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# Introduction

THIS BOOK traces the history of Black and White faith leaders' fight for racial justice since the end of the civil rights movement. It is the story of what they did, how they did it, and what happened as a result. The story is rich in instances of courageous leaders working in small ways to combat discrimination. There is much to be learned about what worked and what can work again.

This is also the story of why these efforts so often failed—how faith communities' advocacy ran into barriers posed by the social, cultural, and political realities of the times, and indeed by the very institutions in which they worked.

The tragic deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and so many others in recent years have pricked the conscience of faith leaders far and wide. Much is being written and many discussions are being held. This is a teaching moment, many say. They hope it is. They want it to be.

Teaching moments are hard. They require frank discussions of why good intentions so often falter—why a troubled conscience is not enough, why it is difficult to turn beliefs into actions. Therefore, it helps to look at what has been tried—to examine what has been effective and what hasn't.

Faith communities' advocacy for racial justice has been neglected in the recent history of American religion. These efforts have been overshadowed by the Religious Right. Vast collections have been filled with

writings about the likes of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson and others at the conservative end of the political spectrum. Much less is known about the Black pastors and White pastors who joined forces to create affordable housing, speak against hate crimes, combat segregation, and advocate for voting rights. Even less is known about quiet congregational exchanges, after-school programs, and police review committees. Yet, all of these initiatives were happening, often in quiet ways that garnered little public attention.

How did these initiatives get started? What did leaders who were inspired by the civil rights movement keep doing long after the headlines shifted to other topics? Where did the funding come from to launch anti-racism programs? To issue policy statements? To bring lawsuits? How did coalitions get formed? Why did some initiatives succeed while others failed?

These are the questions this book tries to answer. They are big questions that must be tackled by looking at the specific issues with which racial justice advocacy has been concerned in recent decades. The most important of these have been fair housing, community development, busing, affirmative action, hate crimes, and criminal justice. There have also been considerable efforts to bring about racial reckonings within congregations. And to mobilize protests, political action, and voter registration.

I've combed every source I could think of to learn how progressive faith communities have tried to work on these issues. The story starts in the early 1970s and extends to the present, developing in fits and starts, focusing on different issues at different times, and engaging Black and White faith leaders who sometimes worked cooperatively and more often tackled problems in complementary ways. The materials through which their work can be told are from denominational deliberations, ethnographic studies, quantitative data, government reports, court cases, and vast numbers of on-the-scene accounts written by local observers. Many of the scholars on whose work I draw are ones I have been privileged to know and to learn from over the years. I stitch together the chronology of events in which faith leaders participated, describe the

organizations and networks they worked with, and locate what they did within the context of major policy initiatives.

A popular view holds that religious communities have done next to nothing to advance racial justice in recent decades. Whatever faith leaders may have done earlier, this idea tells us, their endeavors died with the civil rights movement. White churches and Black churches alike turned their back on racial reckoning. But that view is wrong.

Little-known faith leaders did what they could to push for racial justice. Faith communities mobilized the leadership and resources to create fair and affordable housing, contribute to community development, support school desegregation, advocate for affirmative action, protest racial profiling, demonstrate against police violence, and mobilize voter registration. These were efforts that need to be remembered. They hold lessons relevant today.

The barriers that religious groups faced are equally important. The barriers were rooted in more than indifference and ill-informed attitudes. The barriers were power structures—social arrangements that often had no ill-will in their intent. They were entrenchments that resisted transformation. These barriers hold lessons too.

The leaders I write about would mostly call themselves progressives. They would mean to say they supported racial equality, were interested in bridging the divide between Blacks and Whites, and were eager to assist in advancing racial justice in the churches and society. Being progressive in this way did not mean they agreed with one another on theology, doctrine, or styles of worship. Often, they did not. Nor did it mean that they represented large constituencies who believed as they did. There were critics within their congregations and denominations as well as supporters.<sup>1</sup>

The advocacy groups, leaders, and congregations in this story were affiliated with majority-White Protestant denominations, Black denominations, Roman Catholic groups, and Jewish organizations. Many of the Protestants were African Methodist Episcopal, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, or United Church of Christ. Some were

Brethren, Disciples of Christ, Mennonites, Moravians, or Quakers. Many of the groups were coalitions of faith-based and nonsectarian organizations.

