

RACE AND THE LUTHERAN PASTOR

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## ABSTRACT

Discussions about race and power structures permeate today's society. Because of their sensitive and sometimes controversial nature, these discussions are often avoided in the Christian church. Recently, however, scholars have begun to critique Christian churches as places where racial divide and oppression are perpetuated, in part because of this silence. This thesis seeks primarily to listen to, analyze, and learn from the experiences of African Americans as they relate to white pastors in WELS churches. The results of this research underscore the importance of these discussions and the necessity of careful communication between the pastor and his members regarding race. This study also provides much-needed balance by placing race within a broader context of social and spiritual factors.

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## INTRODUCTION

After the service, the pastor announced that the guest preacher would return the following Sunday. He had traveled a long distance, so it made sense to give him another opportunity to preach. When the next Sunday arrived, the church was more packed than it ever had been before. Members who had not been seen in months filled the pews.

What happened? There was no media campaign. Even though the attendance surpassed any Easter service, this was just an ordinary Sunday. While the guest preacher's sermon the previous Sunday had been strong, it was not unusually so, nor its message atypical. But the speaker was black. And so was the congregation. In this case, with the regular pastors of the congregation being white, that made all the difference.

As the United States continues to rapidly diversify,<sup>1</sup> the intersection of race and religion becomes more and more important. This is especially true for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), a church body which is over 98% white and is served by a ministerium that is over 99% white.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in recent years the rhetoric around race has sharpened

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<sup>1</sup> The Pew Research Center estimates that by 2065, non-Hispanic whites will be 46% of the population. Today, the number is about 60% and in 1965 was about 82%. "Modern Immigration Wave Brings 59 Million to U.S., Driving Population Growth and Change Through 2065," *Pew Research Center*, September 2015, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/09/28/modern-immigration-wave-brings-59-million-to-u-s-driving-population-growth-and-change-through-2065/>.

<sup>2</sup> The synod-wide estimate was provided by Rev. Timothy Flunker, WELS National Hispanic Consultant, in an email to the author. Rev. Flunker did a study in 2015 and found the WELS to be 98.8% white. This does not include the Apache mission, which is not on U.S. soil. As for pastors, I did my own brief study and only found only nine who were non-white out of a ministerium of about 1300.

and, in many ways, divided the country.<sup>3</sup> Because of this, it is both more difficult and more imperative than ever to speak clearly and wisely about race.

This paper is driven by a desire to understand the role of race as the Lutheran pastor relates to church members. Because of the complex nature of race and the limitations of this study, I have chosen to focus on the interplay between a Caucasian pastor and African American church members. I will begin this study with a review of the pertinent scholarly literature, most of which is found in the field of religious sociology. Then, I will lay out my research method and introduce the interview participants. The final section, and the majority of the paper, consists of a summary and discussion of the research findings.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In a country which, publicly at least, celebrates racial diversity, religious life remains stubbornly segregated. According to the 2015 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey by the Pew Research Center, about 3% of the members of the historically white mainline Protestant churches are black.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, only about 2% of the members of the historically black Protestant churches are white.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, LifeWay Research found that “Only about a third (34 percent) of

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<sup>3</sup> Baxter Oliphant, “Views About Whether Whites Benefit from Societal Advantages Split Sharply Along Racial and Partisan Lines,” *Pew Research Center*, September 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/28/views-about-whether-whites-benefit-from-societal-advantages-split-sharply-along-racial-and-partisan-lines/>.

<sup>4</sup> “2014 Religious Landscape Study,” *Pew Research Center*, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

<sup>5</sup> “2014 Religious Landscape Study,” *Pew Research Center*.

Americans have regularly attended a house of worship where they were a minority.”<sup>6</sup>

In many ways, this segregation directly contradicts the Bible’s message. The Apostle Paul told Christians living in Asia Minor, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28 NIV). This is one of many passages in the Old and New Testaments that proclaim the inherently diverse nature of Christianity. While Christian churches and pastors declare themselves inheritors of that tradition, scholars have long noticed a disconnect between how the Bible speaks about racial diversity and the reality found in the pews of the Christian church.

Writing already a half-century removed from the Civil War, the first American sociologist of religion, W.E.B. Du Bois, remarked, “No other institution in America is built so thoroughly or absolutely on the color line [as religion].”<sup>7</sup> Fifty years later, Dr. Martin Luther King echoed the sentiment in a Q&A session at Western Michigan University, saying, “We must face the fact that in America, the church is still the most segregated major institution in America. At 11:00 on Sunday morning when we stand and sing that Christ has no east or west, we stand at the most segregated hour in this nation.”<sup>8</sup>

A half-century after Dr. King’s remarks, sociologists Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith concluded—on the basis of more than 2,000 phone surveys and 200 face-to-face

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<sup>6</sup> “Views on Ethnicity and the Church,” *LifeWay Research*, (January 2014), <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Views-on-Ethnicity-and-the-Church-1.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Phil Zuckerman, “The Sociology of Religion of WEB Du Bois,” *Sociology of Religion* 63, no. 2 (2002): 239-253.

<sup>8</sup> “MLK at Western,” *Western Michigan University Archives and Regional History Collections and University Libraries*, <http://wmich.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/MLK.pdf>.

interviews with white evangelical Christians—that not much had changed. The divide remained, and churches, for all their rhetoric of racial reconciliation, perpetuated or even worsened the problem. In their landmark book, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, published in 2001, they concluded that:

Religion, as structured in America, is unable to make a great impact on the racialized society. In fact, far from knocking down the racial barriers, religion generally serves to maintain these historical divides, and helps to develop new ones.... The structure of religion in America is conducive to freeing groups from the direct control of other groups, but not addressing the fundamental divisions that exist in our current racialized society.<sup>9</sup>

The primary reason given why churches perpetuate the problems of race is their focus on the individual. One reviewer of *Divided by Faith* commented:

For evangelicals faith is about being in right relationship to God. It is establishing a "personal" relationship with Jesus Christ. Therefore, they are individually accountable to God, family, and other people, for their choices alone. Each sinner will have to answer to God by herself. It is essential then to have right relationships in all aspects of one's life to prevent sin. These theological assumptions directly influence how evangelicals picture the structural problems of race. Racism is the bad behavior of the individual but not a societal problem.<sup>10</sup>

*Divided by Faith* kicked off a wave of studies examining the church as catalyst for social change. Therefore, most of the recent literature which studies the intersection of race and religion continues in that vein—the goal is racial equity and diversity and churches are graded by how well they achieve that goal for themselves and for society at large.

Judging by that criterion, and the red ink of most scholars, Christian churches are failing the test. Eric Tranby and Douglas Hartmann sharpened the critique of *Divided by Race* by

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<sup>9</sup> Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 18.

<sup>10</sup> Randal Jelks, "Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America," *Church History* 73, no. 4 (2004): 895-897.

suggesting that in churches, “Anti-black stereotypes may be subtler, more pervasive, and more functionally necessary than Emerson and Smith assume.”<sup>11</sup> Even when churches do succeed in becoming multicultural,<sup>12</sup> scholars suggest that this is because they continue to cater primarily to whites<sup>13</sup> but put on just enough cultural window-dressing to attract blacks who are seeking a haven from black culture and Black Church<sup>14</sup> without totally abandoning their race.<sup>15</sup> In fact, African Americans who attend largely white churches “are significantly less likely to attribute Black/White socioeconomic gaps to a lack of educational opportunities”; that is, they see the problems of racial inequity more like white people.<sup>16</sup>

While the complex nature of multiracial congregations is acknowledged by all scholars, some take a more optimistic approach. In 2003, a team of sociologists, including Michael O. Emerson, published *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem*

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<sup>11</sup> Eric Tranby and Douglas Hartmann, “Critical Whiteness Theories and the Evangelical ‘Race Problem’: Extending Emerson and Smith’s Divided by Faith,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no. 3 (2008): 341-359.

<sup>12</sup> Most scholars define a multicultural church as one in which no more than 80% of its members come from a single race.

<sup>13</sup> Korie L. Edwards, “Bring Race to the Center: The Importance of Race in Racially Diverse Religious Organizations,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no. 1 (2008): 5-9. Quote from the abstract.

<sup>14</sup> For a brief look at Black Church, see Marilyn Mellows, “The Black Church,” PBS.org, (2011), <http://www.pbs.org/godinamerica/black-church/>.

<sup>15</sup> Richard N. Pitt, “Fear of a Black Pulpit? Real Racial Transcendence Versus Cultural Assimilation in Multiracial Churches,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 2 (2010): 218-223.

