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Congregational Segregation: A look at Memphis Evangelical Churches

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us *the ministry of reconciliation*. -2 Corinthians 5:18

“It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning.” -Reverend Martin Luther King Jr, 1963

Introduction

Located in what can be said to be the buckle of the Bible belt, Memphis, TN is home to 640 evangelical Protestant churches (Church Angel). With a population of nearly 654,000 people, Memphis, like many other metropolitan cities, is plagued with vestiges of segregation de facto. Segregation de facto thus explains why 90 percent, 576 of the 640 Memphis evangelical churches have a homogeneous congregation (Emerson, Smith 136).

The purpose of this paper is to answer the question: Why, for the most part, are Memphis evangelical churches still segregated. I argue that Memphis evangelical churches remain segregated because of circumstance and preference. When considering circumstance I take into account historical forces and the demographics of each church’s surrounding neighborhoods. When treating preference I consider the type of music, the style of preaching, and the church aesthetics used to create meaning and belonging within the congregational body.

In order to answer the question of congregational segregation, I conduct case studies on three racially different Memphis evangelical churches. The book *United by Faith* defines a “racially mixed congregation as one in which no one racial group is 80 percent or more of the

congregation” (DeYoung, Emerson, Kim, and Yancey 2). We can infer thus, that if the opposite is true, then the majority racial group makes the church either majority-white or majority-black. I closely examined Missio Dei Church (majority-white), Westhaven Community Church (majority-black), and Fellowship Memphis Church (multi-racial). Though the scope of the paper is limited to these three churches, each respective case study can provide insight into understanding evangelical churches more broadly.

Defining an Evangelical

The paper conducts an audit on Evangelical Protestant Christians because evangelical Protestantism was the mainstream religion for the first century and a quarter of American history and continues to play a vital role in American religious life (Emerson, Smith 3).

Evangelicals hold that the final, ultimate authority is the Bible. Stemming from this, they believe that Christ died for the salvation of all, and that anyone who accepts Christ as the one way to eternal life will be saved. Evangelicals believe in the importance of sharing their faith, or evangelizing. They believe in an ‘engaged orthodoxy’ where they take their conservative faith beyond the boundaries of the evangelical subculture and engage the larger culture and society. Evangelicals want their traditional faith to offer solutions to pressing social problems, such as race relations (Emerson, Smith 3).

However, in practice, evangelical Protestantism has remained largely disconnected from many of the racial issues that engulf our culture (Rah 204). This shortcoming is most evident in the overwhelming number of internally homogeneous congregations. The ideal of an ‘engaged orthodoxy’ is undercut.

Segregated by circumstance: historical forces

Evangelicalism took firm root in America with the spread of the Great Awakening.

Starting in the middle colonies in the 1720s under the influence of people such as Gilbert Tennent, it gained full force in the late 1730s and early 1740s when English evangelist George Whitefield traveled the provinces with his emotion-stirring revivals. As the “founder” of American evangelicalism, George Whitefield embodied some of the contradictions seen in present-day evangelicals. Despite the fact that Whitfield preached of the reconciling power of the gospel, his perspective was that God allowed slavery for purposes including the Christianization and uplifting of the heathen Africans. Whitfield, a “model evangelical Christian”, shows how efforts to evangelize led Christians to support the wider racialized status quo (Emerson, Smith 25-27).

To challenge the very foundations of the larger system was simply not part of the worldview. Further, the connection between cultural and religious legitimation is often strong. So for Whitefield, to overturn slavery was seen as going against God’s ordained pattern.

Here lies the history of evangelical Protestants, whites and blacks alike. Because of such tragic circumstance, blacks were left with no other alternative than to set up separate religious institutions that authenticated their sufferings (DeYoung et al. 106). Very early in the nation’s history we see the evangelical church functioning as a product of racially separate identities and meanings (Emerson, Smith 158). As the “cultural womb of the black community”, the black church achieved its own identity and conceived its own mission (DeYoung et al. 106,107).

Therefore, congregational segregation did not happen in a vacuum. Historical events and social

phenomena influenced and shaped a religion in which segregation by race is the predominant form of community (DeYoung et al. 99,100).

