LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE PERCEPTION OF RACIAL UNITY

IN EVANGELICAL CHURCHES IN CHICAGO

Research Prospectus in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Amber L. Harvey

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2024

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3/20/2024

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Abstract

"Racism in the United States is part of a much older and global phenomenon" that has effects that are seen "today in hearts, minds, and institutions" (Lovelace, 2021, p. 67). Regarding the African American population, housing discrimination continues to be an obstacle to families (Burke et al., 2018), racist systems have led to collateral damage in the health of adults (Bleich et al., 2019), and African American men constitute approximately 25% of police shooting victims (Schwartz, 2020). This study seeks to examine if racism has infiltrated into the local church. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perception or experiential knowledge of racial unity between White Evangelical church leaders and their African American congregants and community members in the Chicago area. Within the context of this study, the researcher defines "racial disunity" as intentional disconnect or apathy toward unity between African American congregants or community members and the predominately White local church. The theory that guided this study was transformative leadership and its power to harness social justice engagement to address societal concerns regarding the subject matter. Through semi-structured focus groups and interviews, a small cross-section of the local church community in Chicago informed the researcher as to their perception of underline themes of racial unity within the local church and community. Additionally, the research provided transformative discussions and solution suggestions for local churches to demonstrate biblical unity within the city.

Keywords: Racial unity, racism, social justice, Evangelical churches, Chicago, African American, local church

Copyright Page

Dedication

My Dad. Your divine leadership, love, and unfailing faithfulness is life to me.

My Mom. Your demonstration of consistency, integrity, and godliness is invaluable.

My Grandma. I have never experienced a greater encourager and intercessor.

Every ounce of success or goodness regarding my life, my calling, and my character are due to the influences of these three.

Acknowledgments

Dr. Jeffrey Davis. Thank you for your encouragement, prayers, academic mentoring, and wisdom during every step of this research and dissertation journey.

Dr. Gary J. Bredfeldt. Thank you for lending your academic leadership and support to this research.

Dr. Marti Dryk. Thank you for your assistance with the editing process.

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CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Introduction

"Racism in the United States is part of a much older and global phenomenon that unfortunately thrives today in hearts, minds, and institutions" (Lovelace, 2021, p. 67). Racial discord has saturated much of the historical framework of the United States of America. Unbiblical conduct has added tension within communities and shaken society's foundations. As witnessed by social disparities targeting African Americans, the problem of racial disunity and the fruit of systematic racism has flourished in modern America (Lovelace). There are a disproportionate number of African Americans targeted by police action and subsequent brutality, as compared to White Americans (Lovelace). In health care, racism carries disparate repercussions that affect the health and vitality of African Americans. Historically in America, African Americans have been victims to racism on both institutional and interpersonal levels that have led to mental, physical, and emotional health issues such as hypertension, depression, anxiety, and psychological distress (Bleich et al., 2019). Students also experience the negative effects of racism, as statistics show that teachers are more likely to discipline, suspend, or expel an African American student than a White American student. The academic discipline has consequential effects such as lower test scores, lower participation in higher education, and reduced opportunities in the job market (Okonofua et al., 2016). In the housing and mortgage arena, racial discrimination has resulted in African Americans living in more dangerous and less-resourced areas that offer a low selection of employment and opportunities (Burke et al., 2018). The authors continue to assert that African American communities have reduced access to healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables because they live in areas rampant with fast-food options yet fewer supermarkets. (Burke et al.). One social-cultural variable, racism, among

others has overflowed into many spheres of American society—law enforcement, the marketplace, education, health, and housing.

While research demonstrates that racial disunity has infiltrated the various spheres of society, this research endeavor explored if racial disunity has penetrated the local Evangelical church. The perception of racial disunity between African American congregants and White leaders within the local church was explored in this research. The researcher sought to identify if racial disunity had overflowed into the pews and pulpits of the local church through a qualitative phenomenological study of White Evangelical church leaders and African American congregants in Chicago, Illinois.

<div align="center">**Background to the Problem**</div>

One definition of racism that exists, is that it is a "system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on race, that unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities, and advantages others" (Jee-Lyn García & Sharif, 2015, p. 27). Racism can also be classified as "prejudice plus power. It is not only personal bigotry toward someone of a different race that constitutes racism; rather, racism includes the imposition of bigoted ideas on groups" (Tisby, 2019, p. 16). The rhythm of racism is not limited to a singular instance or personal bias but infiltrates a nation's systems and policies (Tisby). Jemal et al. (2020) describe racism in America like a virus that infects all systems of the infrastructure, including the family unit, communities, corporate organizations, educational, health, legal, moral, and cultural values.

As racism invaded the country and embedded itself as systematic racism, the historical climate of the country became polluted with mistrust, injustice, and disparity. When looking at perceptions and treatment towards White Americans versus African Americans, it is evident that the institutions of America are plagued with the undertones of racial disunity (Eberhardt, 2019).

Okonofua et al. (2016) stated that White students are less likely to be expelled from school because, systematically, they are perceived as more appeasing and compliant than their African American counterparts. Bonam et al. (2016) asserted that White homeowners in America have higher home equity because they are perceived as more mature, clean, and responsible than other racial groups. Research shows that spaces occupied by African Americans (homes, businesses, neighborhoods) are stereotypically viewed as "physically degraded, unpleasant, unsafe, and lacking resources" (Bonam et al., p. 1566). In examining the criminal justice system, Scott et al. (2017) observed that White defendants perceive less culpability than African American defendants, which results in a decrease in White defendants being sentenced to longer jail time or execution. The misperception within the legal arena carries dire consequences as African Americans are unduly mistreated, granted incompetent counsel, and given harsher sentences for crimes that disproportionately target African American communities (Gonzalez Van Cleve, 2016). As a result of racially motivated legal disparities and mass incarceration, people with criminal records encounter racism when looking for employment or housing, and no longer are eligible for social programs and full voting rights. The results are detrimental to the overall health of the individual, household, and larger community (Jee-Lyn García & Sharif, 2015).

The systemic injustice endured by African Americans birthed a society that consistently demoralized and devalued the African American culture, experience, and identity (Bantum, 2016). Throughout the history of America, the climate of racism was not confined to societal, educational, or legal arenas. Local churches joined on both sides of the racism issue, although the scales often tipped toward passivity and avoidance. Historically, the American church have coward in fear and complicity when confronted with the decision between racism and equality. "They chose comfort over constructive conflict and in so doing created and maintained a status

quo of injustice" (Tisby, 2019, p. 17).

Tisby explored Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous letter from his Birmingham jail cell. In response to the lethargic and neglectful response of the American churches, King poured out biblical truth as he issued a call for justice. King identified that most of the White church denied advocacy and accepted complicity, instead of aligning together as Christians to help African Americans experience freedom (Tisby). A poignant historical example of the gulf between White moderate Evangelicals and African Americans regarding racism is the leadership perspectives of Reverend Billy Graham, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Tisby (2019) outlined the differing approaches that aided in many American churches and denominations overlooking racial injustice in the nation. "King recognized the necessity of changing the laws to ensure the rights of all citizens, and he did not shy away from direct action that caused constructive conflict in his efforts to bring about change" (p. 140). In contrast, Tisby observed that Billy Graham and more moderate Christians took a passive approach towards Civil Rights. They were unable (or unwilling) to see the broader social context of historical racism and its influence on the Civil Rights Movement. Instead, they emphasized an adherence to the Jim Crow laws and defended the view that civil disobedience needed to be subdued. "King saw a different remedy: 'Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention. There is no other answer.' (pp. 142-143).

As a result of American churches being passive in the approach to healing racism in the past, there should be modern accountability for churches to assist in the mending process. Sales and Rim (2023) follow a similar viewpoint and looked to the local church and biblical institutions to play a role in untangling the mess of racism. They state that the local Evangelical churches have remained silent regarding the pressing issue of racism which in fact contradicts

the essence of a biblical worldview. From a biblical framework, God places a distinct value on humanity as image-bearers (Genesis 1:26-27) and embraces a society that recognizes the importance of preserving that image (Kilner, 2015). The role of justice is evident in the Bible, as God utilized His prophets to admonish nations against racial injustice, disunity, and the marginalization of people groups (Woodbridge, 2019). The theological implications are that followers of God must be concerned about the justice issues that weigh on God's heart, which includes creating communities that honor the uniqueness and value of all people. Valuing people also requires a comprehension of their distinctiveness. God enjoys the diversity of His creation and admonishes His people to walk in unity amidst the diversity (Cawley & Snyder, 2015). Passages such as First Corinthians 12, Romans 5, and John 17 reinforce the heart of God for a united Body that reflects the grace and love of God. Therefore, local churches that practically engage in social unity and justice serve the agenda of Heaven (Afulike, 2018).

Involvement with the cultural and social needs of a minority group within the community requires a theological, theoretical, and sociological understanding of race and transformative leadership. In America, African Americans (like most minority racial groups) have received certain racial assumptions and mistreatment. Racial categorizations were a construct that helped to justify the evils of the slave trade and economic oppression of African men and women (Mitchell-Yellin, 2018). Deconstructing race assists in diminishing its power to dismantle societal unity and human dignity (Bantum, 2016). The sociological effects of racial constructs can be a barrier to the focus of inclusivity and generational healing. In addition, the damaging effects are not only on the oppressed group, but also on the oppressors and those benefiting from cultural disparities. "Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999) describes *Ubuntu* as an understanding that people are interdependent and belong to a greater whole. As such, everyone is diminished

when another is denigrated or treated as less than who they are" (Jemal et al., 2020, p. 34).

The African notion of Ubuntu reveals the transformative power of unity and acceptance. Transformative leadership is needed to assist communities and organizations in bringing biblical values, dignity, and integrity to the forefront, even above racial categorization (Evans, 2022). Transformative leadership carries catalytic power to bring influence and lasting change to communities (Bonaparte, 2015) as relational interaction generates systems that encourage societal innovation (Grin et al., 2018). Innovation includes the way people think about and serve one another. The *New King James Bible* (1982) admonishes the audience to "not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2) and "being like-minded, having the same love, *being* of one accord of one mind. *Let* nothing *be done* through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself" (Philippians 2:2-3). The selfless humility of leadership is actualized as people yield to the transformative power found in the Word of God and through the character of God (Petrus Niemandt, 2016). Transformative leadership harnesses relationships and biblical truths to shift cultures and dismantle the power of disunity.

Statement of the Problem

Racial disunity on a national level is a crippling issue that affects a myriad of societal spheres. The problem can magnify exponentially if places of refuge, such as local churches, become affected by racism. If racial disunity is evident within the walls of the local church, then the very solution that God orchestrated to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16) into a decaying and dark world is in jeopardy of becoming part of the problem. The experiences and perceptions of modern church leaders and congregations will assist by providing data to help determine if any fruit of racial injustice exists within local churches. If unity is hindered within the context of

local congregations and community leadership then it rips at the very fabric of God's design for love, unity, diversity, and justice (Kilner, 2015; Woodbridge & Joynt, 2019).

Within the United States, racial unrest has prompted some theologians and sociologists to reexamine the role of race within the country, which has amplified research regarding racial disunity. Racial tensions provide a new dynamic for studying not just the historical implications of racism, but the sociological aspects of deconstructing the notion of race itself. Kim (2020), Bantum (2016), and Heschel (2015) lend contemporary research and insight regarding the collateral damage of racial divisions as well as a hopeful move forward toward unified communities. W. E. B. Du Bois believed that race was the largest problem in American society because race was "invoked as a political tool that is used to deny constitutional law, to violate human rights, and to justify genocide" (Heschel, 2015, p. 3).

The author continued to identify that race, when wielded by those with malicious intent, turns into a weapon that leaves people in bondage to systematic injustices. Pulling from the historic oppression of Jewish, African, and Asian people, Heschel highlighted that racism rips at the spirit of a person by implying that something inherently wrong is connected to the essence of a person from a particular culture. The weight of racial categorization and racism tears at the infrastructure of society. Even as society identifies and acknowledges the evils of racist ideologies, especially "in slavery, Jim Crow, and genocide—shame often suppresses forthright declarations and instead creates 'hidden' institutions of racism, or racist ideas in a different language. Poverty, the prison system, and inadequate medical are some of racism's manifestations" (Heschel, p. 22). The author warned of the slippery slope of racism that leads to violent expressions of mistrust and hatred. The gravity of racist undertones and systems is that it robs humanity of beauty and diversity.

The racism that manifests in current culture is anchored in the historical dehumanization of people through racial categorization (Bantum, 2016). According to Bantum, the current racial disunity in America, particularly regarding African Americans in mainstream America, is due to the consistent sociological and philosophical manipulation of the value of African American people. America has fallen prey to a colonial mentality that fails to recognize the full beauty of the biblical creation and the intrinsic love that God has for all people, regardless of worldly categorizations. Bantum shared his experience growing up in a home that was interracial and reveals with great authenticity the struggle and tension that entangled his life as an African American.

> Having seen the African American story for myself, having heard the cadence of hope and perseverance, I began to see the darkness of my body and its place within this story. I did not want to have to choose, but in a racial world there is no easy in between where we do not have to fill tension, push and pull, and sometimes tearing. (p.128)

Racism and racial categorizations require a delicate and honest examination so that transformation and healing can occur. In examining the role of race from a Christian context, Bantum observed the disunity within the body of Christ and how local churches are often segregated by racial and ethnic affinity, which is a problematic fruit of the roots of racism.

Kim (2020) also recognized the fruits of racism in America. Racial classifications generate a hierarchy regarding those with and without power. The social construct of race permits the dominant culture to determine outsiders and insiders, thus creating space for discrimination. The detrimental consequences of racial classification combined with racism are that society operates from an unbiblical worldview that intentionally positions people's values in direct connection with their cultural or ethnic background. Oliver (2021) viewed that placing racial categories and the subsequent mistreatment of certain groups based on such categorizations undermines the concept of *imago Dei* that God strategically wove throughout

Scripture to demonstrate the value of humanity. Christians should carry the goal of having their lives reflect Jesus and the life He led while on earth. To accomplish that goal, Christians must give God the freedom and space to love people through them. The love of God should be tangible that Christians demonstrate value and compassion for those that are different than they are. It requires a realignment to see people through the lens of God's eyes (Oliver, 2021).

As leaders who operate from a biblical worldview wrestle with the issues of race and unity, current societal trends have pushed racism to the forefront of the news cycle. The resulting wind of change has opened the door for increased discussion about systematic roots and the role of social justice. Woodbridge (2019), Afulike (2018), Kandiah (2017), Groenewald (2016), and Boloje and Groenewald (2014) explored the connection between biblical justice and modern social justice for local churches. Afulike (2018) connected the righteousness of God to social justice and community engagement. The *New King James Bible* (1982) outlines that righteousness and justice are near to the heart and plans of God. Righteousness and justice are "more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice" (Proverbs 21:3), because they "are the foundation of His throne" (Psalm 97:2) and the standard by which He reigns (Psalms 33:5, 72:2). Since righteousness and justice are key elements to the heart of God's Kingdom, practical acts of social justice demonstrated by Jesus and the apostles are an extension of the proclamation of the Gospel (Afulike, 2018).

Kandiah (2017) described social justice as a means of sharing the Gospel from a practical component as he highlighted the paradoxical vantage point of the local church. In his book, the author identified the need for the local church to wrestle with social engagement in such a way that an encounter with biblical justice and compassion ensues. For example, Kandiah personally promoted social engagement such as local churches encouraging adoption and foster care and

partnering with agencies and organizations that support children who are orphaned. Yet social

justice must extend beyond programs and into daily intentionality of recognizing the God of

compassion, mercy, and justice as revealed in the pages of Scripture. The tangible acts of social

engagement are anchored in biblical principles as illustrated by Woodbridge (2019). The author

utilized God's treatment of the poor, oppressed, and marginalized to create a model for the local

church to engage in social justice and acts of service. For example, Woodbridge highlighted how

Elijah in First Kings 21 represents God's justice when he intervenes on behalf of a local

landowner being manipulated and oppressed by the governmental leadership of the day. The

prophet Elijah did not keep silent as King Ahab and his wife Jezebel oppressed, mistreated, and

orchestrated the murder of Naboth, a member of society overpowered by the privileged status of

the king.

Groenewald (2016) carried the same principles of social justice by examining Isaiah and

biblical influencers that walked with a social justice heart as a remedy for the disparities of

society. The author identified how God utilizes His prophets to condemn the powerful elite of

society that marginalizes certain societal and cultural groups. Prophets such as Isaiah declared

what was right in God's eyes and not what people wanted to hear (see Isaiah 30:10). The Old

Testament prophets exposed unjust acts against the weak and powerless, condemned vicious

actions of leaders, and demanded compensation or restoration for victims (Groenewald, 2016).

The biblical picture of being agents of justice calls back to an earlier work of the author that

highlights the importance of a covenantal community (Bọlọjẹ and Groenewald, 2014). The

authors utilize the covenantal relationship that Christians and God share as a backdrop for

building covenant-minded communities and engaging with justice. Social justice involves

recognizing a bond with God and a person's neighbor and community. Corruption and the lack

of integrity (in any form) is a symptom that a person or organization is rejecting the character of God as outlined in the Bible (Bọlọjẹ and Groenewald, 2014).

The accountability to walk in honor, love, and justice forces local churches to recognize the need for increased community participation and the dismantling of societal injustice. Local churches play a key role in creating socialization, connections, unity, opportunities for resource distribution, and avenues for engagement. Therefore, they hold a unique position within society that gives them leverage in exploring community issues (Warner & Konkel, 2019). As the problem of racial disunity persists in America, local churches can serve as a meeting ground to help mend broken relationships. A study of local churches and crime prevention found that local churches help to mitigate social mistrust between police officers and community members, provide resources to assist those affected by crime and bring together leaders to advocate for tangible community solutions (Warner & Konkel).

While examining nuances of racial disunity, local church engagement, and social justice, there is a literature gap regarding the combined efforts of the three topics to bring transformation to local communities. To delve into the aspects of research, the sampling pool must be minimized, so a focus remained on the racial interplay between White American church leaders and African American members. Additionally, evangelical local churches were the focus as an opportunity to develop a controllable sample size and to maintain a level of consistency regarding the biblical worldview of the participants. The dissertation utilized qualitative research (in particular, focus groups and interviews) to assess if there were a perception of racial disunity between White American Evangelical church leaders and African American congregational members. As data was collected, the researcher examined the perceptions and experiences of the participants for any repeated themes that assisted in providing information to fill the literature

gap of racial interactions and community engagement.

Purpose Statement

This purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore if there is a perception or experiential knowledge of racial disunity between White Evangelical church leaders and their African American congregants and community members in the Chicago area. If disunity was perceived, then the research explored the experiences and contributing factors. Within the context of this research, the researcher defined racial disunity as intentional disconnect or apathy toward unity between two racial groups of people, namely African Americans and White Americans. The theory used in this study will be transformative leadership and the influence of leadership on the issue of racial unity.

Research Questions

RQ1. Based on experience or observation, what do Evangelical church leaders in Chicago perceive is the state of racial unity between White church leaders and African American congregants and community members?

RQ2. Based on experience or observation, what do congregants in Evangelical Chicago churches believe is the state of racial unity between White church leaders and African American congregants and community members?

RQ3. What factors do Evangelical church leaders perceive as promoters of and hindrances to racial diversity within the local church?

RQ4. Based on lived experiences, what factors do African American congregants and community members perceive are promoters of and hindrances to racial diversity within the local church?

Assumptions and Delimitations

The following assumptions and delimitations are noted to define this qualitative study's shared understanding and parameters more clearly.

Research Assumptions

The basic assumptions were:

1. The local church leaders involved in the research either work or volunteer at churches that operate from a biblical worldview that incorporates the concept of *imago Dei* as applied to all people, regardless of race.

2. Racial disunity has historically existed in America, and modern society deals with the resulting damage.

3. Participants take the research seriously and answer the questionnaire and focus group questions truthfully, regardless of the other participants present.

4. As an African American, the researcher may carry certain biases, which will be reflected in observation notes.

5. The participants are active members of their respective congregation or community and therefore offer viable experiences and perceptions that reflect the conditions in the given community or church.

6. Racism is a valid concept that has systematic reach and can be defined as "A system of oppression based on race…. Racism can operate through impersonal systems and not simply through the malicious words and actions of individuals. Another definition explains racism as prejudice plus power. It is not only personal bigotry toward someone of a different race that constitutes racism; rather, racism includes the imposition of bigoted ideas on groups" (Tisby, 2019, p. 16).

7. Racism, from a biblical perspective, is connected to the self-serving sinful nature of humanity (Evans, 2022; Sales & Rim, 2023).

8. Racial categorization is a sociological concept (not a biblical concept) that labels people based on external factors. Racial categorization is an integral part of our American culture and therefore important to understanding the human experience (Jee-Lyn García & Sharif, 2015; Oliver, 2021; Roberts & Rizzo, 2021).

Research Delimitations

Leedy and Ormrod (2018) shared that delimitations are under the control of the researcher and highlights the broader areas that the researcher will not focus on. In this study, the researcher has several delimitations.

1. The study included members and leaders of churches that met the criteria of this study, namely Evangelical churches within the 60645, 60659, and 60699 zip code areas of Chicago, Illinois.

2. Although racism extends to every racial category, the study focused on racial disunity between African Americans and White Americans.

3. The study focused on tangible experiences or perceptions of the research population.

Definition of Terms

1. *Social Justice*: The concern for members of society regarding four components: access to ownership of property and assets, liberty from basic wants, power of decision, and fundamental human rights (Levin, 2020). For this study, the term focuses on issues relevant to the African American communities in which the local churches serve.

2. *Church Leader*: A paid or volunteer-based leader that has served in a leadership capacity for at least five years within the same local church, specifically a person that is responsible for shepherding the congregation in some form (i.e., senior pastor, executive pastor, ministry director, elder board member).

3. *Evangelical Church*: Local churches that adhere to the Evangelical theological traditions which include: (1) the Bible as the highest authority, (2) the importance to evangelize to non-Christians, (3) the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ removes the penalty of sin, and (4) the free gift of salvation for those that accept solely Jesus Christ as Savior (Lifeway Research, 2015).

4. *Institutional Racism:* "Institutions, policies, and practices that perpetuate barriers to opportunities and racial disparities, such as through residential and educational segregation" (Bleich et al., 2019, p. 1400).

5. *Interpersonal Racial Discrimination:* "Directly perceived discriminatory interactions between individuals such as racial slurs or microaggressions" (Bleich et al., 2019, p. 1400).

6. *Diversity:* "An all-inclusive concept used to recognize differences via race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and other backgrounds (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015, p. 671).

Significance of the Study

The issue of racial diversity and unity within the local church finds its roots in the early foundations of America (Bantum, 2016). The current research was a beneficial addition to the discussion on promoting racial unity. Considering the recent decades and collateral damage of racism, local churches are forced to engage in tangible solutions to the racial discord that is tearing at the fabric of communities (Evans, 2022). If the research unveils that racial disunity is

not perceived on a local church level, then the study can explore the tangible applications and initiatives of the local church that have enabled them to preserve racial unity in a divisive nation. The research focused on local churches and therefore had a direct implication for the theological sphere, but a qualitative approach also unveiled implications on sociological and psychological levels. This research played a relevant role in helping to identify frameworks from which Evangelical pastors view racial concerns and, thus, their approach to facilitating and maintaining unity. The way pastors examine the presence and role of racial disunity connects with how the local church addresses concerns and moves toward tangible biblical solutions (Oyakawa, 2019).

Providing tangible solutions may require extending beyond a reconciliation service and delving into ways to examine social justice initiatives. A concern that has arisen in the past with the mainstream White Evangelical church in America is the dismissal of the racial disparity felt by fellow community members of minority racial groups. When racism is defined as a spiritual problem unable to be addressed with non-spiritual means, Oyakawa (2019) asserts that it opens the door for the rejection of government and societal initiatives such as affirmative action and welfare. The author continued to highlight the concerning aspect that White Evangelicals historically skim over the true root of racial concerns and ignore practical solutions to alleviate disparity (Oyakawa). Bringing together the viewpoint of White Evangelical leaders and African American congregants in focus groups and interviews provided an opportunity to examine further the experiences, perceptions, frameworks, and methodology of both demographics regarding racial issues.

Searching for practical solutions to racial issues is less demanding when a mediating structure is involved. Local congregations have proven effective mediating structures throughout the American journey of social justice (Houston & Todd, 2013). The unique positioning of a

religious congregation within a community enables social justice engagement to be actualized on multiple levels. The current phenomenological research was focused on the viewpoints and experiences of local church leaders and congregants as an avenue to work within the existing research conclusions of a mediating structure. The local church was ripe for working out solutions to the brokenness of the community. Therefore, the researcher valued the role and experience of local church members when examining the facilitation and maintenance of unity.

Summary of the Design

This phenomenological study focused on two distinct American-based demographics categorized by race, faith, and connectivity to the other culture within the study. The first demographic was African American Evangelical Christians that operated from a biblical worldview and might have felt disconnected (apparent or actual) from the mainstream predominately White Evangelical church in their area. The researcher preferred if the African American demographic described above retains membership in the local church. The second demographic was White American local pastors of evangelical Christian churches that operated from a biblical worldview who might have observed a disconnect (apparent or actual) from the African American congregants or community members in the church's geographical area.

The screening portion of the research was conducted using video conferencing interviews. The researcher incorporated a focus group in the form of a facilitated group discussion that followed the initial interview. The researcher invited a non-biased observer to watch the video conferencing to assist the researcher in watching body language and non-verbal cues regarding comfort, engagement, and veracity. In addition, the observer looked for any changes in the way the researcher conducted the different group discussion.

The methodology sequence for this qualitative study was as follows:

1. Initial survey to narrow the sampling size to participants meeting the basic criteria.

2. A follow-up one-on-one interview to go deeper into the participant's experiences with the issues at the focus of the study.

3. The focus group discussion that included all participants (from both demographics) was facilitated by guided questions.

4. Facilitated a second focus group discussion that included only participants of the same demographic as facilitated by guided questions.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this literature review is to provide the reader with an overview of the relevant materials and studies that inform this research. The topic of this dissertation was to explore if there is a perception or experiential knowledge of racial disunity between White Evangelical church leaders and their African American congregants and community members in the Chicago area. To achieve this purpose, the researcher presented a qualitative study that utilized a phenomenological approach to examine perceptions of racial unity within the local church.

This chapter will examine the theological framework that demonstrates the intentionality of God for love, unity, diversity, and justice, especially within His Kingdom. Then, a theoretical framework will be explored as the reader recognizes the parameters of race and the theories of transformative leadership and social justice that help to inform the need for the research topic. The chapter will also include an overview of related literature that brings a fuller portrait of the prevailing issues and foreshadows possible solutions. Finally, this chapter will close with a rationale for the study and identify any gaps in the literature that the researcher discovered.

Theological Framework

Many prevailing tensions in the United States of America's culture are historically rooted in racial and social injustice (Lovelace, 2021). The accountability of Christian leadership demands theological stewardship that can frame the issue of racism and social injustice from a biblical perspective. The Bible reveals action-plans and solutions for bridging the societal and congregational gap caused by racial divides and injustices. From a foundation of a biblical worldview, leaders can move people from personal sinful and self-focused agendas onto God's

agenda of grace and justice.

Love

Within a biblical context, love is required regardless of a person's racial, social, or cultural position (Shipp, 2020; *New King James Bible*, 1982, James 2:1-10, Colossians 3:11-14). Love does not look for reciprocity or convenience but focuses on the needs of others (Coe & Coe, 2017). Included in this framework was the challenge of loving others even when they follow opposing political or social perspectives. Bray (2018) shared that when Christ expounded on loving one's neighbors, it included loving people that appear to be our enemies. People should aim to reflect God's pattern when dealing with those who are weak and broken. He demonstrated justice and sacrifice through His acts of love. Just as God loved people in their weakness, people in turn should love others that are going through weak moments. For humanity, unity and restoration are key elements of exemplifying a love that mirrors the love of God. (Kasch, 2020). God's love is on dynamic display in the Bible and perhaps most readily recognized through the sacrificial declaration of John 3:16. Kandiah (2017) painted a portrait of the Godhead actively engaging in the greatest act of love in history. God the Father offers the Son to experience the anguish of human depravity. God the Son willingly absorbs the suffering and pain that humanity carries. The weight and cruelty of the cross correlates to the weight and cruelty of sin. God the Spirit empowers Jesus while on earth and quickens our spirits to recognize our desperate need for a Savior. God punishes sins and yet offers forgiveness and love to sinners (Kandiah, 2017).

It is an overwhelming endeavor to grasp the enormity of God's love. Eternal life has been graciously granted through relational connection with Jesus, the Father's only Son. This connection enables believers to escape the grips of death itself (Feldmeier, 2016). The divine

intervention exemplifies God's attribute of love in a profound, life-giving way. Streltsov (2020) asserted the power of the John 3:16 verse as a reflection of God's love. Love requires giving, which was demonstrated when God gave His Son as the ultimate sacrifice for a fallen and broken world. Streltsov continued to observe that the remarkable nature of the John 3:16 love was that it was not merely toward a specific people or group, but that it targeted the entire world.

The power of God's love transcends the gap between God and the world. The Bible repeatedly demonstrates the world's rebellious nature and unholy attributes. The world walks in evil and wickedness, which the Lord will judge and punish (*New King James Bible*, 1982, Isaiah 13:11). The cares and lusts of the world choke the seeds planted by God through His word (Mark 4:19). The world hates Jesus because He testifies of the wickedness of the world (John 7:7). The world does not give true peace (John 14:27), nor does it comprehend or know the Father (John 17:25). The wisdom of the world is foolish to God (1 Corinthians 3:19). Friendship with the world implies enmity towards God (James 4:4). There is no one classified as sinless and righteous in the world (Romans 3:10-12). Streltsov (2020) stated that the contrast between the world and God highlights the level of love revealed in the Scriptures. "In John, the world (κόσμος) is presented as an entity hostile to God, which makes it all the more paradoxical that the entire process of man's salvation is set in motion by the love of God for the world" (p. 355). The author continued to demonstrate that the Father and the Son were in unity as love was displayed among humanity. The common focus of revealing a sacrificial and unfailing love was a unique communion that only the Godhead could share.

