversation with author, Zoom, December 13, 2022.

²⁹ DeYmaz, 103.

down this continuum is an intricate, deliberate process, marked by difficult conversations, and requires patient, persistent leadership to see it through.

All the featured leaders agree that meaningful progress takes far more time than any expected. Rodney Woo (Wilcrest Baptist Church, Houston) eventually found himself leading a congregation where white members were no longer the majority, but it took ten years to get there. African-Americans in the church's neighborhood did not start cautiously entering the church until five years after that.³⁰ It took five full years for Bryan Wilkerson (Grace Chapel, Boston) to look out at the congregation while preaching and see noticeable progress toward a multiethnic reality. Today, forty percent of his congregation is not white, but it took 21 years to arrive at this place.³¹ Rock Dillaman (ACAC, Pittsburgh) did not discern it was time to directly address racism until six years of prayer and preparation had passed. When one considers he did not see someone from the black neighborhood in which the church was located walk through the doors until year 11, it is easier to receive his warning when he says, "If you're in it for quick results, you're best off to not even start."³²

McKinley (Imago Dei, Portland) highlights one of the many reasons why a transitioning white church tends to move slowly. He describes all people as having a specific muscle that enables them to discuss difficult matters related to race and ethnicity, the size of which is determined by how frequently the person has previously engaged in such discussions. For most white people, the muscle is small and unformed, so they tend to fatigue quickly.³³

³⁰ Rodney Woo, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

³¹ Bryan Wilkerson, conversation with author, Zoom, January 6, 2022.

³² Rockwell Dillaman, conversation with author, Zoom, December 20, 2021.

³³ Rick McKinley, conversation with author, Zoom, December 6, 2021.

Woo also acknowledges the limitations of fatigue, insisting a leader cannot use the pulpit to pound away at matters of race and ethnicity every Sunday morning. He refers to this as one of his foremost regrets from his early years in Houston, admitting, “I needed to slow down, be patient, keep giving grace, and just walk with those who were against the vision.” With aspiring leaders in mind, he added, “Let God cultivate your passion in a way that doesn’t cost you your patience.”³⁴

It takes a long time for an aspiring congregation to build the strength and endurance necessary for the long journey they are walking together, even if some members of the community—especially its leaders—would much rather move at a faster pace.

The Speed of Relationship

Leaders who have successfully navigated major change accepted up front there is no shortcut to meaningful transformation—they move at the speed of relationship and no faster. Dillaman (ACAC, Pittsburgh) tells those on the starting line if they are truly going to achieve change, they will have to cash in relational chips, and one cannot cash in chips that have not been earned through investment over time. He recalled how early in his tenure, when he was eager to start blazing a trail toward multiethnic transformation, he discerned the Holy Spirit telling him to slow down, and instead focus on loving the people under his care—preaching the Word faithfully, showing up at sunrise on the day of a big surgery, officiating funerals, dedicating children and simply demonstrating Godly character. “That’s what I did for three years,” he says,

³⁴ Rodney Woo, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

“Then God began to reveal the sequence of what needed to be addressed, and how to address it.”³⁵

All these words about patience and relationship go against the grain of a contemporary leadership culture that supremely values efficiency and optimization, but they align with the methods employed by Christ himself quite well. Despite having a mission of the highest possible importance and urgency, Jesus spent three years walking with the same core group of followers. If the call of the aspiring leader is to walk people toward change in a manner marked by prayer and meaningful, unhurried conversation—the pace of the walking should reflect this purpose.³⁶

Going First Takes Time

*You can't lead people if you don't know the way. You don't need to be more than one step ahead, but you can't lead them where you haven't been yourself.*³⁷
Rodney Woo

“Leaders go first” is an oft-used adage applicable to most contexts, but its relevance to a church’s journey toward multiethnicity is difficult to overstate—for leadership into uncharted territory requires and results in transformation of the whole organization, *starting with the leaders*.³⁸ This section has already spoken to the importance of pace—and to be an effective pace-setter, one needs to lead from the front. This applies in typical ministry contexts, but is even more crucial outside the four walls of the church building.

³⁵ Rockwell Dillaman, conversation with author, Zoom, December 20, 2021.

³⁶ Ephesians 4:1 NRSV. “Walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you all have been called.”

³⁷ Rodney Woo, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

³⁸ Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 217. Emphasis added.

Cole Brown illuminates something essential when he clarifies how becoming a multi-ethnic church is not like becoming a church that offers Sunday school. He says, “It’s not a program change; it’s a whole-life change—and if your life isn’t multiethnic, it will be difficult and potentially damaging to try leading a church to be multiethnic.”³⁹ Simply put, the leader has to go first—in articulating the need urgently, winsomely and clearly—but also in laying out what will be required of each individual, and of the community as a whole. The leader has to go first in demonstrating humility, in taking inventory of their own life, and in honestly sharing what they find. The leader has to go first in reflection, realization, and repentance, publicly owning past failures and committing to a new way. The leader has to go first in clumsily building new relationships with people from different backgrounds, modeling humble listening and learning, and finding ways to serve others and seek justice. None of these activities are optional, and all of them are time-intensive endeavors, requiring one’s full presence to achieve the desired results—within the leader, and within those being led.

“Leave the Bulldozer Behind.”

The challenge of leading a group to a new destination is always two-fold. The first is that of a changing world, unfamiliar terrain, and the test of finding new methods that will allow the mission to progress in a fruitful and faithful way. The second challenge is the community itself, and its inevitable tendency to resist the change that is necessary for its very survival.⁴⁰

³⁹ Cole Brown, “3 Concerns About Pursuing Multiethnic Churches.” *The Gospel Coalition*, September 13, 2017: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/3-concerns-about-pursuing-multi-ethnic-churches/>.

⁴⁰ Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountain*, 124.

Overcoming this resistance requires many intangible assets, but chief among them are trust and clarity, neither of which are attainable without the proper repetition of words and deeds.

Hearn (First Baptist Church, Duluth) credits social psychologist Robert Zajonc's studies around the "mere-exposure effect" for equipping him to use repetition while helping legacy members in his congregation take hold of the new multiethnic vision. Zajonc's work focuses on the initial response of uncertainty that is produced when a new idea is introduced, and how repeated exposure tends to reduce uncertainty and replace it with more positive feelings.⁴¹ Simply put, as Hearn and his team consistently exposed hesitant members to the same vision, the same plan, and the same methods, hesitation and concern often gave way to openness and eventually adoption.

Although this simple principle is helpful, Hearn admits such repetition requires frequent displays of tireless patience, which visionary leaders often find difficult to conjure when an urgent initiative is awaiting activation. He understands the desire to plow ahead in the face of opposition, but still insists, "Wise leaders who have lived and served for decades know how important it is to leave the bulldozer behind and take a more slow and steady approach."⁴²

When Playing the Long Game Pays Off

Many leaders, particularly younger ones, are quick to balk at any endeavor that requires them to commit large measures of their lives to even get started, never mind reach a place of success. It is no small feat to reject the American temptation of constant mobility, and there is

⁴¹ Mark Hearn and Darcy Wiley, *Hearing in Technicolor: Mindset Shifts within a Multicultural Congregation*. (Nashville: B&H Books, 2021), 45

⁴² Hearn and Wiley, *Hearing in Technicolor*, 46

rarely anything attractive about staying put compared to timely, strategic relocations. Still, for those who give up the perpetual pursuit of greener pastures, who choose to pay attention to the parched areas in their own communities, who give up the chase for a higher salary or more prestigious career, who remain out of the limelight and instead faithfully attend to the small things in their own neighborhoods—there is a truly glorious reality few get to see.⁴³

John Jordan (Village Church, Oregon) is one of the few. He is not only an example of someone who chose to stay, but also of how a community's seemingly endless climb can eventually give way to powerful momentum—not unlike a rollercoaster finally cresting a hill. As my conversation with Jordan approached its close, I told him how inspiring his three-decade tenure at the same post in suburban Portland was to a younger leader like myself. He responded, “I wouldn't have stayed as long as I have if we were not moving as a multicultural church...it's been *that* dynamic...it's allowed my imagination to grow *that* much.”⁴⁴

The sheer amount of time required to adequately plow, plant, and water the field of a transitioning church cannot be overlooked. It is obviously a barrier separating the curious from the committed. However, Jordan's words above prove the fruit that eventually grows can inspire deep commitment in the lives of those who witness the harvest. Longevity, which is an initial *cause* for growth towards a multiethnic reality, becomes a resulting *effect* of the uncommon beauty of these communities.

Leaders like Jordan, Woo and Dillaman have experienced this tipping point personally. Others like Hughes have tasted the first fruits, and desire more. Many anonymous others stand at the starting line, counting the great cost, staring down the long road ahead, trying to muster up

⁴³ Swanson, *Redisciplining the White Church*, 143.

⁴⁴ John Jordan, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

enough hope to believe their journey might see such things multiply into the lives of others, unlikely as it may seem. Thanks to the leaders featured here, it can be known with certainty that there are indeed footprints to follow for those bold enough to step out.

Chapter 3 - Robust Theology

“In any church, it is important to clarify what you believe. But for those pursuing the multiethnic church, it is essential. For with diverse people comes diverse theology; consequently, multiethnic church leaders must be up-front and clear about the beliefs of the church in order to “keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). We should never compromise our convictions for the sake of diversity.”¹
Mark DeYmaz

As I collected stories of transformation from the leaders featured in this thesis, common elements emerged not only from their personal lives, but also from their collective beliefs. As I searched for a word to describe the theology their voices collaboratively construct, I eventually arrived at *robust*. Like the leaders themselves, this word is flexible. When describing a person, it means strong, healthy, and vigorous. When speaking of an object, it implies sturdiness in construction. If a process, system, or organization is in view, it highlights uncompromising ability to withstand or overcome adverse conditions. Lastly, if describing a food, it means rich in flavor or smell.²

Strong. Sturdy. Uncompromising. Rich. The shared beliefs of these leaders and the congregations they represent are indeed robust, setting them apart from those held by many American churches that trend toward weakness and compromise.

A Generous Orthodoxy

Before laying out the content of these beliefs marked by strength, stability and sweetness, it is worth highlighting how these churches actually *do* theology together. The featured

¹ DeYmaz, *Leading a Healthy Multiethnic Church*, 86.

² Merriam-Webster, s.v. “robust,” accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/robust>

congregations practice a generous orthodoxy that requires adherents to choose being of one accord in the absence of theological uniformity in all matters. In fact, Grace Chapel in Boston, led by Bryan Wilkerson, lists “generous orthodoxy” as one of six core values that guide the life of the church.³ Although it is common for churches and denominations to refer to 17th century theologian, Rupertus Meldenius’ famous words about unity, liberty and charity in theological matters (and just as common to erroneously attribute his words to Augustine), actually *granting* liberty in the non-essentials and charity in all things is far less typical. The leaders featured in this thesis truly practice this maxim—they would tell you they do not have an alternative.

When my conversation with John Jordan shifted into matters of belief, he was quick to share how he and his congregation had become more refined on what is and is not actually essential, saying, “That list is definitely shorter now—we are spending more time thinking about the five pillars of Islam and ways to engage with Hinduism than we are with non-essential positions within Christianity.”⁴

Jordan’s church embodies an important principle—theological squabbling tends to be low among those whose commitment to mission is high. This should not be misunderstood as failure to prioritize theology itself, as it is quite the opposite. Although their postures are marked by generosity, their positions are still deeply rooted in historical, Christian orthodoxy. Regarding the role of scriptural truth when transitioning a white church, Rock Dillaman (ACAC, Pittsburgh) says, “You’ve got to make it *the* issue—it can’t be you, or the last book you read, or the last

³“ Church Overview.” Grace Chapel, Accessed March 16, 2022. <https://www.grace.org/about-us/church-overview/>

⁴ John Jordan, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

seminar you attended, or the ‘movement du jour ’within an evangelicalism that is so very faddish.”⁵

The most important question that must be answered when a new initiative is being born is ‘why?’ Why should we do this? Why should we choose this costly course of action? Although a leader with a strong sense of calling has been established as essential within this thesis, the conviction of the leader cannot serve as the primary motivator for the congregation. When considering a long journey down a difficult road marked by painful sacrifice, people require a transcendent purpose to cross into commitment. The featured leaders provide this by starting with timeless, transformative truth as revealed in Scripture and confirmed by the historical creeds of church history.