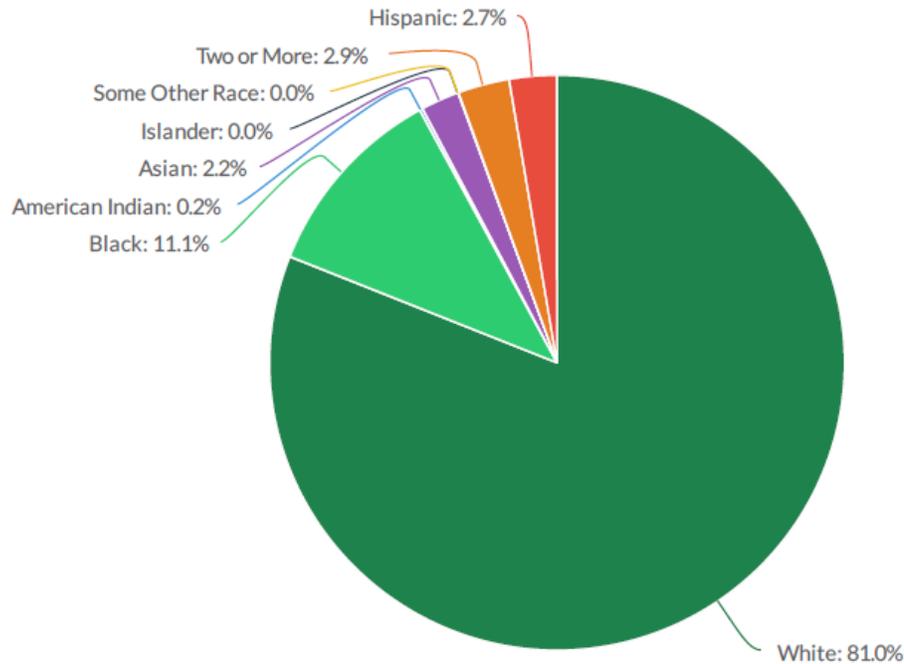
Segregated by circumstance: surrounding neighborhoods

Evangelical seminary professor C. Peter Wagner states, “the local congregation in a given community can only be as integrated as are the families and other primary social groups in [that] community” (Emerson, Smith 151). Some may argue that because Memphis is a commuter city, because countless people worship at congregations that are not in close proximity to where they live, that Professor Wagner’s statement is false. Perhaps, then, the evaluation of each church’s surrounding neighborhood and its consideration as a factor for segregation by circumstance is invalid. On the contrary.

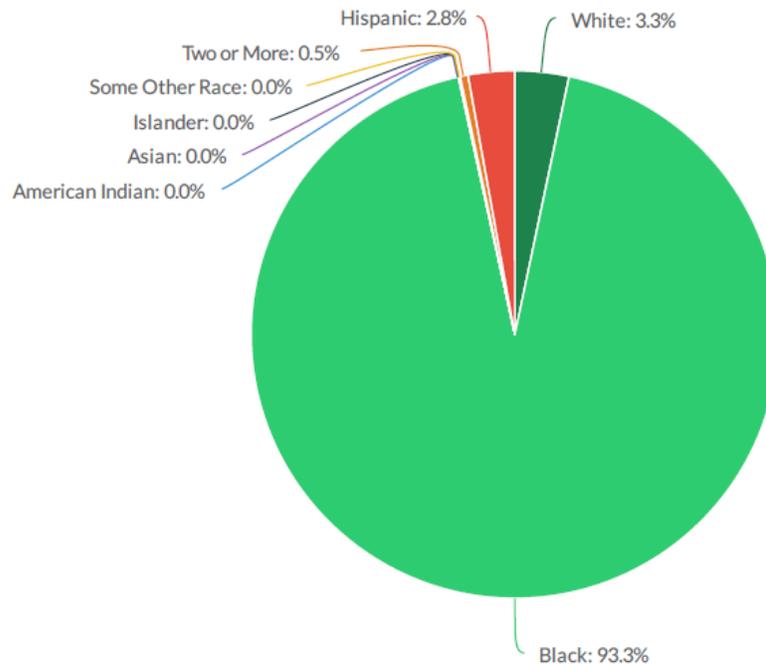
Memphis is a racialized society. This means that race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities, and social relationships (Emerson, Smith 7). It should come as no surprise, then, that evangelicals commute farther to cultivate meaning and belonging with racially similar people who have shared opportunities and experiences. Because the evangelical’s view conforms to the socioeconomic conditions of their time, they usually fail to challenge systemic racism. This shortcoming explains why majority-white churches are in white neighborhoods and majority-black churches in black neighborhoods.

Situated in the 38117 zip code of Memphis, TN, the Missio Dei Church congregation is a reflection of its surrounding neighborhoods. The pie chart below, prepared by Cubit Planning, functions as a representation of the races and origins of the people of Memphis 38117. For the purposes of the paper, I focus solely on the percentages of whites and blacks. Notice that 81 percent of Memphis 38117 is white. Being a congregation of roughly fifty people on Sunday

June 26, only one black person was present. I was able to conclude that Missio Dei Church is 98 percent white making it a majority-white church.