The unified intentionality of the Godhead to demonstrate love to a broken world is metaphorically portrayed in the Old Testament book of Hosea. The book amplifies the adulterous and idolatrous heart of the nation of Israel and God's unrelenting love and patience. It is a book

with theological treasure that highlights both God's heartache regarding Israel's sin and God's provision of grace and redemption (Rydelnik & Vanlaningham, 2014). The depth of God's love and desire for redemption is despite the nation's continual sin and disobedience (Schaab, 2018). Prior to a fully repentant heart by Israel, God declared, "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely, for My anger has turned away from him" (*New King James Bible*, 1982, Hosea 14:4).

Yahweh's promise of love and healing comes before Israel repents, which reflects the certainty of the acceptance and restoration of the nation even after destruction (Schaab, 2018). The beautiful preemptive display of love unveils the heart of God toward humanity and the eagerness to love despite sin's distortion and destructive nature. God's love is so beautifully crafted that it is not constrained by how lovable a person is. Instead, it is a divine love carried out by the gift of Jesus, who creates children of God from sinners (Feldmeier, 2016; see 1 John 1:8-9; 3:1-2; 4:7; cf. John 1:12). Christ reconciled humanity to the Father and freely offered life and love (*New King James Bible*, 1982, John 10:10), and this is demonstrated while the human race was still enemies of God (*New King James Bible*, 1982, Romans 5:10). "The cross of Jesus is the place where love and justice meet, where wrath and compassion combine; as the Psalmist puts it, 'Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other'" (Kandiah, 2017, p. 259).

The biblical reality of love must penetrate the reality of the local church for an authentic Christian lifestyle to be experienced. "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (*New International Bible*, 2011, John 13:34-35). Shipp (2020) examined the Greek word for love in the John 13:35 verse, which translates to *agape*. Love is the

distinguishing marker that should identify a Christian and their lifestyle. Agape is not reduced to a preference or tolerance of another person, group, or racial class. Agape is a zealous pursuit of the well-being of another person (Shipp, 2020). When people walk in agape, they connect their love for another person with tangible actions and thoughts. A biblical understanding of love requires a selfless endeavor to see another person's spiritual benefit and growth, despite the required sacrifice and servanthood (Coe & Coe, 2017).

Paul's epistle to the Roman church presents the theme of allowing love to transform lifestyles. Social hierarchies, political differences, and cultural barriers were not deterrents to the biblical mandate to love. Paul admonished the believers to "live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited" (*New International Bible*, 2011, Romans 12:16). Love within community extends beyond the easy expectations. However, ventures into the disciplined call to humbly love like God as revealed in Matthew 5:48. "'Be perfect (τέλειος) as your heavenly Father is perfect (τέλειος).' If God is love and we are called to be like God, then, as 1 Timothy 1:5 says, "The τέλος (goal, perfection, or endpoint) of our instruction is love" (Moritz, 2017, p. 14). When addressing the issue of love in First Corinthians, Paul says that "knowledge puffs up while love builds up." (*New International Bible*, 2011, 1 Corinthians 8:1). Demonstrating love produces a level of community that mere knowledge cannot. The verse brings together the teaching of Paul regarding the development of the church. If love serves as the foundation, each member will tailor his actions to encourage, build, and strengthen the entire community (Eastman, 2018).

Building up another member of the Body of Christ brings to light the importance and power of authentic community. In a diverse community, as Christians care for the needs of others, God's love is on display in a broken world. In the book of Acts, the birthing of the early

church was through love and service to one another. "Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need" (*New King James Bible*, 1982, Acts 2:44-45). Sacrificial love and serving one another are themes woven throughout the New Testament. In Paul's epistles, the audience recognizes that "Paul's goal is their relational constitution as moral agents capable of wise discernment and constructive action for the good of the whole. This constitution of moral agency happens in and through diverse human relationships mediated by Christ" (Eastman, 2018, p. 15). Relational respect and love are demonstrated as Paul discusses food offered to idols. Although Paul recognizes that idols are nothing and that God reigns supreme, he commits to refraining from eating meat offered to idols if it causes a fellow believer to stumble (*New King James Bible*, 1982, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13). The intentionality and sacrifice of Paul's love is an example of the love God desires from His church (Bray, 2018).

The love admonished in First Corinthians transcends historical context and brings a fresh challenge to the modern church, especially when battling with the knowledge of the sinful actions of people and systems. Johnson (2018) brought a poignant perspective on the essential need for love in contemporary churches and Christian institutions. He asserted that Christians, especially those that lead local churches should be anchored in love. The foundational aspect of love enables pastors and leaders to "practice a hermeneutic of love that sees historical subjects with a pastoral imagination, acknowledging how their context shaped their actions" (Johnson, 2018, pp. 451-452). Empathetic insight is not a weapon to exercise condemnation or exert power, but instead it is a resource to walk in humility and love towards others. In the context of racism and racial disunity, love plays a critical role in creating awareness, humility, and eventual gospel-centered solutions (Johnson, 2018).

While not personally responsible for sinful acts of the past, leaders are able to lament over current disunity that may be consequences of previous generations and oppose the practices that hinder systematic and institutional injustices. Johnson (2018) admonishes modern Christians to follow the example of Jeremiah who lamented over the sins of Israel, even though he had not personally sinned in that specific area. He acknowledged a corporate and national level of sin, and he welcomed lament to shape his affections. Likewise, Johnson (2018) encourages modern leaders to lean into lamentation over the historical and social sins of their communities and nations, with the focus of identifying ways to bring healing and love.

As racial issues are realized, the Christian community has the potential to bring healing through the way they love. Loving those that offend (or wound) is a faith step in obeying God's call to love one's enemies. Loving an enemy is a step of faith that values reconciliation over disunity. It acknowledges that God has the capacity to bring righteousness and justice to every circumstance (Moritz, 2017). The ministry of reconciliation, as outlined in Second Corinthians 5:18-19 should be a marker for every believer. Additionally, escaping the bondage of offense and unforgiveness should anchor each Christian in love (see John 13:35, Ephesians 4:32) (Shipp, 2020). The author continued to admonish the church by stating, "As the racial climate and political tension in our society increases, the Christian believer should remain focused on being peacemakers (Matt. 5:9). Christians have a wonderful opportunity to help restore unity in a chaotic world" (p. 135).

Unity and Diversity

God's Concern with Unity and Diversity

In the opening stages of creation, God brings order to the chaos and decides to make man in His image, creating dignity and identity that is not dependent on cultural or racial guidelines

(*New King James Bible,* 1982, Genesis 1:26-27). Each human contains a unique blueprint handcrafted by God that reflects divine dignity. The image of God emphasizes the honor that God places on people (Grindheim, 2017, p. 465) and serves as a driving force for Christians to operate from a position of dignity and grace. Honoring God is demonstrated through how people treat others with dignity and respect, believing God created each person specifically and intentionally (Kasch, 2020). Recognizing identity focuses on the larger principle of Kingdom unity (Kilner, 2015).

The ethnic, cultural, and racial background of an individual does not produce entitlement or exclusive access to God. All humanity, regardless of race, gender, culture, or class, is enveloped in the creation account. Acts 17:26 states, "From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; And he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands" (*New International Bible*, 2011). This demonstrates a unifying origin in Adam, which showcases that all forms or expressions of division based on race is erroneous (Evans, 2015). The Hebrew word *adam* is utilized in Genesis to highlight the concept. "So God created man [*adam*] in His own image" (*New King James Bible*, 1982, Genesis 1:27). "Connecting God's image both to humankind as a whole and to each of the humans who constitute that 'kind' guards against destructive overemphasis on individuals or collectives" (Kilner, p. 87).

In considering the creation account in Genesis chapters 1 and 2, Cawley and Snyder (2015) observed that humans were created and designed by God for the purpose of reflecting His glory and to be in relationship with Him. The diversity of humans is a reflection of God's desire for connection and interdependence between humans. God did not segregate humans, but invited them into a co-laboring with Him to steward and rule over creation. God's Kingdom on the earth

was entrusted to humanity, which is why collectively using gifts and diversity is beneficial (Cawley & Snyder).

Humanity finds fulfillment when the utilization of gifts and talents are actualized. As people maximize their diversity and uniqueness to contribute to the world around them, God receives glory as a loving Architect (Cawley & Snyder, 2015). The design of humanity emphasizes the importance of unity as each person works in collaboration with one another and God. Unity is realized not through sameness, but through the uniqueness that each person contributes toward a common objective (Evans, 2015). The rhythm of unity operates as people move toward a transcendent goal and not merely about personal preferences or building personal kingdoms.

Diversity and unity are near to the heart of God, as evidenced by the way God refers to nations and people. When God chose Abraham to start the nation of Israel, God declared that it would be for the benefit and blessing of the nations (*New King James Bible*, 1982, Genesis 18:18). In describing His dwelling place, God states that it will be a place of prayer for all nations (Isaiah 56:7, Mark 11:17). The plan for salvation emerges from a place of love that is available to the world, not just culturally specific people (John 3:16). As Jesus instructed His disciples before departing from them, the purpose of receiving God's grace is to go and share that grace with all nations (Matthew 28:18-20). For eternity, God's people will worship around Him, including people from every tribe and nation (Revelation 5:9, 7:9-10). The picture in Revelation of a united chorus worshipping God envelopes the multicultural people connected by Christ. The connectedness in Christ forms a new culture – one that will last for eternity and glorify the Lamb (Okubo, 2016).

Biblical Look at Unity and Diversity

When praying to the Father, Jesus said, "I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (*New International Bible*, 2011, John 17:23; see also John 17:11, 21). The essence of representing Jesus on the earth is demonstrating unity among believers. While the full manifestation of perfect unity might not be achieved until Heaven, Christians have a mandate to "practice their positional unity in Christ" (Rydelnik & Vanlaningham, 2014, p. 1654). Unity with one another is possible only as each Christian is united to Christ and the Father (*New King James Bible*, 1982, John 17:21-22). The Holy Spirit equips the church to walk in unity that reflects God's incomparable love and unity (Fleischmann, 2016). In his final recorded prayer before the cross, Jesus focused on the unity of believers, which demonstrates its importance. Unity within the Church is an avenue by which Christ offers protection from Satan's power and shows a decaying world the hope of God (Fleischmann; see also Ephesians 4:3, John 17:15, 23).

The John 17 prayer regarding unity reflects the benefit of walking in oneness, which is to glorify God. In addition, through unity, believers supernaturally move to an atmosphere where God's response is manifested in such a way that His glory is seen to a fuller extent (Evans, 2015). The glory of God brings about the blessings of God, especially within the context of unity. In Psalm 133, David declares, "Behold, how good and how pleasant *it is* for brethren to dwell together in unity" and "For there the LORD commanded the blessing—Life forevermore" (*New King James Bible*, 1982, Psalm 133:1, 3). God's blessing rest amid unity, starting from Christ as the Head and then down to the church's Body (Psalm 133:2). Disunity breeds limited blessings from God. God will not display His power in its fullness if the church functions in disunity and offense. Disunity blocks the effectiveness and purpose of prayer, which creates a disconnect between God's perfect will and the earthly demonstration of His will. Disunity

generates spiritual separation that is destructive and limiting because it reduces the movement of God (Evans, 2015).

The importance of unity is further displayed in Paul's epistles as believers configure a collective Body that must operate without concern for ethnicity or social status (Lee, 2020). First Corinthians 12 paints a picture of a unified Body as believers work in mutual respect, care, and love for one another for the glorification of Christ. The theme is also revealed in Romans 12:10, as Paul admonishes the local believers to serve and support one another in love humbly. "Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves" (*New International Bible,* 2011). The humility that births love also facilitates unity and oneness, as demonstrated by the epistle to the Corinthian church. Paul utilizes his theological insight regarding the Holy Spirit and the role of the Body of Christ to encourage readers to turn from dissention and cliques to unity (Lee, 2020). Paul teaches that "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good*"* (*New International Bible,* 1 Corinthians 12:7). The presence of the Holy Spirit not only facilitates unity but also challenges Christians to maintain unity. Maintaining unity is a key theme as Paul continually admonishes the church to recognize they are part of One Body, even though it contains many diverse parts (similar to the human body) (see 1 Corinthians 12:12, 14, 18, 20, 25, 27; Romans 12:3-5). Each part is generated and supernaturally sustained by the Holy Spirit, who organizes the Body of Christ (Lee, 2020). The global Church is the only organization that is authentically multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-generational that operates from a place of oneness. This is achieved through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and the understanding of God's authority (Evans, 2015).

The divine role of Heaven undergirds the power of unity within the 1 Corinthians 12:22-23 passage to guard the diversity and unity of believers. Each part is vital, important, and

uniquely crafted to be part of the unifying Body of Christ. "Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty" (*New International Bible*, 2011). To further articulate the collective nature of the Body, Paul uses imagery that denotes political unity despite diversity or external circumstances. "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (*New International Bible*, 1 Corinthians 12:26). "The theme of co-suffering (συμπάσχω) and co-rejoicing (συνχαίρω) in 1 Cor 12:26 shows an apparent political topos for unity..." This statement of Paul serves as an instance of ancient rhetoric for political unity and solidarity" (Lee, 2021, p. 215). The rhetoric of 1 Corinthians challenges the church to bond even in political chaos, societal hierarchy, and struggles.

The struggle for unity is seen in tangible ways in the Bible. In the book of Acts, Peter and Paul wrestle with the concept of unity in Christ between Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. Perkins (2021) elaborated on the historical, cultural, and religious background of the struggle for unity between Jews and Gentiles. In the first-century, Jewish believers had to overcome the stigma of associating with Gentile believers (who ritually were considered unclean and culturally unapproachable). According to Jewish Law, uncleanliness would place Jewish believers in jeopardy of being rejected by their community and by God (Perkins, 2021). Therefore, the act of uniting with a Gentile was a new concept that challenged the very cultural, ethnical, and religious worldviews of the Jewish people. Paul expressed the challenge of racial unity when he rebuked Peter (also called Cephas) for his prejudice. Galatians 2:11-13 reflects Paul's anger with Peter because Peter refused to eat with Gentiles when other Jewish leaders came into town. Peter was afraid of the judgments and perceptions of the circumcised Jewish group. The other Jews

joined him in his hypocrisy so that by their hypocrisy, even Barnabas was led astray (*New International Bible*, 2011). The cowardly actions of Peter reveal the destructive depths of the sin of racial prejudice. His actions alienated the Gentiles to satisfy the religious traditions and biases of the Jews. In the process, Peter led Barnabas astray, who was once known as an uncompromising encourager. Peter yielded to cultural and social peer pressure and posed a disservice to the message of the Gospel. (Evans, 2015). As a result, Paul unashamedly rebuked Peter for allowing his prejudice to cause a poor reflection of Christ's unifying and transformative gospel.

Peter's inner conflict comes to a head when he has a vision from God. In the passage, during a vision, God gives Peter directions to eat animals that would ritualistically be deemed unclean. In an adamant protest, Peter states, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean." (*New King James Bible*, 1982, Acts 10:14). God admonishes Peter and states, "What God has cleansed you must not call common" (Acts 10:15). After the vision, Peter's worldview was shaken, and he began to view Gentiles through the lens of Christ. Peter actively engaged with the Gentiles through fellowship, preaching the Gospel, baptizing, and witnessing the power of the Holy Spirit to saturate Gentile households. The cultural shift that Peter experienced reflects God's heart to see the Body united under the Truth of Christ (Perkins, 2021).

The disunity between Jews and Gentiles eventually led to debate among the Apostles, who served as the religious leaders for first-century Christians. The Council at Jerusalem embraced a new level of unity between the Jews and Gentiles and instructed the leaders to eagerly include differing cultures under the banner of Christ without imposing religious barriers (*New King James Bible*, 1982, Acts 15:22-29). In referencing the Jerusalem council in the Acts

15 account, Seying (2016) observed that the struggle in Antioch to preserve unity challenges the readers to recognize that racial unity and multiracial congregations may require a costly sacrifice. The biblical role of the early church Apostles and leaders was critical in creating a foundation for the modern church to recognize the unifying attribute of the Gospel. Perkins (2021) emphasized that the council of Jerusalem resolution was successful in demonstrating how hostile divisions can be overcome through unity and focusing on Christ. The author continued to assert that the heart of Ephesians 3:4-6 was demonstrated through the Council in that it reflected the mystery of the Gospel—that Gentiles and Jewish people find an umbrella of oneness under the banner of Christ. The new revelation regarding diversity extended beyond ethnic categorization. Jews, Gentiles, men and women, and slaves and freedmen integrated to form a groundbreaking and unparalleled New Testament church (Perkins, 2021).

Scripture reveals the importance of diversity and unity within the church and challenges Christians to preserve and protect unity. "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (*New International Bible*, 2011, Ephesians 4:3). The word 'keep' is also translated as 'preserve,' which demonstrates that unity does not originate with the church, but it is to be guarded by the church. Authentic unity cannot be falsely replicated or manipulated by man because God is the ultimate standard for how oneness looks. Therefore, God frustrates man-made attempts at unity that exclude or disregard God (Evans, 2015; see Genesis 11:1-9). The unity described in Ephesians 4:3 extends beyond cultural and racial identity but presses into the spiritual reality of Heaven. The local church should be agents of salt (see Matthew 5:13-16) that preserve the spiritual unity of believers so that the church can be a catalyst for cultural and racial unity in society (Evans, 2022).

Spiritual unity is only possible through the power of the Holy Spirit. The disciples of

Jesus walked in the unified example of Christ, but it was not until Pentecost that the spiritual

unity was radically displayed and actualized among all the believers.

> When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place….All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them….When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? (*New International Bible*, 2011, Acts 2:1-8)

Evans (2015) elaborated that at least sixteen distinct cultural and ethnical groups were present on

the day of Pentecost, and yet their diversity was united under the Holy Spirit so each could hear

and share in the gospel of Christ. The unity on display was only possible by the working of the

Holy Spirit and could not be manufactured or manipulated by the apostles. Through the Holy

Spirit, as a unity manifested, signs and wonders followed to represent God's movement among

His people. "Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through

the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common" (*New King

James Bible*, 1982, Acts 2:43-44).

The Holy Spirit flowed freely and powerfully through the united apostles, transforming

the lives of everyone they encountered. The unique bond they carried reflected the power when

people gathered around a common goal ignoring cultural and racial distinctions (Evans, 2015).

The fruit of spiritual unity is seen in the Book of Acts. Men who were lame since John, Peter,

and Paul healed birth through the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 3:6-8. 14:8-10). People

tormented by demons were set free from evil oppression (Acts 5:16, 8:7). Paul would touch

handkerchiefs and napkins, which would then be placed on people with illnesses and demonic

strongholds. The people would be healed and liberated (Acts 19:12). The apostles preached, and

thousands of Jews and Gentiles were saved and baptized (Acts 2:38-41, 8:12-13, 10:47-48, 18:8).

As the book of Acts details, the apostles intentionally preserved the unity in the Spirit. Despite

their uniqueness, cultures, and personalities, they became transformative agents in the nations. The integration of diverse individuals was possible through the shared faith in Christ and the power of the ministry of reconciliation.

The Father's intentional reconciliation with fallen humanity catalyzes an authentic community with Jesus and fellow Christians. Within a local church context, as people walk together under the banner of Christ, racial, gender, and societal positions are not sources of division (Evans, 2022). Unity and liberation are revealed in the Scriptures as New Testament apostles led the church during unprecedented times of Holy Spirit authority, power, and unity (see *New King James Bible*, 1982, Ephesians 4). In a Bible commentary on Ephesians, Matthew Henry (1997) asserted, "There is one Christ in whom all believers hope, and one heaven they are all hoping for; therefore, they should be of one heart. They had all one faith, one in its object, its Author, its nature, and its power" (p. 1149). In the book of Philippians, the Apostle Paul teaches about the benefits of unity, partnership, grace, and daily application of God's Truth (Philippians 1:7, 4:14). "When we collaborate with (*synkoisnonos*) others in any ministry effort (i.e., teaching, preaching, witnessing, serving, leading, or worshipping) as connected members of the body of Christ, there is a mutual spiritual benefit conveyed between the partners" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 156). Peering through history at the first century Church, it is clear that a spirit of unity does not diminish or ignore difference, but it bridges those difference to create fellowship and a bond of peace (Perkins, 2021). The unifying bond of peace is a key ingredient to a lifestyle of justice.

Justice

God's Concern with Justice

"But let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know

me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight" (*New International Bible*, 2011, Jeremiah 9:24). In another Bible passage, the psalmist reveals that justice forms the foundation of God's throne (Psalm 89:14). God's character encompasses attributes of kindness, righteousness, and justice. As a result, God is deeply concerned about justice and the treatment of humanity. His justice extends to the spiritual and society's social and familial frameworks (Evans, 2022). Therefore, "when justice is pervasively trampled upon, the very fabric of liveable society crumbles" (Boloje & Groenewald, 2014, p. 1).

The biblical framework for social fairness and unity is inescapable, as seen through the Old Testament motif of justice. In the book of Proverbs, it is undeniable that every person is equal with one another before God regardless of their social standing or racial identity (Woodbridge & Joynt, 2019). God is recognized and honored as the Maker of people in every stratum of society (Proverbs 22:2). Genesis 1:27 echoes God's creative love as the audience witnessed mankind being formed according to the image of God. There is an established connection and intimacy between God and man—an unmistakable alignment. When oppressive systems or discriminatory mindsets distort the view of humanity by forcing society's marginalized populations to become outcasts, oppressors directly insult God (Woodbridge & Joynt). Since God handcrafted man to reflect His character, God unreservedly addresses issues of injustice that wound His image-bearers.

Micah 6:8 outlines God's admonishment to humanity regarding His righteousness and the expectations of His people: "He has shown you, o mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (*New International Bible*, 2011). Rydelnik and Vanlaningham (2014) elaborated on the three aspects of this admonishment:

1. Justice (*misphat*, the moral rectitude of God that His people may possess in dealings with other human beings).

2. Kindness (*chesed*, absolute faithfulness to covenantal relationships; for the community of believers that God had called to Himself).

3. Humility (*sane*, modest reserve before God; contrition in their relationship with Him). (p. 1375)

The notion of justice includes a covenant connection with God and with others. Justice cannot exist without the context of community (Marteli, 2020). Within that context, justice relates to the biblical notion of wholeness. The biblical word *wholeness* comes "from the Greek, *katartismos*, which means to heal a fracture or mend a hole in a broken net. Justice brings about peace because it implies making whole what was broken, divided, or rent asunder" (p. 108). The wholeness of God's justice connects to the wholeness of the gospel and God's desire to see all people walking in humility as they embrace His justice.

The wholeness of the gospel is displayed through the earthly ministry of Jesus. In a declaration of His mission, Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah during a synagogue visit. He states that the Holy Spirit has anointed Him to "proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (*New International Bible*, 2011, Luke 4:18-19). In the proclamation, Jesus is established as anointed to demonstrate and execute the justice of God. Jesus carries both the eschatological weight of a prophet and the Messianic anointing to preach the Gospel and proclaim freedom (Obiorah & Uroko, 2018). The gospel includes the importance of the marginalized in society, namely the poor, prisoners, blind, and oppressed. While these elements can apply to the spiritual state of someone without Christ, they also describe tangible experiences of marginalized and rejected people whom God cares for (Marteli, 2020). Jesus carried the good news to people in social, economic, political, and familial oppression and crisis

(Evans, 2015).

Jesus' declaration of the gospel incorporates uncovering the sinful systems of the world that need revamping and creating a shift in how justice is perceived. Marteli (2020) asserted that the Kingdom reign of Christ included exposing the evils of the world empire of earth. As Jesus ministered and taught, He examined ways of bringing justice to the poor, the weak, the widow, the foreigner, and the rejected. Jesus confronted the perverse leadership of the nation that exerted power to abuse and marginalize others. Justice, as outlined in the Bible, exposes God's heart for His people to walk in freedom, even those sitting on the margins of society.

Biblical justice incorporates the promotion of freedom while accentuating accountability and responsibility. In addition, equality is promoted through incorporating a spiritual dimension to social and cultural normality. God was consistently shifting the perspective humanity had for true justice. (Evans, 2015). The concept of freedom unfolds throughout the pages of Scripture. As God intervenes to deliver and free His people, He, in turn, admonishes His people to help deliver and free others. Justice, as revealed through God, incorporates liberation and action. In talking to Moses, God declares, "I have surely seen the oppression of My people who *are* in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters…I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians" (*New King James Bible*, 1982, Exodus 3:7-8). God executed His justice and liberated the entire nation from the bondage and oppression of Egypt. God expected Israel to demonstrate justice to marginalized and oppressed people. "You shall neither mistreat a stranger nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child" (*New King James Bible*, Exodus 22:21-22). In addition, God connects His covering with the execution of justice and accountability for the poor and oppressed.

Throughout their national history, Israel has been rebuked by God for their lack of social responsibility to the marginalized members of the community. God equates their treatment with His heart for justice. Amos 5 (*New King James Bible*, 1982) captures when God speaks through the prophet and emphasizes Israel's unjust actions: "You tread down the poor and take grain taxes from him" (Amos 5:11), and "afflicting the just *and* taking bribes; diverting the poor *from justice* at the gate" (Amos 5:12). As a result of the nation's injustice, God removes His hand of freedom and blessings. God rejects the people's offerings, sacrifices, and songs of praise (Amos 5:21-23). Instead, He proclaims, "Therefore I will send you into captivity beyond Damascus" (Amos 5:27). In Zechariah 7, the *New King James Bible* displays God's heart for justice and the consequences of disobedience.

God instructs Israel to "execute true justice, show mercy and compassion everyone to his brother. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor" (Zechariah 7:9-10). When Israel refused to walk according to the justice that God outlined (Zechariah 7:11), God subjected the nation to bondage and captivity (Zechariah 7:14). God presents freedom and blessings as a byproduct of His love and justice. However, He also expects His people to reflect a biblical heart of justice for the powerless and marginalized (Evans, 2015). Carrying a biblical heart of justice includes loving others in such a way that their best interests are positioned above personal selfish desires. Alleviating injustice (both when necessary and within our power to do so) and liberating others is a way to demonstrate love for God (Evans, 2015).

As God's heart for justice is revealed in the Bible, it is helpful to observe that He is consistent, even in humanity's pains and questions. Justice is not always a beautifully easy path; often, it requires lamenting and wrestling with one's faith. In Psalm 13, the reader witnesses a transparent plea of David. He connects to God as a Father through a tangible and profound bond

both emotionally and psychologically (Rydelnik & Vanlaningham, 2014). "Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?" (*New International Bible*, 2011, Psalm 13:1-2). As David laments his current situation, he is attentively waits for the God of justice to reply. Human mediation and conflict resolution are valid approaches, but they pale in comparison to bringing the intricate and sometimes unsolvable issues before God (Beckett, 2016). The power of authentic lamenting is that intercessors can bring injustice issues before God on behalf of others. This aspect is developed further in an upcoming section of the paper as biblical characters are examined for their intercessory role in bringing justice to Israel.

As the psalmist continues in chapter 13, he cries, "Look on me and answer, LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death" (*New International Bible*, 2011, Psalm 13:3). "When faced with a hopeless quandary in which a positive resolution is unattainable by human ingenuity, a single-focused pursuit of divine grace is warranted" (Beckett, 2016, p. 213). The psalmist is keenly aware that without God, there is no hope for his unjust situation (Rydelnik & Vanlaningham, 2014). The final verses of the psalm reflect a ray of hope as the psalmist remembers the steadfast love of God. "But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me" (*New International Bible*, Psalm 13:5-6). God's character is deserving of David's praise despite the difficult circumstances. David recognizes God for "who He is (i.e., a God characterized by lovingkindness), what He has promised ultimately to do (i.e., bring full and final salvation), and what He has already done (dealt bountifully with David)" (Rydelnik & Vanlaningham, p. 771).

David's final contentment with the reality of God and His character is a lesson of hope

for those fighting injustices. The ability to spiritually and prophetically discern the boundary

between humanity's actions and God's actions is essential to effective advocacy, peacemaking,

and promoting justice (Beckett, 2016). Applying the lessons of Psalm 13, Beckett (2016)

highlighted a speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the challenging times of fighting for

civil rights and justice in America. Despite the circumstances and the laboring questions, King

anchored on the hope that the God of justice would answer.

> I come to say to you this afternoon however difficult the moment, however frustrating the
> hour, it will not be long, because truth pressed to earth will rise again. How long? Not
> long, because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long, because you still reap what
> you sow. How long? Not long. Because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends
> toward justice. How long? Not long, 'cause mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming
> of the Lord! (p. 215)

Justice Displayed

"Two key words embody what biblical social justice must look like: *mishpat* and

tzadeqah[1]" (Kasch, 2020, p. 37). *Mishpat* is a Hebrew word meaning judgment, what is right,

and what is just (Strong, 1894). The *New International Bible* (2011) demonstrates examples of

the judgment and justice that Christians should follow (mishpat added for emphasis). "Do not

deny justice *[*mishpat*]* to your poor people in their lawsuits" (Exodus 23:6). "He defends the

cause *[*mishpat*]* of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you,

giving them food and clothing" (Deuteronomy 10:18). "Do not deprive the foreigner or the

fatherless of justice *[*mishpat*]* or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge" (Deuteronomy 24:17).

"The Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power; in his justice and great righteousness

*[*mishpat*]*, he does not oppress" (Job 37:23). "To do what is right *[*mishpat*]* and just is more

acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice" (Proverbs 21:3).

Tzadeqah is used in Hebrew tradition to denote righteousness, especially within

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[1] Also transliterated as Tzedakah.

relationships or where the giver aims to develop a connection with the receiver (Kasch, 2020).

