

BOOK REVIEW

Edwards, Korie L., and Rebecca Y. Kim. 2024. *Estranged Pioneers: Race, Faith, and Leadership in a Diverse World*

Oxford: Oxford University Press
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Reviewed by James Butler

The thing which drew me to this book was the language of “pioneer”. This is language I’m familiar with because it is used in a Church of England context to describe those who feel a sense of calling beyond the traditional spheres of the church to connect with people who are beyond the normal reach of churches. Given that one of the critiques of this language is that it is inappropriate because of its colonial connotations and connections, it was interesting to find it used as the language to describe those who sense a call to lead racially diverse churches, or multiracial churches, in the terms favoured in the book. Not only that, but having heard Korie Little Edwards speak, I was aware that these “pioneers” that she and Rebecca Kim had identified had experiences in common with the pioneers I work with, particularly around the ways they saw themselves following an unusual calling, leading to them feeling misunderstood by those around them within their churches and wider denominational structures.

Estranged Pioneers is a detailed look at the experience of leaders of racially diverse churches in the United States. Edwards and Kim are both sociologists, and the book takes a sociology of religion approach in its methods and in its theoretical analysis. Reading sociology of religion as someone based in practical theology is interesting – on the one hand, there is so much which feels in common with my field around the close attention to data and the experience of those living this out in the day-to-day, and yet it always feels one step removed from the kinds of questions I want to be asking. This is not to say it is not a good read; in fact, it is highly readable, and I was drawn in to the accounts, the stories and the reflections which came around race, congregations, leadership and so on. I would recommend the book on that basis alone; it draws the reader into the experience of these pastors and raises important

questions about the challenges they face and what that reveals about Christianity and the racial landscape of the United States.

The book is laid out in five chapters, building from the experience of pastors towards wider questions of race and diversity and the particular challenges for churches and experience of leading racially diverse churches. It starts by describing the different ways pastors found themselves leading multiracial churches (Chapter 1) before turning to focus more specifically on the experience of pastors of colour in Chapter 2. Having begun to point towards the challenges faced, these are made more explicit and explored in more detail in Chapter 3. Given that so much of the pastors' experience seems challenging and difficult, Edwards and Kim then turn to ask whether there are advantages (Chapter 4) before exploring the wider racial dynamics of "white pastor privilege" in Chapter 5.

What I found particularly powerful were the stories of pastors of colour who had a sense of calling towards leading multiracial churches. In reality, they found themselves disadvantaged in comparison to their white colleagues, with barriers to overcome in the ways they were perceived by white members of congregations and predominantly white denominations, and at the same time felt cut off from some of the support structures which would come from their own churches, be that Black, Hispanic, or Asian. Much of the book focused on the ways in which identity played out in their roles as pastors, and the ways in which they navigated those dynamics.

My frustrations with the book, suggested at the beginning of this review, are around the lack of engagement with theological categories. On the one hand this is understandable given that the work is located in the discipline of sociology of religion, and has a focus on the experience of church leadership within the wider racial landscape of the United States. But at the same time, I felt that important interpretative tools were missing from the work. For example, it was interesting to me that the language of "call" was so prominent within the book, and yet there is very little inquisitiveness about what "call" means to those pastors. It is not really dealt with as a theological category and is seen in quite secular terms in ways which I believe would be alien to the pastors themselves. Given that the participants emphasised a sense of calling, it would seem helpful to explore what this sense of call actually was, rather than trying to make sense of it in terms of sociological advantages. Similarly, there were interesting points of exploration around racial justice, but little account was given of the pastors' motivations for pursuing racial justice coming directly from their own faith. For me, this raises important inter-disciplinary questions about how sociological and practical theology research might engage together. It would be interesting to explore how practical theological work on these issues could complement and further illuminate the work done here. My worry with the sociological analysis is that the recommendations can easily be based in assumptions about churches and faith which are not shared with the pastors who have participated. I feel that the

recommendations to churches about next steps and implications need to be considered in theological terms to help surface the assumptions which are held by sociology.

All that being said, in terms of my own reflection, this has been a really helpful and stimulating book. This is the case not just regarding the pertinent questions of racial justice, multiracial church and leadership on which the book focuses, but also the bigger questions around the experience of following a calling which takes you away from one's peers, resulting in the experience of pioneering something new while feeling estranged from all you knew. It would be great to explore the overlaps between the "estranged pioneers" of this context, with the pioneers working in the Church of England and other denominations in a UK context. Overall, I recommend the book; it is an engaging and absorbing read, and one which can stimulate important theological questions, even if it is not interested in them itself.

About the Reviewer

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