The Post-Black and Post-White Church: Becoming the Beloved Community in a Multi-Ethnic World

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discipleship initiatives and leadership development initiatives that taught character traits.

Just Do It

Some churches hesitate to get out in the community because they don’t want to do the wrong thing and possibly cause more harm than good. Some refuse to go out into the community because of fear. Violence, problems that seem overwhelming, or a church’s sense that it lacks adequate resources can keep the church from being missional. I say begin with prayer, and then let God move you to do something. Don’t try to do it all, but do something. If that doesn’t work, then pray again and then do something else. There is no excuse for any church not to be missional.

When we started at the Sanctuary, we would meet at our church offices for prayer and then go out into the community. We called these prayer walks. We weren’t necessarily out there to lead someone to Christ, but if God wanted to do that, we were willing. We weren’t out there to invite someone to our church, but if God wanted to do that, we were open. Our main focus was to experience the community and experience God. We came to learn that God was present in North Minneapolis way before we came on the scene. Your heart and mind change toward a community when you realize that no matter how tough the issues are, God is always there.

Within the first couple of years of the planting of the Sanctuary Covenant Church, we were experiencing pretty steady growth. But we wanted to make sure that we weren’t just growing in numbers; we also wanted to develop as a reconciling community. Curtiss DeYoung, professor of reconciliation studies at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota, and a longtime mentor and friend of mine, came and preached for us once on this important topic for the multi-ethnic and missional church. He challenged us during his sermon when he looked over our congregation and said, “I can see that you are a very diverse church. Praise God for this, but you still have a way to go in order to be a reconciling church.” As he spoke, I felt both an affirmation and a challenge.

After that Sunday, we had some good discussion as a staff about what being a reconciling church means, and we knew that this had to be addressed in how we went about discipleship in our church. Our initiatives of discipleship were developed within the ministry area of one of our core values, equipping and formation—the area
that focuses on spiritual growth and development. Our hope was that reconciliation would be linked to discipleship. Within this area we decided to launch a small groups ministry and would call these groups “community groups.” Reconciliation would not be the sole focus of these groups, but by encouraging each group to be multi-ethnic, there would be a broader reconciling ethos among all of them.

I preached a sermon series, simply called, “Community,” to set up the launching of our community groups ministry. I wanted the church to understand that the goal of our church shouldn’t be just to become a diverse church, but to grow as a reconciling community that was dealing with the various walls that divide humanity. I pointed to scriptures on serving one another through love (Galatians 5:13) and bearing one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2). In a multi-ethnic and missional church, it’s not enough to sit next to each other during a sermon, stand next to each other and sing worship songs, and park in the same parking lot. We had to be willing to do life together.

Using Stories of Race for Understanding

When we launched community groups in 2005, we asked people who were willing to be leaders to sign up for training. We would meet weekly for about eight weeks and then would have a larger all-church launch. It was during the training of leaders that something happened that we weren’t totally prepared for.

Since we thought it was important for me, to do some teaching with the leaders-in-training the first week, I decided that I would do a review of the vision, purpose, and core values of the church and then have a discussion on how they would connect to the initial studies that would take place within the community groups. As I was going over the core values of our church, I mentioned words such as reconciliation, race, ethnicity, and so forth. An older woman who happened to be European-American asked me why dealing with race was such a big deal: “Why do we have to talk about race so much in our church? Can’t we just all be color-blind?” Then she paused for a moment and looked right at me with tears in her eyes: “My parents taught me that racism and prejudice are wrong. When I look at you, Pastor Efrem, I don’t see race. I see the Holy Spirit that is within you. We are all God’s children, and that’s all that matters.” I didn’t want to respond too quickly because I knew that she meant well and was sincere in her remarks.

But before I could say something, another older woman, this one African-American, said, “Well, I don’t know what you see when you look at me, but I’m a Black woman! Yes, the Holy Spirit is in me, but I’m Black, and I live in a world that reminds me daily that I’m Black, so I don’t know what eyes you’re using to look at people. And can’t you see that Pastor Efrem is Black too?” Well, there it was: the elephant in the room had been exposed, and the tension was palpable. I had all kinds of conflicting thoughts running through my head at that moment. On one hand, I was excited because I knew how important this discussion was for moving from a diverse church to a reconciling church. At the same time, I wasn’t sure where we would go from here. In fact, this is one of the reasons we don’t have as many multi-ethnic and missional churches as we need in this nation. The homogeneous church is not without tension, but there is a greater sense of cultural comfort than there is in the post-Black, post-White church.

I responded to the tension by sharing my own stories of dealing with race, which I believe is a healthy approach to developing an authentic community. Many times the issue of race becomes contentious because we’re not sharing our personal stories and listening to others’ stories. Instead, we usually argue or silently live in the tension of issues surrounding race that are reflected in our polarized
media. Or we carry around racial stereotypes or racial stories that are exaggerated. All of these reactions cause much harm in many cases and raise the dividing walls even higher.