Job 29:12-16 demonstrates the essence of tzadeqah:

> because I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist them. The one who was dying blessed me; I made the widow's heart sing. I put on righteousness as my clothing; justice was my robe and my turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy; I took up the case of the stranger. (*New International Bible*, 2011).

Serving the poor, not from obligation but from a sincere desire to demonstrate God's love and provision is important in the principle of tzadeqah. Bringing both Hebrew terms together, mishpat and tzadeqah display qualities of love, commitment, and servanthood (Kasch, 2020).

Many Old Testament prophets, as servants of God, lovingly committed their lives to the courageous confrontation of social disparities and unfair systems of leadership. Elijah strongly rebuked the damaging leadership of King Ahab and his son Ahaziah. In one scenario, Elijah advocated for the rights of Naboth, a marginalized vineyard owner that encountered a manipulative and unjust leader that subjugated his property (1 Kings 21:17-20). Through manipulation and eventual conspiracy to commit murder, the privileged king and his wife Jezebel usurped the dignity of Naboth. In response to the unjust practices, God spoke through Elijah to bring a strong prophetic rebuke that would impact the current leaders and their generations. The account of Naboth acknowledges that God paused and took notice of injustice, even for seemingly unknown individuals (Woodbridge & Joynt, 2019).

God's attention to injustice is also woven throughout the book of Isaiah. The prophet unapologetically rebuked the leadership that utilized their power and religious status to oppress the weak. Isaiah cried out for God's mercy and justice in a nation that was riddled with abuse and injustice (Groenewald, 2016). Isaiah did not speak what "itching ears want to hear" (see 2 *New King James Bible*, 1982, Timothy 4:3), but instead spoke the truth that went against the

majority leadership of the nation. "Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow" (*New International Bible*, 2011, Isaiah 1:16-17).

The prophetic voice proffers a glimpse into the justice heart of God for the vulnerable and socially outcast. The prophets described in the Bible kept social issues and concerns intertwined with their messages (Groenewald, 2016). The gravitas of Isaiah's prophetic warnings and admonishments comes from the fact that he anchored everything upon the righteousness and justice of Yahweh. According to the themes and principles of the book of Isaiah, the foundation of a healthy society is the righteousness and justice of God and how it influences the moral integrity of leadership (Groenewald). The strength of Isaiah's prophetic voice is that he admonished Israel to recognize that justice and inclusion of the marginalized members of society was a national issue that extended beyond one's comfort level.

Social justice extends into the New Testament as Jesus exemplified compassion and righteousness through parables, teachings, and demonstrations. Kgatla (2016) explained that the Jewish people assumed social justice referred to helping fellow Jews. However, Jesus destroyed that assumption as he demonstrated that a neighbor was not merely a relative or someone that shared social or ethnic similarities. The story of the Good Samaritan expounds on the principle of loving one's neighbor. A lawyer, who wanted to justify his personal agenda, asked Jesus to define the term 'neighbor' regarding demonstrating compassion and justice (*New King James Bible*, 1982, Luke 10:25, 29). The response of Jesus was presented through a story that shares about a Jewish man robbed, beaten, and left for dead on the road (Luke 10:30). In the course of the day, fellow pious Jewish people saw the hurting man and ignored his need (Luke 10:31-32).

"But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion" (*New King James Bible*, 1982, Luke 10:33). To conclude His point, Jesus tells the audience that the Samaritan man, although from an outside racial group was the compassionate hero of the story and a true neighbor to the Jewish man. Jesus then admonished the audience to "go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37).

The ethical urgency to pour out compassion is also seen as the New Testament challenges Christians to walk in love. Equality across race, social, and gender lines is vital to the message of the New Testament writers and the Kingdom agenda for which they advocated (Sales & Rim, 2023). For example, Paul petitions for equality between a slaveowner and his slave (*New King James Bible*, 1982, Philemon 1:16) and mandates equal treatment between people of different races and genders (Galatians 3:28). Paul articulates that people of differing cultures are not only equal but are also considered family if they believe in Christ. The cultural shift that Paul presents in his epistles is a unifying example of how justice brings wholeness (Holland, 2018).

In the epistle written to Philemon, Paul writes on behalf of Onesimus, a slave who has embraced the Gospel and is considered a "faithful and dear brother" (*New International Bible*, 2011, Colossians 4:9). Paul is on a reconciliation mission to bring wholeness to the relationship of Onesimus and his master Philemon. Despite the cultural implications, Paul demonstrates how justice encompasses bringing people to a common table in the spirit of reconciliation (Keown, 2018). In the epistle to Philemon, Paul expresses his desire to have Onesimus continue serving him in the gospel (Philemon 1:13). However, recognizing that Onesimus must return, Paul requests that Onesimus be received in the same way Paul would be received (Philemon 1:17). "So rather than using his power as a citizen over Onesimus, Paul shares that power with him. It must be noted that 'serve'…is diakoneō rather than douleuō, a distinction which removes Paul's

reference to service from the realm of slavery" (Holland, 2018, p. 12). The shared power displayed by Paul connects to the liberating power of justice as demonstrated through the lens of Jesus Christ.

Community Engagement

Implications for Leaders and Society

Seeing love, unity, diversity, and justice through a biblical lens liberates leaders to act according to the love and grace of God. The actions of leaders, especially within the local church, must begin from a foundational point of the gospel. Evans (2015) made a distinction between the content of the gospel and the scope of the gospel. The content of the gospel involves the salvation message of Jesus Christ and His life, death, burial, and resurrection. Paul emphasizes this in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (*New International Bible*, 2011).

The scope of the gospel, however, extends beyond the content and into the areas of sanctification, which includes walking in righteousness and justice. Evans (2015) revealed a distinction between evangelism and sanctification in terms of the Gospel. The local church is mandated to share the Gospel (evangelism) so people may come to know Jesus personally. Yet, the local church also needs to demonstrate through daily living the truths of the Gospel (sanctification) so people can witness the fullness of God's truth and give Him glory. Evans (2015) continued to exert that both evangelism and sanctification produce oneness –Christians unite together to evangelize the world and unite in good works in alignment with biblical justice. The combination of the content and the scope of the gospel is a pivotal perspective for leaders as they engage with the community and practically live out the fullness of Christ to society.

Anchored in the love of Christ and the heart of justice, leaders can walk out practical steps to be salt and light. "You are the salt of the earth…You are the light of the world. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (*New King James Bible*, 1982, Matthew 5:13, 14, 16). Leaders, especially those with a biblical worldview, have the privilege to interact with society in a transformative manner. Similar to how salt preserves decaying food and light holds darkness captive, Christ's followers are to radically influence society through the good works they do toward others.

Spiritual leaders serve as catalysts to a compassion-driven culture that holds back moral and societal decay (Coe & Coe, 2017). As leaders step into society, they embark on a mission to restore what has been broken and to illuminate what has been hidden by injustice (Manyaka-Boshielo, 2018). The pathway to bringing light and restoration is found in servant leadership. Based on the biblical reality of love, unity, diversity, and justice, an implication for leaders is to walk in servanthood to the community and those in need. According to Coe and Coe (2017), servant-leadership centers around a leader's understanding that empowering the follower is essential. Additionally, a leader should operate from a selfless perspective that provides opportunity to serve the follower in an authentic manner. Afulike (2018) insightfully stated the correlating factors between biblical worldview and practical servant leadership. "Since righteousness and justice are ontologically connected to God," tangible works of social justice and compassion follow the footsteps of Jesus and the apostles (p. 54). Therefore, through social justice, a person can walk out the Gospel to those around them.

Leaders that advocate for a biblical worldview possess a theological mandate to engage in social justice and help shift the power of injustice and racial disunity. Marteli (2020) challenged the church to examine the meaning of being a neighbor. The scope of being a

neighbor must extend beyond the traditional parameters of nationalistic and ethnic pride. A social justice issue that forces leaders to reassess their 'neighbor' is racial reconciliation. The term racial reconciliation encompasses a restoration of the core values of humanity that bring people into alignment with unity. It requires addressing the consequential harm that stems from racism and racist mindsets (Jemal et al., 2020).

Walking with people and communities on the road to justice and harmony is a transformative opportunity for local leaders. The pathway to reconciliation correlates to the uniqueness and value of each human being (Jemal et al., 2020). Lovingly walking with people, especially within a nation that claims Christian origins is imperative for people of faith. There must be a genuine concern for the tangible needs of people, such as food, shelter, and safety, as a demonstration of the heart of the Gospel (Dekar, 2019). A Christian leader's ethical responsibility to take practical steps for justice is rooted in the character of God. Theologically, it is evident that God is neither remote nor disinterested in humanity. In contrast, God intentionally draws close to the broken and marginalized while zealously advocating for justice and dispensing grace regardless of race, gender, or social class (see *New King James Bible*, 1982, Psalm 34:18, Hebrews 4:16, Micah 6:8, Isaiah 1:17).

Muis (2018) observed that Scripture describes God as creating and sustaining covenants. Covenants are unique relationships where God invites humanity to embrace His promises and draw closer to His character. "God's keeping and fulfilling of his promises to his covenant-partners is a specific way in which God executes and reveals his justice" (Muis, 2018, p. 366). He is a covenant-keeping God that longs to rest among His people and to be glorified through the leadership of the church. The covenant concept acknowledges that justice within this context stems from covenant members' duty to love God and their neighbors (Boloje & Groenewald,

2014). The covenantal community comprised of Christians is a direct extension of the character

of God. Compassion and intentionality are markers of a close covenant relationship between

Christ and the Church. The relationship carries a unity of emotions, commonality of destinies,

and mutual interests that are only realized through covenant (Kgatla, 2016). Christians have the

privilege of a personalized and intentional relationship with God that surpasses cultural climates.

An example of the cultural climate shifting was seen at Calvary as a moment in eternity

was marked by a display of love and reaffirmation of the relationship between Christ and

humanity. At the cross, "mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have

kissed" (*New King James Bible*, 1982, Psalm 85:10). "The cross of Jesus is the place where love

and justice meet, where wrath and compassion combine" (Kandiah, 2017, p. 259). The complete

justice of the Father is personified in the act of sacrificial love demonstrated by Jesus Christ.

Compelled by divine ethics and motivation to see humanity walk in wholeness, Jesus poured out

His love equally and without reservation. He died for the adulterous Samaritan female (John 4:6-

26) and for the rejected tax-collecting Jewish male (Matthew 9:9). Jesus loved the detestably

savage Roman guards (Luke 23:34) as well as the fragile and overlooked lepers (Mark 1:40-42).

The intimacy that Christ has with humanity is a reflection of how social justice should be lived

out (Kgatla, 2016).

Therefore, the pursuit of social justice encompasses an ethical understanding of the value

of all people not only as image-bearers of God but as the redemptive object of Christ's love.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female;

for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (*New King James Bible*, 1982, Galatians 3:28). In his

theological anthropology book, Kilner (2015) devoted the bulk of the pages to wrestling with and

dissecting human dignity and the image of God. The importance of inclusivity regarding the

image of God is pivotal in establishing freedom and equality in many spheres of society. The unifying theological principle commissions the church to welcome people of all societal statuses and racial groups. Christians must look at people through the lens of God and view them as image bearers of the Creator. As a result, any form of injustice against a person is a direct assault to the heart of God, and to God Himself (Kasch, 2020). The liberation discovered in Jesus produces an urgent need to disrupt barriers of injustice, racism, and separation. Within the church, the diversity of people and functions simultaneously catapults the vision of God forward and uproots ethnic and class hierarchies (Sales & Rim, 2023). Celebrating diversity within the church reminds Christian leaders of the theological truths of racial and social justice. From a biblical worldview, it is undeniable that leaders must serve others and advocate for racial and social equality to be implemented in every sphere of society.

In the quest and often urgency to address social needs, racial injustice, and barriers to the Gospel, Christian leaders tackle injustice utilizing methods that are not always sustainable and productive. It is helpful to dedicate space to examine the ineffective practices to create a stronger foundation for church leaders in their sincere desire to bring about change. Porter et al. (2015) identified three well-intentioned obstacles to effectively implementing social justice: "(1) social action fueled by moral outrage, (2) social action fueled by ego-enlargement, and (3) social action fueled by spiritual emptiness" (p. 265). Moral outrage in itself is not a negative quality. The Bible showcases many instances where God and His prophets experienced outrage at the moral depravity of the world. When Jesus entered the Temple and saw how the people misrepresented the holiness of the Lord and instead used it for economic injustice, He was morally outraged. "He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. 'It is written,' he said to them, 'my house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a

den of robbers.'" (*New International Bible*, 2011, Matthew 21:12-13).

When God saw the moral depravity of humanity and the consistent wickedness that brewed in people's hearts, He was both sorrowful and angry. "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them." (*New International Bible*, Genesis 6:7). Throughout history, God spoke through his prophets to declare that the idolatrous and adulterous heart of the nation aroused the moral anger of God and consequences would follow (Isaiah 66:15-16, Jeremiah 7:18-20, 32:30-31, Ezekiel 7:3-12, Hosea 8:3-8). The distinguishing factor between the moral outrage outlined in the Bible by God and His prophets, compared to when humans act against injustice with the sole motivator of moral outrage, is that the human-led actions often are hasty and bring temporary results. "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord... Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good." (*New International Bible*, Romans 12:19-21). Porter et al. (2015) elaborated that "God has unique qualities that enable him to handle anger regarding injustice in a manner that his finite creatures are generally incapable of" (p. 267). James likewise stated that human anger is contrary to the righteousness of God (see James 1:19-20). There is therefore a delicate balance of God's delight in humanity intervening in injustice and people being able to navigate the intervention without motivations of rage (Porter et al., 2015; see also Isaiah 59:15-18, Proverbs 14;29, Colossians 3:8, Galatians 5:19-21, Ephesians 4:26).

The second ineffective motivator for sustainability in the arena of justice is social action fueled by ego enlargement. Humans possess a basic need to be accepted, valued, and appreciated, which can be satisfied through involvement with social issues and meeting

community needs (Porter et al., 2015). The danger arises when people garner fulfillment or motivation from the attention or appreciation they receive. When egos take preeminence, "Those who do not get noticed often become hurt and bitter, those who do get noticed can tend to become aggrandized and arrogant, and those who encounter failure in ministry often quietly fade away" (p. 268). In the Gospels, Jesus consistently taught the disciples to check the motives of their hearts and to give, pray, and serve wholeheartedly unto God and not for the attention and approval of men. "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them" (*New International Bible*, 2011, Matthew 6:1). Jesus knew the deceitfulness of the human heart (Jeremiah 17:9) and wisely taught to guard against ego-enlargement.

The third ineffective motivator is justice work fueled by spiritual emptiness. The busy lifestyle of fighting for justice and addressing disunity can mask the true loneliness that a person may fill in their spirit. There are moments when it is time to stop the metaphorical Martha work and simply sit like Mary at the feet of Jesus and enjoy the relationship (see *New King James Bible*, 1982, Luke 10:38-42). Leadership and working for justice and unity is not a substitute for the focal point of Christianity—Jesus. In referencing James Davidson Hunter, Porter et al. (2015) observed, "when social justice is used as a substitute for cultivating our spiritual life, our work to advance God's kingdom purposes becomes idolatrous" (p. 269). Christianity's focus is the worship and honor of God. Additional elements such as seeking justice, bringing peace to broken areas of society, and demonstrating a moral code are peripheral (Porter et al., 2015). The motivators of spiritual emptiness, ego-enlargement, and moral outrage are often starting points for leaders as they begin to engage with the community and address pressing societal needs. However, they will leave the spiritual leader ineffective and without considerable influence if they do not anchor on a biblical framework.

Interacting with the Community

A biblical framework sustains the local church and leaders regarding spiritual connection, purpose, and fellowship. God led Abraham into a fellowship that paved the way for miraculous purposes. "My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations" (*New King James Bible*, 1982, Genesis 17:4-5). God sovereignly extends the covenantal promise by stating that outside nations will be blessed because of Abraham's leadership and obedience (Genesis 18:18). From the beginning, God has demonstrated a missional heart, which was evident from His promise to extend the covenantal relationship from Abraham to all families on the earth (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). This theme is repeated in the New Testament as well. Jesus comes into agreement with the Father's heart when He declares that He came for the spiritually sick and marginalized. "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Mark 2:17). The extension of Jesus' purpose on earth was to go beyond the Jewish family of Abraham, and to venture into all the nations. The disciples experienced the realities of God's intentions when they were commissioned to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20). Again, Jesus encourages the disciples and provokes missional movement beyond the Jewish community, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (*New International Bible*, 2011, Acts 1:8). An overwhelmingly vibrant theme in the Bible is influencing the outside community with the love of God for the glory of God. Intentionally engaging in racial unity and reconciliation, transforming societal disparities, and advocating for the marginalized are pieces of spiritual formation that allow Christians to shine their light before men (see Matthew 5:16).

As the "light of the world" (*New International Bible*, 2011, John 8:12), Jesus was fueled

with the power and grace of God as He interacted with the community and those marginalized

members of society. In His earthly ministry, Jesus displayed the principles of love and unity as

vehicles for God's gospel. Historically, during the time of Jesus, Jewish and Samaritan people

did not interact because the Jewish people viewed Samaritans as beneath them (see John 4:9).

Samaritans were the fruit of intermarriage between Jewish people and the Assyrians capturers

that conquered the Jewish people in 722 BC (Evans, 2015). Therefore, the discord between the

two ethnic groups during the time of Jesus was anchored in their historical rivalry and seasons of

oppression. In addition, men and women were not viewed as equal, and thus women were treated

lower than men on every level (culturally, socially, economically, and spiritually) (Rydelnik &

Vanlaningham, 2014). However, despite the cultural prejudice against Samaritans and women,

John 4 highlights a powerful moment of God's favor when Jesus encounters the Samaritan

woman at the well.

> "Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." (*New International Bible*, John 4:9-10)

The encounter with the Samaritan woman showcases Jesus' intentional engagement with

culture and community to bring transformation. The request of Jesus for a drink of water would

require the practical act of drawing near to the Samaritan woman and drinking from the cup she

carried. The intimate act of placing one's mouth on the cup of a Samaritan female reflected

Jesus' connection and acceptance while simultaneously giving the woman a sense of value

(Evans, 2015). Engaging with the community requires humility and a refusal to entertain the

colonial mindset of taking over. Instead, engagement encompasses coming alongside and

building relationships with community members. This unique viewpoint of engagement is further

articulated as Evans (2015) commented on the value Jesus gave to the Samaritan woman. Christ elevated her worth through positioning Himself where she could be of service to Him. The act of her offering help to not only a Jewish man, but the Messiah Himself, altered the dynamic on both a social and spiritual level. Jacob's well and the basic need for a drink were both cultural and relatable elements that provided a bridge between Christ and the woman. It is lopsided for Christians to make the effort to help people get saved for eternity if they are not willing to spend time with them in the present. Cross-cultural interaction and relationship building is critical for displaying oneness (Evans, 2015).

The oneness displayed by Christ led to the gospel being preached not only to the Samaritan woman at the well, but also to the other Samaritans in the village. The woman testified to her community, "And many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of the woman who testified, 'He told me all that I *ever* did.' (*New King James Bible*, 1982, John 4:39). The Scriptures continue to share the impact of the one encounter at the well. "So, when the Samaritans had come to Him, they urged Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. And many more believed because of His own word" (John 4:40-41). A city-wide evangelistic outreach emerged because Jesus was intentional and humble enough to connect with someone from a different cultural and ethnic background (Evans, 2015).

The local church in modern America can heed the example of Christ and engage with the community in tangible ways. In America, there are over 350,000 places of worship, which give local churches significant influence on the local community and the residents (Warner & Konkel, 2019). The local church and the heartbeat of Christian service cannot be separated from the tangible issues of social justice and intentionally empathizing with the needs of people (Boloje & Groenewald, 2014). As the church flows into the community and builds relationships, church

leaders carry the ability to bring resolution and healing to broken fragments of society. The local church has a profound ability to impact people navigating ethnic and cultural boundaries (Wieland, 2020). Providing solutions requires a level of cultural research and empathy. From a leadership perspective, empathy "is attempting to perceive the world from followers' perspectives by understanding what they are feeling or thinking, resulting in followers experiencing a sense of uniqueness" (Coe & Coe, 2017, p. 57).

Empathy functions in two stages as described by Coe and Coe. First, the leader builds a cognitive understanding of the context for interaction, engagement, and experiential relationships. This provides the framework for the leader to process the journey and worldview of another. Second, the leader develops genuine concern and generates a desire to help or serve another. The rhythm of empathy allows leaders to leverage their influence in a positive manner and bring purpose to their cultural study and interaction.

Jesus, although fully divine, chose to research the cultural, linguistic, and social norms of people for thirty years prior to embarking on full-time ministry (Lingenfelter & Mayers, 2016). Jesus did not jump into ministry without understanding the target population of His ministry. Jesus and his disciples engaged with and learned the value of the people around them. For example, they attended a wedding (*New King James Bible*, 1982, John 2:1-2), visited people in their homes (Luke 4:38, 10:38), interacted with the leadership of the area as well as the marginalized people (Matthew 9:10, Luke 7:37-39), connected with people as they mourned (John 11:17-27), and enjoyed fellowship and provoking conversations about culture. The same strategic methodology can be applied to modern church leaders as they research, learn, and empathize with the minorities in their communities. Embracing diversity with intentionality requires a level of understanding of the racial tension felt by minorities. Local church leaders

should wrestle with the perceptions and experiences of minority church and community members (Okubo, 2016). To truly wrestle with injustice and tension, leaders must roll up their sleeves and put in the work of integrating into their communities, meeting minority members, and listening to the needs of the marginalized (McNeil, 2015). Serving others is only possible with nearness and deliberate interaction with the community to build relationships and shift injustices (Bonaparte, 2015).

The biblical audience observes Jesus moved to compassion many times during his leadership. "And Jesus, when He came out, saw a great multitude, and was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep not having a shepherd. So, He began to teach them many things" (*New King James Bible*, 1982, Mark 6:34). Another instance, Jesus "saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them and healed their sick" (Matthew 14:4) and then instructed the disciples to tend to the crowds' tangible need for food. Jesus both engaged with the community and identified their needs. As the needs were identified, Jesus was moved to compassion and demonstrated His leadership and authority. He displayed an unwavering burden for the community as He led with moral integrity.

Jesus taught His disciples to mimic His leadership and cultivate relationships within the community for the purpose of walking in the ministry of reconciliation. Modern church leaders must reflect on the actions of Jesus and imitate His leadership intentionality of carrying a burden for the marginalized, disenfranchised, and oppressed. The overwhelming effects of systematic injustice leave racial minorities feeling orphaned in America (Sewell, 2020). The wounds of betrayal and the bitterness of disillusionment generate fragile and heavy hearts that are in desperate need of healing. Christian leaders have the accountability and privilege to operate from a place of compassion and walk in ethical integrity and reconciliation.

Observing and commenting about injustice from a distance turns leaders into spectators that are subject to privileged mentalities lacking substance and biblical truth. When leaders interact with the broken, listen to the marginalized, and observe firsthand the disparities, then leaders carry the potential to bring transformation. On a local church level, the transformational influence of the church is benefited by engaging with and in the community (Warner & Konkel, 2019). Jesus challenged His students to take part in the cultural practices of the community to connect with people and culture (see *New King James Bible*, 1982, John 18:20, Matthew 26:18-19, Luke 9:5-6, 13-17). During intentional interaction, they had access to communities and were able to bring reconciliation and restoration as they healed the sick, cleansed people with leprosy, and cast out demons (Matthew 10:8).

Community engagement cannot be viewed as a religious burden or an insignificant chore. It is an opportunity to demonstrate practical steps for justice and transformation. Both at a macro and micro level, it is essential for leaders to identify key avenues to discuss challenges and experiences of those that face injustice (Kim, 2020). Local church leaders have the responsibility of facilitating and maintaining biblical values within communities. As authentic relationships are forged, it becomes a legacy-building tool that impacts and motivates multiple layers of society (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). Christian leaders that are serious about personal growth and the spiritual formation of their local church, will intentionally engage with the community and participate in activities that respond to social needs (Groeschel, 2022).

The small steps to bringing love to the community include giving practical examples of community engagement. Tangible steps to engage with the community include challenging congregants and leaders to explore books written by minority authors, create a friendship with a person of a different race, engage in active listening when other cultures share their stories,

frustrations, and pain (Kim, 2020). The journey to racial healing and unity is through the road of intentionality and engagement. McNeil (2015) shared tangible steps toward justice and engagement through the acronym CARE.

1. Communicate
2. Advocate
3. Relate
4. Educate

Communicate requires actively sharing with others what has been learned or discovered about racial relations and reconciliation. Leaders must help to bring to the forefront voices and causes of people that are marginalized or silenced by societal constraints (McNeil, 2015). Communicating the stories of the marginalized contributes to bringing dignity and integrity to the issues of racial unity as well as providing authentic connections. *Advocate* entails bringing the issues communicated to the forefront to activate change. It is the responsibility of local leaders to identify what issues within their communities need advocating (i.e. immigration, prison reform, employment equality, homelessness, education reform, etc.).

Relate incorporates building partnerships and authentic relationships. "Acts of justice must be contextually sensitive. Trust is built and credibility earned when people see that we are sincerely invested in the community and that we are affected by the same problems that concern them" (McNeil, 2015, pp. 100-101). After relationships are forged, then leaders must continue to *educate* themselves and teach others about the pressing needs of the community. Leaders should leverage their power and influence to educate others to help bridge the gaps caused by disparity or privilege. McNeil (2015) also asserted that vulnerable groups that lack access to education or information need an opportunity to be viable participants in society. Some people in positions of power prey on those who struggle economically, which perpetuates poverty in the community.

Theoretical Framework

This section of the literature review focuses on the theoretical framework of the underlining issues of the research. There will be an examination of racism in America, particularly regarding the African American population as well as an overview of social justice and the accompanying definitions and implementations. To fully comprehend the research purpose and subsequent findings, it is helpful to recognize the necessity of the research and the fuel that propelled the research methodology.

Racism Within America

In America, the sin of racism is interwoven in history (Evans, 2022). Since racism is at its core a sin issue (Sales & Rim, 2023), it can manifest on multiple levels within the human dynamic: individual, group, institutional, and ideological (Miller & Garran, 2016). Racism includes race-based oppression that creates systems, laws, and cultural norms that adversely affect a particular racial group (Jemal et al., 2020, p. 33). While the topic of this paper focuses on the racial disparity between African Americans and White Americans, racism can occur in any form when a person, system, or structure assigns value based on race that unfairly gives an advantage or privilege to some and a disadvantage to others (Jee-Lyn García & Sharif, 2015). "Another definition explains racism as prejudice plus power. It is not only personal bigotry toward someone of a different race that constitutes racism; rather, racism includes the imposition of bigoted ideas on groups" (Tisby, 2019, p. 16).

Furthermore, "racism involves 'exploitation' and 'resource hoarding' by privileged groups" (Miller & Garran, 2016, p. 23). The resulting effects are that White Americans and minorities have largely different opportunities for societal success, "with people of color having less access to jobs (particularly well-paying jobs), a range of residential neighborhoods, quality

schools, political office, and other positions of power and influence in society" (Miller & Garran, p. 23). "Racism is not the sum of prejudicial actions and individual attitudes, but a state of mind embedded in our psyches, culture, systems, and institutions" (Poole et al., 2021, p. 129). Racism extends beyond attitudes and behaviors, but it involves the complexity of underlining and rooted psychological and social standards and belief systems that must be uncovered and uprooted (Lentin, 2016). Ideological racism can be overt as demonstrated by "hateful and degrading messages about Muslims in Kosovo, Tutsis in Rwanda, and Jews in Nazi Germany, and is used to justify horrendous actions against a racial or ethnic group," whereas more subtle ideological racism involves casual comments that "sustains stereotypes or discriminatory practices" (Miller & Garran, p. 29).

Forward momentum for change and unity cannot exist without a transparent, even if difficult, look at the historical context and factors contributing to the current reality. "Despite our inclinations to forget this past and move hastily toward reconciliation, we cannot easily dispense with the history that informs our formation" (Norris, 2020, p. 38). Racism is a fruit that has grown in the soil of America. In discussing the history of race in America, Norris (2020) references James H. Cone's observations that, "If one wants to create an American Christian theology, one must begin with the experience of the slaves, the crucified people in American history" (Norris, 2020, p. 31). Even once slavery was abolished, the African American experience include the trials of Jim Crow, racial injustices, and legal disparities within the justice system and legislation (Mitchell-Yellin, 2018). The intentional oppressive acts forged in the nation are coupled with present-day distortion of historical accounts. The lack of representation in history textbooks further demonstrates the issue of racism as African American are excluded from the foundational moments of American history. Evans (2015) shared that the lack of

representation in books, movies, and artistic mediums is a concerning concept within the American landscape. It creates a disconnect between African Americans and their heritage and contributions to the history of the nation, while simultaneously elevates White Americans and their status, influence, and contributions. As a result, Evans ascertained that African Americans have a distorted and incomplete view of themselves within history and the present.

The inaccurate reality of race and value in America has fueled ongoing racial disparities in modern society. Statistical trends emphasize the presence of the current reality of racism and racial disunity within the nation. "Overall, the data consistently show that a police officer's use of force—both lethal and nonlethal—differs as a function of suspect race such that Black suspects receive harsher treatment than White suspects" (Scott et al., 2017, p. 702). In the educational realm, teachers are more likely to develop a pattern of mistrust and misperception toward African American students, and therefore African American students are more likely to be suspended or expelled (Okonofua et al., 2016). Subsequently, African American students are more prone to distance themselves from trusting relationships with teachers and White authority figures, more prone to drop out of school and detour their educational and career goals, and more prone to find a pathway to the criminal justice system (Okonofua et al.). The legal system and courtroom dynamics also display racial disparity. In Cook County, Illinois, the largest judicial system in the nation, racism is prevalent and normalized (Gonzalez, 2016). In what is categorized as racial degradation, the author outlines experiences and observations where African American defendants are humiliated, mistreated, and marginalized. Racism has effects on health as well, as Jemal et al. (2020) observed that certain health concerns "systematically occur along racial lines, such as disproportionately higher rates of infant mortality, obesity, deaths caused by heart disease and stroke, and an overall shorter life expectancy" (p. 28) among

African Americans (in comparison to their White American counterparts).