Professor Wagner's observation is reaffirmed as I compare the demographics of Westhaven Community Church to its surrounding neighborhoods. Though only twenty minutes away from Missio Dei, the two churches could not differ more starkly, racially speaking. Westhaven, created in 1986 by Pastor Fred Wesson and his wife Dr. Vivian Wesson is located in the Memphis 38116 zip code. The pie chart below shows that, unlike Memphis 38117, Memphis 38116 is overwhelmingly black (93.3 percent). After attending Tuesday evening prayer time and Bible study on June 23 it was clear that Westhaven, like its surrounding neighborhoods, was majority-black (100 percent of the congregation).



Consequently, this shows that race is intimately tied with the evangelical experience. In fact, rarely is it considered abnormal to attend a majority-white or majority-black church. It is de facto segregation---a product of history and the makeup of one's neighborhood (123).

Wayne Tinnon, a pastor of a Church of God in Christ Church (COGIC), the same denominational affiliation as Westhaven Community Church, made mention of evangelicals being divided not only denominationally but economically and racially. To that I respond, if 2 Corinthians 5:18 commands evangelicals to be reconciled to God and to one another, why are those in pastoral positions content in simply realizing congregational divides? It is hypocritical, perhaps subliminally, for evangelicals to call for an end to racial division yet comfortably worship in their homogeneous churches. Two preliminary actions must take place to achieve multi-racial evangelical congregations. First, white evangelical Memphians, as the creators and benefactors of a racialized Memphis, must repent of their personal, historical, and social sins.

Conversely, black evangelical Memphians must repent of their anger and whatever hatred they hold toward whites and systemic racism (Emerson, Smith).

Segregated by preference: first impressions

There is great subjectivity in first impressions. My first impression of a religious congregation can and probably will differ starkly from another's. My family immigrated to America from the Republic of Congo when I was five years old. I am thus an African-American female, in the most organic sense. For the past fifteen years, my family and I have lived in Nashville, TN. Our church home in Nashville is Park Ave Baptist Church, an affiliate of the Southern Baptist Convention. Thus, it is an overwhelmingly white congregation.

Borrowing some scientific terminology, this project has two constants and one variable. Because we are most interested in the white-black congregational divide in Memphis, Missio Dei Church (majority-white) and Westhaven Community Church (majority-black) are the constants. Fellowship Memphis, a multi-racial church, is the variable. This allows comparisons between Missio Dei and Fellowship Memphis or Westhaven and Fellowship Memphis.

“Transformation. Empowerment. Diversity.” The cornerstones of Fellowship Memphis. This body of believers so desires to be associated with these three words that it has become part of their church logo. In fact, when visiting their church website we immediately see those three words coupled with the name “Fellowship Memphis.” It seems daunting to dream up a multi-racial church in a city like Memphis, TN. When asked why many churches in Memphis remain segregated, Dr. Vivian Wesson of Westhaven Community Church said, “Until leaders of the church begin to preach integration without hesitation I do not think integration in churches will ever be.” Dr. Wesson is calling for those in pastoral positions to remove their racial blinders and

approach the issue of segregation in Memphis and its churches directly (Perkins, Rice). That appears to have been the success of Fellowship Memphis:

Our church began as a dream in the summer of 2003. God drew together people from within Memphis and from around the country to pursue a new expression of a Biblical functioning community in the city of Memphis. The dream was a church where people from all walks of life and all seasons of life could grasp the gospel at a transformational level and could live out the gospel for the welfare of the city and God's fame among the nations. That core group begged God to gather a group that looked like Memphis with her beautiful and powerful racial, socio-economic and generational diversity (fellowshipmemphis.org).

On June 21, 2015, I attended Fellowship Memphis Colonial Outpost Church. As I drove up to the middle school, which houses the church, the parking lot was overflowing with cars. I got out of my car and made my way to the building. There were two greeters: a white woman and a black woman both excited to see me. I was handed a sermon outline and made my way inside. As I situated myself, I began to observe my surroundings. Seated to my right was an elderly white couple, to my left a black couple and their newborn child, a few seats in front of me sat an interracial middle-aged couple. The auditorium was visibly packed with people of various ages and races.

A week later on June 28, 2015, I attended Missio Dei Church. Both Missio Dei and Fellowship Memphis are located in zip code 38117. Never having driven in this particular neighborhood, I keenly observed my surroundings. The area was nice and I could not help but notice how incredibly green everyone's grass was, despite the blistering heat. Unlike Fellowship Memphis, parking at Missio Dei was no trouble. I could immediately tell that the congregational

size between the two churches starkly differed. Upon walking into the church, a white woman took notice of me. She directed me to a Sunday School Class and thus began my Missio Dei Sunday. Because Missio Dei is significantly smaller than Fellowship Memphis, people knew I was a visitor. They engaged me in pleasant small talk and then class began. Other than myself, I had only seen one black person in the whole church. Though this did not make me feel unwelcomed or uncomfortable, it was clear that I did not “belong.”

