The Costs of Diversity in Religious Organizations: An In-depth Case Study

Brad Christerson
Biola University

Michael Emerson
Rice University

A significant body of literature has documented and explained the racial and ethnic homogeneity of volunteer organizations, including religious ones. This paper seeks to break new ground by beginning to examine ethnically diverse religious organizations. In this study we ask: What are the personal costs of being in a multiethnic religious organization, and are these costs borne disproportionately by any specific groups of people? Drawing on macrostructural theories of intergroup relations and social psychological principles, we hypothesize that minority groups (in size and power) within ethnically mixed congregations will disproportionately bear costs compared to the majority group. We test our hypotheses using a case study congregation, conducting in-depth interviews with 22 members and 4 former members of the congregation. We also conduct a network analysis with 38 members of the congregation. We conclude that the same social dynamics that tend to produce internal homogeneity in volunteer organizations also produce high personal costs of belonging to multiethnic religious organizations. This is an important finding because it leads to the larger question of how multiethnic religious organizations survive despite these costs.

INTRODUCTION

Volunteer organizations in the United States are overwhelmingly racially homogenous. Religious congregations certainly are no exception. According to the National Congregations Survey, about nine out of every ten American religious congregations are comprised of at least ninety percent of one racial group (Chaves 1999).

We have a growing body of theoretical literature and empirical works focusing on why volunteer organizations are internally homogenous along factors like race and ethnicity. These works focus on macro sociological reasons such as the ecology of organizations and demographics (e.g., Blau 1977; Blau and

* Both authors contributed equally to this article. Direct correspondence to Brad Christerson, Department of Sociology, Biola University, La Mirada, CA 90639. This research was supported by grant #1998 1384-000 from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. We thank the anonymous reviewers and the editor for their helpful comments.
Schwartz 1984; McPherson, Popielarz, and Drobnic 1992; Popielarz and McPherson 1995), and on the social psychology of group formation and status similarity (e.g., Samuelson and Zeckhauser 1988; Tversky and Kahneman 1990; Verbrugge 1977). Emerson and Smith (2000:chap 7) bring these works together to show why religious congregations are segregated along racial lines, even apart from issues of prejudice and discrimination.

So much attention has been focused on explaining why volunteer organizations generally, and religious congregations specifically, are segregated that little research has looked at how it is possible to have racially and ethnically integrated congregations (see Becker 1999 for an examination of how one was established). Multiethnic congregations, precisely because they exist despite an overwhelming case that has been built against them, present researchers with a ripe field for exploring many important questions within religion, social organization, and social relations.

In this paper we wish to begin the transition from studying why congregations are racially segregated to why some are racially integrated. To do this we ask: What are the personal costs of being in a multiethnic religious organization, and are these costs borne disproportionately by any specific groups of people?

At first glance, our focus may seem an odd one with which to begin a shift from asking why congregations are segregated to why some are integrated. But the questions of personal costs for those within multiethnic congregations are pivotal for ushering in a transition in research focus. Transition questions should speak to both the old research focus and the new research focus, and should build upon the knowledge gained from the older perspective. Our question does exactly this.

Looking forward to the new focus that asks why some organizations are ethnically diverse, we encounter an important fact. If we do not first closely study the costs of being in such organizations, we cannot fully theorize and understand why, even in the face of these costs, some congregations are multiethnic. As such, it is essential that the costs of belonging to a multiethnic congregation be carefully mapped and understood.

To do so we build upon knowledge gained from the old perspective by drawing on existing literature on social homophily (see McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001 for a seminal review). We use this literature to specify hypotheses about the personal and group costs of belonging to a multiethnic congregation (to help set the context of these costs, we also briefly look at benefits). The social homophily literature rarely speaks directly to the personal costs of being in multiethnic volunteer organizations, but important hypotheses can be logically inferred.

We then move beyond the empirical work on social homophily, which leaves the mediating steps between sociodemographic characteristics and organizational memberships unmeasured, untested, and often under-theorized, by examining mediating effects and testing our hypotheses through in-depth face-
to-face interviews. This method allows us to understand what people are thinking and feeling in the multiracial environment, areas left untouched by social homophily researchers.

