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House Negro or Field Negro?: Racial Salience and Claims-Making in the United Methodist Church

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ABSTRACT

Relational inequalities theory relies on categorical differences in status to explain why the claims of people of color may be discouraged or denied. However, this mechanism may be insufficient to explain intraracial inequalities in claims-making. In this study, we draw from 17 semistructured interviews with pastors of color in the United Methodist Church to examine how racial salience affects the success of claims to leadership positions, congregational acceptance, and ordination in an antiracist organization. We find that status differences created by racial categories do not always reduce the success of these pastors' claims. However, when pastors of color express high levels of racial salience, their claims to organizational resources are delegitimized and their presence in the denomination often becomes untenable. This study contributes to understandings of how race interacts with the claims-making process to generate inequalities, intraracial discrimination within organizations, and the limits of formal policies of antiracism.

1 | Introduction

Organizations produce and perpetuate inequalities (Tilly 1998; Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019). One way this happens is when people and groups attempt to claim scarce organizational resources, such as income, jobs, and credentials. Being hired for a job, receiving a raise, and even being accepted as an everyday member of an organization are the outcomes of successful claims. However, not all claims and claimants are equally successful, resulting in an unequal distribution of organizational resources (Ray 2019; Acker 2006). Claims made by individuals or groups marginalized by race, gender, and other categorical distinctions are less likely to be accepted in hegemonically White and male organizations, if these claims are made at all (Edwards 2008). The connection between a person's race or gender and the non-acceptance of their claims reinscribes existing inequalities

when resources, respect, and rewards are denied to already marginalized persons (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999).

Existent theory on the claims-making process relies on categorical status differences to explain why the claims of people of color are discouraged or denied. While broadly useful, this may ignore intraracial differences. One such difference is a person's level of concern about race and racism or their *racial salience* (Thornhill 2019). Racial salience can be expressed in several ways, including protesting for racial justice, raising awareness about inequality, or failing to assimilate into their organization's culture (Thornhill 2015). Persons demonstrating high racial salience in these ways are systematically excluded or discriminated against because they endanger White comfort (Carbado and Gulati 2013b). When organizations screen potential members based on racial salience rather than race, they gain demographic diversity by accepting

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persons of color with low racial salience whose presence does not threaten White people's comfort (Mayorga-Gallo 2019). Having people of color with low racial salience is an advantage, providing an appearance of diversity that insulates the organization from charges of racism (Hughes 2012; Leong 2013).

Since the 2020 murder of George Floyd, an increasing number of organizations have included racial justice and antiracism as key goals (Elias et al. 2024). In response, new programs, hiring initiatives, and increased expenditures have been made to fight racism. Claims are more likely to succeed if they align with the systems of meaning termed legitimate within the organization (Tomaskovic-Devey 2014). In organizations with a focus on antiracism, therefore, it might be expected that race could act as less of a barrier to successful claims. Yet even "antiracist" organizations can reinforce White supremacy if the comfort of White people is centered in the definition and pursuit of their antiracism (Ferguson 2023). How then, might a declared commitment of antiracism affect claims-making by employees of color? And in such an organization, does the success of claims depend on categorical distinctions such as race, or interracial distinctions, such as racial salience?

In this study, we examine whether the embrace of antiracism by an organization can enable the claims of employees of color. Specifically, we draw from 17 semistructured interviews with pastors of color in the two North Carolina conferences of the United Methodist Church. We find that status differences by racial categories do not always reduce the success of these pastors' claims to resources, respect, and rewards. However, when pastors of color demonstrate high levels of racial salience, their claims to organizational resources are more likely denied, often making their persistence in the organization untenable. This study contributes to understanding how race interacts with the claims-making process to generate inequalities and intraracial discrimination within organizations.

1.1 | Claims-Making

Relational inequality theory (RIT) posits that interactions in proximate relationships have the most influence in generating inequalities (Tilly 1998; Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019). These interactions occur within and between organizations, where resources are pooled, and determine the distribution of resources. They are the key pathway by which inequalities in status, culture, and social structure are enacted (Roscigno and Wilson 2014). One of the processes that RIT includes is relational claims-making (Tomaskovic-Devey 2014). Claims-making involves two steps (Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey 2014). First, one party makes a claim to respect, resource, or reward—an employee asking for a raise, for example. Next, this claim is then legitimated (or not) by influential actors within the organization, thus controlling the flow of resources.

Per RIT, types of claims include those that are explicit, such as applying for a job, and those that are implicit, like expecting respect and dignity within the organization. Claims can also be silenced when a claim that could reasonably be made is not because denial of the claim is anticipated (Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019). This range of claims makes much of what an employee

does in an organization, a claim that can be legitimated or denied. The routine nature of claims-making occurs at all levels of an organization and creates constant opportunities for inequality to be created and reinforced.

In multiracial organizations, race is a key factor shaping interactions and resultant inequalities (Castilla 2008). Individuals holding lower status by race expect and receive lower levels of deference and respect than those of higher status (Berger et al. 1977; Ridgeway and Correll 2006). Beliefs about racial status that are consensual or based on what most people think are acted upon consistently in micro-level interactions (Melamed et al. 2019). This lower level of respect and deference translates to less advantage in claims-making; RIT proposes that lower status actors are less likely to make claims and less likely to have their claims legitimated, especially when interacting with higher status actors (Campos-Castillo and Ewoodzie 2014). Within workplaces, this means that lower status employees can be discouraged from laying claims to promotions and raises (Wayne et al. 2023), differently evaluated for the same level of performance (Correll et al. 2020), or denied rewards for performance compared to their peers (Castilla and Bernard 2010).