However on Sunday, July 5, 2015 when I visited Westhaven Community Church, I “belonged.” The scenic drive from Rhodes College to Westhaven was essentially nonexistent. Located a little past the airport, I noticed commercialization and run-down apartment complexes. As my GPS indicated to me that I had arrived to my destination, I thought to myself “Westhaven really needs to get a church sign.” But for my prior visit on June 23, I would not know that the building that houses Westhaven members is a church. Before even making my way into the church building, I was welcomed by a greeter who hugged me and directed me to the auditorium. As I scanned the auditorium for a place to sit, I realized that the church was solely filled with black people. I then noticed some women wearing all white and some men wearing all black with the priestly collar. There was a procession of sorts as these distinguished people made their way to the front of the auditorium, thus began my Westhaven Sunday.

Segregated by preference: a look at music

For evangelical Christians worship is used synonymously as both a time and an attitude. Sunday morning worship encompasses a variety of practices and rituals. The common answers given when asked, “What goes on during Sunday morning worship?” were “prayer time, scripture reading, music, offering, communion and the message.” Though these practices and rituals are given a generic name, they look very different at each respective church. This is

because of preference. To give something preference over something else is to have a greater liking for one alternative over the other. Because of varying cultural backgrounds, blacks and whites might not enjoy the same kind of worship (Emerson, Smith 132). People are comfortable with different worship styles, they want to be with familiar people, and they have different expectations about congregations.

Drum set, key board, saxophone, electric and bass guitar topped by a praise team makes up the essentials for Sunday morning music at Fellowship Memphis. Pastor Josh Weiss, a residency pastor for Fellowship Memphis, shared about the immense intentionality required to prepare for Sunday morning. He states that when it comes to music, “Everyone is going to be a little uncomfortable.” In one service alone, one notices a diverse mixture of song choice with genres ranging from gospel to folk, folk to liturgical, and liturgical to contemporary rock. Such intentionality is necessary to maintain a diverse congregation. In their book *Divided by Faith*, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith call this pluralism a “religious marketplace” (138). In order to stay as diverse as it would like, Fellowship Memphis (the supplier) must meet all or close to all the needs of its congregation (the consumers). Pastor Josh states, “We [the pastoral staff] talk about this [the song selections] making people uncomfortable, but we like it that way.” Pastor Josh’s statement reveals that there are well-intentioned evangelicals at majority-white and majority-black churches, but because of their unintentionality in something as basic as song selection, their congregations remain all white and all black.

Fifteen minutes down the road from Fellowship Memphis Colonial Outpost Church, we find ourselves at Missio Dei Church. Prior to attending service on June 28, I visited the church website to see what music was like for them.

We seek to create deep, Christ-exalting, worship through music. Our band attempts to bring in diverse elements of rock, folk, bluegrass, and other styles, while leading the church in songs that cover the full range of emotion from sorrow to joy, and to cover the full truth of Jesus' gospel from songs, hymns, and spiritual songs that are classic and modern. It is a rich and refreshing time that prepares us to hear and worship God through his word (missiodeimemphis.org)

As I stood in attendance that Sunday morning, I observed subliminal things that were targeted to assist the white evangelical worship experience. My first observation was that the worship atmosphere was lax. The energy in the room was controlled. The church band, which consisted of three white males, made its way to the front. I am in no position to evaluate whether or not these men had a "heart of worship", but based on their outward cues I did not feel compelled to enter into expressional worship. Seldom did I observe raised hands or hear shouts of praise. This stillness, however, allowed me to focus on the lyrics I was singing. I was able to give meaning to and ponder upon the words I sang.

Unlike the more restrained musical styles preferred at Missio Dei, the musical preferences at Pentecostal churches like Westhaven encourage the abandon that typifies the Holy Spirit. As COGIC Pastor Tinnon states, regarding black evangelical churches in general, "People have a greater sense of freedom. The Holy Spirit moves in a tangible way such that people pray, sing, and worship in complete abandon." Though we spoke of this jokingly, Pastor Tinnon stated that whenever a fellow black brother or sister in Christ sings or prays he often thinks, "Come on with it." This due to the fact that for the black evangelical experience, time is of little concern. I was able to experience this first hand at Westhaven Community Church. Thirty minutes were spent in invocation prayer and song where the Holy Spirit was welcomed into the space and time

of worship. By use of the song “Yes, Lord” the congregation acknowledged who God was and their need for him during this time of worship. Following invocation worship came worship lead by the choir and band. The choir consisted of four black women and the band was two black men who played the drums and keyboard. Unlike Fellowship Memphis and Missio Dei there was no display of the lyrics to the songs, though this did not stop the congregation from singing. The songs sang were simplistic, making them easy to learn. Many took on the form of call and response with repeated lyrics. The freedom of expression was evident as some stood, some sat, some clapped, some raised hands, some shouted “Amen” and others like me simply tapped their feet and observed the Sunday morning gospel worship.

