



# Churches Navigating Racial Tensions

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## Executive Summary

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 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 3:26-28

Although the scriptures teach us that God's love and salvation is for all, our society still struggles with conflict along racial and ethnic lines. This study takes a close look at the experiences and attitudes of regular church attenders and pastors towards race, diversity, and the church.

While 6 out of 10 adults attend a church that is not racially or ethnically diverse, they believe the church body largely reflects its surrounding community. The remaining group is evenly split between those who attend a diverse church and those who attend a church that is not diverse and does not reflect the surrounding community.

Regardless of church type, the majority of respondents and pastors say that racial reconciliation is important to them personally. Respondents who attend diverse churches more strongly agreed that their church promotes social justice, encourages congregants to be active in social justice, intentionally promotes racial diversity, and that racial reconciliation is an important issue in their church and community. Interestingly, they were also more likely to agree that their church needs to become more racially & ethnically diverse.

The opinions of pastors generally resemble those of congregants who attend diverse churches. They strongly endorsed the statement that racial reconciliation is important to them personally, suggesting that their opinions represent those most attuned to and passionate about these issues.

Church attenders attribute a lack of diversity in the church to the fact that communities are often still segregated, people prefer what is comfortable and familiar and diversity of preferred worship styles. Pastors and congregants both see a need for everyone to reach out beyond their comfort zones and beyond the walls of their church.

Both church attenders and pastors emphasized that God has created all people and that Jesus died for all as well. Many spoke of the need to keep those truths central and to work to completely accept people. However, some took this truth to mean that we should ignore racial and ethnic differences all together. Others saw the need to acknowledge different lived realities, while also maintaining unity.

Recent events in the United States have brought racial issues to the forefront of our public and private discourse. The conversations occurring across our country are often emotional, difficult, and necessary.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once called 11am on Sunday "the most segregated hour of Christian America." Today the fact remains that within most congregations a single racial or ethnic group predominates.

In some areas, the Church actively engages with their community about social issues, including race relations. Others distance themselves from the issues, emphasizing that God's grace applies to all.

The Center for Bible Engagement seeks to contribute to the current racial discussions by providing empirical data on how pastors and regular church attenders view the issues. Participants

In June 2020, we conducted online surveys with 409 congregants and 70 pastors.

## Congregants

The 409 respondents to the congregants' survey were recruited from those who use goTandem, a Bible engagement app. The vast majority of respondents (82%) typically attend church weekly. Three out of five (61%) are women. They range in age from 15 to 88, averaging 51.5 years old.

As Figure 1 illustrates, our sample resembles the United States adult population well in terms of race. Sixty-three percent of U.S. adults are white and 12% are African-American/Black ([Kids Count Data Center, 2020](#)). This is quite similar to our 68% and 15%, respectively. However, our sample does underrepresent Hispanic/Latino church attenders (5% vs. 16% in the population).

Figure 1. Race & Ethnicity Among Congregant Sample.

