The leaders of a small multiracial congregation in Los Angeles County have called a special meeting on Sunday afternoon. The purpose of the meeting is to have an open dialogue among members about how the racial and ethnic diversity of the church affects the congregation.

A Filipina woman begins by stating that she feels the church, while diverse in membership, is not diverse in the sense that all of the cultures in the congregation are equally valued and represented in the way God is worshipped. An African American woman agrees, saying that she feels constrained by the worship style—she cannot express her love for God in the expressive style she is used to. Filipino and white members respond to her by saying—“we want you to worship however you want; if you want to dance and shout Amen, please do.” She is frustrated by this response, as they seem to have missed her point—that the environment of worship at this church is not conducive to expressive worship.

These two women, as they share their experiences in the church, touch off an avalanche of heartfelt sharing about the difficulties and struggles different members of the congregation have been experiencing but have not felt comfortable expressing. This dialogue about racial dynamics is the first such discussion this interracial church had had in its three-year existence.

A number of white members are annoyed by the lack of attention paid to punctuality and organization in the way the church has been run. An African American member laments the lack of interest in the congregation toward serving and engaging the surrounding community. A number of people complain that members of the largest ethnic group, Filipinos, are exclusive and “cliquey” in their friendships.

Emotions are running high and hurts are being revealed and discussed openly. One member describes this gathering as the most intense he has ever attended. After the meeting, some members question whether the
church should be focusing on these emotional issues that could divide them. Others express relief at having finally been able to express the pent-up frustrations that have been building up for so long, and at the fact that a dialogue about the difficulties in racially integrating a religious organization seems finally to be happening. The leaders of this small congregation are realizing for the first time, with piercing clarity, what they have gotten themselves into by trying to establish an interracial religious organization.

This book is an attempt to probe the sensitive nerve that was touched at this Sunday afternoon church meeting in Los Angeles. It is a vexing issue both nationally and worldwide. How can organizations incorporate separate racial, ethnic, and culture groups? Should they? What is the experience for people and groups in such organizations? Many people, and many organizations, grapple with such questions. Whether it is the integration of public schools, major corporations, or country clubs, issues around race and inclusivity have occupied a major position in U.S. society, and in a number of societies around the world, for decades. Debates swirl around such often loosely defined and easily misunderstood terms as separation, desegregation, pluralism, integration, and assimilation. Which of these processes lead to greater equality among groups, or does greater equality lead to some of these processes? What are the costs and benefits of these processes for the individuals and groups involved in them, and for society as a whole? Throughout the history of the United States, people have died, have been killed, defending or working for one or more of these processes. They are serious business.

The purpose of this book is to address some of the key questions and issues faced by modern diverse nations by taking a close, careful look at one type of organization—religious organizations. Our aim is to provide rich firsthand accounts of the sociological forces that make racially integrated organizations difficult to sustain, and of the beliefs, practices, and structures that allow these organizations to survive and thrive despite their difficulties. We will hear, through the voices of the people in these organizations, the joys and frustrations arising from actually attempting to live racial integration. We will ask how they came to be in such organizations, and why they stay (or leave). Based on analyses of these voices in multiple contexts, we develop a theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics of major processes in interracial religious organizations. In short, we aim to provide readers of this book with an inside,
visceral sense of what it is like to be part of a multiracial religious organization and a theoretical understanding of these experiences and organizations.

Why Study Religious Organizations?

In the United States, religious organizations are ubiquitous. With more than 350,000 congregations of many faith traditions, thousands of religious schools from preschool to graduate school, and thousands of other para-congregational organizations, religious organizations involve millions and millions of Americans. They also occupy vital roles in American ethnic and immigration life, often serving as key locations for adaptation to the United States (Ebaugh and Chavez 2000).

