

White Like Us: A Church Engages Religion, Politics, and Culture Against Racism

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Beginnings

One of the anonymous reviewers for our panel remarked in their review comments that they presumed we were participants in “the evangelical subculture.” I was struck by how easy it is in America to think of socially conservative groups when thinking of religiously dedicated Christian communities. In my paper I study a group of liberal Christians, myself included, who trouble such stable discourses. We are members of the United Church of Christ (UCC), a mainline Protestant denomination with more than a million members in over 5300 congregations in the United States. Our denomination is nationally known both for its liberal theology and for its tradition of progressive activism for social justice.

There are two major sections in this paper. In the first section, I look at how my locally situated UCC congregation positions itself within national and historical discourses of socially progressive change. In the second section, I engage in a close and critical reading of how stable discourses of whiteness posed particular challenges to the same UCC congregation during a recent series of historical events when we tried to become an “anti-racist” church. My overall goal is to present a case study of a more hopeful role for religious identities in their intersections with raced, gendered, and sexualized identities and many others.

Let me first provide a thumbnail sketch of my local congregation. The First Congregational Church of Amherst is located in the center of the college town of Amherst, Massachusetts. It is often called First Church. It was established in 1739 and was the first church in the area, which was not known as Amherst until 1759. Attendance on an average Sunday varies between a hundred to a hundred and fifty people. It is a predominantly white congregation: I am a brown and bearded man, and I am one of less than a handful of non-white attendees. My white partner and I have been attending First Church since May 2008.

Section 1 : Stabilizing discourses of social change

In its public presentations, First Church is proud of its history of religiously dedicated actions for socially progressive causes. Its website celebrates its leadership in the peace and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and proclaims its embrace of the women's movement. In 1980 it became the first church in Amherst to have a woman minister. It has also declared a "Just Peace" anti-war commitment, and it has adopted an "Earth Covenant Resolution" to work toward reducing its impact on the environment.

I want to focus here on First Church's significant identity as an Open and Affirming (ONA) congregation. ONA is primarily a denominational stance that welcomes and affirms all sexual orientations and gender identities as fully accepted members not only in community life but also in ministry. However, not all UCC congregations declare themselves to be ONA. Because of the theological and social implications of ONA, especially for those identities that depend on the ONA declaration being actually practiced church-wide when they enter a newly-declared ONA church, the UCC recommends a rigorous process of education and public deliberation for congregations that want to become ONA. The process typically takes a couple of years, and includes having the entire congregation go through multiple "Sacred Conversation" dialogue sessions on Christian faith and sexual orientations and gender identities.

The General Synod of the UCC approved ONA in 1985. First Church Amherst was one of the first to vote on becoming ONA in 1987. All six major seminaries in the United States that train UCC ministers are ONA, which allows ONA congregations to ordain and accept persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities as their pastors. This alone positions ONA churches against most evangelical or conservative Christian churches in the United States. Local congregations that become ONA make a public declaration of their ONA stance. First Church's 1987 declaration "welcomes all persons, regardless of race, gender, socio-economic status, ethnic background, age, sexual orientation, nationality, marital status or physical or mental ability."¹

First Church's adoption of ONA is part of its history of negotiating national-level discourses of stability and change in its continual positioning and adoption of progressive social actions. My larger point is that for First Church, stability involves a tradition of social change—a combination of discursive practices that can be jarring in their contradictions. First Church, as

¹ http://www.firstchurchamherst.org/open_affirm.html

well as the national UCC, utilizes governance structures and communicative practices within which progressive social activism continually takes place. At First Church, locally situated within the congregationalist history of New England's deliberative democratic traditions, such structures take the form of Town Hall styled meetings, congregational votes, and covenant statements. Their social performances provide an identity and positionality for the collective representation of the individuals who constitute the church. Such practices invoke particularly stable and traditional discourses that serve to secure the community's historical identity while simultaneously enacting major socially progressive changes.

However, the use of stable discursive practices can make it easy to replicate aspects of social conservatism, such as a selective and glorified memory of the past and an unwillingness to engage in forms of change that destabilize the very discursive practices that are so comforting in their stability. In the next section I describe precisely such a discomforting scenario as it emerged for the church's Anti-Racism Ministry Team. The discomfort arose when we engaged particular forms of the church's institutional whiteness that were invisible precisely because of their discursive stability.

Section 2 : Destabilizing discourses of whiteness

In May 2008, media portrayals of Reverend Jeremiah Wright caused a national controversy for Senator Barack Obama. In the wake of the controversy, members of First Church in Amherst organized to form an Anti-Racism Ministry Team (ARMT) to engage the congregation in dialogues and action toward becoming an anti-racist church.

