Is the Multiracial Congregation an Answer to the Problem of Race? Comparative Perspectives from South Africa and the USA

Gladys Ganiel
Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin, 683 Antrim Road, Belfast, Northern Ireland, BT15 4EG, United Kingdom
gganiel@tcd.ie

Abstract
This paper uses a comparative perspective to analyze how multiracial congregations may contribute to racial reconciliation in South Africa. Drawing on the large-scale study of multiracial congregations in the USA by Emerson et al., it examines how they help transform antagonistic identities and make religious contributions to wider reconciliation processes. It compares the American research to an ethnographic study of a congregation in Cape Town, identifying cross-national patterns and South African distinctives, such as discourses about restitution, AIDS, inequality and women. The extent that multiracial congregations can contribute to reconciliation in South Africa is linked to the content of their worship and discourses, but especially to their ability to dismantle racially aligned power structures.

Keywords
religion, race, multiracial congregations, identity, reconciliation, South Africa

Introduction
A team of American sociologists have recently completed a landmark research project on multiracial Christian congregations, which has raised questions about the impact of such organizations in the wider American society, and in other social, political and cultural contexts. This project, headed by Michael Emerson, built on earlier research on multiracial congregations but was distinctive for its wide scope, national scale and blending of qualitative and quantitative methods. This article draws on that research to raise questions about the importance of the study of multiracial congregations in general, arguing that comparative case studies can raise further issues about such congregations and their potential to contribute to social transformation.
Accordingly, this article presents evidence from the American research that multiracial congregations have contributed to the construction of inclusive identities, and that these congregations may make distinctively religious contributions to wider social reconciliation. It uses a case study of Jubilee Community Church in Cape Town to translate those issues into a South African context. It identifies cross-national patterns, presenting evidence for identity change amongst the congregation. It also highlights South African distinctives, such as discourses about restitution, AIDS, inequality and women. Then, it considers the question of whether or to what extent reconciliation in the churches is a matter of public concern in South Africa, arguing that the extent that multiracial congregations can contribute to reconciliation is linked to the content of their worship and discourses; and especially to their ability to dismantle racially aligned power structures. The processes under way at Jubilee indicate that this congregation has the potential to move beyond what Edgell Becker (1998) has called ‘personalism’, a form of social engagement that recognizes socio-political problems but does not engage with them at a socio-structural level. It also presents evidence of sociological processes within the congregation that may inhibit this. In this case, research from South Africa highlights the importance of continuing to keep socio-structural issues at the forefront, pointing to how this may be possible in the South African and other contexts.

**Emerging Research on Multiracial Congregations in the United States**

It is a cliché that 11 o’clock on a Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in the United States. Most religious institutions in the country continue to be segregated, reflecting a long history in which segregation was reinforced by violence and by law. Emerson and Woo (2006) estimate that just seven per cent of congregations in the US are mixed to the extent that ‘no one racial group is 80 per cent or more of the people’ (36). The reasons behind this are complex, including history, geography and worship styles. Emerson and Smith (2000) stated the problem in their pioneering work, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. This wide-ranging study focused on white evangelical Protestantism, which is one of the most socially significant forms of religion in the US. Evangelicalism is an especially strong form of religion (Noll 2001, Smith 1998), which originated in North Atlantic revival movements in the 1740s. Evangelicals are generally characterized by four features: an emphasis on conversion or the need to be ‘born again’, a high regard for the Bible, a belief that Christ’s death and resurrection were historical events necessary for salvation, and an emphasis on personal evangelism or
social action (Bebbington 1989). As Emerson and Smith pointed out, most African-American Christians share these four characteristics but diverge greatly from white evangelicals on which social issues they believe are most important (see also Alumkal 2004, Edgell Becker 1998).

Emerson’s broader project on multiracial congregations grew out of this initial study with Smith, and the results of the research have been published in four significant books (DeYoung et al. 2003, Yancey 2003, Christerson, Edwards and Emerson 2005, Emerson and Woo 2006). These authors argue that multiracial congregations can be a means of breaking down the inequalities that Emerson and Smith identified with the white evangelical churches. The studies demonstrate that multiracial congregations are important sociologically in two broad ways: they have been vehicles for the transformation of individual identities; and their contributions to social reconciliation are potentially more powerful because of their distinctively religious flavour.

The Transformation of Identities

One of the central arguments of Emerson and Woo’s People of the Dream is that people who constitute multiracial congregations experience significant transformations of identity, becoming what Emerson calls ‘Sixth Americans’. Emerson coined the term Sixth Americans as an addition to Hollinger’s five ‘melting pots’ of ‘racial’ groups in the US: Indian/Native American, African American/Black, European American/White, Hispanic/Latino and Asian American/Asian (in Emerson and Woo 2006: 99). Most Americans, even if they live in a geographical region that is racially diverse, live most of their lives and have most of their significant relationships with people from the same racial group. In contrast, Emerson writes of Sixth Americans:

Sixth Americans live in multiple melting pots simultaneously. Minorities among Americans to be sure, Sixth Americans live in a world of primary relationships and associations that are racially diverse…. It is a world where racially diverse others are present everyday, directly shaping the lives of Sixth Americans (2006: 99).

