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The Problem of Kindness: Christian Missions and the Dynamics of Christian Whiteness

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Introduction

This brief treatment of the problem of kindness in white Christian churches makes one argument: critics have failed to fully evaluate the phases and practice of Christian whiteness. The critics who have examined power, privilege, and relationalism have not adequately explored the dynamics of whiteness in the Christian church especially in times of crisis. The phasing of white identity – my term for crisis-dependent variations in white people's awareness of their racial characteristics – privileges an ethic of kindness. As a result, many members of the white Christian church are ill equipped to respond to racial crises as they unfold. Thus the problem of kindness is that institutions and leaders of the white Christian church have so few other resources at their disposal. A singular focus on kindness has left the church anemic.

A synthesis of three bodies of criticism and historical review of two types of programming bolsters these claims. Following a brief discussion of the notion of a white church, a review of the theological, sociological, and activist-based schools of criticism of Christian

whiteness makes evident that to date critics have done an excellent job of analyzing the *who*, *why*, *what*, and *where* of whiteness but have yet to fully examine the *when* and *how*. Discussion of white phasing and kindness fixation expands the argument. Historical material then provides concrete evidence of these themes through a review of programmatic responses to the three schools of criticism, an examination of the Fresh Air hosting model as an ideal type of kindness-based programming, and description of short-term mission service projects as a second ideal type of that same kindness-based initiative. A concluding discussion uses an analysis of the mutually interpenetrating dynamics of kindness and crisis to propose effective and principled church-based programming.

First, two clarifications. The term 'the white church' here references the participants, institutions, traditions, practices, and beliefs found within Christian groups dominated and controlled by white people. By contrast, 'Christian whiteness' references the racial identity of those members of the Christian community who benefit from white dominated and controlled institutions due to their perceived status as members of the racial group that has come to be called white. Although used somewhat interchangeably in popular discourse, in this setting the white church emphasizes the embodied, institutional aspect of the white Christian community and Christian whiteness emphasizes the collective identity of that same community.

To be sure, both terms encompass a broad range of religious practices. A racialized conception of a white Church encompasses a host of faith communities ranging from Greek Orthodoxy to Shane Claiborne's Simple Way with Presbyterians, Methodists, Quakers, Mennonites, and Mormons in between. Moreover, white Christians expound an array of theologies, live in different geographical locations, come from many social classes, pursue richly varied musical traditions, and draw on distinct historical practices of costume, ritual, and worship

(Blum et al.,.2009, 13; Wray 1997). Yet within this diversity, several themes remain consistent including the power of white numerical majority, concomitant institutional benefit to white members, widespread depiction of a white Christ in religious iconography, and the consistent absence of sustained, substantive engagement with issues of racial justice (Blum and Harvey 2012; Jordan 1968). To extend the point, even though the experiences of a wealthy, male, able-bodied, Ivy League-educated, Wall Street stock broker and that of a poor, female, disabled, high school drop out, homemaker in Appalachia vary tremendously, white racial identity still mediates their experience despite the vicissitudes of gender, class, education, status, and physical ability (Goldschmidt 2006, 33). Moreover, race and religion as inextricably bound, co-constitutive categories that share an especially close connection (Goldschmidt 2006, 26,30; Kidd 2006, 1-2, 25-26) even as the two categories have changed and morphed over time in separate and distinct ways (Blum et al., 2009, 12, 18-19).

This discussion of the white church and Christian whiteness acknowledges the complexities of both the broad Christian tradition and the equally broad range of experiences held within white identity (Frost 2007; Hartigan 2005; Hughey 2010). In the midst of – not in spite of – these diverse identities, recurring racially specific patterns make terms like the white church and Christian whiteness nonetheless have utility as analytical constructs (Butler et. al, 2009; Roediger 2002). In brief, the phrase "white church" has meaning.