**THEORIZING COSTS OF BELONGING TO A MULTIETHNIC CONGREGATION**

With some exceptions (e.g., see Ellison and Sherkat 1995), adult attendance and membership in U.S. religious organizations is voluntary (e.g., Finke and Stark 1988; 1992; Warner 1993). People choose if they wish to be involved in religious organizations, and in which one(s) to be involved (Becker, Ellingson, Flory, Griswold, Kniss and Nelson 1993; Finke and Stark 1992; Roof and McKinney 1987). Given that people are able to choose their congregations, including choosing to leave them, specialization and niche marketing are used to provide religious goods to people (Stark and Finke 2000: Chap. 8). People seek corporate religion to satisfy basic needs of meaning and belonging. To achieve these, group boundaries and social solidarity are necessary, including shared identity, values, symbols, and practices (Ammerman 1997; Becker 1998). According to theories of the religious marketplace, successful competitors tend to be those congregations that cater to specific sub-populations. This is because:

> the cost of producing meaning, belonging, and security in internally diverse congregations is usually much greater — because of the increased complexity of demands, needs, and backgrounds, the increased effort necessary to create social solidarity and group identity, and the greater potential for internal conflict. Thus, internally homogenous congregations more often provide what draws people to religious groups for a lower cost than do internally diverse congregations (Emerson and Smith 2000:145).

Why is this so? To answer this question, we explore macro sociological and social psychological reasons.

**Macro Sociological Reasons for Costs**

According to Pamela Popielarz and J. Miller McPherson (1995), heterogeneous volunteer groups, such as congregations, are inherently unstable. This is due, they argue, to two main processes: the *niche edge effect* and the *niche overlap effect*. The niche edge effect means that members who are atypical of the group — described as those who are at the edge of the niche rather than the core — leave faster than others members. Because social network ties influence membership duration in voluntary groups (McPherson, Popielarz, and Drobnic 1992), "members at the edge of the organization’s niche will have higher turnover than members at the center of the organization’s niche, as a result of their higher proportion of extraorganizational ties and their lower proportion of intraorganizational ties" (Popielarz and McPherson 1995:703).
Atypical members also are more likely to leave due to the niche overlap effect. When the niches of groups partially overlap, they recruit some same-kind members. For the members simultaneously being recruited by multiple groups — again, those on the edge and thus most dissimilar — the result is less stability of membership in any one group, due to finite access to time and other resources. Thus, atypical group members are not only more likely to leave a group due to a lack of intra-organizational ties, but because competition for them to join other groups is more intense then it is for core group members.

In a multiethnic congregation, we define the core as those in the numerical majority and as those who hold key leadership positions which characterize the way the congregation is structured. We define those on the edge as all others. Exploring whether the same macro-structural costs exist using different definitions of edge and core is an important question that will be addressed in our future work.

For multiracial congregations to maintain multiple racial groups, they have to be populated by people who are more integrated across race than the general population. Otherwise, they will fall victim to the niche edge and overlap effects. Such people may have more racially diverse social networks before they arrive at such congregations, or they may develop these networks because they are in such congregations. Thus, to thrive, multiethnic congregations must devote much effort to developing cross-ethnic networks among its congregants. Rudowski, in his essay, "The Inclusive Church" (in Stumme 1995), argues that this renders multiethnic congregations inefficient in fulfilling religion's purposes. Attempts to be inclusive invariably lead to frustration, confusion, and conflict, pulling congregations away from their primary tasks.

Although untested, Shachar (2000) argues that in multicultural organizations, while minority group members (in terms of size and power/influence) can accrue benefits as groups, as individuals they typically will bear the disproportionate costs for preserving solidarity and group boundaries. We explore reasons for this claim shortly, but note now that insofar as this claim is correct, to be part of such congregations, as opposed to congregations comprised of one's own cultural group, is risky. To the degree that a congregation is a source of support, consolation, celebration, and strength, if persons do not feel integrated into the congregation, if their worth or troubles are devalued — in Popielarz and McPherson's terms, if they are at the niche edge — they lose compared to what they could receive in uniethnic congregations.

The potential of costs go beyond how people in the congregation treat and value one another, for inequality in costs, extending from the work of Blau and Schwartz (1984), is built into the very nature of relative group size. Starting with the well-supported premise that social associations are more common between persons in proximate rather than distant social positions, we arrive at important implications.
The larger the group, the lower the rate of outgroup relations. Conversely, smaller groups' probability of outgroup relations increases, meaning a greater amount of meaning and belonging must be gained from members of other groups, putting persons of smaller groups at greater risk for failure to meet their needs for meaning and belonging (and we should add, greater potential, if successful, of crossing group boundaries). These effects are amplified in smaller congregations, or in congregations in which the number of people in one's own cultural group is small in absolute terms. In all, Blau and Schwartz's theory suggests that while integration promotes positive social relations and social mobility within the organization as a whole, for the subgroups, the following should be true: Majority members largely experience benefits (their needs are easily met by same race members, so the addition of "diversity" is experienced largely as an additional positive to the congregation), whereas minority members experience both costs and benefits (they venture across racial boundaries not just for enjoyment and novelty, but to gain meaning and belonging, which entails more effort and more risk, as we outline below).