As I juxtapose Missio Dei’s aim of worship, previously outlined, and my experience at Westhaven, I see that there are preferential differences in the levels of charisma found in music. Such preferences, the fact that Missio Dei’s congregation *chooses* to worship to folk and Westhaven *chooses* to worship to gospel, shows that musical preferences have racial bias. The lyrics that are integrated to each respective genre of music adheres to the evangelical worldview, therefore any issues of doctrine are nontrivial. The only issue at stake is preference.

The culprits: religious meaning and belonging

To the extent that people can choose, they choose to be with people like themselves. Evangelicalism has unwittingly contributed to, supported, and used arrangements and methods that propel congregational racial separation (Emerson, Smith 136). In their book *Divided by Faith*, Emerson and Smith state, “it is a basic sociological principle that the human drives for meaning and belonging are realized through interaction with others, primarily in social groups” (142). Such social groups provide people with their moral orientations. The very function of

religion is to serve as a central source of morally collective identities that provide people with meaning and belonging.

However, the quest for individual meaning and belonging undermines the evangelical Christian witness. Christians labor under the burden of a great historical contradiction: *that it is possible to be reconciled to God without being reconciled to your neighbor* (Perkins, Rice 10). Because there is no existing standard to help us measure how reconciled a congregation is to God and more specifically to others, we will instead use the word “integrated” as a proxy for the notion of reconciliation among people. It is however paramount to note that integration and reconciliation are not the same thing (Perkins, Rice). “Integration is a political and social concept. [Memphis] may be more integrated, but it is far from being reconciled. Reconciliation is a deeply spiritual concept and must be approached spiritually” (Perkins, Rice 18).

An “engaged orthodoxy”: A quick look at the Charleston church shooting

Surely, by this point it has been established that religion and more specifically Memphis evangelical churches are reflections of their surrounding culture. The church finds itself responding or reacting to social and political issues. When asked how he chooses his sermon messages, Pastor Wesson of Westhaven Community Church said, “It is a prayerful decision as well as seeing what is going on in the news and our community.”

Nearly a week before I met with Pastor Wesson, nine black members of Emmanuel African Episcopal Church, located in Charleston, South Carolina, were shot and killed. This shooting occurred on the evening of June 17, 2015. For nearly an hour, Dylann Roof, a twenty-one year old white male, sat in on Emmanuel’s Bible study time. One can imagine that the congregation welcomed him and saw him as no threat at all. Roof abused the hospitality of this

black evangelical congregation and brought nine innocent people's lives to a tragic halt. Such events as the Charleston church shooting are the types of news worthy issues that Pastor Wesson would address in a sermon. Adhering to the evangelical notion of an engaged orthodoxy, every church I visited addressed this attack, though the attitudes and stance differed from one congregation to the next.

At Fellowship Memphis, a picture of each of the nine people shot and killed was shown. The congregation was encouraged to pause and pray for the family members to take courage during this time of loss. There was no mention of Roof being a white male shooting nine black people. However, the pastoral staff used this as an opportunity to remind its congregation of the dream on which the church was built:

We dream, even to the point of tears, to provide a medicating balm to the "black eye" of Memphis. From slavery to the assassination of Dr. King and beyond, Memphis has garnered the unfortunate reputation of racism. By standing on the authority of the Bible, and modeling diversity within our walls, we long to be a model to Memphians, the Mid-South and the world of diversity, racial reconciliation and racial harmony. To a world that says blacks and whites worshipping and doing life together in Memphis could never happen, we dream, labor and sacrifice all that we are by the power of the Holy Spirit, and the authority of the blood of Jesus to say, "Yes it can! Yes it will!"
(fellowshipmemphis.org).