The Who, Why, What, and Where of White Christian Identity

A review of three schools of criticism reveals the need for a new approach to the complexities of Christian whiteness. First, the theological. A wide and robust literature by theologians and other church-based critics can nonetheless be summarized as focusing on the

who of white identity – the individual and corporate characteristics of white Christians – and appealing to the *why* of white identity – the self-interest of white Christians. James Cone exemplifies this school of thought. In his classic 1969 work, Black Theology and Black Power, Cone focuses on the identity of the white church when he notes that, in the minds of many African Americans in the late 1960s and early 1970s, white Christians represented the "contemporary meaning of the Antichrist" because they "took the lead in establishing slavery as an institution and segregation as a pattern in society by sanctioning all-white congregations" (Cone 1969, 73). This focus on the identity of the white church is also exemplified by the work of critics from Boston's Women's Theological Center. Representing the work of scholars like Patti DeRosa, Traci West, and Delores Williams, Meck Groot has described the identity of the white church as being grounded "in a sense of racial and/or cultural superiority" (Groot 1997, 3). More recently, James Perkinson eloquently explores the "theological predicament" created by the alignment of Christian supremacy and white supremacy (Perkinson 2005, xxiii-xxiv, 5, 15). Likewise, following the work of W. E. B. DuBois, historian Edward J. Blum contends that white Christians have received a "spiritual wage of whiteness" by claiming to enjoy a special relationship with God and, in turn, asserting their superiority over people of color (Blum 2009, 13, 15-16, 102-103, 106). Daniel Lee argues a similar point through his historical exploration of Victorian era family home magazines (Lee 2004, 106).

Along with this attention to the *who* of white Christian identity, theologically oriented critics also focus on the *why* of Christian whiteness by appealing to white self-interest. These critics claim that the forces of racism in society have warped and debilitated members of the white church (Cannon et al., 1985). The very receipt of race-based power and privilege, goes this argument, has dire consequences on spiritual formation (Mikulich 2005; Sharp 2002). Rather

than relying on divine providence, say the critics, white Christians end up relying on the provisions supplied by a racist society, an effect that in the end atrophies their spiritual vibrancy. In response to the question, "Why should white Christians be concerned about their racial identity?" the answer here is, "because it makes you spiritually weak."

Such theologically based critics are joined by those trained in sociological methods. Sociologists representative of a robust literature have in general focused on the *what* of white identity, a content-centered critique that asserts white Christians have defined the problem of racism in relational rather than systemic terms. Most famously, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith in their text Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America argue that white evangelicals focus on individual character traits rather than systemic forces to explain racial inequity and, as a result, craft programs to respond to racism based on – to use their terms – relationalism, freewill individualism, and anti-structuralism (Emerson and Smith 2001, 76). Emerson and Smith contend that white evangelicals focus on solutions defined first and foremost by fostering individual relationships across racial lines. Think, for example, of the evangelical mass men's movement Promise Keepers and their calls for white participants to build relationships across racial lines. Yet, as Emerson's and Smith's work suggests, if all the white men that filled the Promise Keepers' stadiums had taken that call seriously, the handful of men of color present would have been overwhelmed with requests for friendship. Emerson and Smith also critique "freewill individualism" – a focus on individual solutions to racial problems that calls white Christians to "love your individual neighbors, …[and ask] forgiveness of individuals one has wronged" (Emerson and Smith 2001, 130). They also note a tendency among white evangelicals to reject structural solutions – the term they use is "anti-structuralism." Emerson and Smith assert, "[white evangelicals] do not advocate or support changes that might

cause extensive discomfort or change their economic and cultural lives. In short, they maintain what is for them the non-costly status quo" (Emerson and Smith 2001, 130).

Others have explored similar themes in white Christian communities. Historian Carolyn Renée Dupont, for example, has provided overwhelming evidence of relational thinking in mid-twentieth century white Christian segregationists (Dupont 2013, 8-9, 12, 16, 201, 229, 232, 238, 239). Karen Joy Johnson has likewise found that, within the Catholic church, "even a centralized, top-down approach to race relations could not guarantee racial egalitarianism" (Hawkins and Sinitiere 2013, 7). Douglas Hartman and Eric Tranby have also argued that Emerson and Smith have not gone far enough in their critique of the evangelical community. They emphasized the deep-seated anti-black prejudice and overtly conservative politics at the root of white evangelicals' anti-structuralism, freewill individualism, and relationalism (Tranby and Hartmann 2008). Blum also mediates Emerson's and Smith's thought by noting, that in the late nineteenth through much of the twentieth century, white evangelicals used individual thinking to support efforts to end segregation while simultaneously using corporate thinking to oppose interracial marriage (Blum 2013, 164, 172, 173). Yet even these more trenchant critiques have focused on the *what* of Christian whiteness, its primary content. According to the sociological school of whiteness criticism, the white church is laden with anti-structuralist, relationally defined, power ignorant worldviews.

