Race and Faith: The Role of Congregations in Racial Justice

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In the summer of 2020, catalyzed by the killing of George Floyd, some places of worship more fully entered the conversation on race. Despite a historical tradition of reinforcing institutional racism, many religious traditions also have tools for conflict resolution, repentance, and even reconciliation. Given this ambivalence, how are congregations and religious leaders using religion to engage questions of racial justice? Our answers come through a multimethod data set collected over two years: (a) surveys of 2,293 congregants from 35 diverse congregations find that race relations is the issue they most want their place of worship to address; (b) 90 sermons from 15 congregations reveal how clergy talked about race in the weeks after Floyd's murder depended on the racial background of the congregation; and (c) 21 clergy interviews illustrate differences in how clergy use religion to engage on racial issues. These diverse data demonstrate that congregations are engaging in faith-based racial justice, but with important differences that mainly fall along racial lines.

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Racial inequality is a problem in America. From the wealth gap (Oliver and Shapiro 2019) to maternal mortality rates (Lister et al. 2019) to the frequency of traffic stops (Baumgartner, Epp, and Shoub 2018), the consequences of racism are pervasive and, all too often, deadly. Unfortunately, the history of race and religion in the United States is one frequented by institutional reinforcement of racial inequity (Emerson and Smith 2000, Tisby 2019, Bracey II and Moore 2017, Barron and Williams 2017). Yet, the ambivalence of the sacred means that other paths are possible (Wadsworth 2014, Appleby 2000).

In the summer of 2020, the ugly reality of racism was on full display in the murder of George Floyd. For more than nine minutes, Office Derek Chauvin kneeled on Floyd's neck while Floyd exclaimed that he couldn't breathe and called out for his mother—all while a child recorded video on a cell phone. The murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 and the racial reckoning that followed provides an opportunity to examine a moment in time when some congregations turned towards racial justice (RNS Staff 2021).

These efforts were surprising in some ways; religion has historically reinforced and perpetuated racist structures and attitudes. Yet, in other ways, faith-based racial justice engagement makes perfect sense—many faith traditions possess tools that are well-suited to address the challenges inherent in racial justice and reconciliation efforts. With faith-based resources like repentance and forgiveness, religion has helped to reconcile protracted conflicts from Northern Ireland to Mozambique (Bartoli 2005, Brewer, Mitchell, and Leavey 2013). Although Christian nationalism has led to violence and prejudice (Tisby 2019, Bracey II and Moore 2017, Davis and Perry 2020), religion also has a history of positive engagement with the topic of racial justice in the United States in particular. Churches were organizing points for the civil rights movement and pastors were often major leaders (Hadden 1970, Barnes 2005, Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).

Given both the history and the resources of religion, we ask: what led to engagement at this critical moment? We use a unique multimethod research design to explore the factors that influenced the type and extent of racial justice engagement in one Southern city, [redacted], from 2020-2021. We find that congregants see their places of worship as resources for addressing issues of race, but that the extent and manner of congregational engagement with the topic varies, often along racial and religious lines. Our findings provide insight into when we might expect religion to provide a resource for positive change.

The Ambivalence of Religion and Race

The history of race and religion in the United States is complicated, to put it mildly. White Christians as individuals and institutions have often overtly supported racist policies and doctrines (Tisby 2019, Emerson and Smith 2000, Davis and Perry 2020). In less overt ways, there are meaningful reasons why most congregations remain segregated today. Research shows that racial minorities entering white worship spaces are subject to racial microaggressions and "race tests" that leave them feeling excluded (Bracey II and Moore 2017) and that they are more likely to leave a congregation, compared to those in the racial majority (Scheitle and Dougherty 2010).

Some churches today are trying to better live out their religious values through the creation of multiethnic congregations (DeYmaz 2020, DeYoung, Emerson, and Yancey 2004), yet even these efforts can end up reinforcing values and norms of whiteness (Cobb, Perry, and Dougherty 2015) and place greater burdens on members of color (Ince 2022). Martinez and Dougherty (2013) find that, in multiethnic congregations, the majority race participates more and feels a greater sense of belonging, compared to those in the minority race. Edwards (2008) extensive research into interracial churches finds that they mostly tend to cater to white worship styles and white preferences, with small nods to multiculturalism. "It was like adding rainbow sprinkles to a dish of

ice cream. In the end, you still have a dish of ice cream, only with a little extra color and sweetness" (Edwards 2008, 8). While congregations today are more diverse than ever, we have to be careful not equate diversity with racial justice (Dougherty, Chaves, and Emerson 2020).

Yet religion has an almost unique ambivalence (Appleby 2000). The same faith traditions, practices, sometimes very same verses of sacred texts, that can be used to foment hate and division can also be used to foster healing and reconciliation. Even with its fraught history, people of faith have used and are using religious resources to engage racial justice work, often imperfectly, in both the past and the present. For instance, Evangelical churches who try to do racial reconciliation work often approach racism as a sin issue, which can reinforce structural problems (Wadsworth 2014). Yet even these imperfect efforts do lead to some positive outcomes as individuals change their attitudes over time (Wadsworth 2014) and small groups move from reconciliation to racial justice (Smith 2019).

We also know that there are clear differences in how Black and white churches talk about race and engage with race as a political issue. Scholars have long recognized the Black Church as a resource for community and political organizing (Barnes 2005, Billingsley 1999). Reverend Myra Brown, for instance, talks about how the true work of religion is the work of social justice, saying "we must work tirelessly to end racism where we live…We must open ourselves to others' pain, speak out against injustice, and construct the future in which we want to live" (Brown 2019, 45). When it comes to the content people hear in worship services, White Evangelical pastors rarely talked about systemic racialized inequality—ironically even less so when a larger percentage of their church community is Black (Guhin et al. 2023). The presence or absence of racial content in sermons matters. Brown, Brown, and Wyatt (2023) find that those who heard sermons about race and policing in the weeks following the murder of George Floyd were more likely to engage in racial justice work, a finding that is consistent for Black, white, and Hispanic church-goers.

It is clear that one cannot simply add faith to broader societal conversations about race, stir, and expect positive change. When the damage of racism was so strongly present in the summer of 2020, we know that some congregations sought to use their faith to address racism and racial justice. This research takes a multimethod approach to look closely at race and faith in one Southern city— [redacted]—to better understand which religious communities were using their faith to engage with the topic of race and how.

Methods

This research seeks to understand the role that places of worship can and do play in racial justice and reconciliation through a multimethod approach. Collecting data through multiple forms, across two years, we are able to more fully understand the ways that places of worship use religion to engage with the complexities of race in [redacted]. The city of [redacted] presents a particularly rich context for this study. The [redacted historical event] provides the historical background for a city that remains, in many ways, divided by race, while also highly religious.[1] Faith and race thus have a historic relationship in the city, with congregations taking sides on the integration crisis in the 1950's (Campbell and Pettigrew 1959) and, in more recent years, faith leaders collaborating to address race relations, issue reports (Driskill and Camp 2006), and engage in service and relationship building efforts across Black and white congregations (Driskill, Arjannikova, and Meyer 2014, Driskill, Meyer, and Mirivel 2012).