Social Psychological Reasons for Costs

In part due to the macro sociological reasons discussed above, people generally prefer to be with people like themselves. This is a basic social psychological principle. Studies repeatedly find that status similarity among friends is high, especially for characteristics such as race, sex, and age (Hallinan and Williams 1989; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Lazerfeld and Merton 1964; Verbrugge 1977). One reason for this repeated finding is that social associations between like people are more stable. Stability enables the creation of meaning and belonging, the very reasons people seek association with others.

Of course, this similarity is often socially created. It is also shaped by history. We operate from a status quo bias, that is, the tendency for people to prefer what they have, even if gains could be made by selecting an alternative (Samuelson and Zeckhauser 1988). The religious history of an individual therefore matters. Indeed, as Chaves and Montgomery (1996) show, even if this religious history is randomly assigned to subjects just prior to the time they make their choices, they tend to prefer what they have to what they do not have. Thus, the costs of being a minority member of a multiethnic congregation will be greatest, it would seem, for those with religious histories that differ the most from the majority group.¹

¹ We use the terms "dominant" and "majority" when referring to a group that has the largest number of individuals within the organization as well as the greatest influence in decision-making. "Minority" refers to groups with lower numbers and decision-making influence within the organization than the dominant group.
Hypothesizing Costs (and Benefits)

Based on the macrostructural theory of social relations (Blau and Schwartz 1984), dominant group members should have, within the congregation, a higher percentage of friends who are of the same ethnicity when compared to the friendship ethnicities of minority group members (H1). Also, based on homophily principles, we should find that the dominant group is more likely to report that their closest friends are within the congregation rather than outside of it, when compared to minority group members' reporting of closest friends (niche edge effect) (H2). Although these hypotheses are suggested by theory, to our knowledge they have never been directly tested. The same is true with the remaining four hypotheses to which we now turn.

We expect that all congregants, whether minority or majority, will talk of costs and benefits. However, we expect their discussion of benefits and costs to differ in scope. Fred Kniss (1996:9) writes that “concrete practices and symbols have more problems with indivisibility than do abstractions.” The closer to lived reality an issue, the more it is open to contention. As such, when people speak of gains, they will tend to be abstractions — harmony, unity, diversity, new perspectives on their faith. But when they speak of costs, they will tend to be complaints and questioning about concrete practices and symbols, such as specific types of music (H3). Importantly, we expect a difference in the perception of the quality of social relationships. The majority group will tend to emphasize social relationships as a benefit of being in the congregation, whereas minority members should emphasize social relationships as a cost of being in the congregation (derived from H1 and H2). We explore this below.

Because majority group members can have a greater percentage of same race friends and a higher percentage of their best friends within the congregation, meaning and belonging are more easily and completely achieved. For these reasons, when majority group members talk of costs, we expect the focus to be on conflict that arises in worship and other concrete practices rather than on lack of social attachments (because their structural positions largely help satisfy the latter) (H4).

For minority group members, we expect them to talk much more about costs than do majority group members (H5). Given their social structural positions, in addition to citing problems with concrete practices and symbols such as worship styles and music (which should increase in frequency the more divergent their cultural worship styles are from the dominant group’s worship style), we expect much discussion about the lack of quality social attachments within the church. Indeed, the lack of quality social attachments, given their importance for meaning and belonging, should be their key point of focus (H6). Despite the extensiveness of these costs, minority group members should still perceive benefits. These benefits, following Kniss (1996), should be primarily expressed as abstractions, such as the joy of diversity.
These hypotheses, derived from pre-existing theory about why volunteer organizations are segregated, but derived with the intent of studying costs within a multiracial organization, have not before been specified and tested. To test our hypotheses, then, requires data not collected by previous studies. As mentioned previously, we assume in making these hypotheses that the dominant group is both the numerical majority in the organization and holds the greatest decision-making power through key leadership positions. Whether these hypotheses would be confirmed in other situations, such as when the numerical minority holds the most decision-making power is outside of the scope of this paper, but will be addressed in our future research.