People of the Dream is based on an ethnographic study of Wilcrest Baptist Church in Houston, and Emerson presents evidence of how individuals within the congregation have been changed and become Sixth Americans by their interaction there. Similar changes also are documented in case studies of congregations in contexts such as a Protestant church in New York City, a Southern Baptist congregation in Los Angeles, a Catholic Church in Beaumont, Texas, a Methodist church in Minneapolis (DeYoung et al. 2003), and other evangelical churches in Los Angeles County, a Midwestern city and Houston
Studies by other researchers confirm these findings (Stanczak 2006, Howard Ecklund 2005).

However, one does not become a Sixth American simply by joining a multiracial congregation or living in a multiracial setting. Emerson et al. found that the way in which racial integration happens impacts on the extent that identities are transformed. Recognizing what DeYoung et al. called the different ‘types’ of multiracial congregation helps us to understand the relationship between organizational structures and the transformation of identities. They identified three types, considering factors such as organizational culture, the race of the leaders and the degree of social interaction across races. These are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Types of Multiracial Congregations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Assimilated multiracial congregation</th>
<th>Pluralist multiracial congregation</th>
<th>Integrated multiracial congregation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational culture</td>
<td>Reflects one dominant racial culture</td>
<td>Contains separate and distinct elements of all racial cultures represented in the congregation</td>
<td>Maintains aspects of separate cultures and also creates a new culture from the cultures in the congregation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race of leadership (lay or clergy)</td>
<td>Dominant race</td>
<td>Representative of the different races in the congregation</td>
<td>Representative of the different races in the congregation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of social interaction across races</td>
<td>Can be high or low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
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(Reproduced from DeYoung et al. 2003: 165)

For DeYoung et al., the ‘integrated’ congregation was the one in which transformation of identities was most likely to occur. In integrated congregations, no one culture or race is noticeably dominant; ‘members do things in a new way’ (169) rather than behaving in a way that is culturally comfortable for them. De Young et al. and Yancey (2003) also offered theological justifications for integrated congregations. The broad principle to be gleaned here is that
organizational structures matter in the process of identity transformation (see also Christerson and Emerson 2003, Emerson and Chai Kim 2003). This is significant sociologically because understanding how structures matter provides people with the opportunity to change those structures, opening them up so that further identity transformation may occur.

Further, Christerson et al. focused on how the relationship between numbers and power impacted on the transformation of identities. There are two significant points here that can be applied to other multiracial contexts. First, the group that has a numerical majority is most likely to misuse power. It is impossible to overstate this point, especially since majority groups often are not aware of the myriad ways in which they may do so. For example, in Messiah Fellowship in Los Angeles County, Filipinos were a numerical majority. Minority groups expressed frustration at being unable to break into the close Filipino social networks in the congregation. By way of contrast, Wilcrest is a white majority church and whites tend to have the most power and the tightest intra-race social networks (Christerson et al. 2005). This may seem like an obvious point, but given that whites usually hold the most power in American society, this is an important one. Whites are not inherently predisposed to abuse their power. The broad principle is that transformation of identities is more likely to occur when majority groups are aware of the ways in which they may misuse their power, and take steps to limit that misuse, such as including minorities in leadership structures.

Second, Christerson et al. found that even in situations where whites were a minority, their concerns were taken more seriously by the group in the majority. They reckoned that this may have reflected whites’ generally more powerful position in the wider society, including the idea that white culture may encourage people to mobilize to air their grievances, rather than to tolerate them. Whites also were more likely to leave a congregation if their needs were not met, taking advantage of their generally higher social status and mobility. This also is an important point, alerting us to how ‘external socioeconomic structures’ that favor one race can impact on congregational dynamics (161-162). The broad principle is that transformation of identities is more likely to occur when people from society’s dominant social group are aware of their privileged position and willing to compromise.