A contributing factor to racism in America is the categorization of and exposure to minority racial groups. Racial segregation is evident in American residential trends (Lichter et al., 2016). Segregation removes the opportunity to interact across racial lines, which in turn stifles the ability to confront and question racist ideologies, perceptions, and stereotypes (Roberts & Rizzo, 2021). The reduced interaction is a by-product of the statistical reality of the American population. The 2022 United States Census estimated that the population is 72.91% White American, 18.73% Latinx American, 14.44% Black American, 7.30% Asian American, and 2.58% Native American.[2] As a result, simply from statistics, individuals interact with White Americans more than with minority groups, which contributes to a broader context as to the diverse characteristics of White Americans. And negatively, it leads to misguided presuppositions and biases against minorities (Lee et al., 2017).

The segregation environment of America has contributed to local churches' misunderstanding or apathy regarding the stigma of racial issues in society. Depending on one's personal and cultural context, the effects of racism may seem minimal. Johnson (2018) researched that White American Evangelicals who reside, work, and engage in communities that are predominately White have the inability to identify how race is important to a person's experiences, relationships, and societal opportunities. As a result of the inability to see the effects of racial ideologies, parents inherently teach their children how to perceive race and issues of racism. Unengaged and unaware parents tend to teach their children to walk with a colorblind mentality. "Family ethnic-racial socialization" is a process of sharing with one's children (or family unit) the role of race and ethnicity in family interactions and the societal implications of a

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[2] The percentages do not equal 100% because the statistics accounted for people with multi-racial backgrounds.

given race or ethnic classification (Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020).

Roberts and Rizzo (2021) elaborated on a colorblind perspective that White parents lean towards. Colorblind perspective is defined as "believing that race does not matter and that conversations about race should be avoided" (p. 481). The result is unchallenged and unquestioned assumptions, myths, and stereotypes that broader sectors of society endorse. The avoidance of the topic of race fuels and legitimatizes racial hierarchies and disparities. Roberts and Rizzo (2021) observed that in contrast, minority parents "speak with their children about historical and structural inequalities, and about how to deal with racial biases that they might encounter in the real world, which challenges the observations and myths popularized by the broader, majority White, society" (p. 481).

It is important to recognize that the statistics and theories are not indicative of every White American or African American experience, perception, or mindset (Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020). As family units become more racially diverse through adoptions and interracial marriages, the aspect of family ethnic-race socialization is a struggle for parents as they identify avenues to combat racism and racial disunity on a personal level (Rauktis et al., 2016). White parents are encountering profound moments of empathy as they experience and witness racism as it is directed toward their minority children or themselves for parenting minority children. As more experiences are encountered, White parents are developing new levels of understanding regarding race and a greater willingness to address and wrestle with the concept of racism in America (Jaegoo, et al., 2015).

The colorblind methodology or unawareness of racial influence may stem from the inherent hierarchical system that has infiltrated American culture (Roberts & Rizzo, 2021) that socially and psychologically positions White Americans as superior (Harris et al., 2020). Roberts

and Rizzo elaborated upon the hierarchal trend seen in the nation:

> [White Americans] occupy the highest status positions at a vastly disproportionate rate. As just two examples, in 2018, 97% of CEOs at Fortune 500 Companies were White (Fortune, 2018), as were 98% of past U.S. Presidents. This hierarchy rooted in American history and perpetuated by racist ideologies, practices, and policies (e.g., Plessy v. Ferguson, Brown v. Board of Education) rather than an inherent superiority of White Americans (Alexander, 2010; Bonila-Silva, 1999; Williams, 1987), plays a critical role in the psychology of American racism, such that several cognitive biases and social ideologies reinforce the conception of White Americans as superior. (p. 479)

The implications of the history of racism in America lean towards racial disunity as more than a perception, but a social, psychological, and religious reality that is detrimental to the health of the nation. Regarding the high status attributed to White Americans, Roberts and Rizzo (2021) observed that "Americans are bombarded with social myths that assert that high-status membership is at the same time earned by hard work, fixed at birth, and given by God" (p. 480). The social myths are racism disguised as social norms. To fully tackle the concept of racism, it is essential to look at the construct of racial categories and origins.

Genealogical View on Racism

Examining racism from a genealogical viewpoint is a recommendation pulled from the research of Mitchell-Yellin (2018). A genealogical view on racism helps to combat racism and create avenues for diminishing it. "We should look to a view that focuses on racism's lineage and avoids the monistic focus on a single, ultimate analytical factor—attitudes or institutions—in favor of a pluralistic focus that recognizes the historical interplay between them" (p. 70). This is what the genealogical view seeks to do. It is thus able to capture the messy reality of racism and put us in a position to more effectively combat it. (p. 70)

The genealogical viewpoint is a theoretical framework that brings racism not only to the forefront but allows engagement with the root issues and subsequent solutions for a more unified nation. It is essential to not limit one's scope to merely what racism *is*, but to expand to a

pluralistic understanding of the "individual attitudes, social institutions, and conceptual ingenuity" (Mitchell-Yellin, 2018, p. 65) that comprise the monstrous nature of modern racism. The genealogical viewpoint pulls together the elements of the "drive to dominant" and the "dominion of the dominant" (p. 64) as seen through the lens of history. The historical role of racism, domination ideologies, and construction of racial categories all serve to inform the undercurrents of modern America and racism, and thus serve as valuable aspects to examine and identify the reality and limitations of racism. "Increasingly entrenched dominance of one racial group over another, whether interpersonal or institutional, is a red flag" (p. 68).

The reality of the roots of racism stems from the need to justify and propagate institutions of colonialism, slavery, and free labor (Mitchell-Yellin, 2018). The institutionalized issues provided the backdrop for personalized ideologies and bias to thrive and water the seeds of racial disunity. The genealogical viewpoint hinges on the psychological thirst for dominance. The drive to dominate comes to focus on a particular racial category because this is profitable. "The resulting institutional structures are then reinterpreted in order to justify these practices in racialized terms" (p. 69).

Figure 1

Racism Defined
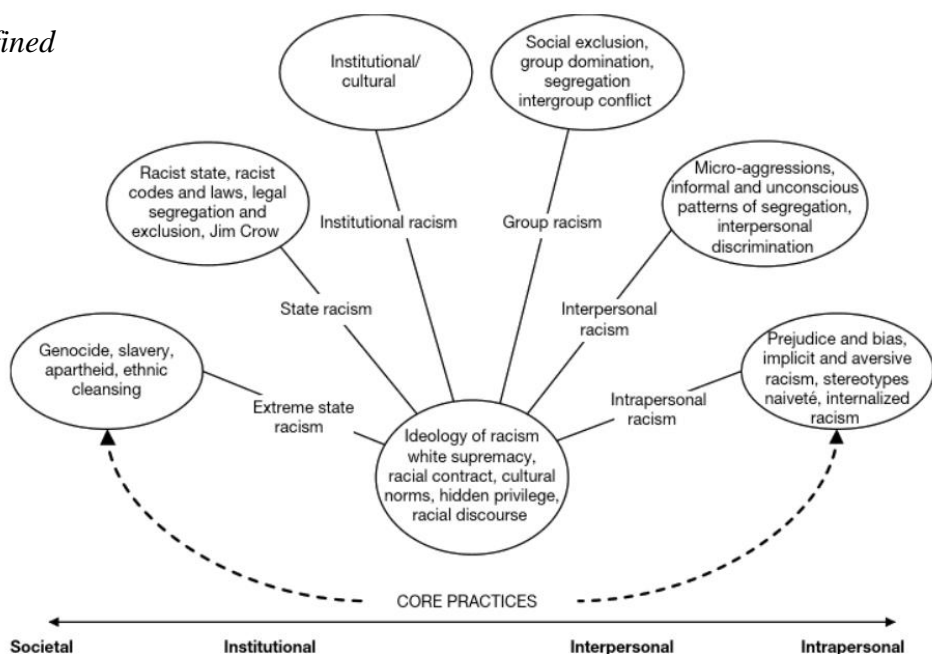
Source: (Miller & Garran, 2016, p. 32)

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

In recent years, the concept of Critical Race Theory has gained traction and attention in America. However, the theory itself is not an innovation that emerged recently but has been part of academia and the discussion of race for many decades.

> CRT began as a movement among legal scholars and activist lawyers, [and] it has extended into many disciplines, including education, because of its interdisciplinary approach to studying structures of race and racism, and its use of intersectional analysis to explain how racism is inextricably bound up with other forms of oppression, especially classism and sexism. (Marrun et al., 2019 pp. 840-841)

CRT examines how "racism is engrained in the fabric and system of the American society...it has become an interdisciplinary tool for examining the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed in many areas" (Brown, 2019, p. 136) including law, healthcare, education, business, minority rights, and gender bias. CRT is helpful in recognizing the interconnectedness of societal structures, political ideologies, and racial inequality (Christian et al., 2021).

The role of Critical Race Theory is to encourage society to shift from a "blaming the victim to a blaming or analyzing the system approach to understanding the harmful treatment received by groups who have been marginalized by White supremacy and privilege" (Crewe, 2021, p. 416). Miller and Garran (2016) outlined the five main components of CRT.

1. The significance of race and racism and how this intersects with other forms of social oppression.

2. The importance of deconstructing and challenging the dominant racial ideology, which normalizes racism.

3. A commitment to social justice.

4. The importance and validity of learning from experiential knowledge and recognizing the unique perspectives of people of color.

5. The use of an interdisciplinary perspective to understand race and racism (p. 26).

Poole et al. (2021) examined further the component of social justice by observing that, "CRT has a fundamental commitment to a social justice agenda that struggles to eliminate all forms of racial, gender, language, generation, status, and class subordination" (p. 129). The authors continued to observe that utilizing a CRT lens allows organizations to examine long-term policy changes and the implementation of clear justice solutions for effective growth. Miller and Garran (2016) challenged readers to action regarding CRT and its effects. People should not be dispassionate spectators, but instead committed societal members that are enveloped in the community and "therefore able to make choices about what we accept or do not tolerate, what we ignore or decide to confront, and whether we are bystanders or social activists" (p. 28).

The call to action that researchers identify within CRT is not found in other avenues of racial study and research theories and paradigms. Christian et al. (2019) highlighted other racial paradigms and how each one falls flat in comparison to CRT.

> Assimilation theorists tend to hold an unwarranted optimism that racial boundaries will blur, shift, and blend, and typically accept society's current distribution of power as the horizon…Boundary theorists similarly adopt a strangely agnostic position when it comes to analyzing social power: conceptualizing the agency of racial groups as a relatively unconstrained set of choices and ignoring that racial structures endow racial groups with differential forms of agency. (p. 1732-1733)

CRT refuses to create an unrealistic portrait of societal inequalities and informs the audience as to the continual and emerging racial inequality. The approach of CRT is often perceived as political or pessimistic. However, it provides an opportunity for researchers and sociologists to orientate themselves and their research to the realities of societal concerns, inequalities, and systems that promote racism (Christian et al., 2019). A large component of CRT is to share stories and experiential moments to create a full picture of the racial tensions and inequalities that invade every sphere of society. Through the recognition of the realities of racism, CRT scholars can generate a level of persistence that is essential to developing a stronger nation that

operates in equality. One of the markers of CRT is the consistent navigation of racial issues despite outcomes. In quoting Derrick Bell, Christian et al. (2019) highlighted that "the fight has meaning...the struggle for freedom is at bottom a manifestation of our humanity which survives and grows stronger through resistance to oppression, even if that oppression is never overcome" (p. 1735). Within the CRT arena, scholars comprehend that progress in racial equality is not equivalent to the eradication of racism. CRT "insists that we not discount the historical trauma that exists and has not been erased by the legislative changes in our democracy" (Crewe, 2021, p. 416).

One avenue in which scholars of Critical Race Theory seek to resist the oppressive nature of racism is to identify new forms in which racism occurs. Mitchell (2020) addresses the concern with the emergence of colorblindness. "Colorblindness is the perception that racism no longer exists and therefore should not be addressed; and that everyone has equal opportunities, when in fact, racism is robust and institutionalized" (p. 1368). Proponents of CRT and its exploration in academic fields identify colorblindness as a new form of racism that hinders the progress of equality. Within the category of colorblindness, a term has emerged called 'cosmetic colorblindness' which is "a discourse of race without acknowledging the institutionalization of racism" (p. 1370). The extension of colorblindness into the fabric of modern society creates a platform for CRT to be explored and tested in various arenas.

The legal ramifications of racism within the United States have historically triggered scholars to explore and generate theories and practices to address racial division and inequality. In the arena of law, colorblindness and the exploration of CRT have been entrenched in Supreme Court rulings, legal mandates, and judicial outcomes. Annamma et al. (2016) explored the pioneering work of Gotanda (a legal scholar) in the area of CRT concerning legislation and the

concept of colorblindness. "Gotanda argued that from the contamination insinuation in American law's 'one drop rule' to reverse discrimination charges arising from affirmative action efforts, the suggestion of a color-blind racial ideology ignored the realities faced in lives and litigation" (p. 149). Through the legal commentary and scholarship of Gotanda, five distinct themes emerge that can help inform societal leaders regarding CRT and the role of colorblindness. Annamma et al. (2016) succinctly articulated the five themes:

1. **Public-private distinction.** There is a clear distinction regarding the role of colorblindness in public arenas (where public officials are discouraged from considering race) versus private arenas (where race can be a consideration).

2. **Non-recognition.** Society falls into a double standard by allowing race to be noticed, but not considered.

3. **Racial categorization.** Racial categories and labels were created (and have been reinforced) to create clear distinctions regarding political, economic, and social power and resources.

4. **Racial connections.** Colorblindness neglects to recognize and examine the interconnection between racial classifications and the subsequent social positioning and access to power that contributes to legal and societal inequality.

5. **Social Change.** The ineffectiveness of a colorblind government is that race is never considered, yet there is no factual proof that it helps to deal with and eliminate racism. (p. 149)

Eliminating racism may be categorized by many as an unrealistic and idealistic notion. However, one goal of CRT is to bring people into intentionality and awareness regarding the racial climate of society in the hopes that transformative change will occur. Crewe (2021)

asserted "the necessity to plant trees that will provide shade that we will never enjoy" (p. 417).

The hopefulness accompanying CRT is a tool that can be utilized in many arenas. Regarding social work, Crewe asserted that social work students should utilize a CRT paradigm to recognize and expose the systematic racism that permeates their field. While an individual may not be racist, the field of social work in which they operate has historical and social racist undertones. Marrun et al. (2019) concluded that CRT is a helpful lens to explore the reasoning as to why teachers of color are underpaid and undervalued in the educational system. The role of racism within the school systems taints the experience and perception of students of color in such a way that it serves as a deterrent to pursuing education as a field of study or a career goal. CRT can enlighten the educational system to discern racial undertones that hinder increased participation by students and teachers of color. Zewude and Sharma (2021) reflected that CRT assists in bringing context to the social construct of race, which liberates medical students and professionals from falling into racist microaggressions and stereotypes. For example, when looking through the scope of CRT, medical professionals can identify the reasoning behind the disparity of minorities affected by certain illnesses and the stereotypes perpetuating false assumptions about medicine and treatment.

Deconstructing Race

The effectiveness of CRT and its role in society is a subject of much debate. However, regardless of one's view of CRT, leaders must look for active avenues to combat the issue of racism and racial disunity in the nation. As Christian leaders embrace the theological weight regarding the mandate for justice and compassion, an understanding as to the sources of inequality will help guide people toward meaningful solutions. Regarding racism in America, Mitchell-Yellin (2018) observed that the categorization of race itself does not change colonial

practices, but it does "clarify what they have been all along. Racism comes to full fruition when existing oppressive practices are reinterpreted in racialized terms in the service of justifying the exploits of those in power" (p. 64). Although usually viewed from a sociological or philosophical perspective, Bantum (2016) provided an intriguing perspective on race as defined through the lens of human experience. "Race is not a history. Race is the story of our bodies, of our churches, of our faith" (p. 4). Bantum (2016) viewed race as tool to deconstruct the integrity of humanity, and from his perspective, African Americans in particular. Race has historically been utilized to classify and construct parameters around freedom, familial connections, and economic status. From colonial shipments of slaves to modern issues of racism, race impacts each person and requires them to confront it and its effects in every arena of life.

"Racialization is the process by which meaning and value are ascribed to socially determined racial categories, and each racial category occupies a different position in the social hierarchy" (Jee-Lyn García & Sharif, 2015, p. 28). When racial categories and accompanying stereotypes and presuppositions are filtered into society, inevitable devaluing occurs. "Category labels and generics additionally promote a descriptive-to-prescriptive tendency (i.e., believing that how a group reflects how group members should be), which supports racial stereotyping and prejudice" (Roberts & Rizzo, 2021, p. 477). Oliver (2021) observed that racial categorization surreptitiously strips away the elements of dignity and neglects the truth that individuals are image carriers of God. Pinpointing racist foundations of culture, the influence of the theory of evolution, and the role of worldly thinking, Oliver asserted that humans are conditioned to examine physical characteristics and formulate broad oftentimes incorrect judgments that favor their own race.

Racial labels have emboldened society to slide into a misunderstanding and distortion of

the image of God. *Imago Dei* is not an exclusive or privileged label, but it is the inclusive litmus for all people as reflected in Genesis 1:27 (Kilner, 2015). The exclusivity attributed to specific races perpetuates colonial mindsets that unjustly oppress targeted and vulnerable groups of people, which is in direct contradiction with biblical truth (Bantum, 2016). Mitchell-Yellin (2018) observed that before and after racial categorization, the colonial mindset carried two ingredients: the "drive to dominant" and the "dominion of the dominant" (p. 64). The elements of domination and exclusivity wreak havoc on the integrity and unity of a society.

An avenue utilized by some scholars to combat the elements of domination and exclusivity is the theory of racelessness. Without a construct of race, some scholars believe that the colonial mindset of racial categorizations has no leverage. In her book on this topic, Mason (2022) articulated that race neither exists in nature or as a social construct. Racism emerges when people believe in race (biologically or socially). As a result, proponents of the theory of racelessness believe that racism is not systematic and can be dismantled. The theory of racelessness operates from two frameworks: "skepticism—the belief that race does not exist in nature—and eliminativism—the position that the concept of race, whatever it is, should be eradicated from human society" (Mason, 2022, p. 1). While this theory is not the core of this research, it does bring attention to the manner in which racism is addressed in America.

American society's focus on race causes damages in that it perpetuates racism (Mason, 2022). The author defined racism as "including the belief in race as biological or a construction," therefore "anyone who holds the belief in "race" is race(ist)" (p. 5). As a result, similar to CRT, racism is perceived as heightened when society engages in racialization (which by Mason's definition is inherently oppressive). Likewise, this leads to an examination of the dynamics of society and the intricacies of racist behavior. The theory of racelessness also emphasizes that

racist ideologies are not limited to what society may historically classify as White Americans. Since race does not exist, racism branches from every people group and is equally oppressive regardless of the specific people group (Mason, 2022).

Race and the Church

Exclusivity encourages leaders to position racial identity before one's faith. Evans (2022) creates a challenging observation regarding the church and race. Race at its core is not a skin or color issue, but it is a sin issue. When people do not confront sins that led to existing divisions and discrimination, then cultural identity trumps moral integrity. Although personal histories and cultural backgrounds are real, they can never take precedence over God. He will never sway from His truth about the value of humanity and His abhorrence to sin.

Especially in America, leaders are susceptible to entangling one's racial identity with one's personality traits, social aptitude, marriage options, educational ability, and career opportunities. Therefore, leaders can fall prey to complacency regarding identification as a member of a racial group instead of as a member of the Body of Christ. Bantum (2019) highlighted that American churches are racially and ethnically segregated, and majority of members are comfortable with the blaring separation. He asserted that in America many expressions of Christianity are really an expression of a racial identity wrapped in the disguise of authentic Christianity. Yet, the racial disunity and tensions that are prevalent in society offer the church a unique opportunity to self-reflect on its perceptions about race and to represent the love and mercy of Christ in a tangible way. The church, especially in America, has faced many historical (and current) moments where they could have gone against the racism trend. The church has had occasions to negate the fruit of racism and instead view each human as an image-bearer of God, treating others as they would Christ (Dekar, 2019).

Historically in America, the church contributed to racial injustices and unbiblical identification of certain people groups (Johnson, 2018). The development of racial classifications was not an experimental or accidental occurrence, but a systematic venture to satisfy social, economic, and psychological needs (Brown, 2019). The author continued to state that when preparing the slave trade shops, the African people were viewed as commodities that were savage and in need of religious reform. As a result, slavery was justified as a means of evangelism. The grace of God was distorted to exert that Africans were all pagans and would otherwise die in sin if they were not taken as slaves so they could receive the Gospel. "So, what had occurred in Europe and South America occurred in the colonies when Maryland passed laws clarifying that conversion to Christianity held no relevance to one's status as a slave and would not lead to manumission" (Brown, 2019, p. 135). The legal support enabled the American Church to continue sharing the Gospel without calling out the injustice that fueled the slave trade economy (Brown, 2019).

The distorted view of Christianity was in direct contradiction to the values of the Bible. Brown continued to explore the disparity between the underpinnings of slavery and the moral themes in the Bible. African slaves and Native Americans were not considered image bearers of God and subsequently not classified as one's neighbor, which therefore led to the belief that they were not owed basic protection given to citizens. (Brown, 2019). As a result, the biblical admonishment to love one's neighbor was disregarded as irrelevant when interacting with African slaves. The early church in America allowed the social structures to dictate the moral structure and subsequently positioned the local churches as agents of the world instead of ambassadors of Christ. To some extent, the issue persists, as acknowledged by Reverend Billy Graham who identified racial hostility as the main social problem not only in the church but also

in the world. Graham stated, "Evangelical Christians have turned a blind eye to racism or have been willing to stand aside while others take the lead in racial reconciliation, saying it was not our responsibility" (Brown, 2019, p. 142).

Christians, in overt and unspoken ways, have promoted and prolonged segregation and racism within the historical culture of America. While the reasons may be complex and nuanced, the effects have been felt throughout history (Johnson, 2018). Many White evangelical churches historically were unaware of solutions to the issue of racism and therefore sometimes chose the path of ignorance instead of tackling the seemingly unsolvable problem. Leaders in the Evangelical church navigated the levels of complexity and complacency (Evans, 2015). The author shared how Warren Wiersbe, a prominent White American preacher viewed the White church as handicapped when it came to tangible acts of social justice and community awareness. In looking at Luke 4:14-30, Wiersbe was convinced that the White church was unable to fully conduct the social context of Jesus' sermon. Instead, the band-aid approach that Wiersbe observed was the occasional incorporation of an inner-city organization into their annual church budget or donating items.

Historically, as churches increased their levels of complacency, issues of segregation became psychologically rationalized. Local churches devoured the food of fear being fed by the economic and social leaders of slavery and segregation. A psychological propaganda of fear began to internalize in the hearts of White Christians. "Fear insulates the conscience against a sense of wrongdoing in carrying out a policy of segregation. For it counsels if there were no segregation, there would be no protection against the invasion of the home, the church, the school" (Brown, 2019, p. 138).

The rationalization of racism birthed from fear was encouraged through the scientific

endeavors of Charles Darwin. Sales and Rim (2023) stated that sin is the root cause of racism

and racist behavior. Yet, Darwin and his theories regarding evolution inspired racism that

allowed for scientific justification of the sin and subsequent discrimination and abuse (Brown,

2019). Evans (2015) elaborated on the dangers of Darwin's publication of *The Origin of Species*

and *Descent of Man.* Darwin's work propelled racist ideologies that enabled people to justify

hate and injustices. The concept of humans emerging from molecules and animals devalued the

entire human experience. In addition, it provided a platform for races to assert dominance and

discriminate against others based on a perceived basis of varying degrees of evolutionary

hierarchy. Darwin went as far as to state that darker-skinned people were closer to apes and ape-

like behaviors and values than lighter-skinned people (Evans, 2015). Through subtle (and

sometimes overt) adoption of Darwinism, White supremacy, and segregation, many Christian

leaders have neglected the theological concepts of dignity, equality, and grace (Brown, 2019). As

the seeds of Darwinism and racism spread, various churches in America have had to identify

avenues for challenging and dismantling the systems of racism.

Racism divided the nation and alienated the African American churches. As a result,

African American churches emerged as change agents not only for African Americans but also

for the entire nation (Brown, 2019). African American leaders have historically attempted to

undercut injustice by repurposing church buildings into houses of refuge to combat the injustice

that is tragically interconnected with the faith tradition. Haggler (2018) outlined how local

African American churches morphed into educational centers, food depositories, skill training

centers, political rally locations, and strategic civil rights meeting places. As African Americans

were discriminated against in White churches, new branches of denominations began to emerge.

The hypocrisy of racism within the church served as a unique catalyst for the development of the

National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., the Church of God in Christ, and the African Methodist

Episcopal Church (Brown, 2019). The African American local churches engaged with the issues

of racial disparity and brought not just spiritual renewal and social justice, but also

transformative leadership.

Transformative Leadership

As God does transformative work in the lives of His people, they, in turn, begin to

transform their sphere of influence and the communities in which they live and minister (Petrus

Niemandt, 2016). The author also asserted that transformative leadership, especially as a

Christian includes an awareness and sensitivity to others. The focus is not on being served, but

on serving and connecting. The permeating power of fostering sensitivity to others connects

across multiple organizational environments. Leaders must intentionally educate themselves

regarding cultural intelligence to discern what is required to transact with love across racial,

cultural, and societal borders. Leadership engagement generates diversity on multiple levels

within the organization, ministry, and society, encouraging growth and higher levels of purpose

(Livermore, 2016).

Transformative leadership[3] is a theory that addresses how a person shapes the world

around them. Cam Caldwell defines transformative leadership as "an ethnically based leadership

model that integrates a commitment to values and outcomes by optimizing the long-term

interests of stakeholders and society and honoring the moral duties owed by organizations to

their stakeholders" (as cited in Xu et al., 2015). The core tenets of the model are recognizing

privilege and power, identifying moral aspects connected to societal and individual equity and

excellence, comprehending knowledge frameworks, developing strategic solutions for

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[3] The term 'transformative leadership' often overlaps with or is interchangeable with 'transformational leadership,' although 'transformational leadership' is a subgenre of the 'transformative leadership' theory.

inequalities, encouraging transformation and liberation, demonstrating courage and activism, and fostering substantial societal change (Caldwell & Anderson, 2021). Transformative leadership is dynamically useful for organizations because it envelopes multiple forms of leadership that combine to generate a colossal impact for sustainable change within the organization and society.

The catalytic force of transformative leadership includes five sub-genres of leadership: "transformational leadership, charismatic leadership, level 5 leadership, principled-centered leadership, servant leadership, and covenantal leadership" (Bonaparte, 2015, p. 26). Transformational leadership utilizes motivation and influence to propel followers forward with passion, innovation, and focus (Afsar & Umrani, 2020). The relationship is not based on a power dynamic, but instead based on a fostering of innovation and support. A principle-centered leader displays a noble character and is guided by a moral compass that admonishes followers to navigate the ethical needs of society (Bonaparte, 2015). A level 5 leader is committed to results, cooperation, and leveraging influence through authenticity and humility. Charismatic leadership generates influence through a referent power dynamic in which the followers carry out the organizational vision fueled by their relationship with the leader (Bredfeldt, 2020). Servant leadership inspires an organization through authenticity, transparency, empathy, and servanthood. Finally, covenantal leadership focuses on understanding by creating "a learning culture in which information is shared, and individuals are provided with the opportunity to improve" (Bonaparte, 2015, p. 26).

Improvement for the leader, the organization, and the community is integral to transformative leadership theory. Transformative leadership garners vitality from using a moral code to develop relationships with the marginalized in society and the local community. As society consistently shifts, leaders build relationships, maintain an innovative perspective, and

recognize the inevitability of change (Kotter, 2012). Transformative leadership harnesses the power of relationships to create and sustain accountability systems and empower people for societal innovation and problem-solving (Grin et al., 2018). Empowerment and problem-solving envelop more than spreadsheets and board meetings, but it examines the relentless leadership of Jesus, who did not idly observe the brokenness and frailty of society. Instead, He manifested himself as the Good Shepherd (*New King James Bible*, 1982, John 10:11), the Healer (Mark 1:34, 3:10), and the Light of the World (John 9:5) and in turn instructed His followers to shepherd, heal, and be light to those around them. Jesus empowered and led them to be agents of transformation for the fragmented parts of society that desperately needed authentic community with the Father. Transformative leadership equips and empowers disciples and modern church leaders to challenge and shift social, racial, ethical, and cultural disparities and establish healthy environments (Xu et al., 2015).

When dealing with transformative leadership and issues of justice and social equality, it is important to recognize the motivating factors behind such endeavors so that sustainability is actualized. Porter et al. (2015) proffered a biblical model anchored in sacrificial service as a key motivator. The model "motivationally grounds social action in the energizing presence of Christ within the Christ-follower. According to this model, ongoing spiritual formation in Christ instills a motivational structure that brings about a rich and sustainable commitment to social justice" (p. 265). Jesus promises, "And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth" (*New International Bible*, 2011, John 14:16-17). The Holy Spirit sustains and empowers believers to align to God's heart of compassion for the well-being of other people, and to demonstrate that compassion in a tangible way (Porter et al., 2015). The sacrificial service motivator is demonstrated in Paul's life as he steadfastly labors

in the Kingdom and fights for the justice and love of God to transform people and unite the Body. Second Corinthians 11:24-28 outlines the rigorous demands and circumstances of Paul's ministry. He endured physical beatings, being stoned, multiple shipwrecks, dangerous living and traveling conditions, threats from both Jews and Gentiles, accusations, sleepless nights, hunger, and emotional conflict as a leader and shepherd. Regardless of the circumstances and struggles, Paul recognized that the power of Christ rests on him during the weak moments (2 Corinthians 12:9-10) and that the Holy Spirit sustains and empowers him (Colossians 1:29, 2 Timothy 4:16-17) for ministry.