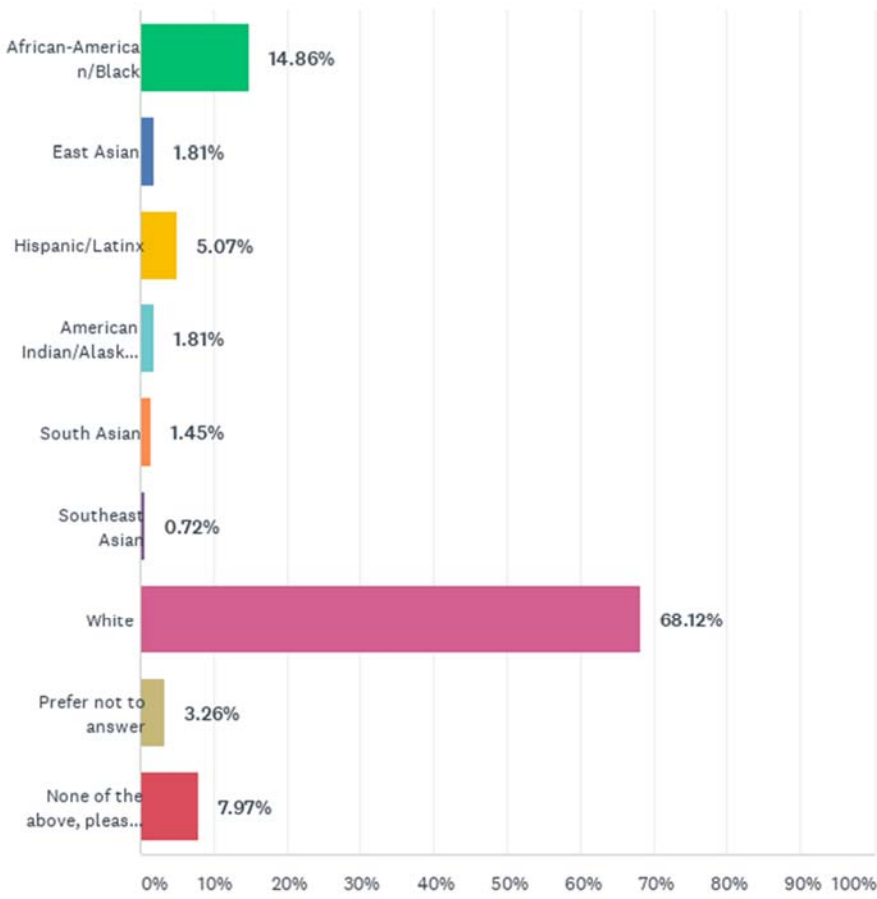
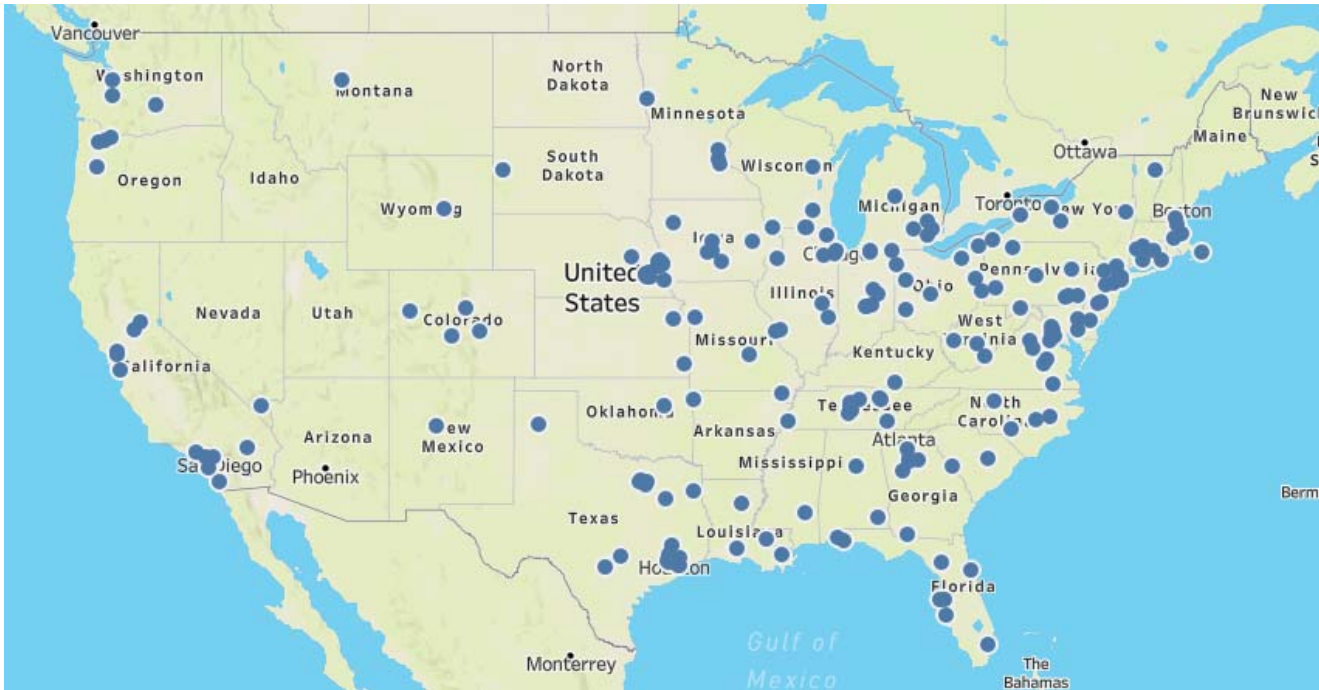