METHODS

The above hypotheses should apply most strongly to smaller congregations. In larger congregations, even groups constituting a small proportion of the congregation can be large enough to form congregations within a congregation. To most directly test our hypotheses, then, we wished to examine them in the context of a small multi-ethnic congregation. With this in mind, we conducted a case study of a multiethnic church in suburban Los Angeles County that has approximately 140 attenders on any given Sunday. The congregation is young, with the majority of attenders under 30, and only a handful who are over 40. The church is located near an evangelical Christian university and a number of the church’s members are either current or former students.

Although our hypotheses cannot be conclusively tested in this one case, it will allow us to determine whether the dynamics that macrostructural theories of intergroup relations and social psychological principles of homophily would predict exist in this particular congregation. If so, this will give justification for further case studies of other types of congregations. The advantage of using in-depth case studies in exploring these hypotheses is that through in-depth interviews we can access rich qualitative data that will deeply probe the spiritual and relational experiences of the congregants. This would not be accessible in a larger standardized survey.

To avoid confounding congregational majority/minority experiences with societal majority/minority experiences, we sought a multiethnic congregation in which Anglo-Americans were not the largest group. Such a congregation allows us to see if the hypothesized patterns are due to the congregational structure, rather than from majority/minority relations in the larger society. The dominant ethnic group at this church is Filipino, which accounts for slightly over half of the congregation. Most of them are young second generation Filipinos. The next largest group is Anglo-American, making up close to 30 percent of the church. Hispanics make up approximately 10 percent of the congregation, and the small remaining percentage is comprised of an even mix of
African American, Kenyan, Vietnamese, Chinese, and other Asian.\(^2\) The most dominant cultural influences at the church are Filipino-American.

At the time of the interviews, the church had been in existence for almost four years. The church would fit into Emerson and Smith’s (2000) definition of “evangelical” in that it holds the Bible to be the ultimate authority in matters of truth and morality as well as emphasizing “sharing faith” and spreading their beliefs to the wider community and culture. It is also casual and informal, and has a “contemporary” worship style- incorporating folk and soft-rock music into the worship service. The church has ties to the Southern Baptist denomination, but most of the church is unaware of this affiliation, as it is neither included in the name of the church nor are there any references to specifically Baptist teachings or structures in the church.

The church began as an offshoot of a mid-sized all-Filipino Southern Baptist Church in the San Gabriel Valley. The vision of the founding pastor was to break out of the hierarchical, traditional and monoethnic mold of the “mother” church. The founding group of the church desired that the congregation would be multiethnic, but most of the leadership in this group was Filipino, and no specific structures or programs were put into place to attract a multiethnic following. Still, in its three and a half years of existence, the church has become increasingly ethnically diverse.

The top leadership is comprised of four elders (three Filipino-American and one Anglo-American), including the founding pastor (Filipino) who is on full-time staff, a part-time teaching pastor (Filipino), and two volunteer members. The church is intentionally non-programmatic and seeks to downplay programs and activities requiring large inputs of time and energy. The church promotes instead the idea of the “priesthood of all believers” where individual members are encouraged to take it upon themselves to care for others inside and outside of the church through personal relationships. The church has grown from an original core group of 20 to the current 140. In the last year, growth has stabilized and the congregation has remained constant in numbers.

**Data Collection**

We conducted in-depth interviews with 22 current attenders and four people who left the church. This was a purposive sample that included people at various levels of commitment to the church and various lengths of time in attendance. The sample was also chosen to be roughly representative of the ethnic demographics of the congregation.\(^3\) Interview length ranged from 45

---

\(^2\) Since the church has no official membership, a precise ethnic breakdown was not attempted.

\(^3\) Filipinos and Anglos were slightly underrepresented and the other groups were slightly overrepresented in order to get a larger sample of the smaller-sized ethnic groups than would be possible under an exactly representative sample.
minutes to two hours. Questions were open-ended. Respondents were asked to candidly share their likes and dislikes, positive and negative experiences, and their experiences in relating to other people in the congregation. Those who left the church were encouraged to share openly the reasons for their leaving and to compare their experiences at their current churches with the ones they left behind.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenyan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, we collected data on the friendship networks of the congregants. Respondents were asked to give the names and ethnicities of their three closest friends within the church, in rank order. They were also asked to give the names and ethnicities of their three closest friends outside of the church, in rank order. Once these six names and their ethnicities were recorded, the respondent was asked whether (s)he were closer to the number one friend within the church or to the number one friend outside of the church. The respondent was then asked to do the same comparison for the number two friends (inside and outside of the church) and the number three friends.