1.2 | Racial Salience

However, race as a categorical distinction is only one way race might appear in the claims-making process. Another could be racial salience. Racial salience is a multidimensional term, and we will attend to three of its dimensions here. When used of one's identity, racial salience refers to "the extent to which a person's race is a relevant part of her or his self-concept at a particular point in time" (Sellers et al. 1997, 806). Salience, centrality, ideology, and regard comprise the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI). The MMRI was designed to look at both the stable and more fluid aspects of racial identity, using these dimensions to jointly assess the meaning of race in a person's life. Salience is unique in the scale because of its connection to context; it represents the interaction between a person's racial identity and their environment.

A second dimension of racial salience is its expression by an individual. This form of racial salience marks concern with race and racism that is displayed outwardly through topics of conversation, dress, and other forms of expression, including activism for racial justice (Thornhill 2019). The expression and intensity of racial salience vary immensely between people of the same racial group and by context (Sellers et al. 1998). The third dimension is the perception of racial salience by others, in other words, whether or not a person's actions make race salient to others (Carbado and Gulati 2013a). These perceptions do not need to align with the internal racial identity salience of the individual being judged to have an effect.

Thornhill (2019) finds that racial salience is perceived and explicitly penalized when individuals are deemed likely to challenge unjust policies and traditions. In his audit study of fictional Black students contacting admissions officials, students involved in Black student associations and antiracist activities were penalized in their contact rate. However, "moderately racially salient" (466) students involved in activities such as cross-cultural clubs

and studies of African American history, rather than activities challenging racial hierarchies, were not similarly penalized. Black students who indicated no activities concerning race and culture were also not penalized. Students who were read as Black because of their names or who engaged in activities toward racial unity were treated as acceptable, while those perceived as having high levels of racial salience were not.

The expression and perception of racial salience can have significant consequences for employees of color. In addition to being screened out of organizations, employees who express high racial salience may be rejected by their coworkers and supervisors (Thornhill 2015). Carbado and Gulati (2013a) find that identity performance is just as important as phenotype in employers' acceptance and treatment of Black employees. To pass this intraracial assessment, Black employees must "work their identities" to avoid being negatively perceived (Carbado and Gulati 2013b, 530). Workplaces that retain low racial salience Black employees can satisfy their claims to be a diverse workplace without dealing with the liabilities of difference. As individuals are given or denied opportunities based on racial salience, the judgment of and based on racial salience becomes a key source of interracial inequalities (Monk 2022).

The identity work required to display low racial salience takes multiple forms. Ince (2022) shows that Black members of multiracial churches take on a *diversity demeanor* to protect White members from embarrassing missteps in interactions. Wingfield and Alston (2014) theorize that employees of color undertake racialized tasks, including adhering to organizational norms, which broadly reinforce Whites' power within the organization. Woody (2023) finds that people of color consistently perform likeability in their interactions with Whites in a liberal city. In all these instances, people of color take responsibility for White comfort simply to persist in their churches, workplaces, and neighborhoods. Because of these constant adjustments to White expectations, when people of color express high racial salience, it can be a jarring display that is met with open disapproval.

Because racial identity makes a difference in one's perceptions of discrimination (Sellers and Shelton 2003), disapproval likely runs both ways. The higher the importance of race to a person's identity, the more everyday discrimination they are likely to perceive. Therefore, persons expressing high levels of racial salience might not just be more likely to encounter discriminatory treatment, as Whites reject their concern with race and racism, but they may also be more likely to notice racial slights they previously ignored. This heightened recognition makes it even more difficult for people of color expressing high levels of racial salience to remain in majority-White organizations.

1.3 | Antiracism and White Hegemony

The term antiracism is by no means new, dating back to the late 18th century (O'Brien 2009). It has taken on new significance since 2020 as organizations reacted to the public outcry after George Floyd's murder through public statements and actions (Elias et al. 2024). The goal of antiracism is the eradication of racism (Ferguson 2023). Although they are often used in concert, the goal of antiracism is distinct from other approaches

to race in organizations, such as diversity. The former seeks to challenge racial hierarchies, while the latter addresses race by representing each group fairly (Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017). Because a focus on diversity can constrain racial justice, antiracist efforts have been promoted as more likely to create positive, lasting change (Okuwobi 2019; Oyakawa 2019). In an antiracist organization that managed to dismantle racism within its ranks, the claims of people of color would be legitimated or not on the same basis as those of Whites, eliminating this form of inequality.

But holding a goal of eradicating racism does not mean that all antiracist efforts are equally effective. Recognizing that antiracisms are not monolithic, Brown (2017) critiques White antiracism for often failing to grapple with whiteness. Marti (2024) shows that whiteness can be used as a primary resource in antiracism, upholding White status. When this happens, White norms and standards of behavior are demanded, thereby curtailing antiracist efforts and individuals that endanger White comfort (Edwards 2008; Lewis 2004). Perhaps, as a result, antiracism is common, "yet oppression is banal and ubiquitous" (Melamed 2011, 49).