Stories of Race in the Media
The stories of race we glean through the media especially concern me. These stories not only become volatile racial issues, but they become divided along conservative and liberal political lines. Hurricane Katrina, for example, became both a racial and a political issue. Many African-Americans looked at the way the local and federal government responded to the mostly African-American and poorer communities in New Orleans and didn’t know how the images in the news reports could be viewed beyond race. The majority of faces stranded at the Superdome and shown on television were Black faces. The majority of families shown waiting for a bus and in some cases a boat to rescue them were Black. Add to that the tensions between the mayor of New Orleans, who was African-American, and the president of the United States at the time, who was European-American.

This was a dramatic storyline for the media that created and reflected much tension for an audience not as unified across racial lines as it should be. Rather than unifying the church around biblical compassion, mercy, and justice, the story of this hurricane became a way that some Christians became divided across issues of race. The tensions with Christians went even higher in some cases when the issue went from being just political and racial to being theological and racial. Some well-known White evangelical pastors proclaimed that Hurricane Katrina was God’s judgment for the sins of America. Of course, that question led to more: If God wanted to judge America for its sins, why would he zero in on an urban city of the South? And why would he choose to destroy communities that would displace so many African-American families?

In 2008, we saw this matter of race at a new level in the presidential campaign that Barack Obama won. The campaign became a racial and political issue that caused both loudly voiced and silent tensions within the body of Christ. There was the tension around Obama’s membership at Trinity United Church of Christ, led by well-known African-American pastor Jeremiah Wright. Many African-American evangelicals (I was one of them, though I don’t agree with all of Wright’s theology) were hurt by how a portion of one of his sermons was taken out of context by some conservatives for political reasons. The way this was done disrespected the Black church on many levels. In this same context, social justice and community organizing, both historic hallmarks of the Black church, were also made political by being called elements of a socialist and liberal agenda. I believe that many who took this position were so caught up in political ideology that they didn’t realize the racial tensions that they were fueling. Many African-American and evangelical Christians knew it would be difficult to talk authentically with European-American evangelicals about this historic election.

There are as well issues that may not be either racial or political at their core but become both. For example, we could compare the way people perceive an African-American athlete being treated in the media versus the way a European-American athlete is treated. Two professional football players from Pennsylvania are an example. African-American quarterback Michael Vick of the Philadelphia Eagles went to prison for his connection to illegal dog fighting. Though he paid his debt to society and has since been a positive force both on and off the field, some in the media and some football fans continue to bring up the issue. Contrast this treatment to that of European-American quarterback Ben Roethlisberger of the Pittsburgh Steelers, who has been accused of sexual harassment multiple times as well as other negative off-the-field behavior. He
was suspended for a few games, and no one has since paid any attention at all to his transgressions.

The issue could at its core be more about behavior than race, but the media make it both racial and political. If ESPN talks about it, it could become simply racial. If CNN picks up on the story, it then can become political as well. This is not to say that there aren't issues of racial discrimination and prejudice in sports or any other field. But in either case, issues of race become tense when we're talking about them in the context of something we saw on television or something we heard someone else say about an issue connected in some way to race. Without diminishing the impact or influence of race in our society, I'm trying to get at how to deal with race in a way that ultimately brings about harmony, unity, and common mission within the church and the broader society. If this is the goal, then you don't start by talking about the hot-button racial and political issues of the day. I'm not saying you never talk about them; I'm just suggesting that you don't start there. I suggest you start with your own personal stories in the context of race and then prepare to listen, without quick judgment, to the stories of others.

**My Own Stories**

After the two women in that training circle for community group leaders spoke up, I began to share my own stories. I started with the stories of my parents and grandparents. My father, Force Smith, is from Monroe, Louisiana. He was raised on a cotton farm where he rode horses and milked cows and picked cotton. He lived on the Black side of the railroad tracks, grew up in the Jim Crow segregation of the South, and went to all-Black schools. He called White men “Sir” and White women “Ma’am,” but he never heard White people pay that same respect to adult Blacks. When my dad became an adult, he left the segregated South and headed up North looking for job opportunities. He eventually made it to Minneapolis, Minnesota, where he met and married my mother, Sandra Knight, who was originally from Birmingham, Alabama, but had moved to Minnesota with my grandmother and three other siblings when she was a child. She too was born in the segregated South of Jim Crow, but by the time she was in high school in Minneapolis, she was experiencing the integrated public school culture of the Midwest.

My parents shared many stories with me about their upbringing in the segregated South and remember vividly the days of the civil rights movement. My parents thought it was important for my younger brother, Tramaine, and me to know our grandparents and other relatives in the South and understand the world in which they grew up, so we spent many summers in the South when we were young. At first I hated what I viewed as forced exile because I wanted to spend the summers with my neighborhood and school friends, but soon I came to appreciate this experience, and as an adult now, I truly appreciate those experiences, which guided me to become a leader of multi-ethnic and missional ministry.

