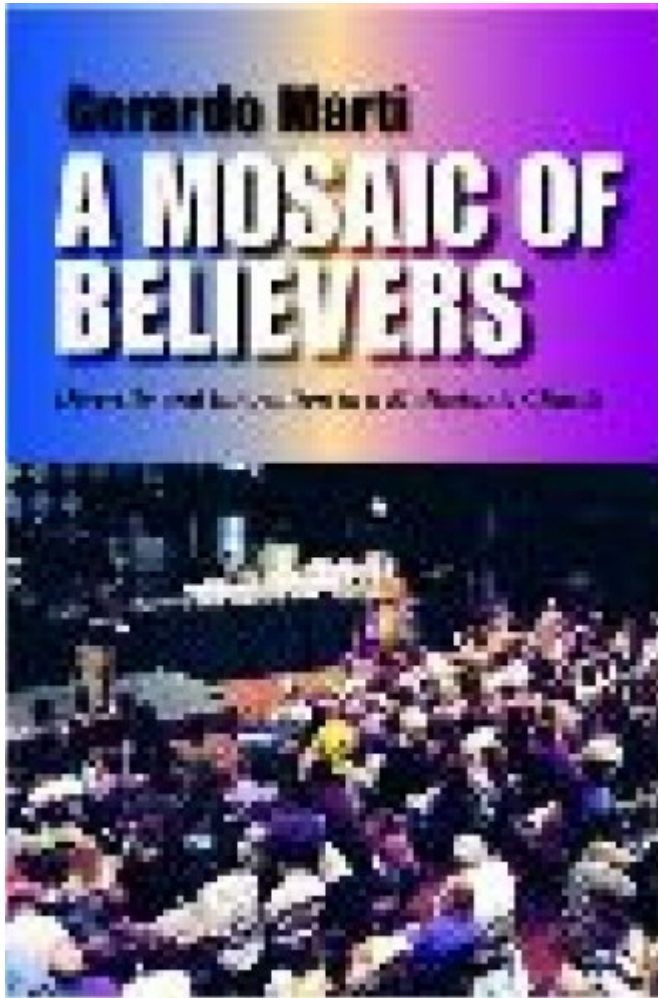


Multiethnic mix

By [R. Stephen Warner](#) in the [July 26, 2005](#) issue

In Review



A Mosaic of Believers: Diversity and Innovation in a Multiethnic Church

Gerardo Marti

Indiana University Press

Ethnic particularism, in the official form of admissions procedures and ethnic studies programs and the unofficial form of students' seating choices in the cafeteria and the library, is a powerful force in American universities. It's also a powerful force in American Christianity. I've spent a lot of time recently studying the manifestations of that particularism as it takes shape in congregations that serve Mexican Americans, Korean Americans, Indian Americans or some other immigrant group.

That's what makes the church Gerardo Marti writes about a precious anomaly: it has no racial majority but has roughly equal numbers of Hispanics, Asians and whites, along with a few African Americans.

Mosaic is the name of this 60-year-old Southern Baptist congregation in Los Angeles which at the time of writing (Marti says the church is constantly changing) consisted of over 2,000 mostly single young adults of every imaginable color who come together every week for one or more of several multisensory services in a variety of rented spaces, including a downtown nightclub. Allied congregations exist in Berkeley, Seattle and New York, and missionaries from the congregation are all over the world. The senior pastor is Erwin Rafael McManus, a native of El Salvador, who is the author of *An Unstoppable Force: Daring to Become the Church God Had in Mind* (Group Publishing) and *Seizing Your Divine Moment* (Nelson Books).

Marti is a sociologist and clergyman who was a member of Mosaic's pastoral staff while he was researching his dissertation on the church. He obviously believes in what the church and its pastor are doing. His task is not to defend Mosaic but to explain how it can exist.

As Marti sees it, the key to building a congregation of people from diverse, often alienated ethnic backgrounds is to appeal to them in ways that trump their differences. The bulk of the book consists of chapter-long analyses of five such appeals, called "havens."

Mosaic first of all offers a "theological haven," by which Marti means that Mosaic affirms orthodox beliefs, albeit in unconventional and decidedly non-Calvinist ways. The church's "artistic haven" attracts people on the creative edge—painters, sculptors, musicians, dancers, actors, filmmakers—of the kind who gravitate to Hollywood. The church is also an "innovator haven," Marti says—"a refuge for people who in other churches have been called mavericks, rebels or freaks." Marti's reference to the church as an "age haven" is a way of saying that the church

attracts single, childless young adults.

Finally, the “ethnic haven” is the church’s appeal to second- and third-generation progeny of Los Angeles’s huge and diverse immigrant population. Insofar as American culture is more media-driven, more edgy and more youthful with every passing year, and Americans themselves less likely to derive from European stock, Marti sees Mosaic as a model, perhaps *the* model, for churches that are viable and faithful.

The concept of havens is the theoretical key to Mosaic’s astounding internal diversity. A church of its sort must offer things that appeal to people across the boundaries of their differences. Yet for Mosaic, no single haven is sufficient. Each haven shelters some of Mosaic’s people but deters others. While some are drawn to alternative forms of worship, others are put off by them, finding them “wild,” “unbiblical,” even cultlike.

