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The color of faith

by Tom Gallagher

NCR Today

Time magazine (Jan. 11, 2010) has an interesting article on how some Evangelical megachurches are bridging the racial divide by making their parishes at least 20 percent multi-racial. The story centers on the work of Pastor Bill Hybels, founder and senior pastor at the Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago's northwest suburbs.

Some startling statistics are presented: According to Michael Emerson, a specialist on race and faith at Rice University, the proportion of American churches with 20 percent or more minority participation has languished at about 7.5 percent for the past nine years. But among Evangelical churches with attendance of 1,000 people or more, the slice has more than quadrupled, from 6 percent in 1998 to 25 percent in 2007.

Megachurches serve only 7 percent of American churchgoers, but they are extraordinarily influential: Willow Creek, for instance, networks another 12,000 smaller congregations through its Willow Creek Association. David Campbell, a political scientist at Notre Dame studying the trend, says that "if tens of millions of Americans start sharing faith across racial boundaries, it could be one of the final steps transcending race as our great divider ?"

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2050 there will be no ethnic majority in the United States.

It seems that many Catholic parishes can learn a thing or two from these Evangelical megachurches.

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