On Tuesday of the same week, I attended a prayer time and Bible study at Westhaven Community Church. As we studied Numbers 35:6-33, which discusses cities of refuge for those who have committed murder, the Charleston shooting incident was brought to light. At first, the

incident was being spoken of vaguely. Members mentioned that it was a shame, a great tragedy that “something like this” would happen in 2015. At this point, there was no mention of race and I assumed the issue had been addressed in its entirety. Then, a woman interjected, “Did you all hear how the police got that boy some Burger King?” Immediately gasps, sighs, and rolling of the eyes ensued. Someone shouted, “It’s because he’s white! Had it been one of us and he would have had his spine cracked and been shot up.” The conversation quickly escalated to matters pertaining to capital punishment. Pastor Wesson then chimed in, “Someone needs to share the gospel with that boy and then kill him for the wrong he has committed.”

At Missio Dei Church, the following Sunday, conversation about the church shooting was minimal. Perhaps this had to do with the fact that it had taken place twelve days prior and had quickly been forgotten; nevertheless, I did note that the shooting was alluded to as “what happened in Charleston.” Like Fellowship Memphis, no explicit mention of race was made. Missio Dei quickly washed its hands of this topic, as if the shootings had not happened.

It is fair to say that we, and perhaps more specifically segregated evangelical churches, are suffering from “race fatigue” (Perkins, Rice). As much as white evangelicals would like to distance themselves from the issue of race and live in a color-blind utopia, the fact remains that Christ sees color (Fellowship Memphis). The apostle John gives us an insight on what heaven is to be like in Revelation 7:9. He says, “After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.” The evangelical worldview attests that heaven is a multi-racial place. If

evangelicals are to uphold such a worldview, they ought to be working toward multi-racial churches.

Segregated by preference: preaching style

The job of those in pastoral positions is to present the gospel in such a way that is both biblically sound and contemporarily relevant. Pastors approach this assignment in differing ways, thus the various preaching styles we see in evangelical churches. As we begin to evaluate preaching style, let us consider the pastor's cadence and intonation of voice as well as the presentation and length of the message.

When I attended Fellowship Memphis on June 21, Pastor Josh Weiss was preaching. He began the message by sharing an anecdote that paralleled God to an artist and a person to broken pieces of shard. He talked about the artist taking those broken pieces and making it into a beautiful mosaic, a picture or pattern produced by arranging together broken pieces of hard material. This tactic of beginning a sermon is not only captivating and contemporarily relevant but it also represents the gospel well. Pastor Josh kept the sermon within a good period, not exceeding forty minutes. He very tactfully varied his cadence and intonation drawing the congregation in at points that required them to be introspective. He created a worship space in which the congregation could freely say "amen" or grunt in approval.

At Missio Dei Church, the atmosphere was more or less similar. Pastor Shaun Payne led his congregation through the reading of James 3, which discusses the killing and life bringing power of the tongue. Unlike Pastor Josh, Pastor Shaun's point of departure was the reading of James 3 in its entirety. He then took each verse one by one and coupled it with commentary. The

evangelical's practice of an engaged orthodoxy was easily seen throughout Pastor Shaun's sermon as June 28 was the Sunday following the Supreme Court's decision to legalize homosexual marriage nationwide. Pastor Shaun was admonishing the reaction of the church at large and exhorting the congregation of Missio Dei to first conduct an inventory of self and then to speak the truth in love. He desires that the conclusion of worship will compel the congregation to "reorient their entire life to God, remembering the gospel, living in community with one another, and sent on mission. That they will see that their life in every part is being used by Jesus to make him known and his kingdom visible as they love Jesus and others more than their own life."

Pastor Wesson would probably agree with Pastor Shaun's desire for his congregation, but once more, the road taken to achieve the desire differs by congregation. On July 5 at Westhaven the message came from 2 Timothy 2:1-6. Here Paul is writing to his spiritual son, Timothy. Paul is exhorting Timothy as a means for Timothy to begin his ministry. Like Pastor Shaun, Pastor Wesson read the section in its entirety and then took it verse by verse with commentary. However, as I listened I first realized that unlike Pastor Josh and Pastor Shaun, Pastor Wesson spoke very slowly. He would often repeat himself until he got a response from the congregation. This technique, "call and response", is a central component of Black preaching (Raboteau 236-237). The congregational participation is so important that many preachers subconsciously pause to leave room for the congregation to respond. At Westhaven, everything is a dialogue, or attempts to be. The dialogue is initiated from the pulpit and continues with the congregation. I said that preaching must be contemporarily relevant. The anecdotes used to create such relevance can reveal the culture of the people present. Whereas the anecdotes used by Pastor Josh and Pastor Shaun were allegorical or personal, the ones used by Pastor Wesson were hypothetical

and caveats. Because Pastor Wesson openly desired congregational interaction, people freely shouted “Amen”, “Praise God”, and “Yes Lord.” In Fact, Pastor Wesson used all three phrases as fillers whenever he was thinking about what to say next. Pastor Wesson cultivates an interactive preaching environment where affirmation of God and self are key.