Cultural shifts and tangible change occur when leaders, especially within the local church (since they operate from a biblical worldview) recognize the Holy Spirit's work in their lives. As leaders see the fruit of the Holy Spirit manifest in their daily ministry, they are more equipped to walk with moral courage and integrity. Moral courage is the characteristic of holding steadfast to the ethically right objective despite roadblocks or cultural disapproval. (Alshehri & Elsaied, 2022). Courage as exemplified by a leader is transformative to the culture around them. People who are normally marginalized and devalued can find a champion in a leader that extends beyond fear and courageously does the right thing. Leaders can leverage the relationships within the community to bring courageous change (Groeschel, 2022). In the biblical context, the relationship component is demonstrated by exercising what Jesus identified as the two greatest commandments: to love God and people (*New King James Bible,* 1982, Matthew 22:35-40). The church, therefore, would be wise to realize that leadership is inseparable from biblical admonishments to love your neighbor, defend the powerless, demonstrate compassion for the poor, and walk in unity across social and racial barriers (see Micah 6:8, Matthew 22:39, James 1:27, Galatians 3:28-29). A Christian worldview liberates leaders to understand the disparities

and societal injustices while discerning the remedies for a broken system.

Related Literature

"Institutional racism exists whether one is aware of it or not. Intentional or unintentional, it exists in both public and private institutions" (Seying, 2016, p. 198). Leaders within a broken system benefit from engaging in critical literacy to bring social justice into an organization or community. "Critical literacy refers to the ability to challenge existing paradigms of knowledge, question institutionalized power relations, and build strategies to act for equity and social justice" (Cho, 2017, p. 7). The theory enables leaders to extend beyond surface-level mentalities and excavate tangible solutions to injustice and theological missteps. Cho encourages teachers and leaders to train people in relational literacy, which is "the ability to understand mutual connections among humans; to consider others without bias and prejudice; and to care for each other within and beyond school walls" (p. 8). As relationships form, walls are dismantled, and increased communication and mutual respect emerge to bring awareness and solutions to social justice and racial issues.

Recognizing the theological basis for a lifestyle of justice, the local church can benefit from the tangible engagement with social justice to reflect the heart of God and demonstrate transformative leadership. Social justice' has been utilized in multiple theories, paradigms, theological implications, and organizational principles. Cho (2017) articulated that "contemporary theories of justice are based on two major concepts: a distribution/redistribution model of justice and a relation/recognition model of justice" (p. 3). However, a systematic issue occurs when viewing racial tensions only through the narrow lens of distribution and power. "Many justice-related issues, such as cultural marginalization, stereotyping, and imperialism reflected in the media industry, are not primarily about the distribution of material or non-

material goods" (p. 3).

Social justice cannot be reduced to distributing goods to pacify emerging issues in American communities. Justice cannot be limited to a model that distributes goods and wealth, because that model is incomplete to deal with power dynamics, rights, self-respect, and authentic opportunities (Levin, 2020). The author clarified that social justice incorporates concern for members of society regarding four components: access to ownership of property and assets, liberty from basic wants, power of decision, and fundamental human rights. The extent to which a society or organization supports and furthers the systematic conditions needed for members to actualize the four components is the extent to which social justice is being engaged.

While the distributive paradigm arguably falls short of expectations, the relational paradigm reinforces the nature and interconnectivity of relationships within society and organizational structures. "Relational justice is more valued in contemporary societies in which collective identities, interdependencies, mutual respect, and equal participation are to be advocated among racially, ethnically, socially, and culturally different individuals and groups" (Cho, 2017, p. 4). When perusing social justice through a biblical worldview, it is imperative to recognize Christian leaders' importance in bridging the racial and cultural disparity gap. "Followers of Jesus need to be about social justice in season and out of season, both when it is popular and trendy and when it is cliché and forgotten" (Porter et al., 2015, p. 263). Porter et al. observed that the local church is wise to identify ways to bring social justice as an intricate part of their discipleship and not merely an add-on or occasional event. To unravel the wounds of the nation, a powerful approach is intentional engagement in social justice so that the lives of all Americans will be impacted for the better as marginalized members of society are interconnected to the community culture and can bring value (Ọlọjẹ and Groenewald, 2014). To engage in

effective social justice, leaders should consider a transformative theory for leadership and community engagement.

Christian leaders carry an ethical responsibility to think about solutions for disunity, disengagement, and injustice. "The transformative leader is credited with the ability to rethink the who, what, where, when, and how of leadership in complex environments" (Bonaparte, 2015). Being a transformative leader requires God-given boldness to push beyond self-centered barriers and cultural trends and interact with those around them (Coe & Coe, 2017). As discussed in the previous sections, the American church contributed to the racial climate in America. Therefore, the ethical responsibility of the church to help heal racial wounds is not merely suggested but necessary. Racism and racial supremacy ideologies are sin and thus preachings and social actions should include biblical approaches to dealing with that sin (Sales & Rim, 2023). American churches have the daunting task and profound accountability to unravel the entanglements that it historically assisted in creating.

Christian leaders can approach social justice from various ethical paradigms to untangle disunity and injustice. Utilizing the ethic of justice paradigm, a leader peers into situations and communities and asks questions dissecting "issues of equity and equality; the fairness of rules, laws, and policies; whether laws are absolute, and, if exceptions are to be made, under what circumstances; and the rights of individuals versus the greater good of the community" (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016, p. 28). This paradigm can help examine societal issues of racial inequality and what systematic policies have contributed to the existing disparity. The paradigm requires leaders to remain accountable to a clear standard of fairness when attempting to implement strategic change.

Change is the rhythm of the ethical paradigm of critique. Leaders that leverage this

perspective are accountable to "challenge the status quo by seeking an ethic that will deal with inconsistencies, formulate the hard questions, and debate and challenge the issues" (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016, p. 30). The paradigm encompasses a strong responsibility for leaders to navigate the difficult and transparent questions that society is too cowardly to address. Leaders must "deal with the hard questions regarding social class, race, gender, and other areas of difference, such as: Who makes the laws? Who benefits from the law, rule, or policy? Who has the power? Who are the silenced voices?" (p. 31).

When examining who has the power and who are the silenced voices, the paradigm of the ethic of care liberates leaders to contemplate non-traditional perspectives and bring underrepresented voices to the metaphorical table and generate solutions. The ethic of care requires leaders to delve into questions such as "Who will benefit from what I decide? Who will be hurt by my actions? What are the long-term effects of the decision I made today? And if someone helps me now, what should I do in the future about giving back to this individual or society in general?" (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016, p. 34).

The Rationale for Study and Gap in the Literature

The concept of power and community dynamics leads to the societal problem of racial disunity. The existing literature provides insight into America's historical racial climate and the importance of dismantling racism on a theological and theoretical level. As a result of the turbulent history, it might be presumed that racial disunity is rampant in the local churches. However, that assumption can be detrimental to biblical agendas. It is essential to uncover the current realities despite the historical missteps of the nation regarding race and unity. A literature gap exists in examining current local churches to identify if racial disunity is perceived or experienced between White Evangelical pastors and African American congregants. This study

will provide additional insight into the climate within the local church and potential contributing factors (real or apparent) that relate to racism and unity. The research will assist local pastors in navigating a societal concern along with potential avenues for creating or maintaining racial unity within the local church.

Profile of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore if there is a perception or experiential knowledge of racial disunity between White Evangelical church leaders and their African American congregants and community members in the Chicago area. The perception regarding racial unity was uncovered through semi-structured interviews and focus groups that take a qualitative examination of the experiences and perspectives of local church leaders and members. The researcher created a profile of the sampling group to uncover the status of racial unity within the local churches represented in the study and the perceived role that church leadership can play in creating or maintaining unity.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter will examine the research details that enabled the researcher to ascertain if there was a perception or experiential knowledge of racial disunity between White Evangelical church leaders and African American congregants and community members in the Chicago area. The methodology that guided the research was a qualitative approach to the subject matter and included questions promoting personal reflection and perspective. The interaction between the researcher and the participants consisted of interviews, focus groups, and discussions to facilitate a more personalized study, given the nature and scope of the research.

Research Design Synopsis

The Problem

In America, there is an undeniable reality that racial disunity and injustice are widespread (Brown, 2019). Historically, racial constructs have attempted to hinder the progress of African Americans in society and within the local church (Herschel, 2015). Bantum (2016) observed that the current racial disunity in America, particularly regarding African Americans and mainstream America, is due to the consistent sociological and philosophical manipulations of the value of African American people. America has fallen prey to a colonial mentality (Bantum) that fails to recognize the full beauty of the biblical creation and the intrinsic love God has for all people (Kilner, 2015). In examining the role of race in America, Bantum also highlighted the disunity within the body of Christ and how local churches are often segregated by racial and ethnic affinity, which is a problematic fruit of the roots of racism.

There is an urgent need to explore the existence of injustices so that avenues of healing can mend broken areas of society (Boloje & Groenewald, 2014). Healing the rift of racism requires exploration from theological, theoretical, and practical lenses. God is concerned about

unity, justice, and helping those outcasted by society (Groenewald, 2016). God's treatment of the poor, oppressed, and marginalized, as expressed in the Bible, is a model for the local church to engage in social justice and acts of service (Woodbridge, 2019). Kandiah (2017) admonished the local church to wrestle with social engagement in practical ways so that an encounter with biblical justice ensues. Anchoring on a biblical worldview, the local church is a prime environment for examining the perception of racial disunity and exploring the role of transformative leadership and community engagement in maintaining and bringing unity across cultural borders (Brown, 2019).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore if there was a perception or experiential knowledge of racial disunity between White Evangelical church leaders, their African American congregants, and community members in the Chicago area. When the participants perceived disunity, the research explored the experiences and contributing factors. Within the context of this research, the researcher defined racial disunity as intentional disconnect or apathy toward unity between two racial groups of people, namely African Americans and White Americans. The theory used in this study was transformative leadership and leadership's influence on racial unity.

Research Questions

RQ1. Based on experience or observation, what do Evangelical church leaders in Chicago perceive as the state of racial unity between White church leaders and African American congregants and community members?

RQ2. Based on experience or observation, what do congregants in Evangelical Chicago churches believe is the state of racial unity between White church leaders and African American congregants and community members?

RQ3. What factors do Evangelical church leaders perceive as promoters of and hindrances to racial diversity within the local church?

RQ4. Based on lived experiences, what factors do African American congregants and community members perceive are promoters of and hindrances to racial diversity within the local church?

Research Design and Methodology

The design utilized for this qualitative research was phenomenological, "a study that attempts to understand people's perceptions and perspectives relative to a particular situation" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018, p. 233). Therefore, the research questions and methodology hinged on the perceptions of the participants and their experiential knowledge regarding racial interactions and unity. Given that the topic involves perception, experiences, and a racial issue, the qualitative approach was the best research method to examine the subject matter. A qualitative study enabled the researcher to peer at the complexities of racial unity within the local church in a way that would be glossed over or reduced to numerical data in another research method. The interaction and relationship between people, societal systems, church systems, and settings played a key role in digging deeper with the qualitative method (Leedy & Ormrod).

In addition, the qualitative method assisted the researcher in uncovering "key problems, obstacles, or enigmas that exist within the phenomenon" and being able to "judge the effectiveness of particular policies, practices, or innovations" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018, p. 30). The methodology presented the opportunity to explore beyond what the researcher or literature review concluded and delved into the tangible experiences of people that live in the social context. It is important to note that the researcher was not attempting to identify the one solution to address all societal woes about the subject matter. In qualitative research, the goal is not "seeking an absolute 'truth' or single answer related to a research question but instead are interested in uncovering multiple meanings and often divergent perspectives that can help us all better understand an issue, process, belief system, or experience" (Leedy & Ormrod, p. 240). The authors continued by explaining that "the ultimate goal of a phenomenological study should

be—not only for the researcher but also for readers of the final research report—to provide a sense that 'I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that'" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018, p. 233). Specifically, regarding race and unity, it is essential to understand how participants (from both racial demographics) perceive and feel the issue to walk in greater levels of empathy and compassion.

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach using via video conferencing interviews. Using interviews created a deeper understanding of participants' life experiences and reflections regarding said experiences as "the researcher attempts to situate participants' lived experiences" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018, p. 233). The researcher incorporated focus groups in the form of facilitated group discussions that followed the initial interviews. The focus group discussion allowed the researcher to observe body language and non-verbal cues regarding comfort, engagement, and veracity. Due to the current flux of policy changes in Chicago regarding social gatherings and vaccinations, the researcher was required to utilize technology to process the interviews and focus groups.

The methodology sequence for this qualitative study was as follows:

1. Initial questionnaire to narrow down the sampling size.

2. Follow-up one-on-one interviews went deeper into the participant's experiences with the issues at the focus of the study.

3. Focus group discussion that included all participants (from both racial demographics) as facilitated by guided questions.

4. Focus group discussion that included only participants of the same racial demographic as facilitated by guided questions.

Setting

The congregations flowed from various parts of Chicago extending north and northwest of downtown. It was not required that every participant be from the same congregation, but it

was beneficial when White Evangelical leaders also had a corresponding African American congregant in the study. This dynamic helped to demonstrate if there were variations in perceptions from individuals within the same local church but who occupied different racial backgrounds. The setting was Evangelical churches in the Chicagoland area with a predominately White congregation and/or church leadership team. The researcher recognized the limitation of this qualitative study. The issue of racial disunity and the desire to resolve injustice is a noble sentiment, but this study did not carry the epitome of all human experiences in Chicago or all solutions to address racial unity in America. This study focused on a target population to help foster current perceptions of racial disunity and, thus, potential solutions for future progress. The researcher also recognized that communication and observations were remote instead of the initially desired in-person interactions. The researcher further recognized that racial disunity is a personal and often emotional issue; therefore, the researcher was ready to encounter obstacles of defensiveness, anger, avoidance, and pain that could have affected the direction of the study.

Participants

This phenomenological study focused on two distinct American-based demographics categorized by race, faith, and connectivity to the other culture within the study. The first demographic was African American Evangelical Christians that operated from a biblical worldview and may have felt disconnected (apparent or actual) from the mainstream predominately White Evangelical churches in their area. The researcher required that the African American demographic described above retained membership in the aforementioned local church. This assisted in creating a shared context that helped analyze the collected data. The second demographic was White local pastors or leaders of Evangelical churches that operated

from a biblical worldview and observed a disconnect (apparent or actual) from the African American congregants or community members in the church's geographical area. According to the 2022 U.S. Census Bureau estimates, Chicago, Illinois, has 2,746,388 residents and is a cultural melting pot with over 1.8 million minorities in the city. Since it has numerous churches, cultural diversity, and context for current racial tensions, Chicago was the target geographical location. However, with the technological techniques and communications available, the researcher did recognize the potential to extend to anywhere within the United States if the Chicagoland area had proven unfruitful.

The participants in this phenomenological study consisted of six adult members (25 years old or above) from each demographic mentioned in the opening paragraph of this section that had access to technological capabilities for remote communication with the researcher and other focus group participants. The participants were selected through criterion sampling, with a combination of purposive and convenience sampling, when more participants were needed. For each demographic of the research population, to create a richer research experience, the sampling involved 12 individuals. The researcher narrowed the sample to six diverse people (i.e., gender, age, occupation, social standing, and years in the faith). From the initial 12 individuals from each demographic, the researcher conducted preliminary interviews to ascertain when data saturation had occurred. At that point, the researcher ceased the sampling process and finalized the participant selection until six to eight participants were selected from each demographic (12 participants total).

Role of the Researcher

There were no foreseeable conflicts of interest regarding the researcher and the participants. Since the researcher is an African American who has experienced alienation and a

lack of connectedness with predominately White churches, there was a personal bias the researcher brought to the study. Therefore, the researcher recognized and observed (through personal, reflective notetaking throughout the research) the researcher's positionality. Positionality "encompasses a researcher's background characteristics and experiences, past and current social roles, and personal biases relating to the setting, participants, and/or research topic" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018, p. 418). The researcher maintained the role of an observer, recorder, and reporter (Seidman, 2013). The role of the researcher was to set aside personal biases and experiences and focus on the participants' perceptions. Leedy and Ormrod shared that in phenomenological studies, the researcher must attempt to "suspend any preconceived notions or personal experiences that may unduly influence what they "hear" participants saying. Such suspension—sometimes called *bracketing* or *epoché*—can be extremely difficult for researchers who have personally experienced the phenomenon under investigation (p. 233).

The researcher remained aware of the potential for bias without limiting the research process. A completely objective stance in qualitative research is often impossible, so the researcher leaned on conformability. The researcher recognized the existence of actual or potential bias and intentionally attempted to anchor conclusions on actual data-collection and data-analysis. The process also included the description of the data collection in detail as to demonstrate that other researchers (given the same data and process) would reach similar conclusions (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018).

From the literature review research, the researcher attained a stronger competency in racism as it has historically manifested in society and local churches. In addition, the researcher gained a stronger comprehension of the psycho-social implications of racial disunity. Understanding contributing and consequential factors of the research population assisted the

researcher in conducting interviews and facilitating focus group discussions with the appropriate level of gentleness, empathy, and awareness.

Ethical Considerations

All participants in this study were unpaid adults; therefore, each participant consented to the study without any ethical concerns. In addition, each participant was anonymous. All participants' names were revealed to the researcher in the collection stage. However, when sharing or condensing data for the dissertation, the researcher created pseudonyms for each participant. This assisted in maintaining proper respect for each participant and preserving the research process's integrity (Seidman, 2013). The only data that was made public was the general demographic information of the participant (age, gender, race, and years at the church) to assist in formulating a more cohesive conclusion and transferability aspect of the research. The researcher maintained the data records and contact information of each participant in the event the study needed to be duplicated, redone, or expanded upon.

To comply with institutional review board (IRB) standards, the researcher obtained approval for all methodologies and procedures for this study. The IRB was a gatekeeper for all participants' ethical treatment, privacy, and informed consent (Creswell, 2018). All the participants were adults with no identifiable special needs or vulnerabilities (incarcerated, victims, mentally impaired). The researcher provided electronic consent forms that were read and signed before collecting data. Creswell outlined the needed information for an IRB application: identification of researcher, sponsoring institution, participant risks, scope of participation, confidentiality security, and freedom to exit the study. After successfully submitting the IRB application, the researcher proceeded with the methodology and procedures.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Collection Methods

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach to collect data. All data was collected based on the participant's verbal and written communication and the researcher's observation of overt nonverbal cues such as body language and tone. The researcher employed reflective and methodological memo-taking to assist in the data collection. The reflective memos gave the researcher an authentic look at personal motives or experiences to recognize bias. The researcher "acknowledge[d] that the particular positions they hold in their social environment (a) have impacted their past experiences and general paths in life and (b) are currently shaping their relationships with participants and their views of the research topic and setting" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018, p. 238). The methodological memos enabled the researcher to track the successful methods and areas that needed adjustment, especially regarding participant rapport during the interview process (Leedy & Ormrod).

Since the approach was transcendental, the researcher remained aware of racial tension in American society and did not allow race theory to obscure the objectiveness of the data collection (Elkatawneh, 2016). The initial sampling pool started with the zip codes 60645, 60659, and 60699 to help provide a more random selection of participants instead of being selected directly by the researcher. The chosen zip codes are considered the most ethnically diverse areas in Chicago (Niche, 2021), which helped provide participants who have experienced or perceived racial aspects of society. As the researcher needed more participants, the zip code parameters were extended to include Chicago areas north and northwest of downtown Chicago. The initial questionnaire was distributed to narrow the pool and produce interested participants. The collection method was as follows:

- Initial questionnaire to generate the sampling size.
- One-on-one interviews to go deeper into the participant's experiences and perspectives.
- Focus group discussion utilizing guided questions.

The data was collected using a semi-structured process that enabled questions to be presented with limited bias (Kallio et al., 2016) and allowed participants to share their experiences and perceptions freely.

Instruments and Protocols

This study's instrumentation was limited to interviews and facilitated focus group discussions. The researcher recognized that some demographic participants expressed themselves more freely regarding the subject matter when all the people in the room belonged to a shared cultural experience. Therefore, the researcher intentionally utilized a semi-structured approach and follow-up questions that allowed for a non-bias slant during the racial affinity focus groups. Leedy and Ormrod (2018) observed that the researcher is a unique instrumentation for qualitative research. The observation and discernment of dynamics, social cues, and cultural interactions offer the ability to assess aspects of the data that would be missed with quantitative instrumentation. "In a sense, the researcher is an instrument in much the same way that an oscilloscope, questionnaire, or multiple-choice achievement test is an instrument" (p. 238). Therefore, recognizing the benefit of discernment and examination, the additional aspect of observation by the researcher assisted in the success of the data collection.

Questionnaires

Initial questionnaires focused on demographics and general church experiences regarding racial relationships to generate a sampling pool of the desired size. The questionnaires were distributed in various cultural communities of the Chicago area to assist in identifying any nontypical perceptions and experiences to create a diverse sampling pool (Leedy & Ormrod,

2018). The delivery method was electronic, and each participant included their name and contact

information, although these items were not made public or included in the dissertation. When

more participants were needed, a purposive sampling technique was utilized to garner more

participants by having a small group directly from personal referrals. Then additional

participants emerged from the initial group's referrals (Dorey, 2017). Given the unique demands

of church leaders ' schedules, this snowball approach was useful when the sampling pool became

difficult to generate (Leedy & Ormrod).

Interviews

Once the sampling size was reached, the participants engaged in an in-person interview

that allowed the researcher to glean from the participants' experiences and perspectives. In

qualitative research, interviews carry a more informal, approachable, and friendly environment

that places participants at ease (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018). The research questions guided the

initial interview, with the researcher adding follow-up questions based on the answers given.

Interview questions were formatted in multiple ways as outlined by Brinkmann and Kvale

(2015):

1. Introductory
2. Follow up
3. Probing
4. Specifying
5. Direct
6. Indirect
7. Structuring
8. Silence
9. Interpreting

Each type of question and interaction brought a fuller interview experience and created an

atmosphere of trust between the researcher and the participants. In addition, elements of the

interview process allowed the participants to freely expand upon their perceptions and

experiences instead of being manipulated by the interviewer's agenda or bias (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). For this research, the initial interview included questions such as:

- Based on experience, what do you perceive is the status of racial unity between White leaders and African American congregants within the Evangelical churches in Chicago?

- Have you had any experiences that show racial disunity within the local church?

- What do you perceive are the effects (positive and negative) due to the racial differences between White Evangelical church leaders and African American communities?

- How do you believe leadership within the local church can play a role in racial unity (both within the church and the community)?

- Have you had any experiences where church leadership has played a role (positive or negative) regarding racial unity?

The open-ended follow-up questions provoked the participants to share additional feedback, observations, and emotional experiences (Dory et al., 2017). The follow-up semi-structured questions and comments included:

1. Please tell me more about that.
2. How did that make you feel?
3. What other things have you noticed about the local church and race?
4. Why do you think that is?

The semi-structured format enabled the researcher to delve into subtext and underlying causes regarding the subject matter that would not have been as easily identifiable in standardized questions and timed responses (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018). In addition, certain preparation and procedural aspects assisted in creating an inviting space for subtext exploration and trust-building, such as:

1. Considered the cultural background and setting of the participant.
2. Prepared core interview questions in advance.
3. Avoided being vague or wandering off-topic.
4. Allowed participants to express their perceptions in their own words.
5. Listened carefully to discern factual information from personal perception and

opinion (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018).

Focus Groups

The goal was to conduct two focus groups following the initial questionnaire and interview processes. The focus groups served as a mechanism to probe deeper emotional and solution-orientated concepts regarding the subject matter, such as racial disunity (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018). The second interaction with the participants assisted the researcher in "ensuring consistency and a complete description of their experiences" (Dory et al., 2017, p. 2). The first focus groups included participants from both racial demographics, while the second round of focus groups was based on racial demographics. The two focus group settings assumed that more transparent communication and problem identification occurred once participants were placed in groups with a racial affinity. Some initial focus group questions included:

Focus Group 1 (all participants)

1. What role do you feel Christians, and particularly the local church, plays in racial disunity?
2. In what ways has your local church addressed (or continues to address) issues of societal racism?
3. In what ways has your local church addressed (or continues to address) issues of social justice?
4. What do you feel is the largest obstacle(s) facing churches and their minority members regarding racial unity?

Focus Group 2 (affinity by race)

1. How diverse is your inner circle within your church? Outside of your church?
2. Do you feel seen and heard in your local church? Why or why not?
3. Do you believe colorblindness is a beneficial way of viewing the world? Why or why not?
4. How do you feel you can practically help the issues of racial injustice in society?
5. What are some ways you would like to see your church reach out to more cultures?

Procedures

The instrumentation and protocols were used to create a cross-sectional picture of the

emotional reality of the participants regarding racial perceptions in the local church. The semi-structured interviews allowed participants to express their social experiences without being confined to specific answers (Dory et al., 2017). The interviews and focus groups were closed Zoom meetings that required the researcher (as the host) to monitor who entered and exited the meeting, which ensured privacy to facilitate free expression.

Larkin et al. (2019) discussed the importance of exploring multiple perspectives of human experiences within the same emotional context and climate. As a result, the interviews and focus groups, although limited in the number of participants, provided a strong snapshot of the emotional experience of church-attending individuals through the multi-faceted perspectives of differing racial groups within the same environment. Creswell (2013) outlined the importance of saturation, where enough interviews have been conducted to reflect saturation of the data—when answers and themes begin to repeat so that the researcher is aware that all the needed data has been collected. The researcher incorporated aspects of saturation in the transcendental phenomenological approach to garner a more authentic picture of this study. With the limited size of the participant sample, the researcher focused on the presence of repeated themes to determine when the interview process was complete.

Data Analysis

The data collected in this qualitative study was from written and verbal communication of the participants. The interviews and focus groups consisted mainly of the researcher taking notes as participants engaged with the questions. The researcher recorded (with the express permission of participants) all sessions, which created an opportunity to collect missed responses and observe the more nuanced reactions of the participants (Saarijarvi & Bratt, 2021). All note-taking and videos were stored on the researcher's laptop, with a backup copy to a Google Drive

where only the researcher can access the material from any location. Once the data was collected and stored, the researcher created a pseudonym key that enabled the researcher to know which pseudonym belonged to which participant if a follow-up question or further research was needed. This key was stored on the researcher's laptop with a backup in Google Drive. As data was organized, the researcher utilized Atlas software and created a codebook that helped visually identify common answers and themes from all participants. Once the researcher began drafting the dissertation and conclusions, all participants were strictly referred to by pseudonyms.

During the data analysis process, the Creswell (2013) "spiral" was helpful as the researcher attempted to get the most from the data collected. The four-step process was repeated until the researcher was pleased with the data analysis and the research questions had been satisfied. First, the researcher organized the data, which consisted of using a computer database to store and position the text data from interviews and focus groups in a manner that was easy to access and read. All Zoom interviews and focus groups were recorded on Zoom and then transcribed using Microsoft software. In addition, the researcher went through each Zoom video to verify the transcription. Within the organization were subunits that consisted of sentences and phrases that made larger text content more manageable. Second, the researcher reviewed the data several times to gain familiarity with what was collected and then wrote initial observations regarding the data. Third, the researcher began classifying the data and creating groupings based on emerging themes and trends. Finally, the researcher utilized Atlas software to help synthesize the data. The researcher formulated tables, charts, and summaries that enabled an easier digestion of the totality of the data.

Analysis Methods

Coding

The coding process for analyzing content data occurred through segmenting and bracketing text data collected in the interviews and focus groups (Creswell, 2018). Qualitative research does not generally have an established coding methodology or template. Codes can be produced in multiple ways: from existing theories or relevant concepts (theory-driven), from tangible research data (data-driven), or from the research questions and specific research goals (Oliveira, 2023). To begin, the researcher utilized an open-coding method, which is "an inductive approach that entails reviewing collected data line by line to identify codes, rather than prescribing coding categories in advance" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018, p. 417). The open-coding method assisted the researcher in eliminating bias, because sometimes "prespecified codes could cause them to look only for evidence that supports their preconceived assumptions and working hypotheses" (p. 346).

The open-coding method was time-consuming; however, it was beneficial to help eliminate any data manipulation. Repeated themes, word groupings, and descriptive phrases emerged as the analysis progressed. The researcher then built a database of codes that were further used as more data was collected and processed. After the researcher analyzed the data from an open-coding perspective, the researcher searched for connections between codes (Oliveira, 2023). The puzzle-like endeavor required the researcher to combine commonalities and themes between the collected codes. This process took multiple attempts as the researcher became more familiar with the data analysis and the coding process.

The coding process was daunting for the beginner researcher, so attention was given to Oliveira (2023) material that helped guide the creation of codes for data analysis. A codebook is "a set of codes, definitions, and examples used as a guide to help analyze interview data. Codebooks are essential to analyzing qualitative research because they provide a formalized

operationalization of the codes" (p. 138). In this research, a data-driven codebook was more

appropriate than a theory-driven codebook. "Data-driven codes...involve five steps to create

codes for a codebook (1) inductively reduce raw information; (2) identify subsample themes; (3)

compare themes across subsamples; (4) create codes; and (5) determine the reliability of codes"

(p. 141).

The coding process was time-consuming, so the researcher utilized the software Atlas to

streamline the processing and analysis of the text data. The participants generated some

terminology that was directly used in the coding and analysis (*in vivo* terms), as that helped to

create a more cohesive experience for the researcher (Creswell, 2018). The cohesiveness

emerged as the researcher identified some of the underlining meaning of the participant's

responses and not merely the substance of the textual data. This required examining the text data

in smaller subsets instead of tackling all the interviews and focus group content altogether

(Leedy & Ormrod, 2018). This required line-by-line reading of transcripts and the identification

of subthemes that presented themselves in multiple interviews. Once coded and at least four-five

themes had been identified, the findings were presented through a narrative descriptive and

accompanying table within the dissertation.