Edwards' (2008) study of interracial churches finds that racially diverse organizations persist to the extent that Whites feel comfortable within them. Indeed, whether White congregants can transcend race to join churches where they are not the majority is rarely asked (Pitt 2010). In interracial organizations, White hegemony is reproduced, whereby Whites dominate with the consent of people of color. The critical question is whether an organization proclaiming itself antiracist will allow people of color to withdraw their consent to domination and take the counter-hegemonic step of expressing high racial salience. As Ahmed (2006) reminds us, actions such as declaring an organization to be antiracist are nonperformative. What is accomplished in the end through this declaration will be determined by its uptake. In what follows, we look at one aspect of that uptake, namely how amenable one antiracist organization is to expressions of high racial salience from its pastors of color.

1.4 | The United Methodist Church

Because of its open commitment to antiracism, overwhelmingly White membership, and multilayered structure, the United Methodist Church is an ideal venue to investigate how racial salience, as compared to racial category, affects claims-making in an antiracist organization. The United Methodist Church is one of the largest protestant denominations in the United States, with nearly six million members at the time of data collection (General Council on Finance and Administration for The United Methodist Church 2021). It is a complex organization divided into 54 conferences, each serving a different region and overseen by a bishop. Each conference is further divided into several districts, each led by a district superintendent and comprised of churches, ordained and licensed clergy, and members. Committees of the conferences handle important tasks, including financial decisions, rules-making, and leadership training. Ordination, the process by which potential clergy have their life's work officially authorized by the church, also occurs at the conference level. At the church level, congregants do not have the power to hire or fire their ministers. Still, they can provide feedback to the conference

and may express their disapproval of their assigned ministers by withholding funds from the conference or through relational snubs of the minister.

The UMC's commitment to antiracism is reflected in its *Book of Discipline*. The 2016 revision, spanning 913 pages and 2719 paragraphs, outlines the law and doctrine of the UMC. This massive tome covers everything from the boundaries of conferences to the theological affirmations of the denomination. Notably, a commitment to racial justice is foregrounded in paragraph 5 of the document. The strong language used includes both a recognition of systemic racial injustice and a pledge to "confront and seek to eliminate racism, whether in organizations or in individuals, in every facet of its life and in society at large" (United Methodist Church [U.S.] 2016, para. 5). The UMC's stance on racial justice is repeated in the social principles section of the *Book of Discipline*, along with a longer definition of racism that calls out personal and institutional racism as antithetical to the work of the UMC (United Methodist Church [U.S.] 2016, para. 162, sec. A).

Despite this stated commitment, there are some indications that the UMC fails to exercise antiracism in all respects. For example, through the pervasive matching of clergy race to congregation race, a violation of stated policies, the UMC creates disparities between Black and White ministers in terms of salary and advancement (Eagle and Mueller 2022). By virtue of broader racial inequality, majority Black churches have lower resources; when Black clergy are assigned there, they may receive only part-time compensation for full-time work. Despite the UMC's commitment to antiracism, policies targeting the redistribution of resources or clergy assignment have not been widely implemented to address these inequalities.

This study focuses on the two North Carolina conferences of the United Methodist Church. Together, the North Carolina and the Western North Carolina Conferences had, at the time of data collection, 1281 churches and 418,636 members (General Council on Finance and Administration for The United Methodist Church 2021). Like the balance of the United Methodist Church, the North Carolina conferences maintain a stated focus on diversity and antiracism. For example, in the fall of 2024, the two conferences launched a series of billboards touting their loving community. The billboards featured a White and Black hand grasped together, with the words "Hate Divides, Love Unites," just beneath (NCCUMC News 2024). Activities like these that may increase racial diversity benefit the denomination; racially diverse churches boast higher average attendance and more stable attendance than majority White congregations (Dougherty et al. 2021). Still, the UMC remains almost 90% White, both in terms of clergy and membership (Mountain 2015).

The structure and skewed demography of the United Methodist Church create many points at which clergy of color rely on White people to legitimate their claims within the denomination. This reliance is further increased by the reality that pastors of color who move to majority White denominations often give up social ties in their home denominations to do so (Edwards and Kim 2024). This reliance can occur at the conference and district leadership levels, where ministers are being assigned to churches and are nominated for leadership positions; it can occur at the local church level as ministers seek the acceptance of

their congregations; it can also occur through formal processes, as ministers seek validation of their work. All these interactions represent claims to resources, rewards, and respect.

Relational inequalities theory primarily relies on status to explain why people of color may more likely have their claims delegitimized within organizations. Leveraging the case of ministers of color within the United Methodist Church, we examine racial salience as another mechanism by which inequality may be generated for people of color in majority-White organizational settings. When high racial salience ministers assert claims to positions and resources from their conference or district, respect and acceptance from their congregations, or the reward of affirmation through ordination, how does racial salience affect the legitimacy of these claims? By better understanding how the claims of employees of color are validated or invalidated in an antiracist workplace, we can more precisely name the processes by which they are disadvantaged in hiring, compensation, positions, and promotions.

2 | Methods

Data for this study come from the United Methodist Clergy Reflections on Vocational Path and Key Timepoints study. A Black woman who is both a co-author and a member of the research team, conducted all the interviews to reduce social distance between the interviewer and respondents (Collins 1990). She completed in-depth interviews with 17 Black, Latino/a, and Asian pastors (12 Black, 3 Latino/a, 2 Asian) currently or formerly in one of the two Annual Conferences of the United Methodist Church in North Carolina in 2021. The interviews took place in 2021, following the murder of George Floyd and resultant protests, and may have resulted in a larger than usual number of ministers expressing high racial salience. Former clergy had left the UMC no more than 18 months preceding the interview. Respondents provided oral consent to participate in this study and were given \$100 to compensate them for their time. All study procedures were approved by the Duke University Campus Institutional Review Board.

