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Dilemmas of Accommodation:
Diverse Associations and the Avoidance of Difference

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Dilemmas of Accommodation:

Diverse Associations and the Avoidance of Racial Difference¹

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Abstract

This article proposes that racially diverse associations are caught in a predicament. A potential democratic contribution of these associations is their ability to facilitate discussions that teach us how racial issues affect others, and that encourage collective problem-solving about racial issues and problems. In the presence of salient racial divisions, however, these activities are potentially fatal for associational harmony. I refer to these perceived choices between harmony and the potential for racial tension as “dilemmas of accommodation,” and I argue that members of racially diverse associations tend to deal with these dilemmas by developing understandings of “how we do things here” (“styles”) that involve the avoidance of racial issues. These styles undermine the deliberative and political promise of racial diversity because they provide paths out of deliberation and political action about issues related to race. I developed this theory inductively during thirteen months of ethnographic and interview-based fieldwork in churches in Boston. The empirical section draws on data from these churches to illustrate the theory in America’s most prevalent association.

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Introduction

Sarah is a longtime member of Fairview Community Church in Boston.³ She regularly attends Black Lives Matter demonstrations, and says that she, a white woman, is engaged in “a constant process of learning about race and privilege.” Many of Sarah’s fellow white and non-white churchgoers attend similar demonstrations and several participate in activism with communities of color in Boston. The vast majority of these churchgoers are liberal and most appear excited about interracial interactions, at least based on their continued commitment to a racially diverse church. These churchgoers also have repeated opportunities for interracial contact, and many pursue interracial cooperation on Fairview’s leadership team, homeless drop-in center, and school volunteer program.

Given this information, we might expect Fairview to foster deliberation and political action on issues and problems related to race. During my fieldwork in Fairview, however, meaningful deliberation and action about racial issues never occurred. In almost any church service or gathering, the discussion *could* have widened out to broader racial issues and solutions, but these kinds of involvements never materialized. Moreover, this puzzle is not unique to Fairview. In March 2021, I started observing and conducting interviews in 72 churches of varying racial compositions in Boston. A striking picture emerged in the racially diverse churches. These churches were home to churchgoers who might have used church meetings and gatherings to talk and learn about different racial issues and perspectives. These churchgoers might have used these diverse gatherings to plan racial justice

³ I use pseudonyms for all churches and participants. “Fairview” has 60 regular members: 21 are white and non-Hispanic, 15 are black or African American, 14 are Hispanic or Latino, and 10 are Asian. The pastor is white, and the other staff are African American (2) and Hispanic (1). These data are based on my observations and interviews with multiple staff members and churchgoers.

actions and demonstrations of the kind pursued by many churches. During the time I spent in these churches, however, this kind of engagement with racial issues and problems did not take place.

Why, given the personal and political commitments of these churchgoers and their opportunities for interracial contact, did deliberation and political action about racial issues not occur? More broadly, what can this puzzle teach us about the possibility of deliberation and action on racial issues in the presence of salient racial divisions in society? This article addresses these questions, drawing on thirteen months of ethnographic and interview-based fieldwork in churches that I conducted between March 2021 and April 2022. During this time, I attended 72 churches in Boston and was an active and regular participant in four churches: two racially diverse churches, a predominantly white church, and a predominantly African American church. In these four churches, I attended worship services, leadership and staff meetings, fellowship activities, and social gatherings. I took detailed field notes on “front” and “backstage” behaviors and conversations. I conducted interviews with pastors, churchgoers, men, women, newcomers, old-timers, members of different races and ethnicities, and members with and without leadership roles. I collected a variety of archival materials alongside these data, including church records (e.g., meeting agendas, subgroup reports, expenditures), event flyers, announcements, letters to the congregation, church e-mail threads, interactions on social media, and newspaper articles about church activities.

This fieldwork highlighted the challenges that racial diversity presents for deliberation and political action on racial issues in societies with salient racial divisions. In this article, I draw inductively on these data to develop three claims about racially diverse associations in these kinds of contexts.⁴

⁴ These claims are geared toward racial divisions in the United States but could apply to any context in which different social groups have different salient divisions (e.g., ethnicity, religion, class, caste). I will return to the scope conditions when I introduce the data and empirical approach.

First, I argue that members of racially diverse associations often perceive choices between harmony and the risk of racial tension. Second, I argue that these perceived choices lead members toward understandings of “how we do things here” (what I term, “styles”) that maintain harmony through the avoidance of issues related to race. Finally, I argue that these styles undermine the deliberative and political promise of racial diversity because they provide paths out of deliberation and political action on racial issues. This outcome is troubling because it suggests that *racially diverse* associations—i.e., those that are best-positioned to facilitate deliberation and political action on issues and problems related to race—are unlikely to deliver on this potential.

This article makes five main contributions. First, it offers a revised picture of the democratic effects of associations in diverse societies (Tocqueville [1835] 1969; Fung 2003; Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003) and suggests that racially diverse associations are unlikely to harness the deliberative and political promise of racial diversity without resisting the avoidance of racial issues. Second, the article highlights the limits of the contact hypothesis (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006) by showing how even close, long-term, and collaborative interracial contact can lead to the avoidance of deliberation and political action on racial issues. In particular, my findings suggest that intergroup contact may be more effective in producing some outcomes (increasing tolerance and reducing prejudice) than others (fostering deliberation and action about intergroup issues and inequalities), and that experimental contact-based interventions may be failing to account for longer-term adaptations in group norms: do short-term impacts on prejudice and outgroup evaluations remain if diverse groups develop norms for avoiding their differences?

Third, the study presents a troubling companion to the tradeoff between deliberative and participatory democracy (Mutz 2006). According to Mutz, diverse discussion networks provide exposure to multiple viewpoints but discourage political participation, due in part to the discomfort of conflict in social settings. This study shows how diversity can lead to the avoidance of different

experiences and viewpoints altogether, and suggests that diverse networks might face a tradeoff between harmony versus deliberation *and* political action on issues related to difference (i.e., that diverse networks are unlikely to become diverse political discussion networks).⁵ Fourth, the study extends a mostly sociological literature on racially diverse churches by drawing out the deliberative and political costs of decisions to downplay racial conflict in worship and interactions (Edwards 2008; Edwards, Christerson, and Emerson 2013).⁶ Finally, alongside a growing body of research, this study aims to illustrate the value of inductive theory-building in the study of American political behavior (Cramer 2004; 2006; 2012; Nuamah 2021; Ternullo 2022; Weaver, Prowse, and Piston 2019).

Racial Diversity as a Deliberative and Political Resource in Associations

When political scientists talk about efforts to bridge lines of difference, what they generally have in mind are engagements across the partisan divide (Mutz 2006; Mutz and Mondak 2006; Matthes et al. 2019; Levendusky and Stecula 2021; Santoro and Broockman 2022). Yet there are plenty of reasons to think that deliberation and action across lines of racial difference are valuable outcomes for democracy. Insofar as racial groups occupy different social positions, they have different perspectives

⁵ This point coheres with Mutz’s finding that diverse political discussion networks are rare in the American context. In addition, Mutz was dealing with partisan rather than racial diversity. By extending her framework to racial diversity, this study highlights the avoidance of racial issues as an important form of political avoidance (and one that can occur even among the politically like-minded).