Much of their advocacy work was performed through church agencies and local congregations, usually by clergy, staff, and lay people acting under the formal auspices of their denominations. The advocacy in which they participated was often spearheaded by Black clergy and in many instances was coordinated by interracial coalitions of Black churches and White churches. It was conducted locally, regionally, and nationally through interfaith cooperation involving Roman Catholic, evangelical Protestant, Black Protestant, Orthodox, Jewish, and Muslim organizations.

I begin the story in 1974, the year of Watergate and Richard Nixon's resignation—the year the nation manifestly hoped to be turning the corner toward a more placid future, putting the turbulent 1960s in the past. Before that, many religious leaders—White as well as Black—had of course been involved in the civil rights movement, or, if not personally active, had been influenced by the movement's ideas. For that reason, many discussions of racial advocacy call readers' attention to the civil rights era as a period to be remembered and to be inspired by. But in so doing, these discussions fail to benefit from the important lessons that can be learned from faith communities' less visible roles in the intervening decades.<sup>2</sup>

By the mid-1970s, the struggle for racial justice was less often talked about but it was far from over. Discrimination and inequality in educational attainment, jobs, affordable housing, healthcare, criminal justice, and voting rights were still the realities that defined American race relations. Nixon's resignation left in place many of the policies that impeded fair housing and effective school desegregation. Many civil rights leaders anticipated that the battle to address racial injustice would now be fought less often in the streets and more significantly in legislative chambers, the courts, city councils, and board rooms. Whether those efforts would receive much support from the public was doubtful. The national mood after Watergate was one of exhaustion with the

turmoil of campus unrest, the Vietnam War, and revelations of government misconduct. Across the political spectrum, the focus of national policy shifted to the inflation-plagued economy and Middle East foreign policy.

The priorities defining religion were shifting as well. Jimmy Carter's election in 1976 brought White evangelical "born again" Protestantism to public attention. By the end of the decade, Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority was mobilizing conservative Christians concerned about abortion and homosexuality. For their part, progressive religious groups were focused on ecumenism, gender equality, and nuclear disarmament. It was unclear if many of the progressive faith communities—White or Black—would continue the work for racial justice that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had begun. Yet that work did continue—usually in quieter ways but often with significant results.

One of the little known and generally forgotten endeavors I write about occurred near Ferguson, Missouri, four decades before Michael Brown was killed there in 2014. The leader in the story was a young White seminary graduate who organized a housing desegregation project that sparked controversy in the White House and resulted in what became known as the doctrine of disparate impact liability. I describe the key roles that several local churches played in this episode and locate it in the larger context of federal fair and affordable housing programs.

Another largely neglected episode is the story of a Black Presbyterian minister who initiated the nation's first city-wide busing program in Charlotte, North Carolina. This endeavor included dozens of Charlotte's churches, some of which supported the plan and others of which founded private segregation academies rather than participate. The Charlotte program was also crucial to the traumatic cross-town busing initiative in Boston where faith leaders were active both locally and in the state department of education.

Among the other endeavors I write about is the Wilmington Ten case that captured national and international attention—a case that started at a church in Wilmington and was led by a Black high school chemistry teacher who earned a divinity school degree while in prison and became one of his denomination's leading spokespersons for racial justice. He

was succeeded in that role by Reverend Traci Blackmon, currently the faith leader who has done more than anyone else to forge ties with Black Lives Matter.

Much of what faith leaders working for racial justice did was strategically local. It happened in response to local events, took place in neighborhoods and towns and school districts, was led by local clergy, and drew on local networks. One of these episodes took place in a small community on the outskirts of Detroit when White supremacists decided to use the community as a staging ground for their meetings and cross burnings. Under the inspiring leadership of an elderly Black parishioner and her White Methodist minister, the community's churches organized an effective plan of resistance to the supremacists.