Although I spent summers in the South some time after the civil rights movement, the racial climate in Louisiana was different from that in Minnesota. It wasn’t the overt racism of cross burnings, colored-only sections, and segregated schools. It was more a sustained sense of Blacks and Whites having and knowing their place in society. I remember when a young White man came to my grandparents’ house one day to check the gas meter. He couldn’t have been older than his mid-twenties. The whole time he was there, my grandmother called this young man by his last name or “Sir,” while he called my grandmother by her first name. I thought this young man was being quite disrespectful by addressing my grandmother in this way, but I was a child and so just watched and remained silent. This was one of the ways of the South at the time, and I would learn more of them. I learned, when we went into town, to make sure that I said “Ma’am” and “Sir” when talking to White adults,
though it was something I didn’t think too much about in addressing Whites in Minnesota. I was certainly polite and respectful to them, but in Louisiana, the way of addressing White people seemed to me to be about a person’s place in society.

When my brother and I returned to Minnesota, I talked to my mother and father about my observations and asked questions because I was a curious and talkative child. This is what led my parents to share their own stories of race. Because of the love and our close relationship, it’s as if their stories became mine, as if I too were carrying them. That’s true for all of us, even when the stories are racist or are full of unresolved anger or hurt toward people of other races. Those stories, good and bad, affect us. For some of us, our journey around race may begin by realizing both the positive and negative ways that our race stories bear on the views we have today.

I’m fortunate that my parents don’t live in anger or hurt from these stories of their experiences as people of color. Rather, they used the stories to help me and my siblings navigate this racialized world as change agents. Now that I am an adult, I have my own race stories as well.

Here’s one. One Sunday evening I was driving in my car with two other African-American men from church to go to the store to get some ice, sodas, and dessert for our dinner together. Both are college educated, work in the corporate world, own their own homes, and are married with children. As we were about to pull into the parking lot of the store, I saw flashing lights in my rearview mirror. I wasn’t speeding. Two White police officers approached the car, one with his hand visibly on his gun holster. As the other officer came to my side of the car, I rolled down my window. “Let me see everyone’s identification in this car,” he demanded.

I was surprised because it made sense that he would ask for my driver’s license and registration, but it didn’t make sense to me that he needed to see everyone else’s identification. Before I could say something, one of the guys in the car with me said, “We better just do what he says.” We all handed the officer our identifications and waited for over twenty minutes. Eventually the officer came back to the car, gave us each our identifications, and told us we could go. He gave no explanation about why we were stopped. And this isn’t the only time this kind of thing has happened to me.

In another instance, I was sitting on my flight in first class waiting to take off. It was a late flight, and I was tired and hungry, looking forward to a meal on the plane. Normally I would have bought something in the airport, but since I knew I would be in first class, I saved the high cost of an airport dinner. The only other person in first class was an older woman who was White. As I settled into my seat, the flight attendant, White and female, walked over to me and asked me if I was sitting in the right seat. I said that I was and noticed that she didn’t ask the other passenger the same question. Once we were in the air, the flight attendant served a meal to the older White woman but never served me. When I pushed my call button, she came over to me and said, “I’m so sorry. I forgot that you were sitting here. Would you like something to eat?” I must confess that I was so offended and upset that I turned down the meal. I’m in no way saying this was the right response and I sure was hungry that whole flight. As I look back on it now, I wonder if the flight attendant just professionally didn’t do a good job of serving me in general on the plane that evening. But because I wasn’t served well, in contrast to the White woman who was served well, it becomes challenging to not see this as an issue of race on some level.

As I shared stories like these with the community group leaders at the Sanctuary, there were gasps, tears, and looks of shock from many of the Whites in the circle. The Blacks and some of the other people of color looked as if they were reliving their own stories as I told mine. There were some Whites there that evening who were
further along in their journeys around race and offered gracious comments. The White woman whose remarks led us into this conversation said with more tears flowing down her cheeks, "I'm so sorry. I didn't know this type of stuff still happened." Her husband wanted to write a letter on my behalf to the airline. I also realized that some of the people of other ethnicities in the room had looks on their faces that led me to believe they were feeling left out of what had become a mostly Black and White conversation. I acknowledged that and invited a Hispanic brother to share his stories.

Inclusiveness and recognition are healthy ways of dealing with the issue of race in a multi-ethnic and missional church. We begin to create the beloved community by sharing our stories and listening to one another. I'm not saying that we were always great at this at the Sanctuary. On many occasions in staff meetings, elder board meetings, and other gatherings, we misunderstood each other, made judgmental statements, and hurt one another. Sometimes my own comments caused offense and the pain, and I learned the importance of seeking forgiveness. At one point we even brought in a group of reconciliation facilitators to assist our leaders in having prayerful, healthy, and authentic dialogue around issues of race.