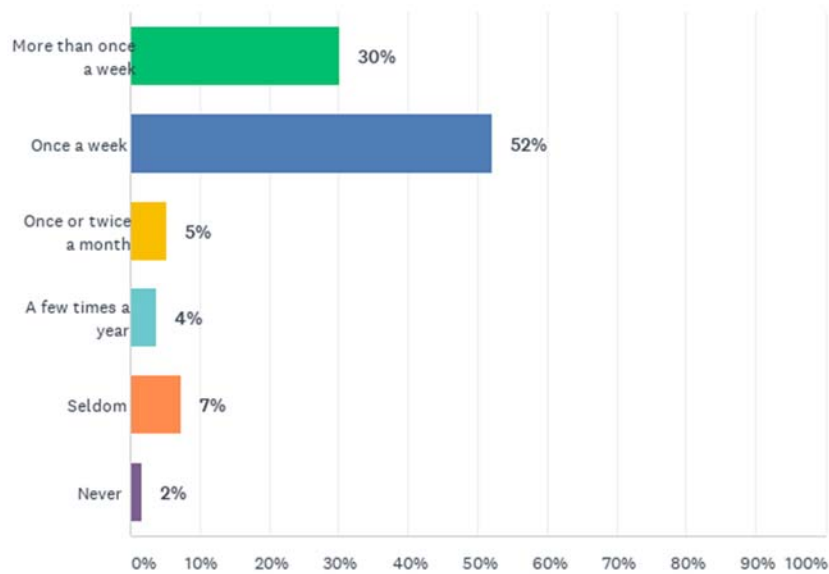