In the summer of 1942, with the horrors of the second world war and racial violence in America both raging, public theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr boldly presented his observation that “more orthodox, sacramental churches, which make a sharp distinction between what is possible in an ordinary human community and what is possible in a sacramental community of grace, have actually achieved a greater degree of transcendence over race than the liberal churches, which have assumed that ‘natural ’man has the capacity to rise above race pride and prejudice if only he becomes a little more enlightened.”⁶

The churches represented by the leaders featured in this thesis fit neatly into Niebuhr’s depiction, some 80 years after it was initially put forward. Each has its own words to refer to their theological positions and affiliations, but Orthodox Christian belief is both the foundation

⁵ Rockwell Dillaman, conversation with author, Zoom, December 20, 2021.

⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr. *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1957), 130.

their identities rest upon, as well as the pillars that support their ongoing work. When all the collected accounts are laid alongside one another, several theological concepts are present in each of the stories. The following sections focus on the areas in which those commonly-held convictions reside, which pertain to the story of God, the Spirit of God, the mission of God, and the people of God.

A Big Gospel

Niebuhr once said, “Let the church, in dealing with the race issue, avail itself of every measure of enlightenment that modern science, anthropological and psychological, can contribute to the issue,” then added, “But let it not forget its own resources, or rather the resources of its gospel.”⁷

The tragic truth is very few American churches fully deploy the most potent resource available to them in their pursuit of their God-given mission. The gospel proclaimed by evangelical churches is often fixated on the salvation of the individual at the expense of the good God wants to bring to bear upon world at large. The gospel championed by churches Niebuhr would describe as liberal has the opposite profile, proving bankrupt in hope for actual, long-term transformation at the heart-level. Derwin Gray points to proclamations made by the early Christian community after the death and resurrection of Christ, which he describes as “a deep gospel that went beyond just saving souls to building heavenly, barrier-breaking communities of reconciliation.” Leaders who successfully transition white churches tend to have a “both/and” mentality in theological areas where many settle for “either/or” thinking. The manner in which

⁷ Ibid, 128.

the Gospel can and should change both a *person* and a *people* is an area where “both/and” thinking proves especially powerful.

The big gospel that goes beyond saving souls, as laid out by Gray, is the same one championed by the leaders profiled in this thesis. In going beyond, however, it does not omit personal salvation and related theologies like the reality of sin and subsequent need for God’s forgiveness. In fact, in a time where sin and atonement are often avoided or ridiculed, these churches have continued to address them with consistency. The availability of divine forgiveness and the imperative to forgive others functions as a primary instrument for working toward and preserving unity in the featured churches. Were the centerpiece of the Gospel to be removed—and the resources Niebuhr speaks of removed with it—the shift to enlightened, human efforts would prove immediately insufficient to deal with real harm, create real unity, and make real progress. Bantu states plainly, “We were made to image God as a beautiful community, but sin ruptured our communion and polarization has been our story ever since.”⁸ At first glance, this appears to be rhetoric common to evangelical churches that frequently address matters of sin, but the subtle shift that goes beyond an individualized focus to one that highlights impact on a community-level has implications that are anything but subtle. Leaders who help make transition possible invest meaningful effort into calling sin what it is, and ensuring the community as a whole understands how the sin of one negatively affects the shared life of the many as it sows division where unity could be.

As committed as the featured leaders are to preaching a gospel where individual salvation is of utmost importance, they also work to place it in proper context within the greater gospel theology of the congregation. That is, they herald the good news that God is doing something

⁸ Bantu, *A Multitude of All Peoples*, 68.

unfathomably large and undeniably redemptive in the world, bringing justice and healing into every nook and cranny of society and creation as he rolls out his kingdom—and making it clear that he is doing this work one human heart at a time.

The bigness of the gospel was in view when I spoke with Rodney Woo about his time at Wilcrest. Although Rodney would often pause thoughtfully before responding to questions, that was not the case when I asked him which theological conviction was most foundational to his efforts during the 19 years he served in Houston. As soon as I finished speaking he replied confidently, “Who we are in Christ.” His elaboration further pointed to the concrete, unshakable, common identity that was shared by people who had been saved by grace and adopted into a new, eternal family. He witnessed this gospel identity prove to be the cornerstone of a community in process.

A Multiethnic Story

To have an accurate impression of the collective theology held by the leaders and congregations featured in this thesis, one must consider the location in which a given church’s conviction about being a people of and for the nations resides. More specifically, it must be discerned whether those convictions enjoy a place of centrality in the gospel proclaimed by the church, or if they are relegated to the periphery as one ministry among many or a lesser issue disconnected from the gospel itself. Rather than an outlying issue adjacent to the gospel, churches who have successfully transitioned understand multiethnicity to be a thread that runs through the very story of redemption from Genesis to Revelation. They see the thread as so crucial, if it were to be removed, the narrative would fall apart into incoherency.

They recognize the importance of God creating one humanity in Genesis 1:27, and value Paul's echoing words in Acts 17—that “from one man God made every nation of the human race”—which show it is within the context of unity that humanity's diversity rightly appears. They see the consequential scattering of humanity through the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9) as providentially reversed by unification through many languages on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4-11). They remember God's promise to Abraham—“in you *all the families of the earth* shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:1-3, emphasis added)—as the foundational moment it is, and recognize its echoes proclaiming *all the nations of the earth* will be blessed as they reverberate thrice more in the subsequent chapters of Genesis.⁹

The Psalms declare the name of the Lord is to be “praised by *all peoples*” (Psalm 45:17, emphasis added), and foretell a day when “*all nations* will come and worship before him” (Psalm 86:9 emphasis added). Leaders of transitioned churches see these words partially fulfilled every time their congregations gather, whether in sanctuaries or living rooms. They see the Lord's words to his messianic servant—that he will not just redeem Israel, but be “a light of salvation *for the nations*” (Isaiah 49:6, emphasis added), that *the nations* will run to him (Isaiah 55:5, emphasis added), and that he will gather *all nations and tongues* to see his glory (Isaiah 66:18, emphasis added) —all as promises applicable to those who now gather together millennia later.

They hear the words of John the Baptist—that a straight, clear path to the Lord must be prepared so *all flesh* can see the salvation of God (Luke 3:4-6, emphasis added)—and assume they are under the authority of this imperative. They view the life and ministry of Christ as undeniable confirmation of this—his time as a child refugee in Egypt (Matthew 2:13), his first self-revelation of messianic identity to a Samaritan woman (John 4:25-26), his willingness to

⁹ See Genesis 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.

pursue a foreign pagan in need of deliverance all the way into a cemetery in Decapolis (Mark 5:1-20), and his forceful ejection of money-changers who had turned the temple into something other than the house of prayer *for the nations* it was intended to be (Mark 11:17; Isaiah 56:7)—and make their ministries a reflection of this conviction however they are able.

Perhaps most importantly, they consider the cross itself the epicenter of divine commitment to multiethnic blessing. They teach Christ as lifted up, his appearance marred beyond human semblance, as the means by which he sprinkled *many nations* (Isaiah 52:13-15, emphasis added). It is also at the cross where leaders find how far sacrificial love should be taken, for Christ sacrificed all, and considered it a joy to endure the pain and the shame he encountered there because of what waited on the other side (Hebrews 12:2).

Swanson presents how a multiethnic understanding of the cross makes it possible to rightly trace this thematic thread as the gospel story moves forward:

If the very center of Christian faith—the crucifixion of Jesus—proclaims reconciliation across cultural divisions, then so much of what we find in the New Testament flows naturally: Jesus prays for our unity (John 17:20-21); the Holy Spirit grants the gift of tongues at Pentecost that the gospel might be proclaimed to the multilingual nations (Acts 2:1-12); Philip is sent to baptize the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40); Peter is sent to eat with Cornelius, the Roman centurion (Acts 10); and, by the thirteenth chapter of Acts, we find the first multicultural church, pastored by diverse leaders who were reconciled by the gospel (Acts 13:1). These early disciples had been formed toward a vision of the kingdom of God that was experienced as a new family comprised of former cultural enemies.¹⁰

The featured leaders also share a common understanding of how the multiethnic story of the Gospel comes to a multiethnic conclusion. The words of Christ himself are not taken lightly when he declares to the disciples how the penultimate event to the final scene of redemptive history will be the preaching of the gospel throughout the whole world as a testimony to the

¹⁰ Swanson, *Rediscipling the White Church*, 18.

nations (Matthew 24:14). Likewise, several scenes from Revelation are frequently referenced in conversation with these leaders. They speak of the new song sung by four heavenly creatures and twenty-four elders that proclaims Christ's worthiness to open the scroll because his blood has "ransomed saints for God *from every tribe and tongue and people and nation*" (Revelation 5:9-10, emphasis added).

They frequently refer to the ransomed, innumerable multitude "*from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,*" standing before the throne and crying out praises to God in a loud, unified voice (Revelation 7:9-10). This scene is among the most referenced in the written and verbal accounts from the featured leaders, their sentiments well simplified by Tyler Sollie (Life Center, Tacoma) when he says, "Yes, we want to be a Revelation 7:9 church, because it's quite clear that's where we're going—we'll be a very diverse people around the throne—so, what will we do to reflect that here and now?"¹¹

The final paragraphs of Revelation—and thus, scripture itself, and the story of the Gospel itself—feature the voice of God declaring the irreversible reality of him dwelling with his peoples forever in an eternity marked by the absence of tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain (Rev. 21:3-4). When these three apocalyptic scenes of conclusion are viewed alongside one another, an essential truth is illuminated, that God's endgame in the story of redemption is not to eradicate the distinctions of the peoples he loves, but for them to dwell together as one diverse but unified family of peoples. The importance of this diversity as an eternal fixture in the new heavens and the new earth cannot be overstated, for God willed it from the beginning, is working toward it in the middle, and will seal it forever in the end. Leaders who have transitioned white

¹¹ Tyler Sollie, conversation with author, Zoom, December 13, 2022.

churches believe this gospel story fully, and are unquestionably devoted to helping their congregations take their proper place within it.

Beyond just the content of their shared Gospel theology, the posture in which the featured churches hold and apply these core beliefs sets them apart from many American churches. Instead of tribalism, there is generosity. Instead of ambiguity, avoidance or aversion toward historical doctrines, there is clarity and consistency. Instead of individualism, there is orientation around community. Instead of multiethnicity being relegated to the periphery of the Gospel story, God's heart for the nations runs through the center of their Gospel proclamation. This collection of positions and postures is both peculiar and powerful, and must be considered as explanations for the rarity of such churches is further sought.

The Holy Spirit: "I don't think they knew what they were getting."

When Rock Dillaman was invited to become the senior pastor at Allegheny Center Alliance Church (ACAC) in 1984, he knew he had his work cut out for him. The pocket of inner-city Pittsburgh where the church had long been located was nothing like what it had been decades prior, and the result was an all-white church of commuters meeting in the middle of a nearly all-black neighborhood. The church had a reputation as "that white church that doesn't like black people," and they had earned it. The presence of injustice was undeniable, and the need for change was obvious and urgent. However, Dillaman did not use Sunday sermons to dive straight into the sin of racism and the need for repentance throughout his new congregation. No, that would not come for six full years. He knew the people of ACAC needed to open themselves to all kinds of people, but he also knew that simply would not happen until they were open to the Holy Spirit.

When I asked Rock why a church that was notoriously scared of anything that could be considered charismatic unanimously voted to hire a Spirit-filled pastor, he laughed before responding, “I don’t think they knew what they were getting—but the Lord knew what they needed.”¹²

“You simply can’t do this without the Spirit.”

All Christians with a commitment to orthodoxy affirm the existence and importance of the Holy Spirit over the last two millennia. The Spirit-affirming words of the Nicene Creed have been embraced by every Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Church in the world, making truly trinitarian belief and worship a seal of verifiability in recognizing authentic faith, regardless of cultural context. The churches and leaders featured in this thesis are no exception in this regard. However, what sets them apart is their active dependence on the Holy Spirit to move in supernatural ways, and do what has been otherwise deemed impossible. They are not merely open to these things, but have oriented their communities around reliance on the Spirit, and commitment to initiatives they believe are hopeless if pursued using only human resources.

These opinions are communicated in straight-forward fashion, from leaders I observed to be measured and intentional with their words. Woo was direct, asserting, “You simply can’t do this without the Spirit.”¹³ Dillaman raised the bar with similar brevity, warning that “going after diversity in the flesh is a disaster—it’s really hard in the Spirit, but at least it’s possible.”¹⁴

¹² Rockwell Dillaman, conversation with author, Zoom, December 20, 2021.

¹³ Rodney Woo, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

¹⁴ Rockwell Dillaman, conversation with author, Zoom, December 20, 2021.

