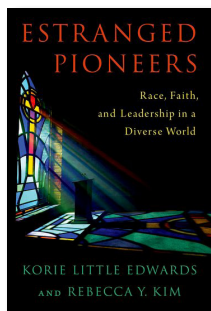


## BOOK REVIEW

### ***Estranged Pioneers: Race, Faith, and Leadership in a Diverse World***

By Korie Little Edwards and Rebecca Y. Kim. Oxford University Press, 2024. ix + 204 pp. ISBN: 9780197638309. \$30.99 (hardcover); \$15.99 (e-book).



Good research sheds light on some questions and raises others where further study is needed. This book does both of these things. Edwards and Kim conducted extensive interviews of senior pastors of multiracial churches across the United States. Though limited to Christian congregations, their study has implications for religious leaders in other faiths and those who lead interreligious organizations. Both ecumenism and multifaith work, after all, require us to confront racism.

Denominations often celebrate how multiethnic and multicultural they are, but Edwards and Kim emphasize that “heading a multiracial church is difficult for all pastors, regardless of their race, religious affiliation, or other identities” (3). This work takes a toll on them, and pastors of color pay an additional cost: they are welcomed less warmly than white clergy, supported less by their home churches, less often assumed to be trained and competent, and expected to conform to white culture. For women, it is doubly hard: one female pastor reports that she finds it harder to be accepted as a clergywoman than as someone who is Black.

Edwards and Kim find this pattern consistently, regardless of the ethnicity of either cleric or congregants, despite the fact that they also find pastors of color are better prepared to bridge divisions and minister in settings different from their backgrounds: they have had to develop greater multicultural competency than white peers to make it through school. The authors argue persuasively that this experience and the disproportionate burdens borne by clergy of color make them “estranged pioneers” in multiracial ministry.

The authors also identify dynamics that we should all consider in cross-ethnic relationships. Pastors of color usually come from communities that accord them high status and expect their flocks to do what they say; white people often resent pastors they perceive as dictatorial and do not typically show parsons the same respect. When I headed to seminary, people asked my mother, “Couldn’t he do better?”

Pastors of multiracial congregations, the authors point out, are often desperate to find supportive peers and mentors who understand the challenges they face. What they often find, however, is that white laity presume that they have the right to criticize, judge, and correct clergy, which leaders of color resent. As, I would add, do most white parsons, even if we have come to expect it. Whether in congregations or interreligious settings, we all would do well to temper how we disagree with leaders, lodge complaints, and offer unsolicited advice.

This book makes important contributions but is confusing at times. It is misleading to say, “mainline Protestant pastors and Catholic priests are assigned to their congregations by denominational leaders, superintendents, directors, or bishops” (19). This is not the process for Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal, Reformed, United Church of Christ (UCC), or many other mainline clergy. They associate a congregational call system with evangelicalism, which hardly fits the UCC, and argue that it gives clergy “greater agency when choosing the type of congregations they want to lead” (40). Really? Perhaps to the extent that the marketplace allows. My seminary classmates went wherever they could find a job, and women and people of color had less choice than I did.

Edwards and Kim conclude that “multiracial churches are products of white Christian hegemony” (153), without having offered any proof. Perhaps such congregations are shaped by the dominant culture, but does this mean that they perpetuate white dominance? Is this the case where Christianity was planted by people of color, such as the United Methodist congregations I served in Hawai‘i, founded by Japanese missionaries? Is it true of diverse congregations in historically Black denominations? The church where I currently worship certainly has been changed for the better by Black clergy who have led it. Could not multiracial congregations undermine racism?

This study suggests additional topics that are ripe for exploration. How do the initial misunderstandings and adjustments faced by clergy of color in new positions compare with the “shakedown cruise” in any new pastorate? (We sometimes joke in my denomination that it takes a year for a new pastor and the congregation to get to know each other—and another two to get

over it.) The authors ask pastors what attracted them to multiracial work and why they stick with it but not what gives them joy and hope, what they have learned from parishioners of other cultures, or how this ministry has helped them to grow. It also would be fascinating to learn how leaders of other faith communities navigate ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences. The astonishing diversity of many mosques and Bahá'í spiritual assemblies suggests they may have something to teach the rest of us.

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