Figure 2. Geographic Distribution of Survey Respondents.



Our participants largely represent frequent church attenders. Half attend church weekly and 30% typically attend more than once a week.

Figure 3. How often do you attend religious or worship services, not including weddings and funerals?



## Pastors

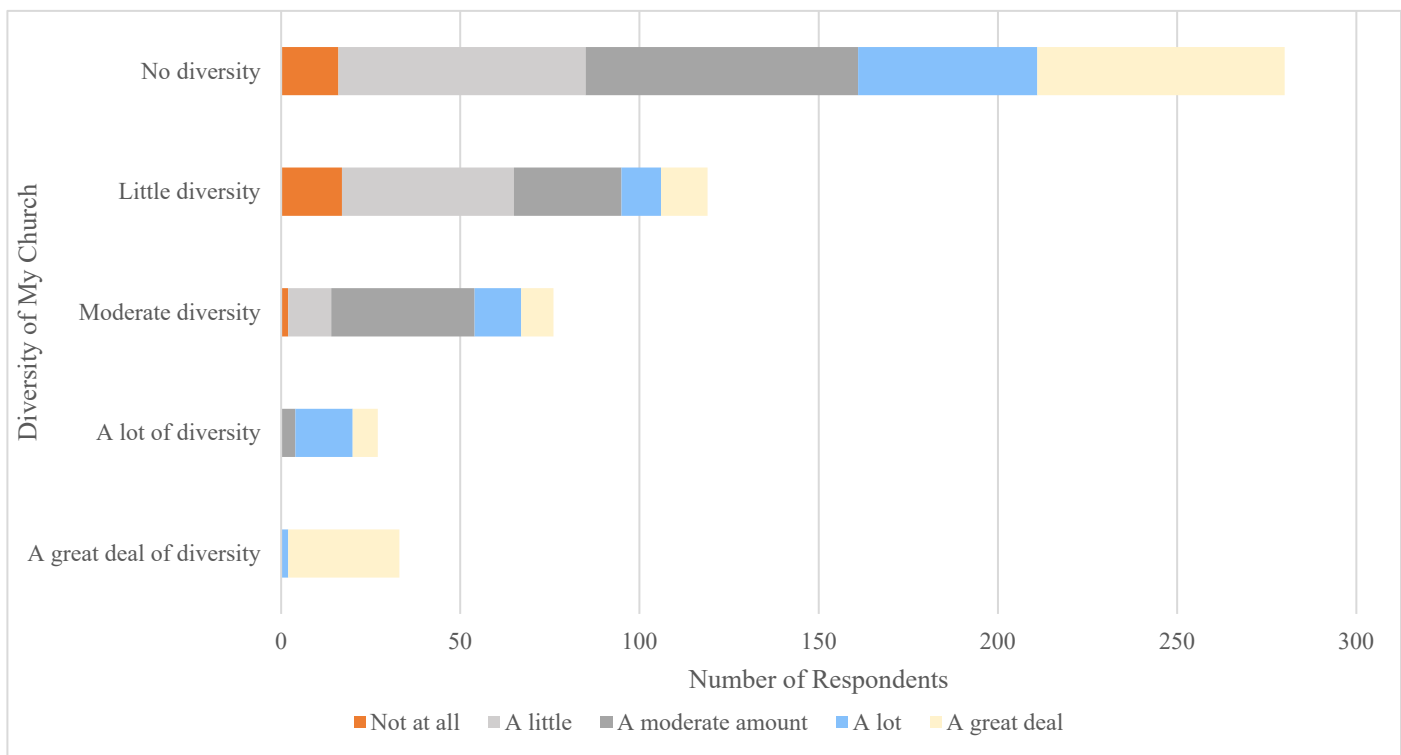
A total of 70 pastors completed our online survey. Most (83%) are men. Seventy-nine percent are white and 15% are African-American. The majority (76%) lead a smaller church with less than 250 adults in attendance. Given the small sample size, the results for pastors should be considered exploratory.