The final arena of white church criticism draws on the previous two. Activists in anti-racism training collectives have worked for decades to transform the white church. Groups like Crossroads Antiracism Organizing and Training and various denominationally based initiatives have led many such organizing efforts ("Anti-racism Training," 2014; "Crossroads Antiracism

Organizing and Training," 2014).[1] This activist tradition attempts to both disrupt the white church status quo and equip interracial teams to transform the racial practices and identities of their constituent institutions. Drawing as they do on the two previous schools, activists attend to the *who*, *why*, and *what* of white identity by addressing issues of identity, superiority, and self-interest, but they also direct white Christians on the *where* of white identity by calling for public proclamation, individual awareness, and political engagement (León-Hartshorn, Shearer, and Stoltzfus 2001). They point members of the church to *where* their white identity resides and *where* they should focus their response.

Activists note that white identity gains its saliency from institutions. So, they suggest that white church members need to counter institutional racism in health care, education, employment, the media, transportation, housing, etc. In order to identify exactly where such institutional racism resides, activist critics call for research into the racial history of individual denominations in order to unearth and re-examine patterns of segregation and, ultimately, to invite congregations to publicly proclaim an anti-racist identity (Barndt 2009).

Taken together, criticisms of the white church emerging from theological, sociological, and activist traditions describe Christian whiteness as unexamined, harmful to those who hold it, relationally fixated, arrogant and superior, ignorant about privilege, and uninformed about the history of racism in this country. This damning criticism seems entirely comprehensive. It addresses, after all, the *who*, *what*, *where*, and *why* of whiteness. Yet, for all such insight and critical purchase, these three schools of thought miss two foundational dynamics, the *when* and *how* of Christian whiteness.

1. In interest of full disclosure, the author notes that he was active in founding and directing Mennonite anti-racism efforts for a period of about fifteen years.

The When and How of Christian Whiteness

White phasing – the *when* of Christian whiteness – emphasizes the transitions and changes in white people's awareness of racial identity. A group of historical and literary scholars like W. E. B. DuBois (Du Bois 1935, 1963), Toni Morrison (Morrison 1992), David Roediger (Roediger 1991), and more recently Edward J. Blum (Blum 2005), Matthew Frye Jacobson (Jacobson 1998), Daniel B. Lee (Lee 2004), Jon McGreevy (McGreevy 1996), and Matt Wray (Wray 1997) have examined changes and continuities of white identity over time.[2] Their often brilliant and always insightful scholarship has thus far, however, failed to fully theorize their findings or apply them to contemporary religious settings. In this essay, I carry forward the idea of white phasing to argue that Christian whiteness is not static but rather a highly dynamic identity that phases in and out of white awareness according to the presence or absence of crisis.

Rather than an emotional or military breakdown, crisis here encompasses any socially, culturally, or politically unstable point in history requiring a decision to act in a new way. In other words, crises serve as a social turning point. The small-scale crises featured here forced decisions on both local and, as aggregated, national levels. These crises produced historical legacies that have shaped subsequent political relations, a point Blum makes with particular power in his study of white reunification in the aftermath of the Civil War (Blum 2005). As Jürgen Habermas suggests, in a crisis the status quo is destabilized, social identities are threatened, and either the present hierarchy is legitimized or a fresh order follows (Habermas 1975). In U.S. history, racial crises have only been felt within white communities, however, when people of color have challenged some aspect of white power or privilege. By contrast,

2. Scholars who explore the closely related topic of the race and religion include Tracy Fessenden (Fessenden, 2007), Henry Goldschmidt (Goldschmidt, 2006), Eric L. Goldstein (Goldstein, 2006), John Stauffer (Stauffer, 2001), and Judith Weisenfeld (Blum et al., 2009, p. 31).

racial crises within communities of color have been ongoing and recurrent as the history of slavery, lynching, racial cleansings, police abuse, and mass incarceration make all too evident (Harper 2010; Jaspin 2007; Logan 2008; Pinn 2003).[3]