Advocacy in local communities has continued through the decades. It was the Los Angeles Council of Religious Leaders that organized churches' response to Rodney King's brutal beating in 1991, the Black Ministers Council of New Jersey that played a leading role in drawing public attention to racial profiling in 1998, a little-known Black pastor named Leah Daughtry who led the Democratic party's faith outreach program during the Obama campaign in 2008, and an offshoot of the Sisters of Mercy that the Obama administration enlisted to manage the Neighborhood Stabilization Program in Chicago from 2009 to 2013.

Progressive advocacy for racial justice rarely mobilizes massive participation among rank-and-file churchgoers. The best scholarship on progressive advocacy has shown that less attention should be paid to religion's role in national elections, important as national elections are, and instead should pay greater attention to the strategic local organizing that emerges through the work of a few dedicated leaders. In their landmark study of African American religion, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, for example, argued that community organizing and community building arranged in cooperation with other churches and civil rights groups, rather than only electoral politics, are central to Black churches' public engagement. Richard Wood, Mark Warren, Jeffrey Stout, Ruth Braunstein, and many other students of progressive faith-based advocacy emphasize interfaith cooperation as well. These writers

urge focusing on the *local* roots of advocacy rather than viewing it as a top-down endeavor. Although ecumenical bodies such as the National Council of Churches and the national offices of major Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church issue statements and offer financial support, these organizations' critics are usually correct in pointing out that the leaders at the top of these groups do not speak for the millions of members the leaders claim to represent. The progressive advocacy that has been most engaged in social justice has been more specialized, local, and directly engaged in grassroots endeavors. Yet it has never been strictly local but has broadened its scope to take account of metropolitan, regional, and national policies.<sup>3</sup>

In her path-breaking research on congregations' organizational networks, Nancy Tatom Ammerman observed that "almost all congregational political and economic activism is channeled through larger outside coalitions and agencies."<sup>4</sup> That has certainly been true of progressive advocacy for racial justice, much of which has been organized through *coalitions*—through people working together across congregations or denominations and among faiths.

The ingredients making these cooperative ventures possible include the following. First, to be interfaith across traditions as diverse as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—or even to be ecumenical among diverse Protestant denominations—requires a willingness to embrace other traditions as strategic partners. The partners need not share the same theological tenets or adhere to the same styles of worship (usually they do not), but they must see the advantage of working together, and they are more likely to see that advantage if they do acknowledge that groups other than their own have access to the sacred. Second, to be a cooperative venture implies investing time away from the demands of running one's own congregation toward the staffing and maintenance of the coalition. This is an investment that seems reasonable because the coalition brings together expertise and differing perspectives, represents different constituencies, and in combination is more than the sum of its parts. Progressive faith-based coalitions in many instances include among their participants—or work with—organizations that are not faith-oriented, such as labor unions, nonprofit community

development corporations, and civil rights groups. And third, faith-based cooperative projects imply an understanding of the value of organized teamwork, meaning that they have committee deliberations, elected boards, and leading contributors rather than being devoted to the “cult of personality” that develops around a single charismatic figure.<sup>5</sup>

Studies show that progressive faith-based communities attract participants who value personal *spiritual practice*. They care deeply about their faith but are also convinced that spiritual practice should contribute to the common good through activities that focus not only on individuals’ private lives but also on institutions. Their understanding of spiritual practice emphasizes personal conviction but is equally oriented toward acts that reach into the community. In this regard, progressive faith-based communities differ from ministries that focus almost exclusively on prayer, scripture study, and worship done in the interest of achieving personal fulfillment and eternal salvation. Progressive groups are like many conservative advocacy groups, whose participants also want to reform social institutions. The difference of course is in the kinds of reform desired and the activities through which those reforms are promoted. Examples of these divergent issues and activities in recent decades are not hard to find, often being identified with one or the other of the two political parties and differing about understandings of sexuality, gender, and social welfare.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the best, but least appreciated, reason to be interested in religious groups’ racial justice advocacy is to understand the hindrances they have confronted. Some discussions treat these hindrances as if they result simply from individuals in the past making racist decisions. That may be true, but the study of racial inequality goes further and means something more when it stresses that racism is *systemic*. Scholars agree that racism persists not only in prejudice and discrimination but also in institutions. An abundance of evidence demonstrates that racism persists through patterns of behavior that are taken for granted and, without anyone having to think about it or necessarily having ill intent, these structures perpetuate unequal access to jobs, educational opportunities, healthcare, housing, criminal justice, and political influence. To say that

