

**Michael O. Emerson (with Rodney M. Woo), *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006)**

*Reviewed by Mike Wilson who works as the Cross-Cultural Ministry Coordinator for the Presbyterian Church of NSW.*

“Multiculturalism” (however that is defined) remains a feature of Australian society. Indeed it seems that questions of cultural diversity are becoming increasingly important. How does the church respond to this? Can we realistically hope to develop “multicultural” congregations? Is this a good approach? If it is worth doing, how do we do it?

*People of the Dream* is a fascinating and important book from the US which helps us with these questions. It is an excellent book which provides a solid sociological basis for defining and analyzing multiethnic or international congregations. The authors are Michael Emerson, Allyn R. and Gladys M. Cline Professor of Sociology at Rice University and Founding Director of the Center on Race, Religion, and Urban Life, and Rodney Woo, Senior Pastor of Wilcrest Baptist Church, Houston, Texas. The book recounts some of the story of Wilcrest Baptist.

#### **A comment on terminology**

Before outlining the book, one comment needs to be made about terminology, specially to help Australian readers make the most of the book. In the US the white–black racial issue is dominant. Hence the book consistently uses words like race, racial, multiracial and interracial. Such terminology would have more currency in Australia if, in developing multiethnic congregations, the central issue concerned racial reconciliation between white Australians and indigenous people. However, in Australia it is far more likely that churches will be involved in ministry to non-indigenous people from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Hence in Australia it is more appropriate to use words like ethnicity, ethnic, multiethnic and the like.

#### **Wilcrest Baptist Church**

The book focuses on Wilcrest Baptist Church, located in the suburb of Alief, Houston, Texas (see <http://www.wilcrestbaptist.org/index.html>). By 1990 the neighbourhood around the church had become approximately 80% non-white, with a mixture of African Americans, Hispanics and Asians. Meanwhile church membership and attendance had dropped from a peak of 500 to less than 200. The pastor at the time promoted a strategy of growth through outreach to white middle class neighbourhoods which were not located near the church. There were plans to relocate to one of these outer suburbs.

The members of Wilcrest did not finally embrace this strategy. The pastor was asked to resign and Rodney Woo was called in his place. Woo does not come from a white-middle class background. His father is half-Chinese and his parents had missionary experience of ministering to poor Hispanics, African Americans and Vietnamese. His father had also taught English to migrants. Rodney's own elementary and middle schooling had been in African-American schools where extremely few pupils were not African-American. His wife, Sasha, is the daughter of Mexican immigrants.

When Woo arrived at Wilcrest there were separate Chinese and African-American churches using the facilities. In place of this, Woo developed a "multiracial congregation." Wilcrest is currently 20% black, 30% Hispanic, 42% white, 5% Asian, with 3% of other ethnic backgrounds. According to the website, 44 nations are represented in the congregation. Using Australian terminology we would call this "a multiethnic or international congregation".

### American Cultural Context

*People of the Dream* offers a quick sketch of American church culture and the place of race. The authors note that Christian congregations are "the most common and widespread institution in the United States", touching the lives of over 100 million Americans who are involved in religious congregations.

These churches are, by and large, racially segregated. Emerson and Woo emphasise that this has been a long-term feature of church life in the North and the South. We see the all-too-familiar pattern of the church dancing to the tune played by society. Emerson and Woo observe that a current survey suggests little has changed since the civil rights movement and most congregations remain racially segregated.

### What is a 'multiracial' congregation

Emerson and Woo offer two ways of assessing the extent to which a church is "multiracial". One approach is a "binary definition", which is that a church is multiracial if "no one racial group comprises 80 percent or more of the people". Emerson argues that 20% is not an arbitrary figure:

[R]esearch in race and gender relations in multiple contexts suggests that 20 percent constitutes the point of critical mass. At this percentage, the proportion is high enough to have its presence felt and filtered through a system or organization. (35)

Applying this binary definition, Emerson estimates that 7% of American congregations are multiracial. However, he points out the number of stable racially mixed congregations is undoubtedly lower than this. He also observes that public schools in 2006 were six times more racially diverse than religious congregations.

The other assessment is a "continuous definition" of a multiracial congregation. This allows for a continuum by measuring "the probability that two randomly selected people in a congregation will be of different racial groups". If a congregation has 50% of one racial group and 50% of another, then the probability = 0.5. If there are four racial groups each constituting a quarter of the membership then the probability = 0.75. According to this standard, any value approaching 0.5 indicates there is a substantial racial mix in the congregation.

On this measure Wilcrest Baptist is highly unusual, with a probability rating of 0.70. The authors estimate that less than half of 1% of American churches are as racially diverse as this. Further, "Wilcrest is 35 times more racially diverse than the average congregation in the United States."