Respondents were recruited using snowball sampling to establish trust ahead of the interviews. Given that the number of BIPOC pastors in the North Carolina conferences of the UMC is relatively small, participants had to trust that their identities would be appropriately protected. Pseudonyms are used here to protect the identity of the leaders we interviewed. Respondents were given the option of being interviewed in person, by Zoom, or via telephone. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed, and de-identified before analysis. Participants were asked about the shape of their career path and pivotal moments in their career and training. This includes questions about their experiences within the UMC, ordination, and appointment processes, and the impact that race has had on their ministry and calling. Tracing their career paths gave us insight into which parts of clergy stress are unique to the experience of being a BIPOC clergyperson in a predominantly White denomination.

The analysis began with in-depth discussions of the de-identified transcripts. These discussions convened a team of researchers

of various ages, religious backgrounds, races, and disciplines to share insights after reading each de-identified transcript. The breadth of this team brought together understandings from multiple standpoints; this approach enables a research team to better engage with the many facets of qualitative data (Edwards 2019). Some team members were highly familiar with the UMC, others had experiences with BIPOC in ministry, and the interviewer provided helpful context to the setting and tone of each interview. These discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and made available to the team for analysis.

After group discussions were complete for all the interviews, the interview transcripts were manually coded in NVivo for this specific analysis. Initial coding was done using a codebook focused on the relational generation of inequalities. Relevant codes for this study include: *claims-making*—any claim to respect, resources, or reward made by a clergy member; *racism*—incidents of racial discrimination and exclusion reported by clergy members; and *identity*—any mention of racial identity or the expression of that identity.

Using these interviews, we investigate how racial salience interacts with the claims clergy of color make to resources, rewards, and respect. We evaluate this in the context of advancement within their conference and/or district, acceptance by congregants in local churches, and approval in formal processes such as ordination. Through this analysis, we come to understand whether the UMC's goal of antiracism is sufficient to create a culture that legitimates claims-making by high racial salience pastors of color.

3 | Results

3.1 | Claims to Denominational Leadership

At the conference and district levels, pastors of color in the United Methodist Church made claims to positions of leadership. Leadership positions included serving on boards, councils, and committees, becoming a district superintendent, or even being elected as bishop over the conference. Current conference and district leaders are the gatekeepers who legitimate or delegitimize claims to those positions, nominating ministers to serve. Successful claims to these positions can result in an incredible degree of organizational power; for example, district superintendents supervise many churches and clergy, work closely with the bishop to make clergy appointments, and are well paid. Determining who can make successful claims to leadership positions matters profoundly for pastors' experiences in the denomination.

When we spoke to pastors of color, we found that their initial claims were often successful, with many advancing to levels of leadership within their district or even in one of the North Carolina conferences. Attracted to the UMC by the denomination's formal espousal of antiracism, these pastors were understandably surprised when antiracist action on their part delegitimated their claims to leadership. Nearly all the pastors we interviewed described being blindsided by how their positions and pathways for advancement disappeared once they displayed high racial salience, for example, by expressing public concerns

for racial justice in line with the organization's formally stated commitments.

One example of this whiplash comes from Pastor Jayce Smith, a Black UMC minister with 21 years of experience in the denomination. Although he grew up in other Christian denominations, he ultimately sought ordination as a United Methodist because of the denomination's "commitment to social justice." By the time we spoke with him, he concluded that the UMC's commitments were surface level, saying "from the outside it looks really wonderful and great, but I think the hard thing happens when you start to see how the system works and you learn that the ideal is often sacrificed for comfort... to prevent the discomfort, especially for white folks."

As a Black man in a denomination publicly concerned with antiracism and racial justice, Pastor Smith quickly found opportunities for advancement, rising to district leadership. His rationale behind this success was that he fit the mold of what would make White members of the UMC comfortable. He explained, "when I was younger, being very assimilated, I was the good Black person. I wasn't gonna really cause much discomfort, so I think it opened some doors in that way." Pastor Smith also had the correct credentials to inspire White comfort as a seminary graduate of Duke, a prestigious, majority-White institution.

Later, this pastor began to do things that expressed high racial salience, such as attending protests and joining the denomination's justice committee. Smith's overt activism was frowned on by conference leadership who disagreed with his assessment of where the UMC fell short of its ideals. "So, when we started taking a critical look, and saying, 'Oh, wait a minute, friends, like something's wrong here,' what we found was some of the same people who recruited us, became the impediment, because the ideals were rubbing up against comfort." Tired of running against this opposition, Pastor Smith declined to be reappointed to a clergy position and left the UMC in July of 2020. As a result of the negative sanctions he received, this pastor has gone from leadership to leaving ministry altogether.

When Pastor Smith reflected on what created friction for him in the UMC, it had little to do with his race, but rather with his degree of racial salience. He reasoned, "Being Black in appearance hasn't been that deleterious to me in ministry; bringing my Black lived experience has been far more costly, if you will." He continued, contrasting the UMC's desire to display diversity with its desire to have people of color impact the organization. "Folks want to have multiracial spaces, multicultural spaces, which of course means they want your Black face, but not your Black lived experience, or your Brown face, but not your Brown lived experience." A Black or a Brown face is useful for creating an authentic multiracial environment. However, when the "lived experience" that comes along with that Black or Brown face creates White discomfort and challenges the status quo of White organizational hegemony, it is no longer desired. Because of this pastor's high racial salience, his claims to leadership were delegitimated.