⁶ Although churches were once viewed as the nation’s most segregated institution, racial diversity is on the rise in churches in the US. Churches in which one racial group comprise less than 80 percent grew from 6 percent in 1998 to 16 percent in 2018–2019 (Dougherty, Chaves, and Emerson 2020).

on those positions and their consequences (Young 1997, 2000). These different perspectives offer what Donna Haraway calls “situated knowledge,” or points of view held by social groups due to their position in relations of structural inequality (Haraway 1988). Because situated knowledges are partial with respect to the whole society, inclusive political action requires the perspectives of differently positioned groups (Young 1997, 2000; Bohman 1996). Racial diversity is a resource for inclusive deliberation and political action, then, if discussion and action draw on the understandings of different racial groups to situate partial perspectives in a wider context, teach us how racial issues affect others, and improve our ability to interpret events and problems from a range of group perspectives.

According to social epistemologists, this point is particularly important with respect to what privileged groups can learn from less privileged groups (Fricker 2007; Mills 2007; Anderson 2010). In the United States, for instance, black Americans tend to have fundamentally different experiences of the government than white Americans (Cohen 2010; Soss and Weaver 2017; Cohen and Luttig 2020). As a result, significant portions of the daily experiences of black Americans remain invisible to whites (Mills 2007; Anderson 2010, 44-50). Deliberation and action that draw on different racial perspectives, then, promise to not only generate more inclusive outcomes, but to also improve white Americans’ understanding of the experiences of communities of color.

A long tradition of research in political science suggests that voluntary associations are well-positioned to harness these deliberative and political benefits of diversity through dialogue and collective action. Running back to Tocqueville, this research emphasizes how associations can cultivate civic virtues, educate citizens, and create space for public deliberation (Putnam 2000; Fung 2003; Skocpol 2003).⁷ In so doing, associations replace narrow self-interest with an awareness of the needs

⁷ On the mechanisms by which associations undergird deliberation and democratic engagement, see, e.g., Warren (2001), Cohen and Rogers (1995), Rosenblum (1998), Han (2014).

of others, or “self-interest rightly understood” (Tocqueville [1835] 1969). Racially diverse associations, then, should be able to mobilize their racial diversity as a deliberative and political resource by pooling the situated knowledges of different racial groups to generate meaningful discussion and action on racial issues and problems.

Theory: Dilemmas of Accommodation in Racially Diverse Associations

In this article, I argue that racial diversity presents challenges for deliberation and political action on racial issues in diverse associations in societies with salient racial divisions. I developed this argument inductively during my fieldwork. For clarity, this section distills the three steps of that argument.

First, I argue that members of racially diverse associations in societies with salient racial divisions regularly perceive choices between harmony and the risk of racial tension. I develop several examples from churches in this paper (e.g., Would preaching about racial violence retraumatize our people of color? Would talking about racism offend other churchgoers?), but one can imagine similar perceived choices in other racially diverse associations (Would classes on racial violence retraumatize students of color? Would workplace diversity initiatives risk difficult conversations? Would conversations about racism compromise “team spirit” on a diverse sports team?).

Second, I argue that as members of racially diverse associations repeatedly perceive these choices, they gravitate toward understandings of “how we do things here” (“styles”) that privilege the maintenance of harmony. “Styles” refer to patterns of interaction that arise from shared assumptions about good and appropriate group behavior (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003).⁸ I refer to these

⁸ Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003, 739) identify three dimensions of group styles: assumptions about the group’s relationship to the world (“group boundaries”); assumptions about members’ mutual

perceived choices between harmony and the potential for racial tension as “dilemmas of accommodation,” and I argue that racially diverse associations often deal with these dilemmas by gravitating toward styles that involve the systematic avoidance of issues related to race.

Finally, I argue that these styles of avoidance undermine the deliberative and political promise of racial diversity because they provide paths out of dialogue and action on racial issues—a valuable path, on some occasions, but a path that restricts the exchange of “situated knowledge” and the likelihood of collective action that aims to remedy racial inequalities. This outcome offers a troubling picture because it suggests that racially diverse associations are unlikely to deliver on the deliberative and political promise of their racial diversity.

This argument engages several leading theories about diversity, contact, and cross-cutting exposure in political science. First, the theory poses problems for the larger theoretical framework in which voluntary associations are deemed important for social integration in diverse societies (Tocqueville [1835] 1969; Warren 2001; Fung 2003; Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003). According to this literature, racially diverse associations should be promising avenues for deliberation and action that improve our ability to interpret problems from multiple racial perspectives and devise solutions that are responsive to different racial groups. My theory suggests that racially diverse associations are unlikely to realize this potential when the pursuit of harmony involves the avoidance of racial issues.

Second, my argument casts new light on theories of intergroup contact. A long literature proposes that contact across group lines can reduce intergroup prejudice (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). This study, however, shows how even frequent, positive, and collaborative intergroup contact can contribute to the avoidance of conversations and action about divisive intergroup issues.

responsibilities (“group bonds”); and assumptions about appropriate speech in the group context (“speech norms”).

This point suggests that contact may be more effective at increasing tolerance and reducing prejudice than fostering deliberation and action that deals with intergroup issues and inequalities.⁹ In addition, this point suggests that experimental contact interventions may be failing to account for longer-term adaptations in group norms (Mousa 2020; Scacco and Warren 2018; Green and Wong 2009). Do short-term impacts on prejudice and outgroup evaluations remain if diverse groups develop norms for avoiding their differences? This insight coheres with recent experimental research that finds ambiguous long-term effects of contact (Asimovic, Ditlemann, and Samii 2022). Finally, my theory suggests that intergroup contact may be limited in its ability to change power relations and intergroup inequalities (Denis 2015). If privileged groups have more to learn about the experiences of less privileged groups (Fricker 2007; Mills 2007; Anderson 2010), then the avoidance of intergroup issues and inequalities reduces opportunities for privileged groups to learn about the perspectives of differently positioned outgroups.¹⁰

⁹ Importantly, this argument is not that interracial contact cannot improve participants' understandings of racial issues or motivation to remedy inequalities without open dialogue about racial issues. Rather, my point is that these effects are limited in the absence of this kind of dialogue.

¹⁰ On this point, my findings also suggest a different mechanism for the "irony of harmony" findings in social psychology. According to this literature, contact can undermine collective action to remedy inequalities by creating the false impression of equality (Saguy et al. 2009). According to this study, however, contact undermines this kind of action because these groups avoid divisive issues and inequalities. This study thus shows how contact can undermine collective action to remedy intergroup inequalities even when the participants are generally aware that these inequalities exist.