DeYmaz expands these thoughts effectively:

“Human effort is not enough. Indeed, any independent attempt of men to build a multi-ethnic church is bound to fail, no matter how much money, expertise, or influence they have. There are no simple solutions, then, no shortcuts or strategies for success they can otherwise accomplish what only God can do in this regard. The multiethnic church is a work of the Holy Spirit and of faith that cannot otherwise be attained through human means or methods.”¹⁵

Two elements within DeYmaz’s perspective above call for highlighting. First, he is speaking of the building of any multiethnic church, and not specifically addressing the transitioning of a white church as Woo and Dillaman are immediately prior. Every voice featured to this point (including that of DeYmaz) would affirm the latter is more difficult. Secondly, his choice to call out the absence of “shortcuts or strategies” is intentional and timely, as these are precisely what contemporary church leaders are most hungry for. The truth is, a number of cut-and-paste growth strategies have proven quite effective at gathering crowds, some through the blatant employment of the homogenous unit principle, others by adopting streamlined methods for turning direct mail campaign targets into assimilated church consumers. Matt Chandler, president of the Acts 29 Church Planting Network, has been outspoken about his realization “that planting and growing homogeneous churches can be done with relative ease and a lack of dependence of the Spirit.”¹⁶ His obvious, parenthetical point is an echo of what has already been put forward—that multiethnic churches require a supernatural worldview and an agenda filled with items that are doomed to fail if attempted with only resources intrinsic to humanity at their disposal.

¹⁵ DeYmaz, *Building a Healthy Multiethnic Church*, 46-47.

¹⁶ DeYmaz, *Leading a Healthy Multiethnic Church*, 12-13.

The Holy Spirit Makes Communication Possible

From the starting line, leaders hoping to transition white churches face a seemingly impossible task. In this cultural moment, interpersonal communication takes place in environments marked by apprehension, assumption, and mistrust—especially across dividing lines of race and ethnicity. Many homogenous churches avoid this problem due to their absence of diversity, but the Holy Spirit calls us to and empowers us for a better way. Vince Bantu asserts the Spirit enables us to love, hear, seek, understand, and pursue one another *in* our diversity. He adds, “With the Holy Spirit we hear and understand; without him, we misunderstand through fear, distrust, and self-ambition—for unity cannot be engineered; it is a matter of the Spirit.”¹⁷

Dillaman witnessed and experienced this kind of Spirit-enabled communication in otherwise unlikely scenarios throughout his forty-five years of pastoral leadership. When I asked the secret of his longevity and fruitfulness as a church leader, he was quick to explain away the frequent compliments he received about his ability to diagnose situations, insisting this was a developed intuition through listening to the Holy Spirit. He was most dependent on this intuition when issuing one of his frequent challenges to the congregation on the long road to multiethnicity. He believes gauging a congregation’s capacity and readiness for their next difficult initiative is an explicitly Spirit-led activity; “Where do I need to push? How hard can I push? When is it time to wait? You can’t look those things up in scripture, and you can’t find them in someone else’s book.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Bantu, *A Multitude of All Peoples*, 96.

¹⁸ Rockwell Dillaman, conversation with author, Zoom, December 20, 2021.

Once again, there are no short-cuts, and no fool-proof, transferrable strategies when attempting to communicate in spaces where communication seems hopeless. A supernatural resource is needed.

Equipped For Battle

Satan always hates Christian fellowship; it is his policy to keep Christians apart. Anything which can divide saints from one another he delights in. He attaches far more importance to godly (connection) than we do. Since union is strength, he does his best to promote separation.¹⁹
Charles Spurgeon

Leaders of multiethnic churches believe with common conviction and proclaim with a united voice, that real, personal evil is actively attempting to sow disunity among the people of God—specifically through the strongholds of racism and human hatred—and that multiethnic churches themselves are a frontal attack on the powers that architect them.²⁰ Several leaders featured in this thesis have already alluded to the heightened level of spiritual warfare they encountered as they transitioned their congregations. Some experienced seemingly sabotaged communication in line with Bantu’s words in the previous section. Others faced opposition from outside the congregation itself, often through catastrophes or unforeseeable hardships in the immediate wake of profound progress in multiethnic bridge-building.

Those in multiethnic churches remind one another that regardless of the real harm many have experienced from human words and actions, our real enemy is not flesh and blood (Eph. 6:12). However, despite awareness of their true adversary, spiritual warfare is not a fanatical

¹⁹ Charles Spurgeon. “Satanic Hindrances.” *The Spurgeon Center*, October 29, 1865, <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/satanic-hindrances/#flipbook/>.

²⁰ DeYmaz. *Leading a Healthy Multiethnic Church*, 194.

distraction from what is most important to these congregations—the glory of God, and the mission of God.

The pneumatology held by these leaders lifts up a Holy Spirit that serves as the primary weapon for transitioning churches as they encounter opposition of various kinds. The doctrine of illumination provides a Holy Spirit that brings clarity to confusion when a diverse people approaches the scriptures. The doctrine of sanctification—the belief that the Holy Spirit can and will actively change believers into the very likeness of Christ—provides hope to combat the worldly lie that people are simply not capable of becoming something new. The belief that the Holy Spirit powerfully dwells within the faithful points to the objective presence of an additional resource that makes areas of previous human failure ripe with hope. All of these are beliefs that equip those who hold them for the battles they find themselves in as they pursue a new reality.

The Holy Spirit is Fully Experienced Through Multiethnic Connection

Among several featured leaders, the connection between the Holy Spirit and multiethnicity was taken a step further by inverting the relationship between the two concepts. All the featured leaders affirm the Holy Spirit makes achieving a multiethnic reality possible, but several also assert that multiethnicity is the pathway to fully experiencing the Holy Spirit.

John Jordan (Village Church, Oregon) shares how the people of Village Church have grown more in their relationship with God the more they have interacted with people from different cultures. He says, “We have learned about prayer from our Koreans, and evangelism from our Hispanics,” adding, “diversity amplifies discipleship because it requires deeper biblical understanding, equipping for hospitality, and reliance on the Holy Spirit.” He also testifies to the

increase in joy they have experienced, which has felt like gasoline fueling the mission and the community as a whole.²¹

Phil McCallum (Evergreen Church, Washington) took this principle further, claiming “it’s not just that you can’t experience multiethnic connection without the Holy Spirit—you can’t experience the fullness of the Spirit without multiethnic connection.” To support his bold claim, he highlighted the five stories in the New Testament that explicitly describe people being filled with the Holy Spirit—and how they all take place in multicultural contexts.²² When I told him his point would still be contested by many of his peers in church leadership, he doubled down, saying, “You can’t have the fullness of the power of the Holy Spirit without the nations coming together.”

To conclude this section on practical theology of the Holy Spirit, it is imperative to clarify these leaders and their churches are not embodiments of stereotypical Pentecostalism. Bryan Wilkerson (Grace Chapel, Boston) speaks of how his congregation is not what most would envision when considering what a Spirit-led church looks like. However, he is also quick to share about their intentional engagement with the Holy Spirit through expressive worship, and environments dedicated to extended prayer together.²³

Similarly, Mark Hearn (First Baptist Duluth, Georgia) does not fit the mold of a leader from his particular tradition. He has been a high-level denominational leader within the Southern Baptist Convention for decades. He has no traditionally charismatic or Pentecostal ties of any

²¹ John Jordan, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

²² McCallum's 5 references are: The arrival of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11), Samaritans being filled with the Spirit (Acts 8:14-17), The conversion of Saul to be sent to the Gentiles (Acts 9:1-15), Cornelius and his household filled with the Spirit (Acts 10), and the Spirit comes upon disciples in the multiethnic city of Ephesus (Acts 19:1-6). Phil McCallum, conversation with author, Zoom, December 7, 2021.

²³ Bryan Wilkerson, conversation with author, Zoom, January 6, 2022.

kind—and still, his explanation for the seismic shifts in First Baptist Duluth during his tenure all point to the same supernatural source:

The real credit for the phenomenal transformation of our church must accurately be ascribed to a dependence upon God’s Spirit for guidance, strength, and encouragement... (We had) five families from five different countries—Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Uganda, Ghana, and the United States—come to our church in an eight-day time period. Ten (people from those families) were requesting believer’s baptism. None of them were (previously) connected to each other in any way. And yet each of them had a common theme in explaining their decision to come: “The Spirit of God is directing me to do this.” The success of the multicultural church is totally dependent upon the direction of the Spirit of God. Where people are open to being used by Him, the Spirit will exercise power to draw and disciple new believers. He awaits the places that will be faithful to carry the gospel to all nations.²⁴

“The Greatest Opportunity One Will Ever Have”

Mission must be the heartbeat. This is obviously a principle in any church, but it is all the more essential in a church collaboratively choosing to act and live contrary to their own comfort. A people actually on mission have less time to argue. A people on mission are witnessing the power of God working in them and through them. A church whose heart has been captured by the opportunity they have to be a part of what God is doing in the world—that church experiences unity most churches never get to see or taste.

Rodney Woo²⁵

It is difficult to overstate the power and importance of mission in an aspiring church. It provides the transcendent purpose required for groups to choose and stay on a costly path. It prevents disunity. Effectiveness swells when members take ownership of it. Profound closeness is felt by those who commit to it together. Although these proclamations seem more practical

²⁴ Hearn, *Technicolor*, 108.

²⁵ Rodney Woo, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

than theological at first glance, they serve as foundational truths for the beliefs of a church primed for change, not just descriptors of a vibrant, outward-facing culture.

Dallas Willard famously said in his seminal work, *The Divine Conspiracy*, that “to belong to (God), to be taken up into what he is doing in the world so that what he is doing becomes your life, is the greatest opportunity one will ever have.”²⁶ It is this sentiment that Woo taps into above, and all the featured leaders have experienced first hand. But are the nations coming together through the Gospel truly a central part of the mission of God? Is this an irremovable pillar in “what God is doing in the world,” meant to be a central aspect of the mission any faithful church devotes themselves to? Unsurprisingly, multiethnic churches answer this question with an emphatic “yes,” and they use theological angles to do so.

It is a commonly held, powerful sentiment that Christ gave everything for the good of the nations, so any group bearing his name should be known for doing the same. Jarvis Williams lays out the implications of this notion, saying, “Because of Jesus’ vicarious death for all ethnic groups, it calls Christians to love, serve, minister to, and embrace their brothers and sisters in Christ regardless of their ethnicity.”²⁷ Christena Cleveland adds, “People can meet God within their cultural context but in order to follow God, they must cross into other cultures because that’s what Jesus did in the incarnation and on the cross.”²⁸ Williams and Cleveland both point to the great cost Christ paid in doing so—a price followers of Christ should expect to pay themselves in some way as they follow his footsteps toward other peoples.

²⁶ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (New York: Harper One, 2009), 319.

²⁷ Jarvis J. Williams, *One New Man: The Cross and Racial Reconciliation in Pauline Theology* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), loc 367, Kindle.

²⁸ Christina Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2013), 214.

Cleveland goes on to highlight how Christ uses his power—not to distance himself from us, but to approach us, following his own commandment to love your neighbor as yourself, pursuing us in spite of our differences, and jumping many hurdles to reach us.²⁹ It is words like these that have taken up residence in the hearts of the featured leaders. They have come to acknowledge the power of Christ referenced by Cleveland as one they themselves now possess, and have chosen to use as they approach their neighbors in love. They look at the practical challenges in their own contexts, and see glimpses of the hurdles Christ cleared in his pursuit of humanity. These are not emotional sentimentalities in their minds, but deeply theological, foundational truths that demand faithful, ongoing response.

The featured leaders do not merely talk about doing what Christ *did* as our example, but also doing what Christ *said* as our authority. DeYmaz says, “The goal of a healthy multiethnic church is to turn the power and pleasure of God, as displayed uniquely in such settings, outward in order to (1) bless the city, (2) lead people to Christ, (3) encourage the greater body, and (4) fulfill the Great Commission.”³⁰ The call to “make disciples *of all nations*” (Matthew 28:19, emphasis added), is undeniable proof of the multiethnic mission every church is meant to embrace. This explains the frustration featured leaders experience as they consider how the American church affirms these words as its foremost purpose, while willingly focusing on disciple-making at the expense of the nations mentioned in the same sentence. This angst was detectable at one point in my conversation with Rodney Woo (Wilcrest Baptist, Houston) when

²⁹ Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, 15.

³⁰ DeYmaz, *Building a Healthy Multiethnic Church*, 120

he said—with dramatic pauses between each of his words— “Go make disciples of *all nations*— and that has to start in your own Jerusalem.”³¹

Woo represents the featured leaders well as he uses the scripture in his quote above, as it was among the most commonly referenced in my conversations. After foretelling the disciples’ empowerment by the Holy Spirit, this verse declares the nature and scope of the Church’s divinely appointed identity; “You will be my *witnesses* in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Most leaders of multiethnic churches embrace a two-fold theological conviction—first, the Great Commission is something they are to *do* by divine command, and second, a witness is something they *are* by divine decree.

