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A FUTURE HORIZON FOR A PROPHETIC TRADITION:  
A MISSIONAL, HERMENEUTICAL, AND PASTORAL LEADERSHIP APPROACH  
TO EDUCATION AND BLACK CHURCH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

by

DAVID L. EVERETT

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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## ABSTRACT

*A Future Horizon for a Prophetic Tradition: A Missiological, Hermeneutical, and Leadership Approach to Education and Black Church Civic Engagement*

by

David L. Everett

This mixed-methods study performed among six congregations explored how the historical framework, fabric, and focus of the Black Church have changed throughout a modern/postmodern context. An exploratory approach was used to study congregations identified by a 10-person pastoral focus group using methods of interviews and questionnaires. This researcher hypothesized that the social gospel dimensions and prophetic radicalism of the historic Black Church have diminished, but that it might reestablish itself as a pillar in the community through a retrieval of its prophetic voice and social gospel roots which caused it to be missional-minded and civically-engage. It is anticipated that this perspective will assist the Black Church in reclamation of its heritage by confirming its purpose and affirming its position within the missional context that God has placed it.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and dedicate this work to my mother Janette. Though she did not get to see its completion, her support, comfort, and wisdom throughout the endeavor was invaluable, instrumental, and inspiring. I love you and miss you dearly.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

On a warm Saturday morning in July of 2000, on Minneapolis' North Side, about fifty volunteers gathered in the fellowship hall at Zion Baptist Church. Located at a major intersection in the North Side community, Zion Baptist is one of the larger historically Black churches in Minneapolis and is part of the National Baptist Convention, Incorporated. This upper-middle class congregation has been a part of the community for 35 years, hosting events like blood drives, food shelves, and tutoring.

The purpose of the gathering on this particular Saturday is a “Get-Out-To-Vote” campaign launched by the Joint Religious Legislative Coalition, a Twin Cities based non-profit advocacy organization that conducts action-oriented forums, workshops, and grassroots initiatives that focus on faith and citizenship. The “Get-Out-To-Vote” campaign partnered with local churches in an effort to increase voter registration and turn-out in the lowest producing precincts throughout Minneapolis. As volunteers began to trickle in, the wide-ranging scope of ethnicity, denominations, and class is on display—Black and White; Baptist and Lutheran; lower and middle-class—all coming together for a cause deemed appropriate in their person, from their pulpits, and amongst their pews.

After a continental breakfast and brief fellowship, the group gathered in a circle. People introduced themselves and explained why, on a sunny Saturday morning which are few in Minnesota, they decided to walk door-to-door, to help register voters, many of

whom look different and live differently from themselves. Following a few testimonies, a middle-aged, White woman from Hope Presbyterian Church, located in a nearby suburb, said with tear-filled eyes, “The history of this country is filled with the minimizing of rights. If I can help one person realize their civic status, I have not labored in vain. It’s the right thing for the Church to do, and it’s the right thing for me to do.”

In this opening chapter, I begin to assess the definition of Christian mission as interpreted and practiced by the wider church community. I do this by 1) contrasting the image of church at the “center” versus the “decentered” church as being sent which highlights a key insight in what has become known over the last fifteen years or more as the missional church conversation; 2) briefly exploring the seven historical Black denominations and how “black” has come to be defined, primary concern being to establish that the Black Church is a collection of individual institutions whose purpose, premise, and activity combine them into a single entity, thus synthesizing the Black Church into a single entity that becomes a network of support and vehicle for social change, addressing and engaging challenges that are distinctive to the Black community, and perhaps some that are not;<sup>1</sup> 3) introducing the language of civil society and civic engagement to focus the discourse on the specific type of missional activity practiced by the Black Church and the corresponding social gospel roots and communal relevancy; and 4) addressing the transition of the Black Church from a historical legacy of prophetic engagement to the heretical practice of pragmatic accommodationism which compromises its mission and dilutes its practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert M. Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 10.

### Research Question, Methodology, and Design

The central research question for this study was: *In light of missional ecclesiology and pastoral leadership, what social gospel dimensions of the historical Black Church can be reclaimed and recontextualized for its renewed prophetic engagement within civil society?* To address this question, this study sought collaboratively to: (1) profile the background of the Black Church and its influence on the civic engagement of six specific churches—*historical*; (2) explore the strands of American individualism that have affected the Black Church’s civic engagement<sup>2</sup>—*practical*; (3) discover how some Black churches have sustained civic engagement—*contextual*; (4) discuss the dimensions of civic engagement that can reemerge—*relational*; and (5) explore the reemergence of Black Church civic engagement as a significant contribution to missional ecclesiology—*educational*.

Deeply-woven within the story of the Black Church is the co-dependency of the pulpit and the pew. Given this fact, a mixed-method research approach was selected to include both Black Church leadership and membership. This approach provided an opportunity to discover how “the meaning of church as a community of holy awareness, care, interdependence, sharing, moral deliberation, and action”<sup>3</sup> has been maintained among churches and leaders when many deliberately exclude, suppress, or ignore the social message of Jesus Christ. The results of this research yield an emerging missiological call to leaders and members alike, within the Black Church and beyond.

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<sup>2</sup> The researcher believes that the prominence of American individualism in Black culture subverted mutuality between the Black Church and its community. Arguably, this individualism contributed intensely to the displacement of the Black Church from its historical centrality in the Black community. See Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Franklin, *Crisis in the Village*, 119.

The research design included the selection of 6 congregations that served as survey sites, 9 senior pastors as interviewees, and the guidance of a 10-member focus group. The congregations were identified based on geographical location, historical legacy, and present-level activity, the roster of interviewees consisted of the senior pastors of the six congregations along with three senior pastors of outside congregations, while focus group members shared documented multi-generational, multi-perspectival viewpoints of Black Church civic engagement in various capacities.

The particular phenomenon being studied, the historical Black Church signifies an institution in missional crisis. Over the past decades, the social relevance of the Black Church has dwindled in the rising religious panorama of individualism. In the midst of its reduced relevance, the Black Church spends more time accommodating, and in some ways, promoting, the dominant secular and individualizing social agenda, that is struggling to meet the spiritual demands of the newer generation consumed with prosperity and accumulation, and less time living out its communal heritage—connecting “theology with politics and culture in order to bring about social justice.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Missional Church**

What does missional identity look like? This is the question that Lesslie Newbigin posed and attempted to answer, taking up the challenge to envision a coming together of the gospel with late-modern Western culture.<sup>5</sup> In his book, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, he posed the question: “What would be involved in a missionary encounter between the

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<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It? Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Craig Van Gelder, ed., *The Missional Church & Denominations: Helping Congregations Develop a Missional Identity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 2.

gospel and this whole way of perceiving, thinking, and living that we call ‘modern Western culture’?”<sup>6</sup>

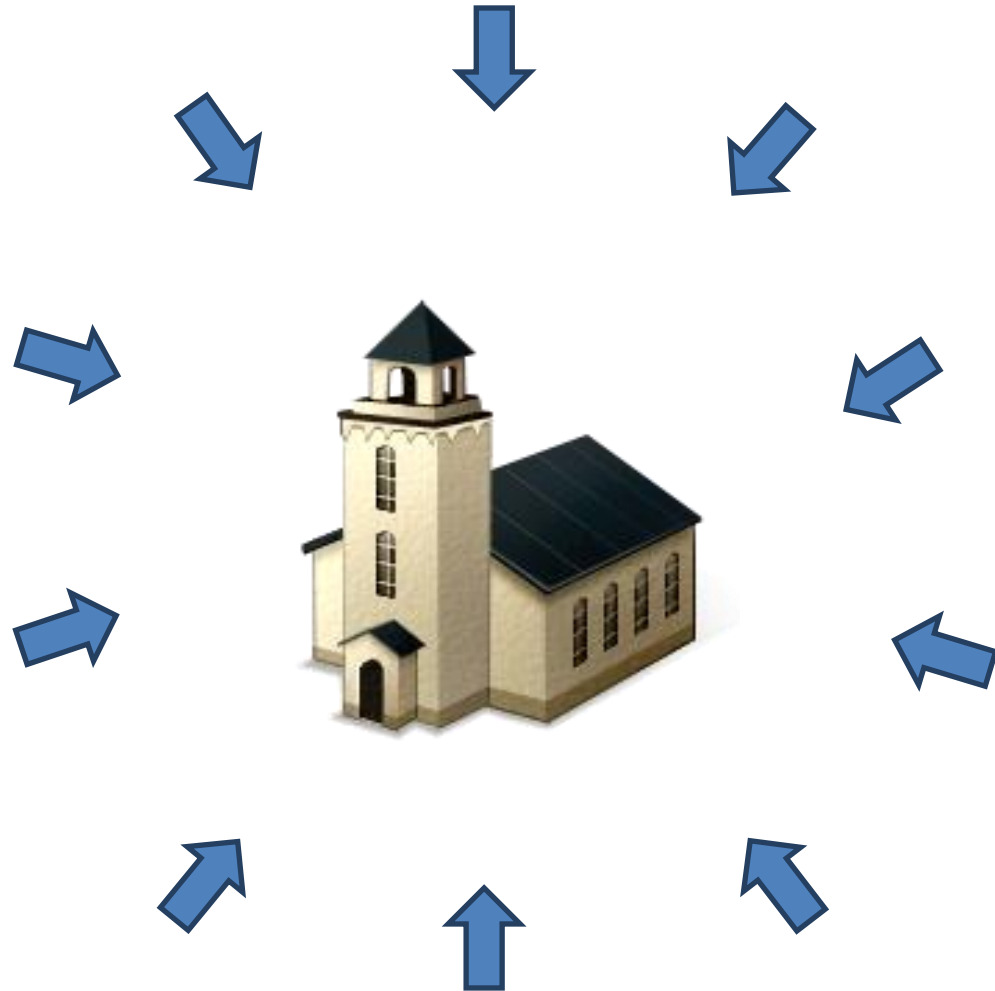
In the past, churches have earmarked vast amounts of resources to build the most eye-catching community constructions in which they were situated. Great music, compelling teaching, and a host of programs designed to attract and gather people were the staple of such church communities. All were welcome and members were encouraged to invite friends, neighbors, coworkers, etc. Generally people had a pleasant experience. Those in attendance appeared relatively similar—education, ethnicity, family structure, income. Eventually, someone asked the question, “What about all the people who aren’t like us, but live around us? Why aren’t they here, too?”

In response, the church increased its marketing budget—direct mailing, newspaper ads, radio spots, fresh web page, and hosting various community events—in an effort to draw attention to its presence and people into its pews. The church was determined to be the center and hub of everything that took place in the community. Church members began to rely on the church to do the work of conveying God’s story in the world—if someone could be brought to an event, they could hear about Jesus from a professional teacher. *Inviting* became synonymous with *evangelism* (see Figure 1.1).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986.), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Taken from a two minute video explanation of missional church by Jeff Maguire. See “The Missional Church...Simple,” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arxfLK\\_sd68](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arxfLK_sd68) (accessed November 2011).



**Figure 1.1**

The church exists in relation to a host of meanings—structure, programs, events, policy, polity, beliefs, organizational model—“but it is more than any of one of them, and in fact, more than all of them combined.”<sup>8</sup> The missional church empowers its members to be the church in the community, reorienting the thinking about the church in regards to God’s activity in the world.<sup>9</sup> The church trains, resources, encourages, and challenges its

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<sup>8</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 14.

<sup>9</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 18.



members to live out the good news in community with those who would be reluctant and otherwise suspicious of the message via marketing efforts.<sup>10</sup> God sends, and the church and its members are sent (see Figure 1.2), recognizing that every believer embodies the life of the church,

[F]rom this perspective, the church, as the people of God in the world, is inherently a missionary church. It is to participate fully in the Son's redemptive work as the Spirit creates, leads, and teaches the church to live as the distinctive people of God. With this understanding, mission shifts from naming a *function* of the church to describing its essential *nature*.<sup>11</sup>

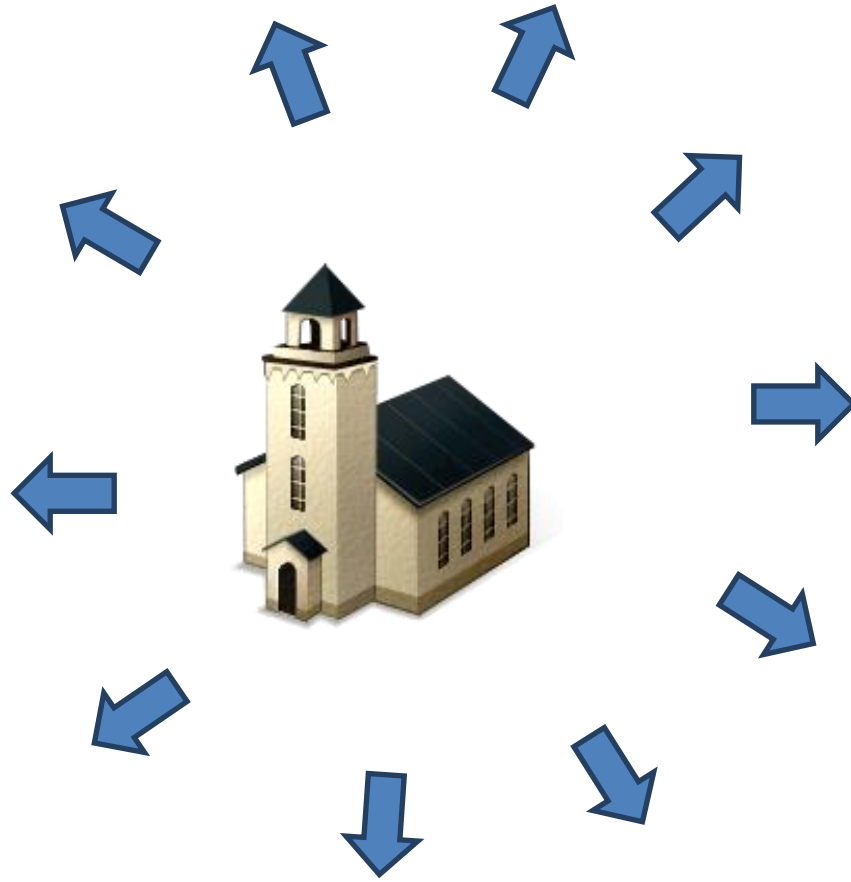
From the viewpoint of the church being missionary by nature, the Spirit-created church does not just simply exist as the body of Christ, it lives as an instrument and demonstration of God's agency in the world. Christian mission, therefore, gives expression to the dynamic relationship between God and the world particularly as this was portrayed in the story of the covenant people of Israel, and subsequently in the birth, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Maguire. "The Missional Church...Simple."

<sup>11</sup> Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, 31.

<sup>12</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 9.



**Figure 1.2**

The term mission refers primarily to the *missio Dei*, that is,

God's self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God's involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate.<sup>13</sup>

As people live in a series of integrated relationships, the missionary task is as coherent, broad, and deep as the need and exigencies of human life. Therefore, neither a secularized church with a focus on this-worldly activities and interests, nor a separatist church which concerns itself with other-worldly aspirations and goals can faithfully articulate and demonstrate the *missio Dei*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

### **Black Church & Civil Society/Civic Engagement**

From its introduction in the late 1960s, the term *Black Church* has been a point of debate for many African-American scholars and historians. Some use the term as sociological and theological shorthand to express the pluralism of Black Christian churches in the United States,<sup>15</sup> while others argue that the term is a political, intellectual, and theological construction that masks the enormous diversity and independence among African-American religious institutions and believers.<sup>16</sup> On both sides of the debate, common ground exists in the identification and recognition of multiple religious expressions among the Black Church. On that basis, this research contends that the *Black Church* has existed and continues to exist as a fellowship of churches organized by their Christianity, vitalized by the dearth of other Black institutions, and mobilized by the past, present, and future Black condition.

The *Black Church* consists of the seven Black denominational bodies: National Baptist Convention, Incorporated, National Baptist Convention of America, Progressive National Baptist, Incorporated, African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, and Church of God in Christ. Though structured in comparable fashion, there are stark contrasts within their functionalities. The Baptist denominations mentioned here are loosely-knit, with their churches largely autonomous, which leaves their ministers free of accountability to a denominational hierarchy—a significant factor in their traditional civic engagement.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Barbara Dianne Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Among Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2008), 9.

<sup>17</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 43.

Each of these Methodist denominations merges an Episcopal structure with a form of “connectionalism,” meaning

each local church maintains its own identity, yet is subject to a centralized governmental authority. No local Methodist church is an entity unto itself, but rather is “connected” at various levels to other units and offices of the national body.<sup>18</sup>

As a result, what Methodist churches and pastors forfeit in autonomy is supplemented through bureaucracy. Church of God in Christ churches enjoy a greater degree of autonomy than is possible in Methodist denominations, but are not as freestanding as the Baptists.<sup>19</sup> All of this to say that pastors within these seven structures receive enormous freedom to make community alliances and establish local networks as it pertains to civic engagement. This “radical remnant”<sup>20</sup> has historically connected theology with civic engagement and culture to work for social justice.

The Black Church has long been recognized as the heart, pulse, and drum of the African-American community. In fact, some argue that it is the community.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the struggles of African-Americans in this nation, the Black Church has been an evolutionary fixture and a revolutionary foundation for the Black community. From harnessing hope during slavery to providing leadership during the civil rights movement, the narrative of the Black Church sprouts from the survival and liberation of individuals in an enslaved and segregated American society. This narrative of the Black Church does

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Free Press, 2000), 128.

<sup>21</sup> See Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long Hidden Realities of the First Years* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004).

several things relative to civil society: one, documents its involvement in, and interaction with, the public sphere; two, validates its viability as a contemporary mediating institution; three, creates space for dialogue, deliberation, and discourse; and four, marks its potentiality as an agent of change.