racism is systemic therefore is not to suggest that it is vague, abstract, or incomprehensible but that racial inequality is perpetuated through decisions in particular institutional settings that reflect the ways in which power is structured in those settings. Systemic racism results from the history of enslavement, segregation, and voter suppression that subjugated the lives of Black Americans throughout the nation's past and have continued to do so today. Systemic racism therefore requires understanding how institutions work, how they become power structures, and how they impede the efforts even of well-intentioned people who want to bring about change.<sup>7</sup>

Systemic racism expresses itself as White privilege in ways as small as not having to worry about being stopped by the police and as large as not being killed if one is stopped by the police. White privilege is also systemic. Whiteness is the invisible default to which behavior is expected to conform, whether on the highway or in the classroom. Whiteness is an expectation about how to speak when answering the phone, greeting a neighbor, or making an appointment. "Acting White," as Monica McDermott persuasively argues in *Whiteness in America*, is not something a person usually has to think about unless that person is not White.<sup>8</sup> White privilege means taking for granted that one's advantages in life are entirely owing to one's own efforts, while failing to understand or care much about the disadvantages that others have faced in pursuing their aspirations.<sup>9</sup>

But popular discussions of Whiteness, including discussions in well-intentioned faith communities, recent studies suggest, too often focus on the tacit norms—mannerisms, modes of speaking, inflections of voice—that govern everyday life, treating these norms as if they can be corrected by White people becoming more conscious of them. White privilege must also be understood as the way in which large-scale social institutions have been—and continue to be—structured to perpetuate both racial inequality and racially differentiated responses to inequality. White privilege in this understanding is less about attitudes—even prejudicial attitudes—than about the institutional arrangements through which asymmetries of power are kept in place. For example, as Stuart Buck shows in *Acting White: The Ironic Legacy of Desegregation*,

perceptions of Whiteness and what it means to be White or not White are profoundly influenced by the manner in which school desegregation was attempted and is still being addressed within the constraints of the fundamental disparities of residential segregation.<sup>10</sup>

Many faith communities attempt to confront racial injustice by focusing on attitudes, interpersonal relations, microaggressions, and conversations within families and among neighbors. Discussion groups usefully prompt participants to examine their hearts and minds. But racial justice activists argue that attacking systemic racism as if it were only a matter of hearts and minds can be problematic, encouraging participants to think that they have done all they can merely by behaving kindlier toward their neighbors. Faith leaders therefore have recognized the value of organizing strategic initiatives, focusing on particular modes of intervention, and challenging racial inequality in its institutional manifestations.

In chapter 1, I trace the history of religious leaders' involvement in the fight for fair and affordable housing, emphasizing the policies set in motion in the 1970s and early 1980s that shaped much of what has been possible to accomplish thereafter. Housing has of course been one of the most significant ways in which racial differences and racial inequality have been preserved. Whether through explicit patterns of discrimination or such implicit practices as the pricing of housing developments, the fact that Black families and White families generally live in different neighborhoods clearly reduces the chances of interacting with one another in ways that would facilitate mutual understanding. Separated by residence means that Black children and White children are less likely to be friends—even if they attend the same schools. Living in different neighborhoods makes it less likely that Black families and White families belong to the same community associations and attend the same churches. As far as churches are concerned, geographic separation adds to the difficulty of predominantly Black and predominantly White congregations forming alliances with one another. When the fact that residential separation is compounded by differences in housing prices and household incomes, the differences in where people live also contribute

to differences in quality of schools and infrastructure, the availability of jobs, and the chances of being treated fairly or unjustly by law enforcement officers.