<sup>16</sup> Ryon J. Cobb, Dilara K. Üsküp, and Steven T. Jefferson, “Congregational Composition and Explanations for Racial Inequality Among Black Religious Affiliates,” *Race and Social Problems* 9, no. 2 (2017): 163-169. For further information about this racial divide in opinion, see, Oliphant, “Views About Whether Whites Benefit from Societal Advantages Split Sharply Along Racial and Partisan Lines.”

of *Race*, which argued that Christian churches should, by biblical mandate, and could, by committing to the cultivation of diversity, help answer the “problem of race.”<sup>17</sup>

Because *United by Race* included profiles of four large multicultural congregations, it set the tone for a more optimistic series of papers which analyzed congregations that had succeeded in becoming multiracial.<sup>18</sup> Gerardo Marti, professor of sociology at Davidson College, has produced several such studies. He argues that intracongregational racial diversity is made possible by ethnic transcendence, which he describes as “the process of co-formulating a shared religious identity among diverse members that supersedes their racial and ethnic differences through congregational involvement.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite the disconnect found in the scholarship reviewed above, both sides recognize the important role clergy and other congregational leadership play in multicultural settings. Negatively, leaders can be complicit in perpetuating the stereotypes and racism which lead to the segregation found in Christian churches.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, if the leaders attempt to appear racially progressive but are seen as disingenuous or too on-the-nose, they risk alienating the

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<sup>17</sup> Curtiss Paul DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Whether or not these congregations were truly successful is disputed. See, Ryon J. Cobb, Samuel L. Perry, and Kevin D. Dougherty. “United by faith? Race/Ethnicity, Congregational Diversity, and Explanations of Racial Inequality.” *Sociology of Religion* 76, no. 2 (2015): 177-198.

<sup>19</sup> Gerardo Marti, “Conceptual Pathways to Ethnic Transcendence in Diverse Churches: Theoretical Reflections on the Achievement of Successfully Integrated Congregations,” *Religions* 6, no. 3 (2015): 1048-1066.

<sup>20</sup> Glenn E. Bracey and Wendy Leo Moore. “‘Race Tests’: Racial Boundary Maintenance in White Evangelical Churches.” *Sociological Inquiry* 87, no. 2 (2017): 282-302.

very people they seek to attract.<sup>21</sup> In a longitudinal study of over 10,000 congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, such a top-down, diversity by mandate, approach failed to stem a sharp decrease in average attendance across the church body.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, scholars have noted several ways congregational leaders positively impact racial diversity in their churches. The mere presence of leaders from a minority culture can lead to an increase in congregational diversity.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, those leaders from the dominant culture can leverage their authority and charisma to “reorient individual identities toward a common, sacred cause.”<sup>24</sup> In effect, a compelling vision leads people to view their religious identities as more important than their racial identities. As this is done, the leader minimizes the risk of alienating minorities if he or she speaks openly and humbly about race in a public forum.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Jessica M. Barron, “Managed Diversity: Race, Place, and an Urban Church,” *Sociology of Religion* 77, no. 1 (2016): 18-36. In this study of a Chicago church that was trying to appear urban, leaders who obviously targeted young and attractive black men to be greeters were seen as pandering by several members.

<sup>22</sup> Kevin D. Dougherty, Brandon C. Martinez, and Gerardo Martí, “Congregational Diversity and Attendance in a Mainline Protestant Denomination,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, no. 4 (2015): 668-683. The weakness of this study, admitted by the authors, is that the decline in attendance may have been part of a larger decline in ECLA attendance, following the trend of other mainline churches.

<sup>23</sup> A leader from a minority culture may make people from other minority cultures more comfortable, or at least signal to them that the congregation cares about diversity. See, Kevin D. Dougherty and Kimberly R. Huyser, “Racially Diverse Congregations: Organizational Identity and the Accommodation of Differences,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no. 1 (2008): 23-44.

<sup>24</sup> Martí, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Gregory C. Stanczak, “Strategic Ethnicity: The Construction of Multi-racial/Multi-ethnic Religious Community,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29, no. 5 (2006): 856-881.

However, even the best leaders run into racial barriers. For one, many people simply prefer to spend time with others who are like them.<sup>26</sup> If a prospective member overcomes this homophily principle and joins a church in which they are a minority, the discomfort they face on an individual and organizational level is so strong that their membership duration will be significantly shorter than that of members from the majority culture.<sup>27</sup> And if the minority members don't leave quickly, their mere presence may scare members from the majority race away, especially if the majority race is white and they think their influence is threatened.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, the race of the pastor in relation to the attendees has also been shown to be significant. An ethnographic study of Oasis Christian Center, a large, nondenominational church in Los Angeles, illustrates this point.<sup>29</sup> The two white founding pastors intentionally filled out their staff with black and Hispanic leaders and made them "equally prominent in both platform presence and backroom decision making." The pastors spoke openly about race but preached sermons intending to transcend it through a focus on problems common to the human experience. The music was chosen to appeal to a broad audience but included enough racially specific markers that "blacks in the congregation universally talked about the worship music of the congregation as having a 'black sound.'" Members pointed to the reasons listed above to

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<sup>26</sup> P. M. Blau and Joseph E. Schwartz, *Crosscutting Social Circles*, (Orlando: Academic Press, 1984), 127.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher P. Scheitle and Kevin D. Dougherty, "Race, Diversity, and Membership Duration in Religious Congregations," *Sociological Inquiry* 80, no. 3 (2010): 405-423.

<sup>28</sup> "In my own research, whites disproportionately left the church in noticeable numbers even when their group was in the numerical majority. These departures coincided with changes in the church that were potentially threatening to their influence within the organization." Edwards, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Gerardo Marti, "The Religious Racial Integration of African Americans into Diverse Churches," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 2 (2010): 201-217. All information and quotations in this paragraph come from this study.

explain the demographic diversity at Oasis. During the 12 months the church was studied, of the attendees “42 percent were white, 32 percent African American, 13 percent Latino, 5 percent Asian, 2 percent Middle Eastern, and 6 percent self-defined as some form of mixed/multiracial ancestry.”

Nevertheless, not all African Americans were willing to be pastored by the two white founders of the church. Marti explains:

Several black members told me their black family and friends ask: “How could you go to church with a White pastor?” Angela, 52 years old, said: “People hate the fact that I come here. [They refuse] to come because the pastor is not a Black man. They say, ‘There is no way those two people understand anything about us. They have no clue. They could not really empathize or sympathize with an African American.’” Angela was dating a black man who would not come to the church. He said to her: “Never. I’ll never sit through his preaching and pastoring me.” Ben explained: “It’s sad but true. It has to do with ‘There’s this White man up there. He can’t really relate to the struggles that I’ve been through’.” Another African-American member in his mid 30s said: “Some people who grew up in a Black church or just grew up in a different time before this whole MTV side to it” will have problems fitting into the church, especially “if you are a Black man who is 40 and above and you grew up in a Black church in a family that considers itself Black.”<sup>30</sup>

Despite the pastors’ efforts to transcend race, efforts that were not without success, the whiteness of the two founding pastors proved a substantial roadblock for many African Americans.

For such a dynamic phenomenon, sociological studies explicitly addressing this roadblock in religious settings are rare. When examining the intersection of race and religion, scholars focus on the effect of the pastor on the relative diversity of the congregation without

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<sup>30</sup> Marti, 2010.

regard for the potential spiritual impact on the church member. Research done outside the field of religious sociology, however, suggests that the effect of the race of the pastor is significant.

Sherwood Lingenfelter, an anthropologist and former vice president at Fuller Theological Seminary, explores this topic from a leadership perspective in his book *Leading Cross-Culturally: Covenant Relationships for Effective Christian Leadership*. He concludes that even well-intentioned leaders “cannot see how their histories and culture shape their ministries and blind them to the unintended consequences of these practices and values in their discipleship and leadership-training activities.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, other scholars have examined and quantified this dynamic in schools. For example, black students with black teachers are less likely to drop out of school<sup>32</sup> and more likely to be chosen for gifted programs than those with white teachers.<sup>33</sup>

Within the WELS, discussions about the intersection of race and religion arose out of necessity when white flight hit Milwaukee, the historic stronghold of the synod, in the 1950s. Traditionally white churches suddenly found themselves in African American dominated areas, resulting in significant membership losses. To assist the churches that did not close their doors or move to the suburbs, the Multicultural Mission Committee of The Board for Home Missions was created in 1990. While this committee did substantial ethnographic research in Milwaukee,

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<sup>31</sup> Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Leading Cross-Culturally: Covenant Relationships for Effective Christian Leadership* (Baker Academic, 2008), 15.