**Systemic Issues of Race**

The stories we shared that evening for the most part were personal ones of race, and most of them came from those in the room who were non-White. We didn't get into the even larger systemic issues of race that surrounded us in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Minnesota, but that soon changed. In 2005 the Brookings Institute did a study of the disparities that existed in the Twin Cities across race, class, and place. Some of the members of our church who were executives in both for-profit and nonprofit organizations were involved in parts of the process. The study found that some groups were not enjoying the same levels of prosperity as others:

- The Twin Cities region has the twelfth highest college attainment rate among the one hundred largest metropolitan areas: 33 percent of its residents have a bachelor's degree or higher. However, only 19 percent of African-Americans, 11 percent of Mexicans, and 8 percent of Hmong do.

- The region has the fourteenth highest median household income among the largest metropolitan areas. In 2000, Whites had a median household income of $56,642, while the typical household income for African-Americans lagged at $29,404 and $38,909 for Mexicans.

- The Twin Cities boasts one of the highest homeownership rates in the country—ranked seventh, in fact—a strong sign of wealth building among families. In 2000, 76 percent of Whites were home owners in 2000, while only 32 percent of Blacks owned homes.

- The region's overall poverty ranks among the lowest in the country, yet poverty still disproportionately plagues some segments of the population. In 2000, only 4 percent of Whites were poor, but one-third of all Hmong lived below the federal poverty line.

**How to Address Issues of Race**

We cannot ignore the issue and the impact of race within the multi-ethnic and missional church. We have to deal with the issues surrounding race so that the post-Black, post-White church can be a healthy and reconciling church. So outside of sharing and listening to personal stories around race, there are other ways to address the issue. One is to define terms around race so everyone uses a
common language, which can lead to unity. One of the reasons post-Black, post-White churches are hard to develop and sustain is that there are so many definitions around race and racism. For example, theologian John Piper defines racism as "an explicit or implicit belief or practice that qualitatively distinguishes or values one race over other races." I believe this definition points us in the right direction but falls somewhat short in that it makes racism an individual and internalized feeling of prejudice that can lead to the devaluing of a group of people simply because of their race.

I believe this definition is better: racism is prejudice plus power used to discriminate or oppress a group of people solely because of their race. I came to this definition through the writings on racism and White privilege by pastor and multicultural ministry leader Joseph Barndt:

Racism is clearly more than simple prejudice or bigotry. Everyone is prejudiced, but not everyone is racist. To be prejudiced means to have opinions, even after contrary facts are known. To be racially prejudiced means to have distorted opinions about people of other races. Racism goes beyond prejudice. It is backed up by power. Racism is the power to enforce one's prejudice. More simply stated, racism is prejudice plus power.

With this definition, it is important as we share and listen to the stories of others that we recognize that racism affects us both individually and in broader systemic ways. On one level, we can dismantle racism through our individual relationships across race and through our daily choices. Individually we can decide to speak out against a racist joke, and we can individually expose stereotypes of an entire group of people.

These individual acts do make a difference, but systemic racism takes more than individual acts. This type of racism must be dealt with by groups of people reimagining and working to redefine communities, institutions, and other structures. It takes more than one individual in most cases to change a school system, a corporation, or a political system. Martin Luther King Jr. didn't bring about change through the civil rights movement all by himself. We must remember Fannie Lou Hamer, Ralph Abernathy, John Lewis, and Rosa Parks. There are also Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox Jews whom we don't know who also worked for change. People of various ethnicities opened up churches, community centers, and homes. This is why multiple multi-ethnic and missional churches are needed. This is why I speak not of just individuals but of churches, and not just of churches but a movement.

**A Deeper Understanding of Race**

In the post-Black, post-White church, race cannot be a topic to skirt around. It must instead be engaged for the church to grow in its capacity to be missional.

A healthy discussion on race that assists in the development of a healthy multi-ethnic and missional church begins by dealing with race as a way of identifying human beings. Any discussion on race has to deal with an evil that can come out of living in a racialized society, and that is racism. Some would argue that the primary product of a racialized society is racism. What can be agreed on is that racism is an evil that leads to unhealthy and destructive outcomes. With this in mind, it is essential to define racism so that it might be clearly revealed for what it is and be dismantled.

Let’s dive deeper into this issue by presenting some definitions that can provide clarity. Race is about categorizing and valuing a people based on skin color and other physical features. It ultimately is an artificial social structure that places the White group on top, the Black group on the bottom, and the Yellow, Red, and Brown
groups in the middle. There doesn’t seem to be any serious biological evidence to support race, however. Differences in skin color and physical features alone are not enough to separate people into classified race groups. Nevertheless, people have been placed in these groups, which are associated with levels of emotion, intellect, and, in the case of slavery in the early history of the United States, the question of the full humanity of Africans. The writing of Christian sociologist George A. Yancey has been helpful in my thinking about race in this way:

The criteria that our society uses to categorize us in separate races are not derived through a logical study of nature. If racial distinctions do not occur as a natural phenomenon then how did they develop? Part of the answer is the fact that this concept of race is what we sociologists call a social construct. It is something that society has developed on its own apart from the natural reality that surrounds society. In short, we made it up. Over time we decided that this group of people should be of one race and that another group of people should be of a different race. We developed rules of segregation to control the mixing of races. Eventually we actually began to believe that this separation is part of the natural order of things. Some of us Christians may even believe that God ordered the separation. All the while we forget that this is something we have made up.

