



Duncan Green

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## Book review. Undivided: the Quest for Racial Solidarity in an American Church, by Hahrie Han

**Duncan Green** reviews a new book that provides deep insights into the community organising role of a US evangelical megachurch.

Undivided has such a crisply written blurb that I can't really improve on it:

*'In 2016, even as Ohio helped deliver victory to presidential candidate Donald Trump, Cincinnati voters also passed a ballot initiative for universal preschool. The margin was so large that many who elected Trump must have—paradoxically—also voted for the initiative: how could the same citizens support such philosophically disparate aims? What had convinced residents of this Midwestern, Rust Belt community to raise their own taxes to provide early childhood education focused on the poorest—and mostly Black—communities?*

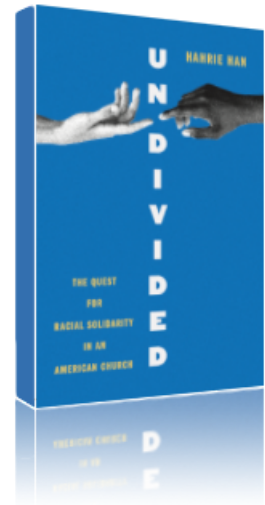
*When political scientist Hahrie Han set out to answer that question, her investigations led straight to an unlikely origin: the white-dominant evangelical megachurch Crossroads, where Pastor Chuck Mingo had delivered a sermon the prior year that set in motion a chain of surprising events. Raised in the Black church, Mingo felt called by God, he told Crossroads parishioners, to combat racial injustice, and to do it through the very church in which they were gathered.*

*The result was Undivided, a faith-based program designed to foster antiracism and systemic change. The creators of Undivided recognized that any effort to combat racial injustice must move beyond recognizing and overcoming individual prejudices. Real change would have to be radical—from the very roots.'*

**Han, a Korean American scholar** specialising in community organisation, spent seven years immersed in the workings of Crossroads, the megachurch that hosted Undivided, attending its courses and getting to know her four subjects, as well as many other members. The result is a

riveting window into the workings of a faith-based progressive change movement for anyone interested in grassroots community organising.

I came to the book expecting to find some useful lessons from the field of community organising, which is much bigger and better developed in the US than in the UK. But actually, that's quite a small part of the book's value. What I got instead, through Han's deep focus on the lives of four, mainly Republican evangelical activists, is a fascinating insight into the debates, doubts and dilemmas of the contemporary Evangelical movement, torn between social justice and white nationalism, conflicts that were all crystallized by the first Trump presidency, the murder of George Floyd, Black Lives Matter and other events from 2016-22. *Faith-based* community organising is, it turns out, similar to the secular variety but also very different.



Her four main characters are Sandra, a black Republican woman married to an increasingly hostile white guy who goes down the white nationalist online rabbit hole during the pandemic; Jess, a white former convict and drug addict struggling to get her life back on track; Grant, a white Republican who grew up with a black (adopted) brother and so thought he was 'colour blind' (boy, did he get that wrong) and Chuck Mingo, one of the few black preachers at Crossroads, struggling to stay onside with its more conservative white leadership while acting on his increasingly urgent desires to pursue social and racial justice. The depth and nuance of their stories is great, eschewing simplistic hero narratives to capture the awkwardness, fear and doubts that afflict activists as they grow and learn.

What also emerges is just what good organisers the megachurches can be, painstakingly designing courses for activists that are both innovative, and keenly attuned to building the power and deep bonds between activists through a plethora of small groups, practical work and a high degree of decentralization ('honeycombs of intimacy, connection and loyalty' – the writing is often lovely). This certainly challenged my stereotypes about how Evangelicals work.

The book is divided into two halves – Agitation and Backlash. The first is more of a primer on faith-based community organising, charting how the four principal characters get involved and become part of some really top-notch initiatives. The second part is more introspective, digging into the tensions and dilemmas of the Trump years, but also at the more micro level of family, community and within the Church itself.



There are, almost as throwaways, some very useful tips for community organising. Empathizing with someone who you disagree with is hard work, so Han records the Crossroads' curriculum four step guide: decide if the person is worth connecting empathetically with; identify the emotional experience he/she is having; third, recall a time when you had a similar emotional experience and finally, act the way in which you wish you had been treated when it happened to you.

Especially in the second half of the book, all four characters are in a perpetual state of struggle – with their identities, partners, unsympathetic workplaces, beliefs, and how to be true to their evolving understanding of their faith. The tensions between an approach to anti-racism based on individual change, and one that recognizes and acts on more structural forms of injustice, is a thread that runs through the book. It feels pretty exhausting, but you have to admire their persistence and courage. This 'work' is not easy.

Han concludes by describing the work of Undivided (which ended up going independent because of foot-dragging from the Crossroads hierarchy) as a 'revolution by trial and error' and says of Jess, Sandra, Grant and Chuck:

'None of them were sure where Undivided was going. They weren't sure where their faith, evangelicalism, was going. They weren't always sure where they themselves, as individuals, were going. But that was okay. Maybe sometimes living at the edge of social change, at the seams between the world that we have and the world we are hoping to create, means that sometimes our sentences just trail off.'

We're adding a week on Community Organising to our LSE course on activism, and *Undivided* will definitely be on the reading list.

## About the author

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