It is a fact of life that "the vast majority of congregations are substantially less racially diverse than the neighbourhoods in which they reside". Interestingly, though,

multiracial congregations are actually 40 percent *more diverse* than their neighbourhoods. Multiracial congregations are unique then not only because they are racially diverse, but also because *they tend to be more diverse than the neighbourhoods in which they reside.* (44-45)

### Why do congregations become and remain multiracial?

The book examines what causes churches to be multiracial.<sup>[1]</sup> The character of the neighbourhood is an important factor in developing multiracial congregations, but it is not determinative. Most congregations in racially diverse neighbourhoods are not themselves racially diverse and not all multiracial congregations are in highly diverse neighbourhoods.

The authors have identified two environmental factors as important in understanding the level of racial diversity in congregations:

I. The faith tradition of the congregation. The larger the numbers of people in a tradition, the less diverse, on average, are congregations in that tradition.

II. The racial diversity of the congregations' neighbourhoods.

Racial diversity is also affected by worship style. Also, multiracial congregations tend to be younger, on average, than other congregations. Significantly, they observe that the theology of a congregation, whether conservative, liberal, or something in between, does not predict a congregation's diversity. They also found that congregations which meet in small groups are more likely to be racially diverse. (Small groups and other methods of developing interracial bonds were found to contribute significantly to the long-term survival of interracial churches.)

Wealth and occupation are other variables contributing to the racial diversity of the congregation. The higher these are then the more racially diverse the congregation tends to be. On the other hand, multiracial congregations are more economically mixed than racially homogeneous congregations.

Beyond these general factors the authors examined the forces which lead to the formation of interracial congregations. They identify three possible forces:

I. *The church's own goals* – the church actively seeks this.

II. The church is forced to move this way because of *changes in resources*, e.g. a decline in membership, budgetary constraints or provision of a new resource may create a perceived opportunity.

III. *Denominational leaders* strongly influence or even mandate such a development.

In light of these factors Emerson and Woo identify seven types of multiracial congregations. [I assume this is from them. If not it probably deserves an article of its own]. The first four types are generation by a sense of mission in which they seek to be multiracial, the final three develop as multiracial for purposes of survival.

*1. Neighbourhood Embracing*

These are congregations which become multiracial due to changes in the racial makeup of their local neighbourhood.

*2. Neighbourhood Charter*

These are congregations which from the very start seek to be multiracial congregations.

*3. Niche Embracing*

These are congregations which develop multiethnically because of the effectiveness of a particular ministry strategy such as English-as-a-Second-Language classes.

*4. Niche Charter*

These are congregations which begin as multiracial church communities.

*5. Survival Embracing*

A significant proportion of churches that eventually become multiracial do so because of a change in resources. So when the composition of the neighbourhood population changes, the membership of many local churches declines and with it financial and other resources, e.g. lay leadership and other spiritual gifts. Some congregations respond to this and change their concept of mission and seek to attract their new neighbours.

*6. Survival Merge*

These are also churches which experience a change in resources and which, in order to survive, merge with another congregation.

*7. Mandated*

These are churches which become multiethnic because an external, denominational authority, either strongly influences or directs the congregation concerned to become multiethnic, either because of the need to reach out to a now ethnically diverse neighbourhood or because of the decision to join with another congregation of a different ethnic background.

Emerson and Woo's analysis is summarised in the following diagram, in which I have taken the liberty of substituting "multiethnic" for "multiracial".

The presence of pressure to form a multiracial church does not mean that this will happen. Emerson and Woo also analyse the factors in the successful development of a multiracial church. They found these to include:

I. An available population of racially different persons.

II. People attracted by the culture and purpose of the congregation. Typically such churches draw from their region and not just locally, that is, create "population opportunity".

- III. A merging of two or more preexisting congregations may immediately generate cultural diversity for the total church community. Sometimes while such developments increase ethnic diversity they may, at least initially, result in a decline of membership – some members may reject such a merger.

Emerson and Woo make some important observations about the factors which make multiracial churches sustainable. They find that if the primary impetus for change is mission and if a congregation draws membership from a broad geographical region, then that church is likely to remain multiracial. In contrast, a church which has become multiracial due to an external authority is less likely to remain so.

Emerson hypothesizes that ethnic diversity generated by merging preexisting congregations is the least likely of the multiethnic congregation types to survive as multiethnic congregations because:

I. The source of continued diversity is uncertain.

- II. Off-putting difficulties develop associated with the differences of culture, social networks and internal authority structures.