The sample for this friendship analysis consisted of the purposive sample of 22 people within the church chosen for in-depth interviews, plus an additional 16 individuals randomly selected from the church phone list. In sum, 26 in-depth interviews were conducted and 38 church members were used for the friendship analysis.

RESULTS

Social Network Ties and Friendships (H1 and H2)

According to our first two hypotheses, majority group members should have, within the church, a higher percentage of friends who are of the same ethnicity than minority group members. Also, majority group members should be more

---

4 Anonymity was assured.
likely to report that their closest friends are within the church rather than outside of it, when compared to minority group members reporting of their closest friends.

The data in Table 2 support these hypotheses. The top portion of the table shows that for majority group members — Filipinos — their friendships within the church are much more likely to be same-ethnicity friendships than is the case for non-Filipino friendships. Around eighty percent of Filipinos say their three best friends in the church are Filipino; conversely a third to one half of non-Filipinos say their best friends in the church are of their same ethnicity. These differences were statistically significant. Table 2 also reveals that Filipinos are much more likely to have their closest friends within the church than outside the church, compared to the minority group members. Approximately two-thirds of Filipino members’ top two best friends are within the church, compared to around a third of the non-Filipino members’ two best friends. With the exception of the number three best friend, the differences between Filipinos and non-Filipinos were statistically significant.5

TABLE 2

Analysis of Friendship Networks (n = 38)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Filipino Members</th>
<th>Filipino Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% whose #1 friend within church is same ethnicity as respondent</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>84**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% whose #2 friend within church is same ethnicity as respondent</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>79***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% whose #3 friend within church is same ethnicity as respondent</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>84***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% who chose #1 friend within church as being closer than #1 friend outside</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>58*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% who chose #2 friend within church as being closer than #2 friend outside</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>68**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% who chose #3 friend within church as being closer than #3 friend outside</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Pearson’s Chi-Square test (* p < .1, ** p < .05, *** p < .01).

As an alternative test of hypothesis 1, we examined the composition of the small groups at this church. These groups are highly segregated into predominately Filipino and predominately non-Filipino groups.

5 As an alternative test of hypothesis 1, we examined the composition of the small groups at this church. These groups are highly segregated into predominately Filipino and predominately non-Filipino groups.
Intergroup Differences in Belonging and Other Costs (H4, H5, and H6)

The most striking pattern in our in-depth interviews was the difference in which Filipinos and non-Filipinos spoke about their experience in forming friendships and feeling a sense of belonging in the church. Specifically, most non-Filipinos appeared to be struggling with a lack of close ties within the congregation. Of the 17 non-Filipinos interviewed, 14 spoke of struggles and frustrations with relating to others in the church, and of not feeling connected socially. In contrast, only two of the nine Filipinos that were interviewed mentioned having difficulties in interacting with others, and neither of those two felt that they had a lack of close ties in the church. Three of the four people interviewed that left the church (all non-Filipino) mentioned a lack of belonging as their primary reason for leaving the church.

The problems that non-Filipinos had in relating to others in the church seemed to revolve around their relationships to the Filipino majority. Most felt like they could not break into the "core" social group in the church, which, in their view, was comprised of Filipinos:

The Filipino relationship structure and ethic makes it hard for people outside of that to break in. . . . The founders of the church have a really tight group. . . . I have at different times been disillusioned by the difficulty fitting in. I'm an extrovert and get to know people easily, but I feel shut out (Kenyan Female).

It seems hard to get involved in [Filipino] groups. . . . They feel comfortable with each other, but I feel like an outsider to those groups (Anglo-American male).

For a long time I didn't have friends at church. I felt really out of place. I tried to understand the Filipino mentality and relate, but I couldn't do it. I was trying to fit in. I even started to try to dress sort of like them and act like them, but I couldn't fit in (Anglo-American female).

[The church] seems kind of friendly at first. People come and talk to you and try to remember your name. But when you decide to become a part of the church, you have to do all the work to get into the in-group. . . . I'm an outgoing person and I'm really adaptable. I get to know people pretty easily. But [this church] is a totally different story. It's like you hit this wall. I have to totally extend myself to get to know people (African-American female).