But even though race is made up, it has an important impact and implications in our racialized society. You have to look at it like the unreal world in the movie The Matrix. The storyline of the popular science fiction trilogy that captured many moviegoers some years ago takes place after a war between machines and human beings. The technology and innovation that humankind made up now enslave it. The machines create a false world for the enslaved humans known in the movie as the Matrix. Although the Matrix was a computer-generated world, it was real to the human beings plugged into it. It was the only world they knew, and they couldn’t imagine any other. But some humans escaped their enslavement and lived in the real world, a city known as Zion. They went back and forth between Zion and the Matrix to save those enslaved in it.

In the same way, race is an artificial, human-created social construct. It is the machine that has taken us over and created a false reality. Even the people who don’t think race is an issue are led to believe race is real based on how they’ve been conditioned. Blacks recognize race as an issue too much, and many Whites recognize it too little or not at all. So in a racialized society, a Black person may attribute every negative experience to race, whereas a White person may have a series of negative experiences that he or she never attributes to race. This is due to how race categorizes a people. If you’re at the top, you don’t have to think about yourself as part of a racial group. When you’re in the middle, maybe it’s an issue from time to time. If you’re on the bottom, it’s an issue too much of the time. There is somewhat of an out to this if you’re in the middle or the bottom, but it’s not necessarily a healthy one. That option is assimilation. If you assimilate into the value system and practices of White culture, race can feel like less of an issue to you. But if race becomes an issue, it can be shocking and surprising. You exclaim, “I can’t believe this is happening to me!”

Assimilation into the values of the dominant culture helps Whiteness become a neutral culture and not a race at all. This is at the core of White privilege. The dominant culture has the power to decide and sustain what is neutral and natural. This is not to say that all of what makes up White culture is bad, but placing it at the core gives it a higher value than the culture of other groups. This concept of race helps to sustain false identities and structures. This is why we need liberation from the race matrix. We need to deal not only with racism but with the construct of race itself. There is another way of living outside the labels, structures, and behaviors of race.
The other way, the better way, is to dismantle the structure of race by finding new identity as Christians. This is why true transformation and reconciliation can be found in the post-Black, post-White church. Our belief in the centrality and authority of scripture ought to lead us to see God’s true design and desire for human beings. The scriptures show us that God didn’t create human beings within categories of race that place one group of people over another. In The Matrix, the central character, Neo, was offered a pill that would show him the truth and provide him the understanding of his new identity. The “pill” for our escape from living primarily in racial identities is the Word of God, the Bible:

Then God said, “Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens.” And God created the great sea monsters, and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind, and every winged bird after its kind; and God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds multiply on the earth.” And there was evening and there was morning, a fifth day. Then God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beast of the earth after their kind”; and it was so. And God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind; and God saw that it was good. Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth: And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” [Genesis 1:20–27].

When God created the animals, he created them after their “own kind.” They were created in groups and were to be fruitful and multiply in those groups. This is why in the animal kingdom, you would never see an elephant and a hippopotamus come together to create offspring. You are not going to see “hippo-phants” from such a union because God created the animals to multiply among their own kind. God did not create humans this way. We are created as one human race in God’s own image. God did not create human beings in categories of separate races or place a higher value on some and a lower value on others. When we live divided by racial categories and characteristics, we live as the creatures that we are supposed to have dominion over. We do not live up to our identity as beings made in the image of God and our true identity from our creator. Race is not God’s original intention for humanity.

So how did race come to be in the first place and have the tremendous impact that it does? We can conclude only that race is a part of the after-effects of the story of the fall of Adam and Eve. Race is a part of the matrix of a fallen and sin-filled world. God created us all equal, as one people with an identity found in being in his image. Race takes away that equality and identity and becomes an idol that prevents us from living in God’s image and thus from being in intimate relationship with God. How can we discover day by day what it means to be in God’s image and not be in relationship with God? To live by racial categories is to find identity and life apart from God.

It’s not just that racism is a sin; rather, the entire structure of race points to false identities within fallen humanity. Race has such an impact on us because it is a spiritual force. It must be dismantled by truth and by new identity found in Christ and in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Part of the dismantling comes with forging the post-Black, post-White church. Through this beloved Christ-centered community, we can live collectively through the power of the Holy Spirit, dying to the old identities of race labels and into the new identities of being God’s beloved children.