The data in the following analyses were gathered through three separate data collection efforts. First, in the fall of 2020, 35 diverse congregations were invited to participate in a survey of

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[1] About 50% of the population of [redacted] is ethnically non-Hispanic white and about 42% of the city is ethnically Black or African-American (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). [Redacted location information], which is located in the Bible Belt of the United States, and is where, for instance 77% of people are absolutely certain of their belief in God, compared to 54% in California (Pew Research Center 2014).

their members. This survey was part of a larger, longitudinal, community-based research project, the [redacted], which periodically surveys [redacted] clergy and congregations. These 35 congregations were drawn from the full sample of 364 congregations within the city limits of [redacted], based on their representativeness, their participation in prior iterations of a longitudinal research project, and their willingness to participate in the 2020 wave. See Table A1 for a breakdown of participating congregations by religious tradition, along with the total respondent n for each religious tradition. Electronic surveys were distributed to all members of each congregation by the congregation leaders during the month of October, 2020. Paper surveys and postage-paid envelopes were also distributed to congregations who requested them for older members or for those without Internet access. A total of 2,293 responses were collected across all 35 congregations. The surveys included questions about community engagement, race relations, and issue priorities. A list of questions and summary statistics relevant to the analysis here are available in Table A2.

Second, in order to analyze the content of the messages that were delivered at worship services in the summer of 2020, 15 congregations were purposefully selected to create a sample diverse in race, religious tradition, geographic location, and size. Descriptions of the congregations and their characteristics are summarized in Table A3. Although our congregation selection for other portions of the research included non-Christian congregations, the sermon analysis focused only on Black Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, and Mainline Protestant Christian churches to make the comparative content analysis as similar as possible.

Each of the selected congregations had a website with archived worship service content or a YouTube channel where past worship services could be viewed. A researcher used a combination of automatic and hand transcription to transcribe from video the content of each worship service, including welcome messages and announcements (for instance, one congregation announced a "camp" for racial injustice during this time period), in addition to sermons. For ease of reference,

6

the analyzed content of each of these worship services is referred to as a "sermon." A sample of sermons from each Sunday for the six weeks following the murder of George Floyd was selected across the 15 congregations, for a total of 90 sermons analyzed.

The sermons for each congregation were pooled and coded for a number of key variables, six of which are used in the analysis here: (1) a binary variable for whether or not George Floyd was mentioned, and count variables (0-10) for mentions of (2) race, (3) a religious call to action, (4) a political call to action, (5) anti-racist work framed as personal effort, and (6) anti-racist work framed as collective effort. For the sermons in some congregations, the count variables were mentioned more than 10 times over the course of the six sermons, but we maxed out the count variables at 10 to reduce the influence of outliers. The sermons were coded by a single graduate student researcher, who recoded a random sample of 10% of sermons to establish reliability at 99% agreement and Cohen's Kappa of 0.93. The codebook used to code the sermons is available in Appendix A1. This codebook provides more detail on our coding decisions and how we coded, for instance, a religious call to action (which referenced holy texts or a divine power in asking members to act) and a political call to action (which referenced specific actions to take in society). Importantly, these two types of calls to action are not mutually exclusive.

Third, a purposeful sample of clergy leaders was contacted in the fall of 2021 for interviews about the efforts of their congregations on the topic of race. A total of 35 congregations were selected for these interviews, a sample which was based on the researchers' personal knowledge of race relations efforts in the community, on previous interviews, and on Google searches of [redacted] congregations that are active on issues of race. Of these 35 sampled congregations, 21 interviews were ultimately completed, for a response rate of 60%. A breakdown of the interviewed clergy by religious tradition is available in Table A4. The interviews asked clergy about the kinds of programs they were undertaking with regard to race, including whether those programs were formal

or informal. The clergy interviews were conducted by four members of the [redacted] research team (three faculty and one graduate student). Intercoder reliability was established through repeated rounds of team coding by three team members and codebook refining, until average pairwise coding agreement reached 97% and Krippendorff's Alpha 0.86. This codebook is available in Appendix A2.

To summarize, in order to understand the factors influencing whether and how congregations are using religion to engage with racial justice work, we gathered data through three different efforts:

1. A survey of 2,293 congregants across 35 [redacted] congregations in October, 2020.
2. A content analysis of 90 sermons from 15 [redacted] congregations in the six weeks following the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020.
3. Interviews with 21 [redacted] congregation leaders in the fall of 2021.

Analytic Approach

The analytic approach our research team selected to answer the question of whether and how congregations are using religion for racial justice purposes is an explicitly multimethod one. We believe that this is a complex question that can best be answered through a combination of methodological approaches. We believe that the qualitative and quantitative methods employed complement each other. The statistical results illustrate key differences among individual congregation members in terms of how important they see the issue of race relations and how much they want to see their congregation involved in addressing it. The sermon data provide a snapshot in time of a critical moment, illustrating the different ways congregation leaders were talking about race. And the interview data take a longer and deeper view of racial justice engagement, from a non-random sample, to look more closely at how these differences persist and play out over time. Employing this multimethod approach was a purposeful analytic choice that helps us gain a deeper

understanding of the differences in how places of worship are engaging with the issue of race in [city redacted] and how we might expect similar dynamics to exist in other environments.

Results

Collecting diverse types of data across time and different populations allows us to see a rich picture of faith-based racial justice efforts in [redacted]—what congregation members want to see from their places of worship, what clergy were saying in the most racially fraught days after the murder of George Floyd, and how racial justice efforts developed in the following year. We present the results of our analyses in the following sections.

1. Congregant Survey Data

We asked congregation members a number of questions about race. Most relevant for our analyses here, we included "race relations" as one of a series of community issues that respondents could rate in importance (along with healthcare, crime, education, etc.). For each issue that respondents named as "very important" they received a follow up question asking them if this is an issue that they would like to see their congregation be active in helping to address, with response options of yes (2), no (0), and maybe (1). The mean values for each community issue, including race relations, on importance and on desire for congregational involvement are presented in Figure 1. In Figure 1, the values for both measures have been normalized to run from 0 to 1, for ease of comparison.

What Figure 1 shows is that race relations is an important issue to the respondents in this sample. It ranks 4th in importance, out of 9 issues, with 48% percent of respondents naming it as a very important issue. But, more than any other issue, race relations is the one that respondents want to see their congregation actively engaged in helping to address. Eighty-six percent of those who received the follow-up question about whether they would like to see their congregation get involved in helping to address the issue of race relations responded yes; only 2% responded no. We

9

can compare this to healthcare, the most important issue (62% of respondents said it was very important), but in the follow up question on involvement, only 58% said they would like to see their congregation get involved in helping to address healthcare. Support for involvement in addressing race relations in the congregation was nearly thirty percentage points higher.