### Civil Society and Civic Engagement Discourse

Acknowledging that competing visions of “civil society” and its definition exist,<sup>22</sup> the present and subsequent usage identifies civil society as a search for a greater degree of harmony, balance, and cohesion within scholarship, policy, and broader public life, the embrace of which “can be seen as a desire to transcend social division and political chaos.”<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the term Black Church refers to historically African-American congregations, inherited from an African tradition, introduced to a European culture, and influenced by a subordinate status in a racist and stratified social system.<sup>24</sup> Finally, crises refer to the fractured and broken relationships among individuals and institutions that inhibit the motivation for, as well as prohibit the mobilization of, collective power among civil society institutions.

While the earliest Black churches differed to a degree in terms of denominational identities, systems of polity, doctrinal beliefs, and practices, this did not obscure their fundamental, consensus agreement concerning the need to challenge the status quo—hence, the term *Black Church*. The Black Church was born into a culture that did

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<sup>22</sup> See Virginia A. Hodgkinson and Michael W. Foley, eds., *The Civil Society Reader* (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> Don E. Eberly, ed., *The Essential Civil Society Reader: Classic Essays in the American Civil Society Debate* (New York: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2000), 6.

<sup>24</sup> Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 2.

not separate private devotion from public duty. Invariably, this meant that the church had to move beyond the strictly spiritual and ecclesiastical to promote positive change in the social, economic, and political aspects of life.<sup>25</sup> When referring to the Black Church as “an all-comprehending institution”, Carter G. Woodson surmised:

The Negro church touches almost every ramification of the life of the Negro. As stated elsewhere, the Negro church, in the absence of other agencies to assume such responsibilities, has had to do more than its duty in taking care of the general interests of the race. A definitive history of the Negro church, therefore, would leave practically no phase of the history of the Negro in America untouched. All efforts of the Negro in things economic, educational and political have branched out of or connected in some way with the rise and development of the Negro Church.<sup>26</sup>

Because of this, the Black Church has no challenger as the cultural womb of the Black community and it has only been recently that scholars of African-American history, culture, and theology have begun to recognize its unique and distinctive traditional aspects not as simply replications of a dominant culture.<sup>27</sup> In many instances, most community anchors—schools, stores, restaurants—were birthed by the Black Church through its membership. As a result, the Black Church became a middle-ground between individuals and social institutions, the realm commonly referred to as civil society.

Christian ethicist and theologian Gary Simpson argues that the notion of representation in “representative publicness” does not refer to an assembly of delegates who represent ordinary people, but rather highlights and accentuates the gulf in status

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<sup>25</sup> See Lewis Baldwin’s “Revisiting the ‘All-Comprehending Institution’: Historical Reflections on the Public Roles of Black Churches,” in *New Day Begun: African American Churches and Civic Culture in Post-Civil Rights America*, ed. R. Drew Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> Carter G. Woodson, “The Negro Church, an All-Comprehending Institution,” *The Negro History Bulletin* 3, no. 1 (October 1939): 7.

<sup>27</sup> See Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*.

between the elite and the commoner.<sup>28</sup> While civil society literature broadly holds that participating in institutions is important to the development of civic skills and trust in individual citizens,<sup>29</sup> and that these skills and trust can then be translated into the type of social skill and trust that are necessary for democratic processes and governance, implicit and explicit challenges arise when applying traditional civil society literature to the Black Church. Embedded in a sizable part of this literature is the assumption that participation in voluntary associations such as churches serves to reinforce the social order—however disproportionate, dysfunctional, and discriminatory.<sup>30</sup> Yet, the Black Church has historically carved out “free spaces” to both cultivate civic loyalty as well as inculcate civil disobedience. Frederick Harris refers to this ability, to both reinforce civic loyalty as well as challenge inequality and inequity, as “an oppositional civic culture.”<sup>31</sup> He further explains that the Black Church serves as source of civic culture by providing Blacks the opportunity to develop positive orientations toward the civic order. The same institution, however, also provides the Black community with resources and dispositions to challenge its marginality.<sup>32</sup>

In an accommodative role, the Black Church served as the major cultural broker of norms, values, and expectations, thus the subsequent view as a mediating structure,

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<sup>28</sup> Gary M. Simpson, *Critical Social Theory: Prophetic Reason, Civil Society, and Christian Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 102.

<sup>29</sup> See James Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>30</sup> See Allison Calhoun-Brown’s “What A Fellowship: Civil Society, African American Churches, and Public Life” in R. Drew Smith, ed., *New Day Begun: African American Churches and Civic Culture in Post-Civil Rights America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> See Fredrick Harris, *Something Within: Religion in African-American Political Activism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> See *ibid.*

thus becoming a network of support.<sup>33</sup> In a role of resistance, the Black Church functioned as the primary source for affirming cultural heritage to withstand mainstream pressures of conformity and compliance, and thus, becoming a vehicle for social change.<sup>34</sup> Operating in this dialectic, one can easily draw the conclusion that the Black community, both historically and at present, cannot be understood apart from the Black Church<sup>35</sup> which recognizes and serves the most vital personal interests of the individual without abandoning or avoiding the interests of the collective to which s/he is attached.

Despite the widely held justification of slavery as a means of spreading the gospel, the economic profitability of slaves, not their Christianization, held top priority in mission work.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, mission in the Black Church has always focused on freedom. While physical and political freedoms were necessary first steps, freedom, in its entirety, meant the assault on any inhibiting factors or conditions which precluded certain individuals from the inalienable rights promised within the Constitution. Therefore, the prophetic tradition of the Black Church acts as an informing agent to bear and transmit operative values of society,

[T]his is true not only in the sense that most Americans identify their most important values as being religious in character, but also in the sense that the values that inform our public discourse are inseparably related to specific religious traditions.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Term introduced in Peter Berger's and Richard John Neuhaus' *To Empower People*. See Don E. Eberly, ed., *The Essential Civil Society Reader: Classic Essays in the American Civil Society Debate* (New York: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2000), 17.

<sup>34</sup> See Robert M. Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in the African American Communities* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

<sup>35</sup> Eberly, *The Essential Civil Society Reader*, 166.

<sup>36</sup> See Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 98.

<sup>37</sup> Eberly, *The Essential Civil Society Reader*, 168.



Black Church scholar and former pastor of The Riverside Church in New York City, Reverend James Forbes argues,

[T]he prophet speaks to both friend and foe, faithful and fallen. The prophet is seer and sayer, and even a provocateur who speaks truth to power. The prophet holds up a plumb line against which the present policies of the nation are critiqued by the principles of righteousness and justice. The consciousness of the prophet penetrates contemporary circumstances to the core of the moral and spiritual tendencies embedded in society.<sup>38</sup>

The dramatic declaration may be confrontational and denunciatory, á la Reverend Jeremiah Wright's condemnation of American domestic and foreign practices (both past and present),<sup>39</sup> but it comes from a deep love for God and His creation,

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn.<sup>40</sup>

The paradoxical juxtaposition of compassion and condemnation created an environment for expression and expectation on two levels: first, the nature of God's love—a love that rebukes, refines, and rewards; and second, the necessary dialectical tension that signals the spirit of civil society—the communicatively generating, sustaining, strengthening, testing, and revising of moral wisdom, action, and argumentation to help prevent social, economic, and political colonizing tendencies.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes, "The Black Church as Prophet, Patriot," in *The Washington Post* April 30, 2008.

<sup>39</sup> See Dr. Jeremiah Wright's sermons, "The Day of Jerusalem's Fall" delivered on September 16, 2001 and "Confusing God and Government" delivered on April 13, 2003.

<sup>40</sup> Isaiah 61:1-2 NIV

<sup>41</sup> Simpson, *Critical Social Theory*, 134.

Under the oppressive conditions that forced African-Americans to create alternate social structures, a socially-conscious Black Church developed in the midst of oppression, segregation, and marginalization. In other words, in a racist context that did not allow Blacks freedom to join mainstream voluntary organizations or the resources to establish many, even segregated civic institutions, the only widely accessible communal associations for Black people were Black churches.<sup>42</sup> The unique circumstances, in which the Black Church emerged, as well as the cultural and societal context in which it operates, give it a dualistic positioning that can either reinforce social order, or challenge this order—a historic duality that has long been the tradition of the Black Church.

### Social Gospel

In chronological context, the social gospel can be understood as a transitional phase of Christian social thought, a sub-movement within religious liberalism, “with a certain view of man and history governing its rationale.”<sup>43</sup> As early as 1910 within the Protestant Christian movement, the social gospel emphasized applying Christian principles to society's problems, which up until this time, had been unvoiced amid the growing problems of industrial society, “in this context its moral message consisted almost exclusively in applications, mild or severe, of the idea that the doctrine of *laissez faire* required Christian modifications.”<sup>44</sup>

The initial fervor and fire of the Social Gospel movement can be found in the teachings of Washington Gladden and the ministry of Walter Rauschenbusch. Both

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<sup>42</sup> Calhoun-Brown, “What A Fellowship,” 39-57.

<sup>43</sup> Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 786.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

argued against capitalism and individualism while seeking to apply Christian ethics to current social ills, motivated by a concern for finding societal truth rather than for biblical exegesis and theological elaboration, “and on the basis of that knowledge to chart programs for ameliorating the country’s social woes.”<sup>45</sup> In a time when many mainline Protestant churches were largely allied with the social and political establishment, in effect supporting systemic and institutional oppression, Gladden and Rauschenbusch connected social issues with their ministries, like establishing settlement houses that offered services such as daycare, education, and health care to needy people in slum neighborhoods. Far from radical, the Social Gospel’s basic political thrust is illustrated by what historian Sydney Ahlstrom claims was Gladden’s “gradual progress from abstract moral protest to a specific critique of American economic institutions.”<sup>46</sup> The Social Gospel obligated followers of Christ to act to improve the conditions affecting God’s people. Rauschenbusch wrote:

[N]o man shares his life with God whose religion does not flow out, naturally and without effort, into all relations of his life and reconstructs everything that it touches. Whoever uncouples the religious and the social life has not understood Jesus. Whoever sets any bounds for the reconstructive power of the religious life over the social relations and institutions of men, to that extent denies the faith of the Master.<sup>47</sup>

Opposing rampant individualism and calling for a socially-aware religion, the social gospel addressed the individual's responsibility toward society amidst a “growing awareness that social change demanded new forms of social action.”<sup>48</sup> The purveyors of

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 794.

<sup>47</sup> See Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907).

<sup>48</sup> Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 804.

the social gospel took churchgoing America as its field of action—seeking to convert the self-oriented Christian consciousness into a neighbor-oriented transformative practice,<sup>49</sup> ultimately leading to government action. As its intellectual foundations deepened, its focus broadened, and its following increased, Social Gospel interpretations and theories began to affect major denominations and prevailing opinions throughout America's churches,<sup>50</sup> in particular, the Baptist pastor-led Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which played an integral role in the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

### Community

The nature of the Black Church is constituted and maintained through its communitarian sensibilities. In other words, the essence of the Black Church is community, which moves beyond the European Enlightenment framework of individualism. The individual is part of the whole, individual identity flows from corporate experience, never in isolation from it; community defines who one becomes, and who one becomes, in turn, shapes the community. The Black Church can be characterized as a dialectic between communal and independent; *communal* referring to the historic tradition of Black churches being involved in all aspects of members' lives, and *independent* meaning removed from the concerns and control of the larger, White community. As a result, the Black Church has been able to play a defining civic role due in part to its formal institutional character, but also because of its informal social nature that has provided a context for action and construct for influence. In the past, during

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<sup>49</sup> See Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1917).

<sup>50</sup> See Dr. Patrick L. Cooney and Henry W. Powell, *The Life and Times of the Prophet Vernon Johns: The Father of the Civil Rights Movement* (Farmville: Vernon Johns Society, 1998) on <http://www.vernonjohns.org/tca1001/vjwscgsp.html> (accessed November 2011).

periods of severe and sustained crises in Black communities, individuals would turn to the Black Church for guidance, support, and leadership. In turn, the Black Church would respond not within the biblical boundary of pietistic mission where the primary focus was spiritual practices to guide God's children, but beyond such ecclesial understandings to instead engage the ethical and moral implications of systemic practices in order to address the social conditions affecting God's people.

### **The Functional Drift of the Black Church**

Throughout the social changes that Black Americans have undergone since the 1960s, the Black Church's minimized prophetic impulse has been accompanied by a fully American cultural emphasis on the individual, to the exclusion of the community. When W.E.B. DuBois coined the term "double-consciousness," he referred to the struggle of Blacks to navigate between two incompatible cultural heritages, Black and American. In this particular instance, maintaining cultural roots as a means of preserving identity and building community has been a key task of Black Church theology. This task involves a constant interplay "between the pain of oppression and the promise of liberation found in the Bible, on one hand, and a similar existence experienced" today on the other.<sup>51</sup> This dichotomy becomes more profound as the internal culture of the Black Church begins to adopt mainstream characteristics—achievement, success, and status, just to name a few. Within the culture of the Black Church are the preserved doctrines of salvation and reconciliation of humanity envisioned in the Kingdom of God as the primary characteristics of its ecclesial self-image. However, the ideology of American

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<sup>51</sup> Dwight N. Hopkins, *Heart and Head: Black Theology Past, Present and Future* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 7.

individualism belies salvation and reconciliation, exacerbating an existing and growing bifurcation within the Black community. Many among the disadvantaged Black classes greatly distrust the actions and interests not only of the Black middle- and upper-classes, but of the Black Church as well.<sup>52</sup> Individualism in the Black Church is a microcosm of the American pursuit of personal gain, marking a major disruption of corporate identity and communal responsibility, and increasing amid the struggles for socioeconomic advancement conditioned by American individualism.<sup>53</sup> The presence and prominence of individualism within the Black Church subverts mutuality between it and the community, contributing to a fragmentation of the larger Black community, and resulting in the displacement of the Black Church and its identification with the community.

The legitimacy of any organization is its ability to transform subjective reality to sustain its relationality, otherwise, “reinterpretation and transformation of subjective reality, and therefore motives and actions as well, are disrupted.”<sup>54</sup> Curtailed civic engagement is a clear reflection of this disruption. The civic engagement of the Black Church has drifted from prophetic radicalism to pragmatic accommodationism, as termed by public theologian Robert Franklin, and represents a functional challenge to the Black Church to sustain a contemporary, social purpose while simultaneously maintaining a historical, social premise. Or in other words, to be the “communicator of culture and

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<sup>52</sup> James E. Blackwell, *The Black Community: Diversity and Unity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 96.

<sup>53</sup> Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, 60.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

translator of Christianity,” clarifying and connecting aspects of ministry to the Black experience.<sup>55</sup>

According to Franklin, prophetic radicalism employs a confrontation and negotiation method aimed at evoking a crisis, attracting attention, and building support for dramatic social, cultural, and political change, while pragmatic accommodationism seeks to effect change through a cooperation and compromise strategy with the status quo.<sup>56</sup> A functional drift occurs when the Black Church, which has always served as the Black “culture center,” begins to adopt the premises and practices of its dominant social predicament, specifically American individualism. Quoting Dale P. Andrews,

[T]he individualism endemic to the age of Enlightenment did not spare black religious life. Though black churches nurtured a communal form of care, American culture remained axiomatic to the often “unreconciled strivings” of African American “double-consciousness.”<sup>57</sup>

Since the 1960s, social conditions have led to extended reflections from Black theologians on what it means to claim a religious faith and be Black in America.<sup>58</sup> Such reflection is critical because identity, culture, and relationships became changing variables as African-American strivings for middle-class position and acceptability in the dominant culture created great distance between the Black Church and its intended audience. Just as Congregationalists and Episcopalians lost touch with their

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<sup>55</sup> See James L. Conyers, Jr. editor, *Black Cultures and Race Relations* (New York: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 2002) and Robert Franklin, *Another Day's Journey: Black Churches Confronting the American Crisis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

<sup>56</sup> Franklin, *Another Day's Journey*, 51.

<sup>57</sup> Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, 56.

<sup>58</sup> See Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988) and Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995).

constituencies in the eighteenth-century, the Black Church's ineffectiveness is clearly marked by its lack of relationship with the larger Black community—the middle- and upper-classes of the Black community feel no sense of connection to the Black Church, while the lower-class has no sentiment of companionship. Additionally, the improved social, economic, and political standing of Blacks has not only affected the expectation of the Black Church, but in the midst of social ferment and crises in the Black community, has led to a less prophetic Black Church that does little to critique, challenge, or change institutional and systemic injustices. According to David Moberg,

American religion, in particular, is often preoccupied with social values enabling the successful functioning of the institutional Church... When the normative function of the Church takes on an uncritical life of its own, inconsistencies with its religious values and identity arise.<sup>59</sup>

The thought that an individual can achieve in spite of social constrictions becomes favored, President Barack Obama as a prime example, thus ignoring the presence, prevalence, and persistence of social injustice. Unfortunately, in their effort to become “mainstream,”<sup>60</sup> many churches become either willing partners in the sins of society, or at least partners by neglect, and thereby eschew their prophetic commission.<sup>61</sup> Ironically, such a position is only possible after the Black Church's prophetic engagement during periods of slavery, segregation, dehumanization, and disenfranchisement. So, how can the Black Church socially reposition itself now without compromising its prophetic identity?

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<sup>59</sup> David O. Moberg, *The Church as a Social Institution: The Sociology of American Religion* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 135-138.

<sup>60</sup> Mainstream being defined as institutional assimilation to achieve social acceptance of the dominant culture in such a way that the original fiber, foundation, and function of the institution is misplaced, ignored, and/or compromised.

<sup>61</sup> Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, 37.