This analysis first asks *when* has the white church looked at issues of racial identity and practice. Historically, the answer has been, "When crisis demands it" (Dupont 2013, 86; Shearer 2012). Members of the white church have actually talked about themselves as white people, thereby overtly surfacing their racial identity, most often in the midst of crisis. White church members talked about their racial identity when black Christians held kneel-ins at their segregated churches (Dupont 2013, 4-5, 15). They did so when confronted with the crisis precipitated by James Foreman's 1969 Black Manifesto, a document demanding $500,000,000 in reparations that also included the threat of worship takeovers. Likewise, white church members talked about their racial identity in the early 1970s in the midst of crisis as African-American, Native American, and Latino activists demanded that white mission agencies place more people of color in field positions and executive management. White identity, far from being unacknowledged by white people (Blum et al., 2009, 15; Levine 1994; McIntosh 1988), is acknowledged during times of crisis, even if only in expressing fears that their white privileges might be taken away (Sokol 2006, 224). As a result, white people have made decisions about scarce resources and the distribution of power and privilege not out of ignorance but rather out of deliberate, informed understanding of the power dynamics at play. Following this analysis, discussion of acknowledged crisis proves as essential as discussion of unacknowledged privilege in addressing white identity. Organizations that have dealt successfully with institutional racism

3. Thanks to one of this article's anonymous reviewers for helping to clarify this point.

have invited and embraced crisis, expected that it will emerge, and prepared themselves to use crisis effectively to further anti-racism ends (Shearer 2011).

By extension, critics of white Christian identity need to look not just at the *who*, *what*, *where*, and *why* of whiteness but also at the *when* of whiteness. Those critics need to treat whiteness as a dynamic social force that ebbs and wanes rather than as a motionless monolith (Jacobson 1998). To rephrase, the phases of whiteness have been under examined. Criticism of white racial identity in the Christian community has too often missed not only a linkage with crisis but has also missed the phases of whiteness – that is the *when* of whiteness.

A second criticism of the existing critical approaches to the white church is that they have missed a linkage with kindness. In this instance, those critics of the white Christian community who have focused on identity, relationalism, anti-structuralism, and political engagement – issues that invariably cluster around the *what* of whiteness – have missed the *how* of whiteness. Often, but not always, whiteness in the Christian community is quite kind. That is where the problem lies.

Kindness in Fresh Air Programs

Several examples from white church programming initiatives establish the point. The first is the Fresh Air Rural Hosting program. A modicum of historical distance and widespread popularity make the programs especially well-suited for demonstrating the dynamics of kindness in white Christian churches. Begun in the late nineteenth century in New York City by the Reverend Willard Parsons, the program first focused on providing children from the city with two-week summer stays in the country. Parsons and his collaborators aimed to provide the children with respite from malnutrition and diseases like tuberculosis. By the middle of the

twentieth century, the original Fresh Air Fund, still based in New York City, had come to focus on providing those same two-week country vacations for the purpose of crossing racial boundaries. The vast majority of the children who travelled to the country on trains and buses were African-American and Latino. Nearly all the hosts were white. With dozens of copycat programs across the country in cities like Cleveland, Chicago, Seattle, and Los Angeles, the programs came to serve – and continue to serve – hundreds of thousands of children.

Christian churches were and are the most central organizing base for the Fresh Air programs. Some denominational groups ran their own Fresh Air ventures. Others supported ecumenical efforts. Still others lent their energies to ostensibly secular programs like the Fresh Air Fund in New York City. Up until the 1970s, a volunteer needed only a letter of reference from a member of the clergy in order to host a child. Although the children went through multiple physical exams, behavioral assessments, and initial vetting by service agencies – many of them again sponsored by churches – the hosts received no such scrutiny. Fresh Air organizers required only that the hosts be kind.

Research into the Fresh Air programs reveals numerous instances of hosts being described as kind. Already in 1925, promotional material promised that children would receive from their hosts "two weeks enjoyment of fresh air, good food and unlimited kindness" ("Seeking Homes in County for about 100 City Children," 1925). In 1955, a Fresh Air spokesperson opined, "There is probably no more substantial, more practical, or more genuine form of kindness and humanness to those who most need and deserve it, then to be a host to one of those children" ("Homes for Fresh Air Tots Asked," 1955). Eleven years later, kindness was still a host's primary criteria: "The only qualification for host families is that they be kind, friendly people" ("Revive Friendly Town Program," 1966). Although the hosting programs

cannot be construed to represent the white church as a whole, they are especially emblematic of the problem of white Christian kindness. Here is why.

Note first the structure of the initiatives. Fresh Air programs are set up to be one way. Children from the city travel to the country/suburbs. Rarely, if ever do children from the country travel to the city. Although in the late 1960s and early 1970s there were a few halting attempts to do what one black nationalist leader called "stale-air" vacations in which white kids from the country and suburbs travelled to the city, such stale air ventures were never sustained beyond a few experimental attempts (Hershey 1971).