Figure 1. Respondent-reported Importance and Desire for Congregational Involvement, by Community Issue
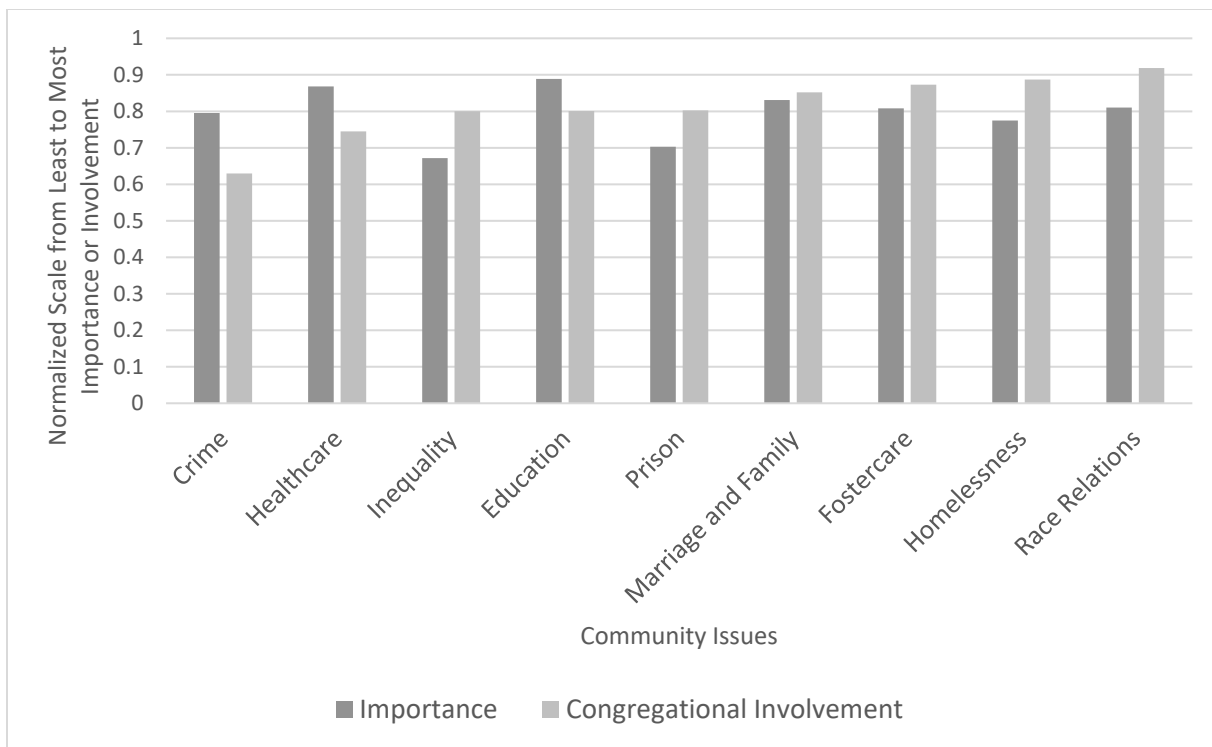
This finding indicates that respondents see race as within the domain of religion. Whereas crime, for instance, might be an issue that matters to many people in our sample, they don't see it as an issue that their place of worship should be trying to solve (only 42% of respondents who rated crime as very important want their congregation involved in helping to address crime). Race relations, on the other hand, is one where congregants do think their place of worship has a role to

play, a theme which we will see emerge even more clearly in the qualitative data to come. Table A5 shows a breakdown in prioritizing race and in a desire for engagement on the issue of race relations by religious tradition, indicating racial and denominational differences in these two behaviors. One interesting finding that this table in particular reveals is that Black Protestant congregations are the most likely to say that race relations is an important issue, but the least likely to say that they want to get involved in helping to solve it. As the interview and focus group data will reveal later, this may be due to a sense of exhaustion from Black people in working on this topic, and especially in educating white people.

We can look more closely at those congregants who say that race is a very important issue and those who want to see their congregations involved in addressing race relations through ordered logit models. The results of the first of these models, predicting prioritizing race relations as an important community issue, are displayed in Figure 2 (full model results are in Table A6).

These results show, perhaps unsurprisingly, that race matters for how important respondents believe race relations is as a community issue. Congregants attending Black Protestant congregations are more likely to say this issue is important, compared to respondents from all other religious traditions. We also see that politics come into play in a big way, with those that are more ideologically conservative significantly less likely to prioritize race relations. Importantly, those who report hearing political sermons at their place of worship are also more likely to prioritize the issue of race relations, as are those who are engaged in the community.

Because the surveyed population is religious, we also included some religion variables in the model, although the results show that those who say that their congregation makes a special effort to be welcoming to those of other races are not more likely to prioritize race relations. Those who believe that God has a plan that they can help carry out, known as providential believers (Glazier 2017), are also not any more likely to say that race relations is an important issue.

Figure 2. Results of Ologit Model Predicting Prioritizing Race Relations as a Community Issue
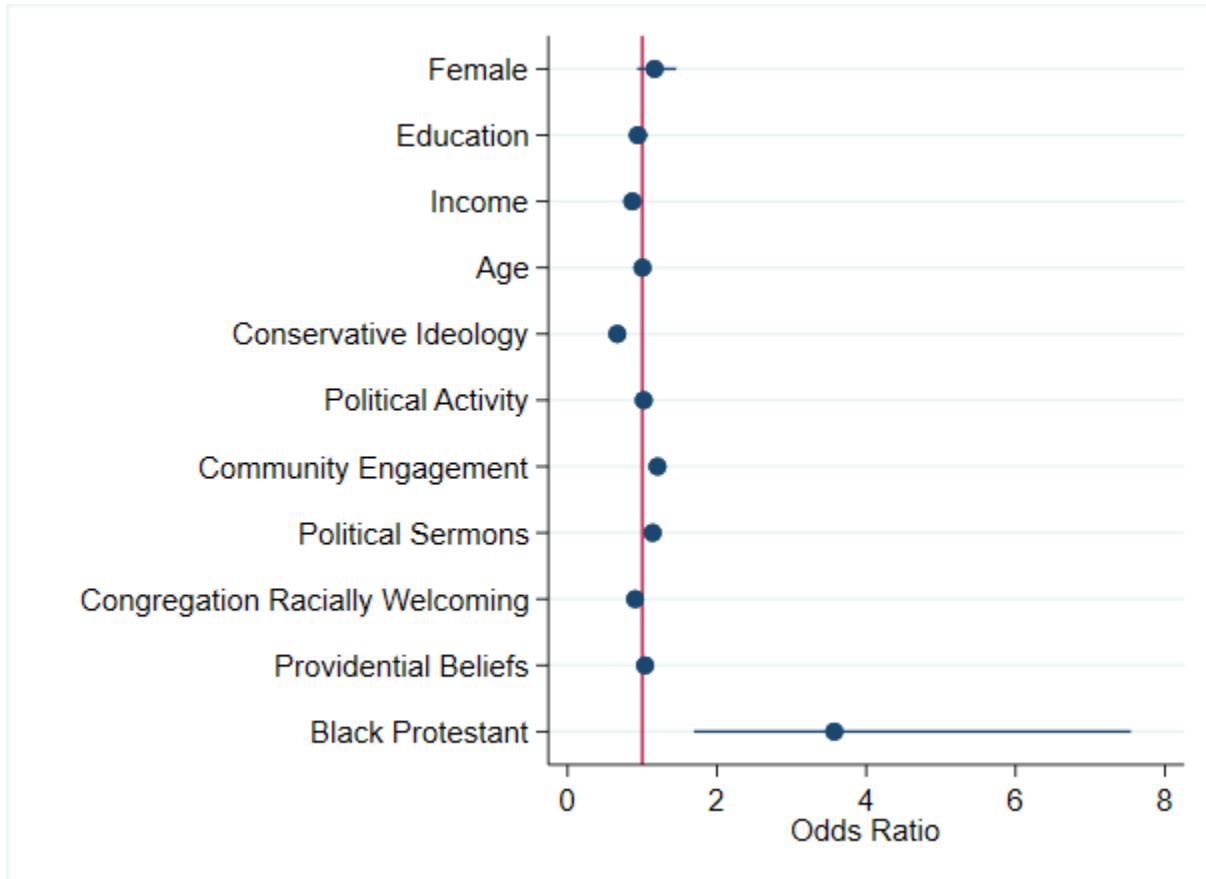

Saying that race is an important issue is one thing, but do congregants want their place of worship to get involved in the topic? The results of the ordered logit models predicting the respondent's desire for their congregation to engage in action on race relations are presented in Figure 3 (full model results are in Table A7). Recall that for this model, only those who said that race relations is a very important issue are included, because they are the only ones who received the follow up question about congregational engagement. These results show that, once again race, politics, and religion rise to the top in helping us understand how people are responding to the issue of race relations.