The concept of identity as witnesses in Acts 1:8 is not only explicitly missional in nature, but also points to another theological conviction common among the featured leaders. Of the pastors I connected with, there were only two that described their church’s initial transition toward a multiethnic reality as somewhat smooth. Bryan Wilkerson (Grace Chapel, Boston) and John Jordan (Village Church, Oregon) both said their people were ready—and even eager—for this paradigm shift. Both partially attributed this readiness to the same attribute—a pre-existing passion for international missions work. Jordan spoke to this dynamic, sharing how they “didn’t lose a lot of people in the transition because passion for the nations, international missions, and sending staffers across the globe were all normative already,” adding, “When we asked our people if they agreed we should be doing this same work here, their answer was an emphatic ‘Yes.’”³²

³¹ It is important to note that making disciples of all nations must be done in a way that does not cause the redemptive stories within those nations to be disregarded, devalued, or even erased. The works of Justo Gonzales and Fernando Segovia speak to this truth. Rodney Woo, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

³² John Jordan, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

Starting to live out the mission of God “in your own Jerusalem,” as Woo says above, is taking theological conviction and making it visible through the lives of the people within the church. Before many churches can do this, they must recognize they have been settling for reaching only the *parts* of their Jerusalem that already look and act like them, instead of pursuing *everyone* in close proximity, regardless of the cost. Mark Hearn (First Baptist Duluth, Georgia) took great care while starting this process with his congregation. He says, “We made sure to phrase this intentionally, that our ultimate goal was not to create a multicultural (community) for its own sake, but rather to effectively reach whatever people God had placed in the radius around us now and in the years to come, whether that meant lifelong Duluth residents, or newcomers.”³³

Phil McCallum (Evergreen Church, Washington) had a similar moment during a sermon in 2013 when he decided it was time to apply some pressure. He asked two intentional questions. The first was “Does our church currently look like the line at your local Starbucks?” After pausing, he answered for the silent congregation, “No, it doesn’t.” The silence endured after the second question was asked, “Should that bother you?”³⁴ The difficult truth that many congregations have to wrestle with is that they do not have a passion for people of other ethnicities finding their place in the family of God because, if they are honest, they are mostly apathetic about *anyone* doing so.

Before a deep conviction toward multiethnic mission can come to bear on a congregation, a commitment to live on mission at all must be present. It is such passion that will endure through a transition into multiethnicity, and make it possible for the congregation to live out what Hearn describes as the ultimate goal of a multicultural church—not merely being a collection of

³³ Hearn, *Hearing in Technicolor*, 48.

³⁴ Phil McCallum, conversation with author, Zoom, December 7, 2021.

ethnicities, but rather to become an incubator for missionaries in the local community and around the world.³⁵

DeYmaz summarizes well what is at stake at the intersection of multiethnicity and missiology:

“In an increasingly diverse and cynical society, people will no longer find credible the message of God’s love for all people when it’s proclaimed from segregated churches. In these changing times, those without Christ will respond not to platitudes but rather to practice, not to words but only to an authentic witness of God’s love for all people that is daily displayed in life and action.”³⁶

There is urgency in these words, for the day DeYmaz refers to is already upon us. Ornamental and hypothetical theologies that have not been fleshed out in real life receive no consolation prizes in our present cultural moment, nor should they. This is a redemptive development, for a reality where a church could proclaim their mission as the pursuit of all peoples while prioritizing only their own should not have existed in the first place.

In the tension of this urgency—and in the acknowledgement of the fact culture will no longer accept claims of unity from sources that refuse to sacrifice for it—stories of hope still shine brightly. Multiethnic church planter, Cole Brown highlights the nature of the missional opportunity before us, saying, “In John 17, Jesus prayed for the unity of his people with the conviction that our unity would convince the world of his true identity.” He adds, “In the United States, there is no more visible and inexplicable unity than unity across racial and cultural divides.”³⁷

³⁵ Hearn, *Technicolor*, 144.

³⁶ DeYmaz, *Leading a Healthy Multiethnic Church*, 36.

³⁷ Brown, “3 Concerns About Pursuing Multiethnic Churches”

Beau Hughes (Village Church Denton, Texas) has seen Brown’s words prove true. When asked to reflect on the current state of his congregation’s missional effectiveness, he said, “Our diversity now, in regard to age, in regard to socioeconomic status, and yes, in regard to ethnicity, is absolutely one of the most compelling parts of our witness to the greater community.”³⁸ Those who live near by no longer have to take anyone’s word for it when they hear Village Church is a place for all people. The theology has not changed since they first declared their multiethnic intentions, but now the congregation itself communicates plenty without having to say a word.

“Good Theology Creates Unity.”

Hearn (First Baptist Church, Duluth) recalls a time in which he was leading a study of John 17 for some members of his church, teaching unity in diversity as a primary means by which God draws people to himself.³⁹ As the study approached its conclusion, one legacy member commented on how “good theology creates unity.”⁴⁰ In this greater section on the beliefs of featured churches, unity has proven to be the inevitable result of Gospel-centered, Spirit-led, mission-minded communities committing to play their role in the multiethnic story of God together. However, unity is not just the result of embracing the three theologies already featured, but a deserving final addition to complete this survey of beliefs.

Understanding unity as a central part of a church’s identity—not merely one of its attributes—proves essential for transitioning congregations. Irwyn Ince asserts that God as

³⁸ Beau Hughes, conversation with author, Zoom, January 6, 2022.

³⁹ “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:22-23, NRSV).

⁴⁰ Hearn, *Hearing in Technicolor*, 35.

Trinity—unity in diversity, diversity in unity—is not a dry, secondary, technical doctrine, but rather the very heartbeat of the Christian faith.⁴¹ This belief—among the most elemental regarding the essence of God—must be prioritized by all Christians, for they only embody their own identity as image bearers of this God when they exemplify unity in diversity through their lives together.

Similarly, when Bantu says Christianity is not *becoming* a global religion, but rather has always been one, he is further clarifying that pursuing multiethnicity is not the worldly accommodation of trends in contemporary culture, but an attempt to bring the congregations into alignment with truth as old as the Church itself.⁴²

A Body With an Autoimmune Disease

When addressing the human proclivity to live in disunity, Cleveland asserts the primary problem is our identities being too small, evidenced by our tendency to rely on smaller, cultural identities while ignoring our larger, common identity as members of the body of Christ.⁴³ The metaphor of believers as the body of Christ portrays mutual cross-cultural interdependence, and was designed to rescue us from homogeneity and remind us of our identity as diverse people united by Jesus.⁴⁴ Sadly, when Cleveland looks upon the contemporary church, she solemnly

⁴¹ Irwyn L. Ince Jr., *The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity and the Church at its Best* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2020), 35.

⁴² Bantu, *A Multitude of All Peoples*, 2.

⁴³ Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, 177.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 110.

concedes that “if we are a body, then we are one that is afflicted with an autoimmune disease.”⁴⁵

This vivid imagery, of a body attacking itself on account of natural entities being mistaken as harmful aliens, is haunting in its prophetic accuracy, describing comfortable congregations who resist the inclusion of those who were meant to be among them all along. In light of Cleveland’s concern, Phil McCallum’s clarification of his role as a pastor in the body of Christ is helpful:

“I am not a white pastor welcoming the nations into the church—that’s arrogant and entitled. Jesus is the head of the church—it belongs to *all* the nations. I am one of the new humans in Christ we see proclaimed in Ephesians 2, and together we come into the body of Christ. We’re exploring what it means to be the new humanity in the new creation. Everybody matters, and everybody belongs.”⁴⁶

What McCallum describes sounds like a family, which is the metaphor Rodney Clapp uses to describe communal Christian identity and its implications. He says the family created by Jesus is a new first family, made up of all who follow him, that now demands primary allegiance over the biological family that was previously considered primary.⁴⁷ Swanson expands the power and implications of the metaphor by highlighting how “the early disciples had been formed toward a vision of the kingdom of God that was experienced as a new family *comprised of former cultural enemies*.”⁴⁸ Clearly, the bar of unity is high for those who follow Christ, and it is meant to be. To those who are disowned by their biological families because of their newfound faith, biblical unity gives assurance they can find new family in the Church. To those who have

⁴⁵ Ibid, loc 1477, Kindle.

⁴⁶ Phil McCallum, conversation with author, Zoom, December 7, 2021.

⁴⁷ Rodney Clapp, *Families at the crossroads: Beyond traditional and modern options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 77.

⁴⁸ Swanson, *Rediscovering the White Church*, 19. Emphasis added.

been considered enemies of God’s people, biblical unity offers a place in the body of Christ. It is one thing to gather a collection of individuals; it is something else entirely for those individuals to see themselves as a people with a shared identity who—despite countless divisions, differences and disagreements—commit to remaining with one another.⁴⁹ Leaders who have transitioned churches into a multiethnic reality did so while standing on such truths, and profound community with shared identity has been the result.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 36.

Chapter 4 - Intentional Culture

We live in a time of ecclesial and cultural transition and even upheaval, a time when it is challenging to discern how to sustain as well as renovate institutions, how to heal and grow communities that are being ruptured by divisions, and to find innovative forms for building new institutions while allowing decaying ones to die.¹

Gregory L. Jones

These words from Jones about are certainly heavy to bear, but their applicability to the aspiring leader is uncanny—for this task indeed requires the ability to discern which institutions need to be left to perish, and which need to be healed and grown. To make these judgements and react in real time requires not one intentional leader, but an entire culture of intentionality that steers the church toward the transformation it seeks.

As previously stated in chapter 2, a church's transition into a multiethnic reality is not merely the introduction of a program, or collection of programs.² It is the transformation of the community itself, person by person, from the inside out. Any other perspective will not only prove insufficient for achieving meaningful change, but also prove harmful to the very people an aspiring church claims they want to care for. Drastic change of reality requires a drastic change of mind, heart, strategy, and spirit. This level of cultural intentionality is beyond what most churches have ever applied to any initiative, as it calls for a 360 degree evaluation of a congregation's present state, coupled with a full reinvention of how the church exists and functions. This chapter highlights the intentional culture present throughout the featured churches, particularly as championed and exemplified by the leaders within them.

¹ Jones and Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, loc 1381.

² Cole Brown, "3 Concerns About Pursuing Multi-Ethnic Churches"

“Pastor, we’ve spent our whole lives longing for this…”

This thesis has already addressed the ways in which the Word of God and the efforts of Godly leaders can usher white churches into shared conviction that things *should* change. However, it is intentional culture that shifts such churches into a common belief that things *can* change. A fitting foundation for this concept, and for all of the cultural elements that follow, is addressed by Kelly Brown Douglass’ words about the concept of moral imagination:

A moral imagination is grounded in the absolute belief that the world can be better. A moral imagination envisions Isaiah’s “new heaven and new earth,” where the “wolf and the lamb shall feed together,” and trusts that it will be made real (Isaiah 65:25). What is certain, a moral imagination disrupts the notion that the world as it is reflects God’s intentions...with a moral imagination one is able to live proleptically, that is, as if the new heaven and new earth were already here. This means one’s life is not constrained by what is. It is oriented toward what will be.³

Having a groundwork of change not only as a moral imperative, but as an inevitable, eschatological certainty, empowers members of an aspiring community to look at individuals or groups of people who previously appeared to be lost causes, and instead see the possibility of partnership. Rodney Woo (Wilcrest Baptist Church, Houston) reflects on how he assumed the older demographics in his congregation would be most resistant to his proposed paradigm shifts. He was quite happy to be wrong when some of the hardest workers under the new vision were

³ Kelly Douglas Brown, *Stand your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2015), loc 4379, Kindle.

people in their seventies. Woo recalls them saying, “Pastor, we’ve spent our whole lives longing for this, with no one here to show us it was possible.”⁴

The members of a congregation are not the only ones who can become owners of a multiethnic vision later in life—pastors can do the same. John Jordan (Village Church, Oregon) recalls how Don Jensen—the senior pastor who ushered the church into transition—was past fifty years old when he initially proposed the church’s new multiethnic trajectory, and had served in that role nearly three decades prior. Jordan believes those years of experience, and even more so, of relationship building, were why the congregation accepted their new mission with minimal amounts of pushback.⁵ A church that believes *things* can change, and *people* can change, has already taken a quantum leap toward pursuing transformation others deem impossible.