A Black woman minister also experienced her claims to leadership being delegitimated because of her racial salience. During her 22 years in the denomination, she successfully claimed many

positions. As she recounted, “I have served on the Board of Ordained Ministry, I have been a delegate to General Conference, Jurisdictional Conference. I’ve served on conference worship teams. I used to teach classes at the licensing school, I was [a] district superintendent.” Despite these achievements, she now reasons her acceptance can be traced to her low racial salience. In a speech, Malcolm X (1963:123) created the categories of a “house negro”—a low racial salience person, more concerned with proximity to Whites than with solidarity to Black people—in contrast to a “field negro”—someone who actively identifies with other Black people and the issues confronting them. Drawing upon these categories, she said, “I think some of my counterparts saw me as a house negro, but I was really a field negro. And when they discovered that I was the field negro, that’s when the problems set in. . . . I was labeled and ostracized.” As she became more vocal about issues of race, her success in making claims to organizational resources began to falter.

This minister’s racial salience came with serious consequences for her career and belonging. After 22 years working in the UMC, she now works for a nonprofit. What is perhaps worse is that she was forced out of the organization without so much as a proper send-off. “I felt that things were maliciously done against me; being falsely accused of things and even when proven wrong, to this day, I’ve received no apology. Out of one of the largest conferences in the denomination in the United States, I receive three [goodbye] cards from clergy.” Later, she recalls that she did get a fourth card. It was from the district office informing her that she owed \$500 for her insurance coverage. She replied to this card, “kiss my foot,” and refused to pay the requested amount.

Among our participants, this story of initial acceptance and later rejection was repeated again and again. Another woman minister told us about the access to leadership positions she was granted as a light-complected, well-spoken Black woman. She explained, “A friend did tell me that ‘we’re looking for Black people, but it’s all Black people who act white.’” For a time, this pastor was happy to be the sort of Black person the UMC desired and felt she benefited. She admitted, “there were unfair positives for me. Because my skin tone is lighter and [the way] I talk, ‘cause I’m from up north and my language is different. The words that I use. I feel like that got me in ministry, into places that other people that were darker couldn’t get in.” Her proximity to whiteness in appearance and language created opportunities for advancement.

Because of her favorable reception, this minister thought that she was positioned to bring in more people of color and unify ministers already within the denomination. She prayed, “God, let me be a catalyst. Let me be that tool that you use to bring us more together as people of color with whites.” Her prayer was not answered in the affirmative. She continued, “none of it really happened. I feel like I was just seen as a nuisance.”

After 5 years of being a nuisance, this minister no longer desires the advancement or the unity she previously sought. Instead, she finds herself disappointed by the lack of progress she has seen. Speaking of the denomination, she protested, “They wanna call themselves, ‘dismantling racism,’ whatever you call it, but it’s not working. Everything I wanted to do, everything I wanted to be, it doesn’t seem like it is. I don’t see anything. I think that’s why

I’m depressed.” For there to be change in the future, this minister believes that the UMC must understand, “that we’re just not like them and they want us to be exactly like them which, that’s not gonna work. If you want the Black church to come, let the Black people be Black people.” Instead of promoting Black people who “act white,” this minister is hoping that going forward, high racial salience Black people will find a place within the UMC.

Pastor Joan Solace understood that low racial salience was required to remain in leadership and adhered to this strategy, although hiding aspects of herself created tremendous strain. She was originally a pastor in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church, a historically Black Methodist denomination that is headquartered in North Carolina. Pastor Solace transferred to the UMC because she was disrespected as a woman in her previous denomination. She felt that in the AMEZ denomination, they “had no regard for women and for sure raised men up higher. And so, I felt disrespected, totally overlooked and devalued.” Seeking affirmation of her ministry, Pastor Solace joined the UMC. She immediately noticed that, although her gender became less of an issue, her race became of primary importance. Before joining the UMC, “I never [thought] about race in the church,” but in the UMC “race has always shown up everywhere.”

Early in her term with the UMC, Pastor Solace was invited to participate in a prominent committee. When giving a reason for her invitation, she said, “I’m told that I have been invited because I have engaged with the United Methodist Church in a very graceful way.” Graceful could mean a number of things for a minister, but in the context of being a Black minister in a White denomination, “graceful” meant not making race an issue. As Pastor Solace put it, “I think that that’s a way of saying I’ve approached the process with what they would consider less Blackness, less African to me. I really think that’s what that means.”

Pastor Solace takes this “graceful” approach in her leadership, although it conflicts with the changes she would like to bring. Having to mind her demeanor in this way is a drain on her time and energy. She explained, “you’re so busy guarding who you are and who your white church is and has always been. And even though we are a multicultural, multiethnic congregation, you’re not going to do but so much to bring about so much change, if any, because you don’t want to make your white people uncomfortable.” Despite the UMC’s official stance on being multicultural and multiethnic, Pastor Solace knows that trying to make changes toward those goals will be met with discomfort and delegitimize her claims to leadership.