There isn't a sense of family or community there. It shouldn't have taken me this long to feel like I know people. I've been going for two years and just now I feel like I have friends at church. People say hi to you and are friendly, but there isn't enough interaction. It's not a family (Hispanic female).

As the last quote suggests, another common complaint among non-Filipinos was the feeling that it was difficult to have conversations with Filipinos that went any deeper than a surface level.
I can’t carry on a conversation with [the Filipinos]. Maybe they see friendship differently than we do. I don’t know if they share very deeply with each other. But I feel like I hit this wall that I can’t get through (Anglo-American Female).

We had an [activity night] with the [Filipino] group. We had a really good time, we played games, we laughed, we had fun. But it was like pulling teeth trying to have a conversation. It’s hard to get to know Filipinos deeply. It’s like pulling teeth. It’s uncomfortable (Chinese-American Female).

Conversely, many of the Filipinos we interviewed expressed that one of the primary things they enjoy about the church is their close friendships. When a Filipino female was asked what she enjoyed about being at the church, she responded, “Friendships. We can be around people and tell them what’s going on in our lives and they won’t gossip, but they’ll just try to help you.” And a Filipino male said, “I enjoy the relationships I have with people on the worship team. I have great fellowship with them.” Another Filipino male stated “I love the family aspect. . . . I like the fellowship after church — fellowship is key for me at this church.”

It appears clear that homophily and social psychological principles are at work in this congregation, with those at the edge of the congregation feeling relationally isolated. These different experiences and perceptions shape responses to ethnic diversity. Despite both majority and minority group members seeing much positive to being in a multiethnic congregation, when we asked “Does the ethnic diversity of the church make anything more difficult?” we found important differences between the responses of Filipinos and non-Filipinos.

In all, 14 out of 17 non-Filipinos mentioned increased difficulties because of the diversity, while only five out of nine Filipinos mentioned any increased difficulties. And four out of the five Filipinos who did mention difficulties focused primarily on conflicts over music or worship styles:

The worship team is pretty diverse and people butt heads over the style of music, the order, do we do it a cappella. People want different types of music. And as a music leader, people are always asking, can you play more gospel, or southern, or hymns, and I don’t know how to do those things. People are used to different styles, and it’s hard for people to welcome a new style (Filipino male).

Only one spoke in detail about relational difficulties as a result of diversity.

In contrast, 12 of the 14 non-Filipinos expressing increased difficulty due to diversity focused heavily on relational problems. Differences in worship, preaching, and leadership styles also were also mentioned by nine of the 14 non-Filipinos expressing increased difficulty. Interestingly, the African Americans were the most vocal in expressing difficulty with the worship style at the church. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that Protestant Filipino worship services are much more influenced by Anglo American Protestantism than by African
American Protestantism. The most commonly mentioned difficulty that was not centered on relationships was conflict over musical styles.

I get frustrated with the worship service. I have to prepare myself before I go. I have to listen to Gospel music before I go in so I can get in a worshipping mindset. There’s not any flexibility in the worship. You just have a set time for the songs and there’s no room for the Spirit to work. The style is really inflexible too. I feel like I’m at a rock concert — or alternative or whatever (African-American female).

Filipino respondents were much more likely to feel there was no increased difficulty that came with ethnic diversity, and instead perceived only benefits.

I don’t think it makes things more difficult. There is a majority of Filipinos, but we don’t treat it like a Filipino church. We’re open to different ethnicities and cultures. A lot of people are attracted to it (Filipino male).

I enjoy it. Everyone can see past skin color. It’s not like Filipino churches where everyone’s speaking the language, and if you don’t speak it you feel out of it. We can learn from different people and can learn about different cultures.

Interviewer: So it doesn’t make anything more difficult?
I don’t think so. It makes everyone realize we have the same purpose, even though we’ve all been brought up differently (Filipino female).

You run the risk of racism, but I don’t see that at [the church]. I don’t think we have a problem as far as ethnicity is concerned (Filipino male).

I think it’s awesome to see diversity, but we have one thing in common. We are unified. I don’t think race is a problem. Everyone wants to learn from everybody. It’s a testimony in itself. I don’t think it makes anything more difficult. Since it’s a young church, everyone is accepting. Older Filipinos are racist. With the young generation, the differences don’t matter (Filipino male).

From the interview data, it appears that the costs of diversity in this congregation are born disproportionately by non-majority members. Some Filipinos acknowledge costs, but mostly experience them through differences and conflicts with others over worship styles. Non-Filipinos appear to be affected not only by conflict over worship styles, but even more strongly by relational difficulties.