Trustworthiness

Elo et al. (2014) gave practical guidance for analyzing the trustworthiness of qualitative

research methods and applications. The authors referenced Lincoln and Guba (1985), that coined

the term trustworthiness to denote that the research is worth the attention. In addition, they

categorized four aspects to measure trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability,

and transferability (Elo et al.). In subsequent research, Korstjens and Moser (2018) added a fifth

element called reflexivity, which connects the positionality idea addressed in a previous section.

Reflexivity is categorized as the "process of critical self-reflection about oneself as a researcher (own biases, preferences, preconceptions), and the research relationship (relationship to the respondent, and how the relationship affects participant's answers to questions)" (p. 121). The role of reflexivity focused more on the researcher's perceptions and presuppositions before and during the data collection process. The researcher's reflexivity was monitored by maintaining reflective memos that enabled the researcher to be transparent regarding any bias or difficulties in maintaining objectivity.

Credibility

Credibility is the "confidence that can be placed in the truth of the research findings" (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121). It is imperative that researchers accurately identify (even if anonymous) the study participants and obtain clear descriptions and details of the participant's perceptions (Elo et al., 2014). In this study, the researcher maintained clear, organized records of each participant, their demographic background, and the flow of information to and from the participant. Through the demographic questionnaire, the researcher verified that the participants' identity was credible and based on reality. A subsequent researcher will be able to ascertain that the study took place and that each participant is a viable contributor, as described in the final data analysis. "Credibility establishes whether the research findings represent plausible information drawn from the participants' original data and is a correct interpretation of the participants' original views" (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121). In this study, the research did not embellish the participant's responses or perceptions. Since this qualitative research aimed not to solve the entire racial crisis in America but to better comprehend people's experiences in the context of racial issues, the researcher had no motive or desire to manipulate data or reach a predetermined conclusion.

Regarding interviews, credibility was established by an interaction that is more than fleeting. It was imperative to establish a rapport during an interview and enough contact to recognize subtext, additional themes, and connections to the subject matter (Seidman, 2013). Credibility in studies that involve interviews includes "sufficient time to become familiar with the setting and context, to test for misinformation, to build trust, and to get to know the data to get rich data" (Korstjens & Moser, p. 121). The researcher had extended and repeated contact with the participants to discern the credibility of their comments and their relationship to the subject matter. In this study, the interviews were 30 – 60 minutes which allowed for thorough conversations and interactions with each participant. When insufficient credibility or experience was identified, the researcher noted the issue in the data and explored additional individuals to serve as a participant.

Dependability

Dependability focuses on the stability of research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). It was beneficial for this qualitative research to produce data that remained stable over time and in other variations (Elo et al., 2014). "Dependability involves participants' evaluation of the findings, interpretation, and recommendations of the study such that all are supported by the data as received from participants of the study" (Korstjens & Moser, p. 121). The study was clearly outlined to enable further study and analysis despite the passing of time. Using an audit trail, another researcher could easily replicate the study and add their academic insight and perspective to the data collection (Korstjens & Moser).

Confirmability

"Conformability refers to objectivity, that is, the potential for congruence between two or more independent people about the data's accuracy, relevance, or meaning" (Elo et al., 2014, p.

2). Once all research was properly redacted to conceal the participants' names and personal contact information, other researchers could review the data upon request. "Confirmability is concerned with establishing that data and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer's imagination but derived from the data" (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121). As suggested by Korstjens and Moser, in this study, the researcher engaged in an audit trail and reflective memos to provide the needed insight to ensure the analysis is based on objectivity.

Transferability

It adds to the overall trustworthiness of a study if the finding can be transferred or generalized (Elo et al., 2014). As a researcher, the responsibility "is to provide a 'thick description' of the participants and the research process, to enable the reader to assess whether your findings are transferable to their setting" (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 122). For this study, the small sampling size was intentional and necessary. However, it came with limitations as to the applicability of the research. As mentioned earlier in the profile, the research was not intended to solve the issue of societal racism in one quick sweep. This qualitative research study informed perceptions of racial disunity within the local church. The study was limited in scope as it focused on a limited number of participants. The scope was further reduced to specific zip codes within Chicago, Illinois. The study did not generalize about all members of the research population or assume that each member of the demographics had a shared experience. However, this qualitative study was designed to add to the existing literature resources and assist in informing future research studies that deal with similar research problems or populations.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology and researcher's intentions regarding this qualitative study. Through a series of questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups, the researcher

selected and connected with a participant group of 12 adult individuals. Each participant was from the same geographical city and Christian denomination. The methodology was a personal approach to the study due to the sensitive and personal nature of the topic of racial unity. The results inform local church leaders and researchers about the perception of racial unity in the geographical area. The research will also inform future researchers that examine racial unity and its role in American churches, specifically where African American members are the minority.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore if there was a perception or experiential knowledge of racial disunity between White Evangelical ministry leaders and African American congregants and community members in the Chicago area. When disunity was perceived, the researcher explored the experiences and contributing factors. This chapter outlines the research findings by the themes uncovered and the research questions. The findings reveal that participants perceive and have experiential knowledge of racial disunity within the local Evangelical churches in Chicago, specifically between White and African Americans. However, the findings reveal that participants perceive and have experienced tangible steps towards bridging the racial gap, which offers hope for a stronger, more united local church in Chicago. This chapter includes the data collected in tables that help present the results visually and succinctly.

Compilation Protocol and Measures

Research Participant Selection Process

After securing IRB approval, the study began by sending participation requests to potential participants in the Chicago area. The initial email served to gather and screen potential participants (see Appendix C). The email outlined the basics of the study and a link to an online screening survey to generate an acceptable participant pool. The researcher did a general online search of Evangelical churches in the Chicago area, starting with the zip codes 60645, 60659, and 60699 since they represented some of the city's most diverse areas. Through webpage searches, social media searches, and phone calls, the researcher determined which churches fit the status of 'evangelical' by their statement of beliefs. For purposes of this study, Evangelical

churches are defined as local churches that adhere to the Evangelical theological traditions which include: (1) the Bible as the highest authority, (2) the importance to evangelize to non-Christians, (3) the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ removes the penalty of sin, and (4) the free gift of salvation for those that accept solely Jesus Christ as Savior (Lifeway Research, 2015). Utilizing the public database or online contact page, the researcher sent out 418 messages to invite participants. In addition, as replies were received (regardless of if the potential participant accepted or declined the invitation), the researcher permitted each potential participant to forward the email to any other potential participants they knew within their spheres of influence.

The researcher sent the invitation message a total of three times to each participant (if a reply was not readily received). For the participants that replied with a decline, the researcher removed them from further communication regarding the research. For the participants that replied with interest, the researcher encouraged the completion of the screening survey and continued online communication with the participants. The screening survey asked participants to share age, race, location within Chicago, current church membership, and if they had experiences or perceptions on racial unity within the local church. As the online surveys were completed, participants were placed into categories based on their race, age, gender, affiliation with an Evangelical church, and geographical location. The participants that satisfied the initial screening were contacted regarding interview and focus group availability.

Consent and Interviews

From the initial recruitment and the screening process, the researcher obtained six participants (three African American congregants and three White American ministry leaders) for the study. More congregants replied so the researcher narrowed down the list so that the number of congregants was the same size as the number of ministry leaders. The narrowing

down process was based on the availability of the participants, especially those that were

accommodating to the Covid-restrictions that were prevalent at the time of the study. Each

participant received the consent form and was requested to read and sign the form.

The interviews were scheduled based on the participant's availability as indicated in their

screening survey. The researcher identified overlapping scheduling opportunities and contacted

the participants to set up a specific time for the Zoom interviews. The researcher connected with

each participant via email, text, or phone depending on the specific preference of the participant.

The interviews followed a semi-structured style of questioning, so the participants had the

freedom to express their experiences and observations without restrictions (Kallio et al., 2016).

Each participant was interviewed individually and then with other participants to create increased

interaction and diversity within the conversation.

In addition, the researcher had an independent observer that followed the expectations set

forth in the IRB approval, which served as an unbiased viewer during the data collection process.

The observer had access to the interviews and the transcripts. The observer also had the

opportunity to share with the researcher 1) if any bias was witnessed, to eliminate or bring

awareness to any research bias, and 2) if any nonverbal gestures or cues were identified with the

participants during the interview. No such bias was identified. All nonverbal observations were

included in the data analysis. The purposive sampling technique was utilized to gain more

potential participants from personal referrals and the initial targeted participants' sharing of the

recruitment email.

Transcript and Coding

At the conclusion of the interviews via Zoom, the recordings were saved to the

researcher's password-protected laptop and to a password-protected cloud database on Zoom.

Each file was saved according to an alias given to each participant to keep the information

confidential. This file name remained consistent from the recordings, transcripts, and final

dissertation. The video recordings were copied as audio-only files and stored on the researcher's

password-protected laptop and the researcher's password-protected cloud storage on Google

Drive. The audio files were uploaded to Microsoft Office and transcribed electronically,

including timestamps. The researcher manually reviewed each recording and transcript for

inconsistencies or errors. (Some misspellings occurred based on the transcription program's

inability to pick up mumbled or fast-paced speaking patterns). After each transcription was

adjusted for accuracy, the researcher imported the transcriptions into the qualitative analysis and

coding software, Atlas.

The coding process utilized a hybrid approach, although inductive coding contributed to

the bulk of the analysis. Due to the nature of the research questions and the literature review,

some codes were pre-established, such as 'representation,' and 'diversity,' while other codes

were created inductively based on the data (Oliveira, 2023). An example of an inductive code

that emerged from the data, was 'discussion discomfort,' which is a concept that encompasses

the variety of responses that White Americans have when faced with the issue of racism.

The concept of 'discussion discomfort' was not emphasized in the previous research

portion of this paper, as it was a product of the participants' observations during data collection.

Therefore, a brief definition will be provided to assist in the data analysis. The concept refers to

the reaction of White Americans when faced with racial tension or topics dealing with racism

(DiAngelo, 2011). The author continued to describe emotional and physical responses that

occurred such as guilt, silence, leaving the situation or conversation, anger, and defensiveness. In

this research, the code of 'discussion discomfort' occurred when the participants were discussing

their experiences and perceptions regarding hindrances and promoters of racial unity within the local church.

After the data was imported, the researcher utilized Atlas to identify repeated themes and words across all the imported data. The researcher identified the themes that were repeated the most and compared them with the video recordings to identify nonverbal behavior during the times when recurring themes happened in the interviews. The researcher noted the nonverbal (and sometimes verbal) behaviors to help narrow down which themes the participants perceived as important or that revealed emotional triggers.

The researcher then focused more heavily on the repeated themes that were accompanied by nonverbal and verbal emphasis. Using those specific timestamps where the themes were repeated and accompanied by nonverbal and verbal emphasis, the researcher reviewed any notes made personally or by the observer to examine additional observational data. "The researcher is an instrument in much the same way that an oscilloscope, questionnaire, or multiple-choice achievement test is an instrument" (Leedy & Ormond, 2018, p. 238). The methodological notes and reflections taken during the data collection enabled the researcher to ascertain areas that needed adjustment, especially regarding participant rapport during the interview process (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018).

Table 1

Themes and Codes

Theme	Code	Type	RQ
Congregational Inclusion	Diversity	Deductive	1,2
	Representation	Deductive	1,2,3,4
Congregational Inclusion	Segregation	Inductive	1,2

Theme	Code	Type	RQ
Member Engagement	Involvement	Inductive	1,2,3,4
	Welcoming	Inductive	1,2,3,4
Community Engagement	Outreach	Inductive	1,2,3,4
	Social Justice	Inductive	1,2,3,4
Conflict	Tragedy	Inductive	3,4
	Politics	Inductive	3,4
Intentional Connection	Empathy & Reflection	Inductive	3,4
	Worship Experience	Inductive	3,4
Racial Tension	Discussion Discomfort	Inductive	3,4
	Trust	Deductive	1,2,3,4

Demographic and Sample Data

The names of the participants were changed for the purposes of this research and to maintain confidentiality. All the participants were adult Christians that reside in Chicago and were part of an Evangelical Church within the north or northwest side of Chicago. In addition, each participant has been at their current congregation for a period that afforded them the opportunity to observe and experience various situations regarding racial unity and racial issues within their communities. The data collection yielded twelve participants that qualified for the research and were available to participate.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Group	Age	Years as a Christian

Andrew	Male	African American	Congregant	26	11
Ben	Male	White American, Latino	Leader	51	37
Cindy	Female	White American	Leader	30	10
Denise	Female	African American	Congregant	83	35
Emma	Female	African American	Congregant	26	13
Frank	Male	White American	Leader	32	18
Harrison	Male	African American	Congregant	41	28
Janet	Female	African American	Congregant	56	30
Max	Male	African American	Congregant	58	8
Stanley	Male	White American	Leader	49	12
Ulysses	Male	White American	Leader	52	35
Xavier	Male	White American	Leader	29	22

Andrew

Andrew is a 26-year-old African American male that stated he has been a Christian since his teenage years. Andrew has lived in Chicago his entire life, which has provided him with the opportunity to experience racial situations both inside and outside the walls of the church. Andrew attends a congregation that promotes its multicultural and diverse demographic, with approximately 14% of the leadership and staff being African American.

Ben

Ben is a 51-year-old White American/Latino male that serves in ministry leadership at an Evangelical church in Chicago. He stated that he has served Christ since he was a young child, so he has many experiences within the local church in Chicago regarding racial unity. He has been a ministry leader at the current congregation for 18 years. When describing the racial

demographics of the congregation, Ben was adamant that, "We are very diverse. We have a large Latino population, some African Americans. We want to make a difference in the community and be a place where everyone feels welcome."

Cindy

Cindy is a 30-year-old White American female who has been a Christian for over 10 years. She currently serves as a ministry leader in an Evangelical congregation in Chicago, allowing her to observe the relationship between members of different races. She openly shared her personal experiences, which mainly centered around her interaction with the women of the congregation and other church leaders as they navigated social justice issues that affected the minority community in which they served. In describing her church, Cindy stated it is:

> [V]ery diverse from a socioeconomic standpoint, we have, you know, CEOs that come and then plenty of homeless people and everything in between and also from an age demographic, there's a wide variance and also from like a racial-ethnic background.

Denise

Denise is an 83-year-old African American female that stated she has been a Christian for 35 years. She currently volunteers at her local church and connects with the church community through weekly attendance, small group participation, volunteer teams, and outreach events. Due to her age, Denise stated that she has personally observed Chicago and local churches wrestle with racism, racial tensions, and segregation throughout the decades. She views racial unity as "an essential issue to address, but it is not a new issue. The churches in Chicago have battled the issue of racism and segregation since I was a small child."

Emma

Emma is a 26-year-old African American female and for two years she has attended a local Evangelical church in a diverse Chicago neighborhood. She stated that she has been a

Christian for the past 13 years. She connects with her local church through weekly attendance, participating in the young adults' small group, and serving with the high school ministry. Regarding racial unity, one of the main hindrances that Emma identified was 'representation.' Emma stated that although the community and congregation are ethnically diverse, an overwhelming majority of the pastoral board and the worship team are White Americans.

Frank

Frank is 32 years old and stated that he has been a Christian for 18 years. He currently serves on the leadership council at a local Evangelical church. He has lived in Chicago since he was a child, which has allowed him to experience and perceive racial situations both in the city and within the local church. Eric expressed a desire to see biblical unity at the forefront of the local church, especially within the context of Chicago. He wants to see people "collaborating together on mission for Christ's work."

Harrison

Harrison is a 41-year-old African American male who stated that he started attending church as a small child with his parents and has been a committed Christian since his teenage years. He grew up outside of Chicago but has been in Chicago with his family for over 10 years. He currently attends an Evangelical church in Chicago, where he has been for the past five years. In his current congregation, he is a minority, with African Americans only comprising approximately 4-5% of the active membership. Harrison has experienced racism and profiling throughout his Christian life and time in Chicago, enabling him to share personal experiences regarding racial unity. In describing the state of racial unity in Chicago churches, Harrison observed:

> Chicago is super segregated, and so it's really just based on location. If you are in a Black area, then the church will be 90% Black. If you're in a White area, then the church will

be 90% White. Sometimes you will see a sprinkle here—a White church with a sprinkle of minorities or a Black church with a sprinkle of White people.

Janet

Janet is a 56-year-old African American female serving Christ for 30 years. She currently attends an Evangelical church in Chicago that is majority White American (both leadership and congregation) and situated in a very racially diverse community. Before her time at the current congregation, she attended a church in Chicago that was majority African American, and the main leader was White American. Her diverse experiences within Chicago congregations have allowed her to perceive aspects of racial unity. In recollecting her experiences, Janet noted:

> When looking at spiritual formation, in particular my own, I have been the most fulfilled and the strongest in my faith when I have been at a church that connects with the community and is more hands-on with discipleship and social justice.

Max

Max is a 58-year-old African American male that stated he was saved approximately eight years ago. He currently attends an Evangelical church in Chicago that is predominately White American. Max has been able to build relationships with his church leaders authentically, allowing him to perceive and experience how racial issues are handled within the congregation. In addition, Max has experienced racism, racial profiling, and congregational apathy within Chicago, which has given him a distinct perspective regarding racial unity and racial concerns. When sharing his experiences, Max vulnerably shared his frustrations with what he considered 'White guilt.' He expressed:

> For the life of me I just don't understand why we focus so much outside of the needs of the community. We send money to Ukraine and cannot see the impact, but we do not meet the needs of Chicago or look for ways to deal with what is happening here. I feel that it's easier for them to feel we are doing something to get that guilt off of them.

Stanley

Stanley is a 49-year-old White American male that serves in ministry leadership at his local church. The church is Evangelical and has a small African American population (approximately 5%). Stanley stated that he has served Christ for 12 years and, being a Chicago native, has been able to perceive and experience different situations that connect to racial unity. Stanley is part of a diverse group of men with fellowship and accountability which further has enabled him to be involved in discussions regarding race and unity within the church. When sharing his thoughts about racial unity, Stanley noted that:

> It feels that sometimes you know people want to blame me or blame White people for what has happened in the country and the city. Really, we just need to all learn to focus on God and love more and not call everything a racial problem.

Ulysses

Ulysses is a 52-year-old White American that stated he has served Jesus for the past 35 years. His local church is a family-orientated community that focuses on building relationships and connecting with those in need. Ulysses' local church is in a highly diverse neighborhood, where many international ethnic groups choose to settle when they relocate to Chicago. Despite the environment, he stated, "I just don't feel our church represents [the neighborhood] in the fact that we're mainly a White church in the midst of this diverse neighborhood. Some say that our [neighborhood] is one of the most diverse in Chicago."

Xavier

Xavier is a 29-year-old White American male that stated he was saved at the age of 7. He has lived most of his life connected to local churches in Chicago and has been able to observe the tension of racial issues closely, especially within the past few years. His connection with the local church and the community has enabled Xavier to serve his church in a greater capacity.

Xavier shared that representation is vital for promoting racial unity and overall diversity within the local church. "The pastoral team likes to make sure like we're having diverse voices from the pulpit."

Data Analysis and Findings

Evangelical Leaders: Participants

The data collection focused on specific research questions. RQ1 and RQ3 centered on the perception of Evangelical church leaders in Chicago. From the participant pool, six participants: Ben, Cindy, Frank, Stanley, Ulysses, and Xavier are Evangelical leaders. Therefore, when analyzing the data for RQ1 and RQ3, the researcher focused more heavily on the experiences and perceptions of Ben, Cindy, Frank, Stanley, Ulysses, and Xavier.

RQ1. Based on experience or observation, what do Evangelical church leaders in Chicago perceive is the state of racial unity between White church leaders and African American congregants and community members?

Table 3

Themes and Quotes from Participants' Responses to RQ1.

Sub-themes	Codes	Quotes
Congregational Inclusion	Diversity	"…there's a wide variance and also from like a racial-ethnic background." "We welcome people from all racial groups."
		"There are different people that attend and feel connected. We are intentional about building a family environment."
		"Yeah, to my understanding it's pretty diverse, but I know some people have showed up and they're like no, this isn't really diverse."
		"…there's a wide variance and also from like a racial-ethnic background."

Sub-themes	Codes	Quotes
		"We welcome people from all racial groups."
		"There are different people that attend and feel connected. We are intentional about building a family environment."
		"I just don't feel our church represents [the neighborhood] in the fact that we're mainly a White church in the midst of this diverse neighborhood. Some say that our [neighborhood] is one of the most diverse in Chicago."
	Representation	"We notice that racial groups connect more when the cell group leader is also a minority. But at our church we have a family atmosphere so even if different race, we still connect." "The pastoral team likes to make sure like we're having diverse voices from the pulpit."
	Segregation	"Chicago people like to stay around people they are comfortable with. It's not a big deal, it just adds different experiences to the city."
Member Engagement	Involvement	"Yes, they [African Americans] feel connected. We have many small groups and activities to plug into."
		"To me I think we could connect more. It's hard especially with Covid and everything, we have been distant overall. So someone who already felt on the outside can now feel even more disconnected."
	Welcoming	"When someone walks into our church, regardless of racial background, we make them feel at home."

Sub-themes	Codes	Quotes
		"It's hard to say if African Americans feel welcomed. We connect with them, but we don't always see them return."
		"That people are so diverse and cool, and I think it's great when we can make lots of space for all people to be welcome there."
Community Engagement	Outreach	"We serve the community, give away groceries and school supplies. We have afterschool programs for the kids and sports programs for single moms looking for something for their kids. We did a lot of those type of things especially during Covid and school closings. I believe the African American community liked the outreaches."
		"We're able to welcome so many different people we work with refugees, and we work with World Relief."
	Social Justice	"During the protests in Chicago, we made efforts to get involved. We did many um, church unity marches and you know, walked against police brutality."
		"The George Floyd situation was a big deal. The community, especially Black community really wanted answers and support. We started paying more attention and getting involved with city prayer marches."
		"Peaceful walks and faith walks that were supporting social justice and there wasn't anything like official that came from the church on that. But it was like definitely something that a lot of our church body were involved with."
Racial Tension	Trust	"I feel like people will get to know you over time and then the trust will grow."

Sub-themes	Codes	Quotes
		"Like it or not, trust had been broken for the Black community and they looked to me as another example of disappointing leadership."

Congregational Inclusion: Diversity

Most of the church leaders that participated in the research felt that their congregations were racially diverse. Based on their responses and the demographics of their congregations, diverse does not equate to even distribution. For example, Stanley considered that "There are different people that attend and feel connected. We are intentional about building a family environment." However, his congregation has approximately 5% African American membership. Although Stanley's church is intentional about building a family connection and enjoys the different people that attend, the level of diversity is not an even distribution. Cindy was adamant about the importance of diversity. "When there is diversity, presuppositions get broken down and you get to learn how to enjoy each other and connect with each other and all of that." She emphasized her point when she said that her congregation has a wide variety of people including diversity from different racial groups. Yet she acknowledged that "to my understanding, it's pretty diverse, but I know some people have showed up and they're like no, this isn't really diverse." The recognition of Cindy that her perception may not be the same as someone visiting her church is seen in the remarks from the African American participants. With church demographics that are like the churches of the White American leaders, the African American participants consistently said that their churches are lacking diversity and representation of African Americans in the community.

Congregational Inclusion: Representation

Ulysses recognized the importance of representation. He perceived a gap between the

diverse neighborhood and the leadership and congregational demographic. Ulysses did recognize that Chicago is a highly diverse city and that there is a gap between the community demographic and the racial representation within the congregation. "I just don't feel our church represents [the neighborhood] in the fact that we're mainly a White church in the midst of this diverse neighborhood. Some say that our [neighborhood] is one of the most diverse in Chicago."

Some congregations are taking steps toward more representation, especially regarding African Americans. Xavier discussed his perception of the strides his church is taking. "The pastoral team likes to make sure like we're having diverse voices from the pulpit." Xavier also mentioned that he has experienced an increase in minority staff members at the church which has assisted in bridging the gap across racial groups. Xavier shared that he perceived that the increase of African American representation on the leadership level reflected the diversity and racial unity in the congregation.

Congregational Inclusion: Segregation

Most of the White American participants did not view Chicago as racially and ethnically segregated. Instead, they saw the neighborhood divisions as a picture of diversity. Ben observed "Sure, Chicago has different neighborhoods. But it is cool to be able to go to Little Italy for lunch and then drive over to Chinatown for dinner and have two completely different experiences in the same city." Similarly, Stanley noted that "Chicago people like to stay around people they are comfortable with. It's not a big deal, it just adds different experiences to the city." He elaborated with examples of various Chicago neighborhoods. "If you go south, you'll find Black churches and soul food restaurants. If you go to Humboldt Park, you'll find Hispanic restaurants, churches with Spanish services, and the Puerto Rican Parade every year, because that area is where Hispanics live."

Member Engagement: Involvement

The church leaders in this study recognized that the myriad circumstances surrounding the Covid pandemic had made connection overall difficult within their churches. Ben commented that:

> Many members simply did not return to church and fell off the grid. My main concern is not how connected African Americans feel at our church, my main concern is how connected everyone feels. This has been a difficult journey since 2019, 2020.

For Cindy, however, the difficulty of the Covid pandemic offered an opportunity to evaluate the connection between African Americans and the overall congregation. Cindy works with a women's ministry at the church, and during the quarantine, she began Zoom groups for women to connect. She admits that:

> It actually was like a good chance to reach out to the women from other racial groups and bring them together. The online studies allowed us to cut down on excuses for connecting and like um provide safe spaces for women of color to feel welcome.

Member Engagement: Welcoming

Engaging members is an area where the participants perceived their local church was demonstrating racial unity. Stanley shared his perception that "When someone walks into our church, regardless of racial background, we make them feel at home." Xavier stated that his church embraces diversity and intentionally creates a welcoming culture. "That people are so diverse and cool, and I think it's great when we can make lots of space for all people to be welcome there." Stanley observed that his church welcomes people of all cultures, but he noticed that many African Americans attend once or twice but do not return. Some participants perceived the lack of consistent attendance as a potential red flag that racial unity was lacking.

Community Engagement: Outreach

Bridging a connection between a welcoming environment and outreach, Ulysses

observed that racial unity is present between his church and the community because they are intentional about welcoming minorities through intentional outreach. "We're able to welcome so many different people we work with refugees, we go on and we work with World Relief." For Ulysses, engaging the community through outreach reflects the racial unity that currently exists within the local church.

Similarly, Ben observed that his local church connects with the community through outreach, which he perceives reflects healthy racial unity. "We serve the community, give away groceries and school supplies. We have afterschool programs for the kids and sports programs for single moms looking for something for their kids…. I believe the African American community liked the outreaches."

Community Engagement: Social Justice

To stay connected with the people they serve, the church leaders identified some issues of social justice that are important to their communities: access to food, safe environments for children outside of school hours, and police brutality. The leaders identified these areas mainly due to the spotlight the media and the pandemic placed on the areas. When explaining the community outreaches of groceries giveaways and kids' programs, Ben stated, "We did a lot of those types of things, especially during Covid and school closings." Stanley mentioned that "the protests caused disruption in the city, and it was in all the news and online. We had to find ways to respond." The participants felt that the George Floyd case contributed to the heightened awareness of social justice issues regarding African American communities and pushed local congregations to action on some level. Cindy mentioned that her church "did a whole series on social justice and racial issues. Back in, like, the summer of 2020 when there was, you know, a lot going on in Chicago."

Ben stated that:

We did not want to put all the attention on the protests, but we did want to stand for justice. Our leaders worked with other churches to do prayer walks in the city. The African American community joined with us, and it was a powerful move of God.

Racial Tension: Trust

The aspect of trust was included to some degree in all the participants' responses as a marker for the strength of racial unity within their churches and communities. Ulysses views that racial unity needs time to develop over time as people form authentic communities. "I think longevity should be included in that conversation about authenticity because I feel like people will get to know you over time and then the trust will grow." Xavier agreed that trust required ample time to form, especially when the two groups trying to form trust are culturally different. Frank shared experiences where he had to intentionally build trust with African American congregants after the social issues of police brutality. "Like it or not, trust had been broken for the Black community and they looked to me as another example of disappointing leadership. I had to be intentional and so I um started building bridges of trust."

RQ3. *What factors do Evangelical Church leaders perceive as promoters of and hindrances to racial diversity within the local church?*

Table 4

Themes and Quotes from Participants' Responses to RQ3

Sub-themes	Codes	Quotes
Congregational Inclusion	Representation	"At our church, we have diverse leadership in various ministries. There are African Americans in high-level positions."
		"I'm very intentional about…bringing a variety of women from different areas of the church and different ethnic backgrounds and cultural backgrounds into my leadership team."

Sub-themes	Codes	Quotes
Member Engagement	Involvement	"Peaceful walks and faith walks that were supporting social justice and there wasn't anything like official that came from the church on that. But it was like definitely something that a lot of our church body were involved with."
	Welcoming	"It is important to treat everyone like a VIP when they enter our doors. This helps to create a family feel where people want to return and want to build community with us."
		"We practically tackle you from the parking lot with um just basic hospitality. When people of color feel honest love, they return and they bring their family and friends."
Community Engagement	Outreach	"Being the hands and feet of Jesus is uh the only thing that matters. Feeding the poor, helping the homeless, and providing school supplies have all helped us stay united."
	Social Justice	"Sometimes a cause that everyone can support helps to, you know, build unity."
		"We are intentional about thinking about people simply as, well, um, as God's creation. We were um all made in His image, so we have to meet the needs of others. We have to help, um, play our part in bringing justice."
Conflict	Tragedy	"Unfortunately, without the George Floyd protests, we would never have been aware of the need for connect more with the African American community."
		"We begin to come together more in unity when the suffering affects us all."