Third, my theory presents a troubling companion to the tradeoff between deliberative and participatory democracy (Mutz 2002; Mutz 2006). According to Mutz, diverse discussion networks foster tolerance and awareness of multiple viewpoints but discourage political participation. Conflict avoidance explains the tradeoff: members of cross-cutting networks retreat from participation because they do not want to put their social relationships at risk. In this study, however, I argue that these kinds of discomfort can lead members of diverse networks to avoid their salient differences altogether. This point suggests that before diverse discussion networks become diverse *political* discussion networks, their members face a tradeoff between harmony, on the one hand, and deliberation and action about their differences, on the other. Insights from my fieldwork suggest that harmony is likely to win out—a point which coheres with Mutz’s finding that diverse political discussion networks are extremely rare in the American context. In addition, my theory extends Mutz’s framework from partisan to racial diversity. In so doing, I highlight the avoidance of *racial* issues as an important form of political avoidance (and importantly, one that can occur even among the politically like-minded).

Empirical Approach

Case Selection and Fieldwork

My arguments in this study are based on thirteen months of ethnographic and interview-based fieldwork in churches in Boston. Racially diverse churches are a useful window into how people experience racial diversity in associations for several reasons. First, these churches tend to facilitate interracial contact that is regular, collaborative, and positive, and that roughly satisfies the best-known formulation of the contact hypothesis: equal status between groups during contact, cooperation, common goals, and support from authorities or custom (Allport 1954). As a result, these churches are a useful approximation for Allportian contact and allow for an ethnographic engagement with that literature. Second, diverse churches are one of the more prevalent opportunities for interracial contact

in the United States. Although once viewed as the nation's most segregated institution, racial diversity is on the rise in religious congregations in America. Dougherty, Chaves, and Emerson (2020), for instance, find that multiracial churches grew from six to 16 percent of churches between 1998 and 2019, even as residential and occupational segregation increased (Menendian, Gales, and Gambhi 2021; Ferguson and Koning 2018).

I conducted my fieldwork for this study between March 2021 and April 2022. During this time, I attended 72 churches and was an active and regular participant in four churches. I began this fieldwork by compiling a list of Christian churches in Boston using Google Maps and denominational locators. I chose to focus on Christian churches to increase the comparability of my field sites and because I felt familiar enough with the rules and practices of Christian churches to study them. After compiling my list, I proceeded to conduct observations and interviews in 38 racially diverse churches and 34 predominantly homogenous churches.¹¹ This fieldwork was inductive in nature: although I was initially interested in how racially diverse churches approached political and collective action, this fieldwork revealed that racially diverse churches were particularly reluctant to engage with *racial* issues.

¹¹ To classify churches as racially diverse or predominantly homogenous, I used a combination of observations and insights from clergy and churchgoers. "Predominantly homogenous" churches were those with more than 80 percent of churchgoers from one racial group. "Racially diverse" churches were those with less than 80 percent from one racial group. This cutoff follows the standard definition of multiracial churches in sociology (Emerson and Kim 2003; Emerson 2006). My estimations were likely imperfect (particularly in the churches in which I spent less time), but the vast majority of churches fell clearly on either side of this cutoff. I also took notes on the racial compositions of each church to ensure variation in the presence and ratio of different racial groups.

I used this fieldwork to develop the building blocks of my theory: that racially diverse churches face pressures and that the avoidance of racial issues is a characteristic response to these pressures.

After this first round of fieldwork, I narrowed my sample to four churches to investigate this puzzle in more detail: two racially diverse churches, a predominantly white church, and a predominantly African American church. I selected these churches for variation in denomination, neighborhood, and the incomes and educations of churchgoers. I used this fieldwork to round out my argument about how perceived choices between harmony and the potential for racial tension contribute to styles of avoidance that preclude deliberation and action about racial issues. The empirical section draws on data from the racially diverse churches in my fieldwork to illustrate this argument in detail.¹²

Data Limitations

This is not a study of churches in Boston. Rather, this is a study of racial diversity in associations that is conducted in churches in Boston (Geertz 1973, 22; Cramer 2016, 21). My aim is to use these churches as a window into the nature and implications of racial diversity in associations—to observe how people experience this diversity, and to grasp the political significance of their responses. It is by trying to make sense of these responses, I argue, that we uncover a dynamic that I suspect is present beyond churches: that members of racially diverse associations often gravitate toward the avoidance of issues related to race; that this avoidance constrains deliberation and political action about racial issues and inequalities; and that something valuable can be lost in the process.

¹² See Appendix A for more details about the fieldwork and data analysis, Appendix B for ethical considerations, and Appendix C for the interview guide. I discuss how my fieldwork in the predominantly homogenous churches informed my theory in Appendix A.

However, there are important limits to what we can learn from my fieldwork. The first issue is generalizability. My data focus only on a sample of churches in Boston and there may be features of churches that limit my ability to generalize to other associations. For instance, churches might place great value on harmony and may thus be uniquely sensitive to the potential for racial tension. This may be particularly likely in urban contexts like Boston, where churchgoers have many viable alternatives in the event of discord or disagreement. That said, the pressures of racial tension are not unique to churches, and the voluminous guidance literature on “race-talk” suggests that these pressures are commonplace in contexts like diverse schools and workplaces.¹³

A related generalizability concern is that my theory might not apply to other time periods or to salient divisions other than race (e.g., sect or class). I conducted my fieldwork in the two years after the murder of George Floyd, and it is possible that the subsequent “racial reckoning” uniquely amplified the perceived risks of conversations about race. However, the avoidance of racial issues has long been documented in group settings in the United States (Eliasoph 1999; Bonilla-Silva 2010; Feagin 2010; McKinney 2005). Moreover, scholars have observed avoidance norms along other lines of division in other divided contexts: studies of Northern Ireland, Quebec, and settler-colonialism in Ontario, for instance, find that intergroup interactions often avoid divisive concerns (Taylor, Dube, and Bellerose 1986; Trew 1986; Pettigrew 1998; Denis 2015).

A second limitation is that there are plausible alternative explanations for the lack of deliberation and action on racial issues in the churches from my fieldwork. These explanations include the possibility that these churchgoers “self-selected” into churches that avoid racial topics and issues,

¹³ A search for best-sellers yields titles like “How to Have Difficult Conversations About Race: Practical Tools for Necessary Change in the Workplace and Beyond” (Christian 2022) and “What We Still Don’t Know About Teaching Race: How to Talk About It in the Classroom” (Hughes 2006).

that these racially diverse groups lack the capacity for effective collective action, or that divisive topics and issues of all kinds are taboo. I address each of these concerns with data from my fieldwork, but no explanation can be categorically ruled out with “small-n” ethnographic observation.

Despite these limitations, my data retain important characteristics that make them suited to understanding the barriers to deliberation and action in the presence of salient racial divisions. This is because these data capture the *experience* of divisions—what actually goes on for people when they encounter racial diversity in their community, and what blocks the transition from merely encountering diversity to meaningfully engaging with diversity through dialogue and action. For the task of inductively figuring out *why* people respond to racial diversity in certain ways, I found no better substitute than observing and listening—joining people in their churches and hearing how they themselves make sense of racial diversity and its demands.