The Benefits of Diversity (H3)

As expected, nearly all respondents, regardless of ethnic group membership, saw much benefit to being in a multiethnic congregation. We found a strong tendency for respondents to express these benefits in generalized terms. Most notably, all but a few respondents mentioned that the diversity of the church was either a main reason for coming to the church, or one of the main things that they enjoyed about the church.
I appreciate that it's a multi-ethnic church. I've never seen a church like that before. It's like church is supposed to be — the body of Christ all together. All of the other churches I've been to are one ethnic group (Filipino male).

It's a taste of heaven on earth to have people from all these different backgrounds worshiping together. I feel like my worship of God is so much more pure and authentic when I look up there and see all of the nations represented (Hispanic male).

It's truer to the biblical model in 1 Corinthians with the body of Christ. We need each other. And it's an example to the world. You know people in the neighborhood see us walking from our cars to our church and can see that people can be together. It's a statement to the world (Anglo-American male).

It's awesome. You get to interact with people from other cultures. We get to know their culture, at least in a small way. It proves how awesome God is that He can bring us all together (Filipino male).

Interestingly, the abstract benefits of being in the midst of diversity were felt strongly enough that even three out of the four respondents who had left the congregation because of dissatisfaction were currently attending or looking for another multi-ethnic congregation. In addition, many of those interviewed who were experiencing high levels of frustration and difficulty expressed that they would never consider going back to a homogenous church.

I don't feel comfortable in an all-white church. I don't know why. Maybe it's because I haven't been in a while. It's boring to me (Anglo-American Female).

Churches with just one ethnicity don't get it. They're complacent with where they are and people are happy with the way things are done. But it's not like it's going to be in heaven (African-American Female).

One person who left the church and was currently attending another multi-ethnic church at the time of the interview (which he has now left) stated:

It's theologically more authentic to have a multi-ethnic church in a place like LA. It's counterintuitive, I guess to have a homogenous church in a diverse environment. A feel like it is a better witness to the secular society, and I find comfort in inviting people from different backgrounds (Anglo-American male).

Another African American member who was very dissatisfied with the church spoke of an all-black church that she had visited as a "temptation" that must be avoided:

I visited a church that I thought about going to. It was the style of worship. It was so home, so comfortable, it was so much what I need and want. I had to stop visiting the church, it was too much of a temptation.
It seems that for many of the congregants of this church, the value they have placed on worshipping in a diverse congregation is so high that they have simply ruled out the option of returning to a homogenous congregation, even when they recognize the greater benefits they would receive by doing so. This is an important finding because it offers a potential explanation for the existence of multiethnic churches despite the costs that they place on their members.

We found such evidence in analysis of our nationally representative dataset — the 1999–2000 Lilly Survey of American Attitudes and Friendships (Emerson 2000). We classified people attending religious services at least twice a month into two categories: (1) attenders of multiracial congregations (no one racial group is 80 percent or more of the congregation) and (2) all other religious service attenders. We then compared these two groups on their responses to the statement, “Congregations should be racially integrated.” Measured on a seven-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree, attenders of multiracial congregations were significantly more supportive of the statement ($t = 2.61$ (df = 1057), $p < .01$). Whereas only one-third of those attending racially homogenous places of worship strongly agreed that congregations should be integrated, more than half of people attending multiracial congregations strongly agreed. These differences were found for each racial group.

DISCUSSION

In this case study, we have examined whether the social dynamics specified by macro structural theories of group relations and social psychological principles produce personal costs for those belonging to a multiethnic congregation. Our reason for doing this is not primarily to provide new tests for these theories, but rather to understand multiethnic congregations. By theorizing and testing the costs of belonging to such congregations, we begin to explore the question of why multiracial religious organizations exist despite the overwhelming forces leading most organizations toward internal homogeneity. This case study suggests that the principles which tend to produce internal homogeneity in volunteer organizations also produce costs to members of multiethnic congregations. Although we cannot decisively conclude that this is the case for all multiethnic congregations, this single case provides sufficient evidence to justify more case studies of different types of multiethnic religious organizations.

Popielarz and McPherson (1995:703) argue that members who are atypical of the dominant group in a voluntary organization will have a higher turnover as a result of “their higher proportion of extraorganizational ties and their lower proportion of intragorganizational ties.” As a result, heterogeneous volunteer organizations are inherently unstable. To address our purpose, we went beyond this work.