In sum, the research by Emerson and his team holds forth a tantalizing prospect—evidence for a new breed of Sixth Americans who transcend racial categories. By their very presence, they model social reconciliation amongst the country’s historically antagonistic racial groups. However, Sixth Americans do not just happen—organizational structures and power dynamics can inhibit the transformation of old racial identities.
Distinctive Religious Contributions to Social Reconciliation

Emerson and his team argue that multiracial congregations can make a distinctive contribution to racial reconciliation in the US precisely because of their transcendent, religious nature. This may be controversial sociologically, but it is not without empirical grounding. This grounding is based in the voluntary nature of congregations and other religious organizations (see also Edgell Becker 1998). Governments may enforce ‘affirmative action’ in some educational or occupational spheres, but not the religious. Change that takes place in voluntary, civil society organizations—whether religious or not—is therefore distinctive and important. But Emerson et al. contend that voluntary organizations with religious underpinnings may be more effective than their secular counterparts at contributing to the transformation of racial identities. This echoes earlier work by Glynn (1998), who claimed that the racial reconciliation movement amongst black and white evangelicals was succeeding where secular efforts were failing. Glynn put this down to three factors that distinguished the evangelicals’ approach: ‘(1) an explicitly religious or spiritual motivation; (2) a sense of sin; and (3) a belief in the efficacy of ritual and in the reality of divine intervention in human relationships and human affairs’ (838). Theological arguments for diversity and the positive experience of diverse worship environments contribute to reconciliation (Christerson et al. 2005: 181). For instance, Christerson et al. found that theological ‘color-blindness’, by which they mean a theology that says that all cultures/races are the ‘same’, leads to a reluctance to engage in dialogue and to the most powerful group imposing assimilation on others. By way of contrast, theological arguments for diversity that emphasize how different cultures reveal different aspects of God and his love open up dialogue, contributing to greater stability. The researchers associated with this project believe this is so important that a substantial portion of the books United by Faith and One Body, One Spirit are devoted to articulating theological arguments for diversity in congregations. Further, they cite evidence for the importance of ‘diverse worship environments’, which may include multilingual prayers, songs and other forms of culturally expressive worship. They also found that Americans who have belonged to a multiracial congregation do not want to go back to a racially homogenous congregation.

Three points from this broad argument must be emphasized. First, it is specific to the American context, which is highly religious by western standards and is predominantly Christian. Second, their conclusions are drawn largely from case studies of evangelical congregations which emphasize biblical teaching and tend to have flexible worship styles. This argument could not be transferred easily to a context in which religion, particularly Christianity, is
not important culturally. The focus on biblical teaching for justification appeals especially to evangelicals, given that they tend to regard the Bible as inspired and/or infallible; and the willingness to experiment with new worship styles and flexible liturgies has been a hallmark of evangelicalism since its inception. This argument might not apply, therefore, to religious traditions without such an approach to the Bible (or a holy book) and without flexible approaches to liturgy. Third, they argue that stable and (relatively) harmonious multiracial congregations do not make racial unity an end in itself—there must be a higher, overarching or transcendent goal. In the case of multiracial congregations, they purport to exist for the ‘glory of God’ or the ‘kingdom of God’, or something else with spiritual connotations. Stanczak (2006) also found this to be the case, reporting that the congregation he studied used ethnicity ‘strategically’ to advance its wider mission. This raises normative questions about whether or not congregations’ overarching goals are indeed worthy. In other words—does the end (racial harmony) justify the means (the promotion of a particular religious viewpoint or ideology)?

This dilemma is highlighted in the finding that religious discourses are so emotionally and morally charged that their use may make for fraught social interactions. Emerson and his team found examples of ‘religiously-charged ethnocentrism’, when people of a particular group identified one of their cultural traits with the way God means things to be (Christerson 2005: 181). For example, whites tended to equate being on time for religious meetings and sticking to a rigid timetable with showing respect for God. People from Latino or African American cultures tended to think that sticking to a rigid timetable squelched the work of the Holy Spirit. When arguments are framed in terms with such high stakes, conflict occurs. Religious organizations may be more open to such conflict than secular organizations, so people involved in them must be especially aware of the power and potential damage of their words.

In sum, religious contributions to social reconciliation amongst races in the US are a double-edged sword. Because they are so emotionally (and spiritually) charged, appealing to transcendence and even absolute truth, they can offer powerful justifications for unity in diversity. Inspiring multiracial worship promotes strong bonds amongst people of different races. However, if words are not chosen carefully they can contribute to further antagonism.

The South African Case Study: Jubilee Community Church, Cape Town

In *Against All Odds*, Christerson et al. called for further research to determine if their broad hypotheses generalize from American evangelical Protestantism
to other contexts. My case study of Jubilee Community Church in Cape Town revealed more parallels than divergences with the sociological processes that they identified in the US, indicating that some of these processes may indeed be generalized. Although my research was conducted from July to December 2005, after the main period of data collection for the studies of Emerson et al., I did not enter into the South African research with preconceived notions based on the American findings. For example, *Against All Odds* and *People of the Dream* were not available for me to read until after I had completed my fieldwork. So I did not enter into the research process with specific, detailed hypotheses; rather, I took an open and semi-structured approach. Beyond wanting to find out how Jubilee had become a multiracial church and what held it together, I did not have a rigid research agenda. I allowed participants to share with me the issues that they deemed most important (Becker 1998).