<sup>32</sup> Anna J. Egalite and Brian Kisida, “The Effects of Teacher Match on Students’ Academic Perceptions and Attitudes,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* (2017).

<sup>33</sup> Jason A. Grissom, Jason A., and Christopher Redding, “Discretion and Disproportionality: Explaining the Underrepresentation of High-Achieving Students of Color in Gifted Programs.” *Aera Open* 2, no. 1 (2015). For the impact of race in the workplace, see, Karen Lee Ashcraft and Brenda J. Allen, “The Racial Foundation of Organizational Communication,” *Communication Theory* 13, no. 1 (2003): 5-38.

they mostly worked to defend the doctrine surrounding cross-cultural ministry and produce practical helps for pastors and congregations.<sup>34</sup>

The question, then, remains: What is the role of race as African American church members relate to white pastors? In religious sociology at large and in the WELS, there has been a great deal written about cross-cultural ministry. However, there is little focus on the race of the pastor, and even less from the perspective of the African American member. While African Americans clearly think the race of their pastor is important, their response is complex. Some seek out diverse churches, others refuse to even visit a church if it is pastored by a white man, and some do not even appear to consider race as they choose a church. Any answer, therefore, will be complicated and, by nature, incomplete. But that does not make it unimportant.

This research seeks to begin to fill that gap. The accounts below are the stories of real people relating to real pastors. This study seeks to listen to their stories and understand their unique viewpoint through a convergence of race theory and biblical perspective.

## RESEARCH QUESTION, METHODS, AND PARTICIPANTS

### Research Question

The following research question guides this study: What role, if any, does race play as African American WELS members interact with white pastors?

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<sup>34</sup> For a summary of the work of the Multicultural Mission Committee, see, Jeff Enderle, "MC2: The Roots and Beginnings of the Multi-Cultural Ministry Committee," *WLS Essay File*, <http://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/1346/EnderleMultiCulturalMinistryCommittee.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

## Research Methods

Empiric evidence is notoriously difficult to come by in religious studies, especially when examining cause and effect.<sup>35</sup> To quantitatively study the impact of the race of the pastor on church members in an effective way, one would have to find a statistically significant number of black men and women, randomly assign them to a set of churches pastored by blacks and whites, and track them for an extended period of time.

On the other hand, a qualitative study, with its emphasis on description and interpretation over measurement, seems ideally suited for this topic. Furthermore, as a future pastor who has been told *ad nauseum*, “People matter!” I was excited for the opportunity to put this truth into practice through this style of research. I selected eight participants (introduced below) who I thought would be open and honest about what is often a sensitive topic.

While understanding that qualitative studies do not carry the burden to generalize to a broader audience, I still strove to limit my research. Thus, all the interviewees are African Americans who currently attend WELS congregations in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The eight participants attend six different churches, with no more than two coming from a single church.

I conducted the interviews in a semi-structured style, following a list of prepared questions but frequently going off script for relevant tangents.<sup>36</sup> I asked all the participants for written consent to audio record the interview and assured them of anonymity for themselves,

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<sup>35</sup> Dougherty, et al. (2015) call the data set used in their study “unique.” This data did not include the race of the pastor.

<sup>36</sup> The interview questions are printed in the appendix.

their churches, and their pastors. They were given the option to edit or delete comments at any time. All the interviews, except the one discussed in the next paragraph, were conducted by me in person and lasted between 30-45 minutes.

Although qualitative researchers generally recognize the validity of interviews performed by cultural outsiders,<sup>37</sup> I was curious how much my presence would affect disclosure. Thus, I arranged to have one interview (that of Participant H) led by an African American male and removed myself entirely from the interview, which was conducted by phone. While it is impossible to know how different the interview would have been with me present, I noticed a more collegial tone but no significant change in content or disclosure.

### **Research Participants**

The following is a brief demographic description of the eight research participants:

Participant A is a male in his mid-30s and has been WELS his entire life. He often thinks about the impact the race of his pastors has on him and on other African Americans.

Participant B is a male in his early 60s. He grew up Lutheran and joined the WELS in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. He shared a number of negative experiences with white pastors that he attributed, at least in part, to race.

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<sup>37</sup> Simply put, no researcher-participant combination is immune to bias and cultural influence. The predominant dynamic of this study—a young, white seminarian interviewing African Americans about their white pastors—is no exception. I simply did my best to minimize my influence. Also, I recognized a cultural currency benefit from having grown up in Milwaukee and attending an inner-city church for a decade. A further advantage is that my father was known and respected by several of the research participants for his work at that church. For a discussion of the ethics surrounding these dynamics in qualitative research, see, Mahnaz Sanjari, et al., “Ethical Challenges of Researchers in Qualitative Studies: The Necessity to Develop a Specific Guideline,” *Journal of Medical Ethics and History of Medicine* 7 (2014).

Participant C is a male in his late 50s. He grew up in Baptist churches before becoming a WELS member as an adult. He does not often think about race in relation to his pastors.

Participant D is a male in his mid-50s. He also grew up Baptist before becoming a WELS member as an adult. He has not found the race of his pastors to be a significant factor in his relationship with them.

Participant E is a male in his late 30s. He grew up Baptist but stopped attending church during grade school until he became a WELS member in his early 30s. He says that having a white pastor is not challenging for him but could be for others.

Participant F is a male in his mid-20s, who has been a WELS member his entire life. He sees race as a critical factor as his pastor relates to his congregation and community.

Participant G is a female in her early 60s. She grew up Presbyterian and Pentecostal before becoming a WELS member as an adult. She shared that race has occasionally been a barrier in her relationship with her pastors but is not currently a pressing issue.

Participant H is a male in his late 20s, who has been a WELS member his entire life. He sees race as a potential barrier but is grateful to have a pastor who strives to overcome it.

After recording the interviews, I used dictation software to produce written transcripts. Next, while listening to and reading the interviews several times, I used the transcripts to color-code themes that were common to multiple interviews. While I did not discard the perspectives unique to a single participant, such cases were rare. In fact, the interviewees told the remarkably consistent story that race matters in their relationships with the white pastors. Furthermore, a pastor's willingness to speak about race had a significant impact on his

relationship with church members. That said, the interview participants had all joined or maintained membership in a Lutheran church despite a frequent lack of these conversations.

## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

In the following section, each of the three themes listed above is given its own chapter. Every chapter contains a summary and discussion of the theme as told by the interviewees. In the summary sections, I will present sub-themes from the interviews and illustrate each with a quotation. In the discussion portions, I will introduce pertinent race theories and allow them to interplay with the data gathered. These theories serve to echo and enlighten the data drawn from the interviews.

In the first chapter, I will present Critical Race Theory, which, if not the most dominant, is at least the most publicized theoretical framework for studying and critiquing race and culture. In the second chapter, I will introduce Courageous Conversation, a paradigm for speaking openly about race which grew out of Critical Race Theory. Finally, in the third chapter, I will discuss the factors that led the research participants to join a Lutheran church, including the data which transcended or contradicted Critical Race Theory and Courageous Conversation.

### **Race Matters**

#### Summary

The following quotations illustrate the sub-themes that are summarized as: "Race Matters."

*The inescapability of race in daily life:* "[At work] I definitely see sometimes a parent will walk in and they'll walk right up to [my white assistants] like they're in charge."

*Specific things a white pastor doesn't understand:* "I don't think pastor can ever fully understand certain subtleties that comes with being a black person here."

*The whiteness of a pastor is a barrier to nonmembers:* "I have one friend of mine who is very Afrocentric, I call it, and he would never be able to have a white pastor."

*White pastors signal white worship:* "The connection that probably came to my mind was, black pastor equals exciting, white pastor equals boring."

*White pastors are connected to white power structures:* "[Pastor] knows how to schmooze and all that kind of stuff and he's also white.... [He has] access to both worlds. Biculturalism."

