

“The Nature of the Church”
Pre-General Conference News Briefing
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Is there a chasm across which we in The United Methodist Church are divided? If so, what is the ground of that chasm?

Good afternoon. I appreciate the honor of serving on a panel of scholars from some of the church's finest seminaries. I speak to you, not so much as an academic, but as a long time beneficiary of the church's commitment to inclusivity. Over the course of fifteen years, I've served as a youth or young adult representative to conference councils, general boards, NCC meetings, and international interfaith conferences. My grandparents would have been astounded that I as a young person and as an Asian American could participate as widely in church structures as I have. Much has changed since the 1930s and 40s, when they pioneered Japanese American churches that were segregated from the rest of the white Methodist Church.

We have much to celebrate in the efforts to close the racial divide. It has been 36 years since the merger that created the United Methodist Church eliminated the segregation of the Central Jurisdiction, 32 years since the General Commission on Religion and Race was established, 32 years since the first Asian American was appointed bishop, and 28 years since the Ethnic Minority Local Church was introduced as a missional priority. These and other important steps have helped heal the chasm that has existed between people of color and the white majority in the church. Nowadays, checking for inclusivity on committees, delegations, and commissions is often standard procedure. The value of celebrating diversity in church membership, worship and education is widely recognized. However, despite our best intentions, the church is not the inclusive, reconciled church we envision. In fact, the shortfalls of inclusivity indicate that the remaining chasm is more invisible and in some ways more insidious than ever.

There exists a shadow culture of exclusion whose assumptions, expressions, and implications often go unnoticed and unquestioned by the majority. For example, in the area of race, white privilege continues to feed this culture of exclusion. If you're a white Methodist in this country, you can pretty much be assured of several things. You can assume that the hymns you'll sing on Sunday are not only in English but have Western melodies, despite the fact the Methodist hymnal reflects greater diversity. If you're a white pastor, you'll never have to explain to your D.S. how conflict in your church is dealt with in the Eastern way. If you're white, American and a candidate for the ordained ministry, you probably already know much of the same “church speak” that those on your committee will understand and validate. If you're white, chances are you'll never be asked to speak for all of your people. No one likes to talk about white privilege. In fact, discussing it often puts people on the defensive. In my experience, white folks will sometimes acknowledge that white privilege exists but then in the next breath give evidence that proves that they themselves are not racist. Getting people to own up to white privilege, let alone racism, is really tough. Eric Law, a Chinese American Episcopal priest, once gave a presentation on racism at a conference. Afterward, a young man said to him, “How could you talk about white people as if they are all the same? We are not all racists. We are not all oppressors. I found it very disturbing to hear you

stereotype us while you are talking about undoing racism.”¹ The paradox is that even talking about white privilege and power honestly seems to widen the racial divide in the church, yet not talking about it maintains or widens it.

Unfortunately, it’s easy to use the achievements of racial inclusivity as an excuse not to examine how power and privilege is maintained in the church. “What do you expect?” some might say. “Look at all the people of color who are serve as professional staff of the church—be they conference or general staff, district superintendents or bishops. Look at all the resources we’ve put toward strengthening ethnic local churches.” Yes, it’s true those gains would not have been possible without inclusive policies, but that doesn’t automatically change dynamics of power and privilege. While ethnic representation is crucial, it doesn’t mean that people of color are playing on a level field, though that may seem to be the case. People of color who are in a position to play church politics—and not many are--don’t necessarily have the power to change the rules of the game, which are largely in favor of those in power (i.e. those who make the rules). But what other choice do people of color have? Either we are in and we try our best to help change the system our we’re out.

Examining dynamics of race, power and privilege in the church means critiquing every aspect of the life of the church. How does the way we make decisions reflect our assumptions about participation, representation, and power? How does the way we worship reflect our assumptions about race and culture? How do we educate people to go beyond merely celebrating diversity? To address the shadow culture of exclusion, the white church must be willing to transform its understanding of inclusivity, from a willingness to fold people of other races and cultures into the life of the church to a willingness to renegotiate collective identity. The global nature of the church makes this work even more pressing, as we become more aware not only how white the way we do church is, but how American it is. What I am pointing to is no less than the church recreating its self-understanding in terms of race and culture.

¹ Eric Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community*. (Chalice: St. Louis, 1993), 15.