Missional Ecclesiology and the Black Church: Reclamation, Recontextualization, and  
Renewal

Black Church historian Archie Smith argues that the displacement of the Black Church, stemming from the subverted mutuality linked to the presence and prominence of individualism, can be directly attributed to the functional drift from prophetic radicalism to pragmatic accommodationism, suggesting that its path unwittingly conforms to the materialism and classism of the dominant American culture.<sup>62</sup> Intentional or not, the fight for civil rights unveiled identity conflicts within the Black community, and the gains of the civil rights movement encouraged the appetite for American individualism while fragmenting the Black Church and community.<sup>63</sup> The Black Church uncritically assimilated social interpretations and integrations of personal achievement, success, and status as dictated by the dominant culture, thereby forsaking its prophetic voice and compromising the collective pursuit for equity and equality.<sup>64</sup> In calling for a return to the collective premise of the Black Church, theologian James Cone articulates the need to connect Black progressive culture and liberation politics with the core mission of the church,<sup>65</sup> a mission which additionally requires addressing the greatest contemporary omission in Black theology—the functional drift of the Black Church directly resulting from the influence of American individualism.<sup>66</sup> The insights presented

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<sup>62</sup> Archie Smith, *The Relational Self: Ethics and Therapy from a Black Church Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 123.

<sup>63</sup> Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, 60.

<sup>64</sup> James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 104.

<sup>65</sup> Hopkins, *Heart and Head*, 15.

<sup>66</sup> Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, 56.

throughout will usher in a new era for the missional and ecclesial engagement of the Black Church in the twenty-first century. They invite a redefining of the Black Church's historical accomplishments that will validate and give meaning to its future relevance. They will also provide a re-grounding of the Black Church that grows out of a practical understanding of context that will allow the Church to become the necessary bridge that connects community with contemporary circumstance. These insights illuminate the civic possibilities that await a transformed institution rethinking its participation in God's unfolding work in the world. Before exploring this process in detail, it is imperative to address the missional ecclesiology conversation.

### **Rationale**

What does liberation in this contemporary context look like? The rationale behind this project was to gain an understanding, from the pulpit as well as the pew, of the prophetic nature of the Black Church and its pastoral leadership. The inquiry targeted the social gospel dimensions of the historic Black Church. This investigation contributes to existing literature in two primary ways. First, it underscores the role, often not addressed in academic literature that pastoral leaders can play, have played, and do play in the practice of "public theology."<sup>67</sup> Second, it advances previous research by empirically delineating some of the perspectives and practices performed by pastors and churches that lend themselves to civic engagement. Specifically, I aimed to answer the following question: In light of missional ecclesiology and pastoral leadership, what social gospel

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<sup>67</sup> See George R. Hunsberger's "The Missional Voice and Posture of Public Theologizing," *Missiology: An International Review* 34, no. 1 (January 2006): 15-28.

dimensions of the historic Black Church can be reclaimed and recontextualized for a renewed civic engagement within civil society?

The rationale of this study has a third feature—the Black Church as a form of American religious expression. While it ought to be viewed as part of a mainstream heritage, it tends “to be understood as marginal and exotic addenda.”<sup>68</sup> Couple this understanding with what George Hunsberger identifies as “significant trajectories” that exist to open fruitful conversation between missiology and public theology, and the potential significance of this study unveils larger implications: first, it delves into the social, political, and ecclesial contributions of the Black Church relative to civic engagement—while the prevailing biblical and field scholarship typically give a mainline, White perspective, this research broadens the scholarly wisdom to consider and include a specific minority and ethnic perspective; second, this research takes into account the holistic effects of civil rights achievement and the impact of American individualism on the development of civil rights; and third, this undertaking could provide options for reframing civic engagement not only by the Black Church, but also by the field of missional ecclesiology.

The Bible enabled the constitution of a new Black person. Frederick Douglass received this revelation about the transformative power of the inspired text, in part, from overhearing his master’s objections to providing Douglass reading instruction: “If he learns to read the Bible,” his master said, “it will forever unfit him to be a slave.”<sup>69</sup> For

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<sup>68</sup> Robert Michael Franklin’s “The Safest Place on Earth: The Culture of Black Congregations” in James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, *American Congregations Volume 2: New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 257.

<sup>69</sup> See Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Crowell-Collier Publishing Company, 1962).

Douglass, this statement struck like a bolt of lightning from heaven, converting his old confused self into a participatory practitioner bent on emancipation. His discovery of a new network—connecting newfound access to profound reality—removed Douglass from the power of his master and propelled him into a new space, metaphorically and literally. Thus, in this example, an enslaved Black person recreated self and world by receiving and perceiving imposed dynamics, then transforming and deploying them for his or her own liberation—thereby fusing an experiential horizon with that of potential. What enslaved religious Blacks called secret meetings, commonly termed “invisible institution”, reflected the location out of which a future Black theology of liberation emerged.

Craig Van Gelder calls on four perspectives to provide a helpful framework for thinking about the visible institution relative to missional ecclesiology—biblical, historical, contextual, and spiritual. Given that the “visible institution” refers to the actual church that presently exists in all its multiple forms and structures, *biblical* reflects the diversity of themes and images, *historical* affirms the insights and teachings of previously formulated ecclesiologies without imposing previous understandings, *contextual* means that all ecclesiologies must be seen as functioning relative to their context, and *spiritual* considering the ongoing work of the Spirit in leading and teaching the Church.<sup>70</sup> According to Van Gelder,

[A]s the church is led and taught by the Spirit, it develops new approaches to ministry and finds new ways to organize its life. Ideally, these new approaches take into consideration biblical teaching and historical learning about the church while also creatively responding to changing contextual realities.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, 38-42.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

This four-part frame is helpful for integrating the various dimensions that must be addressed in fusing the past and future horizons of the Black Church to achieve significant change.

### **Overview of Argument**

By assessing five areas—historical, practical, contextual, relational, and educational—I am constructing a very particular argument, one that endorses a different concept of missional ecclesiology. This is not an effort to condense the definition or practice of the term, but rather expand its scope to include varying interpretations based on different cultures, perspectives, and positions. Besides providing an important narrative structure, Van Gelder’s four perspectives outlined above also help to articulate a framework that is shared experience regardless of difference. And it is shared experience, according to Robert M. Franklin, that “must become the basis for collective action on behalf of the larger public good.”<sup>72</sup> By highlighting the experiential connection in the five areas, the exploration brings them into a broader theological discourse that is just as much civil as it is missional and ecclesial.

What is missional ecclesiology and how does it relate to the Black Church? In chapter 2, I identify a working definition of the term by isolating the terms individually. The isolation is not meant to devalue the collective, but rather to highlight the cultural significance of each as stand-alone theological concepts. I argue that the manner in which different cultures engage the collective term is critically determined by how those particular cultures interpret them individually. This constructive approach then seeks to associate how the conditions under which the Black Church began significantly impacted

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<sup>72</sup> Franklin, *Crisis in the Village*, 11.

the purpose it assumed moving forward. To make a case, I turn to a mixed-methods approach with qualitative and quantitative measures targeting the specific argument of this project: the institutional power of the Black Church can be directly attributed to its history as well as its leadership.

Chapter 3 provides a theological framework that highlights the Black spiritual approach that connects other-worldly belief with this-worldly action. On one hand, Black identity had been dictated by a system designed to dehumanize enslaved Blacks and sever any spiritual premise from liberative practice. On the other, proper Christian understanding demanded the combining of Godly principles with earthly practice, especially as it pertained to the liberation of an oppressed people. With constant appeal to, and affirmation from, the biblical narrative, Blacks approached social conditions as part of, not apart from, their Christian faith. This prophetic engagement was championed by church leaders who argued for a holistic approach to freedom, one that thrust social conditions, economic policies, and political practices into theological discourse.

I begin chapter 4 with an overview of several theories related to the effects of the Black Church—does the Black Church act as a stimulant which inspires civic engagement, or as an opiate inspiring no activity whatsoever. By outlining several perspectives, chapter four crystallizes two main themes—pragmatic accommodationism and prophetic radicalism—that moves the exploration forward by helping to characterize the role of pastoral leadership. As I interject the multidimensional and multifunctional aspects of the Black Church and pastoral leadership, the characterization is then placed in conversation with Hans-George Gadamer’s ‘fusion of horizon’ theory to capture the civic possibilities of the Black Church. The characterization process culminates in the

examination of leadership theory through the lens of the Black Church—specifically, leadership definition, change theory, and networked organizational concepts—thereby making the case that evolved leadership and adaptable organizational approaches are both required if the Black Church is to relevantly move forward.

In chapter 5, I detail the methodological design of the research. In so doing, I also provide three theoretical contributions to the social analysis of Black religious phenomena and sociology of Black churches: a cultural component, the mediating position of the Black Church, and its civic-minded approach to religious praxis. The chapter then transitions to note the selection process of congregations, highlight the rich heritage of those churches, provide a biographical caption of the leaders involved as the focus group, and discuss the data collection and analysis processes.

Chapter 6 documents the findings related to the combined effects of pastoral leadership, historical understanding, social awareness, and biblical comprehension. Maintaining consistency with earlier theological and theoretical perspectives, this chapter begins to unfold how the Black Church has trailled on a “connect vs. disconnect” paradigm and utilizes the three theoretical impulses identified in chapter 4 to help shape the qualitative and quantitative findings. I close this chapter by bringing in Walter Brueggemann’s idea of prophetic ministry and its corrective, radical approach to dominant culture.

The Black Church, it seems, finds its roots in the prophetic approach but presently appears to run away from dutiful praxis. I interpret this theological opportunity as the Black Church’s missional ecclesiological moment, and in chapter 7, highlight three areas where it can effectively make the most of this opportunity: knowledge and negotiation of

social power dynamics, reconciliatory role of education for academia and ecclesia, and finally, the pursuit of effective civic partnerships.



CHAPTER 2  
MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY

*Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.*

Hebrews 13:12-14

**Introduction**

Why is staying within the city gates, or the confines of one's community, so natural and comfortable? A sociological response could be that what is known breeds security and comfort, but a spiritual reply would question whether earthly security and comfort should be goals of the sojourner. This has been the question at the center of the missional conversation. With either response, "it is important for the church to understand the social forces in its midst because of the church's dual nature: social and spiritual. The church is a social community."<sup>1</sup> And as such, its missional ecclesiology has to address and engage the social dynamics, factors, and qualities of the community if it is to be faithful to its calling. According to Darrell L. Guder,

churches function in society as carriers and translators of culture, just as do many other social institutions. From a biblical perspective, however, it is critical that the church be not just a vehicle for people to associate with others who are socially the same. The church is called to be God's divine presence on earth, and as such,

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<sup>1</sup> Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 70.

it lives by an eschatological set of values that brings people with different social characteristics together through the common bond of mission under Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I will attempt to frame the missional conversation from a biblical perspective touching on both Old and New Testament narratives. This intent is to transition into a ‘public’ defining of ecclesial practices and social characteristics such as the Black Church’s reconstitution of mission and a macro/micro comprehension of culture. Revisiting Black Church beginnings, specifically the slave period, I begin to frame how mission in a Black context integrates liberation from, and participation in, the social systems and structures that not only shaped its culture, but were once prohibited. My aim here is to point out that in order for missional ecclesiology to be biblically-reflective and spiritually-effective, it needs to be contextually-informed:

[F]or though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel’s sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.<sup>3</sup>

### **Framing Conversation**

A careful analysis of the biblical story reveals dialectic between centripetal and centrifugal forces concerning mission. A scan of Jewish history in the Old Testament uncovers flight from and absorption of the secular, a concern for self-identity and responsible (or irresponsible!) interaction with one’s environment, elect status as God’s

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 NKJV

chosen people as well as a humble awareness of one's solidarity with humanity entirely.<sup>4</sup> A screening of the New Testament discovers the fundamental aspects of Jesus' confined ministry that sought to challenge and restore the community of Israel, and how they became an inspiration and source for post-Easter universal mission of community—representing multiple ways in which members of the Christian community reflected on their missionary purpose and its relationship to the personhood of Jesus and the history of Israel.<sup>5</sup>

Arguing against an operational ecclesiology that is more instrumental in character, the missional church conversation has reintroduced a discussion about the very nature, or essence, of the church.<sup>6</sup> This conversation no longer understands “being missionary” primarily in functional terms, as something the church *does*, but rather in terms of something the church *is*, as something related to its nature—representing a change that places ecclesiology more front and center.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, “the focus shifts to the world as the horizon for understanding the work of God, and God's redemptive work in the world as the basis for understanding both the nature and purpose of the church,”<sup>8</sup> thereby replacing the operational ecclesiology, characterized by an organizational self-

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<sup>4</sup> Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), 316.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 318-21.

<sup>6</sup> Craig Van Gelder's, “An Ecclesiastical Geno-Project: Unpacking the DNA of Denominations and Denominationalism” in Craig Van Gelder, editor, *The Missional Church & Denominations: Helping Congregations Develop a Missional Identity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 42.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

understanding around a purposive intent, with an ecclesiology that comprehends the church as being created by the Spirit and, in nature, missionary.

Initially, the missional church conversation concentrated on the sending nature of the triune, missionary God: God the Father sends Jesus the Son who then sends the Holy Spirit, who in turn sends the church to the world. This conversation introduces two streams of understanding God's work in the world. First, the *missio Dei*—God has a mission within all of creation; and second, God has brought redemption to bear on all of life within creation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> In an attempt to recover the relational nature of the Triune God, the missional church conversation has more recently adopted somewhat of a retrieval of trinitarian theology where God seeks to bring to His kingdom, “the redemptive reign of God in Christ, to bear on every dimension of life within the entire world” so His larger creation purposes can be fulfilled.<sup>10</sup> This relational dimension, argues Simpson, emphasizes “the mutual sharing of burdens and joys” and stands at the center of ecclesial communion.<sup>11</sup>

### **Ecclesial Aspect**

Public is a word that resides at every turn in the missional ecclesiology conversation. The word *ekklesia* itself emanates from the idea of a civic meeting. Like its Hebrew counterpart *qahal*, it “refers originally to a deliberative assembly of the body

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>11</sup> See Gary M. Simpson, “God in Global Society: Vocational Imagination, Spiritual Presence, and Ecclesial Discernment,” 2008.

politic.”<sup>12</sup> Public is associated with the New Testament word *kerygma* and its verbal vicissitudes. Usually translated “preaching,” it is far removed from what we now label preaching. According to George Hunsberger,

its meaning field has to do with the function of the “herald,” the news announcement by the official spokesperson of one in power or authority. The public broadcast of the news, the “*publication*” of it, is the form of witness the New Testament describes.<sup>13</sup>

Once clear that the church is not simply an organization based on membership, but a body of people bounded by a mission—settling the fact of *who* we are—“then *where* we are is not the facility on the corner but people pressed into the fabric of life, living it in all public dimensions shared by others.”<sup>14</sup> Civic engagement then becomes the welcomed outcome of this “sharing” because it is within such a public society that individuals and institutions learn to cultivate the virtues of citizenship:

If the relationship between the governing and the governed is limited to the mere exercise of the vote, then the power of citizens is reduced to the election and recall of their representatives. The ability of citizens to influence governmental policy is drastically reduced if their public action is limited to the electoral process alone.<sup>15</sup>

As associated, “connected critics,”<sup>16</sup> individuals and institutions committed to fundamental, communal ideas can functionally observe the shortcomings of a public society while engaging and immanently critiquing the very same enterprise. Critical

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<sup>12</sup> See John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1975).

<sup>13</sup> George R. Hunsberger’s “The Missional Voice and Posture of Public Theologizing,” *Missiology: An International Review* 34, no. 1 (January 2006): 17.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Ronald F. Thiemann, *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1996), 152.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

social theorist Max Horkheimer based his theory of society on the notion of an “immanent critique,” arguing that normative rational ideas, which simultaneously serve to critically evaluate as well as redesign and rebuild a different society, are themselves present within a given social system. He explains: “Immanent critique summons the existent [society], in its historical context, with the claim of its conceptual principles, in order to criticize the relation between the two and thus transcend them.”<sup>17</sup>

In succession, immanent critique restates and redefines the “norms and ideals that have been forgotten or repressed, usually because they inconvenience a social class or social arrangement.”<sup>18</sup> It can then serve as a contemporary conscience<sup>19</sup> that weaves together public opinion and public power, highlighting Simpson’s point that “those who bear especially the impoverishing, dispossessing consequences of economic or democratic policy, or of any decision venue, must be full participants with effective voice in the decision-making bodies, processes, and procedures.”<sup>20</sup> For Simpson, this represents a “democratic solidarity and publicity”<sup>21</sup> that addresses the crucial question of who

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<sup>17</sup> See Max Horkheimer as quoted by Gary M. Simpson in *Critical Social Theory: Prophetic Reason, Civil Society, and Christian Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 56.

<sup>18</sup> Simpson, *Critical Social Theory*, 127.

<sup>19</sup> Philosopher Joseph Butler believed that the most fundamental aspect of human nature is the conscience which he defines as the reflective or rational faculty which discerns the moral characteristics of actions. For Butler, conscience is a type of moral reason which distinguishes right from wrong. See Robert B. Zeuschner, *Classical Ethics East and West: Ethics from a Comparative Perspective* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 199-213.

<sup>20</sup> See Simpson, “God in Global Society.”