Overview of Evidence

The section that follows illustrates my argument with data from the racially diverse churches from my fieldwork. First, I provide an in-depth illustration of the theory in a racially diverse church called Fairview Community Church. To open this illustration, I describe the racial diversity of Fairview and argue that this diversity is exogenous to the church’s approach to deliberation and political action about racial issues. Then, I use observations from Fairview to characterize the perceived choices between harmony and the potential for racial tension (the “dilemmas of accommodation”), and to show how members respond by developing understandings of “how we do things here” (“styles”) that involve the systematic avoidance of racial issues. I conclude this illustration by showing how this style of avoidance undermines the possibility for deliberation and political action about racial issues and by addressing alternative explanations for the absence of these involvements. To conclude this section, I step back from Fairview to consider the other racially diverse churches from my fieldwork. This

section provides supportive evidence that Fairview captures a dynamic with broader significance in racially diverse churches.

Evidence from Diverse Churches

Introducing Fairview Community Church

At 11am on Sunday morning, the pews of Fairview Community Church teem with churchgoers. To my front, a Hispanic man and two elderly white women exchange menu predictions for the church picnic. Four African American women gather to my left and, from time to time, pause their conversation to welcome churchgoers. At 10 past the hour, Pastor Jennifer walks to the front of the church. After several rounds of throat clearing, Jennifer is rewarded with the attention of her congregation. The opening African American spiritual is helped along by a clap, courtesy of the Hispanic family on my right.

These scenes depict a typical Sunday at Fairview Community Church. Fairview is a non-denominational church that serves a range of racial and ethnic groups in Boston. Of the 60 regular members of Fairview, 21 are white and non-Hispanic, 15 are black or African American, 14 are Hispanic or Latino, and 10 are Asian. The pastor is white, and the other staff are African American (2) and Hispanic (1). This racial diversity stems from the 1990s, when the predominantly white congregation migrated to other suburbs and a church consultant gave Fairview three options: shut down, move to the suburbs, or become diverse. Fairview chose the third option and hired a pastor with experience in multi-racial churches. We can understand the racial diversity of Fairview, then, as a survival decision from a previous generation. Table 1 provides additional details about Fairview Community Church.

Table 1: Fairview Community Church¹⁴

	Fairview Community Church
Number of regular adult churchgoers	60
Number of female churchgoers	32
Number over 65	9
Number in households with income < \$35,000	6
Number with college degree	35
Number of White and non-Hispanic churchgoers	21
Number of Black or African American churchgoers	5
Number of Hispanic or Latino churchgoers	14
Number of Asian or Pacific Islander churchgoers	10
Number of staff	4
Number of White and non-Hispanic staff	1
Number of Black or African-American staff	2
Number of Hispanic or Latino staff	1
Number of Asian or Pacific Islander staff	0
Race of lead pastor	White
Denomination	Non-denominational
Political lean	Liberal
Collective actions	Homeless drop-in center, school volunteer program, leadership team, youth group, youth summer program

¹⁴ These data are based on my observations and interviews with multiple staff members and churchgoers. The numbers fluctuated somewhat during the research, but I report the figures that I believe best represent this church.

From Dilemmas to Avoidance in Fairview

I first attended Fairview after the Asian spa shootings in Atlanta in March 2021. After the violence, Pastor Jennifer had opened her sermon with a prayer for the victims, and I wanted to press her on aspects of her approach (Why a prayer rather than call to action? Why not a sermon?). In a conversation after the service, Pastor Jennifer explained as follows: “I really wanted to talk about the violence, but I wanted to talk in a way that challenged our white people, but didn’t re-traumatize our Asian Americans and other people of color...That’s the challenge with a multi-racial congregation...I want to give people a space where they can get away from all that.” Here, we learn that Pastor Jennifer struggles to address racism and racial violence in a way that meets the needs of all churchgoers. We learn that she avoids calls to action despite her desire to challenge white churchgoers.

This example offers a window into the pressures of racial diversity in Fairview. However, we can also use this example to characterize the dilemmas faced by members of racially diverse associations in contexts with salient racial divisions. Notice, in particular, how racial diversity presents a perceived choice between harmony and the potential for racial tension. In Fairview, Pastor Jennifer chose a prayer for victims over a sermon that might upset or retraumatize people of color. In more general terms, this is a choice between harmony and the risk of discontent among non-white members.

Jennifer’s response (avoiding a negative response from non-white churchgoers) also offers insight into the understanding of “how we do things here” that characterizes Fairview Community Church. Life at Fairview consists in the avoidance of racial issues and inequalities. As Efreem, a longtime member, put it: “Our approach is very much like, ‘God loves you...Leave all that other stuff at the door’...It’s a diverse place, but we don’t get hung up on that other baggage.” This approach represents an understanding of how we do things here (or “style”) that minimizes the significance of race and creates a space in which racial differences can be cast aside. This style involves the avoidance

of potentially difficult conversations about the experience of race and privilege. This style allows clergy and churchgoers to quickly and consistently navigate the racial diversity of their church.

How did the pressures of racial diversity produce this style? A conversation with Pastor Jennifer offered a window into the evolution of avoidance in Fairview. In that conversation, we talked about several of the “low points” in her ministry journey. This account of Pastor Jennifer’s description of a low point draws on fieldnotes written after the conversation:

Have you heard of Oxfam hunger events? Well, when you arrive at the dinner, everyone gets a little tag. And, say, two people get a full dinner, five people get meat and rice, fifty people just rice, and everybody else gets nothing. It’s supposed to be representative of how food is distributed in the world. It’s a lesson on inequality. Anyway, I tried it out at Easter and people got really angry. Some were like, “But where’s the food?” Other people tried to explain the message about inequality, and that didn’t go down well.

Pastor Jennifer paused, and then continued:

At the time, I was thinking, “Why are people getting so mad about this?” But later, I reflected and realized that some of our members really don’t need a lesson on inequality. Several of our members from [a poor and black neighborhood in Boston] bring their kids to church events for a decent meal. They were mad because they didn’t need a lesson on division and inequality. I wish I’d thought of that before hosting the dinner. We don’t need to rehash the divisions. I remind myself of that all the time.

From this account, we learn that Pastor Jennifer tried to facilitate a conversation about inequality in a racially diverse congregation, and that her efforts prompted anger among churchgoers whose different class (and in this context, racial) backgrounds shaped their experience of the dinner.

