



‘Confess these sins’: white evangelical churches reflect on racism

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Staff writers

By early June, Taylor Rutland was certain God wanted him to preach about racism. What he didn't know was how his congregation would react.

Mr. Rutland pastors First Baptist Church of Dothan, Alabama, just above the Florida border. On June 7, after delivering his first sermon on racism as a sin, Mr. Rutland says he felt comforted to hear congregants tell him they wished he'd addressed it sooner.

“We have a history of [racism],” he says. “And so we've got to go before the Lord and confess these sins and repent of them in order to move forward.”

But moving forward may be a long, narrow road. First Baptist, like many mostly white evangelical churches nationwide, is

now addressing issues related to race for the first time. Motivated by the Black Lives Matter movement, faith groups from the Southern Baptist Convention to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops have acknowledged that systemic racism remains today, and that churches can't ignore it. Their challenge now, experts say, is that they've historically done just that.

American churches have long been some

WHY WE WROTE THIS

As discussions begin in settings where they've long been avoided, Black religious leaders are calling for a recognition of the past and sustained effort into the future.

(See related cover story on page 22.)

of the country's most racially divisive institutions, historians say – and denominations remain largely segregated. (They have also been a frequent setting for race-motivated violence.) As many white congregations now call for reform, many church leaders say real change demands much more than a sermon, state a conference.

“Even as Christian leaders and institutions make statements and make commitments to racial justice in the future, few are taking a critical look at their history,” says Jemar Tisby, a historian and president of The Witness, a Black Christian collective. “For us, racial justice is an ongoing pursuit.”

To build a lasting commitment to faith-based racial justice, white churches need



FOUNDED IN 1776: The Rev. Reginald Davis stands in the First Baptist Church in Williamsburg, Virginia, Dec. 15, 2015. When “the cameras are not on us ... if we don't ... correct the systemic problems, we'll come right back to where we were before,” he says.

STEVE HELBER



understand their past. That past is one of silence, segregation, and complicity, says Mr. Tisby.

In early America, racism existed in the church just as it did in the rest of society, says Michael Emerson, head of sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a leading expert on race and religion. For a long time, white Americans debated whether Black Americans could be Christian. Even after the Civil War, says Professor Emerson, white churches still refused to integrate – entrenching a spiritual divide that remains today.

“We’ve had 160-plus years of separate cultures forming, with different authors people read, different interpretations of the Bible, different music that’s listened to, and I think most fundamentally completely different lived realities.”

Such a long rupture requires a bridging of these institutions, whose differences saturate to their very theology. “Christianity in the United States has been coded as white, which means that any attempt to identify whiteness and white supremacy in it is taken as an attack on the faith,” says Mr. Tisby.

America’s distinct blend of white supremacy and Christianity, he says, existed when white churches used the Bible to defend slavery, when the Ku Klux Klan burned crosses during Jim Crow, when pastors remained silent during the civil rights era, and now, when many white churches avoid addressing racism today.

Consistency of activism

Mr. Rutland says he understands why many pastors – particularly those in the South – are so reluctant to preach on issues of racial justice. No congregant wants to be called a racist, he says, and no one wants sermons to get too political.

Yet the evangelical refrain that politics should be kept from the pulpit can be rather hypocritical, given how active they are on other social issues, such as abortion and LGBTQ rights, says Russell Moore, president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission at the Southern Baptist Convention.

The question for Evangelicals – and white churches more broadly – says Mr. Moore, is about consistency in activism. “When the subject is race, there’s a temptation for white Christians to suddenly become mute or very ambiguous,” he says. “That was the case in 1963. That’s the case



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TASK FOR CHURCHES: A third-generation pastor, the Rev. Dr. Frederick Douglass Haynes III, of Friendship-West Baptist Church in Dallas, says it’s critical to address systemic and structural racism.

in many contexts in 2020.”

Meanwhile, promoting racial equity has long been one of the key roles of the Black church, which has historically connected social and spiritual liberation, says Anthea Butler, a professor of religious studies at the University of Pennsylvania. To join that movement in earnest, she says, white churches will need to dismantle the structural racism that benefits them – systems they helped create.

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– Jemar Tisby, historian

As always, change comes at a cost, says the Rev. Dr. Frederick Douglass Haynes III of Friendship-West Baptist Church in Dallas. But accepting that cost to uplift the most vulnerable, he says, is the gift of religion. The church needs the “moral courage” to promote a more equal future and the humility to admit failures of the past.

He remembers the heartbreak of addressing his church in 1991 after the beating of Rodney King. It was a similar feeling when he spoke on the death of George Floyd this year. Both times, he took that pain and laid it before his congregation. In

his opinion, advocating racial justice is the responsibility of every church – including white evangelicals, who may at first need to listen and learn.

“If you’ve been quiet for 400-plus years and all of a sudden you say something for a week – I’m sorry, that’s not enough.”

After the spotlight

Mr. Rutland agrees. Still, he admits that had this summer’s protests not come, he doesn’t know when he would have first preached on racism. “We should have responded to this hundreds of years ago, and we didn’t,” he says. “We can’t just act like because I preached one sermon on racism we’ve

arrived.”

