

Researchers explore the role of congregations in racial justice

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A trio of University of Arkansas at Little Rock investigators are exploring the role that Little Rock congregations play in faith-based, racial justice efforts, including the response of congregations after the

2020 death of George Floyd.

The paper, "Race and Faith: The Role of Congregations in Racial Justice," was presented at the American Political Science Association Conference in Montreal in September. The paper's authors include Dr. Rebecca Glazier, a professor in the School of Public Affairs and the director of the [Little Rock Congregations Study](#), Dr. Gerald Driskill, a professor of applied communication, and Dominika Hanson, a graduate student in rhetoric and writing.

They collected data that included a survey of 2,293 congregants from 35 congregations in Little Rock; an analysis of 90 sermons from 15 congregations that reveal how clergy talked about race in the weeks following Floyd's death, 21 clergy interviews that illustrate how clergy use religion to engage on [racial issues](#), and interviews with seven national leaders and focus groups with six congregations.

"We have been talking with and listening to members of the Little Rock faith community for many years," Glazier said. "For us, it began in 2019 when we held the Religious Leaders Summit. Race was one of the key issues that congregation leaders told us they wanted us to explore more. Because of what we learned at that summit, our research team has spent more than two years studying race and faith issues."

[In a 2020 study](#) of nearly 2,300 people from 35 diverse congregations across Little Rock, researchers found that the No. 1 issue participants wanted their congregation to do something about was race relations. Further research with clergy members found that 88 percent of them said that Little Rock has a problem with racial division, while 64% believe race relations will get better and that clergy are in a position to help make that happen.

The professors had already decided to investigate the role of

congregations in racial justice efforts, but the 2020 killing of Floyd had such an impact on the country that it presented a unique opportunity to understand how congregations in Little Rock respond.

"During the summer of 2020 when America's reckoning with race relations happened, we did interviews with clergy to understand what was happening in the community after the death of George Floyd," Glazier said. "A lot of people turned to their places of worship and their faith to determine what they should be doing in this moment. How do we handle such a volatile time in our history? How do we grapple with racism?"

The researchers found that Little Rock congregations were very active in engaging with faith-based racial justice work in many diverse ways that include forming book discussion groups, creating podcasts with people from other congregations, conducting audits of their church, and engaging with conversations with people from different backgrounds and religions.

"Events like what happened to George Floyd have been going on for a long time," Driskill said. "Many of our congregations find that listening to different viewpoints is the right thing to do. We're looking at the event in a larger context, and our congregations are stepping up by better engaging the community and being proactive. Some congregations are doing remarkable work with getting those bridges built."

Driskill described how one Little Rock church who provided food and other services to the homeless took an organic approach to really try to get to know the people they helped, many of whom are people of color.

"Members started realizing that they really needed to get to know the people they are serving and not just give them things," he said. "Others are engaged in literacy programs to address the disproportionate number

of minorities with low literacy rates. In another case, a church leader decided to load up a bus and take other faith leaders on a tour of places of interest in civil rights in the South. Good things are going on, and we hope that those can spark others to look at their options."

In their analysis of sermons following Floyd's death, the researchers found clear differences based on racial lines. Black congregations see their religion more closely tied to racial justice than white congregations.

"I think a lot of congregations, both Black and white, were talking about it," Glazier said. "Black congregations were more likely to talk about it in collective terms and say that it's a systemic problem. White congregations were more likely to talk about Floyd's death in individual terms, like this tragedy is sad on an individual level. We collected six weeks of data when people were out there protesting and talking about it all the time. There were some white congregations that didn't even say George Floyd's name."

The researchers' interviews with national [faith leaders](#) and focus groups resulted in a collection of publicly available, faith-based racial justice resources. The free resources will be available to clergy participants of the [Race and Faith Summit](#) on Nov. 2. They will also be released to the [general public](#) by the Little Rock Studies Congregation later this fall.

More information: Rebecca Glazier et al, Race and Faith: The Role of Congregations in Racial Justice (2022). [DOI: 10.33774/apsa-2022-2cq20](https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2022-2cq20)

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