Declaring Things Will Change: Vision & Values

With their theologically informed, multiethnic imagination in place, aspiring leaders can then make declarations of intent for their congregations to reorient around together. Since the greatest gift a leader can give their followers is a clearly defined mission, most of the featured leaders chose to rewrite their mission statements to ensure their most publicly visible declarations of purpose reflected their new multiethnic trajectory.

Mark Hearn (First Baptist Church, Duluth) knew it was time to craft a new mission statement after the congregation had fully shifted their efforts around the needs of their surrounding community. After empowering the legacy members of the church to own the

⁴ Rodney Woo, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

⁵ John Jordan, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

process, they landed on a sentence they believed to be a timeless reminder of their purpose; “We are a united community of faith that loves, reaches and disciples *all people* for the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁶ The statement was joyfully adopted by the congregation without opposition, and it is still frequently used in weekly services to this day.

Woo (Wilcrest Baptist Church, Houston) can also recall reciting a new mission statement every Sunday morning in the early 1990’s. Together, the congregation of 180 people would say, “Wilcrest Baptist Church is God’s multiethnic bridge that draws all people to Jesus Christ, who transforms them from unbelievers to missionaries.” The public affirmation of this statement was an easy scene to remember, because all 180 people reciting it were white. Woo admits it felt strange—the words were not yet true, after all—but they were said sincerely and consistently. Soon after they would never be all-white again.

Under Dillaman’s guidance, ACAC in Pittsburgh settled on “Following Jesus in diverse community.” Tyler Sollie (Life Center, Tacoma) helped pivot from “Inspiring our community to love and follow Jesus,” to “Bringing life in Christ to *every life* in our communities.”⁷ Largely due to Bryan Wilkerson’s guidance, people at Grace Chapel in Boston now declare, “We strive to be a vibrant, growing, *multicultural* community of seekers and believers, discovering life with God for the good of the world.”⁸

The specific wording of these statements is not nearly as important as their proficiency in clarifying how the churches that hold them are multiethnic expressions of God’s kingdom. This

⁶ Hearn, *Mark. Hearing in Technicolor*, 48.

⁷ Tyler Sollie, conversation with author, Zoom, December 13, 2022. Emphasis added.

⁸ “Church Overview.” Grace Chapel, Accessed March 16, 2022. <https://www.grace.org/about-us/church-overview/> Emphasis added.

allows clarity and commitment to work their way into every ministry, community, leader, and member within the life of the church.

In addition to newly declared mission and vision, aspiring churches also need clear values to be repeated to them as they navigate transition together. Wilkerson (Grace Chapel, Boston) refers to this necessary repetition as “sanctified stubbornness,” and warns aspiring leaders they must be prepared to communicate the same essential truths to people who are already tired of hearing them, but are yet to truly embody them.⁹

In my conversations with the featured leaders, I identified six values they embraced while starting this work, and still embrace while continuing it today. The first such value is *clarity*. None of the featured leaders approached their church’s transition as a covert operation. Some initially seeded the vision in smaller pockets of the congregation—such as elders, staff members, or key lay leaders—but the new intentions were eventually declared in public, without downplaying the impact they would surely have on the church as a whole. Several featured leaders spoke of a pivotal moment or seminal sermon that marked the official starting line of their respective journeys, but all of them seemed to value consistency and repetition over stirring first impressions.

Clarity is not only achieved through vision and values, but also vocabulary. Words should always be chosen with intentionality, even more so in a cultural moment where they are often redefined and weaponized. Effective leaders do not merely declare “these are our words,” but more importantly, “this is what we mean when use them.”

Hearn and DeYmaz choose not to use *multicultural* when referring to their churches to avoid confusion with the academic concept of multiculturalism, which is often associated with

⁹ Bryan Wilkerson, conversation with author, Zoom, January 6, 2022.

postmodern universalism. As seen above, Wilkerson has no problem using the word, despite being located in the shadow of several of the country's most notorious universities. Hearn also avoids *multiracial* to honor his conviction that scripture teaches there is only one race, that being the human race. Regardless of the primary term a church chooses to self-identity, work will need to be done to achieve clarity around what the word means *to them*, in *their* particular context, for the good of those inside and outside the church itself.

Clarity around vocabulary is all the more important when one considers how certain words recall real harm that has been suffered by real people. Swanson speaks of a Native American friend who—despite knowing the biblical significance of the word *kingdom*—struggles to think of anything but the European colonization that resulted in the genocide of her ancestors every time she hears it.¹⁰ Creating new associations around important terms for people with such stories is no small task, but one aspiring leaders must prepare for if they intend to shepherd people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds effectively.

Declaring which words should be avoided proves as important as deciding which to use. Some common terms at the intersection of tribalistic discussions regarding theology, politics, and ethnicity can have diametrically opposed meanings, depending on cultural and conversational context. Some of the featured leaders avoid words such as *conservative*, *liberal*, *progressive* and *evangelical*, based on their belief they cause unnecessary confusion and division instead of clarity and unity. In my observation, such decisions are not fearful avoidance of conflict, but rather part of making every effort to maintain the unity in the Spirit of the bond of peace.¹¹

¹⁰ Swanson, *Rediscipling the White Church*, 16.

¹¹ Ephesians 4:3 NRSV.

In addition to clarity, community is another obviously held value by the leaders featured in this thesis. The immense importance of relationship runs throughout all the words employed thus far, from the relational identity of a triune god, to the shared, communal identities of the Church, to the manner in which leaders execute their duties—not just as strategists, but as shepherds responsible for the care and empowerment of actual people.

This value plays out at every level of an aspiring church, and at every step of the multiethnic journey. Relationships—and more specifically, the trust that creates and sustains them—are the primary currency in the economy of a transitioning church. As important as relationship proves to be for the execution of seasonal initiatives, it is even more crucial in times of confusion or disorientation. Margaret Wheatley speaks to this:

It is possible to prepare for the future without knowing what it will be. The primary way to prepare for the unknown is to attend to the quality of our relationships, to how well we know and trust one another.”¹²

The third observed value involves comfort—not prioritizing the comfort of the church’s existing members, but rather identifying comfort as the most likely hindrance to the church’s progress. The featured leaders make it clear that everyone in the congregation will take turns being uncomfortable as they clumsily pursue a truly shared life together.

David Bailey, founder of Arrabon and contributor at Barna, shares how he and his team coined the “70 Percent Rule,” which states that if an individual feels comfortable in their church more than 70 percent of the time, something is amiss, their culture is likely dominating the others represented in the congregation, and adjustments need to be made if a multiethnic trajectory is

¹² Margaret Wheatley, “When Change Is Out of Control” in *Human Resources for the 21st Century*, ed. Marc Effron, Robert P. Gandossy, and Marshall Goldsmith (Hoboken, NJ: J. Wiley & Sons, 2003)
<https://margaretwheatley.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/When-Change-is-Out-of-Our-Control.pdf>

still intended.¹³ Similarly, Jones speaks bluntly regarding what will be required if people truly wish to live according to this principle:

More white Christians will have to worship in churches with senior leadership that is not white, sit in pews where whites are not the overwhelming majority, and experience the tenor of conversations about the connections between Christian commitment and community problems when they are not driven by white interests. In these multiracial settings, even familiar gospel stories and hymns resonate differently. More than any moral aspiration or religious conviction, this kind of lived experience promises to shrink racial perception gaps and bridge the racial divides.¹⁴

Should this straight-forward depiction of what will be required of white Christians give pause to aspiring leaders, they must remember the problems multiethnic churches have the opportunity to address in greater culture. The social networks of white Americans are 91 percent white, and 75 percent have no minority presence in their circles at all.¹⁵ As has been said throughout this thesis, to see drastic change come to pass, drastic changes must be made.

Previous insulation from hard truths makes many aspiring leaders likely to recoil from such words. However, there is still a peculiar joy in laying down one's preferences when time is taken to remember "almost no one is doing what they want to do—(rather) the Spirit of God is pressing every disciple to do precisely what God wants done, and not what they might envision."¹⁶ The joy of obedience—and the hope of a reality far more splendid than one's comfort—must be enough to keep walking.

¹³ "Beyond Diversity", 40.

¹⁴ Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, 194.

¹⁵ Ingram, "Three Quarters of Whites Don't Have Any Non-White Friends."

¹⁶ Willie James Jennings, *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 252.

The final value I observed in the featured leaders was a commitment to celebration—specifically, the regular and public celebration of the different cultures represented within the church, and the community at large. For Wilkerson (Grace Chapel, Boston), this looks like regular “Cultural and Urban Awareness” Weekends being facilitated by the church.¹⁷ Hearn leads the people of First Baptist Duluth in celebrating Indian Independence Day, Three Kings Day, as well as Korean and Chinese New Year.¹⁸ McCallum says some of his favorite moments leading Evergreen Church have involved hosting thousands of Indian neighbors for color festivals and Desi lights parties. These leaders understand there is a chasm of difference between merely tolerating someone’s culture, and properly celebrating it. In choosing the latter, they are also choosing to take tangible steps toward the vision that compels them forward.

The crafting of new mission statements and the embracing of new values by no means guarantees transformation in an aspiring church. Many have done both, only to find they lacked the character and conviction to see them actually applied. However, for the majority of the featured leaders, they proved to be meaningful milestones at the beginning of the respective journeys.

Be the Bridge: A Community of Competence

Although the natural impulse after adopting a new vision is to focus on the development and implementation of strategy, those who have successfully transitioned white churches first prioritize the pursuit of cultural competency throughout the church.

¹⁷ Bryan Wilkerson, conversation with author, Zoom, January 6, 2022.

¹⁸ Hearn, *Technicolor*, 88.

Since the clarification and adoption of new vision typically starts at the leadership level, equipping tends to begin among staff and key lay leaders, as well. Some expressions of this are fairly predictable in their form and content, but still wildly effective. Sollie (Life Center, Tacoma) has seen encouraging progress in building trust through staff-wide book studies and subsequent discussion groups, while Wilkerson (Grace Chapel, Boston) has invested meaningful time and resources in staff trainings around diversity and inclusion.

Beau Hughes (The Village Church Denton, Texas) believes in these traditional means of equipping, and has used them in his own context. However, he has also utilized creative partnerships to grow competency among his key leaders. Through mutual friends, Hughes was able to arrange a staff trip to visit a multiethnic church in Atlanta. Shortly thereafter, he formalized a partnership with Epiphany Fellowship in Philadelphia, led by Dr. Eric Mason. The partnership with Epiphany led to significant progress in the music ministry at the Village Church, as gospel music became a monthly fixture in Sunday worship services.¹⁹

Several other featured leaders refer to similar partnerships with pastors from non-white backgrounds as foundational to their own development, and that of their congregation. Some invited local partners to teach their staff on a relevant topic, but the most commonly mentioned dynamic is the simple value of real relationship and sincere partnership with such leaders.

The featured leaders themselves are obviously essential to their churches, but the success of a congregation's transition efforts are largely determined by their ability to transfer competency into the people they are responsible for. The preferred environment for this work is one that seats people in circles around tables instead of in rows inside sanctuaries.

¹⁹ Beau Hughes, conversation with author, Zoom, January 6, 2022.

Mark Hearn (First Baptist Church, Duluth) was convinced competency could only be effectively formed in community, so he began what he calls “CROSS Class” in his own living room. Several times a year he would invite people representing at least three generations and three ethnic groups to commit to a season of sharing life together. Hearn believes the classes have proven effective at eliminating people’s fear, which he says is the primary enemy of full engagement in the church’s multiethnic vision.²⁰ Similarly, John Jordan (Village Church, Oregon) speaks fondly of multicultural dinners and competency courses—typically taught by members of a highlighted ethnic group within the church—that have been commonplace now for many years.²¹ Several other featured leaders, including Wilkerson of Grace Chapel, shared how their churches have greatly benefitted from “Be the Bridge” groups, which are multiethnic circles of six to twelve people committing to a year of monthly discussions related to race and reconciliation.

Those who oversee these environments would tell you there is nothing especially revolutionary about their content or structure, but they provide a space for people to fumble forward together in the context of relationship, while steadily increasing trust and connection. It was typically in regard to environments like these that featured leaders spoke of their people learning to engage in reflective listening, practicing empathy, or making space for biblical lament—all of which prove essential for widespread transformation to come to pass.

McKinley (Imago Dei, Portland), who made significant investments into competence training at his church, regrets not doing so sooner. Still, he is able to remind himself—and aspiring leaders—of where influence begins and ends:

²⁰ Mark Hearn, conversation with author, Zoom, January 5, 2022.