## Diversity & Community Representation

According to the most recent data available, multiethnic congregations (where no one racial or ethnic group makes up 80% or more of the members) have grown in recent decades. Still the majority of church attenders worship at a church that is dominated by one racial or ethnic group.

We asked participants in our survey to describe how diverse their churches are and whether that is representative of their community. Figure 4 shows that most respondents attend a church with no diversity. This generally resembles the composition of the surrounding community.

Figure 4. Congregation Diversity & Representation of Community - Congregants



Note: Bar colors indicate how well the church reflects the surrounding community.

Combining data from these two questions, we find that

- 59% attend a church that isn't very diverse yet is representative of the community.
- 20% attend a church that is diverse and this is representative of the community.
- 21% attend a church that isn't very diverse and this does not represent the community.

African American and white church attenders differ in how they describe their churches. As Figure 5 illustrates, African American congregants are more likely to attend a church that is racially diverse or one that is not diverse and not representative of the surrounding community.

Figure 5. Differences in Congregation Diversity & Representativeness.

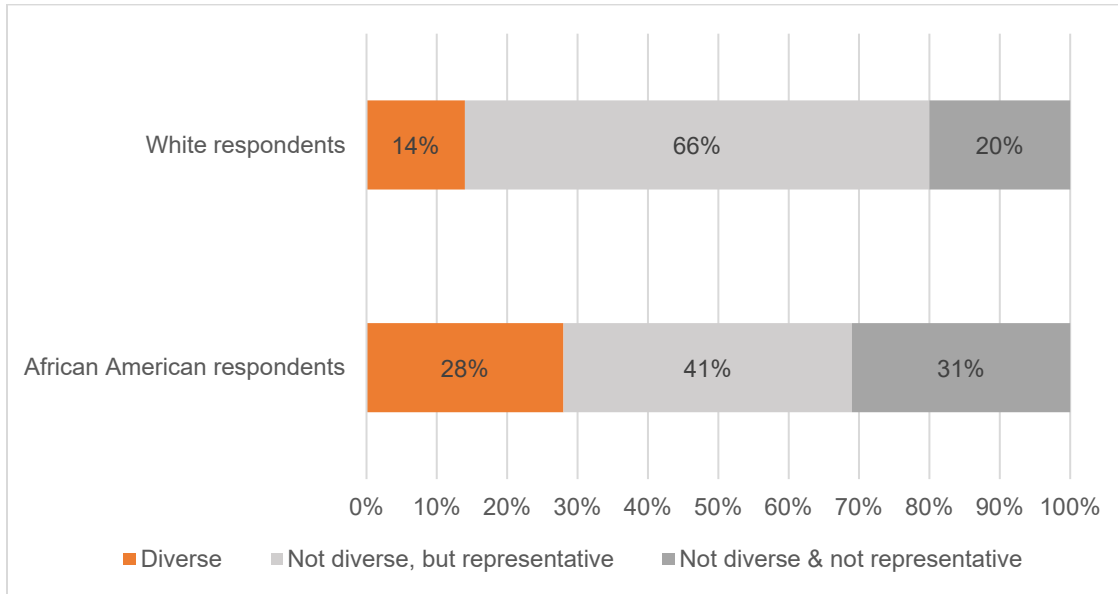
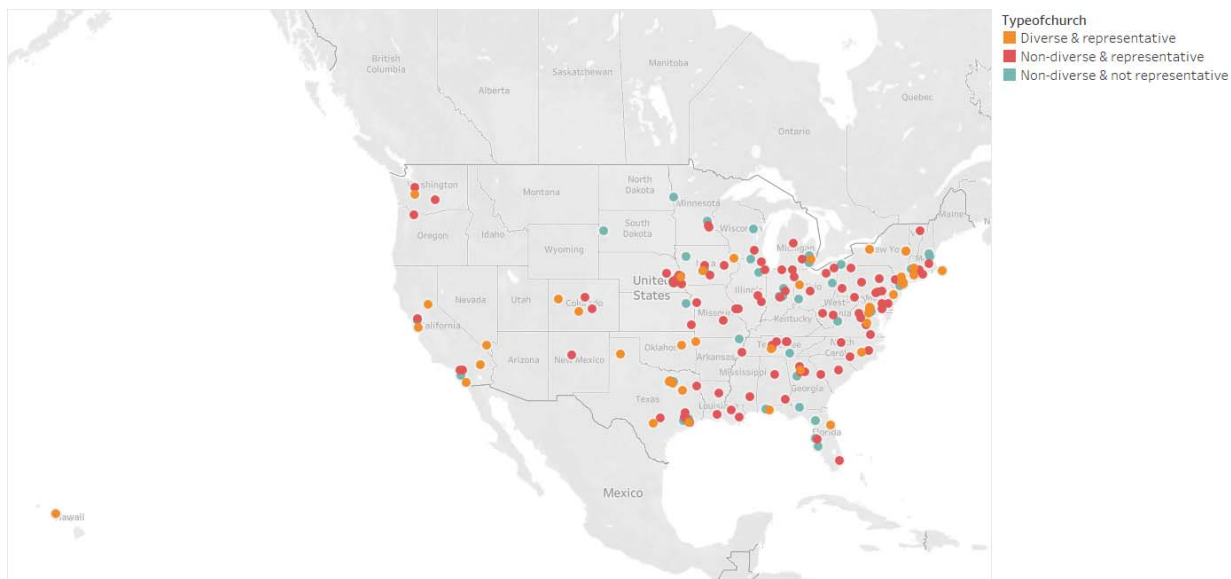


Figure 6 displays the diversity and representativeness of churches by respondents' zip code. In general, West Coast respondents are more likely to attend churches that are diverse or ones that aren't diverse, but not representative of their community.

Figure 6. Type of Church by Respondent Zip Code.