These examples reveal the difference between how racial status and racial salience affect claims for denomination positions. In order to legitimate its own claims as an antiracist organization, the UMC needs Black ministers to make successful claims to denominational positions. However, they actively promote ministers who express low racial salience. Pastors of color who display high racial salience by bringing to bear their lived experience—“acting Black”—or advocating for racial justice were not tolerated. It appears that when white comfort is threatened by racial salience, the “open hearts, open minds and open doors” of the UMC close to pastors of color (Iovino 2018).

3.2 | Claims to Congregational Acceptance and Respect

While district superintendents are responsible for placing ministers in churches, the receiving congregations remain critical to ministers' success. An unhappy congregation can complain to the district, refuse to pay expected financial support to the denomination in the form of apportionments, or ostracize the minister and their family from congregational life. Successful claims to respect and acceptance are foundational to organizational persistence (Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019). At the congregation level, pastors found that these claims depended on low racial salience.

For one Latino pastor, being a low racial salience leader acceptable in a UMC congregation meant ensuring there were few markers of difference, like an accent, that would trigger uncomfortable thoughts of race. A former software engineer, he moved countries and denominations to pursue his ministry with the UMC. He shared, "I had to leave my life. I left my life, my culture, my language, my friends, my job, my everything to follow Jesus. I'm willing to do it again. I don't feel like God is calling me to do that again. If God calls me to, I'm good with that." Although he did not express any regrets about the things that he has given up, he is clear that being with the UMC has cost him aspects of his identity, such as culture and language. The UMC was not a place where he could become a minister with his full ethnracial identity intact. As with the minister above, who averred the UMC wants "Black people who act white," this Latino pastor understood the assignment to embrace White racial norms and commitments.

Despite having left everything, this minister remained in a space where there was a thin line between acceptance and rejection. He was reminded of this when he was watching a wrestling match with a group of male leaders in the church. The wrestling match featured two South American combatants who spoke English with an accent. The congregational leaders' reaction to the wrestlers showed their willingness to denigrate outsiders:

It was five of my leaders, saying, "Hey, you should learn how to speak the language of freedom. You need to learn how to speak English, right. What's that accent about? Where are you from?" Literally, they are from Brazil or Argentina. I'm like, "Do you even realize that you just got appointed a Mexican pastor?" I didn't know how to take that. I think I said something. They were like, "Oh, but your English is good. They should learn how to speak, to do better."

This incident occurred within 2 weeks of his arrival at the church, and it set the tone for this pastor. He came to understand that his acceptance was conditional. He was accepted because his "English was good," and he spoke without an accent. In other words, his statement of giving up his culture and language was correct. The legitimacy of his claims to acceptance at this church depended on it.

A Korean woman minister also felt pressured to give up her culture to be accepted by her congregation. She was drawn to the

UMC because she had felt isolated as a Korean American child and believed the church was a place where she could be fully welcomed. She later discovered the narrow boundaries of that welcome and contorted herself to fit them. One of the primary ways this minister reduced stress and felt at home was by making and enjoying Korean food. Yet, she felt compelled not to make her preferred food during times of transition from one church to another, something that could happen as frequently as every 2 years for newer ministers. Because she lived in a parsonage, a home provided by the church, this pastor would stop making Korean food at least a month before she had to move. She explained this constraint, saying,

It's the, 'Oh I can't leave behind any remnants that I wasn't white enough.' I have to leave things clean. I have to leave things pristine. That's just the extra undergirding that ended up taking more of a toll on my body. Because in order to truly pack up and move, I couldn't cook for about a month and a half. Because the smell left on the walls had to be ... They had to go away.

As a Korean woman, this minister felt that being White enough was part of the qualifications for her job. That qualification extended to even the smells that emanated from her kitchen, so in times of transition, when she needed comfort food the most, it was unavailable to her. Like Pastor Solace above, she adheres to white racial norms at the implied threat of disapproval.

Despite her care to be White enough when it came to food, this minister ultimately displayed high racial salience that was untenable in the UMC. When appointed to a new church, she was able to claim acceptance at first. "I'm considered a breath of fresh air, because I'm young, I'm quiet, I observe. And so, people will project onto me what they want to see; a minority who's well behaved, who isn't loud, who isn't pushy, and bossy, and all of this." This demeanor worked until she found herself shaken by protests over police brutality and compelled to participate. Her vocal stance on racial justice broke her congregation's expectations. She recalled, "When I began to speak more explicitly, [there was] so much pushback because I shattered their projection of who I was supposed to be. Suddenly, I was talking about police brutality and racism and how white supremacy is a deeply ingrained sin. And suddenly, all the niceness turned..." When this pastor began to express concern about racial justice, she no longer met her congregation's implicit criteria for what their pastor should be. From then on, she lacked the support of her congregation and staff as she tried to continue leading her church.

While high racial salience is most often perceived when pastors agitate for racial justice, these examples show how deviating from full assimilation can also signal racial salience. Heavy accents or smells from food (rather than the food itself, which ironically is welcomed in most circles) also create White discomfort that is not welcomed in congregations of the UMC. As Carbado and Gulati (2013a) put it, speaking of low racial salience Black people, those accepted "think of themselves as people first and Black people second... and they will work hard to assimilate themselves into the firm's culture." Latino/a and Asian pastors must also meet these standards to claim congregational acceptance.

