Christian churches still struggle with race, how to discuss it, what to do

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Connie Carroll, left, who lives in the Cincinnati neighborhood of Madisonville, and Kimberly Elliott, of Green Hills, Ohio, hug after a discussion about implicit racial bias during a meeting May 16, 2018, of the Undivided group at Crossroads Church in the University Heights neighborhood of Cincinnati.(Photo: Sam Greene/The Enquirer)

CINCINNATI — On a Wednesday night at Crossroads Church in the Cincinnati neighborhood Corryville, about 30 people — equal numbers white and black, more women than men — stand in a circle in a basement meeting room.

A church leader asks them to give a one-word answer to describe how they're feeling about being a part of the Undivided racial reconciliation program.

"Happy," one said.

"Hopeful," another said.

At the same time, on a website that originates about 75 miles east of Cincinnati in Bainbridge, Ohio, an avowed neo-Nazi proclaims a different sermon. Only a select group of white people are chosen by God, he said. Everyone else is unworthy.

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"Not the Jewish nation. Not blacks. Not Mongrels. Not half-breeds, yellows, Chinese, Koreans, homosexuals or bisexuals," said the white supremacist preacher, Paul R. Mullet.

The messages could not be more different, yet both are based on an interpretation of the same Christian faith. While Mullet is a fringe actor, his sermons are a reminder of Christianity's complicated history with race in America — one stained by the justification and endorsement of slavery.

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Robert "Chip" Harrod, Cincinnati

Mainstream Christian churches don't speak about race in the hateful manner Mullet does, but many also don't address race relations and racism head on as Crossroads is attempting to do. Instead, they still struggle with a more fundamental question: How should they speak about race at all?

Uncertainty about race in the pulpit often stems from the racial makeup in the pews. Almost 9 in 10 Christian churches nationally are predominantly of one race group, according to a Tennessee-based religion information firm. That company, LifeWay Research, also did a survey in 2014 that showed that two-thirds of American churchgoers agreed with the statement that "our church is doing enough to be ethnically diverse."

The lack of racial integration in the Christian church contributes to the overall lack of meaningful contact among people of different races and ethnicities throughout American society, sociologists said.

As a result, fear of the unknown and negative racial stereotypes can set in, said the Rev. K.Z. Smith, pastor for 30 years of predominantly black Corinthian Baptist Church in the Cincinnati neighborhood of Avondale.

"In Chronicles 7:14, God is telling us that if we seek his face he will heal the land, but it has to begin with his people," Smith said of the faithful. "The way things are, we're not doing what we're supposed to. I mean, I've had white people tell me they'd like to worship with us but are afraid they won't be safe in Avondale."

Long-standing Protestant and Catholic churches are based in city neighborhoods or smaller communities and reflect their racial composition. The Cincinnati region, which includes Northern Kentucky and Southeast Indiana, is the nation's 10th-most residentially segregated region, according to an analysis of 2016 Census estimates from Apartment List.com.

Yet some individual churches and denominations here, in addition to ecumenical and interfaith groups, are trying to break down some of those walls in ongoing programs. They range from joint social-justice projects to worship and pulpit exchanges.

Unity and understanding are the goals of a single-day event, Cincinnati Festival of Faiths, planned for June 24 at Xavier University.

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"The race issue will continue to be a challenge for the Christian community and other faith traditions as long as whites focus only on race relations while ignoring society's systemic inequities that shape — if not predetermine — our race relations," said Robert "Chip" Harrod, a long-time Cincinnati diversity and inclusion advocate.

In other words, on addressing issues of race and racism, the Christian church in America remains a reflection of the larger society. A small handful of successes go along with the polite silence of the pulpit and many missed opportunities to call out racism as a sin.

Or as the Rev. Wilton Blake, recently retired presiding elder of the Cincinnati district of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, said, "Bits and pieces but not the whole bite."

Ongoing efforts to confront injustice

Faith-based efforts to close the racial divide and the social damage it can cause continue to be made in small and large ways. They happen here in individual churches, throughout large denominations and in a coalition that uses the collective moral voice and influence of the region's interfaith community.

One of the most overt racial makeovers took place beginning in 2001 at Peoples Church, formerly known as First Christian Assembly of God, in Corryville. At that time it had a 98% white, commuter congregation.