Jubilee was established as an almost entirely all-white charismatic congregation in 1983. Originally called Vineyard Fellowship, it later changed its name to Jubilee and moved its location around Cape Town’s white suburbs. In 2000 it settled in the racially mixed area called Observatory. Although Jubilee does not keep track of its members or those attending according to race, from my Sunday morning observations I estimate that about 45 percent of people in the congregation are white. The fieldwork was intensive, including semi-structured interviews with 14 men and 14 women associated with the congregation, and participant observation. Seven were staff (including four of the five elders), five attended other churches but participated in many of Jubilee’s activities, and four had left the congregation. The interview sample deliberately included people from diverse racial, national and socio-economic backgrounds. Participant activities included Sunday services, a ‘cell’ group (a weekly Bible study held in the home of a church member), and social ministries such as prison visitations, Sunshade (a weekly women’s group), a life skills course for ex-prisoners, and visiting church members in the townships. The research participants, especially the team of elders, were accommodating and agreed that the name of the congregation could be used in research publications, although the identities of individuals would be kept confidential. I have taken an interactive approach to the dissemination and publication of the research results. For instance, near the end of my time in Cape Town I presented my results informally to the elders and to my cell group, receiving valuable feedback in these cases. I also provided drafts of research papers to as many participants as possible before submitting them for publication, which allowed for further comment and discussion. Although I do not always agree with the objections (or praise) of the participants, I have endeavoured to represent their
views, believing that this provides a more accurate picture of the congregation and the complexity of the processes under way there.

Elsewhere, I have framed the results of that research in terms of identity change (Ganiel 2006) and institutional and discursive change (Ganiel 2007). As in the multiracial congregations in the US, there are two important sociological processes occurring at Jubilee: the transformation of individual identities; and distinctly religious contributions to social reconciliation. But the processes occurring at Jubilee are not simply carbon copies of those under way at multiracial churches in the US; rather, the research at Jubilee points to issues that are distinctive in the South African context: the importance of restitution; and addressing AIDS, inequality and women’s issues.

The Transformation of Identities

At Jubilee, I found evidence that people who are involved with the congregation have experienced significant transformations of identity. Although I did not devise a new designation for these people—such as Emerson’s Sixth Americans—I argue that they have begun to construct an inclusive, overarching identity that to some extent transcends South Africa’s old racial categories. In the ‘new’ sort of identity that is being constructed at Jubilee, people conceive of themselves first as Christians (brothers and sisters in Christ), while at the same time emphasizing the unique contributions that people from different racial or cultural groups make to the ‘kingdom of God’. Rather than assimilating to one race’s culture, people at Jubilee claim that they have unity in diversity. In numerous interviews, people told me how their attitudes about race had changed and said that they had been enriched by worshipping with people from other cultures. The congregation attempts to convey this identity through its worship services (which feature multiple languages and music styles), its literature and website (which emphasize Jubilee’s multiculturalism), and preaching that identifies racial harmony with God’s divine plan (http://www.jubilee.org.za). This can be seen in this narrative from a coloured woman, who described her experience of worship and fellowship at Jubilee:

[At Jubilee] they care for everyone. Each and every one. Because as you can see they go out… and pick people up from the road to go to church, it doesn’t matter who you are or what you look like or what, they love people unconditionally. . . . To tell you the honest truth, in Jubilee church, I don’t think you can call it like races there—because we are all one. I think it’s like God’s word says. We are all classed as one. There’s no coloured or white and African…. There’s different languages there, different nations there, but we love each other unconditionally…. It’s one God we’re serving. And we
base it on God's word. . . . It's what God wants from us. . . . We're mixed up with each other. It's a rainbow colour. A rainbow nation. (31 August 2005)

On the surface, Jubilee seems like what DeYoung et al. (2003) call an ‘integrated multiracial congregation’. Its organizational culture ‘maintains aspects of separate cultures and also creates a new culture from the cultures in the congregation’ (2003: 165). This is the vision that was conveyed to me strongly by the leadership—who are mostly white—and by other white people in the congregation. This can be seen in the following quote from a white elder:

We feel that in South Africa the church needs to be . . . multicultural, multiracial—I mean there's the picture in Revelation chapter 5 that before the throne of God there will be people from every tribe and tongue and nation all gathered together. That's not only in the eschatological future, that is actually the kind of church that God wants to build in South Africa now. . . . It's taken a long time to grow . . . but it's lovely now to see on a Sunday here when we meet there's just such a racially diverse, culturally diverse group, and we've come a tremendously long way from where we were back in the 1980s. We know we need to work on some of the areas to insure that there's increased relationship across those traditional barriers and that people from every background really feel welcome here. That this church is their family and they can aspire to an active involvement, to a leadership role, to whatever they might want, that there's nothing that precludes them from doing that just because of the language they speak, the colour of their skin, their culture, whatever that might be. (3 August 2005)

The genuineness of Jubilee’s integration was challenged by some research participants who had left the congregation. I talked to four people who had left, including black, coloured and white South Africans. They contended that there was little meaningful social interaction across different races, and that the preponderance of white leadership limited ‘real’ integration. They pointed out that, of the five elders, four are white men and one is a black Zambian man. They said that when they attempted to raise their concerns with people in power, they did not see any meaningful changes. These criticisms bring us back to the American findings by Emerson and his team: organizational structures matter. For example, Yancey (2003) argued that having multiracial leadership is the most important factor in building a successful multiracial congregation (86-86; 97). Emerson and Woo (2006) claimed that minority groups disproportionately bear the costs of integration—and may subsequently leave. To some extent, this has happened at Jubilee.