3.3 | Claims to Ordination

Formal processes provide a third occasion for rejecting high racial salience pastors, the most prominent among these processes being ordination. Ordination is the authorization of a person's ministry and involves not just a pastor's career but also their faith. As such, the claim to ordination is perhaps the most personal of all claims that could be made within the UMC and fraught with emotion. Practically, ordination also comes with work protections, benefits, and opportunities for full-time ministerial appointments critical to the livelihood of pastors. To become a candidate for ordination, a pastor must have a master's degree, at least 1 year of ministry experience, and a recommendation from the district superintendent, all of which require a series of successful claims within the denomination before a claim to ordination is made. The ordination process is overseen by the Board of Ordained Ministry, which consists of clergy and laity appointed at the conference level.

Many pastors we spoke to described having failed in their claims to ordination time and again, resulting in years of setbacks to their ministry and advancement within the denomination. One was a Black pastor in his late 20s who began as an intern with a United Methodist Church during his college years. He experienced the church's care during a health incident, which won his loyalty to the denomination. "My lung had collapsed and the Methodist Church I was interning with rallied around me. I hadn't been in the Methodist Church, I don't think three weeks, and it was as if I'd been a part of that church all of my life. It just, it blew my mind. I'd never experienced that type of grace or love."

While he initially experienced high levels of grace and love, the warm welcome wore out once this minister was perceived to be high in racial salience. This pastor's high racial salience derived from the way he came to view theology and relationships between racial groups while in seminary at Duke Divinity School.

My whole identity just shifted. This call and this affirmation of welcoming being Black while navigating those white spaces and remaining faithful to the call of liberation for Black people was shifted. And so, embracing that while at Duke, I shifted from using phrases of racial reconciliation to more so of terms of racial conciliation and emphasizing that you can't rebuild what has never existed, but God is always creating.

This minister expressed high racial salience in his theology and writing, for example, by rejecting the popular term of reconciliation due to his realization that racial groups have never been at peace, and so reconciliation is a misnomer. Because of this shift, his ordination attempt was met with extreme scrutiny. He recalls, "I remember hearing an elder say to me, 'Are you sure that maybe you should not be pursuing social activism instead of clergy work.' And I said to her, 'I'm sorry that for me as a Black man I don't get to choose if liberation is a part of my theology. It is a part of it, period.'"

Although this minister's claim to ordination was not overtly delegitimated because of his focus on liberation, coincidentally, the committee then found another reason to decline him: his driving record. This minister feels that it was clear his speeding tickets were not the real reason for their concern. "Because I didn't fit the norm, they were so focused on my speeding tickets that my call was hardly entertained at all. It was disheartening because I put all that work in. It doesn't matter the call on my life, at the end of the day, whiteness was right in this space. And Blackness was wrong. I wasn't fit to be in that space." Religious calling has been described as "that inner persuasion or experience whereby a person feels himself directly summoned or invited by God to take up the work of the ministry" (Niebuhr 1956, 64). Affirming a minister's calling is supposed to be central to the ordination process, however, this minister felt that his calling took a back seat to concerns about his high racial salience. This concern was expressed by scrutiny over speeding tickets rather than directly.

As a result of his treatment during the ordination process, this minister decided to give up on his claim to ordination within the United Methodist Church altogether. He declared, "I don't need Duke Divinity's degree or the United Methodist Church's credentials to affirm God's hand on my life. Do I want it? Absolutely. But I don't need it. I'm in a place of peace and content with that at this point." Although he remains a Methodist theologically, he is now seeking ordination with a different denomination.

A Latino pastor with 8 years of experience in the UMC was rejected from ordination four times. He felt his identity was so policed during his ordination process that he wrote a poem comparing the Board of Ordained Ministry, who make decisions over ordination, to the Border Patrol. He wrote, "My past attempts at crossing made me a marked person. I met other marked people. Over the next year, I heard cries in the wilderness. Met many other people who were like me who worked for the system who didn't work for them." As a Latino who displayed high racial salience, this pastor found that he could not fit the mold they were looking for in the ordination process. As he put it, "ordination can be tantamount to indoctrination." Those who do not completely receive this indoctrination into UMC ways of doing things are likely to find themselves rejected repeatedly. This is an example of expressing high racial salience through lack of assimilation. Finally ordained in his most recent attempt, this minister plans to remain in the UMC despite his difficulties and the gap between the denomination's professed values and their actions. As he put it, "this church gives me a framework, you know, even though we don't always live into the framework we profess, it can be a good one."

3.4 | Accepted in Limited Venues

There was one exception to the narratives of exclusion offered by 16 of the 17 pastors interviewed. A Latina pastor, who was not yet appointed to her own church but served alongside her husband, felt that her racial and ministerial identity were both affirmed inside of the United Methodist Church. She raved, "my identity as a Christian Hispanic female, that's what is the Methodist church for me. I can be the best person that I can be in the Methodist

church. I can be me as a Hispanic Latina, no matter if I have an accent, or if I don't look like the others, or sometimes I don't think like the others, but I can still be a Methodist." While she recognized that there was some racism within her North Carolina conference, she didn't feel that it stopped her from being herself or serving in leadership positions within the church.

This pastor's account of inclusion could be instructive for the UMC in a number of ways. First, she had not yet encountered any of the formal processes, such as ordination, where so many other ministers felt their identity challenged. Second, she and her husband serve in a Hispanic congregation where they are surrounded by others that share their language and at least some of their culture. Finally, her service to the conference is on the Hispanic committee where she is again surrounded by other Latina/o ministers. At this point, this minister is relatively insulated and has claimed little from the UMC in terms of ordination, assignment to churches, and the like. Not yet needing to claim many resources from the organization has provided her a limited space where perhaps she can express high racial salience and still be accepted. It remains to be seen whether she continues to feel included over time, but to the extent that she can continue to carve out space among other Latina/os, her positivity may continue.