The de facto reality of racial segregation in housing has been such an important condition affecting religious practices in the United States that religious leaders who cared about advocating for racial justice have had to take account of it. At present, the preferred way of taking account of this racially separated residential terrain is through the occasional alliances, financial support, and information flows that connect mostly White middle-class suburban congregations with mostly Black inner-city congregations. These connections serve as reminders to the White congregants that they enjoy privileges because of where they live and have a responsibility because of their faith to love their neighbors beyond the immediate neighbors they know best. But there have been times in the past when White religious groups tried to engage the differences in residential patterns more directly. In the 1950s and early 1960s, White religious leaders were involved in some of the protests that resulted in the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which banned explicit forms of discrimination in housing decisions. During the 1970s, activism on behalf of fair housing shifted to programs oriented toward providing affordable housing and locating it in racially integrated middle-class suburban neighborhoods. Those efforts enjoyed some success and proved that religious groups could continue to play a valuable role. But they were also quite limited and after a decade were largely considered to have been a failure or to have accomplished all they could.

In the 1980s, under the Reagan administration, advocacy for fair and affordable housing had to accommodate to the scarcity of federal funding by focusing on community development. Community development focused on rehabilitation and construction projects within Black neighborhoods instead of funding meant to facilitate residential integration by supporting dispersed low-income housing in suburban neighborhoods. Community development necessitated vastly complex financing arrangements that included federal, state, and local contributions and depended on buy-in from banks and real estate companies. For religious groups to play a role at all, they had to work out strategic arrangements

with all of these agencies and participants. The religious leaders who succeeded in doing so created nonprofit management organizations of their own or negotiated partnerships with multisectoral nonprofit firms. Size and location were key to these organizations' success. Interracial and White organizations were often poised to benefit from large-scale financing arrangements, while Black organizations were often in the best position to work with residents. What religious groups did and why they were unable to do more is an important part of the story that must be understood if we are to make sense of how religious advocacy for community development has evolved in recent decades. Community development is the focus of chapter 2.

While housing and community development were an ongoing focus of racial justice advocacy, the issue that most directly affected equal opportunity—starting in the late 1970s and continuing in many communities for years—was busing. Whereas affordable housing and community development projects occasionally met resistance from local communities, school desegregation nearly always did. Faith communities' roles were thus quite different than they were in advocating for fair housing. These roles varied depending on the severity of the resistance from White parents, ranging from engaging in overt violence to initiating all-White private schools. Black clergy and Black churches intervened, sometimes with support from White churches, by monitoring buses and busing routes, counseling parents concerned about safety, organizing off-site school programs, initiating lawsuits, and serving on school boards. From the late 1970s onward, equal opportunity in colleges and universities was also a major issue and was most often pursued through affirmative action policies. Like busing, affirmative action has been so contentious that faith communities could hardly remain uninvolved if they cared about racial justice. What they did was usually a matter of improvisation and thus holds important lessons in how to work out practical measures of racial advocacy on the fly. Busing and affirmative action are the focus of chapter 3.

Advocating for fair housing and for workable busing and affirmative action programs put faith leaders in the unenviable position of lacking the authority to accomplish what they wanted to accomplish. The

constraints that racial justice advocates faced in their own congregations were more manageable. It was much easier (in theory) to make changes within congregations than it was to work with real estate developers, housing authorities, banks, school boards, judges, and lawyers. Thus, it made sense for faith leaders to turn their attention toward what they could do within their own congregations—which they increasingly did by the last years of the twentieth century. But how that was done and how effective it was depended in large measure on the racial composition of congregations and the neighborhoods in which they were located. Two communities—one in Michigan and one in Florida—provide instructive illustrations of how much the neighborhoods mattered, in addition to showing how the clergy in one setting worked to overcome the community's White racist reputation and in the other effectively kept working for racial justice despite a significant loss of White members. In recent years, racial reckoning has importantly focused on interracial congregations, in addition to which pulpit exchanges and sibling relationships among congregations have also played an important role. On the surface, these activities seem like excellent ways for congregations to facilitate racial reckoning. But a growing number of studies identify pitfalls that must be avoided if these programs are to be effective. These studies also reveal the shortcomings of programs guided by colorblind ideas and dominated by interpersonal etiquette concerns. Racial reckoning is the focus of chapter 4.