<sup>21</sup> Solidarity being a key condition for developing moral wisdom thereby playing a constitutive role in a publicly-effective moral epistemology allowing critical issues to be identified, distilled, and framed—manifesting itself through proposals, programs, and practices for moral and cultural formation, or critical reformation. Publicity takes what has been critically-identified, morally-framed and formed, and programmatically-proposed and makes that fully public—meaning, in a transparent and accessible manner, publicity connects what it discovers concerning the social condition to the systems of power that can cause and effect change.

discerns, deliberates, and decides by following what he terms “the participatory golden rule”—decision-makers must be consequence-takers, and consequence-takers must be decision-makers.<sup>22</sup>

### Culture Clash

Lesslie Newbigin straightforwardly asserts that neither at the beginning, nor at any subsequent time, is there or can there be a gospel that is not embodied in a cultural condition.<sup>23</sup> The early focus of the diaspora communities was on serving the religious needs of the people while preserving the cultural identity of their spirituality. So, while missionaries and “enlightened” Christians professed a concern for the spiritual well-being of indigenous peoples, they were primarily shaped by their cultural superiority complexes as most understood “civilizing” and “evangelizing” to go hand-in-hand as there was strong link between the church’s valuation of the *human nature* and *culture* of the non-Christian, non-Western peoples.<sup>24</sup> This began to create tension around the purpose of, and premise behind, mission as the political and economic forces of colonialism, manifest destiny, and imperialism reflected and reinforced the feelings of religious and human superiority, which quite naturally led to perceived cultural superiority.<sup>25</sup> The mission came out of a context that assumed the supremacy of Western culture and “the White Man’s Religion,” that is, Christianity, and consequently, establishing a rift and tension

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<sup>22</sup> See Simpson, “God in Global Society.”

<sup>23</sup> See Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986).

<sup>24</sup> Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 230.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

regarding the overall aim of mission, begging the question: How can Christian community be realized if human and cultural equity are not recognized?

Christians have always used the Bible as the primary guide for missional activity. In doing so, they have mined those rich resources in a myriad of ways and for multiple reasons. According to Robert J. Schreiter,

[S]ometimes they have been guided for personal reasons, seeking inspiration to rekindle and guide their missionary motivation. At other times the reasons have been practical or apologetic, to address specific problems or to underwrite certain strategies. In still other instances they have looked to the Scriptures for blueprints of missionary action or criteria for the establishment of the Christian community.<sup>26</sup>

However, careful use of biblical scholarship has unmasked a “more radical, more inclusive, and more transforming”<sup>27</sup> biblical message. Guder argues that theologians of Protestant traditions continue to be “guided by a shared conviction that the Scriptures are the normative and authoritative witness to God’s mission and its unfolding in human history,”<sup>28</sup> “which reflects the breadth and diversity of perspectives in the Scriptures themselves.”<sup>29</sup> Missional ecclesiology should, therefore, challenge churches to be intentional about their unique social potential within their specific cultural contexts. In this way, Western culture, incubated by the premises of colonialism, manifest destiny, and imperialism, agrees with indigenous culture inculcated by an eschatological hope that sustained generations through the very same practices of colonialism, manifest destiny,

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<sup>26</sup> See Robert J. Schreiter (Foreword) in Senior and Stuhlmüller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission*.

<sup>27</sup> Guder, *Missional Church*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.



and imperialism.<sup>30</sup> Hope in God's coming eschatological freedom sustained suffering people who were seeking to establish freedom on earth even though it had not yet been achieved on the level of their humanity.<sup>31</sup> The most significant circumstances that shaped indigenous culture were dehumanization, degradation, and the need for a liberating message amidst oppression. This reality provided the practical challenge to develop mission that was not only responsible in a faithful Christian concept, but respectful in a functional cultural context as well. This juxtaposition shifted the understanding of mission from "with" to "of", as "with" often carries paternalistic overtones that infantilize the other, thereby suppressing the participatory and communicative spirit of freedom, equality, mutuality, and solidarity connoted by "of."<sup>32</sup>

### **Black Culture/Church Reconstitution of Mission**

To maintain their destined and divine power, White masters prohibited Black slaves from learning to read, particularly the Bible. Although legally restricted, Black chattel subverted this mechanism of power by reappropriating and claiming the sacred narrative from their dehumanized vantage as those at the bottom of the social, economic, and political economy. This seizure of power helped the slaves constitute themselves as human beings created in the image of Christ, while reconstituting mission that has as its telos, its inner aim, an apostolic rationale. That is to say, it is not simply called to follow

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<sup>30</sup> After the Civil War, the Reconstruction Period began and the economic life of the South which was based on free slave labor had to be restored. The most striking aspect of the post-war circumstance was that the United States Congress passed the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1866, which made former slaves citizens, and extended to them equal protection under the law and protection against state interference with their life, liberty, and property.

<sup>31</sup> See Samuel G. Freedman, *Upon This Rock: The Miracles of a Black Church* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> See Simpson, "God in Global Society."

Christ in a generic sense, but rather to steward in a specific service, in a particular context, or, as Hunsberger argues, to recognize Jesus to *be* the truth, and be intent—in forms of thinking, speaking, and acting—on being *true* to that.<sup>33</sup> That mission, publicly-performed, provides a theological framework through which private beliefs can be *transformed* into public consciousness, public consciousness *transferred* into prophetic action, and prophetic action *translated* into the public good. The reconstitution of mission created a syncretized religion that implicitly recognized culture and explicitly rhetoricized Christianity, reflecting cultural meaningfulness as well as Christian plausibility. The result was not only in a missional salvific process, but a prophetic ecclesial practice as well, of which Lawrence Jones writes:

The significance of a religious institution cannot be calibrated solely in terms of the number of conversions it records, in the growth of its membership, or in other measurements utilized by ecclesiastical bodies. The statistical indices inevitably reflect, to some degree, perceptions of the seriousness of the church's commitment to enhancing the quality of life in the community in which it is located. Favorable perceptions invariably result in church growth. But faithfulness to the Christian Gospel, which they proclaim, requires gathered communities of faith to be involved in the changing panorama of political, economic, social, demographic, educational and cultural realities in which persons live out their lives.<sup>34</sup>

This publicly engaged missional ecclesiology emerged from the culture of reasoning, revolution, and reform—this is the life and legacy of the Black Church, as noted by Bruce Fields:

A focal point of God's historical liberating activity was and is the black church. The black church was not only the place where these oppressed people could be

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<sup>33</sup> Hunsberger, "The Missional Voice and Posture of Public Theologizing," 22.

<sup>34</sup> See Foreword in Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like A River: The Black Church and Social Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

affirmed in their personal worth, but there they also heard stories and sermons about the Lord who was always at work.<sup>35</sup>

With the resources of this religious tradition, Black Church identity reflected God's vision for the world. It is an identity deriving from an encounter with God in the midst of pains and struggles of the dehumanized that refused to accept despair as a logical consequence of oppression. Kathryn Tanner suggests:

Culture is not primarily located in the intellectual or spiritual achievements of the community—its great works of art, philosophy, or literature. Instead, culture refers to the whole social practice of meaningful action, and more specifically to the meaning dimension of such action—the beliefs, values, and orienting symbols that suffuse the whole way of life.<sup>36</sup>

Such a cultural approach sets the table for “a public church dimension of missional ecclesiology as prophetic and sapiential,”<sup>37</sup> and as public companions engaging the plurality of networks, associations, institutions, and systems for the prevention of social ills and promotion of societal good will. Providing a way to move forward, inviting and challenging leaders to do the right things, do them more effectively, and do them collaboratively<sup>38</sup> by creating a new paradigm and building a new construct.<sup>39</sup>

### **Black Church Beginnings**

It is no accident that Black spokespersons of the nineteenth century popularized the idea that the history of Black religion begins neither among the slaves of pious Whites in New England and Virginia, nor on the plantations of South Carolina and

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<sup>35</sup> Bruce Fields, *Introducing Black Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 16.

<sup>36</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology Guides to Theological Inquiry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 70.

<sup>37</sup> See Simpson, “God in Global Society.”

<sup>38</sup> Franklin, *Crisis in the Village*, 128.

<sup>39</sup> See Tavis Smiley, *How To Make Black America Better* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001).

Georgia, but in Africa.<sup>40</sup> As Albert J. Raboteau argues, “Thousands of Africans from diverse cultures and religious traditions, forcibly transported to America as slaves, retained many African customs even as they converted to Christianity.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, any investigation of the historic Black Church, with its inherent propensity for radical social and political action, should begin appropriately addressing the connection to Africa and African Diaspora.

The gospel first appeared in Africa in the Upper Nile Valley where a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch named Judich<sup>42</sup> of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, was baptized between Jerusalem and Gaza by Philip, the Evangelist.<sup>43</sup> Blacks from Africa served in the Roman army in the first years of the Christian era, and many, like St. Maurice,<sup>44</sup> converted to Christianity. Over time, the strikingly African character of early Ethiopian Christianity became apparent. One account records,

They sing the Psalms of David of which as well as other parts of the Holy Scriptures, they have a very exact translation in their own language... The instruments of music[k] made use of in their rites of worship, are little drums, which they hang about their necks, and beat with both hands... They begin their consort by stamping their feet on the ground, and playing gently on their instruments, but when they heated themselves by degrees, they leave off drumming and fall into leaping, dancing, and clapping their hands at the same time straining their voices to their utmost pitch, till at length they have no regard

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<sup>40</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 2.

<sup>41</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), ix.

<sup>42</sup> See Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, II, 1, 13.

<sup>43</sup> Acts 8:26-40

<sup>44</sup> St. Maurice was a Black African general who, while stationed in Switzerland during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, refused to lead his legion against the Bagaudae after discovering that the White Gallic tribesmen were Christian. Because of this insubordination and refusal to sacrifice to pagan gods, Maurice and his men were executed by Augustus Maximilian.

either to the tune, or the pauses, and seem rather a riotous, than a religious assembly.<sup>45</sup>

With the origination, continuation, and proliferation of the transatlantic slave trade (initially begun by the Portuguese, then accompanied and rivaled by the British), the plantation colonies of the Americas gave birth to an integrated Christianity that coupled the social condition and cultural practices of the African slave. Gayraud Wilmore argues:

From the beginning the religion of the descendants of the Africans who were brought to the Western world as slaves has been something less and something more than what is generally regarded as Christianity. Under the circumstances, it could not have been otherwise.<sup>46</sup>

Culture is a group's survival kit—it functions as a collection of rules, values, and modes of action that help individuals as well as a community to cope with the realities of their existence. Certainly, the realities of this world for the slave warranted a vastly different type of religion than that for the slave-owner, leading to what Wilmore labels “African American (or Black) religion.”<sup>47</sup>

### **The “Invisible Institution”**

Slavery was already a practice among some West African populations, but Arab slave traders first introduced African slaves into Europe, on a significant scale, by way of Spain and Portugal in 1502.<sup>48</sup> Initially, the British colonies permitted a different practice:

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<sup>45</sup> Charles P. Groves, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa* (London: Lutter-worth Press, 1958), 141-42.

<sup>46</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 22.

<sup>47</sup> The expressed continuities and discontinuities continue to influence and reshape the worship styles, spirituality, and belief structures of Black Christians in America. See *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> See Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810* (London: MacMillan, 1975).

a seven-year term of service after which the bonded person was to be freed and awarded land to sustain himself—indentured servitude. This was based on an Old Testament practice meant to wean the Israelites, newly freed from slavery themselves, away from the practice of slavery entirely.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, poor British people voluntarily entered into indentured servitude hoping to find higher economic standing in the New World at the conclusion of their service. This was the circumstance in which African “slaves” were procured from the Spanish and Portuguese and brought into indentured servitude.

Consequently, the first Africans in English America were not “slaves” at all, but on the contrary, arrived on the same socioeconomic terms as many English and Irish settlers.<sup>50</sup>

Colonists quickly discovered that it was economically advantageous to exploit African versus European servants. If they were, for example, to oppress British subjects by extending their term of service or refusing proper compensation at the end, the servants could appeal to the king for assistance. African servants, however, had no structure or entity with whom to appeal resulting in the imported exploitation of African slave labor into British territory. This served as the economic premise behind the social construction of race,<sup>51</sup> which was simply an ideology created to justify imperial practices and economic exploitation while relieving European consciences.<sup>52</sup> According to Michael Battle:

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<sup>49</sup> Leviticus 25:39-43; Deuteronomy 15:12-18

<sup>50</sup> See Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America* (Baltimore: Penguin Press, 1966).

<sup>51</sup> See Ian Haney López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

<sup>52</sup> See C. Eric Lincoln, *Race, Religion, and the Continuing American Dilemma* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1984).

Racial identity became associated with the people of Europe, who sought to colonize the world. In particular, white bodies and white minds sought to dominate black bodies and black minds. Such domination became the fabric of the Enlightenment worldview that created theological and legal boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.<sup>53</sup>

Theologically, the White interpretation of Christianity effectively divested the slave of any concern about freedom. Marked with inconsistencies, the doctrinal gulf between the allegation of the all-powerful God of the Whites who could care so much about eternal salvation and yet remain indifferent and silent about existential conditions left the slave skeptical and wanting. Operating from a hermeneutic of suspicion, the slaves adopted the outward appearance of White Christian conversion, but took from it only what proved efficacious for easing the burden of bondage. Wilmore asserts:

All of its deficiencies and excesses notwithstanding, the religion that the slaves practiced was their own. It was unmistakably the religion of an oppressed, but not entirely conquered, people. It had, of course, common features with Euro-American Protestantism and, in the French-speaking and Spanish-speaking Caribbean, with Roman Catholicism. But it was not forged in the drawing rooms of the elegant mansions of Virginia and South Carolina, or in the segregated galleries of the northern churches. It was born out of the experience of being black and understanding blackness to be somehow connected with being held in bondage and needing to be free.

Amidst these openly hostile practices, hidden communal practices began to take shape. As soon as enough Africans were settled in a single location, they readily recalled and shared the commonalities of their African religious traditions and adapted their already similar worship practices. Records of their being forbidden to gather clearly establish the fact that, regardless of the variety of tribal backgrounds on any given

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<sup>53</sup> Michael Battle, *The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 28.

plantation, they did gather and devoutly engage in an African style of common worship.<sup>54</sup>

Peter Randolph recounts,

slaves yearned for greater spiritual refreshing in their communal meetings and often stole away to Jesus by assembling in quarters, swamps, and “hush harbors.” There they could hold meetings with preachers of their own. There they consoled one another, prayed, sang, and joined in ritual movement patterned after the African “ring-shout.”<sup>55</sup>

This underground evolution developed despite slave codes that were enacted to curb disorderly conduct and profaning of the Sabbath. The “invisible institution” emerged because Black slaves felt the compelling need to worship and serve God, not out of a particular revelatory experience or principle that overshadowed their spiritual and physical conditions, but based on the notion of a God who was personally involved in His creation and on “an invisible institution,” as Battle articulates, “in which Africans inculturated Christianity in such a way as to facilitate survival throughout slavery.”<sup>56</sup>

### The Slave Quandary

Contained within this “invisible institution,” a quandary emerged between the passive and active expectations of freedom. Was it incumbent upon the slave to “rest in the Lord, and wait patiently”<sup>57</sup> for deliverance, or, should the slave “proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound”?<sup>58</sup> Thus, the slave quandary became a question of how to confront the existential evil—endure or survive

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<sup>54</sup> Bruno Chenu, *The Trouble I've Seen* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2003), 49.

<sup>55</sup> See Peter Randolph’s “Plantation Churches: Visible and Invisible,” in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>56</sup> Battle, *The Black Church in America*, 57.

<sup>57</sup> Psalm 37:7

<sup>58</sup> Isaiah 61:1



bondage until God brings forth a new age of freedom into reality, or take the initiative to escape or overthrow the present practice of injustice. Survival did not depend on a passive and impotent acceptance of circumstance. In fact, for the slave it took the form of proactive participation in the redemptive activity of God, despite the deliberate distortion of Christian doctrine and stringent restrictions upon religious activity. A distinctive African American form of Christianity slowly took root, one that contained a definite moral judgment against slavery and clearly legitimized resistance to injustice.<sup>59</sup>

As early as 1732, in a message to the Virginia House of Burgesses, Governor Drysdale remarked on the difficulty the colony was having in detecting and punishing slave insurrections. That year the legislature passed new laws concerning the control of slaves because the regulations then in effect were “found insufficient to restrain their tumultuous and unlawful meetings, or to punish the secret plots and conspiracies carried amongst them.”<sup>60</sup> According to Wilmore,

[T]hese “tumultuous and unlawful meetings” were, in all probability, religious meetings where the emotions of the slaves, whipped to a frenzy by a preacher, rose to such an intensity that they were extremely vulnerable to an appeal, in the context of a sermon or prayer, to throw off their chains in an uprising.<sup>61</sup>

These clandestine gatherings became the spark that ignited flames of revolt, heightening the suspicion that religion was a primary factor in slave uprisings. Governor John Floyd expressed the opinion that the spirit of insubordination and insurrection among the slaves had its origins in the belief that God was no respecter of persons, meaning that the Black man was as good as the White and “that the white people rebelled against England to

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<sup>59</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 48.

<sup>60</sup> Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1943), 162.

<sup>61</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 54.

obtain freedom, so have blacks a right to do so.”<sup>62</sup> For the “invisible institution,” God was thus simultaneously transcendent and immanent, and upon this element was pinned its theology of hope.

### The Appropriation of Scripture

The implications of liberation contained in the biblical narrative, basic to the New Testament and Reformation theology, were readily recalled by leaders had no difficulty being recalled the leaders of America’s War of Independence. Such implications were, however, assiduously avoided when conveyed to slaves. Rather, Christian theology and ethics were reduced to their most simplistic and innocuous affirmations, a favorite being, “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.”<sup>63</sup> Despite the deliberate distortion of Christian doctrine and stringent restrictions upon religious activity, Africans in America began to appropriate Scripture and to shape a distinctive, contextually-relevant slave religion. Uneducated by Western standards, but far from ignorant, the slave began to practice a Christianity that incorporated a mystical sense of prophecy and divine intervention that “assured a measure of self-determination and continuity with the past, by diverting certain biblical and theological conceptions of Christianity into structures of belief and practice that more adequately served the needs of the slaves.”<sup>64</sup>

A striking distinction of the slave religion was the slaves’ thorough knowledge of Scripture. The spirituals, writings, and sermons of the time express a special affinity to

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<sup>62</sup> Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 106-07.

