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# Cross-Racial, Cross-Cultural Appointments Offer A Chance To Grow In Understanding and Compassion

*Clergy Offer Advice for Welcoming Them Into New Appointments*

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The Rev. Andrea' Cummings wants to be treated just the same as any other pastor moving into a new appointment.

The 39-year-old elder is the new associate pastor at First United Methodist Church Bentonville and, along with new senior pastor the Rev. J.J. Whitney, leads her church in the vibrant and rapidly growing community of Bentonville, Arkansas.

She also happens to be the first Black clergy member to ever be appointed to Bentonville First in the church's centuries-old history.

Benton County, where Bentonville resides, is a majority-white county in far Northwest Arkansas, and the church, like the county, reflects those demographics. According to the most recent census data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Benton County is estimated to be 88.5% white, with Black or African American citizens making up just 2% of the total population.

"I'm the first black pastor, first black woman, to ever be appointed to Bentonville First. And not only that, but this church is the only one that has two women leading it. So yes, it's huge," Cummings said.

"But I was called by God to preach the Gospel. I was called to be a pastor. So whether it's a black church or white church, that doesn't change. And so that's the feeling that I have walking into any space of any church because I know what I'm here to do."

Cummings appointment would be considered a cross-racial/cross-cultural appointment, according to the UMC's General Commission on Religion and Race.

According to GCORR, "Cross-racial and cross-cultural (CR/CC) ministry settings are those congregations whose membership is different than their pastors," such as a Black clergy member leading a white church, or a Native American clergy member leading a Hispanic church.



Rev. Andrea' Cummings, associate pastor at First UMC Bentonville.

The Rev. George Odell, senior pastor at First UMC Clinton and chair of the Arkansas Conference's Commission on Religion & Race, explains that cross-racial and cross-cultural appointments are handled just like any other appointment, with a church's Staff Parish Relations Committee working closely with their District Superintendent, as well as the Bishop and Cabinet, to select a new clergy appointment for the church.

"The process truly begins with the church seeing either the need or the want to have a CR/CC appointment. The appointive process through the Cabinet then works with the church and the SPRC/PPRC to see if a church is genuinely interested in moving in that direction," Odell said.

In the case of Rev. Cummings' appointment to First Bentonville, Brenda Allison, the church's SPRC chair, said she felt like their congregation was ready for a cross-racial appointment.

"When our committee met to discuss a new appointment at our church, we said we would be open and embracing of someone from any background, really. You know, Bentonville has changed a lot in the last 10 years, our congregation has changed. And I think we were looking for certain characteristics and we weren't focused necessarily on race or gender," Allison said.

Despite not specifically looking at a pastor of a particular gender or race, Allison said she believes Cummings was a good fit for the church right now in light of the renewed conversation surrounding race and racism in the United States.

"I would say it's a conversation we've been having within our congregation over the last few years. So it's not it wasn't new to us necessarily, but I think it's new to more people. I think the fact that we're willing to have a conversation about it is important."

According to Odell, beginning the conversation around race and ethnicity in a church is one of the most important steps to becoming more open and accepting of those who do not share the same background as you.

"It is a matter of spiritual, emotional and personal growth to be open to the discernment process of serving those whom you do not have a true ethnic understanding of that culture or race," Odell said.

"I have a friend who is a pastor in another conference and to date has only served two Native American/Indigenous faith communities. I know that in one of the appointments there was a church member who was extremely negative to her appointment being a Native person and a woman.

"The Lord worked through her to help that man change his heart toward women in ministry and Native/Indigenous persons. He even requested that she preside over his funeral when he died. We too many times do not want to venture out of our boxes when God's box is vast and can bless us in many ways. When we are open to the movement of the Holy Spirit to move us into the unknown then we will be blessed beyond imagination."



Rev. Angie Gage, senior pastor at Cherokee Village UMC.

The Rev. Angie Gage, senior pastor at Cherokee Village UMC, said that despite being a Native American woman who is over half Cherokee, she has not had to face the same challenges that her Black, Hispanic, or Asian clergy colleagues have had to face.

"I am in a situation that most of my brothers and sisters do not have the opportunity to have. That is that I am able to be seen as someone who fits in culturally and racially within my congregation. You look at me and do not assume that I am anything other than white," Gage said.

"I have not had to deal with the disadvantages in the same way as my brothers and sisters have because of outward appearances. However, I still have differences that are challenging.

Gage said that often, it feels like it is up to the clergy to learn how to adapt to the cultural norms and expectations of the church, and if you bring in diverse practices too soon, it may not be accepted at first.

"I have learned that the spiritual practices I have as a Christian Native American may not be well received by congregations until I have had the time to get to know everyone, earn trust, and begin to share some of those practices on days such as Native American Ministry Sunday."

Because of the perceived difference between races and cultures, it can sometimes seem scary to congregations or pastors that are entering into a CR/CC appointment, but one thing that Cummings doesn't want her congregation to do is make her feel abnormal or "the other."

"You're walking into a different culture, so automatically everything's different because it's not what you're used to growing up in a black church; the slow music style of preaching, the talk-back things you get in a black church," Cummings said. "But as clergy, we are itinerant, you just move and you don't think 'I'm going into a white congregation and I've got to prepare for that.'"

"My purpose is to preach the Gospel and to be in community with everybody. And if you have that in mind, you know, you're able to walk into that space."

There are, however, real and identifiable tactics that churches can take to make CR/CC pastors feel more comfortable in their new appointment, according to GCORR.

**GCORR suggests** getting to know your pastor, learning about your pastor's culture, and respecting differences in cultural norms are three big ways that churches can honor their CR/CC pastor.

Odell echoes those three recommendations and said that in order to build relationships, it's important to get to know your pastor on a personal level.

"Be real and genuine in forming relationships with them. Be willing to climb out of your safe zone so you can learn what it means to walk in their shoes. Appreciate the contributions that pastors can bring to your congregation as they and you grow spiritually on this journey. If you are going to use something from their culture, ask if it is OK. Too many times we culturally appropriate things from others without seeking permission; it is just a matter of respect."

Gage said that she wants others to know that their words have meaning, and she wishes more people would think about their words before they speak out.

"I get tired of hearing racist comments from people who do not realize what they are saying is racist. I get tired of hearing comments that may acknowledge the rights of some being taken away while forgetting that I sit right in front of them, the descendant of those whose land was ripped away from them. I get tired of hearing comments that acknowledge the wrongdoing of some but forgetting that I sit right in front of them, the descendant of those who had promises broken again and again by the very people who stripped away our rights and called us savages."

"I just wish for myself and all my brothers and sisters that everyone would think before they speak and act. I pray for unity, for understanding, for support for one another and most especially for love of each other."

The Arkansas Conference has set up a webpage for its [Dismantling Racism initiative](#), which includes links to GCORR resources on how you can welcome a new CR/CC pastor to your congregation. Please continue to check this page for constant updates and new information as we gather it.

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