Where you live is more influential than where you worship in shaping racial attitudes
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Whites in multiracial congregations have more diverse friendship networks and are more comfortable with minorities—but that is more because of the impact of neighbors and friends of other races than due to congregations' influence, a Baylor University study has found.

"Solving America's racial problems may be hoping too much from religious congregations," said Kevin D. Dougherty, Ph.D., associate professor of sociology in Baylor's College of Arts & Sciences and study co-author. "Where people live is more influential than where they worship in shaping racial attitudes."

While a small but growing number of congregations are gathering attendees across racial lines and counting diversity as a central part of their mission, most Americans who attend worship do so mainly with those of their own racial or ethnic line. That is the case in nearly nine of 10 congregations, researchers said.

"The responsibility for moving toward racial integration still rests considerably with the majority group," wrote authors Dougherty and Edward C. Polson, Ph.D., assistant professor in Baylor's Diana R. Garland School of Social Work.

The study—"Worshiping across the Color Line: The Influence of Congregational Composition on Whites' Friendship Networks and Racial Attitudes"—is published in the American Sociological Association's journal Sociology of Race and Ethnicity. Researchers analyzed data from Baylor Religion Survey's second wave, collected in fall 2007. The survey was administered by the Gallup Organization to 1,648 respondents in a national random sample of English-speaking adults.

Researchers found that the presence of African-Americans, Hispanic and Asian people in neighborhoods had a more significant impact on white attenders' friendship networks than worshiping together. They also found that the influence of worshiping with another race/ethnicity seems to be most pronounced for whites in congregations with Hispanics.

"For white attenders, worshiping in a congregation with a larger percentage of Hispanic worshipers was related to having more friendships with Hispanic people," Polson said. "This was not the case, however, for friendships between whites and African-Americans or Asian people. Only for white and Hispanic people did worshiping together seem to significantly increase the prevalence of cross-group friendships.

"This is likely the result of both a long-standing pattern of segregation between whites and African-Americans in the U.S. and there being a smaller number of Asian-Americans in many U.S. communities," he said.

White non-Hispanics make up the largest racial group in the country, and the number and cultural prominence of white Americans continue to give this group a position of power, Dougherty said.

The study found that:

- Religious whites, on average, report the most comfort with Asians; a comparable level of comfort with Hispanics; and noticeably less comfort with blacks.
- Older respondents and those who are married report having fewer non-white friends.
- Men, regular religious attendees and more liberal respondents report having more

The study found that:
Respondents living in the East and the Midwest reported having fewer non-white friends than those in the South, while people living in the West report having more.

- Whites in mainline Protestant churches report fewer cross-racial friendships than whites in evangelical churches.
- Older respondents, men and those who view Scripture as literally true are less comfortable with non-whites.
- Education, higher income, worship attendance and liberalism are positively related to comfort with non-whites.
- Southern whites are significantly less comfortable with non-whites than are non-whites in any other U.S. region.

For much of the United States' history, people of color were excluded from institutions and social life controlled by white Americans - including congregations and denominations, Polson said. When there weren't separate congregations, black and white congregants were often required to worship separately; white congregants in the main sanctuary and black congregants in balconies or meeting at separate times.

Eventually, many groups excluded from full participation in mainstream groups established their own congregations and denominations, such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church and congregations identified with Greek and Russian Orthodox churches.

Today, that legacy, combined with Americans' freedom to choose their place of worship, tends to reinforce the color line in American religion, "often without much serious thought or reflection on the part of worshipers and religious leaders," Polson said.

"At the most intimate levels of people's lives—family, friends and faith—the United States remains a racially divided nation," Dougherty said. "When people choose a congregation, they commonly choose to be with others they see as similar to themselves. The outcome is congregations segregated by race, social class and now increasingly by politics."

In a multiracial congregation—defined as one in which the majority group represents less than 80 percent of the whole congregation and other groups make up greater than 20 percent—research shows that contact between attenders of different racial and ethnic groups is more likely to occur, Polson said. Regular and sustained contacts between attenders in worship services, small groups and Bible studies are likely to affect attenders' friendship networks and influence their attitudes and opinions about other groups.

But previous research shows that multiracial congregations tend to become less diverse over time, the researchers said.

"This is one of the most challenging realities facing diverse congregations or those that hope to become more diverse," Polson said. "We know that congregational growth typically occurs as a result of individuals inviting friends, neighbors and coworkers. We also know that those networks tend to be patterned by race. As a result, the majority group in a congregation grows more quickly. The minority group doesn't grow at the same rate and over time tends to become a smaller and smaller percentage of the congregation."

Eventually, minority attenders may feel marginalized and seek a different place of worship.

"Our study suggests that congregations do have a role to play improving race-relations in the U.S.," Polson said. "Positive contact in local congregations seems to contribute to improved cross-group relations generally. However, our findings also highlight the reality that healing long-standing divisions between white Americans and people of color, especially African-Americans, will require more than simply worshiping together. It will likely require continued structural and policy changes in other areas of life."

Congregations hoping to cross the color line and improve race-relations may do well to consider tangible ways they can support such changes and foster connections between racial and ethnic
groups, researchers said.

"Future research should explore the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities in multiracial congregations," Dougherty said. "Another pressing need is a national study of congregations over time. Researchers need to follow a national sample of congregations over five to 10 years to understand when, how and why a congregation's membership changes, as well as the implications of such changes."

Provided by Baylor University


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