## Discussion

### ***Critical Race Theory***

Critical Race Theory emerged in the 1980s as legal scholars sought to solve an apparent paradox: How does racism persist despite universal condemnation by society and the state? As an explanation, the scholars redefined racism not as an individual prejudice but as a society-wide predilection for maintaining the status quo. This is accomplished through power structures that benefit the white majority at the expense of the marginalized minority. Even if no intent to harm can be proven on the part of any individual, such structures are still seen as racist. Because race so deeply affects society, Critical Race Theory is deeply skeptical of any claims, either conservative or liberal, that the United States is or can hope to be a color-blind meritocracy in which wealth and power are the inevitable results of hard work. Instead of

focusing on equality for all, which, according to the claims of Critical Race Theory only perpetuates oppression, the goal in the judicial system and society at large should be equity.<sup>38</sup>

As Critical Race Theory moved into the realm of social science, it found a close cousin in critical whiteness studies, which had its genesis a half-century earlier in the study of the construction and moral implications of whiteness. Today, the two are so closely intertwined that for practical purposes this paper anachronistically includes whiteness studies under the umbrella of Critical Race Theory.<sup>39</sup> While Critical Race Theory scholars continue to impact the legal system, much of the momentum has shifted to social justice and commentary on a broader scale.

Because Critical Race Theory means different things in different disciplines and among different scholars, its study and evaluation are beyond the scope of this project.<sup>40</sup> As such, I will refrain from sweeping judgments about its validity and potential implications. This is also self-serving, as there are few things more controversial than white privilege, microaggressions, or

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<sup>38</sup> The distinction between equality and equity is important. If equality is a level playing field, equity is what levels the playing field. Consider affirmative action in higher education, which often manifests itself in preferential entry requirements for minorities. This is not equality but equitability, says the Critical Race Theory scholar. They point to the racial achievement gap as evidence that minorities suffer the disadvantage of being forced into an education system set up for the benefit of the white majority. In other words, the playing field is already tilted away from them. Equal entry requirements, then, would only perpetuate the problem. Affirmative action, while not preferable to correcting the root problem, is the equitable choice because it begins to level the playing field.

<sup>39</sup> For the seminal work in whiteness studies, see, Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric," *Quarterly journal of Speech* 81, no. 3 (1995): 291-309.

<sup>40</sup> For the legal genesis of Critical Race Theory, see, Angela P. Harris, "Critical Race Theory," *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (2012). For a serious defect of studies in Critical Race Theory—that its proponents almost completely ignore the influence of Black Church on African American culture—see Brandon Paradise, "How Critical Race Theory Marginalizes the African American Christian Tradition," *Mich. J. Race & L.* 20 (2014).

Black Lives Matter.<sup>41</sup> These are all, in one way or another, consequences of Critical Race Theory. But Critical Race Theory relates to this study in one crucial way—in its rejection of color-blindness, it contends whole-heartedly that race matters. And race matters to people of color in a more constant and profound way than white people (usually) understand. This is undoubtedly the experience of the participants interviewed in this study.

Consider the response by Participant F when asked to share something about being a black man that his white pastor might not understand. He did not point to isolated moments of racism but to the pressure of society-wide expectations. He said, “It’s tough, man, it’s tough when you walk out the door and you bust your butt your entire life to not just be another black statistic, and sometimes you’re still treated like a regular black statistic. You know what I mean? No matter how hard you work. No matter how much you pray to God. No matter how much you go to church and do the right things, sometimes people see your skin color and they still think you’re just a regular black dude who might have committed a crime.” If someone shouting a racial epithet is like a slap in the face, Participant F’s experience with race is more akin to a constant headache. He suffers this headache of unfair expectations despite being a husband and father with a master’s degree who sits on his church council.

More specifically, Participant H, when asked the same question, described the burden he feels as one of the only black members on the faculty at his school. He replied, “The simple fact of being black.... If I mess up, it’s like every black person messed up, because there are only

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<sup>41</sup> If reading “white privilege” without its immediate condemnation causes the reader discomfort, consider again the argument from *Divided by Faith*: Could Christianity, with its (biblical) focus on individual responsibility before God, lead Christians to unfairly dismiss the presence of unjust structures in society? To put it another way—Is it possible that the sin of prejudice infects not only the individual living in society, but also the structures created by society at large?

a few.... I think maybe they might not understand from the standpoint where you are a black person ... you have to be the voice of the black person, of the black culture. A lot of times you are the spokesperson.” Even seemingly innocuous experiences, like being asked to give an opinion to a colleague, can carry a burden particular to race.

Participant H stressed that he did not consider this pressure to be malicious or even conscious on the part of his coworkers, but simply the result of being black.<sup>42</sup> He compared it to the weight of expectations on clergy commonly known as ‘The Glass House Effect’. He said, “Pastors have a certain pressure that other people don’t understand because of the lifestyle, the way they’re supposed to carry themselves. I think it’s also the same being a black man.” This observation is especially profound considering pastors choose their vocation and, by extension, their glass houses. Participant H, on the other hand, inherited his with his skin.

These observations are not common to the white experience in the United States. For this reason, studies in Critical Race Theory are characterized by first-person reflections and narratives such as found in the preceding paragraphs. The logic is that because whites have the numeric majority in the United States, and the lion’s share of the power currency, they are generally immune to the prejudice or systemic disadvantages that often typify the minority experience. This immunity leads to ignorance, or even indignance, on the part of whites when claims are made about white privilege. Vivid first-person accounts, then, spotlight racial

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<sup>42</sup> He said, generously, “Pressure is good in a lot of circumstances.”

oppression that might otherwise go unnoticed or unchecked.<sup>43</sup>

In Critical Race Theory, these narratives are often accompanied by claims to subjective truth that are typical of its postmodernism roots. In general, I reject claims that tie truth to the individual instead of an objective reality. However, to risk stating the painfully obvious, truth is not subjective, but experience is. And the subjective experiences of the research participants, in correlation with the claims of Critical Race Theory, confirm as objective reality that race matters, even in the relationship between pastor and church member.

### ***Application of Critical Race Theory***

On one hand, it should not be surprising, even to one unfamiliar with Critical Race Theory, that race matters in the relationship between pastor and church member. Age, height, consistently wrinkled shirts, and a plethora of other miscellanea can color one person's perception of another. It is no great leap to add skin color to that list, especially considering the host of cultural differences signaled by race. But Participant C, when asked to share potential barriers between white pastors and African Americans, suggested that it might not always be so obvious. He said, "The biggest barrier I would always say would have to be color. See, a lot of people don't want to talk about that but that's the truth. However, when you talk about the church, they say, 'Well the church is different from the rest of the world.' No, it is not. The

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<sup>43</sup> For some Critical Race Theory scholars, fiction narratives serve this purpose as well as non-fiction. For example, in 1992 Harvard professor Derrick Bell published his short story, *The Space Traders*. In it, the U.S. government trades all its black citizens to aliens in exchange for gold, nuclear power, and other technological advances. Such uses of fiction to further (or disrupt) academic discourse have been the subject of some of the sharper critiques of Critical Race Theory. See, Alex Cozinski, "Bending the Law: Are Young Multiculturalists Poisoning Young Legal Minds?" *The New York Times* (November 1997).

church is made up of people from this world. And in this world. And the Bible talks about Christ being in this world and not of this world. That's not true for us."

"A lot of people don't want to talk about that but that's the truth." Claims of color-blindness, he implies, are especially attractive in the church. Participant C explained that church members strive to approach their relationships with pastors without thinking about race.<sup>44</sup> "I guess because when you take on the role of a spiritual leader, people expect you to be greater than the sum of your parts. Most of us forget that you're still just a man." The desire for color-blindness is undoubtedly a pious wish—Christian pastors and members know that God does not judge based on color and they strive to emulate him in their interactions with each other—but a pious wish is still a wish if it does not correspond to reality. Even in the relationship between church members and their pastor, race matters.

For instance, race serves as an amplifier of already difficult situations. Even the possibility of racial overtones is enough to complicate instruction or criticism in the church. Participant B shared a problem that arose at his church regarding what he called "The Parent Voice," i.e., explaining something to an adult with the condescension usually reserved for a child. He said, "When someone asks me to do something they would expect me to do it. It's really difficult sometimes to have a discussion without using the parent voice. So now, if you're on the receiving end of the parent voice, it's very easy to say, 'It's because I'm black' and, 'He's

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<sup>44</sup> My own experience working with pastors in cross-cultural settings suggests this is often the case on their part as well.

looking down on me,' as opposed to, 'He doesn't like what I did do or didn't do.'"<sup>45</sup>

One thing all the research participants stressed was that, no matter the impact the race of their pastor had on them, it was more significant for those who were not members of the church. Participant H pointed out that many times people “want to find a reason not to go [to church] instead of a reason to go.” Having a “[seemingly] judgmental white dude up there” might be just the excuse they are looking for. He recalled a funeral service for an infant in which his pastor mentioned that babies were sinful. His friends who were visiting took offense, causing Participant H to wonder, “If it was a black [pastor], would they be tripping or just trying to nitpick something that’s not even an issue? This is in the Bible, but you just get mad because a white person said it.”