<sup>63</sup> Ephesians 6:5

<sup>64</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 46.

the people of the Old Testament. The God of Israel was the Lord of hosts, the God of battles who swept His enemies before the faces of His chosen people. The great prophets, who had fought against the idolatry, hypocrisy, and social injustices, perfectly suited the religious sentiment of the slaves. But preeminent relevance for slaves, “as many of the most famous spirituals bear witness, was found in the story of Exodus.”<sup>65</sup> The bondage of the Hebrews, their miraculous deliverance from Pharaoh, and their eventual possession of the promised land served as inspiration, comfort, and hope. Christianity alone, adulterated, otherworldly, and disengaged from its most authentic implications—as it was usually presented to the slaves—could not have provided the spiritual, emotional, and communal resources necessary for the kind of resistance they expressed. The volatile ingredients of the African religious past were essential enrichments as was, most important of all, the human yearning for freedom that found a channel for expression in the early Black Church.<sup>66</sup>

### **The Early Black Church**

The processes by which Black churches achieved separation from their larger White counterparts and a measure of self-governance varied from church to church, city to city, and region to region. However, it is apparent that prior to 1800, no Black church, North or South, with one known exception, evolved without some form of White denominational recognition, trusteeship of land title, and/or certification to the government by respected White men that the Blacks involved would cause the slave

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 50.

system no trouble.<sup>67</sup> With complications such as this, the “actual” independence of historic Black churches cannot be defined and dated with precision. Even with dependable records, any objective level of “true” Black independence is impossible to establish, due to inescapable White dominance and, what Mechal Sobel terms, the “sub-rosa autonomy.”<sup>68</sup>

The gamut of Black church independence runs from congregations heavily dominated by White sponsors, “to those who found subtle, creative ways to assert their underground independence and follow their own wills” as Black congregations.<sup>69</sup> While in most cases the separation was somewhat amicable, the inevitable separation by race came to a head with the organization of Black churches in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Externally, the clear basis for the separation may have appeared to be antipathy or prejudice, but internally it was clearly due to the differences in class, culture, and control. The class factor evolved as White denomination members began to ascend in social and economic status. Once such status was achieved, these same White members became uncomfortable with, and distanced themselves from, their fellow Black members. This sentiment was so prevalent in some instances that it became the impetus behind White members seeking the outright eviction of Black members, as in the case of St. George’s Methodist Church in 1787.<sup>70</sup>

In similar fashion, the culture of worship became a point of divergence. What for

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<sup>67</sup> Ol’ Captain’s Church began in Lexington, Kentucky in 1786. See Mitchell’s, *Black Church Beginnings*.

<sup>68</sup> Mechal Sobel, *Travelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 205.

<sup>69</sup> Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 48.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

Black members had served as cultural affirmation in the form of worship, eventually became embarrassment for fellow White members as they became “more affluent and socially respectable.”<sup>71</sup> Yet, of greater significance was White reluctance and refusal to share organizational power or control. As Black members sought the right to actively participate in all rights and privileges of membership, specifically voting in denominational matters, White power structures began to revoke privileges and exclude membership. Mitchell writes,

[T]he crucial issue of control at times rendered bitter even the otherwise heroic educational efforts of white denominations in the South after the Civil War. Even in the post-World War II era, the greatest challenge facing ethnically or racially “transitional” congregations has been, and still is, how to settle the issues of culture and control. In other words, the ones who provide the financial resources tend to insist on control, but those who provide the participants want equality of vote, regardless of how much they can or cannot give.<sup>72</sup>

### **Black Church Missional Ecclesiology**

#### **Integration of Mission, Liberation, & Participation**

An essential clarifying point when discussing mission from the Black church perspective, it must be first understood that Black Church formation was not motivated by dissension over doctrinal conceptualizations. Black churches were formed as intentional religious communities attempting to provide worship environments free from racist practices. Borrowing from Emily Dickinson, William Lindsey argues,

prophetic speech talks about what those in power talk about but it does so slant and circuitously, opening up the controlled world of the discourse community to

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 53.

an imagination entirely different from the one mandated from on high, and yet so compellingly believable that we wonder why no one has pointed this out before.<sup>73</sup>

The missional ecclesiology of the Black Church draws from this essential characteristic. As previously mentioned, African slaves appropriated metaphoric images derived from biblical texts in order to contemplate their social conditions and contexts. From an ecclesial perspective, these images were appropriated in order to interpret the Church's mission and ministry in the world, a stark contrast to the typical, apologetic categories related to the creedal formulas used to evaluate the theological and institutional character of the Church.<sup>74</sup>

On this point, James Cone insightfully argues that the reduction of ecclesiology to only such human criteria confers an undesirable legitimacy to the historically racist practices of White Christian churches. Instead, some transcendent understanding of mission is critical to the integrity of the Black Church. While the Nicene Creed criteria traditionally outlines the transcendent character and authority of the Church, the Church, for Black religious life, ultimately represents a people who have been called together and sent out by God's self-revelation in the liberating gospel message of Jesus Christ and who share in the activity of the Holy Spirit in the liberation of humanity.<sup>75</sup>

Liberation plays a pivotal role in the ecclesiology of the Black Church and thereby remains an undisputed criterion in its mission. While a transcendent

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<sup>73</sup> See William D. Lindsey, "Telling it Slant: American Catholic Public Theology and Prophetic Discourse," in *Horizons* 22, no. 1 (1995): 88-103.

<sup>74</sup> In studying the ecclesiology of Black churches, the temptation to begin with creedal concepts exists, particularly the Nicene Creed—the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. These dimensions are useful in formulating a universal, and more general, theological understanding of the Church. While relevant, they do not comprise the distinctive qualities of Black ecclesiology.

<sup>75</sup> James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 63-65.

understanding of the Black Church, and its functions, provides the essential qualification for an existential hermeneutic in ecclesiology, the liberation criterion sustains the viability of any existential approach. Since the inception of Black churches occurred in conjunction with abusive social practices and theological interpretations, such an existential hermeneutic is not merely possible but necessary. An existential hermeneutic in ecclesiology suggests that knowledge is derived from social context, which in turn contributes to individual and communal horizons of—for the sake of this argument, religious—meaning.<sup>76</sup> Though filled with pain, the horizon of Black experience must be engaged and addressed because underneath the pain lies power.<sup>77</sup> It then follows that a self-conscious Black missional ecclesiology emanates from the painful Black experience of oppression which in turn not only accents liberation, but participation as well.

### **Conclusion**

I have attempted to outline the missional ecclesiological conversation as it relates to the culture and context of the Black Church. This is significant because it distinguishes the experiences of the Black Church and establishes the realities in which its missionary impetus originated. These experiences and realities work to produce the premise and practice of the Black Church that came to exemplify its communal nature. We will now turn to the theological framework that sharpens these reflections and begins to discern

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<sup>76</sup> The use of the word “horizons” means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand, not in order to look away from it, but in order to see what is close at hand in a better way, that is, within a larger whole and thereby in truer proportion and perspective. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. and rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 2004), 304.

<sup>77</sup> Franklin, *Crisis in the Village*, 10.

how the Black experience has necessitated a public faith characterized by the Black Church.



CHAPTER 3  
THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

*Slaves obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if the Lord, not men...*

Ephesians 6:5-7

**Introduction**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the social conditions that surrounded the Black Church, namely slavery, contributed to its cultural comprehension, contextualization, and appropriation of scripture. This means that those who called themselves the Black Church, “for the most part knew themselves as such because of the oppressive history of slavery in North America.”<sup>1</sup> Christian theological ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr makes the point that when specific ideals are brought into any institution there is a loss of the original ideals that were already established.<sup>2</sup> Sociologically, Black Christian identity was established as a refuge for those looking and needing to withstand societal forces either working against them, not working in their interest, or both. In this chapter, I illuminate the Black Church’s response to the White churches’ accommodation to an American way of life—a way of life whose religious

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Battle, *The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 43.

<sup>2</sup> See H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1929).

loyalties that it apparently claimed appeared at odds with the social functions that they actually performed.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Legacy of the Black Church**

Public faith<sup>4</sup> has played a significant role in many of America's most important movements, including, for instance, this country's movement for independence from Great Britain in the 1770s, where "at every stage in that momentous era, American Christians were present, involved, and even in the forefront of promoting an independent United States of America."<sup>5</sup> While the Black experience does not originate with the establishment of a country, it is associated with disenfranchisement within a country—namely, the Black experience in America, "which was and is a very singular illustration of the complexities of the human predicament, and of the spiritual resources available to the black church's mission to overcome."<sup>6</sup> So, to begin exploring the legacy of the Black Church, one must first "understand the reality that America began with slavery as a normality."<sup>7</sup> According to Michael Battle, to be Black was

to be a member of a cultural and linguistic nation, defined, in part, by its West African cultural heritage, by its forcible removal from Africa, by its estrangement from the cultures of both its mainly white context and its own past, by the

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<sup>3</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 78.

<sup>4</sup> Public faith being defined as the non-privatized warranted religious activity, i.e. a privatized faith being the displacement of one's religious beliefs to the subjective sphere of self, rendering it irrelevant to the institutional functioning of society.

<sup>5</sup> Mark A. Knoll, *One Nation Under God? Christian Faith & Political Action in America* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 35.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like A River: The Black Church and Social Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), xx.

<sup>7</sup> Battle, *The Black Church in America*, 47.

ultimately unintelligible modern European concept of “race”, and by shared experiences in slavery and segregation.<sup>8</sup>

These factors foundationally shaped the Black Church in that they fostered among people a deep faith in a supreme God who sympathized with the plight and problems of His people, specifically, the existential crisis of slavery. So, the White interpretation of Christianity, which effectively divested slaves of any concern about freedom, was transformed into what is today the Black Church.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, the Black Church lived in a different *Imago Dei* through its congruency of individual and community, connecting spirituality and social witness with welcoming the stranger, thereby displaying a real inter-relationality that did not separate human identity from the divine presence of God. On a communal level, the relationship between the ongoing historical narrative and spiritual behavior defines the Black Church, a consequence, argues Black Church scholar Michael Battle, “of encountering a community with a constant, alternative narrative that leads to a radical interpretation of the old narrative, or the holistic creation of a new one.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, the foundations of the Black Church developed out of the necessity to redefine Black identity, using Christianity

not so much as it was delivered to them by racist white churches, but as its truth was authenticated to them in the experience of suffering and struggle, to reinforce an enculturated religious orientation and to produce an indigenous faith that emphasized dignity, freedom, and human welfare.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 51-52.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>11</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 25.

The result was an evolution of the Black Church from its beginnings as a source of solace and solidarity for the enslaved, to its central position in the struggle for liberation, becoming a beacon of courage with a will for the marginalized within society to resist further oppression and inequity.

From the 1800s, since the time of David Walker, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner, a radical biblical appropriation began to occur, the central thrust of which, according to Black Church history professor Charles Hamilton, “was to redefine the meaning and role of the church and religion in the lives of black people.”<sup>12</sup> This hermeneutical change provided the contextual challenge to develop a theology that was not only Christian, but also relevant for the social and political needs of this particular people. This change shifted the discourse of the conversation from the individualistic tune proffered by larger society, to a communal hymn performed by the Black Church.

Saturated with biblical reference and prophecy, David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*,” published in 1829, stands as an iconic religious document of the Protestant era, drawing favorable comparisons to Martin Luther’s “*Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*” from notable Black scholars and theologians.<sup>13</sup> Walker took liberative aim at many social theories and practices of the time, including Thomas Jefferson’s well-known theory of Black inferiority, slavery in the United States, and the scheme of Black colonization proffered as a solution to the race problem since the time of the Revolutionary War.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, Walker’s *Appeal* called

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<sup>12</sup> Charles V. Hamilton, *The Black Preacher in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1972), 140.

<sup>13</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* 62.

<sup>14</sup> See Herbert Aptheker, *One Continual Cry, David Walker’s Appeal* (New York: Humanities Press, 1965).

for rebellion—urging Blacks to educate themselves, remove the shackles of slavery, “and fight in self-defense for freedom and dignity in the name of the Lord of hosts.”<sup>15</sup>

According to noted liberation theology scholar Gayraud S. Wilmore, through the excoriation and condemnation,

an ultimately hopeful spirit breathes through [his] writing as he calls upon white Christians to count the cost of racial peace and to humble themselves before God in order that friendship and brotherhood can bless the land that must otherwise be soaked with blood.<sup>16</sup>

The revolutionary pursuit of freedom, equity, and equality instilled in many the will to vanquish themselves from oppressive conditions. The indomitable will became the spark that ignited a radical interpretation of Christianity. After purchasing his freedom in 1800 and settling in Charleston, South Carolina, Denmark Vesey, the “Methodist Conspirator,” led a slave insurrection. With an absorbing interest in Black religion, Vesey became “engrossed in the study of the Scriptures and brought to his investigations some interpretations that were decidedly unorthodox and possibly African or West Indian in origin.”<sup>17</sup> According to Wilmore, church meetings provided the opportunity for indoctrination into this unorthodox interpretation and preparation for revolt, as Vesey was

a member of the Hampstead church, one of several black congregations that broke away from the white denomination that year. The class system of the independent African Methodist Association of Charleston was used as a recruitment and indoctrination vehicle as well as a communication network for revolt. All the leaders were members of the new independent black church.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 66.

<sup>17</sup> See Sterling Stuckey, *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon, 1972), 32-38.

<sup>18</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 83-84.

After the insurrection plot was revealed by a house servant, Vesey and his followers were either executed, transported out of South Carolina, banished from the United States, or severely beaten and discharged. The failed conspiracy, however, was neither viewed as in vain, nor did it dampen the ardor for liberation. In fact, the

dismal failure and the terrible consequences were the price that had to be paid by blacks to shake the consciences of Americans. Black Christians continued to believe that God was aligned with them against the iniquitous system of slavery.<sup>19</sup>

In 1831, while a slave in Southampton County, Virginia, Nat Turner, the Baptist prophet of rebellion, discovered an important fact that White Christians had successfully concealed from slaves for more than two-hundred years—that contained within the biblical narrative was a demand of justice, as well as a liberationist understanding of the message of Jesus Christ, which set believers free from every dehumanizing principality and oppressive power.<sup>20</sup> Believing that he had been given a true knowledge of the faith, Turner began to think of himself as a minister of the gospel and began to spread his message throughout the area.<sup>21</sup> Convinced that God had given him a great work to perform, and insisting that the war be waged “upon a Christian basis,”<sup>22</sup> Turner led the bloodiest insurrection in American history. Causing one Black scholar to assert,

Nat Turner’s appropriation of another kind of Lord, his recognition of the meaning of Jesus...adumbrated the black theology which developed among black

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>20</sup> See F. Roy Johnson, *The Nat Turner Insurrection* (Murfreesboro: Johnson Publication Company, 1966).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> George W. Williams, *A History of the Negro Race in America, 1619-1883*, vol. 1 (New York: Putnam, 1883), 88-90.

preachers from Henry Highland Garnet to Martin Luther, King Jr.—Jesus as the protagonist of radical social change.<sup>23</sup>

Two fundamental purposes animated the theological enterprise of the Black Church: first, the Black Church presented itself, implicitly or explicitly, as a specific vehicle for black liberation;<sup>24</sup> and second, it regarded its engagement as a Christian mandate. For the Black Church, the struggle for liberation from any and every kind of oppression was consistent with the gospel, and every theological statement must coincide with, and perpetuate, the goals of liberation. Liberation, therefore, must engage multiple forms of bondage—social, cultural, political, economic—and the Black Church must be a spiritually-defined, determined, and dutiful advocate. Even before the founding of Black religious institutions, Black public protest was cast in explicitly religious terms,<sup>25</sup> so it follows that the Black Church would become a social, economic, and political extension that provided for slaves and freed persons of color what no other institution was willing, or capable, of doing. Thus, spiritual uplift permeated every aspect of Black communal life that

brought the comfort and the security of God’s love and redemption into the hopelessness of abject dereliction. The black response—the prayer and the preaching, the singing, the moaning, the shouting (or as Du Bois put it, “the frenzy”)—kept human spirit alive and the presence of God an assured consolation.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 90.

<sup>24</sup> Black liberation being defined as transforming the black condition from oppression to authentic humanity.

<sup>25</sup> As early as 1774, Africans in Massachusetts petitioned for release from their condition as “slaves for Life in a Christian land.” See Barbara Dianne Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Among Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> Billingsley, *Mighty Like A River*, xxiii.

Two specific narratives functioned as *modi operandi* for the Black Church—the Exodus story and Jesus’ suffering on the cross—both of which provoke an invitation to discover new meanings of human identity and community. The Exodus story resonated with Blacks as they likened themselves to the children of Israel—“involuntary adhesions to a host society in which their creative participation was severely limited by law, by tradition, and by caprice.”<sup>27</sup> An identity as God’s new chosen people created a community of faith<sup>28</sup> in the face of White scholars’ adamant refusal to acknowledge Egypt’s historical significance and geographical connection to people of color. To combat the debilitating implications that the White scholars’ refusal had on Black identity, Black Christian liberation encouraged “the idea that black people were not ‘cursed of God,’ nor condemned by God to be ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’ for the white people who called themselves ‘masters.’”<sup>29</sup>

In this manner, the appropriation of the Almighty transformed Black corporate identity from an imposed social condition to a cognitive understanding of belonging, enabling a transcendent cohesion of African American and faith identity as a people of God.<sup>30</sup> The Old Testament notion of God as liberator anchored the experience of suffering and struggle in an evolving truth. It reinforced an enculturated religious orientation and produced an indigenous faith that emphasized dignity, freedom, and human welfare. So, Black people began to identify themselves not as the cursed

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., xx.

