

Race and Ethnicity

Summary: Many Christian churches in America carry violent legacies of settler colonialism and slavery, and yet many are filled with remarkable diversity and prophetic voices for justice. Across denominations, Christians create communities and traditions informed by their racial and ethnic identities, and many see their faith as an imperative to reckon with racism in the country today.

The United States in the 21st century is home to perhaps the most diverse and varied Christian population on Earth, with Christians of Indigenous, European, African, Asian, and Latin American birth or descent. This great racial and ethnic diversity poses both challenges and opportunities for America's Christians. With the new immigration that began in 1965, the racial and ethnic diversity of American Christians has grown greater than ever, recasting the already complex issues of race and ethnicity.

In addition to its vast diversity, American Christianity is characterized by the dialectic tension between its history of oppression and colonialism, and its ability to be a prophetic voice of justice and a spiritual home for many. Native American Christians today worship in Protestant churches in Oklahoma, in Catholic parishes in Arizona, and in Russian Orthodox churches in Alaska. They carry with them the legacy of missions, the rich resources of their own Native cultural heritage, and the continuing struggle to retain their identity. The violent history of colonial settlement and displacement has led some Christian churches to apologize publicly for the role their churches played in the injustices done to Native peoples. In 1987, for example, the leaders of ten Christian denominations in the Pacific Northwest issued a "formal apology on behalf of our churches for their long-standing participation in the destruction of traditional Native American spiritual practices" and pledged a "commitment of mutual support in your efforts to reclaim and protect the legacy of your own traditional spiritual teachings." In 2007, the Episcopal Church and representatives from many Native American tribes met in Jamestown, Virginia to affirm a "new covenant of faith" that would integrate more fully the experiences of Native people into the life of the church.

Justice for Black Americans is also an ongoing challenge and task for Christian churches. For Christians today and throughout the history of the U.S., challenging racism and structures of racial oppression has been central to the reconciling work of the church. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s

involved the work, leadership, and commitment of many Christians, most prominently the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Inspired by the deepest values of Christianity, these Christians condemned institutional structures and practices that upheld a racially segregated society and, in many cases, a racially segregated church. As King put it in *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community* (1967), “Over the last five years many religious bodies—Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish—have been in the vanguard of the civil rights struggle, and have sought desperately to make the ethical insights of our Judeo-Christian heritage relevant on the question of race. But the church as a whole has been all too negligent on the question of civil rights. It has too often blessed a status quo that needed to be blasted and reassured a social order that needed to be reformed.”

While many gains have been made, race is still a major issue for Christian churches. Some local churches are still, in effect, racially segregated. Others, however, have intentionally cultivated racially inclusive congregations and have expressed a commitment to racial justice in their life of worship and service. In the midst of this struggle, the historic Black denominations, such as the National Baptist Convention of America and the African Methodist Episcopal Church, have worked to preserve a strong identity while also challenging all Christians to a new vision of racial equality and justice. Many large denominations like the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have active Black caucuses that bring Black Christians together for planning and action.

In the context of still deep and unresolved racial tensions in American society, the “new immigration” has called attention to an even more complex set of racial and ethnic issues. Native Americans, Euro-Americans, and African Americans now have Korean American, Indian American, Arab American, and Latin American neighbors. The opportunities for stereotyping and discrimination have grown, as have the opportunities for understanding and community-building. Efforts like the grassroots ethnic associations within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are but one example of these commitments within multicultural ministries today.

The past decades of immigration have also brought more forms of Christianity to American shores. Asian churches, for example, have demonstrated extraordinary growth. There are new denominations, such as the Church of South India and the Mar Thoma Church. There are new congregations of

Vietnamese Catholics, Korean Presbyterians, Samoan Methodists, and Chinese Evangelicals. Older communities of Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino Christians, who have experienced the vulnerability of being small ethnic minorities in the United States for nearly a century, have now increased in numbers and become more vocal. Today, many Christians are addressing the issue of anti-Asian racism in their churches, and there are Asian American caucuses within most of the major denominations.

The growing number of Hispanic Christians, now more than 25 million, constitutes one of the most significant transformations of American Christianity. While there is a centuries-old Hispanic population in the United States, new immigrants have come in such large numbers from Mexico, Central America, and Cuba that today 24 percent of American Catholics are Hispanic. The first Hispanic Roman Catholic archbishop was appointed in the early 1970s. Hispanic Christians have brought their own distinctive traditions of Christian faith, theology, and practice to the U.S. While the majority are Catholic, Hispanic Protestant and Pentecostal churches are also growing rapidly in the United States, and Hispanic Christians are gaining a stronger voice in mainstream Protestant denominations as well. The National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, a sister organization to the National Association of Evangelicals, was established in 2001. Since the 1970s, Hispanic priests, pastors, and laity have aided refugees from Central America, given voice to the economic concerns of immigrants, and joined efforts like those of César Chávez to advocate for the rights of exploited farmworkers.

Drawing upon the ministry of Jesus that moved boldly across lines of race, tribe, and ethnicity, demonstrating the universality of God's love and justice, Christian leaders have called the church to be a just and inclusive community that does not erase difference. As Martin Luther King, Jr., penned to the National Council of Churches in 1957, "All men, created alike in the image of God, are inseparably bound together. This is at the very heart of the Christian gospel." For King and many others, Jesus challenges the churches to claim their multidimensional diversity and work together for racial justice.