Likewise, the programs were time-limited. On average, children stayed for two weeks. A few more dedicated hosts invited a small percentage of guests to stay for longer in the country, but those instances were rare. More typically, as the programs matured, the duration of stays shortened – some ultimately settling on weekend visits, especially as more and more women entered the workforce in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the same vein, the programs were age-defined. Children were no longer eligible to participate past the age of 12 unless they were given a rare invitation by a host to return through their adolescence. Program hosts and organizers considered adolescent participants "too sophisticated" and expressed concerns about the possibility of interracial romance blooming should, as one local organizer ever so delicately opined, "Familiarity in this case might lead to certain problems" (Nickel 1961).

Yet, most centrally, the programs were based on assumptions of racial, class, and agrarian superiority. Program sponsors took children out of an environment deemed harmful to them, one typified by poverty, black and brown majorities, and urban density, heat, congestion, noise, and foul odors. The adults then brought children to an environment deemed beneficial to

them, one typified by relative wealth, white majorities, and open space, cool temperatures, green grass, quiet nights, and pleasant aromas. Hosts and organizers downplayed the homesickness that many children felt for their friends, families, and neighborhoods in the city and often ignored the overt acts of racism encountered by the children. In the same way, promoters also downplayed the health hazards from farm work and – as more than one fresh air guest pointed out – the foul smells emanating from cattle yards thick with manure.

In all of these, as African-American Fresh Air participant Cindy Vanderkodde noted in reflecting on her childhood experiences in a white Christian community in Michigan, "Once I became an equal … there was just no interest there" (Vanderkodde 2010). Her hosts had treated her well as a child, but they rejected her attempts to reconnect after she returned to the community having gained a college education and found professional employment. Children could expect to be treated kindly, but, as the author of a 1963 letter to the editor in Bennington, Vermont, opined, the same hosts who "treated… [a fresh air guest] kindly as a child… reject[ed] … adolescent visitor[s] from the city" (Warfield 1963). The kindness of the white Christian hosts, who constituted the vast majority of the hosting population, apparently had its limits.

Yet, the majority of the hosts were kind. They brought children that they did not know into their homes, received no reimbursement for doing so, and, in some cases, created an environment to which children from the city wanted to return. The hosts that got the most public attention came through Christian churches. Look for example at the press given to these groups and individuals.

A 1958 profile in the Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Intelligencer Journal, described Emma Denlinger, a Fresh Air host and coordinator with more than twenty years of experience, as a "kindly, gray haired woman" with "a knack for talking" Fresh Air children "out of … crying

spells" (Little 1958). In 1970, a reporter from the Delaware County Pennsylvania Daily Times quipped that "[i]t was a different kind of love-in, without hippies" that gathered at the Church of the Good Samaritan to collect Fresh Air children there (Munafo 1970). The report went on to profile the eager, kind families who exuded, in the words of the reporter, a contagious "heartwarming feeling." A 1991 article in Curio magazine profiled D. Lloyd and Alice Trissel of Harrisonburg, Virginia, a Mennonite couple who hosted more than fifty Fresh Air children in the course of thirty years. Mrs. Trissel described their kind attitude by noting, "Sometimes the most important thing you can give to someone isn't money or material things. It's simply to care about them" (Wissinger 1991).

When describing such host families, reporters invariably mentioned their kindness, often by linking that kindness with nature. Note this patch of purple prose describing one Fresh Air hosting environment, "another world, one of beauty and kindness where the realities of living are softened by a cooling zephyr breeze or by the gently undulating mountains. Shots of happiness replaced the wailing sirens, and life for these children, at least for a brief period, was pure pleasure and satisfying effort" (*Elko Lake Camps* n.d.). A Fresh Air program run out of Boston claimed, "The only qualification for host families is that they be kind, friendly people whose motivation for having a child in their home springs from genuine concern and compassion" ("Churches Will Sponsor Friendly Town Program," 1966). The Fresh Air Fund itself put kindness at the center of their efforts on the occasion of their 100th anniversary when a reporter from the New York Times noted in 1977, "Sometimes a single act of kindness can set off a chain reaction that reaches into many lives. Judging from the accounts of alumni, that may be one of the special qualities of the Fresh Air Fund" (Cummings 1977).