²¹ John Jordan, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

We have to understand from the jump that this is a value—and because it’s a value you can’t make anybody adopt it. All you can do is teach it, uphold it, know how to tell when someone has adopted it, and have the necessary conversations when it’s clear someone has not.”²²

Signposts of Welcome

White churches who have become places of safety and flourishing for people of other ethnicities found ways to authentically welcome such people into the community. Sadly, many churches are simply bad at making *anyone* feel welcome, never mind those outside the majority culture of the church. Signposts of welcome are necessary—blatant, visible declarations that people from other background are seen, valued, and wanted.

Several featured leaders spoke of including additional languages from the greater community when designing signage, text for handouts, or slides for projector screens. They also share that when those languages go from visible to audible in moments of corporate prayer or scripture reading, guests from nonwhite ethnicities tend to receive them as proclamations of welcome.

Mark Hearn (First Baptist Church, Duluth) describes the pride his members have taken in watching flags representing the home nations of new members appear on the walls of the sanctuary. He is also eager to share the miraculous stories that spring up through their “One Voice Language Resource Center,” which offers translation during services, bible distribution,

²² Rick McKinley, conversation with author, Zoom, December 6, 2021.

and English lessons for all the language groups in their congregation and surrounding community.²³

All of these concepts are prime examples of making people feel welcome, regardless of their background. However, they also point to a biblical understanding and full appreciation of true hospitality, which is too often under-prioritized in American churches. Although the word *hospitality* causes many to think of the last time a neighbor invited them over for dinner, Scripture paints a different picture. Biblical hospitality goes beyond entertaining those in our inner circle, and instead leads us to pull up a chair to sit with the unfamiliar. The Greek word for hospitality used throughout the New Testament literally means “love toward the stranger,” and typically refers to people from other nations, languages, and ethnicities. Real hospitality crosses dividing lines and makes it possible for people who were once strangers to become family.²⁴

An important aspect of hospitality that aspiring leaders must remember, is that it is proactive in nature, always prepared ahead of time to offer welcome to unannounced guests. If a church waits to include Vietnamese words on their signage until someone from Vietnam arrives, they are too late. For aspiring churches, hospitality may require diligently preparing for the arrival of people who may not arrive for months or years. This is why Rock Dillaman hired a gospel and jazz musician at his all-white church in Pittsburgh, and why Hearn required song lyrics in languages that were being spoken in his city, but not yet in his congregation. If they desire their actions to be in line with their claimed convictions, aspiring leaders will need to identify how they will do similar things for the sake of those they hope to reach.

²³ Hearn, *Technicolor*, 131.

²⁴ Hearn, *Hearing in Technicolor*, 80.

Friend, what do *you* think we should cook?

Representation—both on stage and on staff—is another signpost of welcome. Every featured leader would agree having representation from non-white backgrounds in places of visible leadership is just one aspect of a much larger, essential conversation. People who represent ethnicities outside the dominant culture using their gifts in preaching, worship and other public capacities is encouraging to visitors, but the visual only has profound impact if it is paired with actual influence and shared ownership at the leadership level of the church.

One observation I had while speaking with the featured leaders was their tendency to value representation around leadership tables more than on stage. To be clear, they do not value the former at the expense of the latter, but seem to operate under the conviction that people who are given a real voice and actual authority will naturally find places to use their gifts in public capacities of different kinds. In doing so, they communicate to others from non-dominant cultures there is opportunity for them to do the same.

The voice and authority referenced in the previous paragraph can be profoundly effective through the empowerment of lay leaders, but this does not lessen the importance of representation in paid staff positions. In fact, John Jordan (Village Church, Oregon) admits settling for representation at the lay level for too long is one of his few regrets when he reflects on thirty years of multiethnic ministry. The fruitfulness of their ministries devoted to ethnic minority groups were increased dramatically once the churches commitment to those groups was reflected at the staff level.²⁵

²⁵ John Jordan, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

The important thing to clarify about empowerment is it must be more about *faithfulness* than *fruitfulness*. Empowering called, qualified, competent leaders from all kinds of backgrounds is the *faithful* thing to do. Any fruitfulness that follows is to be celebrated, but in the absence of such fruit—numerical or otherwise—conviction must not wane.

Rick McKinley (Imago Dei, Portland) is gracious and vulnerable while discussing his regrets as the lead pastor of a transitioning church for two decades. Still, as he reflects on being able to hire his friend, Eric Knox—a gifted African-American pastor and accomplished leader in the nonprofit world — he is able to share wins alongside his regrets. He says in regard to bringing Knox onto the pastoral staff:

One thing we did right is we didn't just invite him to the table—we asked him to come and *set* the table. Most people make the mistake of hiring someone to come to a table where the trajectories are already set.”²⁶

Aspiring leaders must remember this brief sentiment, especially as they work to build out their teams. The image of someone from outside the dominant culture coming to a table that is already set, filled with dishes that have already been chosen, prepared and served according to the desires of the regulars, forced to discern and mimic the norms of those already eating, should be sobering to those who have always been the host, and never the late arrival. Likewise, the image of the late addition being brought in as a co-host and co-owner of the space, next to a bare table with friendly faces and empty hands standing by, hearing a voice speak out—“Friend, what do *you* think we should cook?”—*that* scene should compel leaders to clear the table, and invite

²⁶ Rick McKinley, conversation with author, Zoom, December 6, 2021.

others to set it anew. As Rock Dillaman says, “It’s not just about sharing a room—it’s sharing power, and decision making, and the formation of the culture as a whole.”²⁷

“Discipleship has never been optional.”

Perhaps the most important area of intentionality among the featured leaders is in discipleship, which can be understood as equipping people to know and follow Jesus Christ as the definitive activities of their lives, and providing counter-formation to the misinformation of secular liturgies into which we are thrown from an early age.²⁸

Addressing the wide-spread nature of the discipleship problem in the American church is beyond the bounds of what this thesis is capable of adequately treating. However, the featured leaders make intentional efforts to view discipleship through the lens of the multiethnic journey they find themselves on.

In addition to ministry expressions already mentioned in this chapter (Hearn’s CROSS Class, “Be the Bridge” groups), other examples of intentional discipleship abound. Shortly after accepting the role of Senior Pastor at Allegheny Center Alliance Church, Rock Dillaman realized the curriculum being used in the children’s ministry was designed for white children, and largely inaccessible to kids from other ethnic groups. When their search for resources fitting for a church pursuing multiethnicity in the late 1980’s proved fruitless, Dillaman’s wife responded by investing several years into rewriting the entire curriculum herself.²⁹

²⁷ Rockwell Dillaman, conversation with author, Zoom, December 20, 2021.

²⁸ James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 88.

²⁹ Rockwell Dillaman, conversation with author, Zoom, December 20, 2021.

The foundational element of discipleship in most American churches is found in the pulpit, where a multiethnic trajectory brings many implications to bear. Rodney Woo (Wilcrest Baptist Church, Houston) is emphatic when he claims his multiethnic journey not only changed, but *improved* his communication skills. Preaching consistently to an ethnically diverse room forced him to shift from monologue to dialogue, and sharpen his creative storytelling since narratives appeal to every culture, and are not nearly as easy to refute as lectures tend to be.

Woo enters some deep waters as he points to the connection between multiethnicity and preaching style. In his 1977 work, *The Recovery of Preaching*, Mitchell argued that white preachers had much to learn from the black tradition of preaching as folk culture. He claims the downfall of American, white, middle-class preaching was connected to the inability or unwillingness of its preachers to proclaim the gospel in the idiom of the people. He further claimed they had opted for an academic approach, oriented in a way that made themselves inaccessible to the majority of Americans.³⁰ In light of demographic shifts over the four decades, Mitchell's assessment is more accurate now than when it was originally offered.

When one considers the theological observations made regarding the Holy Spirit in Chapter 3, it should not be surprising that several featured leaders spoke of changes they made to music and worship styles as demonstrations of cultural intentionality. Every church has to find its own expression of worship over time. The difference for a church pursuing a multiethnic reality is they no longer get to base their decisions in this realm on the desires of those who are already present, but also the desires of those they hope will worship with them in the future.

³⁰ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), loc 324, Kindle.

Churches must consider and correct the ways white norms create barriers between people of color and a meaningful worship experience—even if it means shaking up or letting go of the way things have been.³¹ For transitioning churches with a subdued style of worship, Woo plainly says there will almost certainly need to be a shift that makes room for people to worship more expressively, as is normative in most non-white contexts.³² Wilkerson, whose context in Boston is quite different compared to where Woo served in Houston, still voiced similar sentiments in this regard.³³

Aspiring leaders should consider what would change if they were committed to making the act of singing together feel like a ‘welcome home’ to as many neighbors—from as many backgrounds—as possible. As mentioned above, moving away from worship as a monocultural performance and toward worship as an act of multiethnic hospitality made a profound impact at The Village Church Denton. It seems likely a similar shift in churches from other contexts would yield comparable, fruitful results.³⁴

One final ministry expression present in several featured churches that creates opportunity to infuse multiethnic intentionality into discipleship, is Alpha. Championed by Nicky Gumbel of Holy Trinity Brompton in London since 1990, Alpha is a two-to-three month course designed to be a safe place for those who are not Christians to have meaningful conversations about faith, God and life. Although wildly effective, it is not the *content* of the course that provides the most significant multicultural opportunities, but rather the *structure* of it.

³¹“ Beyond Diversity”, 128.

³² Rodney Woo, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

³³ Bryan Wilkerson, conversation with author, Zoom, January 6, 2022.

³⁴“ Beyond Diversity”, 39.

After launching an Alpha course at Evergreen Church, Phil McCallum embraced the freedom site leaders are given to customize its implementation. Since one of the three movements a guest experiences at every Alpha gathering is a shared meal, McCallum used staffing dollars to hire a professional chef in the name of hospitality, and chose meals for each week of the course that reflected the different cultures already present in the life of the church. Sometimes signposts of welcome and revisited discipleship expressions look like literal signs, and other times they look like perfectly cooked tandoori chicken.

There is an additional reason aspiring leaders should consider new discipleship environments such as Alpha, the aforementioned classes, and Be the Bridge groups—they are not formed according to geography, as the small groups in most churches tend to be. Although neighborhood-based groups boast both convenience and missional opportunity, they also tend to gather people along the very ethnic and socioeconomic lines aspiring leaders are attempting to cross. This dynamic should compel leaders to consider alternatives that promote multiethnic connection instead of impeding it.

A final observation regarding intentionality in discipleship was formed in my conversation with Rodney Woo (Wilcrest Baptist Church, Houston), who said simply, “When you cross this line and decide you are to become a multiethnic church, suddenly *all* of scripture is applicable.”³⁵ I have come to realize what I believe he intended with those words—that when aspiring leaders start doing what is necessary to transition their white church toward a multiethnic reality, they find that for the first time, they are *actually* doing what they were *supposed* to be doing all along, just because they are a disciple of Christ. Dallas Willard

³⁵ Rodney Woo, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

addresses the gap between what Christ commanded, and what we actually do as people who bear his name:

“The current position of the church in our world may be better explained by what liberals and conservatives have shared, than by how they differ. For different reasons, and with different emphases, they have agreed that discipleship to Christ is optional to membership in the Christian church. Thus the very type of life that could change the course of human society—and upon occasion has done so—is excluded from the essential message of the church.”³⁶

Since discipleship to Christ has never been optional, perhaps the greatest gift of committing to transition a white church is simply this: faithfully walking out the process will usher a congregation into the joy of actually obeying Christ, instead of just discussing what it would be like if they did.

“Oh, these white people are serious.”

Among the more inspiring attributes shared by the featured leaders is the high value placed on multiethnic collaboration. Many examples of this have been previously referenced in this thesis—Hughes partnering with Epiphany Fellowship, for example—but none are more stirring than those about the pursuit of greater local and global impact.

John Jordan (Village Church, Oregon) is clearly proud of his church as he recalls how their intentional efforts to meet the tangible needs of refugees in their region were so fruitful over the

³⁶ Dallas Willard, “Discipleship: For Super-Christians Only?,” *Christianity Today*, October 10, 1980, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1980/october-10/discipleship-for-super-christians-only.html>

years, that local government officials eventually procured their assistance when the pandemic hit record highs and public stations for the distribution of COVID-related health care measures needed to be established. Local authorities were so familiar with the church's reputation among immigrant populations, they asked the congregation to focus on providing care for those very people groups, which are typically at higher risk of infection, yet slower to trust government officials without a personal connection of some kind. Village Church's team of translators was happy to provide that connection.