## Perceptions of the Church's Role in Racial Issues

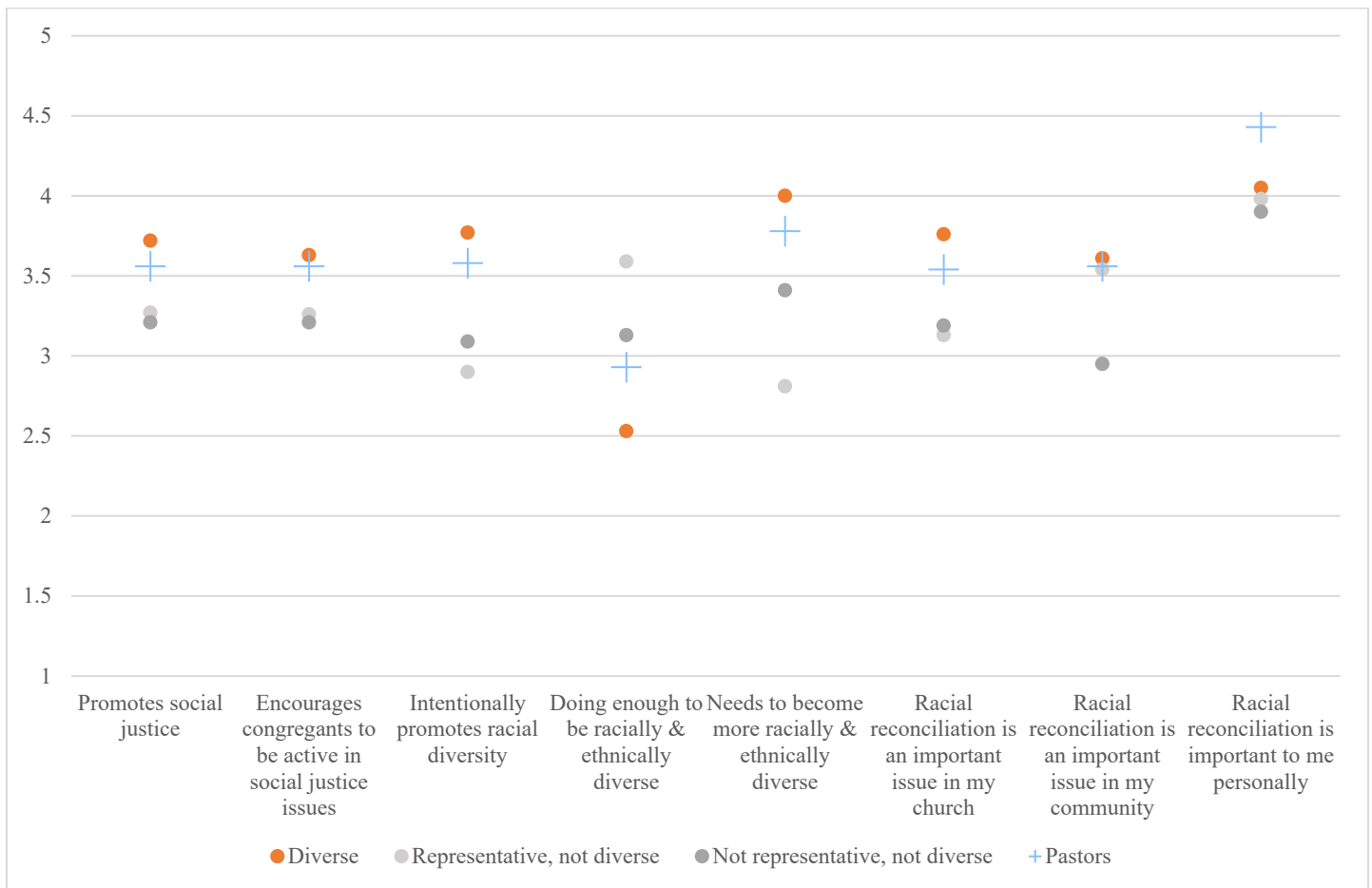
To understand how congregants and pastors are thinking about racial issues, we asked a series of questions about their church and their own personal beliefs. Participants rated each statement on a 5-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5).

Figure 7 displays the mean rating for each statement by pastors and then by congregants in the different church types. We find that, regardless of church type, the majority of respondents and pastors say that racial reconciliation is important to them personally. Respondents who attend diverse churches more strongly agreed that their church promotes social justice, encourages congregants to be active in social justice, intentionally promotes racial diversity, and that racial reconciliation is an important issue in their church and community. Interestingly, they were also more likely to agree that their church needs to become more racially & ethnically diverse.

The opinions of pastors generally resemble those of congregants who attend diverse churches. They strongly endorsed the statement that racial reconciliation is important to them personally, suggesting that their opinions represent those most attuned to and passionate about these issues.

Congregants who attend churches that are not diverse shared similar opinions except for the questions concerning their church's efforts. Respondents who attend churches that are not diverse, but are representative of their communities were the most likely to say their church is doing enough. They are also the least likely to feel that their church needs to do more to be diverse.

Figure 7. Perceptions of Church's Involvement in Racial Issues.



## Why are churches still racially segregated?

We used an open-ended question to solicit congregants' opinions on why church are still racially segregated. Responses centered on three themes:

- Communities are not diverse.
- People prefer to comfort of the familiar.
- Different worship styles contribute to segregation.