The attention the church gives to the arts appeals to Hollywood people, but it makes others feel inadequate. The stress on innovation excites some but wearies others. The appeal to youth makes some older people feel unwanted. The diverse “ethnic haven” draws in those who have had enough of their parents’ and grandparents’ immigrant churches but repels those who are committed to their ethnic and racial identities. Each haven represents not only something appealing but also a refuge from something—it’s a place to dispose of negative baggage.

This two-edged dynamic is particularly true regarding the theological and ethnic dimensions of the church—a complication of the argument that Marti could have spent more time on. Those who are drawn to the church’s unconventional but theologically conservative worship are evangelicals turned off by the dry, boring, narrow, judgmental churches of their upbringing. The second- and third-generation immigrant youth who are drawn by Mosaic’s multiethnic profile are those who, unlike their parents, do not speak with an accent and are not competent in their ancestral culture, do not experience discomfort around Americans of other races and may be dating across racial lines, and do not confine themselves to old-country music but express themselves in terms of American popular culture. Marti makes it obvious that the proximity to Hollywood is a special ingredient in the Mosaic mix, but he does not sufficiently stress that the church’s demographic dependence on the Angeleno nexus of conservative Protestantism and immigrant cultures may limit its applicability as a general model.

A more important issue—one to which Marti is attuned—is whether multiethnicity is indeed a haven for all young Americans. For the past 20 years, scholars in race and ethnic studies have noted that ethnicity is optional in a way that race is not. For example, I can tell my students about my German identity—about my grandfather landing in America in 1895 and the old-country language spoken by the women in my household—but there is nothing written on my white face that requires me to confess these things, nor does being “German,” to the slight extent that I am, limit my life chances.

Marti is marked by his name as Hispanic, but as he notes (and as the photo on the dust jacket attests), he can “pass” as Anglo. The son of Cuban immigrants, he was born in this country, and his English is better than his Spanish. “I have choices,” he says.

To a remarkable extent, to judge from the interviews he cites, choices also exist for many of Mosaic’s people, not only whites but also Latinos and Asians. Senior pastor McManus has a German given name from his grandfather and an Irish surname from his stepfather, and he chooses to use his middle name to highlight his Latin American birthplace. Another leader describes herself variously as Hawaiian, Japanese and Asian. A member whose mother is Japanese and whose wife is Norwegian-American feels he has more in common with his wife’s culture than his mother’s. Mosaic is not only multiethnic; many of its people are polyethnic.

Dwelling little on “race,” Marti stresses the malleability of identities and the way that being a follower of Jesus Christ at Mosaic “transcends” ethnicity. In so doing he offers an appealing vision of a church that builds on the dynamism of demography and popular culture to overcome the scandal of religious segregation (as well as the specter of civic balkanization). He thus challenges those of my sociological colleagues who see the fate of America’s second- and third-generation Latinos and Asians inscribed on their bodies. His book will be on the syllabus the next time I teach a course on race, ethnicity and gender in American religion.

Several questions remain. Mosaic’s ethnic haven has little appeal for African Americans, whose life chances are indeed circumscribed by their race. To his credit, Marti acknowledges this issue throughout and cites experts, such as George Yancey, who see the African-American experience of race as qualitatively different from, and more profoundly alienating than, that of America’s other racial minorities. Yet he thinks things are getting better in the wake of the civil rights movement, and that

younger blacks are more willing and able to make the “cultural leap” necessary to join churches like Mosaic.

Marti went out of his way to speak to some of Mosaic’s few African Americans, current and former, in order to comprehend that cultural leap. A deterrent for many was the positive draw of the black church and its traditions. Another barrier, forcefully articulated by a woman who sought out Marti to confide why she was leaving the church, is that Mosaic affirms “white evangelical” individualism instead of the black church’s systemic critique of inequality.

Most, however, were turned off by Mosaic’s music. Featuring guitars instead of a choir, the music was perceived as “not soulful” and “not gospel.” One person, not intending to be complimentary, called it “Vineyard music.” This was one of the instances in which I wished Marti had been more descriptive and less theoretical, for he gives few hints as to what, beyond not including hymns, characterizes Mosaic’s music. In one place he mentions preservice music drawn from the scores of such films as *Lord of the Rings*, *Gladiator* and *Braveheart*. Elsewhere he says that the music is “electronic” and that new songs are introduced every week.

These hints are enough to make me wonder whether Mosaic’s multiethnicity is a Faustian bargain. Marti honestly acknowledges not only that he can pass as white but that he has “been rewarded” for doing so. The popular youth culture that serves to unify church members across their separate ethnic identities is identified in the end as “white popular culture,” casting doubt on the claim that it transcends ethnicity. American whiteness is a huge social space, one that over time has encompassed wider and wider segments of the population, including Anglo-Saxons, Celts, Mediterraneans, Slavs, Semites and Turks. I think Marti is right that it is not necessarily off limits to Hispanics and Asians. But the understanding has always been that African Americans are excluded. It is easy to see why other Hispanics and Asians, not to mention African Americans, would be leery of embracing multiethnicity on such terms.

Clearly, Mosaic is spiritually compelling. Its members are on fire with their faith, eager to share it with everyone in Los Angeles. Its leaders take risks that most pastors would not dare. Marti, himself a church leader before leaving for a teaching position in North Carolina, is learned and self-aware. I wish that he had shared more with his readers about what is sacrificed—not only hymns and soul music but a place for the old and the very young—in a church systematically built around the culture of young, media-savvy, single Americans, no matter how ethnically diverse they are.