When Rock Dillaman (ACAC, Pittsburgh) commit himself to leading an all-white church located in the middle of a black neighborhood, he knew good intentions would not be enough to cut through decades of fully-justified mistrust in the hearts of the neighbors. Dillaman recalls it took many years, but eventually the intentional efforts to address tangible needs in the struggling community caused locals to murmur, "Oh, these white people are serious."³⁷

In the decades that followed, ACAC commit to a simple rhythm of praying for wisdom, identifying problems in the community, looking for collaborators, and sacrificially giving time and resources until the issue was resolved. Access to suitable medical services was unreliable at best, so they started a health care center, subsidized by the payments of church members. Predatory payday loans were financially crippling local families, so they partnered with city officials to start a credit union. A nearby building was hosting a disturbing percentage of local crime, so they purchased it, and then sold it to the city at a discount to be used for redemptive purposes. They realized there was a special call on their congregation to expand efforts such as these, so they empowered one of their associate pastors to start the Urban Impact Foundation,

³⁷ Rockwell Dillaman, conversation with author, Zoom, December 20, 2021.

which has now been serving children and families throughout North Pittsburgh through education, athletics and performing arts for over 25 years.³⁸

These stories exemplify several values the featured leaders have learned to embody in different ways over time—the tethering of fervent prayer to practical action, as well as the embodiment of biblical, redemptive justice in the world outside the church’s four walls.

The Colossal Misunderstanding of Our Time

The final aspects of intentional culture embodied by the featured leaders are humility and vulnerability. Each leader demonstrates these twin virtues in compelling fashion. This is a profound compliment when one considers the words of Niebuhr, who once posited, “There is no temptation so seductive as the temptation to be humble and proud at the same time.”³⁹ I have sat with leaders who have surrendered to this temptation, and I have witnessed the off-putting results—the leaders featured in this thesis are not among them.

Beau Hughes (The Village Church Denton, Texas) is an astounding, yet perplexing leader to talk to. After speaking with him I found myself reading and rereading the notes I had taken during our conversation. I could not believe how much intentionality he had injected into his efforts to lead his church into the multiethnic future they were called to a decade ago. Book studies. Trips across the country to simply listen, learn, and build relationships. Roundtable discussions for the staff, and for the community at large. More book studies. Taking risks in new worship styles. Book studies *for other churches*. Leadership development at every level of the

³⁸“ Home.” Urban Impact, March 11, 2022. <https://uifpgh.org/>.

³⁹ Niebuhr, *Love and Justice*, 120.

church. And it all led to real fruit. The good kind of growth. Real change happening in the hearts of real people—all kinds of people. And yet, as he reflects on it all, he is clearly more comfortable talking about the losses than the wins. In fact, I am not sure I can recall speaking with someone so impressive, who is so very unimpressed with themselves and their accomplishments. It is not insecurity, however—it is real humility. It is an awareness of ways he could improve that is not rooted in shame, paired with eyes that would rather fixate on the people around him in the present, or the possibility that still lies in the future, than the hurts he has acquired in the past.

I do not know what to call what I saw in one long conversation with Beau—humility and vulnerability with have to do—but I saw it in all of the leaders who were gracious enough to share their time with me.

Edwin Friedman says, “The colossal misunderstanding of our time is the assumption that insight will work with people who are unmotivated to change.” He continues, “If you want your child, spouse, client, or boss to shape up, stay connected while changing yourself rather than trying to fix them.”⁴⁰ This leadership insight for bringing change into the lives of others is not only pure gold for the aspiring pastor, but also the closest thing one will find to a fast-track into humility—committing to changing oneself, and not in private as most address their flaws, but rather connected to the people one is leading, so there is awareness of one’s imperfections. This is true humility, and it is what I see demonstrated in the lives of the featured leaders. Wayne Schmidt, pastor of a multiethnic church in Michigan puts it this way:

⁴⁰ Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), ix.

People you lead love to learn with you, to join you in the journey. Your mistakes, when readily admitted, keep them from being paralyzed by attempted perfectionism. You're not an expert instructing them, but a fellow journeyer discovering along with them."⁴¹

Hopefully it has not gone unnoticed how freely each of the featured leaders share the biggest regrets from their journeys. They certainly did not owe such humility and vulnerability to someone they did not know, who would be putting said failures on paper, to be potentially read by a wider audience. Apparently, they do not care about looking successful nearly as much as they do about the mission they have been called into, and helping others commit to the mission themselves. And *that* is what building a culture of intentionality looks like.

⁴¹ DeYmaz, *Leading a Healthy Multiethnic Church*, 66.

Chapter 5 - Concluding Observations and Implications

The leaders featured throughout this thesis have provided footsteps to follow, but the stories of their churches are a gross misrepresentation if they do not properly highlight the individuals who were *not* part of the majority ethnic group, but still chose to lead by ‘going first’ in a manner no less significant than what was exemplified by the featured leaders themselves. Without them, none of these stories of transformation would exist, and while some made meaningful appearances throughout this thesis, the importance of their contributions calls for recognition here.

Eric Knox comes to mind first, whose friendship with Rick McKinley over two decades ago created awareness, that became passion, that became a multiplying church with a heart for reflecting God’s kingdom. Without his investment in McKinley as a friend—and eventually in the church as a pastor—Imago Dei’s story would not be what it is today.

Sam Onwucheka was another, whom Beau Hughes referred to as the catalyst that preceded The Village Church Denton’s tipping point on their multiethnic journey. His work as a chaplain among athletes at the University of North Texas—and within the ministries of the church itself—allowed dividing lines to be crossed for the first time, and resulted in people finding their place in the Kingdom of God.

Then, there’s Kelvin Walker, the African-American worship leader who chose to join Rock Dillaman in Pittsburgh years before anyone else who looked like him would walk through the doors of the sanctuary to hear him sing. The five Korean families who were the only non-white members upon John Jordan’s arrival at Village Church Beaverton, and the first Indian family at a Desi lights party to accept Phil McCallum’s invitation into an Alpha course at Evergreen Church also have places of honor on this list. All of these are examples of courageous,

transformative leadership, the absence of which would have rendered the efforts of the featured leaders unfruitful and irrelevant. For any white church to have a chance of reaching the multiethnic reality they aspire to, God will have to provide such leaders who are bold enough to go first, and humble enough to choose a reality that will be—at least for a time—more uncomfortable for them than anyone else in the community.

“You have to meet my friend, Keith.”

You might remember the name Keith Jenkins. He was introduced as one of the featured leaders in the introduction, then not mentioned throughout the chapters that followed. This was not an oversight. His story was intentionally preserved for this space—after the in-depth look at the great cost of walking this road, and before implications are put forward for those considering their response.

I am only aware Keith Jenkins exists because of an unplanned conversation with a new friend at a pastors gathering. He asked me about my doctoral studies, so I started telling him how it involved white churches pursuing a multiethnic reality. Before I had finished, he could not help but interrupt, “I’m sorry, but you have to meet my friend, Keith.”

A few minutes later I left with contact information for a man about whom I knew very little. I knew he was a well-known, faithful leader in the Foursquare denomination. I knew at one time he had been the chaplain for the University of Oregon football and basketball teams. I knew he had accepted the lead pastor position at a historically white church just outside Portland shortly before the pandemic. And I knew he was black.

When the day of our Zoom call arrived, I was determined to maximize the thirty minutes Keith had agreed to set aside for our conversation. We logged on, I introduced myself and my thesis, then jumped right into how little I know and how many mistakes I have made in the areas we would be discussing. He laughed and responded, “I actually have an hour—I told you I had thirty minutes because I didn’t know if you were an idiot—clearly you are not.”¹

He quickly gave me a fly-by of his earlier years. He was born and raised in inner-city Baltimore, and joined the marines out of high school. He shared how being in a shower with forty other recruits at boot camp was the most multicultural moment of his life, then spoke of how ten years of military service took him all over the world—Guam, Thailand, and the Philippines. A call to ministry eventually brought him to the West Coast, where he has served Foursquare churches and leaders ever since.

Most recently, his journey brought him to East Hill Church Family in Gresham, immediately east of Portland. East Hill is nearly a century old, was the fastest growing church in Oregon in the mid-seventies, and hosted over ten thousand people for Easter in 2001. After being approached by the denomination to consider the open lead pastor position in 2019, Keith and his wife, Coco, eventually sensed a divine call to accept the offer. Soon after, they arrived at a predominantly white church of 800 people, led by an all-white staff, in a rapidly diversifying area, with a very racist history few are aware of.² They moved into their new house just in time for a global pandemic, an extended lock-down, and a year of horrific social injustice.

¹ Keith Jenkins, conversation with author, Zoom, January 5, 2022.

² See Alena Semuels, “The Racist History of Portland, the Whitest City in America,” *The Atlantic*, July 22, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/07/racist-history-portland/492035/>

“So...why do this?”

Even though my time had been doubled to an hour, when the first opportunity for me to ask a question arose, I cut right to the chase, asking, “So...why do this?” The rest of our time together—which went well past the allotted hour—was a flurry of wisdom, vulnerability, perspective and encouragement. Three specific moments remain etched in my mind.

First, he provided a direct answer to my question, saying, “I’m doing this because I’m a missionary, I’m a gospel-believing man,” then adding, “It’s not about my comfort, and it’s not about my preferences—do I believe the Kingdom is coming or not?”³ He was just a few sentences in, but had already declared his Gospel identity, his willingness to sacrifice, and the source of his present and future hope.

Second, he shared about the costs his new role has already required him to pay. He told me about a man in his congregation asking him after a sermon to tone down the preaching techniques he had learned in the black church, and the impact such moments have on his soul:

Brian, you never have to walk out on the stage and think “I wonder how white I should be today?” You just go out there as Brian, as you should. Every week I have to ask myself, “How black can I be today *on my own stage*? How much of me can they handle?” Just my presence is a jolt to the system, because I’m a black man, and I’m in authority.⁴

³ Keith Jenkins, conversation with author, Zoom, January 5, 2022.

⁴ Keith Jenkins, conversation with author, Zoom, January 5, 2022.

I was moved by him trusting me with such vulnerability, while also coming to a sudden realization—Keith pays these costs *in addition to* those the featured leaders have to pay for transitioning a white church.

Third, he shared some recent thoughts that came to him while watching his granddaughter play in the back yard with a white child from their neighborhood:

If I'm not living here, that family has nothing but stereotypes to build their views with. If people like us don't make sacrifices, I don't know how we close these gaps. But that's the beauty of the Gospel—God puts us in proximity with each other, and things just start happening, because we're the family of God.⁵

I realized something humbling in that moment—Keith pays a greater cost than most, because of what he believes more than most—that *anyone* can change. He believes the Gospel is so powerful, that comfortable, white Christians can be changed enough to joyfully lay down their preferences and choose sacrifice for the good of others. He believes this so much, in fact, he is willing to go first to prove it.

Revisiting the Question

This thesis started with impossibility. The first words of chapter 1 recalled the harsh advice I once heard for leaders of established, white churches who desire a multiethnic reality; "It's too late. Blow it up. Start over." A few sentences later, impossibility shifted to unlikelihood; "I wouldn't bet on it happening, unless there's a move of the Spirit." From this initial uncertainty,

⁵ Keith Jenkins, conversation with author, Zoom, January 5, 2022.

a question, a need, and a hope emerged. The question was why white churches who have become multiethnic are so rare. The need was more stories from leaders of such churches. And the hope was that such stories could provide footsteps for aspiring leaders to follow.

So, what about that question? In this thesis we examined how God’s multiethnic story of redemption is clear in Scripture, the need for unity is obvious in culture, and the desire for change is present in leaders—so again, why are these churches so rare? There are two answers to this question.

Answer: “It’s just really, really hard.”

When I started gathering stories, I anticipated hearing about hardships, but I could not have anticipated the depth and diversity of the pain shared with me by the featured leaders. As addressed extensively in chapter 1, to lead a white church toward a multiethnic reality there is cost to pay, and the cost is steep. Hughes (The Village Church Denton, Texas) says:

“I totally understand why most churches don’t want to touch this. You can come with all the vision and all the biblical conviction you want — but at the end of the day, it’s just really hard work. And after you work hard you have to watch as culture shifts, and political rhetoric and elections play out, and you see just how fragile it all is. If you’re going to engage in these conversations there is so much room for misunderstanding and failure. So, when churches just decide to stick with practices they know will result in staying homogenous—man, I understand that. I don’t prefer that, and I don’t think that’s

the most powerful witness in a context where something more cross-cultural is possible, but I get it, because it's just really, really hard.”⁶

Formerly white, now multiethnic churches are incredibly rare, because the work required to transition them is incredibly difficult. Some might consider such a conclusion disappointing or anticlimactic, but that is only due to their lack of familiarity with the nature of this difficulty—which is intense enough to deter many leaders who foresee it while considering transition, and crush many more who embark on the journey in ignorance of what lies ahead.