Notice how this episode represents a choice between harmony and racial tension: here, Jennifer chose between a dinner with or without potentially difficult conversations about race and inequality. Notice also how the backlash set Fairview on the path toward its style by reminding Pastor Jennifer that they “don’t need to rehash the divisions.” This commitment captures the essence of an understanding of how we do things here that involves the systematic avoidance of racial issues.¹⁵

Importantly, this “triggering event” (Fine 1979) did not singlehandedly produce this style of avoidance in Fairview.¹⁶ Rather, this event is representative of episodes that regularly occur at the church. These episodes are internalized by participants (Jennifer reminds herself of the dinner “all the time”) and shared with other churchgoers as rationale for the avoidance of racial issues. Moreover, these episodes are not only experienced by pastors: although pastors appeared to face the most pressure to maintain harmony and hold the most power to shape norms of avoidance, churchgoers referenced similar episodes in our conversations and interviews. An Asian woman from Fairview, for instance, referenced an interaction with a black churchgoer about the threat posed by a black homeless man at the church homeless center as an episode that informed her reluctance to raise racial issues in conversations at church (she assumed the threat posed by the black man was high; the black

¹⁵ It is possible that Pastor Jennifer felt these pressures more acutely because of her own whiteness. However, as I discuss in the next section, I found that pastors of color faced similar pressures in other racially diverse churches. For instance, one black pastor shared that he had been fired from a racially diverse church for “speaking too much about Black Lives Matter” and now chose to stay away from racially charged issues in his current diverse church.

¹⁶ I borrow the term “triggering event” from Fine’s (1979) discussion of group culture formation. These events involve interactions that provide a “spark” which produces the group culture (or “style”).

churchgoer “gave her a look” that implied that her reaction was based on the homeless man’s race). Together, and over time, these kinds of episodes have discouraged open discussions and collective action about racial inequalities and produced an understanding of “how we do things in Fairview” that involves the avoidance of racial issues.

The Consequences of the Avoidance of Racial Issues

Up to now, I have described how perceived choices between harmony and the potential for racial tension produced the avoidance of racial issues in Fairview. I will now shift my attention to the deliberative and political implications of this journey. Consider the following conversation about the racial justice activities of another church with Gabrielle, a member of Fairview. In that conversation, Gabrielle shared that “We don’t really do that kind of political and social justice work...I’d actually say we draw a clear line between the spiritual and political.” This delineation aligns with Pastor Jennifer’s account of her response to the episode of racial violence in Atlanta (recall: “That’s the challenge with a multi-racial congregation...I want to give people a space where they can get away from all that”). As Pastor Jennifer described in another conversation about racial justice demonstrations, “Politics isn’t really what we do at Fairview...I don’t know how to approach that in church. Or even whether I should. It’s not something any of us know how to do together.”

Notice how these descriptions represent the avoidance of racial difference and issues. By offering a refuge from difference, Fairview forecloses the exchange of differing racial perspectives. As Efrem put it, Fairview leaves “that other stuff at the door.” Churchgoers do not share political opinions or perspectives. Churchgoers do not explore their different positions or racial backgrounds, nor do they form new perspectives through dialogue and collective action about issues related to race. Although the regular and collaborative contact may increase tolerance and reduce racial prejudice (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998), churchgoers in Fairview are not directly confronted with the different

perspectives and experiences of this racially diverse congregation. Despite their regular, positive, and collaborative intergroup contact, churchgoers do not draw on their different “situated knowledges” to remedy inequalities together, and white churchgoers, in particular, are not exposed to the perspectives of less privileged racial groups. The avoidance of racial issues in Fairview, then, limits this church’s ability to harness the deliberative and political value of racial diversity (Tocqueville [1835] 1969), shows how regular and positive intergroup contact can fail to generate meaningful dialogue and action about racial issues (Allport 1954), and reveals how salient divisions can generate a tradeoff between harmony versus deliberation and political action on issues related to difference (Mutz 2006).

Are there alternative explanations for the absence of deliberation and action about racial issues and inequalities in Fairview? First, it is not the case that churchgoers in Fairview lack the skills or capacity for collective action. These churchgoers exercise their administrative and fundraising skills on the leadership team, practice public speaking during the service, and supervise a homeless drop-in center and school volunteer program.¹⁷ These activities thus undermine alternative explanations rooted in varied opportunities for civic skill development at church (Verba, Brady, and Schlozman 1995). Moreover, these activities reduce the concern that this diverse group lacks the capacity for collective action due to barriers like language differences, poor information flow, or weak social sanctioning mechanisms (Habyarimana et al. 2007; Larson and Lewis 2017; Oliver 2010).¹⁸

¹⁷ While certainly important (and “political” in the sense that they involve the pooling of resources for shared concerns), these activities do not involve dialogue or action about racial issues and thus preclude opportunities to draw on and learn from different racial perspectives about racial inequalities.

¹⁸ In addition, the fact that these collective actions are focused on non-divisive but not divisive issues suggests that the avoidance of intergroup tension might undermine collective action on divisive issues

Second, it does not appear to be the case that members of Fairview are not interested in race or have “self-selected” into a church that avoids racial topics. Pastor Jennifer organized with an anti-racism group during divinity school and several churchgoers regularly (and separately) attend Black Lives Matter demonstrations and protests. Moreover, when I shared toward the end of my fieldwork that I was interested in how churchgoers talked about race, several churchgoers of color seemed eager to share stories of racial discrimination (i.e., of the kind that could have sparked meaningful learning and collective problem-solving about racial inequalities if shared with other churchgoers). While impossible to rule out the role of self-selection, I take these conversations as evidence that self-selection is not the entire story, and that churchgoers would at least be willing to engage in deliberation and collective action about racial issues and inequalities.

Third, disagreement itself is not taboo in Fairview. During my time at the church, I witnessed animated debates about fundraising options, budget decisions, and the provision and scheduling of youth group programming, among other such issues. More than a few churchgoers were willing to express unpopular opinions on issues like the order of service and hiring decisions. These observations suggest that Fairview is not home to Noelle-Neumann’s (1984) “spiral of silence” in which people refrain from expressing unpopular viewpoints in public. In Fairview, churchgoers and clergy avoided deliberation and debate about race and racial topics, not debate or disagreement in general.

even when diverse groups have the capacity for collective action. The avoidance of tension thus offers an additional explanation for the negative relationship between racial diversity and collective action (Alesina, Baqir, and Easterly 1999) that differs from accounts focused on the inability of diverse groups to impose social sanctions (Habyarimana et al. 2007; Miguel and Gugerty 2005), residential segregation (Trounstine 2016), and intergroup economic inequality (Baldwin and Huber 2010).

The conclusion to draw from this illustration, then, is that the avoidance of racial issues is what leads Fairview away from deliberation and political action about race. In her commitment to avoiding racial issues in Fairview, Pastor Jennifer missed the opportunity to use the racial violence in Atlanta to facilitate a conversation about churchgoers' differing experiences of race and privilege. In their commitment to this kind of avoidance at church, churchgoers missed opportunities to share their varied experiences and perspectives on racial issues and problems. This argument, importantly, is not that these decisions were wrong: diverse groups cannot always push for difficult conversations, and there are certainly occasions to step back from racial issues. What I have tried to demonstrate with this illustration, however, is that racially diverse associations that rigidly commit to the avoidance of racial issues will *repeatedly* miss opportunities for deliberation and political action about race. The systematic avoidance of racial issues offers a path out of dialogue and action about racial inequalities and, in so doing, undermines the deliberative and political promise of racial diversity.