Segregated by preference: church aesthetics

In their book *United by Faith*, the authors talk about how the worship styles of multi-racial churches tend to include the cultural elements of more than one racial group (DeYoung, Emerson, Yancey, and Kim 176). They say that worship style is an important way to symbolize to visitors acceptance of other races. An inclusive worship style, in the facet of church aesthetics, communicates to visitors of different races that both they and their cultures are respected (176). When discussing aesthetics in a religious realm we often think of representations of the Christ. Such representations ascribe a racial identity to the Christ figure, which is usually indicative of the dominant congregational race (Blum, Harvey). However, no such representation was seen in any of the three churches.

Because Fellowship Memphis meets in Colonial Middle School, it is modestly decorated. The life size cross on the stage is the extent of their decorating efforts. This then left me to observe the announcement slides and their website. Bright colors, images of the Memphis skyline, and panorama pictures of Memphis are readily used within the literature of Fellowship Memphis. It seems that there is an intentional effort being put in creating a connection between the city and the congregation.

Missio Dei is similar too in its awareness of being situated in Memphis. There is great emphasis in “missional communities.” Because Missio Dei strives to actively, engage their Christian orthodoxy in everyday life, their décor took mundane everyday things and put a Christian spin on it. There was an announcement slide with a picture of a coffee mug in a coffee shop. The camera focused in on the mug, blurring all else. Written below the mug was the phrase “Everyday Christianity.” At face value, this slide means little to nothing. However, it invokes a sense of meaning and belonging to a specific demographic. A demographic that regularly frequents coffee shops, a demographic that considers gathering around a cup of coffee as a sign of comradery and intimacy.

When noting my first impressions at Westhaven, I noticed a delineation between the sacred and the profane. This delineation is seen in church attire that also functions as an example of church aesthetics. Unlike Fellowship Memphis and Missio Dei, Westhaven makes a clear distinction of hierarchy amongst their church body. To those women who have been deemed as “honorable mothers”, they wear all white. Four of them, including Dr. Vivian Wesson, who is affectionately called “Mother” as she serves as the superintendent of women, sit on the stage. Three deacons, who wear all black and a priestly white collar, sit adjacent to the mothers on the stage. Though Fellowship Memphis and Missio Dei also include communion as part of their Sunday worship, Westhaven puts a particular emphasis on it. There is a ritualistic procession where the deacons, the mothers, and Pastor Wesson prepare the table and then invite the congregation to join in. It seems as if great aesthetic attention has been given to this liturgical practice.

Talking about segregated congregations

Throughout their interviews on the issue of evangelical religion and the problem of race in America, Emerson and Smith were able to conclude that the contemporary white evangelical does not want a race problem. They want to see people get along, and want people to have equal opportunity. They see these as essential to living out their faith. In short, they yearn for color-blind people (89). In my personal interviews of those in pastoral positions, it became clear that white evangelicals, regardless of whether or not they worshipped at a majority-white church or multi-racial church, avoided the topic of race. However, when questions pertaining to race were brought up each white evangelical was armed with a response. Their responses often aligned to what Emerson and Smith called “the miracle motif.” The evangelical Protestant faith is based on interpersonal relationships. We see this in their emphasis on having a relationship with the triune God and subsequently other people. White evangelicals think that by building meaningful relationships with those outside their racial group, societal segregation as well as congregational segregation will eventually (“miraculously”) ameliorate itself.

Perhaps it seems that I am callous in my evaluation of white evangelicals, maybe even blaming them for congregational segregation in Memphis and America at large. However, the evidence shows that blacks have tried integrating with whites a number of times within various institutions and facets. Whites, for the most part, have been an unwilling partner (Perkins, Rice 32). Unwillingness was once the collective white evangelical narrative, which is why in their desire to re-write their story, white evangelicals want to do without color (race) all together and press on. Societal white guilt has permeated into the realm of evangelicalism and has undoubtedly weakened white’s witness to the black community.

As I asked her questions about segregation in Memphis and Memphis evangelical congregations, Sister Tinnon, Pastor Tinnon's wife, said, "The scars from the past are engraved in all our [blacks and whites] hearts and minds. They [blacks and whites] have to be reconciled." Writing as adherents in their book *More than Equals*, Spencer Perkins (a black evangelical) and Chris Rice (a white evangelical); conclude that the idea of racial reconciliation, given all their [black people's] problems, is low on the priority list (67). If they are to be honest, black evangelicals have reached a place of contentment, in what pertains to congregational separateness, which white evangelicals have yet to reach; "Black people are going to worship at black churches and white people are going to worship at white churches", said Pastor Wesson.