<sup>28</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 311.

<sup>29</sup> Billingsley, *Mighty Like A River*, xxiii.

<sup>30</sup> Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 43.



descendants of Ham,<sup>31</sup> but as the children of enslaved and liberated Israel, with America, once thought by the Puritans to be the Promised Land, being viewed as Egypt—thus equating God with the God of the suffering and oppressed.

In the heart, mind, and spirit of Black folk, the cruciform Jesus provoked “an invitation to discover new meanings of human identity and community.”<sup>32</sup> Within the cross is a declaration of self-withdrawing and self-giving love, which manifests a power “to commit oneself to reorganize identity in the service of empowering others.”<sup>33</sup> To be identified with Christ, His disciples are called to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Him.<sup>34</sup> Thus, authentic “Christian identity and theology have a cruciform shape, but the meaning and significance of the cross must be reinterpreted in relation to particular contexts.”<sup>35</sup> So, the Black Church became, as C. Eric Lincoln characterized, “a precipitate of its *own* culture, developed from, and in response to, its own experience.”<sup>36</sup> This became, according to Battle, “the incredible achievement of the Black Church: to make seamless human incorporation into the pursuit of God’s peace and justice demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.”<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, to counter the contrasting rhetoric of Church versus state, the Black Church helped to crystallize that all civic responsibilities are an obligation of Christian service as it constructed a new politic

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<sup>31</sup> A theory suggested and supported by many White slaveowners, as well as the group called “American school of anthropology.” See Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974).

<sup>32</sup> Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, 30-31.

<sup>33</sup> Battle, *The Black Church in America*, 31.

<sup>34</sup> See Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23

<sup>35</sup> Battle, *The Black Church in America*, 31.

<sup>36</sup> Billingsley, *Mighty Like A River*, xxi.

<sup>37</sup> Battle, *The Black Church in America*, 44.

of self, community, and society based on its reinterpretation and reapplication of Scripture. As Karl Barth offers, John 3:16 does not say, “For God so loved the *Christians...*” but “For God so loved the *world...*”<sup>38</sup>

On this continuum of reinterpretation and reapplication, the Black Church began to recognize the need for a completely new “starting point” in theology, insisting that this “starting point” be defined by people at the bottom as opposed to those at the top of the socioeconomic ladder.<sup>39</sup> It is of paramount importance to convey that the Black Church challenged coercive ideologies that constructed a framework within which the dominant culture deprived others of their identity. Yet, because the spirituality of the Black Church was interpersonal and communal, it sought the new creation of a civic community that could sustain basic opportunities for, and relationships among, all people—oppressor and oppressed, Black and White, rich and poor.<sup>40</sup>

### The Civil Rights Movement

Among other things, effective movements bring new issues and values into the public sphere in a manner that couples a reality with an expectation.<sup>41</sup> Deeply troubled by White Christianity’s convenient overlooking of racism, the civil rights movement, through the Black Church, “came together as a united witness of communal

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<sup>38</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, translated by Thomas F. Torrance and Geoffrey W. Bromiley (New York: Scribner, 1936), IV, 3/2, 559.

<sup>39</sup> Battle, *The Black Church in America*, 99.

<sup>40</sup> See Robin Lovin, “Civil Rights, Civil Society, and Christian Realism,” in *Religion and Values in Public Life (Center for the Study of Values in Public Life at Harvard Divinity School)* 6, no. 2-3 (Winter/Spring 1998).

<sup>41</sup> Virginia A. Hodgkinson and Michael W. Foley, eds., *The Civil Society Reader* (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2003), 286.

spirituality.”<sup>42</sup> Due to the interpersonal and communal spirituality of the Black Church, “the civil rights movement was a natural action derived from the history, worship, and theology of the Black Church.”<sup>43</sup> Many of the civil rights movement’s leaders came from the Black Church, and they articulated the theological basis for the social transformation the movement was advocating. Chief among these leaders was Martin Luther King, Jr. Historian J. Deotis Roberts reminds that,

Without the black church tradition, there would not have been a Martin Luther King Jr. as we know him. Without the religious experience that steeled black sufferers against hardships and inflamed their consciences against injustices, King would not have emerged as it were from the womb of the black church.<sup>44</sup>

In articulating the struggle for civil rights, King defined the biblical term “*agape*” as love in action that seeks to preserve and create community. He highlighted four aspects of *agape*: insistence on community even when others seek to break it, willingness to sacrifice in the interest of mutuality, willingness to go to any length to restore community, and going the second, third, even fourth mile if necessary. Action, therefore, took the form of organizing, mobilizing, marching and protesting, so that one’s creed matched one’s deeds.<sup>45</sup> King wrote:

One of the great tragedies of life is that men seldom bridge the gulf between practice and profession, between doing and saying. A persistent schizophrenia leaves so many of us tragically divided against ourselves. On the one hand, we proudly profess certain sublime and noble principles, but on the other hand, we

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<sup>42</sup> Battle, *The Black Church in America*, 127.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> J. Deotis Roberts, *Black Religion, Black Theology: The Collected Essays of J. Deotis Roberts*, ed. David Emmanuel Goatley (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 58.

<sup>45</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom the Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 105.

sadly practice the very antithesis of those principles. How often are our lives characterized by a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds!<sup>46</sup>

King's biblical precedent for this point is the New Testament Epistle of James, which reads:

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors... What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.<sup>47</sup>

James suggests that genuine faith, as personally held, is to be publicly practiced, naturally producing good works. In fact, faith and works are complementary. When an individual truly believes in a cause, that belief will change the way the person lives. As a result, creeds become deeds. True faith and righteous actions go hand-in-hand as they comprise the work of God's servants. Faith brings an individual to salvation (through the calling of the Holy Spirit), while action brings the individual to faithfulness (through the conviction of the Holy Spirit). Privately held, "actions" embody a personal character that seeks to comprehend God's will in a particular situation through rigorous effort to clarify unconditional moral duties. Publicly practiced, "actions" embody a political character, which comes to understand God by prudently acting together with others in public struggle to redress some social or economic injustice.<sup>48</sup> The issue, therefore, for the Black Church at the time of the civil rights movement was not whether one's private faith should come to public expression—the two could not be separated—but rather, to what

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<sup>46</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 40.

<sup>47</sup> James 2:8-9;14-17 NRSV

<sup>48</sup> David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About A Theological School* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 47.

*extent* one's public expression should be informed by one's personal faith. Jon Meachum notes, "for believers, God may guide history, but men [sic] remain its makers."<sup>49</sup>

Institutionally, the Black Church helped define the terms in which American democracy and freedom would be discussed as it demonstrated to the rest of American religious communities how faith could be a driving force for serving the common good. The result of this process was twofold: first, the goal to fully participate in American society; and second, the collaborative effort of citizens that extended beyond ethnic, class, and racial differences.<sup>50</sup> The Black Church was committed to protecting the rights of all people living into God's image, eschatologically portraying the Kingdom of God as a time and place that invites persons to be of one accord—acknowledging, accepting, and valuing difference in the common society. It asserted that God's interest was not merely in the freedom of black, brown and yellow, but rather, as King testified, "in the freedom of the whole human race and in the creation of a society where all men [sic] can live together as brothers, where every man will respect the dignity and the worth of human personality."<sup>51</sup> An eschatological vision of hope became a primary emphasis in the Black Church that sustained and nurtured the practical quest for liberation.<sup>52</sup> For the Black Church, "other-worldly" and "this-worldly" are not separate. What initially appears to be

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<sup>49</sup> Jon Meachum, *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006), 24.

<sup>50</sup> See Hart M. Nelsen & Anne Kusener Nelsen, *Black Church in the Sixties* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975).

<sup>51</sup> James Melvin Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), 215.

<sup>52</sup> George C. L. Cummings, "The Slave Narratives as a Source of Black Theological Discourse: The Spirit and Eschatology," in *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and George Cummings (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 54.

a divergence, realistically amounts to a convergence, as heavenly mandates lead to earthly practices, which, in turn, brings about present action and ways of being.<sup>53</sup>

Exploring the dichotomy between the present and future as it relates to the meaning of biblical eschatology, Hans Küng asks, “What does the reign of God, which is already irrupting into the present, mean for the concrete existence of [humankind], what meaning does it give to [human] life here and now?”<sup>54</sup> For the civil rights movement, influenced by the prophetic impulse of the Black Church, eschatology became inextricably linked both to immediate survival and a vibrant expectancy that preserved the hope necessary for living in the present age.<sup>55</sup>

For King and the civil rights movement, the concept of community included a prophetic vision of an eschatological society in which those in conflict may one day live without oppression.<sup>56</sup> To make the connection between Jesus and social justice, King argued,

The gospel at its best deals with the whole man, not only with his soul but also with his body, not only his spiritual well-being but also his material well-being. A religion that professes concern for the souls of men and is not equally concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them, is a spiritually moribund religion.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Cummings, “The Slave Narratives as a Source of Black Theological Discourse: The Spirit and Eschatology,” 58.

<sup>54</sup> Hans Küng, *The Church*, trans. Rosaleen Ockenden and Ray Ockenden (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 61.

<sup>55</sup> See Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, 48; also Küng, *The Church*, 66.

<sup>56</sup> Battle, *The Black Church in America*, 133.

<sup>57</sup> King, Jr., *Strength to Love*, 149.

“This connection,” states Battle, “between Christian spirituality and political involvement was deeply rooted in the prophetic tradition.”<sup>58</sup> The premise of this thesis is that this connection should be mined and brought up-to-date to contextualize and confront the contemporary social conditions challenging the Black community.

### **The Importance of Pastoral Leadership**

Arguably, the Black preacher is the most important and influential figure in Black culture. Within the church, the preacher is expected to provide spiritual guidance, organizational leadership, and congregational direction. The expectation is that s/he be a great orator, study the bible thoroughly, and deliver inspiring sermons. The scope of the Black preacher’s responsibilities range from blessing newborn children, to planning and presiding over funeral services—all while simultaneously being available to congregants at any given time. Due to this high visibility and influence in, and on, the community, the Black preacher is often called upon to provide leadership outside of the church.

Just as Martin Luther, John Wesley, and others had no desire to form new churches, so the Black preacher would have chosen otherwise had viable options been available. Since the formation of Black churches was not motivated by dissension over doctrinal conceptualizations, but formed as intentional religious communities attempting to provide worship environments free from racist practices, the Black preacher became the preeminent, pulpit paradigm—able to influence, inform, incite, and inspire. In other words, Black preachers “have always been in a state of readiness, at least theoretically, to move from a so-called conservative mode into quite a different style, depending on the

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<sup>58</sup> Battle, *The Black Church in America*, 135.

circumstances.”<sup>59</sup> From slave quarters to contemporary contexts, the purpose and meaning of the Black preacher have not greatly changed in the traditional churches, sects, and cults of the Black community. Whether channeling contempt or rousing rebellion, the Black preacher sounds the trumpet to reach the masses, release power, and reaffirm purpose.

During slavery, the Black preacher’s creative rendition of the eschatological passages of the Old and New Testaments became a means to draw people from the edge of hopelessness, to the horizon of possibility. The preacher continued, therefore, to propagate the pragmatic implications of the biblical message—“that the day would surely come when the truth of the gospel of liberation would be manifest.”<sup>60</sup> More than 130 years after the hanging of Nat Turner, Black clergy in many major denominations began to reassess the relationship of the Christian church to the Black community. Black caucuses developed in Catholic, Presbyterian, and Episcopal churches with the central purpose being to redefine the meaning and role of the church and religion in the lives of Black people.<sup>61</sup> For the first time in the history of Black religious thought, according to Battle, Black clergy began to recognize the need for a completely new “starting point” in theology. They insisted that this starting point must be defined by those in the margins of society, as opposed to those in the middle. So, the Black preacher “began to reread the

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<sup>59</sup> Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 52.

<sup>60</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 75.

<sup>61</sup> Hamilton, *The Black Preacher in America*, 140.



Bible through the eyes of their slave grandparents and started to speak of God's solidarity with the oppressed of the earth."<sup>62</sup>

From their meeting with General William T. Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton to discuss the implementation of the Emancipation Proclamation,<sup>63</sup> through the formative phases of the civil rights movement, up to rallying behind Barack Obama's presidential election, Black clergy have

sought not to access a set of opportunities already in existence, but the creation of a new civic community that could sustain basic opportunities for and relationships among people historically oppressed in American society and around the world.<sup>64</sup>

Indeed, from the time of emancipation, Black clergy have immersed themselves in electoral politics to effect change and meet the social needs of their community. When newly freed Black men had their first opportunities for open political engagement, religious institutions provided the organizational infrastructure for mass political mobilization. So it just made sense that Black clerics—the most educated, revered, and recognizable figures in the Black community—would seek public office. Black clerics were particularly prominent in Reconstruction politics. One historian estimates that over 100 Black ministers, from African Methodist Episcopal to Primitive Baptist, were elected to legislative seats during Reconstruction, noting that ministers used their churches as a political launching point.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Battle, *The Black Church in America*, 99.

<sup>63</sup> The profiles of the 17 Black clergy appear in appendix C. There were 20 religious leaders in total, the remaining 3 being Laymen.

<sup>64</sup> Lovin, "Civil Rights, Civil Society, and Christian Realism," 8.

<sup>65</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 93.

Individualism and the drive for personal wealth accumulation symbolize a modern new threat to the integrity of today's Black preacher. The mantra of prosperity, rather than the biblical mission of love, service, and justice, more accurately describes the chief aim of many Black church leaders. Having earned a noble place in the complicated history of American democracy and Christianity, the Black preacher demonstrated to the rest of American communities that faith could function as a force for serving the common good. The Black preacher helped to define the terms in which American democracy and freedom would be discussed.<sup>66</sup> The single greatest threat to the historical legacy and core values of contemporary Black Church leadership is their reluctance to walk in the prophetic tradition of critiquing and challenging the society in which they live. This is symptomatic of a larger crisis of purpose that has placed the Black preacher in a posture of pragmatic accommodationism, avoiding extremely conservative or liberal political views, and thus cooperating and compromising with the social, political, and corporate status quo.<sup>67</sup> Conforming to society is not a new challenge, but with two conditions firmly in place—Christianity as a dominant religion, and a nation that rewards and permits extraordinary disparities of wealth and power—the new face of an old problem constitutes the crux of the issues facing the Black preacher: assimilation sanctifies personal greed, obsessive materialism, and unchecked narcissism. This leads to a more thorough and comprehensive distortion of the gospel and self-centered, individualistic leadership that dares not critique unjust social systems and practices.

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<sup>66</sup> Robert M. Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 106.

<sup>67</sup> Robert M. Franklin, *Another Day's Journey: Black Churches Confronting the American Crisis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 44.

Asserting a crisis in Black leadership, Cornel West suggests that today's leaders lack two qualities that were present among the past leaders of the civil rights era: anger and humility. The irony is that many of today's Black preachers strategically present themselves as relevant, powerful, and accepted individuals while doing nothing to risk their access to important people or revenue streams in order to achieve "higher ground" goals in the area of social justice.<sup>68</sup> Black preacher activity should become more than the usual "gossip topic" in the village<sup>69</sup> and instead become a cause for community action that identifies, cultivates, and constructively critiques authentic leaders. In order to demand a new level of accountability among Black Church leadership, a new culture of village responsibility will be necessary. The community needs to "call out," or openly challenge, their leaders and request a declaration of their vision for serving and transforming the community.<sup>70</sup> The renewal of the Black preacher depends on a reckoning with the significant social, political, and economic changes that have occurred in Black communities since the Civil Rights Movement.

Currently, despite struggles of the past, the issue of race continues to plague American society—a fact that is supported by an increase in race-related incidents throughout the country. In some states, Black men have been sentenced to prison on drug charges at rates twenty to fifty times greater than those of White men.<sup>71</sup> This lack of recognition regarding the significant role played by race in American policies and

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<sup>68</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 51-70.

<sup>69</sup> For example, the extra-marital affair and financial misappropriation of Reverend Henry Lyons, former President of the National Baptist Convention.

<sup>70</sup> Franklin, *Crisis in the Village*, 133.

<sup>71</sup> See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

practices serves to perpetuate social inequities. According to social historian Manning Marble,

Race is a dynamic, changing social relationship grounded in structural inequality. As the human composition of American society's social order has shifted, the lived reality of structural racism has also changed in everyday existence. What has remained constant, unfortunately, is that "blackness," no matter how it is constituted in ethnic terms, has continued to be stigmatized and relegated to the periphery of power and opportunity.<sup>72</sup>

The election of the United States' first Black president is clearly the product of a social trajectory that denies race or racism. Barack Obama's successful presidential campaign and the general social climate in which we live furthers the myth that many Americans accept about what it means to be citizens in this country. The myth centers on equality and opportunity for everyone who "works hard," but for most Blacks, the myth is quickly destroyed by the realities of daily life.

In addition to the political realities, there is an economic dimension as well. In his work, *Being in the Black, Living In The Red: Race, Wealth, and Social Policy in America*, Dalton Conley critically analyzes the relationship between race and wealth accumulation. The current system of free market capitalism, through which, allegedly, anyone who works hard can succeed, operates on several principles that are crippling to many Blacks. According to Conley, savings and investments are important for growing the American economy, but Blacks have been under- and unpaid labor for an extended period of time, with only the last fifty years offering opportunities to amass wealth.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, there has been no significant accumulation of wealth in Black communities,

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<sup>72</sup> Manning Marble, *Living Black History: How Reimagining the African-American Past Can Remake America's Racial Future* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006), 208.