Similarly, several participants mentioned frustration with people who refused to even visit their church because of their white pastor. Participant F shared that even though his church is largely black, they have the reputation of being a “white church.” He attributed this largely to his white pastor:

Almost every other black church that isn't Catholic or Lutheran has black preachers—black woman preachers, black man preachers.... It comes up more than you think, man. It kind of sucks because it shouldn't matter what race your pastor is. It kind of upsets me.... I think a lot of the community people have the same type of mindset when it comes to a church having a white pastor: “Oh, that pastor, he doesn't know. They only care about people in that building. They don't care about the community. They don't care about real black people.” It's hard to change people's belief systems who have been going to black churches their entire lives.

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<sup>45</sup> To further complicate matters, Participant B's church saw a series of white pastors treat their largely black congregation as a stepping stone by consistently leaving at the first opportunity. He characterized their attitude as, “I'm the missionary coming to help you poor black people.” As he said, “so how many times do you think that could happen before the trust thing goes right out the window?”

While not all the participants had encountered such complete opposition to white pastors, not one was surprised to hear that it existed. Without being prompted, several guessed that a black pastor might remove some of those barriers. Participant A admitted to often thinking about the potential benefits of a black pastor for evangelism. He commented, “The biggest thing that’s on my prayer list all the time is ‘How can we be better at delivering the message?’ If that means getting an African American pastor that can relate culturally to our community, then that’s what it means.... I’m not going to sit here and be naïve and think that that doesn’t have an impact. Because it does; it absolutely does.”

Others added, with caution, that a black pastor might also relate better to black members in certain situations. Examples were given of “black problems” that a white pastor might be perceived to not understand or sympathize with, such as financial disorder, drug abuse, or children out of wedlock.<sup>46</sup> Participant F noted that race can serve as an amplifier to the shame and embarrassment already common to life problems such as these. He said, “Sometimes [people with problems] will open up to some of the black leaders around here. Now imagine being a white leader and you know they definitely don’t want to have that conversation.”

Two participants extended this relatability to preaching style, commenting that the lack of the familiar markings of black preaching occasionally makes it difficult for them to listen to

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<sup>46</sup> Even if this is solely a problem of perception, it still creates a difficulty. It may prevent the black church member from approaching the white pastor, much like a church member with a gluttony problem may have difficulty broaching the subject with a super-fit pastor.

sermons.<sup>47</sup> Overall, this desire for black pastors was commonly framed as an internal struggle—not wanting race to matter but not being able to escape the conclusion that it did.

An unexpected theme that arose was the white pastor's connection to white worship. Although none of the interview questions mentioned worship, it became clear that white pastors strongly signal white worship to the black community. Participant E admitted to stereotyping the music at churches with white pastors as "boring." Another participant mentioned that ever since he began attending a church with a white pastor, he feels compelled to listen to gospel music on the radio on the way to and from church to get his fix. Another interviewee frequents a WELS church 20 minutes further from his house in order to sing in a gospel choir, something absent in his home church.

While many of the descriptions of how race mattered were negative, most participants also cited benefits that were specific to the race of their pastor. For example, Participant G sees it as an opportunity in which she and her white pastors "can learn from each other." She enjoys "introducing them to different cultural food ... so they can see."

Participant H has noticed that people, white and black, pay more attention when his white pastor speaks up about race issues. He said:

I think a benefit with him being white is that you can take what he says in a different light, compared to if he was a black pastor saying some of the same things. White people might be able to see something about black culture or black paths better than someone who's actually black. [They might say] "Oh, he's just trying to stick up for black people." But if [pastor] says something it's like, "Okay. He's not black but he still empathizes. He sees this as a problem or this is an issue. All right, this is something that needs to be addressed."

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<sup>47</sup> Participant H wondered if the rigid style of preaching he often hears is particular to WELS Lutheran pastors, noting that he has heard white preachers of other denominations with more diverse styles. That said, he was quick to add that his pastor's sermon delivery "is still on the ish."

Participant B saw this dynamic play out at a neighboring WELS church, noting that the congregation “has made a lot of tremendous progress, thanks partly to [pastor]. He knows how to schmooze and all that kind of stuff and he’s also white. ... [He has] access to both worlds. Biculturalism.” He compared this phenomenon to the boost in cultural currency the Civil Rights Movement received when white people joined, saying, “It’s no accident that the Civil Rights Movement would have made no progress without white people joining in. Sometimes you need somebody else in front.”

A white pastor can also help an African American gain access to personal opportunities that might otherwise be unavailable to them. Participant D noted that joining a predominately white church with a white pastor was an unexpected boost to his career. He said that the combination “has opened up opportunities for me to take a different course in my life, in my career, that probably wouldn’t have come if I continued normally at the church I grew up in. And even if there was a white pastor in that Baptist Church, what I do now is totally different demographics—Lutheran as opposed to Baptist. So just opportunities that I think it has opened up because they wanted me involved. It was the pastor who put my name out there.”

Although none of the participants mentioned Critical Race Theory, their responses confirm its central claim that race has a far broader impact than readily apparent to observers from the majority race. The whiteness of a pastor can be a barrier to reaching intimacy with African American church members and building bridges to the black community. Even when the research participants recalled the benefits of having a white pastor, some of these came as the

result of what Critical Race Theory would call “unjust power structures.”<sup>48</sup> While Critical Race Theory has its flaws, it enlightens this study and shuts down any Pollyanna idea of color blindness in the Lutheran church. Race matters, even in the relationship between church members and their pastor.

### **Talking About Race Matters**

#### Summary

The following quotations illustrate the sub-themes that are summarized as: “Talking About Race Matters.”

*The desire for a biblical paradigm for race discussions:* “I think that it’s definitely hard to separate what’s happening in our country from what the Bible says.”

*The internal angst created by race discussions:* “My mind has been reeling.... The way I view the world changed dramatically after [a seminar on race].”

*The prevalence of race discussions outside of their churches:* “You have other pastors of churches that are stepping out saying, ‘We have to do something about this.’”

*The difficulties of speaking about race:* “That conversation goes wrong, and they may never forgive you.”

*Pastors fear speaking about race:* “I think [white pastors] are intimidated to talk about it because they just don’t want to be offensive.”

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<sup>48</sup> As noted above, some felt the outside world took their church and their problems more seriously when a white pastor represented them.

*Pastors speaking poorly about race:* “He thought for some reason Africans and African Americans are the same. And they are not.”

*Pastors speaking wisely about race:* “[Pastor] is not dismissive. Ever. He’s just not that type of person.”

*The benefits of the pastor addressing race:* “I’m very comfortable sharing these things [about race].... When I have questions about different things, I just shoot him a text.”

## Discussion

### ***Courageous Conversation***

In the book *Courageous Conversations About Race*, Glenn Singleton, president of Pacific Education Group and adjunct professor at San José State University, seeks to remedy the racial achievement gap in education through a process he calls Courageous Conversation. Singleton rejects the three most common explanations for the inequality found in schools: the “liberal interpretation” that blames socioeconomic disparity between races, the “conservative model” that blames a lack of industriousness in black culture, and the “genetic model” that blames a lack of intelligence inherent to the black race.<sup>49</sup> Instead, he builds off Critical Race Theory and focuses on the racial inequity of the educational system itself. He writes, “I ... believe that the racial achievement gap exists and persists because fundamentally schools are not designed to

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<sup>49</sup> Glenn E. Singleton, *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*, Corwin Press, 2014.

educate students of color and indigenous students, and educators continue to lack the will, skill, knowledge, and capacity to affirm racial diversity.”<sup>50</sup>

Singleton outlines a three-step process for this conversation. He begins with Passion, an explanation of the history of educational reform which serves to motivate educators to disregard a color-blind approach and focus on race as “a phenomenon that affects the lives and learning of all children.” Second is Practice, “a step-by-step journey into the race conversation, providing the language, markers, tools, and insights necessary to being and stay in the dialogue.” Last is Persistence, a call for leaders to adopt the practices and strategies necessary to achieve “systemic racial equity transformation.”<sup>51</sup> While Singleton admits that the conversations involved in the process will be challenging for all parties, Singleton argues that without Courageous Conversation the inequity in schools will continue, despite the otherwise well-intentioned efforts of the teachers.