Beyond Fairview Community Church

What I have offered in this section so far is an illustration of the dilemmas of one set of actors (clergy and churchgoers) in one racially diverse church (Fairview). However, is avoidance in Fairview representative of the racially diverse churches from my fieldwork more broadly? In this section, I take a step back from Fairview Community Church to consider the other racially diverse churches from my fieldwork. These churches provide supportive evidence that Fairview captures a broader dynamic: despite fostering positive and collaborative interracial contact, these churches did not facilitate meaningful deliberation or collective problem-solving about racial issues.

First, across my observations and interviews, it was clear that these diverse churches fostered positive, regular, and collaborative interracial contact. Throughout my fieldwork, churchgoers of different races expressed enthusiasm about the diversity of their church during interviews and in

conversations before or after services and activities. Pastors often referenced interracial friendships among churchgoers when I asked what made them proud of their church, and churchgoers provided regular examples of these friendships in conversations and interviews. Churchgoers also pursued regular and effective forms of interracial cooperation: in the churches I spent time in, I observed churchgoers working across racial lines on welcome teams, leadership councils, choirs and music groups, food pantries, and church clean-ups, among other forms of service and outreach.

Importantly, however, these churches did not appear to foster dialogue about racial issues or collective action to address racial inequalities. Sermons very rarely mentioned race or related topics, and the few references I observed were brief mentions or prayers after nationally significant episodes of racial violence. Pastors did not appear to engage in more extended discussions of racial issues on the “backstage” (e.g., in private or small-group conversations with churchgoers after the service or during gatherings). Churchgoers, moreover, appeared not to speak publicly about things that signify racial difference (e.g., stories of racism or discrimination, Black Lives Matter protests, conversations about certain neighborhoods in Boston) during church gatherings and activities or in their backstage conversations before and after the service.

What explains this approach to racial diversity despite the regular, positive, and collaborative interracial contact? As in Fairview, the explanation that emerged during my conversations and interviews was the avoidance of racial issues. When I asked about the lack of discussion or action on racial issues, churchgoers and pastors often described or alluded to understandings of “how we do things here” that involved the avoidance of issues and problems related to race. Several pastors, for instance, referenced the negative career and social consequences that might follow extended discussions about race (recall the earlier example of the black pastor had been fired from his previous diverse church for “speaking too much about Black Lives Matter”). In conversations about the absence of dialogue or political action about race, four white churchgoers separately said that they did

not want to “offend anyone” and two described racial issues as “sensitive.” Non-white churchgoers also brought up this kind of avoidance: one middle-aged black woman told me that she “didn’t want to shake anything up,” and another black churchgoer pointed to the risk of “discontents” around issues related to race. Perhaps also illustrating this kind of racial avoidance, a younger Hispanic woman shared that she “wouldn’t know how to start that kind of conversation.”¹⁹

What my observations from these racially diverse churches suggest, then, is that Fairview captures a dynamic with significance in churches of different denominations and sizes, with pastors of different races, and with churchgoers with different educations, incomes, and political commitments. As in Fairview, this broader set of racially diverse churches appeared to adopt styles of avoidance around issues related to race. Also like Fairview, these styles of avoidance appeared to lead churchgoers and pastors to repeatedly miss opportunities for deliberation and political action about racial issues and problems.

Moreover, although there are important limitations to the generalizability of my fieldwork, I would cautiously propose that this dynamic has significance beyond churches, and that racially diverse associations (workplaces, schools, sports teams) might also gravitate toward avoidance without intentional efforts to resist this dynamic. Indeed, by articulating this dynamic in racially diverse churches, I have tried to shed light on what I suspect is a broader dynamic in diverse associations—

¹⁹ I should note that not all churchgoers and clergy dealt with this question in this way: several churchgoers responded that racial topics were “not relevant” at church, and two pastors alluded to the idea that racial discussion was outside the scope of their role. One interpretation of these responses is that for these members, the absence of discussion and action about race was because their understanding of the issues that should be dealt with at church excluded issues related to race. Another interpretation is that these responses were themselves an effort to avoid racial topics.

one that occurs when racial diversity creates perceived choices between harmony and the potential for racial tension; when these perceived choices lead to the avoidance of racial issues; and when the result truncates the democratic contributions of diverse associations. This argument aspires to significance beyond churches and offers a more nuanced picture of racially diverse associations: not so we abandon their potential for meaningful deliberation and problem-solving on racial issues, but so we can approach it with an appreciation for the dilemmas to which we should attend.

Conclusion and Future Directions

In this article, I have argued that members of racially diverse associations are caught in a predicament. A key democratic contribution of these associations depends on their ability to facilitate discussion and action on issues related to race—i.e., discussion that teaches us how thorny racial issues affect others, and that encourages collective problem-solving about racial issues and inequalities. Yet in the presence of salient racial divisions in society, these activities can be fatal for associational harmony. I refer to these perceived choices between harmony and racial tension as “dilemmas of accommodation,” and I argue that members of diverse associations tend to deal with these perceived choices by gravitating toward understandings of “how we do things here” (“styles”) that involve the systematic avoidance of deliberation and action about race. This outcome is troubling because it suggests that racially diverse associations are unlikely to deliver on the deliberative and political promise of diversity without efforts to resist the avoidance of racial issues.

This study has several implications for research on diversity, contact, and cross-cutting exposure. First, it shows how the avoidance of racial tension can undermine deliberation and action about racial issues in racially diverse associations. In so doing, the study allows us to better appreciate the limits of the framework in which diverse associations contribute to integration in diverse societies (Tocqueville [1835] 1969; Fung 2003; Warren 2001; Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003). Second, this study

places important limits on the contact hypothesis (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). In particular, my findings show how contact can fail to generate deliberation and political action about race, and how members of privileged groups can repeatedly miss opportunities to learn about the experiences of less privileged groups despite regular, positive, and collaborative contact. Third, the study casts new light on the tradeoff between deliberative and participatory democracy (Mutz 2006) and suggests that diverse groups may pursue harmony at the expense of deliberation and political action about their salient differences. Finally, the study extends sociological research on racial diversity in churches, which finds that diverse churches tend to adopt racialized power structures and minimize racial conflict (Edwards 2008; Oyakawa 2019; Wadsworth 2010; Priest and Priest 2007; Cobb, Perry, and Dougherty 2015). My findings draw out the political costs of this tendency: namely, the failure to realize the deliberative and political promise of racial diversity, and the missed opportunity for white churchgoers to learn from the situated knowledge of less privileged racial groups.