We made the inference and then tested the hypotheses that costs would be disproportionately borne by those on the niche edge, that is, the congregational
minorities. In the congregation we studied, members atypical of the dominant ethnic group did indeed have closer ties to people outside the church than inside, and members of the dominant group had a higher proportion of intraorganizational ties. This lower proportion of intraorganizational ties, as hypothesized, produces greater costs for minority group members because relationships and a sense of belonging are key religious and social goods, and minority respondents find it difficult to obtain them. This pattern is, we think, particularly true of small organizations because of the small absolute numbers of minority group members. In this small congregation, it seems clear that non-Filipinos are bearing more of the costs of belonging to this church. Relationally, they must work harder for less return. They also sacrifice in other areas, such as worship style. These costs have led people to leave this church to look for better opportunities for friendships in other churches. Interestingly, however, most who left were looking for those opportunities at other multiethnic congregations.

The fact that the two most dominant groups were Filipinos and Anglo-Americans introduces a number of dynamics that may be somewhat unique. Anglo-American models, particularly in worship and in preaching styles, heavily influence Filipino-American Protestant churches. As a result, conflicts over preaching, music, and other aspects of church may be less intense in this church than would be the case in a congregation where the two largest groups were, for example, African American and Anglo-American. In addition, the particular mix of ethnic groups in this church may cause some unique relational dynamics to occur that would not exist if the mix were different.

The fact that this is a Protestant evangelical church may also produce dynamics that are different from what one might see in a liberal Protestant or Catholic congregation. For example, many Catholics choose churches based on a "parish" orientation, in which one simply goes to the closest Catholic church in their neighborhood. Thus, diverse neighborhoods would be likely to have diverse congregations, and those disaffected would be less likely to leave for another congregation than may be the case at a Protestant church. Our future research will explore whether or not the same dynamics we observed in our case study exist in different types of religious organizations.

From our case study, we conclude that the same principles that produce internally homogenous volunteer organizations also produce high costs for members of ethnically heterogeneous religious organizations, especially for minority group members. Given these findings, researchers must now ask: How do multiethnic religious organizations survive despite the high costs of belonging for congregational minority members?

As we noted in the methods section, we suspect that the smaller the absolute and relative sizes of minority ethnic groups, the more fully supported will be our hypotheses. For this reason we chose a small (but average sized) congregation. Similar studies, but with varied congregational and ethnic group
sizes are necessary to understand if costs are altered by size. Such work will provide an important set of clues as to why some congregations are multiethnic. To the degree that size matters, we may reasonably hypothesize that, when compared to large congregations, it is easier for small congregations to become multiethnic (it takes less people), but harder to remain multiethnic (greater costs will lead to a higher minority exit rate).

A second important avenue for further research lies in studying the nature and extent of benefits people perceive from being in multiethnic congregations. Though our data are limited, some preliminary clues emerged from our case study. First, there appears to be something exhilarating about the experience of worshipping in a diverse congregation. Many reported experiencing a "taste of heaven" through corporate worship in a multiethnic setting. This benefit appears to be keeping many in this congregation despite high levels of frustration and relational difficulty. Second, it appears that for many, including those who left the church out of frustration, the theological importance of worshipping in a diverse congregation has closed off the option of seeking a homogenous congregation, despite the social benefits of doing so. This is suggestive of the transformative power of religion, where strong religious beliefs can counteract and sometimes overcome strong social forces. Hence, although conflict and costs arise in concrete practices and symbols, the fact that abstractions — the level at which most respondents discussed benefits — are less subject to divisibility (Kniss 1996) suggests that having common but abstract principles are highly important for multiethnic congregations. Much as the diverse United States appears to survive its concrete conflicts by placing emphasis on its common but highly abstract creeds (such as liberty and justice), so perhaps lies an important means by which multiethnic congregations can survive and succeed.

This leads us to the question of whether religious organizations are different from other voluntary organizations with regards to the dynamics of diversity. It could be the case that justifications for diversity that are rooted in a transcendent theology are a stronger counterforce to the influences that produce organizational homogeneity than are other justifications for diversity. We clearly see from this case that religious organizations are not immune from the same social forces that operate on other voluntary organizations. However, they appear to have additional qualities that are unique to religious organizations. Exploring this question further will provide an important opportunity to advance both organizational theory and theories in the sociology of religion.

REFERENCES