<sup>73</sup> See Dalton Conley, *Being Black, Living in the Red: Race, Wealth, and Social Policy in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

definitively disproportionate to White communities, “since wealth accumulation depends heavily on intergenerational support such as gifts, informal loans, and inheritances.”<sup>74</sup>

With experience being a key element to increasing productivity under free market ideologies, the fact that Blacks have historically been shut out of many professional areas has meant that Blacks have not obtained the long-term experience considered necessary for professional advancement.

In order for a person to adapt to changing work environments, education is vital.

Economist Marcellus Andrews believes,

A highly educated work force that has extensive experience with rapidly changing technologies, and that can pass on knowledge of how to succeed in academic competition to its children, will be able to improve its ability to work over time, quite apart from any investments in new types of machines and production methods.<sup>75</sup>

But, he continues, Blacks have had unequal access to education as part of the considerable legacy of historic underinvestment in the human capital of Blacks.<sup>76</sup> This confluence of economic factors has created market-driven segregation as the middle-class uses its higher income to create economic and social distance from lower-classes, resulting in what Andrews concludes is nothing more than free-market racism.<sup>77</sup>

These ideas are supported by a variety of statistical data. In 1865, at the time of the Emancipation Proclamation, Blacks owned 0.5% of the total worth of the United States—not surprising seeing that most Blacks had been slaves up to that point. However,

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<sup>74</sup> See *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>75</sup> Marcellus Andrews, *The Political Economy of Hope and Fear: Capitalism and the Black Condition in America* (New York, New York University Press, 1999), 121.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

by 1990, a full 135 years after the abolition of slavery, Blacks owned a meager 1% of total wealth.<sup>78</sup> “In other words,” according to Conley, “almost no progress had been made in terms of property ownership. African Americans may have won ‘title’ to their own bodies and to their labor, but they have gained ownership over little else.”<sup>79</sup> Statistics augment Conley’s point: Black unemployment rate is 14.8% (compared to 8.5% for Whites), less than half of Black families own a home (47.4%) compared to 75% of White families, Blacks are three times as likely, as compared to Whites, to live below the poverty line, 19.1% of Blacks are without healthcare insurance (10.8% for Whites), and the median Black household earning is \$34,218 (compared to \$55,530 for White households).<sup>80</sup> Although as a group Blacks have made progress in a number of socioeconomic areas, the base from which they began was dismally low. For instance, in 1964, only 9.4% of Blacks held professional or managerial positions, compared to 24.7% of Whites.<sup>81</sup> Statistics aside, the conditions and issues plaguing urban areas throughout this country, such as high school dropout rate, lack of pre- and after-school programming, dilapidated housing, high incarceration rates of Black men between the ages of 20 and 35, continue as evidence that substantial racial inequities remain in the United States.

Another challenge in preparing responsive Black pastoral leaders is to address what Sharon Daloz Parks refers to as five key hungers that conspire to create a growing

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<sup>78</sup> See C. Anderson, *Black Labor, White Wealth: The Search for Power and Economic Justice* (Edgewood: Duncan and Duncan, 1994).

<sup>79</sup> Conley, *Being Black, Living in the Red*, 25.

<sup>80</sup> See *Jobs 2010 The State of Black America: Responding to the Crisis* (A National Urban League Publication, 2010).

<sup>81</sup> J. L. Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 55.

crisis in leadership: personal agency, authority, ability to deal with complexity, adaptive response, and the creation of a new moral moment.<sup>82</sup> If the Black preacher is ineffective or inept, it may be due to a lack of proficiency in navigating among, and negotiating with, the public institutions and systems within the social environment. Franklin argues that the Black preacher must become a public theologian, committed to not only presenting spiritual understandings, but also ethical principles and values for public scrutiny, discussion, and possible acceptance. In contrast to sectarian theologians who understand that they are speaking for and to the community of believers, public theologians understand themselves as “ambassadors for Christ,” standing between worlds, representing the distinctive vision and virtues of Christianity to a secular culture.<sup>83</sup>

An awful legacy of slavery preserved by many African ancestors is the mistrust of others manifested in competition with one another. During slavery, the competition was to earn the good will of the master. Malcolm X, more than any other contemporary leader, sought to demolish this sentiment and instill more cooperative and trusting working relationships throughout the Black community and abroad. In order to transform communities, the Black preacher must bring to a close the current culture of inefficiency, duplication, and “silo survival.” This is a call for leaders who are collaborative and cooperative thinkers committed to renewing communal relationships within civil society. The preceding eras have taught that if any institutional and systemic impact is to be made, it will come via broad and nonpartisan coalitions, whose sole purpose is effecting change. The power and influence of the preacher remains exceedingly important.

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<sup>82</sup> See Sharon Daloz Parks, *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2005).

<sup>83</sup> Franklin, *Another Day's Journey*, 122.

Whether viewed as cultural reformists or thoroughgoing radicals, the vocal presence of Black leadership challenges the sacred grounding of society itself.<sup>84</sup> This has been the implicit danger in all moral reform efforts, particularly those activities of the historic Black preacher, which take aim at systemic and institutional change. We should remember that the calling of the Black preacher emerged out of slavery and the Black Church was born out of the nation's race problem. With many social, economic, and political problems still intact, especially in the Black community, the need for the Black Church and Black preacher/prophet continues.

### **Liberation and Prophetic Engagement**

Liberation and prophetic engagement continue to be major concerns for the Black Church and community. Indeed, several recent discussions and publications among Black preachers and scholars have focused on the legacy and future of a social gospel.<sup>85</sup> Before proceeding with this section, I must highlight a few noteworthy considerations. First, the term Black is used in definitive conjunction with, not contradiction of, Negro, Colored, Afro-, and African-American. Throughout history, each of these has been used progressively and interchangeably to refer to persons of color who do not identify with Asian, Hispanic, or Native ethnicities. Second, I recognize that congregants enter Black churches with a multitude of identities that shape their experiences. Thus, while my inquiry is focused on understanding commonalities across the Black Church, I

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<sup>84</sup> Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, 58.

<sup>85</sup> See Dwight N. Hopkins and Linda E. Thomas, eds., *Walk Together Children: Black and Womanist Theologies, Church, and Theological Education* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010).



acknowledge the importance of recognizing the diversity within this population with regard to gender, sexual orientation, social/class/generational status, and so forth.

According to the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, conducted in 2007 by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, while the United States is generally considered a highly religious nation, Blacks are markedly more religious on a variety of measures than the United States population as a whole—including level of affiliation with a religion, attendance at religious services, frequency of prayer, and the significance of religion. Compared with other racial and ethnic groups, African-Americans are among the most likely to report a formal religious affiliation, with 87% of Blacks describing themselves as belonging to one religious group or another.

The Landscape Survey also finds that nearly eight-in-ten Blacks (79%) say religion is very important in their lives, compared with 56% among all United States adults. In fact, a large majority (72%) of Blacks who are unaffiliated with any particular faith say religion plays at least a somewhat important role in their lives; nearly half (45%) of unaffiliated Blacks say religion is very important in their lives, which is roughly three times the percentage of those who say this among the religiously unaffiliated population overall (16%). Additionally, several measures illustrate the distinctiveness of the Black community when it comes to religious practices and beliefs. More than half of Blacks (53%) report attending religious services at least once a week, more than three-in-four (76%) conduct prayer on a daily basis and nearly nine-in-ten (88%) indicate they are absolutely certain that God exists. On each of these measures, Blacks stand out as the most religiously committed racial or ethnic group in the nation. Even those Blacks who are unaffiliated with any religious group pray nearly as often as the overall population of

mainline Protestants (48% of unaffiliated Blacks pray daily vs. 53% of all mainline Protestants). And unaffiliated Blacks are about as likely to believe in God with absolute certainty (70%) as are mainline Protestants (73%) and Catholics (72%) overall.

The Landscape Survey also shows that the link between religion and some social and political attitudes in the Black community is very similar to that seen among the population overall. For instance, just as in the general public, Blacks who are more religiously observant (as defined by frequency of worship service attendance and the importance of religion in their lives) are more likely to oppose abortion and homosexuality and more likely to report higher levels of conservative ideology. It is important to emphasize, however, that differences on political and social issues across religious groups within the Black community tend to be smaller than among the population overall. Compared with other groups, Blacks express a high degree of comfort with religion's role in politics. In fact, in a subsequent survey, Blacks tended to closely resemble White evangelical Protestants on that score, with roughly six-in-ten among both groups saying that churches should express their views on social and political topics, and roughly half saying that there has been too little expression of faith and prayer by political leaders.<sup>86</sup>

### **Religion and Politics**

While the current preaching trend is to promote success and prosperity, the historic role of the prophetic preacher in promoting a social gospel has been integral to

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<sup>86</sup> Source: Survey conducted summer 2008 by Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Pew Forum.

the Black community.<sup>87</sup> Religion and politics in the United States have always significantly interacted. This is more so true for African-Americans, since the Black Church is central to African American social, economic, and political life. The connections between Black religion and civil institutions range from the role that Black churches played in sponsoring early and after-school programs to the disproportionately high numbers of Black clergy and churches involved in electoral politics. These latter habits carve an important caricature of much African American civic culture, which involves such matters as beliefs, attitudes, and general disposition toward political systems. The Black Church has long participated in and shaped an American civil religion that has endowed this nation with transcendent meaning and millennial destiny. This civic faith combines religion and nationalism, fusing American religious themes such as messianism, deliverance, and redemption with U.S. political ideals such as democracy, freedom, and equality. This country's faith, with its pool of symbols, myths, and rituals, seeks to merge the highly diverse, heterogeneous U.S. polity into a single national moral-spiritual community—a guiding principle of the Founding Fathers. The *concern* of religion and civil society differs from the *concept* of church and state. Failure to make this distinction results in confusion. Jefferson's concept of church and state has to do with institutions and practices, and neither must trespass the boundaries that define their legitimate sphere of influence. Jefferson's concept of separation is valid, but thorny in two particular areas: the first involves trying to navigate between establishment of religion and free exercise—prayer in public schools is among the most contentious; the second arises when religious belief and practice conflict with secular law. The concern of

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<sup>87</sup> See Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

religion and politics defines another set of issues. While church and state identifies the independence of institutions, religion and civil society outlines their interdependence in the lives of individuals. As Kenneth Cauthen notes, “citizens who belong to religious groups are also members of the secular society, and this dual-association generates complications.”<sup>88</sup> While it may be true that religious beliefs have moral and social implications, and it may be appropriate for people of faith to express these through their activities as citizens within the civic order, the fact that ethical convictions are rooted in religious faith should not disqualify them from the secular realm. However, they cannot be deemed secularly significant simply because they are thought by their exponents to be religiously mandated—they must be argued for in appropriate social and political terms that harmonize with national values. In both cases, according to Cauthen, “we should be prepared to deal with complexities, ambiguities, and overlapping realms in which practical discernment must find workable principles to guide us that are as compatible with fundamental Constitutional imperatives as human reason can devise.”<sup>89</sup>

As Blacks coped with slavery and racial segregation, the religion that emerged out of that experience underwent various reforms, and what evolved was a civic tradition that cultivated identity and contributed to a heightened sense of citizenship. While Black religious traditions had different ideas concerning approaches to social conditions, during the civil rights era, most Black religious traditions arrived at a consensus concerning the need to be involved in addressing the oppressive, racist, and at the time, legal conditions affecting the Black community. As a mediating institution reflecting the interests of a

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<sup>88</sup> See Kenneth Cauthen, *The Ethics of Belief: A Bio-Historical Approach* (Lima: CSS Publishing Company, 2001).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

marginalized population, Black Church beginnings privileged the holistic needs of its community—social, economic, and political; but like most institutions, the foundational warrants for the prioritizing of such activities became the basis for disagreement. Like most religious institutions, the Black Church primarily existed to meet the spiritual needs of its members, leading them to devote most of their resources to and for pastoral leadership. As the needs of the community began to change due to social conditions, the scope of the church's responsibility changed as well, giving rise to another civic tradition within the Black Church—prophetic engagement. With a more expansive view, the activist aspect within the Black Church, dating back to the Reconstruction era, began to surge.<sup>90</sup> That tradition of prophetic engagement and activism, especially when collaboratively approached, i.e., ministers aligning themselves to form urban political machines, gives basis for theological interpretation.

#### Institutional Interaction

Without a doubt, the Civil Rights and Black Power movements altered Black religious and secular institutions. It must be noted, however, that only a small number of Black ministers, churches, and civil institutions supported either. In recounting the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Martin Luther King pointed to the difficulties of mobilizing support from Black ministers, noting their apathy stemmed from a sincere aversion to the earthy, temporal matters of social justice and economic improvement.<sup>91</sup> While these attitudes and actions were not rare, the success of the movements had long-term implications for the continued role of the Black Church. Since ministers were a

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<sup>90</sup> See Billingsley, *Mighty Like a River*.

<sup>91</sup> See King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*.

visible part of the leadership cadre, and because of the emphasis on Christian values, the movements projected an image that the Black Church was the vanguard of social change. Since then, social relevancy has been a hallmark of the Black Church.

In general, prophetic engagement of Black churches has reflected the contextual opportunities and limitations operative within their current setting. For instance, with the enactment of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, 1964 and 1965 respectively, an altogether different context of Black church involvement emerged as a result of unprecedented Black access to the processes and practices of American politics. Evidence of the historical settings and cultural shifts indicate the varied responses to social crises. As church-based community outreach programs evolved during the Reconstruction era, so did the prophetic engagement of the Black Church during the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s. As newly freed Black men were given the right to vote, Black churches provided the organizational resources to mobilize the new Black electorate—providing the “safespace” for political gatherings, candidate connection, and volunteer recruitment.<sup>92</sup> Political platforms were regularly discussed from Black pulpits, as Black churches provided the only mechanism by which Black expression and connection could be unfiltered, uncompromised, and uninhibited. Political activism then began to take on a collaborative form as many Black churches worked in cooperation with civil rights groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League (NUL). Aligning with these social organizations allowed political elites to employ churches as a direct vehicle for Black political participation. Political candidates made direct appeals before Black

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<sup>92</sup> See Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*.

congregations and many Black ministers began to endorse candidates, promise support, and deliver votes—it was not unusual during a primary or general election campaign to see a number of White candidates on the agenda ready to present their claims for support during Sunday morning service, e.g. Congressional candidate Keith Ellison and Senatorial candidate Al Franken frequenting several Twin Cities area Black churches.

The pervasiveness of racism led Black church leaders to conclude that systemic power was the most significant ingredient, and inhibitor, of their people's equality efforts. The sense of powerlessness compelled Black churches to take the lead in establishing an ethos to uplift the Black community—making the social gospel a foundational premise. The Black Church emphasized the perfectionist ideas that signaled an emerging holiness movement in American culture, and grounded those ideas in the conviction that the solution to social ills was the collective transformation of individuals, institutions, and systems.<sup>93</sup> The prophetic engagement of the Black church, which came in its critique of current social, economic, and political practices, accounted for its most pronounced social relevance. In challenging America's deficiencies, namely the failures to deal justly and constructively with racial issues, the Black Church candidly called White society's attention to a vision of liberty with a more inclusive understanding of religion's participatory role within civil society.

Forced into the public arena by the very nature of the Black condition, the Black Church put aside concerns of church/state separation to engage in the work of making the Christian faith relevant to the struggle for social justice. As a result, Jefferson's concept of church/state separation became neither a principled nor a prudential statement, but

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<sup>93</sup> See William H. Crouch, Jr. and Joel C. Gregory, *What We Love About the Black Church: Can We Get a Witness* (Valley Forge: Judson Press Publishers, 2010).

rather a political reflection concerning the institutional arrangement of a system in which the Constitution was intended to guide. So, for the Black Church, this political reflection concerned the arrangement of institutions, not the obligation of individuals. Hence, the prophetic consciousness of the Black Church sought to attack contemporary circumstances at the core of moral and spiritual tendencies embedded in society.

More than an organizational space, the Black Church acted as a theological interpreter of the Black experience in America. This understanding syncretized indigenous religious ideas and organic theologies into a specific Black theology of reconciliation—a theology rooted in specific understandings of bondage and oppression in Scripture.<sup>94</sup> In fact, Black theology is distinct because of its specific theodicy—the issue of reconciling God's justice in the presence of human suffering.<sup>95</sup> While not unique to Black theology, theodicy takes on a specific, racialized form in the Black religious experience. For Blacks, evil takes the identifiable form of White supremacy, enslavement, Jim Crow, or otherwise. Having to confront, if not resolve, this fundamental dilemma of God's love for Black people in the midst of oppression, segregation, and racialization is an implicit, as well as explicit, theological interpretation of reconciliation. While the earliest Black churches dissented relative to denominational identities, systems of polity, doctrinal standards, and modes of discipline, they assented regarding the fundamental need to challenge the status quo.<sup>96</sup> They had a common understanding of the Christian faith and its implications for addressing human need and inequality. In other

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<sup>94</sup> See Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004).

<sup>95</sup> See Battle, *The Black Church in America*.

<sup>96</sup> See Crouch and Gregory, *What We Love About the Black Church*.



words, there was a unanimity—beliefs, attitudes, values, and expectations—that bound them together despite the autonomy that distinguished one from the other. Thus, they were able to reconcile individual differences with a collective objective while dismantling divisive social practices with a divine vision for humanity.