As with Critical Race Theory, I lack the space and the expertise to fully examine the background and implications of everything Singleton proposes in *Courageous Conversations About Race*. Also, despite similarities, the influence of a teacher or administrator in a school setting is not an exact parallel to that of a pastor in a church. That said, Singleton’s central point—the importance of speaking about race openly and wisely—is exactly what I found in the interview process. The interviewees appreciated pastors who left their comfort zone to speak with them, both publicly and privately, about race.

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<sup>50</sup> Singleton, 47.

<sup>51</sup> Singleton, 15-16.

Unfortunately, these conversations were rare. Singleton notes, “Many white Americans have been raised to believe that it is racist to notice race – that it is virtuous to be colorblind, so to speak. Thus, many white educators view talking about race as inappropriate, particularly while in mixed racial company.”<sup>52</sup> The same proved to be true concerning the pastors of the research participants. The pastors either ignored race or did not talk about it as frequently as the participants would have liked.

### ***Application of Courageous Conversation***

As Singleton notes, it is understandable that pastors would be reluctant to speak about a subject like race. Participant B, after commenting that he had never heard a white pastor say anything about race, said, “Discussions about race ... are very uncomfortable conversations for probably 90% of the people in the world. So which pastor would be willing to take that chance? It is a risk. Because that conversation goes wrong, and they may never forgive you.” Two other participants mentioned that the unwillingness of their pastors to talk about race may be exasperated by the aggressive way African Americans often approach the topic. When Participant C was asked if he had ever heard a white pastor talk about race, he responded, “Not really, not really. Because a lot of them, all of us, even black people, that’s a subject that we really don’t want to tackle. And when black people tackle it, they tackle it from an attack point of view. You know, Black Lives Matter.”

Several research participants recognized that the conversation around race in America is often politically charged. Thus, they suspected that their pastors feared that discussions about

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<sup>52</sup> Singleton, 129.

race would cause disagreements with church members. One mentioned the tension that comes from knowing that his pastor voted for President Trump. Another, discussing his pastors' apparent reluctance to talk about race issues, said, "Maybe their opinion is just different, and they don't want to state that opinion because it may hurt somebody's feelings, or they may lose members or something like that. Who knows?" (Participant D).

Singleton argues that this apparent reluctance to speak openly about race in fear of someone getting upset or uncomfortable has led to ineffective and aimless diversity training in schools. Instead, "Courageous Conversation ... asks participants to agree to experience discomfort so they can deal with the reality of race and racism in an honest and forthright way." In a similar way, if a pastor chooses comfort over Courageous Conversation with church members, it comes at a cost.<sup>53</sup>

Participant D mentioned that failure to talk about the worship preferences of African Americans has led to ineffective evangelism strategies. A recent outreach event at his church did not incorporate any of the heart music of the black community—gospel music and spirituals. He advised, "Listen to members. Or, if you are evangelizing your community, go ask them, 'What would you like to see in your church? What would keep you coming back? What would bring you in here?' Then make some decisions instead of just staying here and coming up with what you think they want to hear."

Additionally, the pastor's silence on race issues can signal indifference to his congregation, especially considering the recent rise in racial tensions and the willingness of

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<sup>53</sup> Of course, church members may also be responsible for dodging these difficult conversations. This does not minimize the pastor's responsibility as spiritual leader.

pastors of other denominations to speak out. Participant D added, “You have a lot of this tension that’s going on in our city now, and even some close to [church]. You have other pastors of churches that are stepping out saying, ‘We have to do something about this. We have to come together as a community.’ That’s not happening at our church. Why isn’t that happening at our church? And I think that could have something to do with having a white pastor.”<sup>54</sup> A pastor may have reasons for not thrusting himself into the middle of the public conversation on race relations, but a failure to compellingly communicate those reasons to church members can signify that he does not care about something that is central to their lives.

Furthermore, silence on the part of spiritual leaders deprives church members of a biblical framework for interpreting the increasingly sharp rhetoric surrounding race. Participant A commented on the recent uptick in racial tensions:

I think that it’s definitely hard to separate what’s happening in our country from what the Bible says. It’s definitely one of the hardest things right now. Our faith is being tested now more than I can remember. And I’m not that old! It’s definitely changing the way people are thinking about worldly things.... I think [talking openly about race] has been what our congregation is starving for because, like I said, it’s every day. It’s in every aspect of your life. You’re trying to understand—What does all this mean?

For Participant A, it does not matter if the pastor giving him the framework is white. He continued, “I am of the understanding that these are the conversations we need to be having and for me it doesn’t matter who is leading the conversations. They need to be happening. And as long as you’re coming from a standpoint of understanding and trying to really grasp what exactly does it mean, then I’m okay with that.”

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<sup>54</sup> For background to Participant D’s comments regarding racial tension in Milwaukee, see, German Lopez, “Milwaukee’s Riot Didn’t Happen in a Vacuum.” *Vox Media*, (August 2016), <https://www.vox.com/2016/8/15/12480930/milwaukee-riots-race-segregation-police> and <http://mpl.org/blog/now/milwaukees-long-history-of-race>.

Participant F shared a negative result that can come from the lack of an appropriate biblical framework for talking about race. Referring to a recent seminar at which he was exposed to the concepts of Critical Race Theory and structural racism, he said: “My mind has been reeling after the seminar. It’s never great when your entire belief system is challenged. Not my spiritual life, but the way I view the world changed dramatically after that class and I feel like I succeeded or I’m doing all right in life is because I learned to assimilate into white culture. I learned to live as a black man in a white world.”

Another, Participant E, noted that his daughter was already confronted with the potential divisiveness of race in the first grade. He said:

And it’s just because, unfortunately how because our society is. It’s always, division is always brought up in a certain way. And to be honest, that is taught. I can’t really break it down in any other way. That is taught.... And you’re going to carry that with you throughout your adult life because the seed gets planted very early. So I can say that some of the kids probably at [church], probably look at a white pastor and the white teachers a certain way because of that. Because of what was told to them about white people from their family.

Finally, a pastor who refuses to speak about race and racism robs his members of the opportunity to repent of race-related sin. The stakes are nothing less than eternal life for the member and the guilt of the blood under his watch for the pastor.<sup>55</sup> Participant C, when asked if it would be helpful for pastors to talk more openly about race, noted that he has witnessed white church members commit numerous acts of conscious and unconscious racism. He commented:

I could go on and on with those stories. If you don’t get your heart right, do you think you’re going to be in heaven? If you have a real serious issue that I hate— “If a black person comes to my door I’m going to shoot him”— do you think that person is going to

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<sup>55</sup> Ezekiel 33:7-9.

be in heaven? A lot of white people that talk like that think they're going to be in heaven. And I wonder why you think like that. God says it. "If you hate your brother you are a murderer." You can repent—they say you may see Jeffrey Dahmer in heaven—you can repent. But you can't play with God neither. When it comes to that, a lot of people think, "I can get this one past God." I think the conversation should have happened already [in church].

As one participant put it, "That's the only way we get better at understanding—having difficult conversations" (Participant F). Whatever the reason for the reticence, a pastor's failure to speak to church members about race and racism can have serious detrimental effects on his relationship with church members and on their spiritual health. Fortunately, silence on the part of the pastors has not been the only experience of the interviewees. Several had pastors who spoke openly and wisely about race, both in the pulpit and in private conversation, and they benefitted from this experience.

Participant G described a series of retreats run by her pastor "so we could get some things out in the open." She admitted that even at the retreat these discussions were not easy, saying, "In the beginning, it's kind of hard. Because you're afraid that you're going to step on somebody's toes. There's always a way to say anything without stepping on anybody's toes, there really is." In her case, the difficult conversations paid off, as she and other church members developed a closer relationship with her pastor. She said, "We can talk on different subjects, on racism, and no one gets upset. We're just talking about the way things are, and he's more discerning—that he knows there's an issue."

Participant F shared that his pastor has been able to achieve similar openness without retreats:

Sometimes when some people hear anything about race, especially white men, unfortunately, man, they either get defensive, they shut it down, or they act like it's not a problem. And [pastor] is not that way, ever—dismissive. He's just not that type of

person. Even if it might be the most outrageous claim that has nothing to do with race, [pastor] will take his time to digest it. He might not agree with it! But he's going to find the most positive way possible to communicate something without making you feel like you did anything wrong by bringing it up. I mean, that's what makes him special. That's what makes him an awesome person. He's willing to listen, to digest, to better understand, to grow, and if we had more pastors like that.