4 | Discussion

High racial salience people of color are often screened out of majority white organizations to preserve the comfort of white members (Carbado and Gulati 2013a; Thornhill 2015; Thornhill 2019). Despite the denomination's stated commitment to antiracism, the pastors we spoke to also experienced this screening out of the North Carolina conferences of the United Methodist Church. When Black, Latino/a, and Asian pastors we spoke to expressed their racial identity in a way that made Whites uncomfortable, these pastors were removed from conference/district positions, rejected by their local congregations, and denied ordination. This most often occurred when these pastors displayed concern for matters of race, racism, and White supremacy. The delegitimation of their claims to denominational positions, congregational acceptance, and ordained ministry came not from status connected to their racial categorization in and of itself; rather it was their racial salience that cost them opportunities.

Situating their experiences within relational inequalities theory, then, these findings reinforce claims-making as a complex process with many factors. In this case, status based on categorical distinctions becomes a plus factor, helping highly qualified pastors of color claim organizational resources. White-led efforts at "antiracism" may gain legitimacy by inviting the presence of employees of color. These employees are otherwise denied agency within the organization and forced to exist within narrow constraints (Okuobi 2025). In the case of the UMC, the legitimacy of claims by their pastors of color persisted until these pastors were perceived as high racial salience individuals. High racial salience quickly erased decades of successful claims, often resulting in the exit of pastors of color from the denomination. Here, interracial differences are not as critical as intraracial ones in determining the success of claims-making.

The accounts of these pastors reveal the limitations of antiracism as an organizational objective. As with the interracial church Edwards (2008) analyzed, White comfort was non-negotiable in this organization. A stated goal of antiracism was not enough to overcome this tendency, showing how White antiracism is often stymied. Organizations declaring themselves to be antiracist cannot both protect the comfort of Whites and simultaneously meet their stated commitments to people of color. Based on the evidence provided by the pastors we spoke with, the UMC has chosen the former rather than the latter.

4.1 | Racial Salience Versus White Activism

An alternative explanation for these findings would be that this is not an issue of racial salience at all, but rather a wholesale rejection of any confrontation of racism. If this were the case, white pastors who expressed a concern with race and racism would face similar negative sanctions for their efforts. Our data do not include data from white pastors, however, work from Holleman, Johnston, and Mischke (2025) shows that White pastors in the UMC also felt constrained in their antiracist work, experiencing pushback from congregations or even denominational leaders when overtly addressing racial injustice. Interestingly, though, the White pastors were able to find outlets for their efforts, either through gentle leadership in their congregations or efforts outside their congregations, including at the conference level. None exited the UMC and almost all continued in their congregations. These divergent outcomes point to a distinction between racial salience and white activism, at least in this denomination.

Furthermore, the rhetoric and efforts of the UMC around antiracism reveal areas where there is latitude for some people to engage issues of race overtly. Conference efforts around race, including trainings that specifically call out anti-Blackness and racial justice continue 2 years after these interviews were conducted. Although insufficient to eliminate racism within an organization, even this level of action and use of language remains relatively rare, especially given the prevalence of less polarizing terms such as diversity (Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017). That latitude was not extended to pastors of color. Recall that Pastor Smith's participation on the justice committee contributed to delegitimizing his claims to denominational leadership after 21 years of ministry. But the justice committee is an official conference committee! It was not a secret, grassroots effort, but rather continues as an official committee overseen by the conference bishop. For this reason, we conclude that high racial salience pastors of color uniquely disturbed White comfort, had their claims delegitimized, and were encouraged through their rejection to exit the UMC. As Holleman et al. (2025) make clear, this is not to say that any antiracist action on the part of Whites would be accepted. It is only to say that pastors of color engaging in the sorts of activities that some White pastors also pursued were treated differently.

5 | Conclusions

In Zakiya Dalila Harris's debut novel, *The Other Black Girl*, the protagonist must choose between being successful and being herself. As a review of her book summarized, "If you choose

the first path, as a young Black woman, you may find yourself sublimating your true self — not just style and taste, but the very ideas and principles at your core. If you choose the second path, as a young Black woman, you'll own your identity, but you'll never sit in the corner office — you'll cause too much friction along the way" (Patrick 2021). The ministers of color within the United Methodist Church face a similar choice. The first path, low racial salience, is marked with successful interactions with congregants and positions within the district and conference. The second path leads to negative sanctions that make it difficult to persist in the denomination. Even the UMC's declared commitment to antiracism is not enough to alter this reality for its ministers of color. Returning to the title of our paper, pastors perceived to be "house negros" are allowed to remain in the house, while those perceived to be "field negroes" are unceremoniously put out.

This study has several limitations. The first is that all interviews were conducted in the North Carolina conferences of the UMC. As such, it is possible that some of the observed patterns are regionally specific. In addition, although differences by gender were not readily apparent in this analysis, perceived racial salience and the implications of racial salience do vary by gender and other characteristics (Rattan et al. 2019). Further investigation of this intersectional reality should be undertaken in the future. These limitations notwithstanding, this study provides an important step forward in understanding the claims-making process and the generation of intraracial inequalities within antiracist organizations.

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