

Religion

Bridging the divide



From left, the Rev. Arockiam Arockiam of St. Paul the Apostle Catholic Church in New Orleans; Shaun Moses, pastor of First Grace United Methodist Church in new Orleans; and Roger Templeton, pastor of Gretna (Louisiana) United Methodist Church study together. Photos by Justen Williams, for *The Many*

Mission Reconcile working toward uniting congregations of different races

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"It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is 11 o'clock on Sunday morning," the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. once said.

In many churches, King's words still ring true. Fifty-three years after legal segregation ended, many churches and religious schools remain starkly separated by race. Often churches have acted as havens for marginalized groups and meeting houses for social movements, including in the country's fight for racial equality. But historically, Christian teachings have also been used to exclude people on the edges of society. Making peace with the church's complicated past can be difficult for the faithful.

Mission Reconcile tackles this dissonance. Still in its early stages, Mission Reconcile is a nonprofit organization based in New Orleans and Washington, D.C., that aims to connect predominantly single-race churches to talk across racial divides and with a Christian perspective about race, racism and social justice issues. Khalida Lloyd, co-founder of Mission Reconcile, said the group bases its practices on the ministry of bringing people into a relationship with God.

"The way you truly reconcile others or bring people to God is your relationship with them," Lloyd said. "Reconciliation is using two people who have been divided, in this case, based on race ... bringing them together to have one common purpose, one common goal of justice, of righteousness, of doing good."

Mission Reconcile provides spaces for these groups to come together in a number of ways, such as prayer breakfasts, workshops and visitation to other churches. The goal of these visits is to have mixed-race congregations led by pastors who might otherwise preach to a homogeneous group.

"One of our pathways to reconciliation ... is to give up the pulpit on a Sunday and invite another church into your church where that pastor will be the guest speaker. And then for the next Sunday we reverse it," said Danielle Blevins, 31, who met Lloyd at United Community Church in Washington, D.C., and co-founded Mission Reconcile.

Churches also learn about other cultures through food and music, Blevins said. Ken Pauley is a member of Grace Lutheran Evangelical Church in New Orleans and learned about Mission Reconcile when Lloyd spoke at one of the church's joint reformation services with Grace Lutheran's Spanish-speaking, sister congregation, Mesa Abierta.

Pauley has taken Mission Reconcile's message to heart and has attended services at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, which has a predominantly black congregation.

"It's always nice to experience something a lit-

tle different than what our normal church service," Pauley said. "Even though Bethlehem is a Lutheran church and follow the liturgy, they do bring in a lot of their culture of gospel-type music and use of instruments and things like that. It's really uplifting to be involved in such a diverse atmosphere."

Much of the work of Mission Reconcile takes place outside of the sanctuary and focuses on a range of topics from politics to social justice. Taking on issues surrounding inequality can be challenging, given the United States' history of racial tension.

These issues stem from before colonial America, dating back to the Protestant Reformation in Europe, said Michelle Purdy, an assistant professor of education at Washington University in St. Louis, who described the roots of segregation in American churches.

"So you get these different denominations but then you also have a country being developed built on racism, built on sexism and so the way women and people of color are able to interact in society carries on into these different churches, let alone if you are an enslaved person of African descent or African-American," Purdy said.

The Bible has been used to justify discrimination, Purdy said: "Christianity has been used as a defense for slavery, has been used as a defense for sexism, has been used as a defense for homophobia, and the list goes on and on."

The effects of church segregation also spilled over into parochial schools, said Lerone Martin, an associate professor of religion and politics at Washington University in St. Louis. He explained how these schools upheld discriminatory practices after official walls fell.

"There is a long history, particularly in the South, following the Brown v. Board of Education decision, of an increase of Christian academies affiliation with churches. These schools became segregation academies. This was one way churches and faith communities responded to Brown v. Board of Education so that their children would not have to go to school with African Americans," Martin said.

In some ways, the disconnect continues today. Most recently, the biblical verse Romans 13, "to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order," has been used by Attorney General Jeff Sessions to justify separation of immigrant children from their parents at the Mexican border, despite faith groups standing against these separations.

Americans are not entirely convinced about the impact that churches have regarding social justice issues. According to study from PEW, a non-partisan think tank, from 2016, 38 percent of non-practicing Americans say religious insti-



Sandra Rhodes Dunkin hugs her pastor during the Unity Prayer Action Breakfast in May at Rhodes Pavilion in New Orleans.

tutions contribute at least some help in solving social problems, compared to 65 percent and 63 percent of Protestants and Catholics who, respectively, say the same. Just four years ago, Americans thought churches were more often instrumental in solving social ills. When the same poll was conducted in 2012, 65 percent of all respondents said churches and other houses of worship played some kind of role in solving these problems.

"What's done in the name of God in the past millennia hasn't been all peaches and roses. We've done some really horrific things in the name of Jesus, things he would not approve of. In America, it goes back to racism. It goes back to slavery and the fact that the church condoned it," said Blevins. "Until we come to place where the church can come together and talk about these issues in away where people can get understanding, nothing is going to change."

While Mission Reconcile is just getting started, it has already impacting the congregations they have worked with. Lloyd described their plans for the future.

"The goal is to be in cities all over the nation, particularly starting with the Deep South. But the fact remains there's homogeneous churches all over our nation. There's more multicultural churches, now more than ever."

But Lloyd challenges these churches to go a step further and go beyond optics.

"But my question to multicultural churches is 'Are you just a rainbow?' Multicultural churches should also engage in deep conversations, connections and relationships surrounding the truth about race and racism in order to go past the surface."

The Many

AL.com is partnering with Spaceship Media in *The Many: A Conversation Across Divides*, a moderated Facebook conversation for women of all political stripes. Featured in this piece is participant Danielle Blevins, who pursues dialogue across many facets of her life. *The Many* will be open through at least the November midterms and we'll be featuring stories of members and conversations from the group.