When it comes to our respondents wanting their congregation to engage the issue of race, those who are more conservative tend to shy away from the issue, while those who are politically

active want their congregation to be more involved. Whereas Figure 2 revealed that members of Black Protestant congregations are more likely to see the issue of race relations as important, in Figure 3, we see that members of Black Protestant congregations are less likely to want their congregations to engage in helping to address the issue of race, compared to other religious traditions in our sample.

Figure 3. Results of Ologit Model Predicting Respondent's Desire for their Congregation to be Active on the Issue of Race Relations
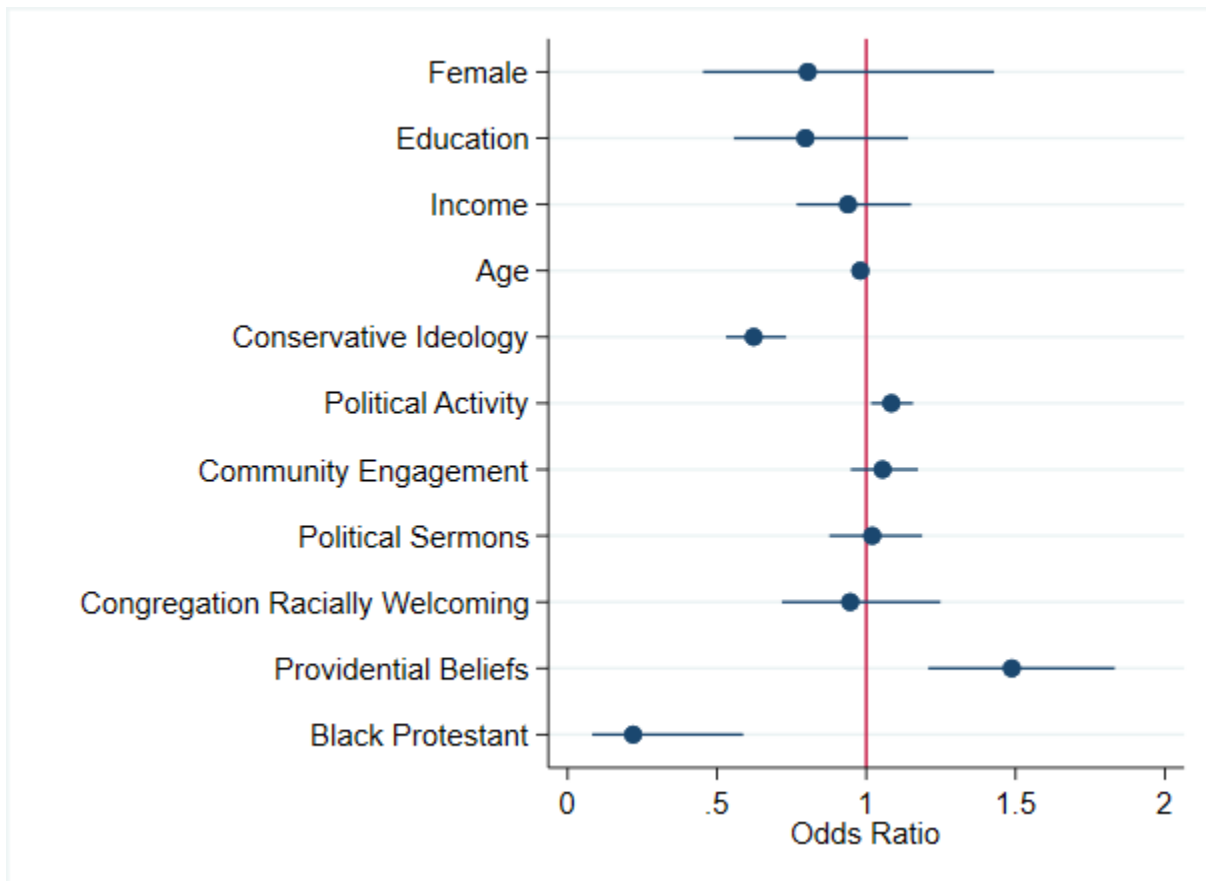
This finding may seem counterintuitive at first, but as the qualitative data will later reveal, many Black Protestant congregations have been deeply engaged in racial justice work for a long

time. In the months following the murder of George Floyd they may have been feeling exhausted or burnt out, whereas majority white congregations were engaging for what may have been the first time.

When it comes to religion, Figure 3 also shows that people who hold providential religious beliefs—those who believe that God has a plan that they can help carry out—are more likely to want to engage in work on race. This is something we have seen among religiously motivated peacemakers in conflict zones around the world. Believing in a plan and a power greater than yourself often keeps peacemakers working through very difficult circumstances (Glazier 2018) . We may see something similar happening among those who choose to engage in faith-based racial justice work in the South.

We can conclude from these quantitative survey data that, from the 2,293 respondents at the 35 surveyed congregations in [redacted], race relations matter and places of worship may be seen as important, safe spaces to talk about what can be challenging issues related to race. Additionally, white and Black congregations are in very different places when it comes to engaging on this issue. As later data will indicate, many Black churches and Black members are exhausted from traumatizing events and conversations. White congregations may be interested in taking action on the issue of race but may not know how to move forward. Here, clergy can be key leaders for conversations and progress. Our next data collection effort looks at how clergy were talking about race in the summer of 2020.

2. *Clergy Sermon Data from the Summer of 2020*

In the summer of 2020, race relations were on the minds and lips of many people in America. The killing of George Floyd at the hands of police officers, shared on viral video, sparked both individual outrage and collective protest. But how did religious leaders use their faith to address this specific

murder and the broader question of racial justice and reconciliation during this particularly

challenging time? And how did responses differ by race? Although we know that, under certain

circumstances, sermons can have a powerful impact, the extent to which clergy use them to address

race varies widely (Brown, Brown, and Jackson 2021).