Racial inequality in the administration of criminal justice has been a major concern during the entire period under consideration. Combating racial inequality in the criminal justice system has taken shape principally in mobilizing against hate crimes, advocating for police reform, protesting against racial profiling, and addressing the effects of mass incarceration. A series of high-profile cases from the 1970s through the end of the century played a highly significant role in bringing public attention to each of these issues and prompting local and federal legislation. These cases included the Wilmington Ten convictions and sentencing in the 1970s and the protests that developed in Los Angeles in response to the police beating of Rodney King. Just as they were in school desegregation efforts, Black churches were extensively involved

in these cases and White religious leaders played important supporting roles—however, these cases left much unanswered about policing and violence. Why that was the case despite the protests that took place and the progress achieved in many communities are the focus of chapter 5.

Faith communities' advocacy for racial justice has always necessitated political action, but Barack Obama's campaign and presidency provided a unique opportunity for progressive religious leaders to play a role in electoral politics and policymaking. The opportunity was shaped not only by Obama being Black but also by his membership in the United Church of Christ and by the fact that progressive religious groups had quietly mobilized to play a greater role in electoral politics after failing to do so during the 2004 presidential election. Understanding the frustration that some social activists felt by the end of Obama's second term in office requires looking, first, at how expectations were generated during the campaign, and second, at how the key issues that the Obama administration faced necessitated faith leaders' pivoting their own activities toward those issues. Among the most important of these issues were economic recovery, healthcare reform, and voting rights. Faith leaders who pundits assumed were satisfied simply to have helped Obama win office now entered new terrain and played new roles in surprising ways. How religious groups aided—and criticized—the administration's policies in these areas are the focus of chapter 6.

The rise of the Black Lives Matter movement following the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, toward the end of Obama's second term in office posed an opportunity—but also a challenge—for faith communities. The opportunity was the heightened public attention the movement brought to racial injustice. The challenge was that Black Lives Matter activists held differing ideas from many church leaders—Black and White—about how best to protest against racial injustice. Movement leaders and faith leaders were at first critical of each other's strategies, but gradually developed a relationship that reflected a division of labor and at times resulted in cooperation. The heightened public attention to racial injustice also prompted new discussions within White churches about White privilege and generated anti-racism initiatives in many progressive denominations. Faith leaders

who had not thought much about racial justice for a while found themselves searching for ideas about what to do next. They often talked about White privilege as if it could be corrected through better attitudes but found it difficult to grasp the meaning of systemic racism. How these developments unfolded and the challenges they have faced are the focus of chapter 7.

The paths taken by progressive faith communities in advocating for racial justice over the past half century reveal several striking misconceptions. One of these misconceptions is that progressive faith communities were pretty much synonymous with the White mainline Protestant denominations that were declining—and that because of their decline they did next to nothing of importance for racial justice, even though they had played a role during the civil rights movement. Membership in these denominations did decline, but the decline was not from disgruntled progressives decamping (although there was some of that). It was mostly from middle-class mainline members having fewer children and being older when they had children. The further misconception is that declining membership meant declining advocacy. While there is of course a relationship between membership and advocacy in that members provide financial resources, advocacy within mostly White progressive denominations has always been conducted by dedicated leaders whose work was as often criticized as it was supported. Moreover, progressive advocacy was conducted not only by White mainline Protestant denominations but also by coalitions that included African American churches, groups composed of Roman Catholics or Jews, and in a few instances with faith leaders who defined themselves as theological conservatives.<sup>11</sup>