Answer: It's all about the leaders.

To find a leader able to withstand and thrive in the storm of these hardships is to find something rare indeed, especially considering there is no finish line when transitioning into a multiethnic reality. The conditions are always precarious. Unity often feels brittle. Trust is always being earned, lost, and earned again. Very few are capable of bearing this weight, and even fewer are capable of doing so joyfully. And still, the leaders featured in this thesis do just that.

If there could only be one answer to the central question, it is that transitioned churches are rare because the leaders required to transition them are equally rare. So rare, in fact, in considering their traits, one worries if the hypothetical list of additional, qualified, aspiring leaders might be woefully short. For in regard to their leadership attributes, they sense a clear calling to build *this* specific kind of church, accept the call despite knowing the steep cost to be

⁶ Beau Hughes, conversation with author, Zoom, January 6, 2022.

paid, and are uniquely wired with patience and perseverance to slowly walk with people who waver in their commitment to the vision. Although they are gifted enough to consistently have other vocational opportunities—including some that offer mobility, promotion, resources and recognition—they still choose to play the long game in an often lonely environment. Although gifted, they are humble, and although consistently subjected to heightened levels of opposition, accusation, and rejection, they are not bitter.

In regard to *theology*, they embody and guard an atypical combination of historical Christian beliefs, while still practicing a generous orthodoxy. They preach a big Gospel that saves individuals and reconciles communities, actively rely on the Holy Spirit to do the otherwise impossible, place the mission of God—marked by both evangelism and justice—at the center of the church’s life, and teach unity as an identity to share, not just an entity to pursue.

In regard to *culture*, they breathe intentionality into every part of the church. They have communication gifts for winsomely bringing clarity to mission and values, and boldness to declare everyone must take turns being uncomfortable. They persistently move people toward competence, creatively establish discipleship environments to serve the church they hope to become, and humbly lay down their preferences—or even their positions—for the greater good of the body.

Simply put, they demonstrate strength and proficiency in areas many American pastors are notoriously weak and ill-equipped, making their own rarity obvious, and that of the churches they lead, far less mysterious. And still, the ten leaders featured in this thesis remain, representative of many more anonymous pastors surely doing the same work, for the same purposes—hoping others will count the cost and stay the course as they have.

Implications for Leaders

The stories within this thesis come from churches representing five states and six denominational affiliations, distributed almost evenly between urban and suburban areas. Since the contexts from which these stories come differ significantly, a wide scope of people must discern the implications for their own churches, and their own lives. After hearing of congregations similar to their own who counted the cost, stayed the course, and arrived in a multiethnic reality, many leaders will no longer be able to point to impossibility as the reason for their congregations' homogeneity. Some will feel immediately compelled to start their journeys toward multiethnicity, but even those who do not sense such a call must still discern their appropriate response.

Rufus Smith of Hope Church—featured in chapter 1—now leads one of the largest multiethnic churches in the country. He has sacrificed much to help it progress as much as it has over the last decade, despite starting with a white representation of 99 percent in a racially charged city in the South. Still, he does not believe every church should be multiethnic, or that every white church is obligated to transition into multiethnicity. However, because of the great potential for multiethnic churches to be Gospel bridges across dividing lines, he does think every church should find ways to support the increase and flourishing of multiethnic churches in America. He encourages white churches who are *not* compelled to transition themselves, to consider resourcing a team who *could* plant a new multiethnic church. He exhorts them to relationally and financially partner with existing multiethnic churches—or nonwhite, mono-ethnic churches. He urges them to come alongside local initiatives that benefit multiethnic

populations—with a posture of humility and empathy—believing such efforts will be fruitful for all involved, whether opportunity and desire for transition in the future arises or not.⁷

During our conversation, Smith said of his experience leading Hope Church on their multiethnic journey, “What started as a great experiment, has become a grand experience.”⁸ Aspiring leaders who prefer starting their own great experiment over the likelihood of managing slow decline for decades to come—as well as denominational and network leaders who desire to care for aspiring pastors—will both benefit from focusing on assessment, relationship, and pace as they discern how to take action.

Commit to Assessment

If movement leaders (from denominations and church-planting networks) believe white churches becoming multiethnic can exemplify a profound truth about unity and humility for greater culture—while also helping denominations fulfill their purpose in a changing world—they should greatly expand their efforts to identify young pastors who are either currently or interested in leading churches through transition. If customized environments and resources were made available to such leaders, there would be immediate potential for the curious and the called already within existing networks to step forward. Formal assessments would not only serve aspiring leaders and denominations well, but also the people who would be under the leaders’ care during a potential transition. Existing members would benefit from leaders being more

⁷ Rufus Smith, conversation with author, Zoom, March 16, 2022.

⁸ Rufus Smith, conversation with author, Zoom, March 16, 2022.

prepared for the difficult journey, and harm could be minimized for those from other ethnicities choosing to trust a white church—and white leaders—for the first time.

A reality in which movement leaders provide formal assessment for those interested in transitioning white churches—and in which aspiring leaders submit to such assessment—would have profound, immediate impact. Discerning the presence or absence of calling, reviewing the information required to properly count the cost before committing, and evaluating current levels of cultural competence, would all be most effective in the context of community.

Prioritize Relationship

Formal assessments could be one of several additions to establish norms where relationship is the chief value among aspiring leaders and movement leaders alike. Since loneliness and isolation were recurring themes among stories from the featured leaders, establishing multi-layered community for those leading churches toward change should be highly prioritized.

The action step with the highest potential return on investment would likely be to create support structures and facilitate personal connections among leaders who are transitioning a white church—whether newly committed or decades into the process. One disheartening commonality among the featured leaders was the general absence of peers who had committed themselves to the same mission. Several of them responded with obvious eagerness upon learning of other leaders like themselves that might be interested in connecting. The potential for

interdenominational collaboration in establishing a robust network of aspiring leaders in various geographies and contexts is inspiring to imagine.⁹

Whether new structures are formalized or not, movement leaders must have meaningful relationship with those leading churches in transition. Only then will they be able to effectively arrange potential mentorship with those who have already transitioned churches themselves, and encourage them toward meaningful relationships with leaders from nonwhite churches in their area.

The formal structures proposed here—which would rely on the initiation and provision of movement leaders—cannot and must not replace the value of more organic relationships, which several featured leaders referred to as crucial in their journeys. Rick McKinley’s friendship with fellow Portland church planter, Eric Knox is a prime example, as are the partnerships Beau Hughes described with leaders from multiethnic churches in Atlanta and Philadelphia. Although having a network to facilitate connections is helpful, aspiring leaders must commit to finding such relationships themselves, as well.

More important than all of these concepts is the imperative nature of living a multiethnic life before attempting to become the leader of a multiethnic church. Every aspiring leader needs friends of other ethnicities to sit *with*, and mentors of other ethnicities to sit *under*.

Slow Down

⁹ DeYmaz’s Mosaix network and Gray’s Multiethnic Roundtable are excellent examples of connection and equipping in the multiethnic space. Similar environments for leaders specifically transitioning white churches could be dynamic for ongoing mutual support.

Some may hear the call to delay efforts to transition a church until after meaningful personal relationships across ethnic lines have been established, and lament how much time such pre-work would require. These leaders need reorientation that can only happen after addressing the matter of pace. All aspiring leaders—and all movement leaders—must commit to slowing down. Transitioning a white church into a multiethnic reality is a marathon, and leaders who operate with a sprint mentality will not only fall victim to fatigue themselves, but will likely cause harm as they outpace the capacity of existing members and those they intend to engage for the first time. Among the most timeless exhortations within this thesis was Rodney Woo's challenge to aspiring leaders—to allow God to cultivate their passion in a way that does not compromise their patience.¹⁰ Those called to the missional task will always feel urgency and trend toward a frenetic pace, which makes the downshift required to heed any of the proposals in this section most helpful.

To effectively support aspiring leaders, movement leaders will also need to slow down, starting in matters of *preparation*. As rare as the featured leaders have been revealed to be, it should be encouraging to realize most of their attributes can be developed in aspiring leaders. Skills can be taught, and character can be cultivated, but both require deep relational investment *over time*. Properly assessing prospective leaders, addressing self-care and relational health, teaching the uncommon combination of theologies previously highlighted, training in new discipleship methods, and providing practical equipping for creating cultures of intentionality and competence, are all time-intensive endeavors—but well worth the grand investment.

¹⁰ Rodney Woo, conversation with author, Zoom, October 6, 2021.

Movement leaders will also need to slow down in evaluation. It will be necessary to revisit how transitioning white churches are evaluated compared to typical congregations. Having learned of the great cost transitioning pastors pay, and the length of the journey they often must travel before seeing desired results, movement leaders should adjust their timelines and success metrics accordingly. Similarly, denominations and networks that embrace annual appointments and the frequent relocation of pastors should consider how these practices have potential to greatly hinder—or even derail—the efforts and progress of a church in transition. Allowing longer—if not indefinite—tenures for pastors of such churches will not only assure them of the time needed to achieve their goals, but also protect those within the congregations who have been slowly establishing trust with a leader outside their own ethnic group for the first time.

Although formulating a sufficient response to the implications of the stories shared by the featured leaders requires far more than can be provided in this thesis, the few focal points above will hopefully serve those compelled to discern first steps toward needed change. I invite and look forward to the many more stories others will collect moving forward, and rejoice already that redemptive efforts will only improve as such stories continue to be shared.

Final Words

The majority of my conversations with the leaders featured in this thesis would all end the same way. I would first ask how to steward their story well, then ask if they would pray a

blessing over me, my efforts on this project, and my ministry as a fellow pastor committed to playing the long game. These were sacred moments for me, and I found myself revisiting these prayers often when weary from the grind of the writing process. It was an honor to give them the final word in those discussions, and it seems fitting to give one of them the final word here as well.

Below are the responses Keith Jenkins gave to those two questions, which I believe speak for themselves—the way I pray our actions will as we consider the footsteps he and others like him have left for us to follow.

When you consider my story and think,
“Man, how the hell is he doing this in that white community?”
my hope is that you would ask yourself,
“What am I doing likewise to be uncomfortable,
to be misunderstood,
to have to interpret and reinterpret unfamiliar environments?
What am I doing to be that disrupted from my status quo?”

Hopefully your readers will listen to my story and say,
“I need to go further—I’m not even scratching the surface of this thing.”
Because the essence of white fragility is a tendency to opt out of anything where you’re not in
control or don’t know the answer—lean into that.
You don’t have all the answers, and guess what? You don’t need them.
The resistance to failing and trying again is stupid.
You’re not going to master this.
You’re gonna learn, be humble, and stay humble.

Pastor Keith Jenkins
East Hill Church | Gresham, Oregon

*Lord, we honor you so much.
You call us sons. We're part of your family. Adopted.*

*Thank you for the work Brian is doing. I pray you would continue to strengthen his hands for it.
May it all come together, that it would begin to flow.
Remove the pressure, for there will be other contributions made, and his is but one.
Make it clear and concise for him.*

*Encourage him along the way.
Every setback or failure is not final, it's not fatal, it's just part of the journey.
Help him to be humble enough to embrace it, to learn from it, and to do the autopsy on every
failure so he might become wiser and stronger.*

*Surround him with a community of people who can pour into him in this area.
So he might be thoroughly equipped as a man of God to rightfully divide your word for hostile
people who might be resistant to change.*

*Give him patience and keen discernment as he hears your voice,
when to hit the gas, when to hit the brakes, when to comfort, and when to challenge.
Give him great wisdom beyond his years, and great discernment.*

*In Jesus ' name,
Amen.*

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Biography

Canadian-born and Texas-raised, Brian McCormack immigrated from Montreal to the suburbs of Houston with his parents. After finishing his college basketball career at Northwest University, he served as a youth minister and preacher at The Woodlands United Methodist Church, just a few miles from his childhood home. He and his wife, Emilie moved to the Pacific Northwest to plant a church on Seattle's Eastside, co-founded Reach Church in their apartment living room in 2012, and have sent out several more church plants in the years since. Brian attended Western Seminary in Portland, earning a masters degree in Biblical and Theological Studies. When not traveling with Emilie, he loves going on spontaneous adventures in his pickup truck with his five children — Boston, Ryder, Banner, Scotlynn and Arrow — and he wouldn't want it any other way.

The voices that God is raising up in your generation?
Praise God! It's so encouraging to us.

Learn from those who go before you,
and make the necessary adjustments.

You guys are going to do things we never dreamed of,
and I'm so excited.

Rodney Woo
International Baptist Church of Singapore