Aside from personal conversations, several participants appreciated hearing their pastors address race in the pulpit. In this public setting, however, a more indirect tone was described. When asked if his pastors ever talked about race publicly, Participant C was proud to say they did, sharing, "We talked about these feel-good churches—they want you to feel good when you leave. We don't have those pastors. They will tackle some subjects; they just don't call it the black and white subject. They will tackle it as racism, but more subtle than anybody."

Participant H shared a similar experience, "Like when [pastor] is telling stories, he definitely mentions or talks about different dividing forces and how the devil can be active in trying to divide our race—promote hatred. And so being we are susceptible in our society because we hear it all the time." When asked how he responded to this preaching, he continued, "Oh, I was happy he brought it up. I think the more real, the more straightforward it can be, the better it is. You can't with certain topics, you can't sugar coat it or beat around the bush. But really apply it to the heart." As a result, he and his pastor share a close relationship, so much so that when asked if he felt comfortable sharing race-related issues with his pastor, he responded, "I'm very comfortable sharing these things.... That's the only way he can grow and that's the only way that I can grow. Different things, different insights that he can provide for me. It's not a big deal for me. When I have questions about different things, I just shoot him a text."

As these research participants described it, the skills required to have these courageous conversations successfully were not complex, nor did their pastors have a vast array of prior experience in cross-cultural ministry or Glenn Singleton seminars. Instead, they exhibited basic skills such as empathy, a willingness to learn outside of one's comfort zone, and an open mind. And the response was consistently positive and appreciative.<sup>56</sup>

As Participant E explained, most often, a genuine effort is the most important factor for the success of these conversations:

If people are people following the Lord they know you're not perfect. So they're going to understand that you're not going to know their culture because you are from a different culture. Same way with a pastor coming from a background where there is no black people. If they didn't understand my culture, that's going to be cool because you're not black. So I can't expect you to understand everything or where I'm coming from. But I do expect you to be engaging and to want to know and try to learn. But if you don't do that, that looks strange.<sup>57</sup>

In fact, only one participant classified a race-related discussion with a pastor as negative. Participant G mentioned a pastor who often claimed to understand the African American experience because he had spent time on the continent of Africa. It was obvious to her that he conflated Africans with African Americans—as if everyone with dark skin were the same. The same pastor occasionally brought up O.J. Simpson, one of the most racially divisive figures in United States' history, as an example of a bad person in his sermons. Even then,

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<sup>56</sup> This echoed my experience as I carried out this project. After speaking openly about race in eight interviews and a half-dozen informal discussions over the last few months, I can't recall the conversation ever feeling particularly difficult or dangerous. The research participants were willing to speak with me and open to answering any questions I had. In fact, they often thanked me for broaching the subject.

<sup>57</sup> Participant E noted that his pastors "never mentioned a background with pastoring black people or any other ethnicity." In fact, one pastor "came from a tiny town of probably 10 people." Nonetheless, he said, "In my dealings with them and seeing them, they are all comfortable" and the congregation members responded with trust.

Participant G was more incredulous than offended. She recalled with laughter, “Why do we have to go there? I don’t know. You pick the one person in the world that caused the most problems, that broke up America. Guess what? If [America] ever were together, after O.J., it all fell apart! And he brought up O.J. two times in a sermon!”

Courageous Conversations can have pitfalls. Glenn Singleton writes, “Addressing the impact of race in education is not a ‘feel-good’ experience.”<sup>58</sup> Participant G used the analogy of a wrestling match, saying, “Until you learn the fundamentals, I wouldn’t suggest you step on the mat. It’s going to hurt. It is very much like that, if you don’t know the basics you don’t want to step in here.” But in the case of Courageous Conversation, the fundamentals are not a complex series of holds but enthusiasm and basic communication skills, both of which should be in any pastor’s toolkit. Unfortunately, the enthusiasm is often lacking, leading pastors to downplay or dodge the subject. Thus, race issues often go unaddressed, leaving the pastor and the church member poorer as a result. As Participant D stated, “If you’re a pastor, there’s things that you should naturally be willing to do and reach out of the comfort zone. Because you’re a pastor. I mean, you’re in this environment. You’re in this demographic. God has placed you here for a reason. Are you taking advantage of that?”

## **Paths to Transcendence**

### Summary

The following quotations illustrate the sub-themes that are summarized as: “Paths to Transcendence.”

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<sup>58</sup> Singleton, 49-50.

*Prior exposure to white culture:* “So it’s kind of one of those things that became a norm. So having a pastor up there who was of a different race had no bearing on much for me.”

*Seeking out white churches:* “Some people hate going to a Baptist church, even black people.”

*Race is not insurmountable:* “No one has ever made the comment, ‘I’m leaving this church because of [white pastors].’”

*Race is often not a concern:* “I would think most black members would not mind [having a white pastor] at all.”

*Transcendence of the Word of God:* [Race] was never an issue at all. It was about the Word and what I was hearing and whether I can relate and understand what they were saying.”

*The power of the Holy Spirit:* “Whether or not it’s an African American pastor doing it or a white pastor or whoever, I think the Holy Spirit will work through whoever is there.”

## Discussion

### **Ballast**

Studies like this one often have their genesis in a perceived imbalance or gap in research. Indeed, as shown in the Literature Review, scholars of religious sociology have generally failed to isolate the impact of race on the relationship between a white pastor and African American church members. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter Two, because of apathy, ignorance, or fear, pastors rarely broach this subject with church members. Through research and the experiences of the interviewees, it has been demonstrated that race matters and talking about

race matters. Thus, in an oblique way, the first two chapters of this paper argue for more frequent conversation and greater transparency regarding race in the Lutheran church.

The temptation in studies like this one, then, is to overcorrect. What was previously underreported or underrated becomes the central issue. One proposed solution, out of many, becomes the only right way to address this issue. Soon enough, the pendulum has swung up in the other direction, silencing viewpoints and alienating listeners along the way.<sup>59</sup>

Besides the futility of this approach, which is rhetorical hyperbole at best, in this case it would also be a disservice to the power of God's Word. As one urban pastor put it:

The gospel has been jumping across cultures since Egyptians chose to march out of Egypt with the Israelites, since Philip baptized an African, since a Jewish ex-fisherman came to see an Italian military officer as his brother, since the Greeks told the Russians about Christ, Spanish Franciscans told the Aztecs, the Jesuits told the Japanese, and German Pietists sailed for India. Cross-cultural ministry is happening all over ... and it will continue until Jesus comes back for his people.<sup>60</sup>

Furthermore, the total pervasiveness of race is not the story as told by the research participants. While only one of the pertinent pastors had attended a Courageous Conversation seminar, this had not prevented the other interviewees from actively participating in congregational life under their white pastors. Though some interviewees shared a deep desire for more African American pastors, an equal number claimed it was not a pressing concern for them. To state the obvious, the research participants are members of congregations in an overwhelmingly white synod of a historically Germanic denomination with an almost entirely

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<sup>59</sup> An example of such an overstatement is found in *Courageous Conversations About Race*. Singleton writes, "As you examine this prompt further and begin to deeply investigate race personally, you will come to recognize that race impacts every aspect of your life 100% of the time." Singleton, 90-91.

<sup>60</sup> Mark Jeske, "Concern for the City," *Northwestern Lutheran Magazine* (September 1998).

Caucasian ministerium. This fact alone testifies to how race has been transcended, at least to some extent, in their lives. The following section provides a snapshot of how this came to be.

### ***Findings***

Participant C noted, “You can look for [race] problems and find them anywhere you go. If you look hard enough, if you dig with the shovel, you can overturn a whole lot of can of worms.”

He, however, chose a different approach when he first began to visit a Lutheran church.

Although Participant C found the experience and the pastors in the Lutheran church far different from the church in which he grew up, he said it did not matter because “in my heart is the gospel. It doesn’t make a difference as long as [the pastor] is preaching the word—the Word of God—I’m happy.” He wished more people would look past differences and do the same. Instead of digging up worms, they could “open up some knowledge and read the Bible.” Many of the research participants who participated in this study had done exactly that.

While the ways in which the research participants came to attend Lutheran churches varied, the most common denominator was prior exposure to white culture. Four of the participants attended Lutheran grade schools as children, and three of those also attended Lutheran high schools and colleges. They described a gradual racial awakening, with one saying, “You know as a kid, you really don’t think about [the race of your pastor] a whole lot” (Participant F). Another added that it was not a big surprise to realize his pastor was a different race, but “kind of Captain Obvious” (Participant H).