What is more, religious organizations occupy a unique place in U.S. civil society, serving as vital mediating forces between the small, private worlds of individual and family and the mass, public worlds of government, the economy, and public education. Much has been written on the important roles mediating organizations play in bridging the disparate spheres of the public and the private, in allowing democracy to function (e.g., Wuthnow and Evans 2002), in generating and organizing volunteer labor and other social capital (Cnaan 2002; Putnam 2000), and in serving as key locations for identity formation, meaning, and social networks (Emerson forthcoming; Olson 1993).

Religious organizations, as the nation’s largest volunteer organizations, are essential players in U.S. race relations, both contemporarily and historically (Emerson and Smith 2000). Moreover, their volunteer nature allows us to study what people do when given the opportunity to choose their affiliations and participation levels. This characteristic stands in stark contrast to most institutions and organizations, such as mandatory primary and secondary schooling, competitively selective higher education and work, and price-exclusionary housing markets. In non-volunteer organizations, the patterns and processes of racial and ethnic relations and representation are impacted in various ways by these other factors. But religious organizations, because they are voluntary and because they involve more than half of all Americans, provide us with perhaps our clearest opportunity for studying the processes of segregation, desegregation, integration, assimilation, and pluralism in American organizational
life. Studying such organizations allows us to see what people do when they are free to choose with whom to associate.

Because of the wide range of choices (Finke and Stark 1992), and the freedom to make those choices, it is perhaps not surprising that religious organizations are the most segregated institutions in U.S. life (Emerson forthcoming). For example, about 90 percent of congregations are at least 90 percent one race (Emerson and Smith 2000). For this reason, to study the process of integration in religious organizations is to examine a rare event, to study something that exists against all odds. Focusing on religious organizations allows us to see what forces are necessary, apart from law or coercion, for organizations to be racially and ethnically integrated. To study these organizations, then, has the potential to teach us something new about racial and ethnic relations, something we could not learn by focusing on neighborhoods, schools, government, the military, or places of employment.

**How Can We Go About Such a Study?**

We had many choices about how to approach our study. Because we knew little about the process of integration and racial and ethnic diversity in congregations (see Ammerman 1997; Becker 1999; Dougherty 2003 for exceptions) and have little theory to guide us, we used what is called the case study method. We selected four congregations, a university-based religious organization, and a religiously-based university. We studied the history of these six organizations, attempted to understand how they became racially and ethnically diverse, and, through interviews, focused on people’s experiences in these organizations. Specifically, our case studies were oriented around the following questions:

What are the reasons people give for choosing to be involved in multiracial religious organizations as opposed to homogeneous organizations?

What are the added benefits, both spiritual and social, that accrue to members of multiracial religious organizations as a result of their involvement?

What are the costs and difficulties involved in maintaining a healthy and functioning multiracial religious organization? Which groups within the organizations tend to pay the highest costs of maintenance?
What, if any, are the specific practices that appear to make the maintenance of a healthy and functioning multiracial religious organization more likely?

Each substantive chapter to follow focuses on one religious organization’s experiences of and answers to these questions. We use our case studies to help us identify commonalities and differences across these organizations. In the concluding chapter, we not only reflect on the commonalities and differences, but begin working toward a theory of integration—specifically in religious organizations, but also more generally, in organizations of all types. The case study method makes our concluding chapter possible; in turn, this concluding chapter will allow for further and more complete testing and research in the future. The case study method also makes for interesting reading, as the individual cases afford an inside look at these organizations and their people. Readers undoubtedly will learn from the case studies in ways not anticipated or touched on in the discussions we present.

**Selecting the Cases**

Though on the surface selecting the cases seems mundane, much of this book’s value rests on the careful selection of appropriate cases to study. We had several factors to consider. We needed to balance having a diversity of cases with our need for enough commonalities in them that we could separate racial from other processes. Six cases studies seemed the proper number: enough cases to see variation, but not too many to overwhelm the value of in-depth case studies. We wanted regional variation, but again we did not want six different localities (which we felt would introduce yet another variable—we would not know if differences were a result of the organizational practices and people in that organization, or more generally of the region in which the organization was located). We settled on what we call a *decreasing stack* method. We chose three cases in southern California, two in the Houston area, and one in a large midwestern metropolitan area. We chose to locate all of our cases in large metropolitan areas because this is currently where the overwhelming majority of racially diverse religious organizations are located. We suspect this large metropolitan dominance will decline over time, as the racial and ethnic diversity of the United States is reflected more and more in subur-
ban and rural communities as well as cities. For now, however, our cases are all in highly diverse large metropolitan areas.