Indeed, analysis of 90 sermons from 15 diverse Christian congregations in [redacted] in the

six weeks following the murder of George Floyd show that the response was not uniform. For our

analysis, we divided the congregations into white (n=10) and nonwhite (n=5). The nonwhite

category includes four Black Protestant churches and one multiethnic church that includes Black,

white, and Hispanic members. Here again we draw on a mixed method approach to first present

statistical differences across the two categories and then look more deeply at qualitative themes from

the sermons. The results of the statistical comparisons are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparing the Sermons of White and Nonwhite Churches in [redacted] in the Six Weeks
after the Murder of George Floyd

	Average Race Mentions*	Percent of Congregations Mentioning Floyd by Name	Average Religious Calls to Action	Average Political Calls to Action	Average Personal Frames	Average Collective Frames*
White (n=10)	3.6	70%	5.6	3.0	4.5	4.4
Nonwhite (n=5)	7.4	100%	8.2	6.0	6.6	7.6

*p<0.05; Note: Six weeks of sermons were analyzed from each of the 15 congregations following the murder of George

Floyd on Monday, May 25, 2020. Total sermons n=90.

As expected, there are key differences in how frequently white congregations talked about

race in the six weeks after the murder of George Floyd; the 10 majority white congregations in the

sample mentioned race an average of 3.6 times in their sermons, with one congregation making no

mention of race at all. (As a side note: The average mention drops to 2.8 when we remove one

majority white church that has emphasized addressing racism as a central value in their church and maxed out race mentions at 10.) On the other hand, the five majority nonwhite congregations mentioned race an average of 7.4 times in their sermons across these six weeks—a statistically significant difference. Additionally, every majority nonwhite congregation in the sample explicitly mentioned George Floyd by name, whereas 3 of the 10 majority white congregations did not say his name.

The way that race was discussed in these congregations differed as well, although there were some key similarities. For instance, both the majority white and the majority nonwhite congregations heard sermons with calls to action on racism and in both, these calls were more likely to be framed in religious than in political terms. For instance, in one Black Protestant congregation, you could hear the sorrow in the sermon and the solution clearly put forward as a religious one: "Lord, Your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Quite honestly, given the emotions and frustrations of this week, we need a word from you." The connection between spiritual strength and racial oppression was also clear in this sermon from a multiethnic church:

> "Before our God verse 11 [in Revelation, Chapter 12] they have overcome [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony. I believe that we as a country are overcoming right now. It's not only about blood, it's the blood that has been shed by the people. Brianna Taylor, George Floyd—that's a catalyst we can only truly overcome by the blood Jesus Christ shed on the cross."

Political calls to action were less common, although the differences here are not statistically significant. The Black Church has a much deeper history with political engagement, particularly on issues of race and we hear those political calls to action in the sermons following the murder of George Floyd. See, for instance, this political call to action in a sermon from a Black Protestant church,

> "And so, it's our job to continue to work with, to stand up for, and to speak up for those who are marginalized. We do that with our voices, and most importantly, church, we do that with our votes. And this fire that we feel, our flame, our passion, at the ballot box to elect

people who will represent us in the highest offices, locally and nationally, to ensure that justice is done going forward."

One key difference in framing is in how the clergy talked about whether the work of addressing racism was work that needed to be done on a personal level or work that needed to be done as a collective. When we look at the quantitative data, we do see a statistically significant difference based on race here. White churches are much more likely to frame racial injustice as a personal issue, whereas sermons from Black churches portray it as a more systemic problem that needs to be solved collectively. For instance, this sermon from a Black Protestant church emphasized the importance of collective work:

> "When you watch what's taking place, you watch all different ethnicities joining force for change. And when you get everybody working together to make a difference, man, then God will begin to make the difference… God says he needs everybody to stand. Everybody needs to unite. Everybody needs to pray, everybody needs to get on their knees, everybody's heart needs to turn back to him so that he can begin to heal our labor."

We can compare that to the following sermon from a majority white church, which emphasized individual action. Although the sermon is still addressing racism and treating it like a problem, it is addressing it as an *individual* problem that can be solved by changing the way an individual lives, not by working collectively.

> "Jesus not only taught us how to be anti-racist, he lived it, he demonstrated it, and he confronted it head-on and that's what this verse is talking about. Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which Jesus walked . . . we are not only to say it, but we should teach it, not only teach it, but live it."

Our research team decided to take the same codebook and method and look at sermons from these same churches the two weeks prior to the killing of George Floyd. With such a small sample we weren't expecting, and didn't find, statistically significant differences, but the qualitative results deepened our understanding of the differences between how Black and white churches approach the topic of race. One Black Protestant church spoke about the struggles "for those of us who are concerned about the justice issues of our day; about Black and brown bodies that are

harmed with impunity and without any consequence." Whereas a white church had a Facebook Live Q&A for their worship service on Sunday, May 24, 2020 and answered a question about whether there is a Biblical mandate against interracial marriage. The clergy member answering the questions responded "that's not a matter of scriptural admonition; that's really in the category of what's wise" and "I think a bigger issue would be a cultural issue." Both before and after the murder of George Floyd, there were qualitative differences in the nature of the discussions around race at Black and white congregations. These differences matter because the messages that congregants receive about the roots of racial problems and potential solutions are not just religious; they have political implications as well (McDaniel 2016, Iyengar 1994, Feezell, Glazier, and Boydstun 2019).

During the summer of 2020, many congregations in [redacted]—Black, white, and multiethnic—were talking about race. These discussions ranged from Black clergy leaders drawing on scriptural symbolism, to white clergy leaders calling for compassion, to white clergy leaders condemning racial protests with no mention of George Floyd. This background helps us better understand the next set of data: interviews with [redacted] clergy about their race relations efforts.

3. *Clergy Interview Data*

In the fall of 2021, our research team interviewed 21 clergy leaders from diverse congregations in [redacted] on the ways that their congregations were engaging with the topic of race relations. This purposeful sample of clergy included congregations we knew were engaged with the topic of race—this was not a random sample. We wanted to know more about the diversity of approaches to faith-based racial justice efforts happening in our city, so we sought out clergy who were working on those efforts for these interviews. Table 2 contains an exhaustive list of the types of formal programs clergy mentioned to us in the interviews. From book clubs to podcasts to sermon series, congregations in [redacted] found many ways to engage with the topic of race. In addition to

learning about these specific programs, three major themes emerged from our analysis of the interviews with these clergy.

Table 2. Formal Programs Mentioned by Clergy in Interviews

Within Congregation
Book studies
Discussion Groups
Guest speakers
Hire more diverse leadership
Listen to or host podcasts
Meetings
Multi-week seminar
Research history of own church
Special sermon series
Talks around MLK Day, George Floyd, Black History Month
Watch movies
Workshops
With Other Congregations
Host discussions with other pastors
Joint worship services
Meet with other pastors
Partner with local organizations or congregations
Outside of Congregation
Attend rally
Issue formal statements
Outreach to diversify congregation makeup

First, many clergy talked the centrality of race relations to their faith. In fact, more than half of our clergy expressed that sentiment (14 of the 21). For instance, one clergy member said "race is always an underlying part of whatever program we are doing, whatever outreach we are doing." Another told us "we believe [racist systems and structures] are breaking God's heart and so we are seeking to live in a different way." One leader said "my convictions about racial justice are intrinsic to my faith. I don't know how to separate those." In telling us about the racial justice programs they

19

were engaged in, clergy repeatedly emphasized the motivations for them as faith-based. As one pastor said, "I'm meeting with young Black pastors all the time… racism [is] a big ongoing conversation for our church because we think that's kind of church that God wants us to be."