In 2004, in only his third year as pastor, Chris Beard articulated the new mission statement: "To be a racially reconciling, generationally rich, life-giving church thriving in the heart of the city."

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Many white members left. Some would eventually return.

Today, Peoples Church has a congregation that is 25% African-American; 25% international, representing 30 nationalities; and 50% white, a mix that Beard and his congregants refer to as "heaven on earth." The staff and lay leadership also are diverse.

"It's sinful that the white American Christian church has perpetuated a climate of white supremacy instead of repenting for the sins of the

founding of America," Beard said. "It's humbling and scary to face our own sin, but without truth, there is no repentance."

Marvis Ware, 59, greets pastor emeritus Clyde Miller before the 9:30 Sunday morning service May 27, 2018, at the Peoples Church in the Cincinnati neighborhood of Corryville. (Photo: David Gifreda/The Enquirer)

For Marvis Ware, 59, who lives in the Cincinnati neighborhood of Roselawn, the racial unity he experiences inside Peoples Church has helped him to understand and withstand a society that wants to cast him as a second-class citizen.

"I see all races, all ethnicities, all nationalities, I see us worshiping together and getting along," he said. "As a black man, that gives me a lot of hope."

Peoples Church is part of a religious demographic known as evangelical Protestants.

It is a group that has 50 denominations in the Cincinnati region and whose numbers have risen steadily since the early 1980s to 329,000 in 2010 — the most recent U.S. Religion Census. The evangelical Protestant category also includes Crossroads, whose membership increased 36% in the past year and is now at 38,000.

The Catholic Church remains the largest and most culturally influential denomination here. It has 402,000 members in the Cincinnati region.

Following residential patterns across the Cincinnati archdiocese's 19-county area, four of its 211 churches are predominantly black, a few are meaningfully integrated, but most are almost exclusively white.

The archdiocese operates an office of African-American Ministries and has offered several racial education and diversity-building programs for its members and clergy in the past several years. Among them is an international church twinning program in which about 20% of archdiocesan parishes participate.

The challenge is to remove hot-button issues such as immigration and race from the contentious political environment, said Tony Stieritz, director of the archdiocese's Social Action Office.

"With race, how do you open up conversations that people are going to participate in without defenses going up right away?" Stieritz said.

The Cincinnati Archdiocese 50 years ago helped to create an organization called the Metropolitan Area Religious Coalition of Cincinnati, better known by the acronym MARCC, to address specific social issues through political action and prophetic teaching of God's absolute standards.

About 250 people were turned away on a recent Saturday morning at Woodward High School in Cincinnati from applying for a Metropolitan Area Religious Coalition of Cincinnati ID card. Demand for the alternative identification card surprised organizers. (Photo: The Enquirer/Mark Curnutte)

Today, 11 of the coalition's 15 denominational members are Christian. It focuses on two social concerns each year. This year they are community-police relations/justice reform and affordable housing/displacement.

In 2016, MARCC created an identification card that is used by unauthorized immigrants, people returning from prison and homeless people. Cincinnati officials allow its use to access city services.

In two years, 1,603 cards have been distributed, and the Hamilton County Sheriff's Department and the Blue Ash, Forest Park, Springdale and West Chester Township police departments also recognize the MARCC ID.

To Margaret Fox, the coalition's executive director, the card represents a victory for a diverse but unified faith community, the creation of a service that helps vulnerable people from many races and ethnicities in a time when it's badly needed.

"You can preach from the pulpit, but at this point in time, actions seem to speak louder than platitudes," she said.

'Issue is social justice, not integration'

For some theologians and ministers, church segregation within American Christianity is not the problem.

The problem is the racial, class and social division that runs contrary to the central Christian message of loving God and loving one's neighbor as one's self, said Pastor Lesley Jones of Truth & Destiny Ministries in the Cincinnati neighborhood of Mount Airy.

"It's fine for people to be in touch with their cultural heritage," said Jones, who founded the church in 2003 and ran unsuccessfully for Cincinnati City Council last year. "The problem is when we think social justice only applies to us."

She recently addressed gun violence in her predominantly black congregation of about 200. It's about 20% white and biracial, as well as having a handful of Latino members.