Another participant attended public grade school in the predominantly white Milwaukee suburb of Mequon. Because of that he said, “Nothing about the pastor being white did anything to me. But at the same time, I had a different background because I went to school

in Mequon public school system. I had white teachers ever since I was in first grade. So that's what I was used to seeing" (Participant E). Participant D, who attended a predominately white college, echoed this, "It's kind of one of those things that became a norm. So having a pastor up there who was of a different race had no bearing on much for me." These participants were generally unbothered by having a white pastor and, in fact, did not even find it noteworthy until adulthood.

On the other end of the spectrum, unsatisfying exposure to Black Church and black culture drove some research participants to seek out a different religious experience. As Participant H put it, "Some people hate going to a Baptist church, even black people. Because they don't want to be there all day. They don't want to be running up and down hollering and screaming. They don't want to be there for three hours." Several pointed to a desire to avoid the more extreme aspects of Black Church as their initial motivation for attending a WELS church, even as they continued to appreciate seeing some cultural markers of Black Church in a Lutheran setting.

Participant G described the contrast she experienced when she first attended a WELS church. She said, "I was going to my mom's church at the time, which is a Pentecostal church. They can be a little long-winded—four hours! When I was younger, we all would get there for Sunday school at 9:30 and then it would be 2:30. And they're still trying to make it last! As long as they enjoy themselves, that's fine. But it became a little bit too much for me." She found services in a WELS church, on the other hand, to be considerably more restrained.

This participant also appreciated the different expectation for pastoral support at her WELS church. When asked if she saw any benefits connected to having a white pastor, she

responded, “Well, I don’t have to buy him a Cadillac!” She explained that one of her friends who had also become Lutheran had left her former church after being ostracized for not wanting to buy the pastor a Cadillac. For her and several of her friends, the Lutheran church felt familiar theologically without the flamboyance that sometimes accompanies Black Church.

Participant D, who grew up Baptist, told a similar story. After visiting a Catholic church several times, he was intrigued by the clear and relatable messages but wary of the doctrine they contained. He said, “What I liked about the Catholic Church was that I could literally understand what the priest was saying. If you’ve ever been to a Baptist church, they can get a little loud and sometimes you don’t get the point. So [at the Catholic church] I can understand, I can relate to some of the stories. And it was short. There were a lot of other things that I just can’t get with within the Catholic denomination.”

In the end, both participants were won to the Lutheran church by the strength of God’s Word clearly proclaimed. Participant D described how he felt when he first attended a Lutheran church, “Still the same conversational-type tone from the pastor to the congregation. The length of the service was good, but the all the other stuff kind of fit. It wasn’t like it was far left from the way I grew up. So I say, ‘I can do this. I kind of like this.’” Participant G described a lengthier process that included several false starts in Bible Information Classes. But one day, after a “wonderful message”, her young son asked her why they couldn’t join that church. She recalled, “And then I said to myself, ‘A little child shall lead you.’ And that’s when I went back and signed up with the pastor.”

Racial differences, while significant, are no match for the power of God’s Word. “Whether or not it’s an African American pastor doing it or a white pastor or whoever, I think

the Holy Spirit will work through whoever is there” (Participant A). Part of the Holy Spirit’s work is leading the sheep to recognize the voice of their shepherd. He does so with the power of the living sword, penetrating racial barriers and cutting through prejudice and presuppositions. Throughout the interview process, research participants expressed a desire to hear God’s Word, regardless of the skin color of the man speaking the words. Participant E emphasized, “If you’re trying to get the Word of God, it doesn’t matter whose mouth it comes out of. And it’s not like you can’t go and read it. If you tell me something, I can go check it out. There’s a book called the Bible where all the information you share with me is right in there.”

## CONCLUSION

The eight Christians who participated in this study do not speak for all minorities. They do not even fully represent the experience of black WELS Lutherans living in Milwaukee. They are, however, real people in real churches with real pastors. A careful study of their words, in concert with historical background and pertinent race theories, provides a window into the role of race in the Lutheran church. Race matters, and it matters to minorities in a way the majority culture does not understand except through careful conversation.

This truth humbled me throughout the process of writing this paper. In grade school, my two best friends were first-generation immigrants from India and Guyana. At my first secondary school, I was the only white boy out of over 500 students.<sup>61</sup> Later, in high school, I shared a bus with my inner-city travel basketball team for two summers. In short, without ever asking an

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<sup>61</sup> My nickname was, appropriately, “White Boy.”

African American what they thought about having a white pastor, I assumed I knew what I would find.

My beliefs and presuppositions were challenged in this project. What I thought would be important frequently was not, and things that I never thought would matter, do. While the conclusions of this paper might not be groundbreaking, the process was enriching, and I am wiser for it. If nothing else, this is a call to recognize the benefits of open conversations about the intersection of race and Christianity.<sup>62</sup>

This does not, of course, diminish the power of the gospel to transcend every barrier imaginable, including culture and race. As Isaiah prophesied God's words to the coming Messiah, "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6). My father, who grew up in rural Minnesota and does not recall a single significant interaction with a black person until seventh grade, found that out. His ministry has been rich with successful cross-cultural experiences in two world mission fields and one inner-city congregation. He invited that guest preacher to speak those two Sundays many years ago.<sup>63</sup> Jesus' disciples experienced this power first-hand when they watched their Lord minister to Syrophenician and Samaritan women. Philip the Evangelist

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<sup>62</sup> Several other questions arose but ultimately fell outside the scope of this research. How compatible are the claims of Critical Race Theory with biblical teaching? What, if any, is the moral responsibility of Christians to confront structural racism? Considering the tremendous influence of Critical Race Theory on politics and society, as well as the destructive nature of the Social Gospel Movement, there is a great need for thorough, balanced, and biblical perspectives. Also, the largest minority population in the WELS and in the United States is Latino. What impact does the whiteness of a pastor make on Latinos? How do they, and other minorities, process and relate to historically Lutheran worship practices? Finally, some work has been done to recruit and train more minority pastors. What more can be done so the WELS ministerium reflects the diversity found in the United States?

<sup>63</sup> One member told him, "We love you, pastor. But it is so good to see someone who looks like us."

saw the gospel work in the heart of an African eunuch. Jewish Christians in Jerusalem watched in amazement as Christianity exploded prejudice and racism across the Mediterranean.

The transcendent power of God's Word displayed in and through the research participants puts race in its place. Race matters, and if not spoken about openly and wisely often has a detrimental impact on church members and their relationship with their pastor. But the ultimate problem, at the root of every racist remark, false presupposition, and unjust structure, is sin. The only solution to sin is a Savior who died to remove a wall of hostility far more imposing than race—a Savior who conquered death and promises to one day not abolish race but transcend it for eternity. He will gather his sheep from "every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Revelation 7:9) to praise him with one voice. In the meantime, may God bless our efforts here on earth to bring our churches to resemble that joyous assembly.

## APPENDIX. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are your first memories of going to a Lutheran church?
  - a. If they grew up non-Lutheran...
    - i. How was the Lutheran church different from your previous experiences in church?
    - ii. What were your feelings about the race of the pastor at the time?
  - b. If they grew up Lutheran...
    - i. How did you become aware that the pastor was a different race than you?
    - ii. What were your feelings about it at the time?
2. At what times do you find yourself especially conscious of the fact that your pastor is of a different race?
  - a. What benefits do you find in that?
  - b. How does that challenge you?
3. Were there any particular experiences that changed how you think about race and your pastor?
  - a. How have recent racial tensions affected your thinking on this?
4. What do you face in your daily life that your pastor might not be able to relate to?
  - a. How comfortable are you sharing these things with your pastor?
5. Do you talk with other African-American members about the race of your pastor?
  - a. What are those conversations like?
  - b. Would you initiate those conversations? Why or why not?
  - c. Are there things you feel other white members don't understand about your relationship with your pastor?
    - i. What do you wish you could tell them?
6. What do your non-Lutheran friends and family think about your church?
  - a. Are there things you feel other African Americans don't understand about your relationship with your pastor?
  - b. How do you respond?
7. How has your pastor addressed race...
  - a. From the pulpit?
    - i. How do you respond?
  - b. In private conversation?
    - i. How do you respond?
8. What do you appreciate most about your pastor?
  - a. Why do you appreciate that?
  - b. What could he say or do differently to help you feel more comfortable?
9. Are there any other questions that I should have asked, but didn't?

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