Such kindness stands out in sharp contrast to the actions taken by other white Christians during the period of the Fresh Air Program's greatest popularity from the early 1960s through the 1970s. During that time, white Christian Bostonians organized to oppose busing, sometimes violently (Formisano,1991). Protestants in both the North and South continued to actively oppose interracial marriage despite official church documents to the contrary (Blum 2013; Botham 2009; Dailey 2004; Pascoe 2009). In the South, Protestant clergy populated the ranks of the segregationist White Citizens Councils and penned informational pamphlets such as *God the Original Segregationist* (McMillen 1971, 174-175). At the same time, other white Christians poured time and energy into supporting the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's 1964 Freedom Summer campaign (Findlay 2000, 142), passing resolutions in support of black-led protests (Knotts 1989, 267-268), and participating in demonstrations against church segregation (Kosek 2013). Rarely did these activist Christians - whether segregationists or integrationists – hear their contemporaries call them kind.

Those who hosted Fresh Air children chose a middle path. To be certain, few involved in Fresh Air programming took to the streets to oppose segregation in their neighborhoods and cities, but neither did they throw bricks at those who brought black and brown children into their homes. Although many children of color dealt with racial discrimination from their hosts and the rural residents they encountered (Shearer 2010, 94), the majority of the white Fresh Air participants desired healthy, strong connections with the children. By contrast to other white Christians at the time, Fresh Air hosts avoided activism in either extreme. Few took to the streets in pursuit of integration or segregation. They expressed interest primarily in bringing at least short-term racial diversity to their community. In this pursuit, they were indeed kind.

Kindness Explored

Kindness and the related values of friendliness, concern, caring, love, and compassion can hardly be faulted as values on their own. The white Christian community has been especially adept at the task of spiritual formation in fostering kind individuals. Christian practitioners regularly celebrate the "fruits of the spirit," a reference to two verses in the New Testament, Galatians 5:22-23, which list kindness along with love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control as products of Godly living.

Yet, in the context of a discussion of white Christian identity, the value of kindness is problematic. If Fresh Air programs serve as an exemplar of a programmatic expression of this virtue, then the problems become evident. When a white Christian couple like the Trissels took one or more children into their home through the Fresh Air program, they expressed a kindness to them. The children were often grateful for the chance to travel and learn about a new area. As Rafaela Moreno, an 11-year old Fresh Air child from Harlem, said of her time with the Trissels, "It makes me sad to leave Ma and Pa Trissel, but when I leave I know I'll see them again next year" (Wissinger 1991). Yet such kindness came at a cost. It was offered only in one direction, from the white adult hosts to the black and brown child guests. It was offered in a context where the one offering the kindness was perceived to be superior to the one being given the kindness. It was offered for a time period but then cut off by age limits. When given with those caveats, the kindness was no longer simple kindness; it became paternalism, an offering of care, direction, and restrictions by those in positions of authority to those beholden to them for the stated purpose of improving the condition of those in the subordinate position.

The paternalism implicit in the Fresh Air model paralleled other dependency-based missions. Although the efforts of Christian missionaries to evangelize peoples of color across the

globe varied extensively and had both radical and highly conservative impulses (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Hanley 2003; Whiteley 2003), in multiple venues white missionaries considered converts to be, at least partially, dependent on their leadership and largesse (Ruether 2002; Wenger 2009; Yoo 2003). In the same way, Fresh Air hosts often viewed their charges as dependent on their gifts and charity. Reflecting sentiments gleaned from her parents, a white rural host proclaimed in 1979, "I am very concerned about the poor children…and would like very much to help them" ("'To Send a Child to the Country ...'" 1979). Such declarations of the hosts' largesse and guests' neediness peppered Fresh Air reports and appeals from the late nineteenth century forward.

This kind of dependency relationship set up the hosts as superior and the guests as inferior. Given that Fresh Air administrators did the double move of claiming that their programs set up "friendly meeting across racial lines" (Cornell 1965) but were not, as the director of the Fresh Air Fund informed the author several years ago, "about race," the hosts were ill-prepared to do anything but act in a paternalistic manner.

Kindness in Short-term Missions

A second example extends the point. The white Christian community has likewise been heavily invested in the practice of short-term missions. In the main, these are programmed trips by church groups often made up of youth but also consisting of families and retirees. The groups travel to a work site for a week or two and engage in various mission activities ranging from building latrines to building houses, from serving food in soup lines to distributing socks to the homeless. Again, the activities themselves are often not inherently problematic, but the way in which they are done reveals the complications of kindness.

