

ABSTRACT

UNITY IN THE BODY OF CHRIST: A STUDY OF THE RACIAL UNIFICATION OF THE CHURCH OF GOD IN VIRGINIA

by

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Cultural unity in God's church has always been deficient. In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. famously declared, "11 o'clock Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week. And the Sunday school is still the most segregated school" (Beima 11). Many Christians would claim, based on personal experience, that cultural unity in the body of Christ is unattainable. Unless the process of uniting culturally different churches or church groups can continue, God's desire for Christian unity can never be achieved.

Beginning in the late 1990s, the Church of God in the state of Virginia took decisive steps to end cultural and racial division within its borders by joining together the Black and White church groups to form one united church. The merger has not been without its difficulties as no successful precedence existed that the two organizations could follow.

This study explored the history of what happened within the state of Virginia in the unification of the two governing bodies (Black and White) and traces how the churches and pastors reacted to the unification event over the eight years following its happening. It sought to understand how churches and most especially their pastors have responded to unification. The complexity of the situation as it now stands must be studied to know the impact it has had on the state churches or to predict what future unifications may expect.

The intercultural communication approach of William B. Gudykunst and You Kim Young is selected as a structured model for the evaluation of the semi-structured interviews. Within this model all communication is coded under cultural, sociocultural, psychocultural, and environmental categories. The initial coding is accomplished using the grounded theory techniques of Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin.

The study concludes with a series of barriers and facilitators to the process of unification of statewide governing bodies within the Church of God (Anderson). A study of these themes would be helpful to similar agencies' unification efforts.