Sub-themes	Codes	Quotes
	Politics	"I never dishonored politicians while preaching….I always encouraged the congregation to not allow division. If we saw true injustice, we had to speak out."
		"…the people that were bashing [politicians] caused us to be more divided than ever before. You saw on Facebook who was standing for Christian values and who was blinded by race."
		"It was messy. Very difficult navigating those four years. I feel like politics began to creep into our board meetings and sermons. And the issue of race kept growing and uh being more tangible, you know?"
Intentional Connection	Empathy & Reflection	"Could we be silent and watch minorities be mistreated and still try and preach the Gospel on Sunday?" "I think a lot of what's going on here is just a cultural dynamic. And so then we were kind of talking about how to do culturally sensitive leadership training."
	Worship Experience	"I think to just be intentional about the types of events you do and how accessible they are to different cultural types and what the perceptions are going to be for those things."
		"We enjoy different types of music. The worship team sings mainstream Christian music but also Tasha Cobbs and some Gospel songs."
	Trust	"And so we're this tiny village kind of in this big city of Chicago. So I think we all see each other's faults and still will, you know, be welcoming."

Sub-themes	Codes	Quotes
Racial Tension	Discussion Discomfort	"I want to say the right thing here. I don't want to like put that burden on people of color to like be the one that's educating me. There's tons of books and stuff like that, but I think for people of color, maybe even just pointing it out is sometimes helpful."

Congregational Inclusion: Representation

Reflecting on representation within his church, Ben stated, "At our church, we have diverse leadership in various ministries. There are African Americans in high-level positions." Ben did not intentionally select leaders because they were African Americans, but he perceives that their presence helps foster racial unity and diversity. "I suppose it helps people to see a familiar face from their own background." At her church specifically with the women's ministry, Cindy acknowledged that "I'm very intentional about my leadership teams bringing a variety of women from different areas of the church and different ethnic backgrounds and cultural backgrounds into my leadership team with me." Alternatively, Ulysses perceived that the lack of African American representation at the leadership level within his church serves to hinder racial diversity. "It's kinda sad because the community is very diverse but yet we are not diverse as leaders. We do not have Black leaders or pastors in our church community." He expressed that the community might be more willing to connect if they felt more represented on a racial level. In response to Ulysses' perception of representation, Xavier shared that congregants have told him that, "if they do see somebody represented in maybe their own skin color, that they do think, oh, I could be in that position because they see somebody that looks like them." Therefore, Xavier perceives that representation is crucial for promoting racial unity. As the discussion continued, both Xavier and Ulysses shared their experiences that representation without power is

futile in promoting racial unity and inclusion. They both asserted that actual leadership power must be attached to minorities in leadership or staff positions, otherwise, it is a form of manipulation.

Member Engagement: Involvement

When the local church gets involved with topics that connect with the community, it can help promote racial diversity. Every church leader that was included in this research experienced a greater level of member engagement regarding being involved in issues and subject matters that were expressed as important by African Americans in the congregation and community. Each church represented opportunities for its members to participate in activities such as peaceful marches, prayer walks, community forums, and roundtable discussions. Alexander reflected on the past years and the various protests, marches, and causes that African Americans valued in his community. His church was intentional about engaging the members beyond the church building. Cindy related to the importance of involvement to encourage racial diversity. "Peaceful walks and faith walks that were supporting social justice and there wasn't anything like official that came from the church on that. But it was like definitely something that a lot of our church body was involved with." Cindy continued to share that the African American congregation members and community expressed their appreciation that the local church was actively engaged in the important issues of the time. Cindy perceives that involvement was key in building and maintaining deeper levels of racial diversity within her church.

Member Engagement: Welcoming

The welcoming culture was an area the participants perceived their local churches demonstrated well. As a result, a welcoming culture was highlighted as a promoter of racial unity. Ben shared that if African Americans felt welcomed in a new environment, then they

would be more likely to return and invite others to return. "It is important to treat everyone like a VIP when they enter our doors. This helps to create a family feel where people want to return and want to build community with us." Jim had similar experiences where the initial welcoming at his church was intentional about making people feel like they belonged. "We have, um, seen more African Americans return, and they share that it is because they felt loved and welcomed." Alexander also agreed that a welcoming environment is key to promoting racial diversity. "That's something, um, you know, that our church does well. We practically tackle you from the parking lot with, um, just basic hospitality. When people of color feel honest love, they return, and they bring their family and friends."

Community Engagement: Outreach and Social Justice

Member engagement correlated with community engagement, especially in heightened racial tensions in the Chicago culture in the past few years. Each participant perceived that racial diversity and unity were fostered the more connected the congregation was with the community and the more the congregation (leaders included) participated in activities that concerned the African American community. Ulysses shared that his church is trying to encourage racial diversity by engaging with the community and their needs. His church is making strides at being intentional with working with homelessness and fresh start opportunities that benefit African Americans. Xavier shared his experience within his local church and their intentionality in addressing social justice issues. His church leadership team navigates the congregation back to the basic concept of everyone is made in God's image. Therefore, when looking at social justice and outreach concerns, Xavier perceives that his church fosters racial unity by engaging with the community on a foundational human level—without allowing personal bias to hinder the demonstration of God's love.

Conflict: Tragedy

Societal, cultural, and emotional conflict play a factor in racial diversity and unity—

whether promoting it or hindering it. Cindy commented that her church leaned into the needs of

the African American community when conflict and suffering happened. The conflict and

tension of police brutality in the George Floyd case prompted her church to be more active in

prayer walks and peaceful marches. "There wasn't anything like official that came from the

church on that. But it was like definitely something that a lot of our church body was involved

with." Stanley recognized that conflict, especially incidences of tragedy of innocent lives "makes

us stop and think about what is important. We begin to come together more in unity when the

suffering affects us all, like September 11th." Regarding tragedy, Ben offered a more personal

perspective.

> While it was horrible what was happening in America, my church experienced personal
> tragedies in these past years. As we navigated the death of loved ones and had to bury
> members, we came together like never before. It was amazing to see my church actually
> be the Church. Overall, while awful as it is, tragedy helped us stay united. It didn't matter
> about racial differences, it just mattered about being there for one another.

Conflict: Politics

Every participant in the study perceived that politics served as a hindrance to racial unity.

They all experienced politics creep into their ministry meetings, sermons, small groups, and

leadership conversations. Unfortunately, when politics was included, it stirred up racial tensions

and instigated discord, even if on a small scale and even if unspoken publicly. Stanley noted that

"differences like politics and the people that were bashing [politicians] caused us to be more

divided than ever before. You saw on Facebook who was standing for Christian values and who

was blinded by race." Stanley believed that the conflict in the nation was exposing people within

the church with a racial agenda instead of focusing on the Gospel. While participants do not

necessarily agree on which political group had the correct agenda, they all perceived that the political division hindered racial unity within the local churches. Cindy reflected, "It became very difficult to ignore how divided we were as Christians." Ben commented that "I never dishonored politicians while preaching... I always encouraged the congregation to not allow division. If we saw true injustice, we had to speak out." Xavier's church avoided political labels because it was perceived that politics (especially when racial tensions were at the forefront) hindered true racial unity. "I mean, like we live in a society where politics matter. But I think when you use certain language like Republican or Democratic, it can like automatically put people in a certain space."

Intentional Connection: Empathy

Speaking about injustice is an avenue to intentionally help to foster racial unity within the local church in Chicago. In addition to making statements and gestures regarding justice, Cindy found it essential to engage in intentional training. "I think a lot of what's going on here is just a cultural dynamic. And so, then we were kind of talking about how to do culturally sensitive leadership training." Cindy has experienced racial unity strengthening as her church purposefully sought ways to train and educate the leadership and staff on racial awareness and cultural presuppositions. In addition, Cindy's church "just like officially made the decision to celebrate Juneteenth." While the church is still looking for ways to incorporate Juneteenth into the Sunday service and activities, she feels the recognition of the holiday is a step toward fostering racial unity. Ben added that the conflict and suffering of the African Americans being killed by law enforcement caused his leadership to empathetically reflect on how to promote racial unity. "Could we be silent and watch minorities be mistreated and still try and preach the Gospel on Sunday?"

Outside of the larger context of injustice, empathy and reflection also include self-

awareness and the ability to learn about another person. Ulysses and Xavier shared that they have experienced moments where they made judgmental conclusions based on an incorrect assumption regarding race or culture. Their perception was that they needed to be reflective when dealing with issues that are sensitive to other Christians. Both men also observed that open conversations and opportunities for vulnerability within a Christian community help promote racial unity. The more empathy and grace extended, the more unity can be expressed.

Intentional Connection: Worship Experience

Cindy also perceived that intentionality must extend to the elements of the Sunday service. The church should "be intentional about the types of events you do and how accessible they are to different cultural types and what the perceptions are going to be for those things." Ben agreed with this concept and stated that his church engages in diverse types of music, such as songs in Spanish and songs by African American singers. However, Ben did acknowledge that most of their services align with mainstream contemporary Christian music that White American singers and songwriters craft. Stanley expressed that intentionality is unnecessary to cater to a specific race because "that would be difficult to do, you know, to please everyone."

Racial Tension: Discussion Discomfort

Navigating what works might create racial tension. Xavier shared that he has been overly cautious or insecure when discussing the issue of racial unity outside of his racial group. Xavier stated:

> I want to say the right thing here. I don't want to like put that burden on people of color to like be the one that's educating me. There's tons of books and stuff like that, but I think for people of color maybe even to just like point it out is sometimes helpful.

Ulysses openly shared his feelings of guilt when dealing with racial topics in which he does not have a solution. He has experienced moments of helplessness trying to find the right words

or the right actions. "Even now, it is difficult sharing some of these things as a White man, because, well you know, it can go the wrong way. I really just don't know how to help many times."

Racial Tension: Trust

Ulysses shared his experience regarding trust in the context of racial unity. He expressed that trust is fostered in their local church because they are a smaller congregation that operates as a community. This allows space for vulnerability, empathy, and forgiveness. "We're this tiny village kind of in this big city of Chicago. So, I think we all see each other's faults and still will, you know, be welcoming." Ulysses continued to share that at his local church, people are free to "love God, love my neighbor, and just be themselves" without fearing rejection or prejudice.

In contrast, Frank shared that the large size of his church sometimes hindered racial unity because people did not have an opportunity to build trust with one another. "Unless you are intentional as a member to connect with home groups or smaller networks, you will never foster a community feeling. It makes it difficult to discuss issues of race because there isn't an authentic bond."

Congregation Members: Participants

The researcher collected data from congregants within Chicago Evangelical churches to examine what works for the members. RQ2 and RQ4 centered on the perception of African American congregants in Evangelical churches in Chicago. From the participant pool, six participants: Andrew, Denise, Emma, Harrison, Janet, and Max are African American congregants. Therefore, when analyzing the data for RQ2 and RQ4, the researcher focused more heavily on the experiences and perceptions of Andrew, Denise, Emma, Harrison, Janet, and Max.

RQ2. Based on experience or observation, what do congregants in Evangelical Chicago churches believe is the state of racial unity between White church leaders and African American congregants and community members?

Table 5

Themes and Quotes from Participants' Responses to RQ2

Sub-themes	Codes	Quotes
Congregational Inclusion	Diversity	"We are working on more connections with the neighborhood, but we have a lot of work to do."
		"How that looks at my church is 98% White, 1% Asian, 1% black. And the makeup of the community I'm from is predominantly Hispanic and African American."
	Representation Segregation	"We have a racially diverse church staff."
		"Hispanics worship with Hispanic congregations. Um, Europeans worship with European congregations, Asians with their congregations, and, um, Blacks with their congregation. That's what I generally see here in Chicago."
		"If you're in the Spanish area, you're gonna have 90% Spanish members. You know, if you're in a Black area, you're gonna have 90% Black members, so it's really Chicago is super segregated, and so it's really just based on location."
		"[Racial unity] is an essential issue to address, but it is not a new issue. The churches in Chicago have battled the issue of racism and segregation since I was a small child."
Member Engagement	Involvement	"We have intentional small groups that meet to connect with people of different races and life experiences."
		"I joined Bible studies with them, and you know, not only did I have a voice, but it appeared that, as if you know, my voice was very valued. And that was just wonderful."

Sub-themes	Codes	Quotes
Member Engagement	Involvement	"I mean, I'm here for a reason. I connect with the people, and my family does too. Even though we are not the same race, I stay connected."
	Welcoming	"I felt welcomed, but you know, um, I have a very outgoing personality. I don't see the same for other African Americans in the community."
		"My church is very welcoming. It has a family vibe to it. My kids love going there, which makes it a more encouraging place for me and my wife."
		"If you're a visitor, you will definitely feel welcomed. We treat visitors like VIPs. When the racial issues in Chicago started to increase, we were more overt in making African American visitors feel welcomed."
Community Engagement	Social Justice	"The leadership has taken the congregation on a journey through the lens of racial righteousness."
		"It's been cool to see my pastors and leaders march for justice and be vocal in public about police shootings against Black men."
		"Social justice is, you know important for us. I know that the before I got there, they took on a group of people called the Lost Boys. Come from out of Africa, so they, you know, they supported them and, you know, had a ministry around that."
		"One of my favorite moments was when I marched with my kids alongside my church during the police brutality cases. It was a historic moment."

Sub-themes	Codes	Quotes
Community Engagement	Social Justice	"[W]hen the whole, um, George Floyd situation. They went out, and they came out to show support, and they did a march with other churches. They unified with other churches."
Racial Tension	Trust	"They uh trusted me in their homes, and they didn't even know me." "I think we could all agree the past couple of years in our nation has just been a really, really hard couple of years just for like racial unity and just distrust with the police, and it's really hard to go to a conservative church that shies away from the conversation."

Congregational Inclusion: Diversity

Denise's experience at her church reflects a diverse congregational experience. "I think we reflect biblical unity in terms of as it relates to our church, 'cause we have so people from so many different backgrounds that really love each other." Emma perceived the same feeling of unity within her congregation as it is multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. However, Emma did state that diversity is different from an equal representation of each racial group. Outside the congregational experience, the African American participants felt a deficiency regarding personal connection with the neighborhood surrounding the church location. The geographical locations of predominately White American churches are located within ethnically diverse communities. As a result, there is an immediate gap that needs to be bridged for connection. In addition, a vast majority of the members at each church are commuters, which means they do not live within the local neighborhood. As a result, there is a disconnect between the congregation members and the neighborhood members. Janet noted that "We are working on more connections with the neighborhood, but we have a lot of work to do."

Congregational Inclusion: Representation

The congregants interviewed came from churches where African Americans are the minority race. Max's congregation is 1% African American, while the other African American participants estimated their congregations are approximately 4-5% African American. Harrison and Janet both described their leadership staff as diverse, with minority representation at some level of leadership. To encourage a more diverse church experience, Janet recognized that her church leadership intentionally brought various voices to the table. "We have a racially diverse church staff." Janet attributes the diversity of pastoral leadership to her church's willingness to confront racial issues and pressing social justice concerns. Emma, Denise, and Andrew all shared their disappointing experiences with the lack of African Americans in pastoral leadership and overall ministry staff positions. Emma shared, "It is true that we have many cultures at our church, but that does not translate to the leadership demographic." Andrew had a similar perception as he stated, "It's difficult, um, you know, to claim that we walk in unity, but then I don't see a leader that looks like me at the altar. How does that encourage me to connect? Sadly, um, it doesn't." Denise shared that her experience has witnessed Chicago churches go through segregation and the Jim Crow era. For her, representation is not only necessary, but "it is vital if we are going to truly encourage racial unity. The scars are too deep to ignore the need for people of color to see other people of color empowered within the church."

Congregational Inclusion: Segregation

Regarding racial connection, Max observed that "in Chicago, we generally work well together, but we don't live together." The aspect of living together points to a consistent observation by the African American participants about racial unity: segregated neighborhoods demonstrated the disheartening state of racial unity in Chicago, especially within the faith communities. Emma shared an experience with her Uber driver, who dropped her off at home.

The driver commented that Black people do not live in that area but that they live on the other side of town. The other participants validated Emma's experience and agreed that the assumptions of the Uber driver were a normal occurrence with co-workers, friends in the faith community, and even family members. Harrison stated, "Assumptions like that are, um, you know, everywhere. It is frustrating as a Black man to hear those, um, but unfortunately, in this city, we tend to stay with our own culture." Emma continued to share her perception that Chicago is very segregated, and it is due to the lack of racial unity, which makes it more difficult for local churches to connect with their communities.

Member Engagement: Involvement

The African American participants mentioned member involvement numerous times as a reflection of racial unity within their local churches. Max shared his experience, "I joined Bible studies with them, and you know, not only did I have a voice, but it appeared that, as if you know, my voice was very valued. And that was just wonderful." Harrison had similar experiences where although he was the minority (and often the only African American present), he saw his local church intentionally involving African American members in small groups, outreaches, and other activities. In addition, Harrison shared his experiences with congregational involvement in racial issues that he valued, such as prayer marches against police brutality. "I connect with the people, and my family does too. Even though we are not the same race, I stay connected."

Member Engagement: Welcoming

Connecting with individual congregation and community members was recognized as imperative on a personal level. At each local church represented in the data, the African American participants expressed that their church intentionally connects with them and makes them feel welcomed. Max expressed genuine surprise when he received support from his local

church when he first arrived. He was humbled by the outpouring of love demonstrated by the church leadership. "[W]hen I reached out to them and told them my story, and they let me move it to their houses. They didn't even know me. I mean, trust me, they really didn't know me." The sincere kindness shown to Max is why he is planted at his current church and an active member. He continues to share how he felt valued by the leadership. "I joined Bible studies with them, and you know, not only did I have a voice, but it appeared that, as if you know, my voice was very valued. And that was just wonderful." Janet expressed that she has always experienced a welcoming environment at her church. She shared that her church thrives on making people feel part of the family, which she believed is a reason why her church demonstrates unity.

Community Engagement: Outreach and Social Justice

In the current climate of the United States, especially in Chicago, the African American participants perceived that social justice is intertwined with racial issues. Each felt that the state of racial unity could be seen through the lens of how well social justice issues were being addressed and handled within local churches. The African American participants stated that the current social justice issues that were important included: police brutality, systemic racism within the education system, lack of representation at seats of power, economic disparity, access to healthcare, and housing discrimination. The African American participants identified long-term issues rooted in the fabric of the Chicago (and American) culture. This varied from the White Americans' perception of social justice, which mainly focused on specific outreach events or the need for increased generosity.

At her local church, Janet recognized that her church leadership was actively involved in learning about and bringing to the forefront social justice issues. "The leadership has taken the congregation on a journey through the lens of racial righteousness hosting social justice retreats, traveling to the African American Museum of History, and arranging sermons on the topic." She

was optimistic about the state of racial unity when she experienced the events surrounding the George Floyd case. "When George Floyd happened, we were just so hurt. We just needed to hear each other and see each other, crying the same tears over the same issue." Janet perceived that the empathy demonstrated by White American church leaders and the African American community was a hopeful sign for racial unity. At Harrison's church, he has experienced his church leadership encourage involvement in prayer marches throughout the city, specifically regarding social justice issues that affect the African American community. "It's been cool to see my pastors and leaders march for justice and be vocal in public about police shootings."

While Harrison shared positive experiences within his local church, other participants were more discouraged regarding social justice within their local churches. Denise perceived that her local church was not adequately addressing social justice issues that affected the African American community. While progress had been made over the decades, she felt that a large chasm still revealed that racial unity was lacking in her local church. Andrew reflects on his experiences of encountering ignorance or apathy from church members regarding social justice issues. "It can be disheartening because you know it shines a light on just how much disunity still exists."

Racial Tension: Trust

All participants observed mistrust between the African American community and the police department. While each participant has their personal perceptions of the degree of mistrust and reasoning, it was unanimously observed that the mistrust was weakening racial unity even within the church walls. Emma perceived that there was an underlining mistrust between African Americans in the community and police officers, given the social events of the past years that made it difficult for her to navigate belonging to a local church that did not address the issue of

racial unity. During the data collection process, the African American participants were more reflective when examining the motive for White Americans' actions (or inactions) and local church leadership. In reflecting on his connection at his church, Max noted that when he first arrived at his local church (predominately White American), the leadership trusted him in their homes, showing him that there was a good foundation for racial unity. However, Max also noted, "I don't know what space it was coming from. But I do know that I benefited from it."

The other African American participants revealed a lack of surety regarding motivations for connection. Janet observed that her local church is heavily involved in social justice and community endeavors and attempts to connect with its congregation on a racial level. However, she also recognized that the connection attempts may be from a place of guilt regarding the recent police brutality cases against African Americans. She also noted that "there was an incident within the walls of the church that triggered leadership to be more intentional about racial awareness and relationships." Harrison noted that "sometimes Christians feel burdened or guilty due to their privilege and feel forced to make a connection with me as a Black male. It's condescending, but maybe it's a start for them."

RQ4. *Based on lived experiences, what factors do African American congregants and community members perceive are promoters of and hindrances to racial diversity within the local church?*

Table 6

Themes and Quotes from Participants' Responses to RQ4

Sub-themes	Codes	Quotes
Congregational Inclusion	Representation	"We have a racially diverse church staff."
		"There are key people in our church that are minorities and have a voice."
Member Engagement	Involvement and Welcoming	"It is the personal connection with other people of color that make me feel safe to express myself…share my faith journey."

Sub-themes	Codes	Quotes
Community Engagement	Outreach and Social Justice	"We must learn to rally behind, and support causes that actually matter in the daily lives of people of color."
		"Let's be unified around moving forward or, you know, a group saying, hey, we, we haven't done right in these areas. Forgive us. We're going to move forward on this and be unified in this."
Conflict	Tragedy	"George Floyd, man, um, that just shook us all. It required so much of us on so many levels. It was emotionally and spiritually draining. But, um, you know, it brought us all closer."
		"It's ironic how a racial crime, um, helped to bring racial unity." "I hate that tragedy makes us united. It should not take death for us to practice love."
		"It didn't matter who you were of what you believed. Black, White, Asian, Latino, we all were there marching over the tragedy of George Floyd."
		"I've never seen Chicago churches that united. Maybe not since 9-11. Maybe even more so because we had racial shootings by police happen here in our own city. It wasn't something on the news. It was something we experienced."
Conflict	Tragedy	"The George Floyd thing, that was a reality check. We aren't as far along as we thought." "The African American community was looking very closely at how the churches reacted to the police shootings. It would either be a unifier or a line in the sand. There was no way out. Every church's response was duly noted."

Sub-themes	Codes	Quotes
Conflict	Politics	"The politicians and social media pastors have singlehandedly decided to represent the Evangelical movement in America have done a horrible job in truly representing the diversity and truths of evangelicals."
		"I couldn't believe it. I was like, how, how in the hell can you say you are a Christian? And you vote for a man who says these such things about women. Who says these things about Blacks?"
Intentional Connection	Empathy & Reflection	"We need genuine empathy. Sometimes I feel that White Americans, perhaps subconsciously, apply pressure to me and African Americans, I guess in general, to pacify their feelings and to help them reach an acceptable level of empathy." "[It] is not enough to do things to educate yourself intellectually. One must educate themselves emotionally and really switch perspective when exploring the African American experience."
		"Man, this this can't be all that difficult, you know, I mean? Love your neighbor as you know you want to be loved. I mean, how simple can that be?"
		"Our church is intentional about engaging the congregation in issues of race and the African American experience."
Intentional Connection	Empathy & Reflection	"Our church made efforts to find out where we were as a whole on the spectrum. They tried to see you know what we need to work on to move the needle forward."
		"They actually took a serious look at themselves as it related to race."

Sub-themes	Codes	Quotes
Intentional Connection	Worship Experience	"The music is, uh, like for sure one issue. Having your typical Gospel or more modern music helps uh bring together people."
Racial Tension	Discussion Discomfort	"Evangelical Christians are at a point where because of their indoctrination that has taken place for centuries, it's hard for this generation to break out of that."
		"[As] a Black man, it frustrates me when Christians look at me to be okay with what is going on. I love y'all, but I am not okay."
		"I notice that it's easier for them to do things. Uh, to give things. And so, they, um, feel everything is okay."
	Trust	"I have no problem with the Gospel and with Christ. I just have a problem with Christians not actually living the Gospel and following Christ. For that reason, you know I don't always share that I'm an evangelical when people ask."

Congregational Inclusion: Representation

All the African American participants believe that having African Americans represented in leadership is an avenue to promoting racial unity and diversity. Conversely, the participants all perceived that racial unity is hindered when African Americans do not see representation in church leadership. Janet asserts that the racially diverse staff at her church encourages African Americans to stay connected and eventually decide to become a member at her local church. Harrison shared his experience of encountering African Americans in ministry positions at his current church as a motivating factor for him to get more involved, eventually committing as a member.

Member Engagement: Involvement and Welcoming

All the African American participants perceived that member involvement and creating a welcoming atmosphere for members were key components in promoting racial unity on the local level. Each participant shared that the intentional involvement and connection motivated them to plant themselves at their local church and invite others. In addition, they expressed how they intentionally see African American visitors or congregation members and engage with them during Sunday services.

Emma and Andrew shared experiences where they felt welcomed, and other African American congregants intentionally included them in small groups for the young adults. In turn, they both are intentional about personally greeting young African Americans within the church and forming a connection. Emma shared, "Although we are in a large church, it is the personal connection with other people of color that make me feel safe to express myself, and you know to share my faith journey."

Community Engagement: Outreach and Social Justice

According to the African American participants, the intentional engagement of the local church with the community in outreach and social justice is a key promoter of racial unity. Andrew shared his perception of the disconnect around the areas of social justice.

> I think it really has to come with a sense of humility from all groups to say, hey, look like, yeah, we've had a history of segregation, discrimination, brutality, and mistreatment. And they say, you know what? Let's actually forgive and, like, let's be unified around this. Let's be unified around moving forward or, you know, a group saying, hey, we, we haven't done right in these areas. Forgive us. We're going to move forward on this and be unified in this.

Other participants shared the same sentiment as Andrew. Harrison feels that local church engagement with the community and issues of social justice, in particular police brutality and unfair housing and educational concerns, is vital for promoting racial unity. "We must learn to

rally behind, and support causes that you know, like, actually matter in the daily lives of people

of color." Janet perceives that engagement and education around social justice are imperative for

local churches and leaders to move toward racial unity and an authentic community. Emma's

experiences have led her to recognize that engagement with issues of justice is the only way for

communities to connect beyond racial and cultural boundaries.

Conflict: Tragedy

The death of George Floyd and the aftermath that erupted in the nation was perceived as

a watershed moment by all the participants. The presence of the racial conflict that brimmed over

from the George Floyd case was unanimously perceived as a great opportunity for racial unity in

the Chicago churches. However, only the African American participants saw the tragedy as a

measure of the heart of local churches. It was perceived as more than just an event; it was a

marker shaping the upcoming months and years. Janet shared her perception very poignantly:

> The African American community was looking very closely at how the churches reacted
> to the police shootings. It would either be a unifier or a line in the sand. There was no
> way out. Every church's response was duly noted.

While still recognizing the issues with racism in the church, Max shared his experience with the

social justice marches in Chicago, "It's ironic how a racial crime helped to bring racial unity.

There was so much injustice that the church had no choice but to come together. Just no choice."

Harrison reflects on the tragedy's toll on him and his community: "George Floyd, man, um, that

just shook us all. It required so much of us on so many levels. It was emotionally and spiritually

draining. But, um, you know, it brought us all closer."

Conflict: Politics

While the George Floyd tragedy was perceived as a promoter of awareness and unity in

America, the political climate during President Trump's administration hindered unity in the

nation. While the President was the main political figure mentioned by participants, they also

noted that the overall political atmosphere in America was disheartening as Christians. Most participants mentioned the current political climate (from the White House to local Alderman) that hindered unity within the local church, especially between racial groups. Cindy shared her experience within her church during that time. "It was messy. Very difficult navigating those four years. I feel like politics began to creep into our board meetings and sermons. And the issue of race kept growing and uh being more tangible, you know?" The White American participants felt that political views brought out conflict that increased division among Christians regarding political issues and preferences such as abortion and the economy. However, the African American participants felt that political views brought conflict, specifically regarding race. As the topic was discussed, all participants used verbiage and defensive non-verbal cues to justify their political affiliations or perceptions. Stanley asserted, "The people that were bashing [politicians] caused us to be more divided than ever before. You saw on Facebook who was standing for Christian values and who was blinded by race."

Regarding certain voting results, Max stated, "I couldn't believe it. I was like, how, how in the hell can you say you are a Christian? And you vote for a man who says these such things about women. Who says these things about Blacks?" Janet reflected on the personal political stances and endorsements of local pastors. "The politicians and social media pastors that have singlehandedly decided to represent the Evangelical movement in America have done a horrible job in truly representing the diversity and truths of evangelicals."

Intentional Connection: Empathy and Reflection

Intentionality includes proactive measures to bring representation, awareness, and understanding regarding racial diversity to promote a deeper sense of unity. Janet recognizes the impact that intentionality has had within her church. "Our church is intentional about engaging the congregation in issues of race and the African American experience." Janet's church has

taken trips to Washington, D.C., to visit the African American History Museum to open awareness and dialogue about the African American experience in the United States. In addition, Janet asserts that "my church regularly schedules retreats, sermon topics, and training by people of color that address real issues and problems facing the minority community in the city." Max's church experience led to "shock" as he saw how the leaders were intentional about racial unity. "It's a congregation where they actually took a serious look at themselves as it related to race." Max recognized that although imperfect in the execution, the leaders took steps to see where they were personally (and congregationally) on the racial awareness spectrum and looked for ways to move the needle in the right direction.

In addressing empathy, all participants felt that the Evangelical Church should practice empathy. However, the African American participants stated that they perceived that the Church needed to *learn* what true empathy looks like for minorities. For example, Cindy commented, "I think a lot of what's going on here is just a cultural dynamic. And so, then we were kind of talking about how to do culturally sensitive leadership training." However, Janet went further and asserted that "it is not enough to do things to educate yourself intellectually. One must educate themselves emotionally and really switch perspective when exploring the African American experience."