#### Who attends multiracial congregations?

Emerson and Woo examine who attends multiracial congregations. They observe that “the more choice people have, the more they end up in homogenous congregations”. So in the US white Protestants are the least likely to be in racially mixed congregations.

Social ties between homogeneous and ethnically mixed congregations are compared. In homogenous congregations 86% of members say that all or most of their friends are of their own race. In interracial congregations only 25% say this. However, it must be recognized that in many racially mixed organizations, for example, a desegregated school, friendships can remain largely homogenous. This is not the case in racially mixed congregations. The majority of people, regardless of their race, had greater diversity in their friendship circles *after* becoming part of a racially mixed congregation.

Emerson found that respondents who attend mixed-race congregations also currently live in more racially diverse zip codes than do respondents who attend racially homogenous congregations. It is also more likely they used to live in a racially mixed neighbourhood and attended a racially mixed school while growing up.

Emerson and Woo discuss the implications of these observations in terms of social capital. “Social capital” is a key good that may be held by an individual, small group, organization, community or a total society. It comes from successful relationships, referring to the resources that accrue from social networks; the objective associations between individuals that are reciprocal, trusting and display positive emotions. Two types of social capital have been identified. *Bonding social capital* develops from micro-bonds between individuals within already well-established groups and is characteristically inward-looking and associated with homogeneous groups. *Bridging social capital* develops from bonds that form between people across groups and is characteristically externally focused and involves linking disparate individuals and groups which do not have shared histories or identities. It has been noted that the development of one type of social capital often curtails developing the other. Strengthening bonding social capital is associated with increased prejudice and discrimination as one’s own group is favoured over other groups.

Conversely, the development of bridging social capital is connected with the maintenance of segmented social networks and the generating and reproducing of inequality between groups. The authors propose that racially diverse congregations, like racially and economically integrated schools, serve as *bridge organizations*, which uniquely provide the possibility of simultaneously building bonding and bridging social capital.

The authors discovered that whites in interracial congregations are, on average, younger than those in uniracial congregations, and, on average, about the same age as white Americans who do not regularly attend religious services. Compared to whites in uniracial congregations, whites in interracial congregations are less supportive of the statement that the number of immigrants should be reduced, less supportive of the statement that there is too much talk today in the United States about racial issues, less likely to be upset if their child were to marry someone of another race, and less likely to prefer living in a neighbourhood that is 75 percent their own race and 25 percent of other racial groups. Whites in uniracial congregations typically believe the best way to change the US is to change individuals. Whites in interracial congregations are less likely to share this viewpoint.

### What attracts attenders to multiracial churches?

In a survey of Wilcrest Baptist Church, members were asked for the main feature which attracted them to the church. The results were: 40% Worship (music, preaching, pastor); 23% Personal relationships; 22% Location; 18% Vision of diversity; 15% Friendliness; 11% Programs (106)

Only a minority originally come to such congregations because they are interracial. They usually come for the same reasons people go to any congregation: personal invitations from friends or family, a convenient location, friendliness, meaningful worship or attractive programs.

### The effects of multiracial congregations on attenders

One intriguing result is that the report is that "far from integration leading to assimilation, at least in the overall context of the multiracial congregations my colleagues and I studied, *integration helped people grow more secure in and proud of their cultural identities*". [\[2\]](#)

### Conflict and viability

Conflict is one of the difficult areas for any congregation to negotiate, and this is heightened in a multiracial setting in which people approach conflict very differently. Emerson and Woo observe that "white culture tends to separate intellect and passion, often described as separating mind and body." White culture emphasises presenting facts and citing experts, being dispassionate, impersonal and calm. Public debate should be low-key, excluding affect. Being personal or emotional during debate is considered "losing one's cool" and as trying to win debate by deception.

However, in black culture the validity of ideas is tested through animated, interpersonal, confrontational discussion. Debate is heated with raised voices and the display of affect. Debaters show concern for the topic and allow false ideas to be exposed so that truth might survive. Whites are intimidated by this approach and see it as angry argumentation, not debate; as overly aggressive and too personal.

Cultural sociologist Penny Edgell distinguishes two main types of conflict:

- I. *Within-frame conflict* occurs between people and groups who share the same expectations and similar habituses. Such conflict can usually be resolved when routine steps are accepted and the decision is usually abided by.
- II. *Between-frame conflict* occurs between people with divergent habituses, divergent standards of what is right, or divergent expectations about how things ought to be done. Often there are questions over identity, who we are, and 'how we do things here'.

Between-frame conflicts are more common in multiracial congregations than in uniracial congregations. Emerson observes various misuses of power (which always occur to a lesser or greater extent) in multiracial congregations.