In June 2008, the ARMT organized a church-wide reading and dialogue project where every member of the congregation was asked to read Tim Wise's book on race, racism, whiteness and white privilege, titled *White Like Me*. Members then met in groups for three dialogue sessions over the summer. Also over the summer, a member of the ARMT collected, co-edited, and published a book of personal narratives on race and racism, written by several persons, including myself, from within the congregation as well as from the Amherst community.

After the election of President Obama in November 2008, the ARMT mobilized the congregation to vote on a covenant that would make us an "anti-racist" church. The wording of the covenant proved difficult. Some of us felt the congregation was ready to declare ourselves "anti-racist" and to begin active work on social justice efforts in Amherst. Others, including myself as the only non-white member of the ARMT, felt that the church still had work to do in recognizing that being anti-racist meant wrestling with our whiteness. We agreed on a compromise. In January 2009 the congregation voted to adopt a covenant statement that emphasized our commitment to continue on a journey toward anti-racism in which we would "explore how our faith calls us to change as a church and as individuals in response to our commitment to racial justice."²

Over the rest of the winter and the spring of 2009, the ARMT organized several activities including movie screenings, performances, workshops, dialogues and learning circles, and many other forms. Meanwhile, the ARMT also served as a point-of-contact for many members of the congregation who wanted to engage in social justice action in Amherst. The ARMT's work within the congregation and within the Amherst community continues at the time of this writing.

While First Church established a productive community activist foundation for our local actions toward changing discourses of racism, I argue that we also found our own regional New England whiteness to be a discourse both too stable and too slippery to confront and grasp entirely. I

² http://www.firstchurchamherst.org/anti_racism.html

titled this paper *White Like Us* as an intentional play on Tim Wise’s book. While Wise wrote about white privilege and its invisible and unconscious benefits for individual white people, I argue that white-dominated Christian communities (“like us”) that engage in anti-racist work must first understand our institutional white privileges and their invisible and unconscious benefits for us collectively. This becomes especially important given the historical connections between Christianity and the construction of ‘white’ racial identities. Alastair Bonnet (1997), for example, traces back to 1680 the formation of ethnoreligious bases for whiteness as a race in conjunction with European imperial expansions, leading to “a triple conflation of ‘white’, ‘Europe’ and ‘Christian’ [...] that imparted moral, cultural and territorial content to whiteness” (202).

It was only 80 years after that triple conflation with European colonization that First Church was founded in colonial New England. Some 250 years later, those same conflations of white-European-Christian traditions in postcolonial New England continue to establish a stable discourse for our institutional whiteness that resists our efforts at social change toward anti-racism. As current pastor Reverend Vicki Kemper notes in her sermon during First Church’s celebration of Amherst’s 250th anniversary this year:

Of course, “forgetting what lies behind” is not so easy here in New England, where history is long, historical pride runs deep, and the temptation to embellish is hard to resist. We here at First Church are quick to brag about our connections to Emily Dickinson and her brother, Austin, for example, and we like to note our role in the founding of Amherst College. But when is the last time you heard someone tell a visitor, “And our founding pastor was a slaveholder and diehard supporter of King George who opposed the American Revolution”?³

³ http://www.firstchurchamherst.org/sermons/past_srmns_09_01_11.html

Conclusions

I have tried to do two things in this paper. In the first section, I looked at how my locally situated UCC congregation uses particularly stable discursive practices to enact powerfully progressive social changes such as the Open and Affirming declaration. In the second section, I looked at how efforts within my UCC congregation to change us into an “anti-racist” church encountered challenges posed by the stability of whiteness as an institutional discourse. Even so, my overall aim is to provide a representation of a religiously dedicated Christian community that troubles dominant discourses which link religiosity with social conservatism.

There is a lot at stake for members in religiously dedicated communities to engage in discourses of stability and change. To do so is to risk taking on subject positions within those discourses that are particularly vulnerable to accusations and mis-portrayals. To put it another way, as an ex-evangelical now in a liberal Christian congregation, as a brown and bearded man in a white-dominated community, and as a partner in an inter-racial heterosexual marriage within an Open and Affirming church, I cannot but help realize that myself and the members of First Church are in continual discourses of stability and change at multiple levels of identity in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, language, nationality, and many others.

What can be easily forgotten, however, is that these discourses also take place within a context of religious identities that matter in tangible ways to many persons and families. First Church’s ONA status, for example, provides a vibrant community of faith for persons of sexual orientations and gender identities that were excluded from other faith communities. This includes those who, like me, have wandered with uneasy and untraced itineraries through various criss-crossings of ‘routes’—to borrow a term from Stuart Hall—some of which involve painful conversions and acts of betrayal against previous communities among whom we were once patriotic citizens. Places like First Church, and national organizations like the United Church of Christ, provide spaces for the constructions of alternate discourses of religiosity that become deeply meaningful communities for those who were once considered alternate subjects.