These insights are based on close observations and interviews in churches in Boston. These data are well-suited to the task of inductively figuring out how people experience and adapt to racial diversity, but limit my ability to generalize to other populations, associations, and types of division. These limitations suggest two avenues for future research. First, future research could investigate whether and how my claims about racial diversity operate in other associations and contexts. Investigations of a larger and more representative sample of churches could be beneficial, particularly those that investigate churches with different denominations, racial compositions, and locations. Future studies could also analyze how the avoidance of divisive issues plays out in other racially diverse associations (e.g., workplaces, schools, sports teams). For instance, it would be interesting to explore whether racially diverse workplaces and sports teams are more likely to avoid racial tensions than churches because the aims of the job or team demand harmony (i.e., whether these associations avoid racial tensions in the name of “team spirit”). In addition, future work could investigate my arguments

about diversity and avoidance in divided contexts other than the United States, where the role of race might be assumed by differences in sect or class.

Second, this study did not examine racially diverse associations that *do* facilitate meaningful deliberation and political action on racial issues. I found no examples of such churches in my fieldwork, but this is not to say that these associations do not or cannot exist. Thus, an equally important avenue for research is the question of how to overcome the dilemmas described in this study. Overcoming these dilemmas may require institutional solutions, such as programs that build interracial relationships to reduce the risk of conversations about race (Warren 2010; Han and Arora 2022), or mechanisms for conflict resolution and sanctions that reduce the stakes of racial tension and disagreement (Ostrom 1990; Levine 2022). This aim might also require the strengthening of deliberative norms to replace norms of avoidance (Mansbridge et al. 2006; Niemeyer et al. 2023). Future research might also investigate the role of long-term institutional support for deliberation and decision-making, such as civic education (Allen 2016; Allen and Kidd 2022).

These avenues for future research, then, comprise an agenda that takes up two inter-related questions. First, what are the barriers to deliberation and political action about racial issues in diverse associations? And second, how might these barriers be overcome? This study opens up a line of inquiry into first question, in the hope that future research might more fruitfully explore the second.

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Appendix, Dilemmas of Accommodation: Diverse Associations and the Avoidance of Racial Difference

Appendix A: Methodological Details

A.1 Fieldwork and Access.

This section describes the two stages of my fieldwork.

Stage 1: March – August 2021. Between March and August 2021, I attended online and in-person services in 72 churches in Boston (38 racially diverse churches and 34 predominantly homogenous churches). These services were a combination of live in-person services, live virtual services, and recorded services on church websites. By March 2021, many churches had returned or were returning to in-person services after closures for the COVID-19 pandemic. Some churches had made a full return to in-person activities, others remained entirely virtual, and still others opted for a combination of virtual and in-person worship. Most churches stored recorded (in-person or virtual) services on their websites and social media. I attended as many live services as possible (usually two per Sunday) and observed additional virtual services through the week. I attended 68 of the 72 churches in-person at least once between March 2021 and April 2022. In-person services provided the richest fieldnotes, followed by virtual Zoom rooms (which still provided some insight into churchgoer expressions, interactions, and “backstage” conversations via comments and breakout rooms). Recorded worship services were the least revealing (although still valuable for understanding what was deemed acceptable on the “frontstage” in sermons and announcements).

I also conducted in-person or online semi-structured interviews with a pastor, staff member, or churchgoer from 18 of these churches (I requested interviews at 24 churches, 6 pastors declined or did not respond to my request to be interviewed, and after 18 interviews I felt I had learned enough to begin follow-up interviews about specific aspects of the theory). I then conducted follow-up

interviews with a different staff member or churchgoer in 12 of these churches. I let my interlocuters choose the format (in-person or virtual) of interviews through the duration of my fieldwork

To gain access for these interviews, I introduced myself to the pastor before or after the service and explained that I was a graduate student doing research on how churches foster community. I asked to interview the pastor, a member of staff, or churchgoer and informed them that all data would be anonymous. In these interviews, I asked various questions about the size and composition of the church, life at the church, and the various outreach and collective activities of the church (see the interview guide in Appendix D). I used verbal consent procedures before each interview. The interviews lasted between 25 minutes and 1.5 hours, and I adjusted the order and number of questions when necessary. I also included church-specific follow-ups based on episodes or insights from fieldwork or previous interviews. For example, after Sister Frances in St. Joseph described the “two-names, two-needs policy” (p. 16), I asked other members of staff what that term meant to them, and if they had examples of episodes or events that would help me understand the term.

I took an inductive approach to this research and refined my research questions throughout the fieldwork. Initially, I was interested in understanding how diverse and homogenous churches approached political and collective action. As I spent more time in these churches, however, I realized that diverse churches were particularly reluctant to engage with and pursue action on *racial* issues and I started to focus on and investigate this puzzle in more detail. This round of fieldwork thus provided the building blocks of my argument: that racially diverse churches face pressures and that the avoidance of racial issues is a characteristic response to these pressures.

Stage 2: August 2021 – April 2022. In August 2021, I decided to further investigate the avoidance of racial issues with in-depth ethnographic and interview-based fieldwork. I narrowed my sample to four churches: two racially diverse churches (Fairview Community Church, a non-denominational church, and a Catholic Church), a predominantly white church (also non-

denominational), and a predominantly African-American Catholic church. I selected these churches for variation in denomination, neighborhood, and the income, education, and politics of churchgoers. The fieldwork consisted of in-person participant observation (services, meetings, fellowship activities, social gatherings), and 31 in-person and online interviews with clergy and churchgoers (26 one-on-one interviews and 5 group interviews with 4-8 people). Having already established contact with these churches, I asked each pastor for permission to conduct further interviews and participant observation activities. I informed the pastor about the data to be collected (fieldnotes and written interview notes) and that these data would remain anonymous. I asked the pastors to inform their churchgoers about my research, and to give churchgoers an opportunity to opt out such that they would not be included in my fieldnotes and written research. All pastors consented and no churchgoers opted out.

To select churchgoers and clergy for these interviews and informal conversations, I looked for variation along multiple dimensions (gender, age, race, income, education, level of political interest and engagement, role in the church, and length of membership in the church). Before each interview, I reminded participants that the interviews were voluntary and anonymous and asked for verbal consent. My interviews in this round of fieldwork lasted between 30 minutes and 1.5 hours. I used questions from my interview guide (Appendix D) unless I had already asked those questions to the participant. Usually, however, these interviews focused on church-specific questions and follow-ups, particularly as my research progressed.

I used this fieldwork and continued visits to the larger sample of churches to inductively develop the theory I had sketched in my first round of fieldwork. The two diverse churches were particularly valuable for this kind of theory-building and I use data from these churches to illustrate my arguments. However, the predominantly white and African-American churches also proved instructive. The white church, in particular, engaged with racial issues relatively frequently (e.g., in sermons, racial justice vigils, a reparations discussion group, and conversations in church meetups and

after services). On several occasions, churchgoers alluded to the absence of the pressures of racial tension when I asked about these activities (one churchgoer, for instance, contrasted these activities with “diversity workshops” in her diverse workplace: “The way I look at it, I can really mess up there and it would ... make things difficult. So, we’ll be in a workshop ... and that’s what we gotta do, but I don’t say much ... Here, I don’t have to worry about that”). These kinds of insights helped me to understand the pressures of diversity and their impact on engagement with race in diverse churches.