The lack of diversity in communities churches serve was the most common response. For example, participants said:

*Not sure but most is because of the community, if the community is not that diverse the church won't be either.*



*My church is in a very rural, predominantly white community. We have a few members of different ethnicities but it is difficult to be a racially diverse church in an area that is not racially diverse.*

*I'm not sure...I guess because we, in a sense, still live in segregated communities/neighborhoods*

A second theme focused on people's tendency to prefer the comfort of the familiar. Responses with this theme include:

*Church is family and we are more comfortable with people with the same culture and beliefs. Race seems to give us a different culture and experiences so we tend to go where our friends and family go. Not that it is the correct thing to do but that is human tendency.*

*Lack of opening up to each other and coming together. Being comfortable or complacent in "how things have been for years and years" and not overtly welcoming or making it known that a place of worship encourages all people to gather.*

*Because people are comfortable and not thinking primarily as Christians first but identifying with their "cultural" norms.*

A related theme identified the nature of church itself. Many respondents felt that different worship styles contributed to separations along racial and ethnic lines:

*Historically, we were segregated, and developed different styles of worship. When segregation ended, the cultural separation did not.*

*I think different styles of preaching and singing feel more comforting and familiar than others to different peoples. That's it.*

*Because our cultures are different. We worship differently.*

## What can the church do better?

Regarding what the church can do better to promote racial reconciliation, both respondents and pastors described the need to reach beyond the church walls and beyond on our comfort levels. For example, church attenders said:

*Having more multi-church, cross-cultural events.*

*I don't think participating in protests is very beneficial. You can march every day with signs but it won't change anything except get people tired of seeing it. Start communicating with folks. Reach out, talk and then devise a plan. Then do it!*

*I think the churches need to speak out more for discrimination issues. They need to let people know that they want to be culturally diverse. I think most Christians accept people of other races. Maybe*

*have meetings about it with the different churches and people getting together. I would love to be a part of that. Maybe I could seek out some of the church leaders to see what they are doing?*

*Publicly welcome guests of color, ethnicity, gender and beliefs. Host a panel and discussion with church leaders from other races to create an inclusion plan for alternating services at one church or another.*

*Join with a church of completely different race and culture for monthly get togethers to worship and relate to one another. Build relationships intentionally.*

Similarly, pastors responded:

*We must make reaching across racial differences a priority in services, communication and outreach.*

*Ministry outside of the church needs to focus on all communities and all types of people. When we can build relationships outside of our churches with people who aren't just like us then we will be more likely to desire to worship together.*

*Stop isolating and focusing on comfort. Don't overcorrect and become social just warriors. Just walk outside and build personal relationships with people in our immediate community that don't look like us or have the same background and interest in us. I believe that this is the solution. It isn't an easy solution. It requires every person to choose to do something uncomfortable. The fruit will all be on the back end, but it will be massive.*

Both church attenders and pastors emphasized that God has created all people and that Jesus died for all as well. Many spoke of the need to keep those truths central and to work to completely accept people. However, some took this truth to mean that we should ignore racial and ethnic differences all together. Others saw the need to acknowledge different lived realities, while also maintaining unity. For example:

*Not focus on the topic... just try to select diverse groups where possible... the truth is that racial reconciliation is only achieved when race is not even a factor. It does not come to our thoughts, words or actions because we do not put any race higher or lower. The ground is level at the foot of the cross.*

*Practice what you preach. ALL were redeemed by the blood of the lamb. The more we keep using language of "racial reconciliation", "racially diverse", "social justice", the more we fuel the issue. As the church we know that we were all created by God, "IN HIS IMAGE", and God is Love. We need to live the love that is in us from the one who created us. We need to model the behavior that changes the hearts of the community, not pandering to the outcries of ridiculous ideals in the name of social justice. We need to stand firm on the word of God, Romans 12:2, Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, his good pleasing and perfect will. NIV*

*Address it specifically versus only alluding to it through the acceptance of all people. Respect and involve everyone that is united in Christ Jesus--all are welcome! Embrace the differences that are not contrary to sound doctrine and celebrate God's amazing creation! Our pastor brought out*