Our next decision was what should be the ratio of congregations to non-congregations in our sample. Because congregations account for the majority of religious organizations, we wanted the majority of our cases to be congregations. However, we needed more than one non-congregation religious organization represented in our sample. So we settled on four congregations and two other religious organizations. These two other cases provide an important point of comparison, an opportunity to consider whether the processes identified in the congregations are the same or are modified in a non-congregation religious setting.

Perhaps our most important decision was what religious tradition(s) our cases should come from. The United States is a highly religiously diverse nation in terms of the variety of groups and traditions (Eck 2001), but most of this diversity in terms of numbers is found in different forms of the same tradition—Christianity (Beaman 2003). About 90 percent of religious people in the United States claim a Christian affiliation, with no other religion having more than a 3 percent share (Emerson and Kim 2003). Weighing our goals for this book, our number of cases, and the variations we have already discussed, we decided we had to locate our cases within one faith tradition. To do otherwise would have introduced far too many complexities into the interpretation of our findings.

Perhaps in part because it is so dominant, Christianity in the United States falls into several largely separate traditions. Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical Protestant are the main categories; some analysts also include separate categories such as black Protestant and Pentecostal Protestant. To reduce the number of variables between cases, we needed to locate all of our case studies within one of these traditions. We chose the evangelical Protestant tradition for two reasons. First, in terms of organizations and people, it is currently largest of these Christian traditions.¹ Second, because one of us (Emerson) had previously studied evangelicals and race (Emerson and Smith 2000), locating our case studies within this tradition gave us the richest theoretical base and point of departure.

We recognize that in studying just one faith tradition we jeopardize our ability to generalize beyond that tradition. We reflect on the broader applicability of our findings in the concluding chapter.

Within the guidelines of the factors discussed above, we selected our
cases to vary in racial and ethnic composition, and in size of organization, as these factors may influence the process and experience of integration. Subsequent chapters afford in-depth looks at each of the cases, but by way of introduction Table 1.1 presents a summary of the six organizations studied.

### Summary

Our aim in this book is to understand the processes that occur when members of different racial groups come together within organizations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational Type</th>
<th>Metro</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Racial Composition</th>
<th>Current Type</th>
<th>Founding Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Messiah Congregation</td>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>55% Asian, 30% Anglo, 10% Latino, 5% Other</td>
<td>Asian majority</td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crosstown Congregation</td>
<td>Midwest City**</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>65% Black, 30% Anglo, 5% Other</td>
<td>Black majority</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilcrest Congregation</td>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>42% Anglo, 30% Latino, 20% Black, 5% Asian, 3% Other</td>
<td>Anglo plurality</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brookside Congregation</td>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>55% Latino, 30% Anglo, 15% Black</td>
<td>Latino majority</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emmanuel Bible College</td>
<td>Southern California</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>75% Anglo, 10% Latino, 10% Asian, 5% Black</td>
<td>Anglo majority</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christ in Action</td>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>45% Asian, 45% Anglo, 10% Other</td>
<td>No majority</td>
<td>Anglo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Religious group on non-sectarian campus
**Name of city withheld to protect anonymity of organization.
Our focus is on volunteer religious organizations. These organizations afford us a unique opportunity to study the processes of desegregation and integration and to better understand race relations. We begin by traveling to suburban Los Angeles, into the world of Messiah Fellowship, the congregation in which the intense meeting that began this chapter took place. What factors led up to that meeting? Let us find out.