Emerson and Woo identify seven vital principles which must be followed if people in multiracial congregations are to "limit the shadows, fight off nightmares, and create healthy congregations", namely:

- I. An institutional commitment to racial equity, clearly stated.
- II. Leaders who are personally deeply committed to racial equity.
- III. A common purpose that supersedes racial equity.
- IV. Structures to ensure racial equity (to ensure outsiders come to be and feel like insiders, that they belong and have a voice).
- V. Internal forums, education and groups (space to discuss issues, learn about race issues, discuss misuse of power).
- VI. Be a DJ (DJs must constantly adjust the volume, bass level, and treble level depending on the size of the room, the acoustics, and the number of people in the room. Leaders of multiracial congregations must treat adjustments as normal, make them often, with a larger purpose in mind – what works today cannot be assumed to work tomorrow).
- VII. Recognise that people are at different places, and help them move forward one step at a time.

### Multiculturalism

In an appendix Emerson and Woo critique multiculturalism, noting that its singular focus on culture has weaknesses. Pluralistic multiculturalism wrongly treats cultures as static and pure, as uninfluenced by other cultures, "as if culture really were like a pane of colored glass" This does not allow for the improving and purifying of cultures through contact with other cultures. Pluralistic multiculturalism deems it to be intolerant to speak of cultures as having negative aspects.

Indeed, many forms of multiculturalism appear to trivialize inequality. Justice is identified with a right to practise and live in one's own culture and ignores the need to address socioeconomic inequality. While multiculturalism achieves some worthwhile ends, it does not address inequality and injustice and actually hinders these goals, insofar as it excludes



other solutions. Consequently, while multiculturalism “may be a necessary step ... it is not the final step”.

In this context Emerson sees multiracial congregations as harbingers of a new stage of US race relations.

## Conclusion

The Australian context is not the same as that of the US. The need for US church models that will effect deep racial reconciliation between blacks and whites is not replicated in Australia to anything like the same extent. Also, it is to be doubted that there is any one model for dealing with ethnicity that is the “right” or even “ideal” model, notwithstanding the vision of Revelation 7:9. There will be no marriage in heaven either. Does this mean that singleness is the “right” or “ideal” model for dealing with sexuality? It is not helpful to insinuate that what are often dubbed “first generation” churches or language-based congregations are somehow inferior or deficient, except in the same way we might say all earthly expressions of church fall short of all they could be.

Yet, there is undoubtedly a critical need to develop multiethnic churches, especially in Australian cities, for a number of reasons. The ultimate community of God’s people will be multiethnic (Rev 7:9), so the development of international congregations is clearly in tune with this. Many of the neighbourhoods in our metropolitan centres are rapidly increasing in ethnic diversity and there are many people who are best reached through such models, especially for a range of persons whose ethnic identity includes those who have become alienated from their ethnic roots, those for whom such roots are of marginal importance and those who are bi-cultural. Further, racial prejudice is still a problem for us and there are too many mono-ethnic churches, or churches with a very narrow range of ethnicity (including many “Anglo” churches), which are introspective and substantially exclusivist. Consequently, international churches are indeed an important witness to the depth of unity the cross of Christ effects.

This book is a key resource in identifying the essential foundations, factors and principles upon which the development of a viable multiethnic church depends.

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**[1]** For an alternative taxonomy for multiracial congregations and an assessment of the success of the models see G. Yancey *One Body, One Spirit’ Principles of Successful Multiracial Churches* IVP, 2003.

1. *Leadership multiracial congregations*: a leader or leaders attract a diversity of people.
2. *Evangelism multiracial congregations*: effective proselytizing strategies attract a diversity of people.
3. *Demographic multiracial congregations*: ethnic diversification of the neighbourhood results in an ethnic diversification of the congregation.
4. *Network multiracial congregations*: an expansion of social ties causes growth of ethnic diversity.



Yancey's study reveals that the most likely of these four models to grow are network multiracial congregations.

[21] Emerson, 55. Ecklund reports that second-generation Koreans who were in Korean congregations preferred to see themselves as white (not black or Hispanic) Americans and talked about being Korean relatively little. But it was much more probable that Koreans in multiracial congregations would view themselves as being Korean and not white. Such Koreans emphasized the differences and similarities between themselves and other racial and ethnic groups. They saw little to be gained from assimilation and valued preserving their cultural uniqueness. Her study indicates: "Korean Americans in these multiracial congregational contexts were able to reconcile their American and Korean identities, and do so without discomfort. They could construct cohesive identities while living in multiple worlds." (119-120).

**Mike Wilson works as the Cross-Cultural Ministry Coordinator for the Presbyterian Church of  
NSW.**