

Southern Baptists try to diversify churches

by [Heidi Hall](#)

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (RNS) How tough is it to create a racially diverse denomination? Consider a recent luncheon organized by the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

About 100 Nashville-area evangelical leaders accepted invitations to a lunch hosted by the denomination's policy arm, the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission. On the agenda: a pitch for a spring summit and a short discussion by ERLC President Russell Moore about the need for churches to become more racially diverse.

The number of African-Americans who showed up for the lunch? Four (two of them denomination employees).

ERLC leaders originally planned a summit on bioethics. They quickly shifted gears after grand juries in November and December failed to indict police officers for the deaths of young unarmed black men. Moore's social media remarks condemning the New York City jury's decision not to indict the officer who killed Eric Garner were met with an angry backlash, some from people in Southern Baptist pews and pulpits.

Black church leaders are greeting news of the summit with reactions ranging from polite skepticism to hopeful support.

It can't come soon enough for Erskin Anavitarte, a Southern Baptist pastor-turned-musician who attended this month's luncheon. Anavitarte, who is African-American, said he finds resistance when even suggesting white privilege exists.

"People who talk about Ferguson and say that justice was served—most of them don't even have a grid to make those statements they're making," he said. "They don't even have friends who are African-American."

The Southern Baptist denomination was birthed in 1845 when it insisted its members had the right to own slaves. The denomination didn't formally apologize for its stand on slavery until 1995. Four years ago, the SBC considered a name change to move past that split and increase opportunities for expansion outside the South.

Moore, a Mississippi native, opposed the rebranding. Earlier sin needs to be kept out front, he said, lest members forget it. One of his earliest Sunday school memories convinced him of that.

"We had a substitute teacher, and I put a quarter in my mouth," he said. "She said, 'Don't put a quarter in your mouth, because a colored person might have touched that.'"

Moore said the teacher probably never examined her own belief system around race.

But his proposed solution to that—diversifying worship spaces—will take some work. Of 50,500 Southern Baptist congregations, 3,502 identify as predominantly African-American, or about 7 percent, a 2013 denominational report shows.

Broaching the issue is important, said Joshua DuBois, former chief of the Obama administration's faith-based initiatives and author of *The President's Devotional*.

"Where the Southern Baptist Convention leads, a whole lot of white conservatives around the nation follow," said DuBois, who is African-American and attends Assemblies of God-affiliated National Community Church in Washington, D.C. "One of the most exciting things is the possibility of churches connecting at the grass-roots level to do more together to create interracial churches. Right now, 11 a.m. on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America."

DuBois said a good example of ways to change that was the recent merger of predominantly white Ridgewood Baptist Church into predominantly black Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., prompted by the white church's financial struggles.

Shiloh pastor H.B. Charles Jr.—who will speak at the upcoming summit—became primary teaching pastor of the combined flock and told The Huffington Post he hoped the merger served as an example of racial reconciliation.

Races worshipping together will increase understanding, said Miguel De La Torre, a professor at United Methodist-related Iliff School of Theology who studies the intersection of race and religion. For example, anyone worshipping at a diverse church wouldn't be surprised that grand juries didn't indict the police officers that killed Michael Brown and Eric Garner, he said.

One reason most churches are segregated is that racial reconciliation has meant whites expecting African-Americans and Latinos to worship with them, De La Torre said, perhaps throwing in a "Taco Tuesday" as an attraction.

"For me to worship at an Anglo church, I must accept white theology, pray in a white manner, sing white German songs, and eat meatloaf at the potluck," he said.

De La Torre said it's far more useful for whites to come to African-American and Latino churches, hear the reflections of religious thinkers from those cultures and take those lessons home.

It's good that the Southern Baptists are talking about race, said Anthony Evans, president of the Washington, D.C.-based National Black Church Initiative, an interdenominational coalition of 34,000 African-American and Latino churches, but he has a lot of questions.

"There were no discussions within the universal Christian faith—I certainly didn't get a call—about what should be the vision going forward," Evans said. "I'm not sure the motivation of their actions, but it's a small beginning."

He said he will have more interest when he sees a long-term, strategic plan and a financial commitment to implementing it.

The Gospel and Racial Reconciliation Summit will be held March 26-27 in Nashville. Speakers include: Fred Luter Jr., senior pastor of Franklin Avenue Baptist Church in New Orleans and the Southern Baptist Convention's first African-American president; John Perkins, a civil rights leader and founder of the Christian Community Development Association; and Juan Sanchez, preaching pastor at High Pointe Baptist Church in Austin, Texas.