

# Religion and race relations in America: Focusing on Christian Evangelicals

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## Here, Kazunobu Horiuchi explores how several movements based on religion have developed in American society to improve race relations

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Since the second half of the 20th century, several movements based on religion have developed in American society to improve race relations. These include the “racial reconciliation” movement, the “social justice” movement, the “civil disobedience” represented by Jim Wallis, and the “multiracial congregation” movement.

### The first wave of racial reconciliation

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The first wave of the movement for racial reconciliation, the Civil Rights Movement (CRM), began with the Montgomery Bus Boycott of December 5, 1955, led by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. The movement that followed practiced civil disobedience with the goal of improving the status of black Americans through desegregation and building a “Beloved Community,” a society of multiracial coexistence supported by Ghandi’s nonviolent protest and Christian love.

The world was very different for black and white evangelicals in the South. Although some whites participated in the CRM, most were not white evangelicals, but rather northern liberals, progressive Catholics, the evangelical left of political liberals with conservative faith, and Jews and ordinary people interested in civil rights. Southern white evangelicals supported segregation; northern white evangelicals focused on evangelism, fighting communism, and responding to theological liberalism.

### The second wave of racial reconciliation

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The second wave in the 1990s was more popular than the first. New organizations sprang up, and race relations were discussed in the media and at conferences. The most influential, Promise Keepers, an evangelical parachurch organization founded in 1990 by Bill McCartney, a former American football coach who converted to evangelicalism through the “born again” experience, held its first conference in the stadium in 1991, with 50,000 people in attendance. The organization has grown rapidly since then, hosting an interracial and interfaith gathering of more than 39,000 ministers in 1996. McCartney told the assembled clergy that the event was meant to be a place of reconciliation and continued: “It’s impossible to love God and not love your brother.” By 1997, the organization had grown to over 2 million participants, eight regional offices, and a \$96 million budget.

The second wave retained many of the goals and values of the first wave. For example, racism was still considered a sin, and the primary focus of the movement was on racial prejudice and the transformation of racist minds. In the second wave, racial issues were perceived as personal and culturally relevant rather than embedded in social structures. Efforts were directed toward strengthening interpersonal bonds and cultural relations between white and black people. That is why many black people were not enthusiastic about the second wave.

## **Black Lives Matter**

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The racial reconciliation movement as the premise of the first and second waves disappeared with the emergence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and was replaced by the “social justice” movement. Behind this is the recognition that for millennials born between the 1980s and early 2000s, racial equality is the achievement of social justice for black people and other people of color who are discriminated against, and that racial reconciliation is predicated on the achievement of social justice.

The first wave of the BLM movement saw protests in 3,500 locations from 2014 to 2016. The second wave of the movement, after 2020, saw the shooting death of a black man, George Floyd, by a white police officer that same year, leading to protests at 7,500 to 10,000 locations across the U.S. The BLM movement peaked with its expansion to the rest of the world.

Although there were reports of rioting, looting, and murder during the demonstrations, 93% of the demonstrations were peaceful.

## **Differences between the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter**

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The difference between the CRM and BLM is that the former’s goal was law reform. After the chaos caused by the march, negotiations with local government officials took place at the negotiating table. In addition, there was a core leadership and organization of the movement, whereas the BLM, albeit larger in scale, occurred at the local level with no core leadership or organization of the movement; its goal was to raise people’s awareness of inequality against black people through nonviolent protests and letter-writing campaigns, thus diminishing unfair treatment of black people.

The evangelical left is religiously conservative but liberal in its political beliefs. Jim Wallis, a leading white evangelical left, founded the Sojourners organization and the magazine, The Post American (later Sojourners) in 1971, and has worked with organizations of diverse religious backgrounds to promote social justice. Wallis claims that Republicans on the political right use religious language without reflecting gospel values in their policies, while Democrats on the left reflect Christian values and discuss broad humanitarian agendas without addressing religion per se. Advocating a “politics of God,” Wallis argues for the need for a prophetic vision in politics. God is nonpartisan and impartial, and both the two major parties and the state must allow the prophetic voice of religion to be heard.

Religion must “maintain the moral independence to critique both the Left and the Right.” Strongly influenced by and following the thoughts and actions of Rev. King, Wallis practices civil disobedience.

## **Multiracial congregation churches have seen a steady increase**

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Finally, the multiracial congregational movement has gained attention in recent years. According to Prof. Michael O. Emerson of the University of Illinois, Chicago, a multiracial congregational church is one in which no single race makes up more than 80% of the membership. Multiracial congregation churches have seen a steady increase in the racial diversity of their congregations from 1998 to 2019. Among the 350,000 churches in the United States, multiracial congregations increased from 6% in 1998 to 8% in 2007, 12% in 2012, and 16% in 2019. By denomination, Catholic churches increased from 17% to 23%, white evangelical Protestant churches from 7% to 22%, Pentecostal churches from 3% to 16%, mainline churches from 1% to 10%, and black churches from 1% to 1% between 1998 and 2019.

With the arrival of the Trump administration in 2016, there was talk of a “quiet exodus” of black people from white churches, but in reality, the exodus was not as great as it could have been. It seems that the improvement of race relations by religious people has entered a new phase.

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