In my book, Jump: Into a Life of Further and Higher, I deal with this important connection between what I call the beloved life and the
beloved community. We find new identity beyond racial identity in Christ. This does not mean that the post-Black, post-White church delivers us from the matrix of a racialized society altogether. We are still in the world, yet through new identity, we are also otherworldly. Race will continue to be an issue until Jesus comes back and we live in the community of God’s new heaven and the new earth. Until then, the multi-ethnic and missional church can provide a sneak preview of what that eternal kingdom looks like. We can live into the new identities of our citizenship in that kingdom right now.

The alternative is the reality of what the segregated church looks like now. In the segregated church, we proclaim our new identity and new life in Christ, but we live within the system of the old and false identities of this world. To this extent, we are in the world and of the world. By desiring the homogeneous church, we actually desire racial hedonism. Why not practice now living into the new kingdom community where we will live eternally?

This concept of our identity in Christ is key to moving beyond the matrix of race. Matthew 1 tells us about Christ’s human genealogy, as a descendent of Abraham: “To Abraham was born Isaac; and to Isaac, Jacob; and to Jacob, Judah and his brothers; and to Judah were born Perez and Zerah by Tamar” (Matthew 1:1–3).

This is the earthly family tree of Jesus. Could it be that there is a connection between the bloodline of Jesus and the bloodshed on Calvary that washes away our sin and brings about both eternal life and new life right now? This genealogy of Jesus shows us the significance of him as the Son of man. Jesus is part of the family of Abraham and Isaac, but he is also the Son of God. His heritage ultimately begins before the beginning of time. It is before and beyond this earthly realm. Before the creation of the heavens and the earth, he is. As the Gospel of John says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life and the life was the light of men... And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

The Multi-Ethnicity of Jesus

That Jesus is the Son of man is empowering to us because we live in him and he in us. As a descendent of Abraham, to whom God promises his role as the father of nations, Jesus is heir to great multi-ethnic diversity. This is important to note in connection to his human family tree and his identity as the Son of man. Could this be Jesus, Son of multi-ethnic humanity?

When we look through scripture, we see the interplay of ethnicity and the way race came to be and see how Jesus is the fruit of a long and diverse bloodline. A woman named Tamar listed in the genealogy of Jesus provides some insight into his multi-ethnic and multicultural family tree. We learn about her in Genesis 38. As a Canaanite, Tamar is the descendent of Canaan, who had been cursed by his grandfather, Noah. For a time in our Christian culture, there was a theology accepted in order to justify slavery within the United States that the Canaanite was Black. This type of racial theology was helped to reinforce the false and inferior identity of Blackness. Biblical scholar J. Daniel Hays sheds light on this issue:

It may also be pertinent to note that the Canaanites are ethnically very close to the Israelites...the Canaanite language and culture is similar to that of the Israelites. They were also probably very similar in appearance. The critical difference was, in regard to the gods that they worshipped. So...the curse on Canaan has absolutely nothing to do with Black Africa. Furthermore, because of the close ethnic affinity between the Canaanites and the Israelites, it can be said that this curse has nothing to do with race at all.
Note that Canaan and his family are the original inhabitants of Israel and Palestine. Canaan's brother, Cush, and his family are the original inhabitants of Ethiopia and the Sudan. Another brother, Mizraim, and his family are the original inhabitants of Egypt. And yet another brother, Phut, and his family are the original inhabitants of Libya. Canaan's uncle, Japheth, has a group of descendents (including Ruth) who are known as the Moabites, whom some scholars believe are the ancestors of Europeans. This means that Jesus's bloodline has Israelis, Palestinians, Ethiopians, Sudanese, Egyptians, Libyans, and various European ethnic groups in it.

The biblical world of Jesus thus spans Africa, Asia, and Europe, which means that Jesus walked the earth as a multi-ethnic human being, not as Black or White. None of these ancestors dominated his identity, unlike the days of slavery in the United States when a person who was even one-eighth Black (which amounted to a teaspoon of Black blood) was classified as Black. If this race rule were applied to Jesus, he would have been considered Black. But race rules don't apply in scripture or in the kingdom of God. Jesus both transcends and dismantles race. The fact that he was multi-ethnic as a human being is significant.

When Jesus was hanging on the cross and the blood was dripping from his head, hands, and feet, that was multi-ethnic blood. When we say that Jesus died for all of our sins, that is true both figuratively and literally because all humanity was pumping through him and pouring out of him. He was the sacrificial lamb of all of sinful humanity and therefore embodies all of humanity in both the carrying and shedding of this precious blood. This truly is in this sense a substitutionary death. That is why the multi-ethnic and missional church must find identity in the multi-ethnic Jesus who is the Son of man and the Son of God. Through the Holy Spirit, this multi-ethnic Jesus lives in us. In him is new life and new identity.