Intentional Connection: Worship Experience

Harrison is a musician, so his experience intertwines the importance of music to connect with people. His perception is that music and the overall worship experience at a church can be a deciding factor for visiting African Americans. "If the music connects with the vibe of the Black community, then they will feel more at home and uh you know, like they belong." Emma shared that her church focuses on what she considers classical White American music with all-White

singers. She perceives that the lack of diverse worship experience is a hindrance to building

racial unity and diversity within her home church. Denise agreed that her experience in

Evangelical churches has been discouraging when the worship music caters to the White

American culture. She shared that she perceives that people would feel more included if African

Americans were present on the worship team and the songs connected to a Gospel style of music.

Racial Tension: Discussion Discomfort

In addition to segregation observations, the participants diverged in their perceptions

when it came to the idea of White privilege. All the African American participants mentioned the

concept of 'discussion discomfort' or 'White guilt' (a concept that the White American

participants did not identify). When the topic arose in individual or racially similar groups, the

African American participants were frustrated with the burden of navigating what they perceived

as White guilt or being the universal representative of their race. Max asserted that the leaders

often ask him about racial dynamics. He admitted that although it was not his verbal reply, he

internally thought, "I'm like, why are you asking me? You know you all built this, so it's up to

you all dismantle it." He shared his perception that:

> Evangelical Christians are at a point where because of their indoctrination that has taken
> place for centuries, it's hard for this generation to break out of that. I believe the next
> generation, Gen Z, will have to be the ones to break out of it.

Similarly, Harrison commented that "as a Black man it frustrates me when Christians look at me

to be okay with what is going on. I love y'all, but I am not okay." He shares that he feels that the

guilty conscience of White Americans can "apply pressure to me and African Americans I guess

in general to pacify their feelings and to help them reach an acceptable level of empathy."

Racial Tension: Trust

According to Max, the need for greater empathy and connection is what attributes people

want to disconnect from the Evangelical church in recent years. "No one wants a part or even be

a part of the word or the name evangelical at my church. No one wants to be associated with that

because of all the racial hurt that has happened recently." Harrison and Janet agreed that racial

tensions and racism, especially by Evangelical leaders and the people they affiliated with, have

caused people to distance themselves from the label 'evangelical.' Harrison observed that:

> I have no problem with the Gospel and with Christ, I just have a problem with Christians not actually living the Gospel and following Christ. For that reason, you know I don't always share that I'm an evangelical when people ask.

Janet shared that she feels a disconnect from the title "evangelical" because the people in the

news and politics that have "singlehandedly decided to represent the Evangelical movement in

America have done a horrible job in truly representing the diversity and truths of evangelicals."

Evaluation of the Research Design

When looking over the data collection and the data analysis process, the researcher

discovered that the research design itself was reasonably crafted, but the data collection process

was much longer than initially anticipated. Obtaining participants that met the IRB-approved

qualifications and expectations was unexpectedly a tediously long process. The researcher

encountered "busyness" as the main deterrent for participants joining the research study. The

researcher is aware that the excuse of "busyness" is most likely a mask for many other reasons

for not wanting to participate. However, when participants did agree on the study and initial

screening surveys were completed, the researcher found that the time availability given by the

prospective participants reflected extremely busy schedules. The lack of available time was more

prominent among the ministry leaders and pastors. Another observation was that many

prospective participants were open to completing a survey (something they could complete in

their own time) instead of an interview or a focus group. The survey-only method may have

suited a quantitative research design, which is helpful for the researcher to note for future research on the topic.

Due to the cultural and health climate during the research, the design methodology contained avenues for Covid restrictions. As a result, the initial research design operated from a "plan B" status, which was effective but not what the researcher would have ideally desired. The video conferencing, recording, and transcribing processes were easy because the researcher previously utilized the protocols. The interviews ran smoothly, and the participants were all eager to share their experiences and observations. The willingness to share eliminated awkward silences or lulls in the data collection process. As a result, much information was collected in a shorter interview time than expected. The coding software, Atlas, was a new endeavor for the researcher and required a learning curve that included re-categorizing themes, redoing uploads, and reorganizing coding tables many times.

Regarding saturation, the participant pool was lower than initially desired, and therefore full saturation was difficult to achieve. There were areas of agreement and repeated themes within the data. Specifically, within the same racial classifications, the participants repeated the same key themes and perspectives. The similar experiences, observations, and perspectives were despite the participants being from different generations, having different spiritual journeys, and being connected with different churches. Due to the smaller-sized participation pool, the researcher did utilize semi-structured questioning to probe for outlying themes that may not have been discussed, to help encourage saturation of data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018). In addition, the participants' eagerness during the initial 1-on-1 interviews informed the researcher greatly regarding the experiences and perceptions of the participants, which made further probing more strategic during future interviews and focus groups.

The strategy of multiple focus groups that incorporated both affinity racial groups and mixed racial groups was helpful to gather information in multiple settings. The affinity groups shared more on an emotional level when interviewed regarding racial tensions or experiences with racism. Additionally, themes such as 'discussion discomfort' and personal political ideologies were more expressed in the affinity groups. When the focus groups were mixed with all participants, there was an initial hesitation to fully express the emotional level as the affinity groups. However, as time progressed, all participants became more open and vulnerable in sharing their observations and experiences. Also in the mixed focus groups, the White Americans appeared intentional regarding listening more than speaking. Themes such as empathy, congregational inclusion, and member engagement were more frequently discussed during the mixed focus groups. Participants verbalized thankfulness for being able to share their experiences, hear diverse perceptions, and be part of a conversation that they perceive is important for the local church.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Research Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore if there was a perception or experiential knowledge of racial disunity between White Evangelical ministry leaders and African American congregants and community members in the Chicago area. If participants perceived disunity, then the researcher explored the experiences and contributing factors. Within the context of this research, the researcher defined racial disunity as intentional disconnect or apathy toward unity between two racial groups of people, namely African Americans and White Americans. The theory used in this study was transformative leadership and the influence of leadership on the issue of racial unity.

Research Questions

The following Research Questions guided this study:

RQ1. Based on experience or observation, what do Evangelical church leaders in Chicago perceive as the state of racial unity between White church leaders and African American congregants and community members?

RQ2. Based on experience or observation, what do congregants in Evangelical Chicago churches believe is the state of racial unity between White church leaders and African American congregants and community members?

RQ3. What factors do Evangelical church leaders perceive as promoters of and hindrances to racial diversity within the local church?

RQ4. Based on lived experiences, what factors do African American congregants and community members perceive are promoters of and hindrances to racial diversity within the local church?

Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications

This study has provided additional information, experiences, and perceptions that can lend themselves to the ongoing discussions and research regarding racial unity within the Evangelical churches in Chicago. While the participant pool was limited in size, the repeated

themes and perceptions revealed in the research enabled the researcher to identify key findings.

Conclusions to Research Questions

Conclusions to RQ1 and RQ2

In terms of racial unity, the finding was that racial unity is an issue within Evangelical churches represented in this study. White church leaders perceived the disunity between leadership and the African American congregation as minimal and able to be remedied. In comparison, the African American congregants perceived the disunity was significant and would take miraculous work to be remedied. Two of the research questions focused on the experience or observation of the participants regarding the perceived state of racial unity between White church leaders and African American congregants and community members in Chicago (RQ1 and RQ2).

The findings from the data reveal that all participants, regardless of racial classification, believed there was a general disconnect between White church leaders and African American congregants and community members. However, the level of disconnect was where the racial classification of the participants demonstrated a difference in perception. The White church leaders perceived a lesser disconnect (i.e., more racial unity), and the African American congregants perceived a greater disconnect (i.e., less racial unity) within the Chicago area. The church leaders shared their experiences regarding attempts to bridge the racial gap and to find intentional ways to make African American congregants feel welcomed. The congregants perceived the attempts at racial unity, but each expressed their observations and experiences that the attempts were not as effective as the church leadership intended. For example, the church leaders highlighted the avenues in which the church had programs and activities that created a welcoming environment.

In contrast, the congregants highlighted the fact that White Americans were the vast majority in the congregations despite the diverse culture of the community in Chicago. In addition, the congregants all observed the segregated Chicago landscape regarding Sunday morning services (Lichter et al., 2016). Whereas most of the church leaders either did not observe the segregation and disparity in representation or did not personally perceive it as a forefront concern.

When examining the perception regarding racial unity within the Evangelical church, African American participants referenced historical, systematic, and social aspects. The current status of racial unity was viewed as intricately connected with the historical climate of race in America and the systematic disparities in Chicago (i.e., housing, healthcare, and education) (Burke et al., 2018; Bleich et al., 2019). The African American participants all had experiences that supported their perceptions that racial unity was an issue and that it stemmed from greater social issues (Brown, 2019, p. 136). The church leaders in this study did not have personal experiences of disparity or social injustice, and they did not readily connect racial unity with a larger systematic issue. Instead, the church leaders observed that social issues could be addressed through more outreach-orientated endeavors such as neighborhood festivals, food drives, and clothing donations.

Examining the larger community, the participants all perceived a disconnect between the majority White Evangelical churches within the study and the surrounding African American community. While various methods were discussed for reaching the community, the congregational demographic did not reflect the diversity of the community in which a specific church was located. A key difference in the data occurred when examining the emphasis on disconnection. The church leaders emphasized the attempts to connect with the community

through outreach events such as food drives, youth groups, holiday events, and small groups. The congregants within the study emphasized the disconnect and the need to act more intentionally about bridging the racial gap between the local church and the African American community. All participants anchored on a biblical worldview and, therefore, sincerely desired to see their respective communities experience the love of Christ. Yet the African Americans within this study believed that experiencing the love of Christ required more consistent and intentional interaction with the injustice that directly affected the African American community.

Conclusions to RQ3 and RQ4: Promoters of Unity

The findings are that within Evangelical churches represented in this study, specific promoters of racial diversity existed between White Evangelical church leaders and the African American congregation and community (see RQ3 and RQ4). Specifically identified promoters include crisis events, affinity groups and outreaches that target minority needs, and intentional education and action regarding racial awareness. The main promoter identified across all participants was the presence of a crisis event, namely the increased police brutality cases that emerged in mainstream media. Regardless of their socio-political ideologies, each participant recognized that their church's responses to incidents such as the George Floyd case assisted in demonstrating racial unity in their communities.

The police brutality incidents that recently surfaced in America served as a crisis catalyst for racial connection and unity. The exposure of potentially racially motivated or racially biased cases of police officers wounding or killing African American males gained national attention and surged in the social media culture. Evangelical church leaders and members that were part of this study recognized that the police brutality events created a racial crisis that motivated local churches to lean into the issue of racism and racial disunity. In joint efforts to bring attention or

solutions to the crisis of racial disunity, White church leaders, African American congregants, and community members engaged in civil marches, prayer walks, sermon, teaching series, and collective brainstorming that helped bridge the gap between the different racial groups.

The findings reflected that bridging the racial gap was attempted through intentional acts of social justice and education. Churches represented in this research focused on tangible avenues of educating the leaders and members. Generating curriculum and training seminars on racism and racial equality supported building racial unity. Church leaders attempted to connect across racial lines through social justice action steps such as community outreaches, tutoring sessions, providing school supplies, providing groceries to low-income families and single mothers, making donations to funds within the city that helps disenfranchised individuals, taking trips to educational museums and exhibits, and getting involved with town-hall meetings (Woodbridge, 2019; Kandiah (2017). A key difference was that White leaders within this study were more optimistic about a one-time event or outreach addressing police brutality against African Americans. At the same time, all the African Americans within this study recognized that the one-time attempts were merely starting points in what should be an ongoing conversation regarding creating true racial unity and justice within the nation and local church.

Conclusions to RQ3 and RQ4: Hindrances of Unity

The findings are that within Evangelical churches represented in this study, there exist specific hindrances of racial diversity between White Evangelical church leaders and the African American congregation and community, namely politics and mistrust of motivations (see RQ3 and RQ4). The largest area of division noted within the research data was politics and political affiliation's role in racial unity. While national crisis moments help to bridge racial divides, national political agendas (regardless of which side of the political aisle) facilitate racial division.

The findings demonstrated that political affiliation was the strongest emotional trigger among the participants when discussing racial unity, especially during specific presidential administrations. Regardless of a person's political preference, the findings reveal that bringing politics into the local church dynamics created tension in relationships and community-building.

Another area that the data revealed tension in racial unity was the aspect of trust. The African American participants alluded to mistrust regarding the motivation for building relationships across racial lines. The data showed that African American participants did not securely believe that the attempts at racial unity initiated by the church leaders were genuine. Perceptions of White guilt were a repeated theme in the findings that caused African American participants to question the motivations behind actions for racial unity. The undercurrent of mistrust was exposed as a hindrance to racial unity because congregants felt like a project instead of a person.

Future Implications

In the area of racial unity, the research study showed an overall pessimistic view about the future of local churches in Chicago to reach a form of racial unity that is reflective of biblical principles. The participants, across both racial groups, were hopeful about their local churches creating more space to discuss the topic and navigate practical issues that hinder racial diversity and unity. However, most of the participants perceived that outside an intervening miraculous work of God, racial unity in the larger context of all churches in Chicago would not happen in their lifetimes. Yet even in those assertions, transformative leadership and intentional discipleship were avenues of hope for the participants as they reflected on race within their spheres of influence.

As the participants shared their experiences and perceptions, varying aspects of the tenets

of transformative leadership (as outlined earlier in this paper) were noticeable as participants discussed promoters of racial unity and the church's future. The African American participants highlighted the recognition of privilege and power as something that needs to be part of the leadership's awareness when considering race. A few White American participants perceived that the power schism needed to be repaired to see true racial unity within the church. The overall perception was that leaders needed to not only give representation to African Americans within the church but also the power that carries influence.

The study revealed that influential leadership was a needed ingredient for identifying areas where the church's moral compass was askew in terms of racism and unity. Additionally, the participants demonstrated their eagerness to see more than quick outreaches and sermon topics that address inequality and racial disunity. Instead, strategic planning and training would uncover deeper sources of solutions and more effective promoters of racial unity. As strategies emerged, participants felt that courage would arise for local leaders and congregations to engage in social activism and social justice that would help mend broken relationships between the races within their local churches and communities. Peering into a hypothetical future, participants desired to see a substantial and sustainable change that would foster true biblical racial unity between predominantly White American churches and African American congregants and community members.

Fostering biblical unity through transformative leadership requires intentional discipleship to help unlearn incorrect racist, biased, uninformed conclusions and learn (or relearn) biblical truths around unity. The intentional inclusion of issues of engaging in social justice, loving one's neighbor, and demonstrating compassion in practical ways across racial lines could be beneficial to developing Christians walking in biblical truth. In the event of

another crisis, racial discord, or political conflict, the perception was that well-disciplined Christians could rise to the challenge of being salt and light in tangible ways to minority racial and cultural groups. As the church engages in the command of Matthew 28:18-20 to make disciples of all nations, it is imperative to teach the totality of the Gospel, including the *imago Dei* concept. Recognition of the intrinsic value of each human empowers leaders and congregants to operate with a biblical framework of compassion, empathy, and justice. The perspective of a person carrying the image of God regardless of their racial classification may help to anchor the Church through the societal issues of racism.

Findings Related to the Literature

Recognition as a valuable person within the church and overall society was important to the participants in the study. Society and cultural backgrounds have conditioned people to examine the exterior and make general judgments and assumptions based on what is seen (Tisby, 2019). The participants shared perceptions that echoed the literature regarding biblical compassion and racial unity. Two participants transparently shared that they and their circle of church friends have fallen prey to assumptions and prejudices based on someone's race within their church. The participants further shared that their perceptions and presuppositions were hindrances to walking in racial unity.

Therefore, the issue of certain police cases that dehumanized victims in America (Lovelace, 2021; Scott et al., 2017), was also a concern within the local churches that were part of this study. The participants shared their perception of racism in the police brutality cases and subsequent aftermath that was present at the time of the study. As a result, the participants recognized that national and citywide crisis, such as police brutality against African Americans, was a surprising catalyst for building racial unity. Societal racism created a common enemy for

White church leaders, African American congregants, and community members to fight against. Ironically, and unfortunately, without the heavy attention on the George Floyd cases and similar cases, the local churches may not have united to combat racial disparity.

In the combat against racial disparity, the findings point to social justice as a helpful solution. Afulike (2018) highlighted that social justice is an avenue for proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a local church's primary objective. The participants' perceptions in this study aligned with the literature that social justice is a practical and necessary way of reflecting Jesus to communities. The participants utilized the word 'outreach,' which refers to tangible acts (events or smaller scale) that aid marginalized people in their areas (Kandiah, 2017). If the difficulty of mistrust of motives can be overcome, then the outreach concept is perhaps another way of verbalizing the objectives of what Afulike refers to as social justice. The intentional acts of outreach and serving the community aligns with Woodbridge's (2019) observation that people must recognize the God of compassion and mercy that is found in the Bible. Racial unity is fostered when people actively get into their communities and advocate for the voiceless and the marginalized (Groenewald, 2016). However, the study also revealed that there is a difference in how the White American and African American participants viewed social engagement. The White American participants appeared more prone to classify social engagement as a one-time or seasonal community outreach such as giving clothes. This viewpoint may hinder the full effectiveness the local church can have in finding sustainable solutions to justice issues that affect the African American community.

The participants in the study revealed the significant role that leadership plays in creating and preserving racial unity. Each local church represented in the study had transformative style leadership that did not want racism to dominate their culture. The leadership created

relationships, addressed racial crisis issues that were prevalent in their areas, harnessed the

power of the community, and empowered people to find innovative ways to educate the

congregation and reflect Christ (Grin et al., 2018; Kotter, 2012). A key aspect revealed in the

study was the perception that local leaders needed to actively engage in learning about

underlining racial issues that specifically affect the African American community. Participants

shared how intentional conversations, workshops, and staff meetings are crucial for developing

what Bonaparte described as a "learning culture" (2015, p. 26).

Part of the learning culture was identified by some participants as an awareness to

identify and flow with societal change (Kotter, 2012). Participants shared that the heightened

awareness of police brutality and the pandemic placed pressure on church leaders to change their

methods of connection and engagement. The study revealed a strong perception that connection

should go beyond mere fellowship, and incorporate problem-solving techniques (Grin et al.,

2018). While the methodology and level of awareness varied among participants in this study,

the perception was that the leadership was making some effort. Considering the grand topic of

racism in America, participants perceived the effectiveness and trustworthiness of the effort in

varying degrees.

The concept of mistrust around racial disunity is not new. The findings reinforced the

literature on the topic by acknowledging mistrust is an undercurrent of racial disunity in America

(Eberhardt, 2019; Heschel, 2015). The literature offered avenues for mitigating the findings

regarding hindrances to racial unity and diversity. Warner and Konkel (2019) shared that local

churches offer one of the best avenues for building (or rebuilding) trust in the area of racial

connections. The local church has the potential to serve as a catalyst for trust within the

community and is a helpful promoter of that trust. McNeil (2015) shared that connection and

trust are essential for White Americans to demonstrate they authentically care about minority communities. The findings in this research agreed and demonstrated that trust is a vital part of building racial unity. The findings also show that African American members within this study did not fully trust the church leadership's motivations. An area that was not addressed in this study (but can be useful for future research) is if White leaders within the local church can operate effectively if they are unable to overcome the mistrust of congregants. Ironically, the location where Warner and Konkel asserted trust is key (the local church), was the same location where trust was questioned. This difference may be due to the sampling pool for this research, or it can point toward a larger issue that can be further studied.

Research Limitations

This research was limited to the scope of a small geographic region within the United States. The participation pool was limited to twelve participants, comprising two racial demographics. Additionally, the research focused on a section within the church and focused on pastors and leaders within those local churches. While the research narrowed its focus for data collection and analysis, the limited scope also served as a research limitation. The researcher recognized that the limited scope was not a full reflection of the entire body of Christ and therefore there was room for continued study and broader perspectives.

The participants' perspectives were captured through a qualitative approach to data collection. The interviews, focus groups, and open-ended questions allowed for a more robust discussion of perceptions and experiences (Leedy and Ormrod, 2018), crucial to researching the questions posed within this study. Additionally, the structure of the interviews and focus groups provided an opportunity for engagement and observation that would not have been possible through quantitative questionnaires and surveys (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The limitations of

these methods are that the data collection and analysis are more time-consuming, which may limit the number of participants allowed to engage. Researchers looking to expand upon this study may find it fruitful to work in research teams to expand the data collection capacity within a set period.

Overall, the interview process of the data collection followed the general expectations of the outline in Chapter Three, with some notable exceptions. Due to the Covid pandemic, there were some restrictions on group gatherings in the Chicago area. In addition, with the number of cases on the rise in Chicago, many people were cautious of in-person interviews and groups. As a result, the data collection was processed and recorded via the video conferencing platform Zoom Video Communication, Inc. In addition, the data collection time was longer than the researcher initially anticipated, specifically due to the lack of interest or the busy schedules of potential participants. Janet, one of the African American participants was unable to fully attend the joint interviews (focus groups) with the other participants due to personal scheduling.

Roberts (2010) shared that "A limitation is a factor that may or will affect the study in an important way, but is not under the control of the researcher" (p.133). For this study, certain limitations out of the researcher's control existed, namely the Covid pandemic and subsequent social restrictions. The study was initially planned for in-person interviews and focus groups. However, the social distancing and public shutdowns along with gathering fears of some participants made it impractical to execute the methodology. This particular study had to adjust the methodology to Zoom focus groups and interviews, which allowed for proper data collection. This limitation reduced the ability for in-person observation and researcher analysis which is unique to being in the same space as a participant (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018). In addition, the lack of in-person data collection makes it difficult to reduce environmental and social distractions

(depending on where participants connect to the Zoom application). However, in-person interaction may yield more detailed data analysis for future studies.

Further Research

Future research opportunities are extensive, but it would be helpful to expand the current study to explore the topics of racial unity across a greater demographic in Chicago. This study only included twelve participants, which limits its scope concerning the topic of racial unity. A more extensive study with a sampling pool in more neighborhoods in Chicago and with more churches would reflect a stronger picture of the local Evangelical church in Chicago. With a larger pool of participants, researchers can delve into subthemes that may emerge and provide a deeper analysis of the current state of racial unity. Expanding focus groups will allow future researchers to collect data revealing new trends and perspectives beyond this current study. The expansive focus groups will also enable more participants to share their experiences without a time limitation.

Also, a nuance that would be intriguing would be to focus on a specific church and perform the research study within one congregation, especially if the leadership is White American and the congregation has ample African Americans interested in participating. One church's focus may help eliminate factors that may cause a disparity in the results. A singular congregation will have the same life events, geography, community, and engagement. Therefore, the variables are decreased when looking at one congregation instead of multiple. It will be interesting to explore if the perceptions of congregants and leaders within the same local church are similar or if they diverge in certain aspects. The research will allow researchers to dissect racial unity to alleviate deviants from different Chicago neighborhoods, pastoral leadership styles, and varying agendas of local churches.

Additionally, since a national crisis was identified as a catalyst for promoting racial unity, a further study considering the Covid-19 crisis and aftermath would be interesting to note its effects on how the local churches have made steps toward increased unity and connecting with the African American population. The pandemic affected the entire nation (and the world), so the crisis component is more universal and a shared experience than the police brutality that was mentioned in this study. The shared experience of the pandemic will allow researchers to explore subthemes regarding promoters of racial unity as it relates to the crisis. While certain demographics may have experienced a different rate of Covid infection, the crisis was broad enough to encompass every racial group. It will be a noteworthy study to see how a collective crisis, one that is not linked to race, adds to the current data.

This study focused on African American congregations and communities regarding racial unity, but further study on various minority groups and their perceptions and experiences could provide a fuller picture of racial unity within Chicago. This study leaned on the relationship between White church leaders and African American congregants, yet research questions can easily emerge that focus on racial unity between various combinations of racial groups (i.e. Latino congregants and White church leaders, Asian congregants and African American church leaders, White congregants and Latino church leaders). Additionally, utilizing African American church leaders as a participant group may provide insight into the underlining issues of racial unity as it pertains to leadership. For example, is racial disunity present simply with White church leadership, or is the issue one that transcends the race of the leaders and goes to a deeper systemic concern? How would racial unity and diversity be perceived if the pastor were African American and White Americans were a minority percentage of the congregation? These adjustments of populations may provide insight as to how the church views racism, what

contributing factors to racism, and if representation is sufficient to dismantle racial disunity.

Summary

The role of racism in America is a vast topic that finds its roots in the historical, economic, social, and spiritual soil of the nation. This study focused on a small subsection of Evangelical churches in Chicago to uncover if racism that is present in the nation has permeated into the pews. The findings revealed that racial disunity is present within the Evangelical churches in this study. The findings also revealed that through transformative leadership, social justice endeavors, and bonding during the national crisis, the local churches are moving in a direction that resembles the biblical principle of unity and love. A key aspect that was discovered was the way White church leaders and African American congregants approached the issue of racial disparity. The White leaders mainly focused on the current fruit of the issue, such as an African American male being killed by a police officer. The African American congregants were more concerned about the root of the issue of racism in America which led to the current fruit. While the current state of racism was important to the African Americans in this study, they were unsatisfied with stopping at the current condition without examining the historical condition of racism in society and within the church.

The study's findings were not surprising or contrary to previous literature, but it did help to confirm that racial unity is an issue that needs to be addressed seriously within the local church community. Extending beyond the ordinary methods of local church fellowship and occasional outreaches, racial unity requires intentional problem-solving methodologies that anchor in seeing biblical compassion and justice displayed within the local church and communities (Woodbridge, 2019). Pastors and leaders with a biblical worldview have an opportunity to make a mark on history by changing the narrative of racism in their city and being

transformative leaders that engage in intentional discipleship and social justice for the people they shepherd.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval

Date: 2-14-2022

IRB #: IRB-FY21-22-571
Title: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE PERCEPTION OF RACIAL DISUNITY IN EVANGELICAL CHURCHES IN CHICAGO
Creation Date: 12-16-2021
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Amber Harvey
Review Board: Research Ethics Office
Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Expedited	Decision	Approved

Key Study Contacts

Member		Role		Contact	
Member	Jeffrey Davis	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	
Member	Amber Harvey	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	
Member	Amber Harvey	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	

Appendix B

Consent

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Study of the Perception of Racial Disunity in Evangelical Churches in Chicago

Principal Investigator: Amber L. Harvey, Graduate Student in Doctoral Program at Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be atleast 25 years old, able to and willing to partake in Zoom focus groups, reside in Chicago area, affiliate with the Evangelical church, and belong to one of the following categories: White-American church leader or African-American congregant. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to explore if there is a perception or experiential knowledge of racial unity between White Evangelical church leaders and African American congregants in the Chicago area.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
1. Complete an initial survey (1 minute) that collects your demographic information. Your identity will remain protected.
2. Be part of interviews or focus groups (30-60 minutes each) facilitated by the researcher to discuss personal and shared experiences and perceptions regarding racial disunity in the local church and community. The interview will be videorecorded for research purposes. Your identity will remain protected.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include assisting local Evangelical churches to navigate racial issues within the Chicago area.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher and observer will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms and codes. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer. Only the researcher and observer will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged by the researcher, it is possible that other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you (apart from focus group data) will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Amber Harvey. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ███████████████████████. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Jeffrey Davis, at ███████████████████████.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Printed Subject Name

_____

Signature & Date

Appendix C

Recruitment Email Sample

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in education. The purpose of my research is to investigate the perception of racial disunity within the local Evangelical church in Chicago, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants, if willing, will be asked to partake in:

1. An initial interview to gather background data and
2. two Zoom focus groups (approximately 60 minutes).

The Zoom focus groups will take place Thursday March 17, Tuesday March 22, or April 4 depending on your availability.

If you or anyone in your network is willing to participate, please complete the informational electronic survey before March 13, 2022 at: https://bit.ly/harveyresearch

Participants must be atleast 25 years old, able and willing to partake in Zoom or in-person interviews and focus groups within Chicago area, reside in Chicago area, affiliate themself with an Evangelical church, and belong to one of the following categories: White-American church leader or African-American congregant. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and electronically return it to me.

Sincerely,

Amber L. Harvey
Doctoral Candidate at Liberty University
████████████████

Appendix D

Sample Interview and Focus Group Questions

These sample questions are not in a particular order and were not all utilized depending on the conversation dynamics of the given focus group or interview.

1. Describe the racial demographic of your local church.
2. Describe the racial demographic of the community in which your church is located.
3. What is the race of your local church pastor?
4. What is the racial make-up of your local church leadership team?
5. Do you perceive that the racial make-up of your church leadership in relation to the congregation and community plays any factor in the racial unity within your church or church neighborhood?
6. Have you had any experiences that show racial disunity within the local church?
7. What do you perceive are the effects (positive and negative) due to the racial differences between White Evangelical church leaders and African American communities?
8. How do you believe leadership within the local church can play a role in racial unity (both within the church and within the community)?
9. Have you had any experiences where church leadership has played a role (positive or negative) regarding racial unity?
10. What are some contributing factors and what are some hindrances to racial unity, particularly between White-Americans and African Americans within your local church or community?
11. What role do you feel Christians and particularly the local church plays in racial disunity?
12. In what ways has your local church addressed (or continues to address) issues of racism?
13. In what ways has your local church addressed (or continues to address) issues of social justice?
14. What do you feel is the largest obstacle(s) facing churches and their minority members regarding racial unity?
15. How diverse is your inner circle within your church? Outside of your church?
16. Do you feel seen and heard in your local church? Why or why not?
17. Do you believe colorblindness is a beneficial way of viewing the world? Why or why not?
18. How do you feel you can practically help the issues of racial injustice in society?
19. What are some ways you would like to see your church reach out to more cultures?
20. Do you believe that racial unity is a realistic goal for our society? For local churches?
21. General probing questions as follow-up:
    - Please tell me more about that.
    - How did that make you feel?
    - What other things have you noticed about the local church and race?
    - Why do you think that is?