As Table 2 indicates, across our sample, congregations were involved in a variety of initiative to address race relations, including within their own congregation, with other congregations, and outside of their congregation. However, our categorization of these programs reveals that the predominate efforts were within their own congregation, with only one mention of an actual structural change (diversifying leadership).

Second, clergy foregrounded religious texts to explain why faith-based racial justice work was so important to them and their congregation. In fact, while our sample was not random, we found it of value to note that 20 of the 21 interviews, clergy mentioned stories from scripture or explicit scripture references. As one example, one clergy member referenced the Exodus story of Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt as a parallel for the deliverance of those who are currently oppressed today. Other clergy leaders explicitly referred to the Apostle Paul creating multiethnic churches as a model for what clergy should be doing. One said, "we see in the book of Acts that the Spirit of God can tear down all of those cultural barriers that we have placed up and allow us to see that we're probably not as different as we like to think."

Still other clergy used the specific phrase "image of God" in referring to how all people should be treated with dignity and respect. As one pastor put it, "when you begin to make a hierarchy of races, that is an affront to the image of God in all people." This clergy leader went on to say, "that is how I like to frame racism and racial justice, the redemptive work of that is to recover the image of God in all people or a better way of saying it is to recover our ability to see the image of God in all people." Another clergy leader from a different faith tradition similarly said, "We are all

made in the image of God, and if that's the case and if we believe that which we believe, then it doesn't matter what color you are."

Third, while our sample was not random, differences based on race merit attention. The eight nonwhite clergy we interviewed were much more likely to talk about scripture. The nonwhite clergy made an average of 9.4 general or specific scripture references in their interviews, compared to an average of 4.4. for the white clergy (a statistically significant difference). Every single nonwhite clergy member made multiple references to holy scripture in talking about racial justice, sometimes expounding on particular passages or stories at length. For instance, a Black clergy leader went into an in-depth discussion of the story of the Good Samaritan, explained how "Jesus recalibrates the Jewish understanding of neighbor" because, "along comes this person that's hated who helps this person, and not only helps them but pays their bill at the end and goes above and beyond. That's what neighboring looks like, Jesus says. You make yourself uncomfortable." In contrast, some white clergy mentioned the same scripture stories, but it was more often the case that scripture references were made in passing. For instance, one white clergy leader said, "You know, Jesus he crossed a lot of lines: Jew, Gentile, male, female. There's a lot of different things that he did in his ministry to include people."

A fourth and final theme was a desire to address race relations while giving voice to what white faith leaders saw as limited efforts. We saw sincerity in our interviews as these clergy expressed their desire to do something to combat racism and to help their congregations address the challenging issues of the day. For instance, one clergy member acknowledged, "I will say we're trying real hard but we're still a very affluent, predominantly white congregation. I would not want to project the idea that we feel like we've got it figured out, because we really don't, but I think we're starting to think about some things that are important to move forward." Other clergy members felt overwhelmed and like they weren't doing enough. In speaking about past racial divisions,

denominational segregation, and harm, one said, "in terms of our own denomination that is still white, […] there is a need for repentance."

Thus, the clergy interview data revealed clear commitments to addressing race relations as central to the faith of many leaders and grounded in holy texts. Nonwhite clergy leaders were more likely to speak about racial issues in more explicit religious terms, using stories and examples from scripture to emphasize the importance of racial justice. A final theme, and one worth exploring further, was the sense that despite the varied efforts, white leaders sensed they were not doing enough.

Conclusions

Places of worship have the potential to lead people of faith and their broader communities when it comes to making progress on race relations. Our research shows that many people of faith see race as an important issue; those who do want their congregations involved to help address it. As our country and communities continue to struggle with the realities of racism, this study provides insights into the ways places of worship and religious leaders are engaging important issues of race through the lens of religion.

The data we collected from clergy sermons and interviews shows that some clergy have been using the tools of their faith to address racial justice issues over the last couple of years. This can be challenging work, but it is work that some clergy leaders are very committed to. As one pastor said in an interview with our research team, "everybody likes Jesus until Jesus calls you to do hard things, but the real Jesus always calls you to do hard things, and this is just one of those things." Another emphasized to us just how important it is that religious leaders act first on addressing racism, saying, "The church as a whole will only progress in terms of race relations to the degree that it's leaders, both formal and informal, have done so in their own lives."

But clergy engaging with the topic of race relations is certainly not uniform, even across a city like [redacted], which has a long and checkered history with racism and has experienced tensions in recent years (Carroll 2020, Campbell and Pettigrew 1959). Our analysis of sermons in the summer of 2020 shows that some congregations were silent on the topic of race—20% of our sample never said George Floyd's name.

But one of the most common themes we heard from majority white congregation leaders in our clergy interviews was a desire to engage with the issue of race relations together with a feeling of not knowing where to begin, or not knowing how to do it well. In speaking with national experts on faith-based racial justice, we learned, "People don't know how to get involved. They don't know the entry point." Although this racial ignorance, or not-knowing, is itself an example of racialized social systems that reinforce white dominance in communities where white people and white-majority congregations don't *have* to learn about racism (Mueller 2020, 2018), helping congregations find an entry point for faith-based racial justice is one goal of our community-based research. We seek not only to learn as social scientists from the community we live in, but also to return findings of value to that community (Rogers 2009, Wilkins 2011, Glazier and Topping 2021).

Thus, our research team worked to develop resources—based on this research, our review of the literature, and conversations with other community and national leaders—to share with faith leaders and congregations. Our data provides ways to respond to racial ignorance by indicating not only ways to tap into holy texts and other religious resources but also ways to explore structural changes, consistent with Critical Race Theory, by hiring diverse leadership and exploring past history with race. The resources our team developed are now available on our project website. Additionally, on November 2, 2022, we hosted a Race and Faith Summit bring clergy leaders from across the city together, share these results, distribute the developed resources, and talk about the challenges that our community faces when it comes to race.

How are congregations using the tools of religion to engage questions of race? They are doing so through sermons, by using scripture, in diverse programming, and in ways that vary across religious traditions and race. The rich and diverse data we have presented here indicate that, despite the decidedly ambivalent history of religion and race, people and places of faith have the potential to facilitate progress on racial justice issues, that congregants want to see their places of worship engage with these important issues, and that many clergy leaders are already beginning to do so.