Ethnicity and Tribes

Although race is not biblical, ethnicity is. We see groups of people described by ethnicity, nationality, and tribe within the scriptures. We also see where some of the same dynamics that take place in our racialized world also come into play in the social structures of the Bible, for example, in the ethnic divide between Jew and Gentile. Other social divides connect more directly to social divides of our own day, such as class and gender. But we see through scripture that these divides are dealt with in Christ, as Paul tells the Galatians: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

As Jesus is walking the earth, we see him dealing head-on with the divisions within the social structures of his day. He sits at the well with a Samaritan woman (John 4); heals the daughter of a Canaanite woman (Luke); and sits at table with a tax collector and immediately after is touched by a hemorrhaging woman while he is in the midst of a large crowd (Matthew 9). The multi-ethnic Jesus deals with the social structures and divides of his day and connects them both to the kingdom that he proclaims and the cross on which he will hang. Christ brings unity into divided humanity by offering new life. His miraculous works are the signs of what potentially can happen through the power, authority, and transformation found in him. In Christ Jesus, we are no longer red, yellow, brown, black, and white. We are new creatures in him. We are freed from false identities, but we retain the gift of our true identities of ethnicity and nationality. Although these characteristics are biblical, they can become false identities when we live them outside our relationship with God through Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This means we never put our ethnicity or nationality above our identity in Christ.
This hierarchy of identity can be problematic for people who have made being Christian synonymous with being American. What does my identity in Christ mean for my relationship with another Christian in, say, South Africa? Am I closed in relationship eternally with another American or another Christian who is a citizen of another nation? Our nationality can become a base of worldly pride, our ethnicity can lead to ethnocentrism, and our tribalism can cause civil war. But our ethnicities, nationalities, and tribes in Christ can become a vehicle to give God glory and advance his kingdom in the world. This new identity in Christ is what makes the multi-ethnic church both healthy and missional. This healthy, beloved community is better positioned to fulfill the Great Commission both locally and globally.

The biblically based theology of race in the post-Black, post-White church must show up in teaching, preaching, and other initiatives of Christian formation. For many, dismantling old identities of race in order to live into the new identity of Christ-centered multi-ethnicity will be like a second conversion. This process is a journey. I remember how sometimes people at the Sanctuary Covenant Church would think that a sermon series on race would be too long, even if the sermons were full of scripture. And some would say, “When are we going to get off this race issue and focus on Jesus again in the sermons?”

The issue for many people is that because of all the uncomfortable feelings that arise around of race, they would prefer a quicker process. Many suffer from what I call “race fatigue”: they want to deal with race quickly and get it over with so that we can move on to easier issues. In some cases, this has to do with a fear of living in sustained guilt. I’ve been to some Christian seminars dealing with race, and they have felt like White guilt sessions. I wondered why I was even in the room because it was so much about Whites as the guilty party. Nevertheless, I realize that truly dealing with and dismantling the false identities of race require dealing with White privilege, individual and structural racism, and oppression. But any Christian approach to dealing with race should be full of grace. We also need to remember that we all carry the issues and baggage of the sin of race and racism. This is why prayerful, authentic, and ongoing dialogue about race is so important.

Beyond dialogue and a biblical theology, we must find other ways to facilitate learning and awareness that lead to competencies and skills that will equip us to feel more comfortable in tackling the issue of race and empower us for multi-ethnic ministry. The more we know about the impact of race historically and today, the better chance we have at forging a new future as the beloved community.

Raising Cross-Cultural Awareness and Racial Understanding

I’m fortunate to be part of a denomination that offers many opportunities for pastors, lay leaders, and church members to grow in the cross-cultural awareness and racial understanding. Through the Department of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice, as well as within regional conferences, the Evangelical Covenant Church offers several initiatives. One is an invitation to racial righteousness, an experience that challenges participants to move beyond language and knowledge of racial righteousness to a deeper place of personal awareness, responsibility, healing, and action. Participants are equipped to engage in relationship- and community-building activities to move toward true community across ethnic and racial lines, explore racial and ethnic injustices that exist in our society, and identify action steps for change, both personally and as a community.

Racial Righteousness

Racial righteousness is an experience that points to the ability to live as the righteous and beloved children of God in a world where
race matters. Facilitators of different ethnicities are trained in pairs and go on site to a local church. The program usually begins with a meal on Friday evening, continues all day Saturday, and concludes with worship on Sunday morning. This provides an entire weekend of focus for a congregation. Smaller congregations can include the whole church in this initiative. Medium to larger churches have to select or have sign-ups for smaller groups to participate. Because the Sanctuary Covenant Church grew to become a church of close to a thousand, we initially did this initiative every year for three years. I participated in it twice and found it to be very helpful in providing unifying definitions of key terms so that we could have a common language for talking about race.