"Sometimes, there are things only I, as a black minister, can say to black people," Jones said. "I told our black mothers that it wasn't just about street violence in black communities. I said we need to join with these white mothers who are losing children in all these school shootings."

The message of equity Jones delivered is an example of what's needed more, said Adam Clark, associate professor of theology, Africana studies and in the Institute for Spirituality & Social Justice at Xavier University in Cincinnati.

"The issue is justice," Clark said. "It's more about equity. We have to recognize the prophetic nature of Christianity, which calls for social justice."

The Bible indirectly addresses racism and diversity many times. Examples:

• **In Genesis,** all people are created in God's image.
• **In 1st Corinthians,** all are baptized by one spirit in order to form one body.
• **In Revelation,** the heavenly picture is a great multitude from each nation and all tribes speaking every language before the throne.

Yet throughout history, the American Christian church has shown favoritism of whites and presented a narrative that Christianity moved from Israel to Europe and then to the Americas, Xavier's Clark said.

"It kind of erases the history of the Ethiopian church, the Coptic Church in Egypt, how Exodus is an African story, how Jesus is obviously a Palestinian," he said. "Blacks are marginalized Christians."

Churches respond to race-inspired acts

The nation's timeline since 2014 is dotted with racially charged incidents, such as when a man drove into a crowd protesting a rally that drew hundreds of white nationalists to Charlottesville, Va. Starting with the police shooting of unarmed black teen Michael Brown that August in Ferguson, Mo., these events seemed to pull white from black, said Chuck Mingo, pastor of Crossroads in the Cincinnati neighborhood of Oakley.

In the midst of the violence — including the 2015 massacre of nine African-Americans in a prayer group by an avowed white supremacist at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C. — Mingo said he wanted to start a church-based conversation about race.

That dialogue grew into the Undivided program, which in two years has shepherded 3,000 people through a six-week racial reconciliation process. Mingo said he has heard "story after story of hearts being broken and hearts being mended."

The Undivided program grew out of a dialogue Pastor Chuck Mingo of Crossroads Church said he wanted to start about race. (Photo: Kareem Elgazzar/The Enquirer)

Crossroads, as a megachurch, draws from across the Cincinnati area. Unlike most Catholic or mainline Protestant churches, it is not identified by neighborhood or community boundaries.

For Mary Burns, 42, a white lawyer who lives with her husband, Joseph, in Newport, Ky., Undivided has been a catalyst for racial understanding.

"I am still trying to figure out the benefits I received but did not earn because of my race," Burns said. "You learn these benefits came at the expense of other people's undeserved hardships.

"And you're left asking, `What do I do with that?' " she said. "I know as a Christian that I have the responsibility to do something."

Other Crossroads members felt the same. Undivided was the root of the formation of a social-justice team that worked more than 500

volunteer shifts to help Issue 44, Cincinnati Preschool Promise, pass by 24 percentage points in November 2016.

For a faith community that is just 10.5% African-American, the Undivided justice team's current issue is one critical to the black community: criminal justice reform. Members are collecting thousands of signatures to help get proposed laws on the Ohio ballot in November.

As a black man from Philadelphia, Mingo said he looks around society and Crossroads itself and knows that room for growth exists with Undivided.

"I feel most challenged by the young white guy because I know, given our culture and even the demographics of our church, statistically, they are going to be the least likely to be in relationships with people who really have different life experiences than them," the pastor said.

The shooter at Emanuel AME was a young white man, Dylann Roof, 21 at the time, a white supremacist who said he wanted to start a race war.

The Rev. Henry Zorn, the pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Resurrection in Ohio's Anderson Township, formed Anderson Churches for Racial Unity in response to the massacre of the Emanuel Nine.

Zorn's congregation is one of eight Christian churches in predominantly white and affluent Anderson Township that have spent the past three years studying race by listening to guest speakers, screening films, discussing books and attending workshops. The Anderson churches have developed an ongoing relationship with an urban black church, Allen Temple AME in Cincinnati's Bond Hill neighborhood.

On June 18 at Zorn's church, he and Allen Temple's pastor, the Rev. Alphonse Allen, will preside over a third-anniversary commemoration of the Emanuel Nine.

"God does give us diversity as a gift," Zorn said. "You're missing something if you don't seek it out."

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