In one instance, recipients of white Christian kindness through short-term mission wrote an open letter to their presumed beneficiaries. Felipe Hinojosa, now a History professor at Texas A and M, wrote in 2001 to the white Christians who regularly travelled to Mexican communities to build churches and engage in other service projects. Echoing the experience of Reconstruction era short-term missionaries to the South who returned home having reified African-American stereotypes (Blum 2005, 60), Hinojosa described white short-term mission volunteers who brought their local Mexican hosts brought to tears by proclaiming U.S. superiority. Hinojosa went on to identify jobs left unfinished, houses entered without permission, and skill sets unshared. He wrote, "Short-term mission is an enterprise in which the rich, the white, the young and the old can come, drain local resources and build a church in the process." He added, "short-term mission develops white leaders and instills in white youth and adults the myth of white superiority." And perhaps most damning, "As this cycle develops, communities of color come to trust and befriend white people more than we do those in our own community" (Hinojosa 2001).

The short-term mission groups who served with the most kindness – those who were sensitive and did not act in a jingoistic manner – were the most likely to be rewarded with deference and offers of friendship. Kindness led to a perpetuation of white dominance as local service recipients deferred to the outside expertise of their white guests. Programmed kindness as expressed in short-term mission projects once again misses the foundational issues of race – power, privilege, identity, and oppression – as well, as argued here, crisis.

Critics of Christian whiteness have, in sum, failed to fully interrogate the dynamic of kindness in white Christian identity. Even as crisis forms and informs white Christian identity, so too does kindness. White Christians discuss their identity primarily in the midst of crisis. In those settings, their racial identity surfaces in a consciously active manner. In the same way, many

white Christians have historically expressed their racial identity through the conscious, sustained, and widespread exercise of kindness evident in Fresh Air and other short-term mission endeavors. To be white and Christian in America is to be kind.[4]

These two markers of white Christian identity also interrelate. When there is no racial crisis looming, white Christians act out their racial identity primarily through kindness. When a racial crisis arises – whether from the police shooting of an unarmed black man or other inciting incident – the white church is ill-prepared to respond because they have, in the main, been conditioned to know how to act kindly but been ill-prepared to do little else. And so, calls for love and patience and getting along come across as ill-informed at best and paternalistic at worst.

Lambasting practices like Fresh Air hosting and short-term mission service projects is not this essay's end goal. Although the initiatives explored here invite further problematizing, the aim in this instance is to note key areas in which the critique of white Christianity – which David Roediger notes has been deemed "whitianity" by members of the black community (Roediger 1998, 360) – has fallen short.

Emerging Solutions

The solutions offered by critics of the white church have been fairly limited to date. Participation in anti-racism training is often prescribed as a first step. Many critics call for political engagement of some sort, often evincing a certain nostalgia for recreating the 1960s civil rights movement (Dupont 2013; Harvey 2014; Scriven 2013). Few offer models for programmatic engagement with the white community itself.

[4] With apologies to Robert Terry who has written, "To be white in America is not to have to think about it" (Terry, 1981, p. 120).

In response to their critics, white church leaders have drawn a set of relationally based solutions. Rather than anti-racism training, some congregations have organized less controversial diversity or human relations workshops focusing on interpersonal and psychological dynamics. Other white churches have developed intentional relationships with African-American and Latino congregations. Choir exchanges, pulpit swaps, and shared worship experiences have been organized as attempts at building bridges. Almost all such efforts are short-lived and frequently one-sided. Sometimes building projects and other short-term mission service trips are conceived of as opportunities for reaching beyond racially segregated church environments. Yet both critics and insider program promoters operate from a limited kit bag. The conceptual array is often unimaginative and uninformed.

Academics are hesitant to make normative, practical suggestions. And those trained as historians should be especially cautious. Understanding the past does not always equip scholars to organize the present. Nor does such historical training keep anyone from repeating the mistakes of the past. Identifying a solution that proved successful in the past and bringing it forward to the present rarely works. Both the past and the present are too complex to allow for such simplistic re-patterning.

Yet scholars can reflect on the past in order to inform contemporary decision makers of previous errors. So, building on research into how the white Christian church has responded to racial inequality and subordination in the past, a few contingent, conditional, and tentative suggestions can be offered.