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Appendix for Race and Faith: The Role of Congregations in Racial Justice

Table A1. Congregations Participating in the October 2020 Survey of Members

Religious Tradition	Participating Congregations	Total Respondent N
Black Protestant	7	102
Evangelical Protestant	9	366
Mainline Protestant	13	971
Catholic	1	607
Muslim	2	61
Jewish	2	85
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	2	101
Total	35	2,293

Table A2. Survey Question Wording and Summary Statistics

Measure	Question Wording	Summary Statistics
Community Engagement Scale	Summative Measure of Six Questions, coded Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neither agree nor disagree (3), Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1): • I do things to make the community a better place • I am aware of the important needs in the community • I rarely talk with my friends and/or family about community problems (reverse coded) • Becoming involved in political or social issues is a good way to improve the community • Government is too complicated for me to understand (reverse coded) • I believe that I can personally make a difference in my community	Mean: 23.75 S.D.: 2.95 Min: 6 Max: 30
[redacted] Racial Divide	[redacted] has a problem with racial division, coded Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neither agree nor disagree (3), Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1)	Mean: 3.96 S.D.: 0.87 Min: 1 Max: 5
[redacted] Racial Improvement	I think that race relations are likely to improve in [redacted] in the future, coded Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neither agree nor disagree (3), Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1)	Mean: 3.52 S.D.: 0.81 Min: 1 Max: 5
Issue Importance	Please indicate how important each of these issues is to you, coded Very important (5), Important (4), Moderately important (3), Slightly important (2), Unimportant (1): • Crime • Race Relations • Access to Healthcare • Education/Schools • Income Inequality • Marriage/Families • Housing/Homelessness • Prison/Criminal Justice • At-risk Children/Foster Care	All variables range from 1 to 5. Crime (Mean: 4.18, S.D: 0.87), Race Relations (Mean: 4.24, S.D: 0.92), Access to Healthcare (Mean: 4.47, S.D: 0.75), Education/Schools (Mean: 4.55, S.D: 0.69), Income Inequality (Mean: 3.68, S.D: 1.16), Marriage/Families (Mean: 4.32, S.D: 0.91), Housing/Homelessness (Mean: 4.09, S.D: 0.87), Prison/Criminal Justice (Mean: 3.81, S.D: 0.97), At-risk Children/Foster Care (Mean: 4.23, S.D: 0.84)

Congregational Issue Involvement	Would you like to see your congregation get involved to help address the issue of [x]? Yes (2), No (0), Maybe (1)	All variables range from 0 to 2. Crime (Mean: 1.26, S.D: 0.69), Race Relations (Mean: 1.83, S.D: 0.42), Access to Healthcare (Mean: 1.49, S.D: 0.69), Education/Schools (Mean: 1.60, S.D: 0.66), Income Inequality (Mean: 1.60, S.D: 0.61), Marriage/Families (Mean: 1.70, S.D: 0.55), Housing/Homelessness (Mean: 1.77, S.D: 0.49), Prison/Criminal Justice (Mean: 1.60, S.D: 0.64), At-risk Children/Foster Care (Mean: 1.74, S.D: 0.52)
Political Activity Scale	Summative Measure of Seven Questions regarding the frequency of various political activities, coded No (1), Yes once or twice (2), Yes a few times (3), Yes many times (4). In the past year, have you: - Tried to persuade someone to vote - Donated money to a political candidate or campaign - Signed a petition - Participated in a local political or community group - Participated in a national political group - Contacted public officials on a political or social issue - Posted or shared something political through social media (like Facebook or Twitter)	Mean: 12.33 S.D.: 4.63 Min: 7 Max: 28
Congregation Racially Welcoming	My congregation makes a deliberate effort to be welcoming to racial and ethic groups that are different from the majority here, Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neither agree nor disagree (3), Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1)	Mean: 4.09 S.D.: 0.95 Min: 1 Max: 5
Political Sermons	Combination of responses to the following two questions: How often do the worship service messages by your religious leader: Focus on advocacy or social action?	Mean: 5.66 S.D.: 1.86 Min: 2 Max: 10

	• Urge you to register to vote? Response options are: Never (1), Seldom (2), Sometimes (3), Often (4), Always (5)	
Providential Beliefs	Combination of responses to the following two questions: • Would you say your religion provides some guidance in your day-to-day life, quite a bit of guidance, or a great deal of guidance in your day-to-day life? Some guidance (2), Quite a bit of guidance (3), A great deal of guidance (4), Religion isn't that important to me (1) • Please mark how much you agree or disagree with the following statement: God has a plan and I have a part to play in it: Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neither Agree Nor Disagree (3), Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1)	Mean: 7.99 S.D.: 1.25 Min: 2 Max: 9
Conservative Ideology	Many people use the terms liberal, moderate, and conservative to recognize different political opinions. On a scale from 0 to 6, where 0 is the most liberal position and 6 the most conservative, where would you rank yourself when you think of your general political views?	Mean: 3.21 S.D.: 1.88 Min: 0 Max: 6
Nonwhite	Coded 0 for anyone who responded that their racial or ethnic identity was white and 1 for all others.	86% white 14% nonwhite
Female	Coded 0 for anyone who responded that their gender was male and 1 for anyone who responded that their gender was female. The 7 "other" responses to the gender question were dropped from this variable.	33% male 67% female
Education	What is the highest year in school/degree you have achieved? Less than high school (1), High school/GED (2), Some college/applied degree (3), College graduate (4), Post graduate (5)	Mean: 4.21 S.D.: 0.86 Min: 1 Max: 5
Income	By your best estimate, what was your total household income last year, before taxes? $10,000 or less (1), $10,001 to $20,000 (2), $20,001 to $35,000 (3), $35,001 to $50,000 (4), $50,001 to $100,000 (5), $100,001 to $150,000 (6), more than $150,000 (7)	Mean: 5.42 S.D.: 1.37 Min: 1 Max: 7
Age	2020 minus the year the respondent was born.	Mean: 57.35 S.D.: 15.33 Min: 19 Max: 89
Black Protestant	Respondent is a member of a Black Protestant Congregation	N=102

Table A3. Descriptive Information of the 15 Congregations Selected for Sermon Analysis

Religious Tradition	N
Black Protestant	4
Evangelical Protestant	7
Mainline Protestant	4
Race/Ethnicity	N
White	10
Black	4
Multiethnic	1
Geographic Location	N
West Little Rock	4
Downtown	5
Southwest Little Rock	1
Midtown	5
Size	N
Less than 150	3
150-400	6
More than 401	6

Table A4. Descriptive Information of the 21 Clergy who Participated in Interviews

Religious Tradition	N
Baha'i	2
Black Protestant	4
Evangelical Protestant	5
Mainline Protestant	7
Catholic	1
Islamic	1
Jewish	1
Race/Ethnicity	N
White	13
Black	6
Asian	2

Table A5. Mean Issue Priority of Race Relations and Mean Desire for Engagement on Race Relations, by Religious Tradition

Religious Tradition	Mean Issue Priority of Race Relations (1 to 5)	Mean Desire for Engagement on Race Relations (0 to 2)	Respondent N
Catholic	3.97 (0.05)	1.78 (0.03)	607
Mormon	4.10 (0.11)	1.72 (0.09)	101
Evangelical Protestant	4.21 (0.06)	1.85 (0.03)	366
Total	4.24 (0.91)	1.83 (0.42)	2293
Mainline Protestant	4.33 (0.03)	1.90 (0.01)	971
Jewish	4.52 (0.09)	1.81 (0.07)	85
Islamic	4.56 (0.08)	1.87 (0.06)	61
Black Protestant	4.72 (0.07)	1.57 (0.09)	102

Note: standard deviations are in parentheses

Table A6. Full Model Results for Ologit Predicting Prioritizing Race Relations as a Community Issue

Variable	Odds Ratio	Standard Error	Z Score
Female	1.164027	0.132496	1.33
Education	0.941587	0.064742	-0.88
Income**	0.866707	0.038717	-3.2
Age	1.002586	0.003529	0.73
Conservative Ideology**	0.666316	0.023583	-11.47
Political Activity	1.020078	0.013381	1.52
Community Engagement**	1.20432	0.02476	9.04
Political Sermons**	1.13923	0.036547	4.06
Congregation Racially Welcoming	0.905292	0.054755	-1.65
Providential Beliefs	1.038511	0.047125	0.83
Black Protestant**	3.572222	1.362439	3.34
N=1,494			
Pseudo R2=0.134			