Previously, I have argued that people involved in Jubilee judged the extent of integration according to their perceived position of power within the congregation (Ganiel 2006). The aspects of an inclusive, overarching identity that they considered most important were bound up with what they had been able
to do to effect desired changes (if any). I grouped people into three empirical categories that encompassed what individuals thought was important for an overarching identity, and their evaluations of Jubilee. Table 2 summarizes the categories, including the aspects of an overarching identity that were emphasized by each group, the racial composition of the group, and the congregational positions (staff/active volunteer, congregant, or left the congregation) of people in each group. As is obvious from the table, most white people considered an overarching identity important, and believed that Jubilee was adequately expressing one (Ganiel 2006: 566).

Table 2: Conceptions of Jubilee’s ‘Inclusive’ Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Important and Adequate:</th>
<th>Given:</th>
<th>Important and Inadequate:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive identity is important and (is becoming) adequately expressed at Jubilee</td>
<td>Inclusive identity is not an important component of self-perception</td>
<td>Inclusive identity is important but is not adequately expressed at Jubilee</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Aspects of inclusive identity emphasized | 'Multiracial’ congregation, multilingual worship & preaching, ministries to 'previously disadvantaged’ groups, location in a mixed suburb | Enjoyed Jubilee’s style but religious experience overrides ‘race’ issues | All races represented at highest leadership levels, prominence for ‘previously disadvantaged’ groups, systemic approaches to socio-political action and restitution |

| Racial group(s) | White (10); South African Black (2); Other African nations (1) | Other African nations (2); South African Black (1); Coloured (1); White (1) | Coloured (2); South African Black (1); White (1) |

| Congregational Position | Staff/Active volunteer (13) | Congregant (4); Staff/Active volunteer (1) | Left the congregation (4) |
The different conceptions of the components of an inclusive identity, and the different perceptions of the extent that Jubilee is integrated, alert us to something that was obvious in the American findings: power matters. Because whites are in a numerical majority at Jubilee and because whites hold disproportionately more powerful social and economic positions in South Africa, structural conditions give them more opportunities to misuse power.

It is not my task as a social researcher to adjudicate between the research participants who considered Jubilee truly integrated and those who did not; between those who believed that Jubilee was aware of the potential misuse of power and those who did not. Previous research on multiracial congregations in South Africa, such as that of Anderson (2005) and Balcomb (2004), focused on the lack of integration and the abuse of power. However, if I were to make the same conclusions after my research at Jubilee I would be making a sociological mistake. Yes, I uncovered many of the same criticisms as Anderson and Balcomb. However, I also uncovered evidence of identity transformation and instances of reconciliation. No one at Jubilee claimed that they had ‘arrived’ at full integration, but they saw themselves on a trajectory towards transformation and coming ever closer. Christerson et al. (2005) also considered the ‘trajectory’ factor in their research at Wilcrest (56). It is important that the (majority group) leadership is seen to be moving toward honouring racial diversity as a key component of a transformed, overarching identity. It also is important that this trajectory does not move too slowly.

**Distinctive Religious Contributions to Social Reconciliation**

Elsewhere I have argued that discursive changes at Jubilee have been necessary to justify and inform individuals’ identity changes (Ganiel 2007). At Jubilee, specific discourses are used to explain the congregation’s multiracialism, and were conveyed through a number of mediums: preaching, Bible studies, written words on the website and other literature, and through the multilingual and multicultural worship style. I identified two broad discursive themes: an emphasis on ‘unity in diversity’ and ‘restitution’. The emphasis on unity in diversity parallels some of the American findings. There was none of the theological ‘color-blindness’ that Christerson et al. (2005) identified as damaging to racial integration; rather, Jubilee’s discourses parallel more closely the American discourses that claim that different cultures reveal different aspects of God, enriching one another. Further, like the Americans who had experienced multiracial worship, I could find no one at Jubilee who wanted to go back to monocultural worship. For instance, one white South African woman described monocultural worship as ‘boring’.
Restitution means recognizing an unfairly gained privilege and making practical, material amends for it. Thus it recognizes the socio-structural basis of continuing racial inequalities, something that did not have strong parallels in the American studies. At Jubilee, restitution included the recognition that whites had and continued to hold unfairly gained social and economic privileges. Whilst the South African government might be implementing affirmative action policies, some at Jubilee believed that more than this was required. The main practical restitution activity at Jubilee is its Education Fund, which gives people from previously disadvantaged groups money for education. Members of the congregation are periodically encouraged to contribute to the fund, and details about how to donate to it are printed in the bulletin every week. On occasion, stories are told about people giving up houses, cars or other material goods and using the proceeds to assist others. Making restitution is justified discursively by appealing to the Bible, much in the same way that the Bible is used to justify unity in diversity. This can be seen in the following narrative from one of the white elders who describes how the congregation began using the word ‘restitution’. He credits the influence of a coloured pastor from another local congregation, and draws on examples from Jesus’ teaching to justify restitution:

I was challenged by a coloured pastor [about restitution]…. [He knew about our work in the townships in the early 1990s] and he began pressing us and saying that this has got something to do with the background of South Africa. What happened with apartheid and so on. And eventually he forced us in a sense to say well what is it we are doing? And we said it’s what you call restitution. And he said right, why don’t you use that word because otherwise it looks like charity, especially to the black folk in the townships. You come off rather paternalistically…. The word restitution quite apart from being real, he said it’s better for them to hear you openly acknowledge [the past sins of apartheid and how whites benefited from it]…. So what we want to do in the church is provide a facility that is motivating people to be challenged about restitution…. Jesus particularly is very radical when he talks about the poor and when he talks about repentance…. People will say didn’t Jesus say we shouldn’t tell people when we give to the poor what we’re doing, we should keep it secret? And I said yes when you’re giving charity or alms to the poor, that’s true. But restitution isn’t charity, it is repentance. (8 December 2005)

However, Jubilee’s restitution discourses were not as frequent, obvious or widespread as their unity in diversity discourses. This may be because it is more costly to practice restitution—emotionally and materially—than it is to practice unity. It is easier to sing a song in another language and sit beside a person of a different race in a pew than it is to restructure an organization (or an entire society) so that there is less inequality. In addition, individual
members of the congregation who were involved in its social action projects framed their participation in explicitly Christian terms. People who were involved in AIDS treatment and prevention, its prison ministries and its pregnancy health centre gave biblical justification for serving women and the poor, and addressing inequalities. These discourses, whilst significant, also did not come across in as systematic a way as the unity discourses. If these discourses were more ‘joined-up’ with the unity in diversity discourses, they might be better suited to compel people to practical social action (Ganiel 2007).

Finally, three points from the Jubilee case study must be emphasized. First, it is specific to the South African context, which is predominantly Christian. Second, these discourses are drawn from a charismatic congregation that places a high regard on the Bible and has a flexible, expressive worship style. Third, there was sometimes a tendency for people to resort to ‘religiously charged ethnocentrism’ when talking about highly charged issues. For instance, people who had left the congregation questioned whether the leaders were ‘hearing God right’, because there were so few minorities in leadership. Leaders also questioned the leavers. Like the evangelical multiracial congregations in the US, Jubilee is making distinctive religious contributions to racial reconciliation, and is not immune to religiously charged conflict. How far this can be transferred to the public sphere remains to be seen. The next section explores those possibilities.

Multiracial Congregations and Social Reconciliation in South Africa

As stated earlier, Emerson conceives of multiracial congregations as uniquely placed to contribute to social reconciliation in the US. For similar reasons, they may be even better placed to do so in South Africa. This is because of the sheer number of Christians in South Africa—about 80 per cent of the population identify themselves as Christian (US Department of State 2005)—and for historical and sociological reasons. Religion increasingly has been recognized as integral to understanding society and politics in contemporary Africa (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004). Histories have examined religion’s role in colonization; more recent studies have analyzed its role in democratization and in providing social cohesion and cultural meaning (Gifford 1995, 1998; Anderson 2005). Other studies focus on its roles in conflict (Appleby 2000; Falola 2001; Akenson 1992), resistance against oppression, and in post-conflict transitions, including truth commissions or public ceremonies of healing (Uwazie et al. 1999; Appleby 2000). South Africa has one of the most substantial bodies of literature on religion and politics on the continent. Much of this
has focused on the role of the ‘mainline’ (Anglican, Catholic and Methodist) Christian churches in the struggle to end apartheid and their contributions to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (de Gruchy 2005; Thomas 2002; Borer 1998). The churches that were seen to support or legitimate apartheid, such as the Dutch Reformed Church, have been subjected to strong social, political and theological critiques (de Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio 1983; Fawcett 2000). Given their prior role, it might have been expected that the churches would have been major contributors to post-conflict transition in South Africa. These hopes were eloquently expressed by Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu in his designation of South Africans as the ‘Rainbow people of God’ (Tutu 1994). This term has been taken up in the public discourse as the ‘Rainbow Nation’, but it is not clear that South Africans see it in the religious sense that Tutu intended. Some research has indicated that the churches’ contributions to social transformation in South Africa have been limited (Anderson 2005, Balcomb 2004). But there are other examples in which congregations that were active in the struggle against apartheid have continued transformative, multicultural ministries in the post-apartheid period. For instance, De Gruchy (2006) describes the work of Rondebosch United Church (Congregational and Presbyterian) in Cape Town, which has made the transition from a monocultural white church to a multicultural church that emphasizes ministries ‘to those who are too often forced to the edges of society’ (65).