Treating the opening quotes

In 1963, fifty-two years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr stated, "It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning." I cannot help but think that Dr. King was addressing more than just segregated church buildings. In our interview, Pastor Josh of Fellowship Memphis made a keen distinction. He said, "Institutions are integrated, people are reconciled." This is of key importance when treating congregational segregation. Because of the ministry of reconciliation, which teaches that Christians are reconciled to God, first, and to others, second, Christians must be reconciled one to another before churches can become integrated. The ministry of reconciliation is, after all, the overarching message of Christianity (Emerson, Smith 54).

When I asked Pastor Josh, what his thoughts were in regards to Dr. King's statement he said, "It is just a shame, it is just sad, but it does not get me all fired up. Each church has to do whatever they think is right." If I am to be honest, I was a bit disappointed with Pastor Josh's response. I suppose I wanted a more emotive response that demanded for the revitalization of the

evangelical church to become multi-racial. Desiring a black pastoral perspective from this multi-racial church, I interviewed Pastor Russell McCutcheon. Pastor Russell is the lead pastor of Fellowship Memphis East Outpost. Having been raised in a majority-black church and now pastoring a multi-racial church, his response was one I could align myself with. Upon reading Dr. King's statement to Pastor Russell he responded, "It's true and it's sad." Pastor Russell stated that he respected the work that goes on in homogeneous churches. He stated that the forces keeping these churches homogeneous are too great. If the church is to become multi-racial, then we must start from scratch. Pastor Russell began to speak to me about the importance of church planters. He stated that because minority-cultures are replicating rapidly, multi-racial churches will soon become "the norm." This is the goal.

Pastor Shaun of Missio Dei Church also agreed that Dr. King's statement holds true in Memphis and America at large. In fact, he provided me reasons for why congregational segregation continues to be an ailment that plagues Christian churches. "Comfort, apathy, not caring, and mediocrity allow Dr. King's statement to [still] be true." Thus as a way to actively combat indifference amongst his congregation, Pastor Shaun invited mostly black pastors in the city who he knew "were amazing men to come and teach the church to see the need for diversity and the love Jesus has for all people." During the months of February and March, Pastor Shaun began a sermon series entitled "Elephant in the city: the white silence toward the black experience."

On the other hand, Pastor Wesson of Westhaven Community Church and Pastor Tinnon of a home COGIC church have made little efforts to desegregate or simply educate their congregations on the white evangelical experience. In fact, Pastor Tinnon stated that "No, it is not appalling" that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning remains the most segregated hour in

Christian America. He stated that you have to look at the historical context in which Dr. King made that statement. According to Pastor Tinnon and his wife, America has come a long way from Dr. King's statement. The Tinnons mentioned that history, circumstance, and preference attract similar people to similar looking congregations. They stated that so long as one is not harboring hatred in their heart towards another race, it is okay that congregations are homogeneous.

Conclusion

Memphis evangelical churches are products of racially separate identities and meanings, thus congregational segregation (Emerson, Smith 158). We learned that religious identity and meaning are constructed within the realms of circumstance and preference. While the ministry of reconciliation makes the appeal for reconciled evangelicals and multi-racial evangelical congregations, the fact remains that the hearts and attitudes of evangelical Memphians cannot be legislated. Memphis evangelicalism and American Christianity at large has embraced separation, if not in theory than most definitely in practice (Perkins, Rice 30).

Regardless of the context in which Dr. King uttered the renowned statement, "It is appalling that the most segregated hour in Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning" and regardless of the fact that America has come a long way from 1963; evangelicals cannot be content knowing that an overwhelming number of their churches remain homogeneous. A gospel that reconciles people only to God and not to each other cannot be the true gospel of Jesus Christ (Perkins, Rice 48).

There are many who would argue that my push for multi-racial evangelical churches would strip blacks of their sole autonomous institution. In the book *United by Faith*, the authors

discuss how majority-black churches often overcompensate and construct hierarchies of power within themselves. I see this as a form of self-preservation. For hundreds of years whites in this country have gravely oppressed blacks. Perhaps it is insensitive of me to ask the black church to put it all behind and start anew, however that is not what I am asking.

What I am asking is for both white and black evangelical churches to align themselves to the gospel they claim to center their lives upon. I have no secret formula to undue hundreds of years of systemic racism, however I believe in the ministry of reconciliation. Evangelicals must conduct an inventory of their heart; this is where reconciliation and integration begin. Pastor Russell spoke words of truth that the forces keeping congregations homogeneous are great; however, the city of Memphis desperately needs an example of an integrated institution with reconciled people, what better institution than the church?

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