Regarding critics of the white church, those who critique Christian whiteness need to:

- recognize that the practice of kindness is not only an expression of spiritual maturity as defined by the Christian tradition; it is also an expression of white identity that has as much to do with compassion and understanding as it does with acquiescence to racism;

- take crisis as seriously as they currently do power and privilege. That is to say, critics need to pay attention to the phasing of white identity in order to know what kind of white identity is being expressed. It makes a difference if whiteness comes under scrutiny in a crisis phase or a non-crisis phase. In a crisis phase, white people have historically acknowledged their racial identity; in the latter, white people have been ignorant of and often denied their racial identity;

- support black-led justice initiatives like Black Lives Matter with finances and public backing. Rarely have white Christian communities offered their enthusiastic support for social change efforts in which white people were not in charge. The Black Lives Matter movement provides an opportunity for white churches to change this pattern;

- evaluate how white churches could design programs to equip their white members to respond to racism with more than just kindness and acknowledge their racial identity in more than just crisis situations. Theologian James Perkinson offers essential insight into six foundations of white supremacy – political/economic, bodily inhabitation, self-awareness, rationality, predestination, and revulsion of blackness (Perkinson 2004, 158-159) – that such programming can address.

What might such a program look like? To answer that question, the words of a mid-twentieth century preacher offer some insight. Florence Spearing Randolph was a powerful preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion tradition. For 21 years – from 1925 through

her retirement in 1946 – she pastored Wallace Chapel in Summit, New Jersey. On Race Relations Sunday, February 15, 1941, she delivered a sermon entitled, "If I Were White."

The Federal Council of Churches had initiated Race Relations Sunday in 1922. Scheduled on the Sunday nearest Lincoln's birthday, the event reached its widest popularity in the 1930s and 40s. Sometimes used as an opportunity for pulpit exchanges between white and black pastors or as an occasion for interracial worship services, more typically pastors in white churches simply reflected on the fact that race continued to be an issue in the United States (Reimers 1965, 161). Although by the 1960s Race Relations Sunday had become an object of ridicule by civil rights activists, in the 30s and 40s the very practice of setting a Sunday aside to focus on the problem of race in the United States could prove quite controversial. Up until 1935, Southern Presbyterians refused to recognize the day (Wills 1989, 178).

In her sermon in 1941, however, Randolph used Race Relations Sunday to do much more than wring her hands. Far in advance of the piercing criticism of white church leaders by black male theologians like Albert Cleage and James Cone, Randolph challenged white people to support African-American efforts to improve their financial, social, and political experience. She felt that whites could only become true Christians by getting rid of racial sins. She wrote, "If I were white and believed in God, in His Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Bible, I would speak in no uncertain words against Race Prejudice, Hate, Oppression, and Injustice" (Collier-Thomas 1998, 111). Furthermore, she asserted that "whites must attend not only to the impurity of their own souls, but also to the material labor of making the world a better place for all" (Collier-Thomas 1998, 112).

Perhaps Randolph does nothing more than echo the social gospel doctrine in the tradition of Walter Rauschenbusch. Perhaps some of her language is more focused on individual

articulation of and concern about interpersonal notions of sin. Yet by attending to the *how* and *when* of white racial identity, two important rhetorical moves in her 1941 sermon become evident. First, Randolph made clear that work against racism was not just about being kind. Few are described as kind when they speak "in no uncertain words against Race Prejudice, Hate, Oppression, and Injustice." She in essence knew how essential it was to pay attention to the *how* of Christian whiteness.

She also made clear that white people were accountable for attending to and addressing issues of race at all times, not just during times of crisis. She, in effect, challenged members of the white community to pay attention to the *when* of Christian whiteness. Although she did not use the language of crisis in her comments, Randolph nonetheless asserted that white Christians needed to work against racism in a non-crisis mode. If they did not work at the "material labor" of directly addressing the financial, social, and political problems of racism – and by extension, the very nature of injustice – they might as well not claim the title of Christian she averred. On a Sunday given over to Race Relations she said that her white co-believers should do much more than give a Sunday over to race relations. It was the only way to get beyond a crisis mode.

White Christians have often responded to sermons like Randolph's by asking, "How can our congregation become more racially integrated?" Given the necessity of examining the particular dynamics of crisis and kindness, it may very well be that they are asking the wrong question. The query, "How can a white congregation become integrated?" ultimately leads to the same traps of kindness and crisis found in Fresh Air hosting programs and short-term mission service initiatives. A more appropriate question may be, "How can white congregations equip their members to resist racism when crisis is not unfolding?" Thus, by equipping congregants to

address racism during times when crisis is not an issue, the practice will prepare them for the times that it is.

Whether analysis of the *how* and *when* of white Christian identity will solve the problem of kindness is unclear. What is evident is that being equipped to respond only with kindness does not have a chance of doing so.

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