That said, multiracial congregations have not received much scholarly attention. This may be because there are so few of them—Parker (2005) estimates that only seven per cent of churches in the country are racially mixed (in Emerson and Woo 2006: 37). Apart from Parker’s recent study of a racially mixed Seventh Day Adventist congregation, there has been a tendency to dismiss the impact and the viability of multiracial congregations. This has been the case in the study of both mainline and charismatic congregations. The record of the mainline churches, particularly the examples of Anglican and Catholic cathedrals where there has been a substantial history of mixed worship and leadership, is often overlooked. Some studies of Pentecostal/charismatic churches have touched on multiracialism, with Gifford (1998) arguing that Pentecostal/charismatic congregations may be particularly effective at ‘breaking down ethnic barriers, especially in urban areas where English or French is used’ (347-348). However, he does not pursue this point in great detail. Venter, on the other hand, (2002) emphasizes the limits of multiracial congregations’ linguistic integration. His research used a postal survey to reach 60 racially and linguistically diverse congregations from the mainline denominations. He found that 72.5 per cent had monolingual preaching only, which
was predominantly in English. Whilst Venter links this to wider global sociological processes that devalue indigenous languages, it also may indicate that the multiracial congregations that do exist in South Africa favor the assimilationist model that DeYoung et al. found less receptive to reconciliation. This is in contrast to De Gruchy (2006), who claims that the pattern at Rondebosch United is ‘repeating itself to some extent across the country in congregations of many different denominations, providing evidence of the church being a community in which the gospel of reconciliation makes us more truly human’ (66).

More common are criticisms like those of Balcomb (2004), who studied what is perhaps South Africa’s most prominent multiracial Pentecostal/charismatic congregation, the white-led Rhema Ministries of Ray McCauley in Randburg. He classifies McCauley as a pragmatist who became enthusiastic about reconciliation as it became clear that apartheid was untenable, and he is critical about the extent to which Rhema is really racially integrated:

> Although the public-relations material produced by Rhema boasts that the congregation is ‘fully multi-racial’, our investigations have shown that most of the blacks attending the Rhema meetings are bussed in from black areas. They do not necessarily ‘feel at home’ in Rhema, and the extent to which Rhema’s black and white communities are integrated is limited. (18)

This rather dismissive assessment of a multiracial congregation stifles debate about their potential role in South Africa’s transition. The findings from my case study of Jubilee challenge those of Anderson and Balcomb, providing evidence of change and of an at least limited degree of reconciliation. My research cannot claim that the micro-level processes that are taking place at Jubilee are widespread in South Africa, or even that Jubilee is maximizing its potential. But it can demonstrate that such processes are possible and are to some extent happening on the ground. Table 3 summarizes four aspects of congregational life that are important for these processes at Jubilee. The studies by Emerson and his team show that these aspects are important in integrated multiracial congregations in the US, providing comparative evidence that transformative processes are possible. When these components are present, the transformation of old racial categories to a new, inclusive or integrated identity within the congregation is more likely to occur. This is significant, because it can have a wider social ‘demonstration effect’, especially in contexts in which the population is broadly Christian, such as South Africa.
Table 3: Aspects of Congregational Life Important for Reconciliation in South Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congregational Components</th>
<th>Characteristics in Integrated Multiracial Congregations</th>
<th>Wider Social Significance in South Africa?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worship</td>
<td>Multilingual singing and preaching; flexible, expressive styles</td>
<td>Demonstrates harmonious interaction of previously antagonistic cultural practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourses</td>
<td>Biblically-based justifications for unity in diversity; in South Africa, justifications for restitution and for addressing other pressing social issues</td>
<td>Unity in diversity discourses justify South African vision of the ‘Rainbow Nation’. There is yet untapped potential round discourses of restitution, AIDS, equality and women’s issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structures</td>
<td>People of all races represented in leadership (it may be necessary for congregations to impose their own quotas or structural safeguards)</td>
<td>Demonstrates that this is possible without government compulsion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Recognition that groups with a numerical majority or with a privileged socio-economic position outside the congregation are open to misuse power (majority groups must be willing to listen to minorities tell them how they feel disempowered)</td>
<td>Demonstrates that powerful groups have ‘blind spots’ that can only be revealed by listening to groups with less power</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, it is worth repeating that the processes that I analyzed at Jubilee may have been facilitated by its charismatic character, which emphasizes the Bible and flexible worship styles. This is a point that has a wider social significance,
in that Pentecostal/charismatic churches in South Africa have been growing and outstripping the traditional mainline denominations. About 10 to 40 per cent of the population of South Africa could be classified as Pentecostal/charismatic, depending on the definition that is used (Anderson, 2005). Whilst social researchers have generally considered these churches apolitical, that is beginning to change. Some scholars have begun to argue that they may facilitate democratization (Martin 2002, 1980; Stoll 1990). These claims, however, are couched with qualifications. Gifford (1998) notes that scholars ‘are extremely tentative about [its transformative potential]…. Martin adds a subtle “maybe” at crucial steps of his argument. Stoll is perhaps even more hesitant in his conclusions; he would like to think that Pentecostalism will be a force for social change, but regrets that it probably will not’ (37). This is echoed in Anderson’s (2005) work on the latest wave of Pentecostal/charismatic revivalism in South Africa. He observes that these churches are still divided on racial lines; they have not been pro-active in addressing AIDS, poverty and crime; and they have been content to ‘retreat to other worldly comforts’. He concludes that: ‘they are not making an impact nor addressing challenges posed by a rapidly changing society’ (87). My research at Jubilee challenges those findings and demonstrates that there may be other sociological processes at work.