But one sermon can matter. At least Mr. Rutland’s did to Abby Maddox, a congregant at First Baptist for most of her life. “I just wanted to stand up and cheer,” she says. “We’re called to mourn with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice. And we’ve got a whole group of people who are mourning right now.”

She’s been reading books on race theory, attending a discussion group with friends, and having hard conversations with her children and family. People need to talk about the issue to make it better, she says, but making it better requires more than talking.

In the eyes of Mr. Tisby, change comes from those who adopt social justice as a way of life. The current level of activism around racial justice is unsustainable, he says. So, when it wanes, who will be left?

That’s a question the Rev. Reginald Davis, of First Baptist Church in Williamsburg, Virginia, also has in mind. Founded in 1776 by a group of enslaved people, he says, First Baptist is one of the oldest Black churches in the nation. “Black Americans, we have fought about this. We have preached about this. We have marched about this. We’ve been jailed about it. We have written about it. And we died for it,” says Mr. Davis. “But it has not been solved because enough white Americans have not gotten involved.”

For the first time, he now sees a large number of white Americans getting involved. “When the media walks away, the cameras are not on us, the interviews are gone, if we don’t engage the system to correct the systemic problems,” he says, “we’ll come right back to where we were before.”



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"First the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear."

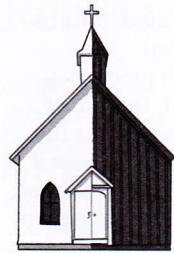
Erasing the color line in churches

In March, church leaders in the United States were driven from their pulpits by a pandemic. By June, they were driven to the streets to address the country's racial reckoning. The two crises have brought new urgency to healing deep divisions in the American Christian family, starting with racism.

Across the country, clergy of all demographics have joined marches to reform police departments and bring equity to minorities. That solidarity could be more than temporary optics.

THE MONITOR'S VIEW

Many clergy have held video dialogues with their congregations to explore perspectives on racism. That's a start to an empathy that could transcend intolerance and indifference.



A big test for religious leaders comes when the pandemic ends and the pews are filled again. That is when largely white churches must confront hard questions of social justice. A sustained dialogue with mainly Black churches should begin.

Black ministers have long been weary of needing to tiptoe around questions with white colleagues about the use of Christian theology to condone or ignore social and economic inequality. Among Protestant Christians, 2 in 5 white adherents say the U.S. has a race problem while 4 out of 5 Black churchgoers say racism is a problem, according to a poll released in June by the Barna Group and the Racial Justice and Unity Center.

Significantly, 61% of white Christians say racism stems from the beliefs and prejudices of individuals, while 67% of Black Christians say racial discrimination is built into society and its public and private institutions. In the poll's look at only "active" Christians, twice as many Black respondents say they

are motivated to address racial injustice as are white participants.

The poll was conducted in 2019, six years into the Black Lives Matter era but well before the current moment. Initial polling since the police killing of George Floyd shows that public concern about racism, particularly among white people, is rising. The support that President Donald Trump has from many white evangelicals, however, has made Black Christians deeply skeptical of that group's concerns about racism. Black ministers lament that, from seminaries to the highest councils of their faith, their interpretation of Christian theology is often dismissed.

The Rev. Dr. Nicole Martin, executive director of healing and trauma at the American

Bible Society, says many white Christians are unconvinced that racism is a religious question. Theology, she argues, has gotten in the way. Black and white Christians approach the Scriptures from divergent experiences and interests shaped by America's troubled racial history. Yet it is in that very divide that unity and healing are possible. "There are all these little nuances in the way that we think about theology," she said at a Barna Group webinar. "Now is the time to break up some of that ... and let the Bible speak."

The shock waves of racial injustice coursing through societies around the world have opened a new opportunity for Christians to unify in the U.S. That starts with seeing the sacred texts they share as resources of healing rather than the basis for division. ■

Neighborly US-Latin America ties

Even before the coronavirus crisis, Latin America had the world's slowest economic growth. Now it is also an epicenter for new COVID-19 cases. The combination is driving the region into recession. Mexico's economy, for example, is expected to dip by about 20% this year. No wonder most of the migrants lately crossing the southwest U.S. border have been single Mexican men seeking work.

THE MONITOR'S VIEW

Washington's treatment of border crossers is often seen as a test of how it views Latin America. Under President Donald Trump, the treatment has been strict, even harsh at times, in denying access. After a tsunami of migrants last year – mainly Central American families – Mr. Trump's new policy of pushing migrants back has cut illegal crossings by nearly half. Yet many economists predict ever larger waves as Latin America's recession deepens. The new

border policies, including more fencing, may not be enough. The time could be ripe for the U.S. and Latin America to again be more neighborly.

One inkling that this idea has taken hold is the administration's decision in late June to provide \$252 million in additional aid to

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The U.S. also supports \$5.2 billion

in emergency aid to Latin America from the International Monetary Fund. Another focus that addresses root causes is the July 1 launch of the new North American trade accord – the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement.

The borderless impact of the pandemic is forcing a rethink of the physical and mental borders between the U.S. and Latin America. If a new wave of migration emerges, the two will need more cooperation. Being secure requires being neighborly. ■