Through readings, videos, and presentations by the facilitators, we gained a deeper understanding of the impact of race historically and today. It was a truly multi-ethnic experience that took the issue of race and ethnicity beyond a Black and White conversation. Asian, Hispanic, and Native American perspectives and stories were shared throughout the experience. There was a good mix of large and small group activities so that everyone had a chance to ask clarifying questions and share how they were feeling throughout the experience. At the end of the day on Saturday, we collectively developed a church covenant for dealing with issues of race and creating a strategy for congregational unity. A number of churches within the conference where I serve now have gone through this initiative and found it very fruitful. A member of one of our churches had this comment about the experience:

What’s next? My personal goal is to raise the level of dialogue and ultimately the level of individual, corporate, and systemic commitment to the young people with whom I have contact. I want to hear more of their stories. No, not hear, but really listen to what they have to say. By respecting and valuing their personal narratives, I can validate them and create a foundation of trust so that they will hear and listen to my story. Both generations learn from each other. To break the chains of indifference, racism, bigotry, and other negative situations is humanly impossible. In Christ, with the power of the Holy Spirit, all things are possible.

Sankofa

Another Evangelical Covenant program is Sankofa, an African word for a depiction of a bird with its head pointing back at its tail. This depiction is stating that you have to be willing to look back in order to go forward.

Sankofa is a four-day bus ride that begins in Chicago and makes its way to Birmingham, Alabama. Participants are paired across race and ethnicity in order to process the experience throughout the journey. On the bus, videos are shown that deal with the historic divide of race in America. Though other ethnic stories may be shared, there is a primary focus on the Black and White divide. Stops are made on the way down south and back at historic sites that are part of the racial story. Ending in Birmingham is of great significance because it is the home of the Civil Rights Museum. The facilitator for the journey provides discussion questions and topics for each of the pairs to work through in order to gain deeper understanding and begin to think through the development of new ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice within their local churches.

Journey 2 Mosaic

Two of the other conferences within the Evangelical Covenant church thought it was important to develop their own bus journeys similar to the Sankofa journey yet unique to the cultural context of their regions of the country. From this the Journey 2 Mosaic (J2M) initiatives were born. J2M began in the Pacific Southwest Conference, where I now serve. It is facilitated by Greg Yee, who is Chinese-American and serves as the associate superintendent of the
conference, and Walter Contreras, who is Hispanic and serves as the director of outreach and Hispanic church planting.

With their cultural experiences and insight, we developed a journey that went beyond the Black and White story and told the unique narrative of the western United States. J2M begins in Oakland, California, which has important yet mostly untold stories of African-Americans. Participants of J2M begin by going on the Black Panthers legacy tour in Oakland. I had perceived the Black Panthers to be both a militant and renegade group who were the violent alternative to the civil rights movement. But the tour showed me a different side to the Black Panthers. They pioneered feeding programs, including free breakfast and free lunch programs. We see the fruit of these initiatives through free lunch programs for low-income children in public schools today. The Black Panthers also worked to lower crime in the Black communities of major cities and started multiple Black-owned businesses to spearhead economic development enterprises. As I took in all of this new information during the tour, I couldn’t help thinking, “If I’m African-American and needed to have my former views changed on this aspect of African-American history, how many people of other ethnicities have even more misperceptions of African-Americans?”

The second day we rode the bus to the Central Valley of California to experience one aspect of the Hispanic story. Like the Sankofa journey, we watched videos on the bus to increase our awareness of various issues of race and racism. In the Central Valley, we spent the day with migrant workers and learning from a Hispanic pastor about immigration (from a perspective that I believe the church needs to hear more).

One the third day, our bus took us to Los Angeles. At our first stop, the National Japanese Museum, we learned about Japanese internment camps in California during World War II. Because my experiences around race had been mostly limited to Black and White, this journey was particularly meaningful to me, and it raised even further my cross-cultural awareness. After each experience, we came together as group for a debriefing circle, in which one of us would share a devotional; we would then share how we were feeling and have a time of prayer. This helped to focus us on the bigger outcome throughout the journey.

On the evening of the third day, we went to the Fred Jordan Mission in downtown Los Angeles on Skid Row, where there is a significant concentration of homelessness and poverty. Led by the Fred Jordan staff, we talked about homelessness and poverty and then went out into streets. We brought bread, bottled water, and an invitation to the programs at the Fred Jordan Mission. We prayed with people, but most important, we were ministered to. We met God on the streets of Skid Row. The group spent the night at the Fred Jordan Mission. The next morning, before heading back to Northern California, we worshipped at a multi-ethnic Covenant church in Long Beach.

Conclusion

Dealing with issues of race and racism is not easy, but it is needed if we hope to move from simply a diverse congregation to a beloved community. We must be willing to share our stories and listen to the stories of others. We must have a biblically rooted theology of race. We also need ongoing initiatives that raise our awareness and develop competencies that bring us out of the discomfort of boldly dealing with race so that we can dismantle racial barriers and live in new identities of righteousness. This is slow, hard, and sometimes painful work. But if we are willing to stay on the journey, blessings await us, especially the blessing of living in an earthly community that points toward the new community where we will live eternally.