**p<0.001

Table A7. Full Model Results for Ologit Predicting Respondent's Desire for their Congregation to be Active on the Issue of Race Relations

Variable	Odds Ratio	Standard Error	Z Score
Female	0.804304	0.235544	-0.74
Education	0.796558	0.145632	-1.24
Income	0.93903	0.097211	-0.61
Age*	0.980226	0.009308	-2.1
Conservative Ideology**	0.623144	0.051206	-5.76
Political Activity*	1.084123	0.035845	2.44
Community Engagement	1.054746	0.05727	0.98
Political Sermons	1.020023	0.079036	0.26
Congregation Racially Welcoming	0.946438	0.133763	-0.39
Providential Beliefs**	1.48749	0.158249	3.73
Black Protestant*	0.219461	0.110445	-3.01
N=682			
Pseudo R2=0.148			

*p<0.05; **p<0.001

Appendix A1. Codebook for Sermons on Race After George Floyd

- *Do* they or *don't* they mention race?
  - Count 1 for each mention of race, racism, George Floyd, Black Lives Matter, racial injustice, etc.
- Is it *personal?*
  - Do they say George Floyd's name? Code yes for the specific mention of his name.
- *How* are they talking about it?
  - *Episodic*–George Floyd, specific BLM protest, isolated event
  - *Thematic*–Ongoing societal subjects such as systemic racism, ongoing racial injustice, police brutality as a broader issue
- *What* are they saying to do about it?
  - Do clergy say this is personal/inner work (for each *individual* to do) or work as a *whole* (collective) to do together? Whose responsibility is this work–each person or the church community?
- Is the call to action *religious* (e.g., prayer, spiritual growth) or *political* (e.g., vote, march)?
  - A religious call to action mentions holy texts, a divine being, or spiritual power, etc.
  - A political call to action mentions work to be done in society
    - Religious and political calls to action are not mutually exclusive. For instance, a pastor saying "we need to pray for our political leaders to have the courage to act to address racism" would receive a code for both a religious call to action and a political call to action. However, "we need to pray for hearts to change" would be just a religious call to action and "we need to demand that our political leaders act to address racism" would be just a political call to action.

Appendix A2. Codebook for Interviews on Race with Clergy

- Central Value: Anti-racism is a core value of the congregation.
    - Because race relations is so central, it is likely to come out in all they do. This is very important to the congregation (e.g., this is a value, our vision, we have a long history of, this is really central to who we are, etc.).
        - "We are known for this. This is our mission."
        - Note that central values can't be inferred by what congregations are doing or a reference to scripture. They can only be stated.
        - Use this code sparingly--only when it is explicit.
- Informal Race Relations Efforts: Congregations race relations efforts/engagement is informal.
    - Not a formal program led by the clergy (e.g., we have encouraged conversations; we talk often about).
- Specific Program/Initiative: A specific program or effort is discussed. This is a formal program that has a start/end.
    - Examples include sermon series, reading groups, tour of civil rights sites, etc.
        - Race relations was the primary target
        - Racial justice was a secondary outcome
- Scripture: Clergy member uses holy text (scripture) to explain/justify their racial justice/reconciliation efforts.
    - General: Any time clergy say "Jesus said" or "the Church says" we code it as scripture because scripture is implied.
    - Specific:
        - Formal scripture/story. Verse, chapter, line given (in John 3:16…).
        - Narrative from scripture; more than just a citation or mention (the story of the Good Samaritan teaches…).
        - Image of God references go here (references to being created equal, may reference Genesis or just the creation account).

Appendix A3. Clergy Interview Protocol

The interview protocol is divided into blocks. The blocks provide an organizing framework and structure for the interview and an initial framework for coding the interviewees responses. The interviews are semi-structured and follow-up questions may slightly deviate from the specific wording used here. The Blocks are organized as follows:

- Block 1 provides an overview of the congregation's engagement with the topic of race relations.
- Block 2 focuses on specific efforts (if any) and any impact/changes the clergy member has seen.
- Block 3 focuses on whether and how the clergy member sees race and religion as connected.

Elements to cover before beginning the interview

1. Introduction and Overview of project
   a. There have been a lot of discussions about race over the past couple of years and we want to know more about how the faith community in [redacted] is engaging, or not, in these conversations. It can be challenging to talk about race and we really appreciate you being willing to engage in this conversation.
      i. As we are talking, you may find it necessary to mention people in the congregation or the community. To protect their confidentiality, we ask that you don't name specific individuals during our conversation, unless you are referring us to another person we might want to interview.
      ii. You can skip any questions that you don't feel comfortable answering.
   b. Confidentiality (explain IRB informed consent).
   c. Discuss taping for accuracy
      i. "I would like to record this interview to make sure that I have your response accurately. Is that okay?"
   d. Thank you—always be polite and thankful for their time.

Block 1. Overview of congregation's engagement with race

2. Background. There has been a lot of discussion—both in [redacted] and around the country—about race over the last couple of years.
   a. Have you heard conversations about race taking place in your congregation? What have those been like?
      i. Follow up: are those mostly informal, or has your congregation had any formal efforts to discuss race relations?
         1. If no formal efforts, ask about what the informal efforts have looked like and then skip to Block 3.
         2. If they have formal efforts, move on to Block 2.

Block 2. Discussion of specific congregational efforts on race

Thank you for telling me a bit about your congregation's engagement on race. We are particularly interested in understanding more about the specific efforts that different congregations have undertaken and the effects that clergy have seen among their members.

3. Could you tell me a little more about [specific program they mentioned in Block 1]?
    a. How did you organize that effort?
    b. Did the initiative for it come mostly from the members or mostly from the leadership?
4. How was this program received by the members? How did people react to it?
5. What effect do you think the program had?
    a. Did you see any changes among the members of your congregation?
6. Did you learn any lessons from this effort to engage on the topic of race?
    a. If you did it over again, what would you do differently?
    b. What about it do you think was most helpful for your members?

Block 3. Race and religion

We would like to talk theology with you for a minute, if you don't mind. We are interested in the faith-based connections between racial justice or racial reconciliation and religion.

7. Could you tell us a little about how you see race and religion connected, theologically?
    a. Is there a religious imperative to do racial justice or racial reconciliation work?
        i.   Probe for discussion here: what is that imperative or explain why not?
    b. Is there a role for religious leaders or faith-based organizations to lead on the work of racial healing?
        i.   Probe for discussion here: what does that role look like or why is this a role religious leaders shouldn't take on?

Wrapping up

Finally, can you think of any congregations or religious leaders in [redacted] that are working on racial justice and reconciliation issues that you think we should be talking to?

Thank you so much for your time! That is all of the questions that I have. Thinking back over our conversation, is there anything you want to add or clarify?

Thanks again! We are working with a couple of different community organizations, including the [redacted], to provide some resources to congregations that are interested in engaging with the topic of race relations. This will be really helpful as we try to create the best possible resources and as we do the academic work of research and writing articles. Thank you!