*something that I had never heard explained before. He referred to God dividing the people and confusing their languages when they pursued their proud aspiration building the Tower of Babel. But through the Holy Spirit, he explained that Acts 2 pictures God bringing us back together, in Christ. "...if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself." John 12:32*

Pastors frequently mentioned the role preaching could play in promotion racial reconciliation:

*Focus on promoting the Biblical concept that there is only one race--the human race--and living it out without noting so-called racial differences. God has created all people equally in his image, Christ died equally for all peoples, in Christ all are one body, and the Great Commission calls us to reach all peoples.*

*Getting back to the scripture and living out Ephesians 2 and 4. Understanding that there is no separate races, only separate ethnicity's and culture. A better Biblical view of humanity and realizing that our real enemy is not flesh and blood.*

*Identify biblical truth concerning race and regularly speak from the pulpit or within discipleship groups about being racially diverse.*

A final recommendation from survey respondents gave practical advice on how churches can make their environments more inclusive:

*Include more diverse people. Accommodate for them. They welcome refugees help them get adjusted. Yet, then push them out because they are not socially economic like themselves. Help lower the costs for student trips, education classes those who are on the lower income scale. Strive for diversity. Offer more variety in the program. It is hard to see diversity in a bunch of old white people trying to sing southern gospel and missing the mark because they are singing soprano.*

*Making direct and welcoming statements that encourage new members of the community of all ethnicities and backgrounds to join. Including teachings on racial reconciliation, acceptance, love, etc.*

*Be more welcoming and ready to adapt. We need to be more flexible.*

## Unity through Scripture

Woven throughout their survey responses, we can see that the words of the Bible played a key role in how congregants and pastors approach questions of race and social justice. They may not have all reached similar conclusions, as evident by the differing views on whether to ignore racial and ethnic differences or to acknowledge and seek to build unity. Still scripture provides for Christ-followers a common language, perspective, and truth when addressing issues such as race and ethnicity.

When asked what role the Bible and Bible engagement could play in addressing racial reconciliation and social justice in the church, pastors used words such as "huge", "tremendous", and "prominent". Elaborating on this perspective, they said:

*A tremendous role. The Bible tells the story of the heart of God as revealed through Christ that He loves us enough to reconcile sinful people to Himself who is holy. He has given the church the ministry of reconciliation. We are to continue the reconciling work of Christ in our world. The Bible provides us with how to do so.*

*The Bible is a book that promotes diversity and should be used as a fundamental guideline for diversity*

*It says a lot. Zechariah speaks to this in chapter one. But when Ezra says that you should not have a mixed marriage, people take it literal rather than spiritual. We also could share love and show love in our neighborhoods. Get out of the building on Sunday evenings and go through the communities sharing love.*

*Well...if people really read the Bible and understood that the call of God calls us out of our comfort zone, it would help. However, that is a bigger fish to fry than just social justice and racial equality. We LOVE our comfort and can't believe that God would call us to anything that doesn't make us "happy" and "comfortable" in the short-term. This is ultimately a symptom of terrible Biblical illiteracy.*

### **About the authors:**

Dr. Pamela Caudill Ovwigho serves as the Executive Director for the Center for Bible Engagement (CBE) at Back to the Bible. The CBE surveys thousands of people every year about their spiritual lives.

Dr. Arnie Cole is the CEO of Back to the Bible, an international ministry dedicated to using media and technology to lead people into a dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ. He also serves as Director of Research and Product Development for the CBE.

### **About the Center for Bible Engagement:**

The Center for Bible Engagement (CBE) began in 2003 as a research division of Back to the Bible and has become a major world center addressing Bible engagement and spiritual growth. The CBE goes beyond simple usage statistics to consider attitudes and behaviors that significantly impact spiritual growth and a person's relationship with God. Our passion is developing methods, tools, and resources that will engage people with the Bible and fuel life transformation. We have surveyed more than 400,000 people around the world about their spiritual lives and that number continues to grow each year. The CBE also partners with churches and other organizations such as the American Bible Society, Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, the Jamaica Broilers Foundation, and McLean Bible Church to build an empirical understanding of life transformation through a relationship with Christ and engaging scripture. For more information visit [centerforbibleengagement.org](http://centerforbibleengagement.org).