A.2 Data and Analysis

The data in this paper are drawn from the two racially diverse churches from my in-depth fieldwork. The primary forms of data are (1) ethnographic fieldnotes written during and after observations, and (2) detailed interview notes written during and after the semi-structured interviews.

To analyze my data, I conducted multiple close readings of my fieldnotes and interview notes, looking for patterns with respect to the demands and pressures of diversity, expectations for appropriate speech and behavior in church, and discussion and action on racial issues. As I proceeded, I wrote memos about patterns and theoretical possibilities. I considered the evidence I would need to observe to validate my conclusions and altered my questions in interviews and conversations accordingly to reflect my evolving questions and theoretical insights. To further verify my conclusions, I reexamined my fieldnotes and interview notes, continued to visit and speak with churchgoers in churches from the previous round of fieldwork, and triangulated with additional forms of data (including church records, announcements, letters to the congregation, e-mail threads, social media interactions, and newspaper articles about church activities). Triangulation, here, refers to an attempt to explain human behavior by studying it from more than one standpoint. In practice, triangulation involved comparisons and cross-checks between these other forms of data and data from my interviews and observations. In some cases, this exercise served to verify accounts from interviews. In

other cases, triangulation provided additional insight into the “style” of the church—when a pastor’s announcement singled out the contributions of a particular churchgoer, for instance, or when a donation testimonial revealed the import of a routine or practice.

Appendix B: Ethical Considerations

B.1 Ethics

I was granted an IRB “exemption” for my fieldwork. Recognizing that IRB approval or exemption alone does not ensure ethical research, I took steps on my own to set up my project in an ethical manner. Complete anonymity became the focus of this effort. Churches can be small and intimate communities that mean a great deal to their members. Several participants revealed information (e.g., about their pasts, their sexuality, difficult interactions in the church) that could compromise or complicate their membership. Before each interview, I used verbal consent procedures that indicated my obligation to keep all data protected and anonymous.

B.2 Positionality

I think there are three ways in which my positionality shaped this research. First, I grew up in a divided context (Northern Ireland). As a result, I suspect that I was particularly attuned to the avoidance of divisive issues in intergroup settings. It is difficult to know the extent to which this influenced the research, but I think it likely that this background shaped the concerns and questions that I brought to my fieldwork and analysis.

Second, several of my identities offered moments of “insider” status that proved important for access. Most participants asked about my relationship with religion (I was raised Protestant but am no longer religious). In a number of these conversations, we discussed our journeys away from religion, and participants described their return to the church. Several members of Fairview had reconciled

their religion and sexuality (I, a queer woman, had not), and we discussed that journey and experience. A number of churchgoers had Irish or Northern Irish roots, and we spoke about life at home. There were members of both churches who knew international students, and many asked about the transition, immigration, and my future plans. These moments of insider status were valuable for access and trust. In some ways, churches are accessible contexts for this kind of research: most welcome visitors to services and events, and many churchgoers are excited to talk about their church. However, clergy and churchgoers can be protective of their communities, and many of my interlocutors seemed unsure about what they could or should share in our early conversations. These insider moments helped to build rapport and seemed to put participants at ease.

Third, my positionality appeared to influence the kind of information shared by churchgoers and clergy. For instance, clergy and churchgoers seemed to make a greater effort to explain particular practices and traditions to me (a researcher) than to other new members. Often, these explanations offered insight into the “style” of the church—when clergy explained the rationale or history behind a tradition, for instance, or when churchgoers compared the practices or activities in their church to what I might find in others. Since a large focus of this study was on members’ understandings of good and appropriate behavior in church, these efforts proved valuable to the research.

However, my positionality might also have shaped my interactions and interviews in ways that undermine the research. My identity as a researcher and community outsider, for instance, might have motivated some to present a particularly harmonious picture of their church. It is also difficult to know how my whiteness shaped the kinds of stories that interlocutors chose to share. Ultimately, and as with all research based on close observation, my account is refracted through my own background and qualities. I can only hope that my fieldwork has allowed for a story that provides some theoretical leverage while remaining recognizable to the communities that appear in it.

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Section 1: Basic Information

1. How many adults regularly participate in the religious life of your church?
2. Of these participants, what percent would you say are female?
3. What percent would you say are over 65 years old?
4. What percent would you say have four-year college degrees or more?
5. What percent would you say live in households with income under \$35,000 a year?
6. What percent are white and non-Hispanic? Black or African-American? Hispanic or Latino? Asian or Pacific Islander? An ethnicity other than the ones I've mentioned?
7. What percent have served in a leadership role in this congregation in the past 12 months?
8. How many people currently work in this church as staff? What are their roles?
9. What are the races and ethnicities of those staff members?
10. Is your church affiliated with a denomination? What is the name of that denomination?
11. For diverse churches: How did this church become racially diverse?

Section 2: Life at the Church

12. What, in your opinion, are the defining features of this church?
13. Are there any recurring themes in sermons and worship?
14. How would you describe your church to someone who was thinking about joining?
15. Can you describe a scene or episode in your time at the church that stands out as a high point, or an especially positive experience?
16. Can you describe a scene or episode in your time at the church that stands out as a low point, or an especially negative experience?
17. What makes you proud of this church?

18. For staff: What are some of the challenges you face in your role as pastor/staff?
19. For staff at diverse churches: How does the racial diversity of the congregation shape your work at the church?
20. For diverse churches: How does the church try to support this racially diverse congregation?
21. For diverse churches: During your time here, has the church changed in its approach to supporting a racially diverse congregation? How so?
22. For diverse churches: Do you think the church could improve in its approach to supporting this diverse congregation? How so?

Section 3: Deliberation and Action

23. Does the church hold any groups or meetings or events outside of the service? What are the purposes or activities of those groups or meetings?
24. In your time at the church, have there been any groups or meetings or events specifically focused on the following purposes or activities: An effort to get people registered to vote? To get out the vote during an election? To organize or participate in efforts to lobby elected officials of any sort? To organize or participate in a demonstration or march about some public issue or policy? To discuss politics? To discuss issues related to race and race relations?
25. Do sermons ever refer to political issues or events? How often? What kind of issues are raised?
26. Do churchgoers ever discuss political issues or opinions? What kinds of issues are discussed?
27. Do sermons ever refer to racial issues? How often? What kind of issues are raised?
28. Do churchgoers ever discuss racial issues? What kinds of issues are discussed?
29. In your time at the church, have churchgoers or clergy shared opportunities for political activity, including petition campaigns, lobbying, or demonstrating?

30. How, if at all, did this church address or respond to issues around racial violence and injustice in the past year?
31. Politically speaking, is your church more on the conservative side, on the liberal side, or right in the middle?
32. In your life outside of church, would you describe yourself as politically engaged? Do you vote regularly? Do you take other forms of political action, like attending marches or contacting elected officials? Can you describe any of those activities for me?