This point about the flexibility of the Pentecostal/charismatic and evangelical traditions is one that also is made by Emerson and his team in their research on the US. Congregations from these traditions were over-represented in their research, although they did provide a few notable case studies of multiracial congregations from mainline traditions, such as the Catholic Church. Further research is needed, in both South Africa and the US, to substantiate the claim that the flexibility of the Pentecostal/charismatic and evangelical traditions facilitates harmonious integration. For instance, the ways in which the rich liturgical traditions of Anglicanism and Catholicism might also facilitate integration have yet to be fully explored.

In sum, reconciliation in the churches is a public concern in a society such as South Africa, with multiracial congregations uniquely placed to demonstrate relatively harmonious racial relationships and practical actions for addressing inequalities. Multiracial congregations also are well equipped to articulate powerful, discursive justifications for social reconciliation.

Conclusions

As the results of the American research on multiracial congregations have been disseminated more widely, there has been a move toward considering multiracial congregations an ‘answer’ to the problem of race. Indeed, in United by
Faith DeYoung et al. state: ‘We are calling for a movement in the church toward multiracial congregations!’ (184). This standpoint was reflected in the cover story of the April 2005 issue of Christianity Today, which reported on Emerson’s research with the headline: ‘why all churches should be multiracial’. Indeed, the social research presented here indicates that multiracial congregations have contributed to individual identity change and the transformation of racial relationships at the micro-level. It also has explored their potential to impact on wider social reconciliation, reporting that this seems a feasible expectation in widely Christian cultures such as the US and South Africa.

However, this is a cautious conclusion. Edgell Becker’s work (1998) alerts us to the impact of what she calls ‘personalism’, the tendency for people in congregations to see race as an individual, psychological problem rather than one that is deeply embedded in social structures. Emerson and Smith (2000) and Smith (1998) also realized this is an obstacle to social change, especially amongst white evangelicals. Further, Alumkal (2004) documents how, in the American context, the racial reconciliation theology that emerged in the 1960s was stripped of its radical elements. Those radical elements once included an imperative to address structural inequalities; now, evangelical leaders ‘focus on individual-level action’ (203–204) and define ‘racism as a spiritual problem that is immune to secular solutions [giving] whites license to oppose affirmative action, welfare, and other divisive government programs’ (205). Alumkal explains this shift as a product of a crisis in white identity and black disenchantment with liberalism.

This evidence of a lack of engagement with social structures raises doubts about the optimistic claims of the American researchers that multiracial congregations can provide an ‘answer’ to the problem of race. However, the research at Jubilee Community Church in South Africa provides an example of how a congregation is recognizing, naming and addressing the problem of race at a structural level. This is best seen in the congregations’ discourses about restitution, and the practical steps it is taking to address inequalities. But this also is a cautious conclusion. First, people who left Jubilee argue that its engagement with social structures is superficial, unsystematic and divorced from politics and the public sphere; for them, not enough is being said and done about restitution. Second, it is not clear to what extent the findings at Jubilee can be generalized to other multiracial congregations in South Africa. Third, it is not clear how discourses and acts of restitution can impact on South Africa’s other racialized social problems, such as ‘white flight’ (widespread emigration to the UK, Australia, and other western nations) and increased crime. Recent calls for ‘moral regeneration’ by Tutu, as well as South
African President Thabo Mbeki, serve as an invitation for congregations and religious organizations to engage creatively with the social structures and individual attitudes that contribute to the country’s many social ills. The comparative perspective provided here adds to our knowledge about the possibilities and limitations of faith-based reconciliation, and highlights the importance of continuing to keep socio-structural issues at the forefront of this process.

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*Christianity Today* April 2005.