A second misconception is that American religion in recent decades has remained so fundamentally segregated that understanding advocacy for racial justice is best done by looking only at Black churches or, alternatively, by investigating White churches to see how they embrace White privilege. This misconception reflects the reality that most Black churchgoers do attend predominantly Black churches and most White churchgoers attend predominantly White churches. The fallacy is

basing observations on rank-and-file attendance patterns rather than considering the many ways in which faith leaders have worked for racial justice that do not reflect their grassroots memberships. In many instances, residential segregation has meant that Black religious groups addressed racial injustice in different ways from White religious groups. However, the opportunities for cross-racial cooperative and complementary action were many, ranging from joint congregation-based programs and mutual denominational affiliations to Black clergy serving in or being supported by mostly White denominations, to Black and White clergy participating in city-wide coalitions, to forming multiracial congregations. Many of these efforts were difficult to sustain and they were often frustrating in what they were able to achieve, but they should be acknowledged for what they did attempt to accomplish.

A third misconception is that progressive religious groups—whether mostly Black or mostly White—did not cooperate with secular (non-religious) progressive advocacy organizations and, indeed, were usually viewed skeptically by the leaders of those organizations. This misconception has surfaced in various forms, at times in an accurate perception that some progressive faith communities were not on board with gay rights and at other times in an inaccurate perception that faith communities were reluctant to work on issues that might compromise separation of church and state. The reality was that progressive religious groups partnered extensively with secular nonprofit organizations and with national networks that made it possible to be more effective than if they worked alone.<sup>12</sup>

A fourth misconception—a view that, unfortunately, appears to be shared in many well-meaning faith communities—is that the best thing for churches to do is to advance a postracial “colorblind” style of thinking. This way of thinking seems, on the surface, to be a theologically sound idea based on the conviction that we are all God’s children. Carried to its logical extreme, it argues that good Christians (and good citizens) should be colorblind; that they should act as if racial injustice is no longer a reality. It is an outlook that fits comfortably with the way many churches have accommodated to the intense therapeutic individualism of American culture: focus everything on individuals’

relationship to God, emphasize how God can help individuals feel better about themselves, talk about how to be nice to one's neighbors, encourage people to come to the church where they can feel like a community, and try hard to avoid anything that might seem "divisive." This is a recipe for ignoring the hard facts of racial inequality.

There is one conception of progressive faith communities that tracing the recent history of their advocacy for racial justice confirms. The faith communities that have worked most effectively for racial justice have understood themselves to be integrally connected with other institutions—with neighborhoods, school districts, zoning boards, the police, businesses, and legal systems. They have not retreated into private spaces where the mark of an ideal believer is showing up for worship and serving on a church committee. They have understood themselves to be in service to a God who cares about justice and mercy in the conduct of the courts, the functioning of schools and businesses, the distribution of wealth, and the equity of public affairs.

For faith leaders today who seek to engage in the work of racial justice, the lessons to be learned from the past half century are clear. The share of America's tens of thousands of congregations that have done much to address racial injustice has been small and is likely to remain small. For much of anything to have been done, therefore, faith leaders have had to take risks, seek other like-minded leaders, form coalitions, and draw inventively from the resources of their denominational offices. They have been most effective when they did not address racial injustice as an abstraction or as an interpersonal problem but when they seized on a particular aspect of racial injustice in their communities' institutions—the schools, courts, law enforcement agencies, boards of elected officials, neighborhood groups, and businesses in which significant decisions were being made. Effective faith leaders have had to be strategic in discerning what needed to be done and how they could contribute, choosing at different times and in different places to direct their efforts to topics that ranged from housing, community development, and equity in schools, to affirmative action, hate crimes, criminal justice, voting rights, and related issues.

Faith communities clearly are not a force that somehow shapes (or can shape) public policies on their own. What faith communities have been able to accomplish for racial justice has happened by taking account of the institutions that govern what most of us do most of the time. In these instances, faith communities' contributions have been small—a small share of the affordable housing that has been constructed, a small part in furthering desegregation, a small measure in combating the effects of mass incarceration. Were one to ask what might matter most in effecting change in these realms, one would look to public policies over which religious organizations have little or no control. But to do so would mean failing to appreciate the efforts faith groups and leaders have made—because trying and accomplishing a little is better than not trying at all.

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