### Institutional Tension

The concept of “dual citizenship” has been used to define social condition and political conflictedness. It refers to individuals whose discriminatory and discretionary exclusion from inalienable rights take them on a quest for alternatives to the formal politics within their context amidst persons unsettled and uncertain in a modern setting with enduring loyalties to colonial approaches or imperial practices.<sup>97</sup> This duality can be drawn upon to talk about a type of tension felt within the Black Church as well as to shape how it can move forward. The Black Church has historically lived between acquiescence and agitation, secular standing and spiritual impulse, in an evolving effort to guide its participation in American civic life. A primary guide can be the literal interpretation of mission and destiny as “under God,” albeit one civic scholar presents the dyad of “Nation under God” versus “Nation as Self-Transcendent” as one of the most fundamental divisions within American civil religion.<sup>98</sup> The “Under God” form positions the Judeo-Christian God as the origin of America’s mission, which therefore remains always subject to divine authority and judgment. On the other hand, the “Nation as Self-Transcendent” form regards America’s social-political system, and attributes such as democracy and free enterprise, as having intrinsic meaning with or without God. In order

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<sup>97</sup> See Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches*.

<sup>98</sup> See Knoll, *One Nation Under God?*

to understand the theology of the Black Church, its tradition must be interpreted as a comprehensive, harmonious, possibly contentious, vision for America given by God,

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.<sup>99</sup>

Believing that “all men were equal before God,” and associating “moral evil with institutions of the external world,” and holding that it was within the capacity of men to achieve salvation by unselfish deeds and unrelenting struggle against inward and outward evil, the Black Church’s exercise of free will condemned domination, subjugation, and oppression and denounced those who sought them as usurpers of power that belonged only to God.<sup>100</sup>

A secondary guide can be a prophetic postulation which reconciles the critique of society with work toward effecting change. The position has as extremes dormancy and relevancy. Borrowing from Malcolm X,

...when you’ve got some coffee that’s too black, which means it’s too strong, what do you do? You integrate it with cream... But if you pour too much cream in it, you won’t even know you ever had coffee. It used to be hot, it becomes cool. It used to be strong, it becomes weak. It used to wake you up, now it puts you to sleep.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Taken from the *Declaration of Independence*.

<sup>100</sup> See D. B. Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984) and *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966).

<sup>101</sup> Taken from Malcolm X interview with WUST, 1963 found at [www.ourtimepress.com](http://www.ourtimepress.com) (accessed November 2011).

This leaves little room for institutional compromise, relative to prophetic engagement, as far as the Black Church is concerned. When Black people collectively experienced racial oppression in similar ways, there was greater group solidarity. Racial integration has altered, in a fundamental way, the common ground that once served as a foundation for Black liberation struggle.<sup>102</sup> If the belief is that God has placed it in a unique position to speak truth to power, then action must be indicative of that premise and placement and the tension related to its location must be reconciled. That is to say, the church as refuge, grounded in a faith of the oppressed, must sustain the cultural congruity between Black life experiences and the systems through which those experiences are structured. The action, along with God's power working on behalf of and alongside the struggle for liberation, must address the comprehensive system—prophetic engagement cannot analyze social condition absent from political practice and economic policy.<sup>103</sup>

### **Conclusion**

There is no greater context in which to see the Black Church than its ordeal with slavery. The scourge of slavery birthed a spirituality to not only see God in the midst of oppressive conditions, but comprehend those troubling conditions as necessary to “get to glory.” And, “if there were any associations of spirituality, Black churches were primarily about cathartic or emotional spirituality in which to appropriate issues like slavery and racism.”<sup>104</sup> While true, this viewpoint is somewhat limiting as the aforementioned evolution of the Black Church demonstrates. But, the theological reality

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<sup>102</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 36-37.

<sup>103</sup> See James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990).

<sup>104</sup> Battle, *The Black Church in America*, 39.

remains unchanged—God’s image of community is primary and such a practice carries with it great costs and burdens, especially when faced with the affliction of American slavery.<sup>105</sup> The investigative process causes us to critically think about the role of pastoral leadership as we come to understand the Black Church. As it emerged from slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow, the guidance and direction provided its leaders proved to position the Black Church as either accommodating, or prophetic, bringing to bear an argument of its resultant value—does the Black Church preach a passive, docile doctrine that believes Christianity is “waiting on the Lord,” or, does it teach an active, participatory approach that asserts Christianity as a willingness to “take one step and expect the Lord to make two.”

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 4

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations. Ah, Sovereign Lord, I said, I do not know how to speak; I am only a child. But the Lord said to me, Do not say, I am only a child. You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you, declares the Lord.*

Jeremiah 1:5-8

*I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and teaching.*

2 Timothy 4:1-2

### **Introduction**

The Black Church has held a distinct position in the Black community. The position has been one of refuge, revolt, and in some cases, reform. As an institution, its standing in the community is undeniable, but accompanying that institutional standing is the high regard afforded the Black preacher/prophet. The traits and trends attributed to the Black Church can be directly traced to its leaders of the time. From the hopeful assurances and revolts through slavery, to the call for equal rights during legalized segregation, the preacher/prophet has been given a platform by the Black Church to speak out and stand up against injustice. And in so doing, according to Andrew Billingsley, the

“leaders of Black antebellum churches stepped up to the challenges history had laid for them. And, because they acted, they helped to shape the course of history itself.”<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I will initially draw upon Robert Franklin’s concepts of pragmatic accommodationism and prophetic radicalism to interrogate the relationship between leadership philosophy and church practice. In addition, this process will use the ‘fusion of horizon’ theory of Hans-Georg Gadamer in an effort to correlate and interpret the leadership style, theory, and practice as they appear in the Black Church. It is with great scholarly trepidation that I attempt to make this connection, but I have no doubt that there is no better theory that captures the importance of connecting the history of the Black Church to its future.

#### Opiate versus Stimulant

For many, the link between religion and civil society is obvious. Historically, civic engagement of the Black Church has been well documented. Presently, media accounts regard civic engagement of Black ministers and churches as routine features of Black religious life. However, scholars over the years have differed sharply on the role that religion plays in Black civic engagement—some believe that the character of Black religiosity is heavenly-focused and acts as an opiate, while others assess Black religiosity as temporal and an inspiration.<sup>2</sup> The opiate perspective, which I liken to Franklin’s “pragmatic accommodationism,” insists that Black Christianity promotes a concentration on otherworldliness, functioning as an instrument of civic pacification and fatalism. The

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like A River: The Black Church and Social Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 67.

<sup>2</sup> Hart M. Nelsen & Anne Kusener Nelson, *Black Church in the Sixties* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1975), 14.

inspiration perspective, here likened to Franklin's "prophetic radicalism," makes the opposite claim, arguing that Black Christianity has played a central role in Black civic participation, catalyzing, for example, the collective involvement of Blacks in the modern civil rights movement. In either case, the emphasis falls on civic acquiescence versus civic agitation with the lingering question of relevance and usefulness.<sup>3</sup> Can the Black Church be, become, and maintain its relevance and usefulness without significant civic activity? The main European churches have been, until recently, state churches: leaders are formally confirmed, clergy paid, and schools subsidized by the state. Although rapidly changing in Scandinavian churches, religious doctrine is handed down by leaders—the pope, cardinals, and bishops in the Catholic Church—and the clergy's duty is to inculcate the members of the congregations in church dogma, and despite important differences in history, doctrine, and administration, the Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran, and Orthodox Churches of Europe have generally legitimated governmental authority and rallied popular support for their wars, laws, and other enterprises.<sup>4</sup> When these European churches came to the United States, they became voluntaristically aligned with the cultural establishments that supported the state. This alignment with the cultural establishment left these churches less willing to be civic critics. In contrast, Black churches have always been independent of the state and often served as critics of state policy and advocates of individual rights. They played a leading role in attacking ethnic privilege in the United States and were the principal vehicles through which Black people were drawn into the process of reshaping American society created by a sense that the

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<sup>3</sup> Acquiescence can resemble a kind of accommodationism, while agitation can promote a form of radicalism.

<sup>4</sup> See Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: Doubleday, 1996).

Black preacher was employed by the congregation rather than controlled by the cultural hegemony of the dominant culture(s). The result: action being informed by the pews and not indoctrinated by the power structure.

### **Pragmatic Accommodationism**

As Manning Marable has observed, “black religion is often viewed as the culprit, an agent of the oppressor, rather than a potentially liberating ideological force.”<sup>5</sup>

Pragmatic accommodationist theorists argue that religion works as a means of social control, offering Blacks a way to cope with personal and societal difficulties and thus undermining their willingness to actively challenge racial inequalities.<sup>6</sup> This perspective has prevailed across several generations of leading social scientists in a range of disciplines, including anthropology, psychology, sociology, and political science.<sup>7</sup> The theory has its origins in the writings of Karl Marx, who saw religion as an instrument of economic and political domination over 19<sup>th</sup>-century British workers. Marx famously dubbed religion as the “opium of the people.”<sup>8</sup> By minimizing temporal concerns and

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<sup>5</sup> Manning Marable, “Religion and Black Protest Thought in African American History,” in *African American Religious Studies*, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 333.

<sup>6</sup> See Hans A. Baer, “Bibliography of Social Science Literature on Afro-American Religion in the United States.” *Review of Religious Research* 29 (June 1988): 413-30.

<sup>7</sup> See Hortense Powdermaker, *After Freedom: A Cultural History of the Deep South* (New York: Viking Press, 1939). Also, A. H. Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944); See R. A. Billings, “The Negro and His Church: A Psychogenetic Study,” *Psychoanalytic Review* 21 (1934): 425-41. Also, John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1937); See Charles S. Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934). See Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1944). Also, E. Franklin Frazier and C. Eric Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America/ The Black Church Since Frazier* (New York: Schocken Books Incorporated, 1974); See Ralph J. Bunch, *The Political Status of the Negro in the Age of FDR*, ed. Dewey W. Grantham (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973). Also, Robert E. Lane, *Political Life: Why and How People Get Involved in Politics* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1959).

<sup>8</sup> See *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, edited and translated by T.B. Bottomore (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963).



encouraging believers to focus on other-worldly pursuits, religion, in his view, pacified oppressed groups so that they would accept their subordinated status in society.

Echoing Marx, Eugene Gordon, writing in the 1920s, accused Christianity of teaching Blacks to be “meek”, “humble”, and “to turn the other cheek when [they] should retaliate in kind.” He further portrayed Negro Christianity as a “workable tool for others,” and as “religiously enslaved” with their minds neglecting “the very real and very present now for the delirious pleasure of wandering in a vague, remote, and uncertain hereafter.”<sup>9</sup>

Social science research during the Jim Crow period reinforced the idea that Christianity subverted Black resistance. Political scientist Robert Lane concluded that religion offered urban Blacks and newly arrived immigrants an “otherworldly solace for temporal ills,” which encouraged political apathy.<sup>10</sup> Although Gunnar Myrdal highlighted the Black Church’s potential as a “power institution,” he observed that the Black Church “has been relatively inefficient and uninfluential” as an instrument of collective action.<sup>11</sup> The harshest critique, however, was offered by sociologist E. Franklin Frazier who viewed the Black Church as “having cast an entire shadow over the entire intellectual life of Negroes” as well as being responsible for the “so-called backwardness” of Blacks.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Eugene Gordon, “A New Religion for the Negro,” in *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (New York: Citadel Press, 1972).

<sup>10</sup> Lane, *Political Life*, 250-55.

<sup>11</sup> Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 873.

<sup>12</sup> Frazier and Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America/ The Black Church Since Frazier*, 90.

The first relevant attempt to resolve this question via survey research was sociologist Gary T. Marx's study of belief systems in the Black community.<sup>13</sup> More than any other study, Marx's findings sparked a debate between pragmatic accommodationism and prophetic radicalism prior to Franklin's articulation of the two terms.<sup>14</sup> In his 1964 metropolitan sample of Blacks, Marx found that intense religious belief had a contradictory effect relative to the aims of the civil rights movement. Specifically, Marx established that in his sample, the greater the subjective significance of religion to Black respondents, and the more often they attended church, the less militant their support of civil rights issues. Although Marx conceded that "many religious people are nevertheless militant," he concluded that until religion lost "its hold over these people, or comes to embody to a greater extent the belief that man as well as God can bring about secular change, and focuses more on the here and now," Black Christianity "would seem to be an important factor working against the widespread radicalization" of the Black public.<sup>15</sup>

More recently, Adolph Reed, in a critique of Jesse Jackson's 1984 presidential pursuit, sternly dismissed the idea that Black Christianity encourages civic engagement among adherents. Instead, he argued, Christianity encourages "political quietism" among Blacks, stifling the possibility of mass activism. Though he grudgingly acknowledged the Black Church's "tactical support of political mobilization," Reed maintained that Black Christianity is essentially an instrument of oppression, stating, "the domain of the black

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<sup>13</sup> See Gary T. Marx, *Protest and Prejudice: A Study of Belief in the Black Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967). Also, Gary T. Marx, "Religion: Opiate or Inspiration of Civil Rights Militancy Among Negroes," *American Journal of Sociology* 81 (February 1967): 139-46.

<sup>14</sup> See C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> See Marx, *Protest and Prejudice*, 105.

church has been the spiritual and institutional adaptation of Afro-Americans to an apparently inexorable context of subordination and dispossession.<sup>16</sup> Reed posits a fundamental tension between the Black Church and civic engagement, particularly because, in his opinion, the leadership of the Black Church is authoritarian and the tradition of the Black Church is antidemocratic—resting solely on the purpose, mission, and method identified and dictated by the pastor.

### **Prophetic Radicalism**

The other side of the debate consists of theologians who contend that Black Christianity inspires and informs political liberation and activism.<sup>17</sup> Historians of American slavery have discovered that religion played a pivotal role in the survival and rebellion of African slaves.<sup>18</sup> Social scientists who have studied Black churches have highlighted the influence of Black pastoral leaders as catalysts for mobilizing Blacks into electoral and community politics.<sup>19</sup> Looking primarily at the civil rights-era in the South, sociologists have noted that the urban church, as an indigenous organization, provided the

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<sup>16</sup> Adolph Reed, Jr., *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon: The Crisis of Purpose in Afro-American Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 59.

<sup>17</sup> See James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975). Also, James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1970). Also, Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1981). Also, Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teachings of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). Also, Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982). Also, Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988).

<sup>18</sup> See Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974). Also, Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). Also, Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> See Charles V. Hamilton, *The Black Preacher in America* (New York: Morrow, 1972). Also, John Brown Childs, *The Political Black Minister: A Study in Afro-American Politics and Religion* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980).

leadership base, social interaction, and communication networks required for collective action.<sup>20</sup>

Describing southern Blacks as a “God-fearing, churchgoing people,” political scientists Donald Matthews and James Prothro maintained that the racially-segregated Black Church may have “planted the seeds for the destruction of segregation” by serving the political organizing needs of southern Blacks.<sup>21</sup> Their survey of Black and White southerners during the early years of the civil rights movement asked how often political campaigns were discussed at respondents’ churches. While an overwhelmingly majority of both Blacks and Whites reported that political campaigns were not discussed in their church, 35% of Black respondents reported hearing some discussion about political campaigns, compared to only 18% of White respondents. Of those attending church services, 18% of Blacks reported that their pastor encouraged members to vote for a specific candidate, compared to only 5% of Whites. The investigators estimated that almost “a fifth of the Negroes who go to church thus receive direct clues as to how they should vote, and over a third hear some kind of discussion of elections.”<sup>22</sup> These findings on direct church involvement in electoral politics during the civil rights movement, but prior to the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, provide some evidence that southern Blacks were more amenable than their White counterparts to a civically engaged church.

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<sup>20</sup> See Doug McAdam, *Political Process and Development of Black Insurgency: 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). Also, Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984).

<sup>21</sup> Donald R. Matthews and James W. Prothro, *Negroes and the New Southern Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc. 1966), 232.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

Matthews and Prothro's findings during the 1960s are comparable to patterns in contemporary politics. Katherine Tate's analysis of Black electoral behavior indicates that present-day religious institutions are an important organizational resource for disseminating information related to civic participation—elections, voter registration drives, providing a hub for individuals to volunteer with political candidates, as well as to give financial support to political campaigns.<sup>23</sup> Tate's findings confirm the enduring significance of religious institutions as a vehicle to mobilize Black civic participation in the post-civil rights era.

### **Multidimensional and Multifunctional**

Political scientist Kenneth Wald begins to develop a multidimensional approach to the study of religion and civic participation by viewing religion as a “political resource.” He explains that religious-based resources are “qualities possessed by religiously motivated people that can prove valuable in political action.”<sup>24</sup> According to Wald, these qualities are represented in three types of religious-based resources for political mobilization—motivation, organization, and social interaction. Religious motivation could work in two ways. First, it could encourage political activism by fostering a sense of individual or collective empowerment—actors might feel that with spiritual guidance they could be effective in this-worldly pursuits, including politics. Second, religion might stimulate political action by leading participants to perceive political issues in moral terms. Religious leaders and political practitioners can articulate

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<sup>23</sup> See Katherine Tate, “Black Political Participation in the 1984 and 1988 Presidential Elections” in *American Political Science Review* 85 (1991): 1159-76.

<sup>24</sup> Kenneth Wald, *Religion and Politics in the United States* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 29.

political issues, like immigration, as questions of morality, mobilizing religiously motivated actors for or against issues and for or against candidates who promote their moral perspective.

Wald also notes that religious ideals are potentially powerful sources of commitment and motivation that should not be underestimated as participatory resources. He believes that religious ideals inspire people to act politically because of a unique set of participatory incentives, making them so potentially powerful that “human beings will make enormous sacrifices if they believe themselves to be driven by a divine force.”<sup>25</sup> Since these ideas are sacred to believers, they provide powerful cues for political engagement. Stephen Carter affirms, “people to whom religion truly matters, people who believe they have found answers to the ultimate questions, or are very close to finding them, will often respond to incentives other than those that motivate more secularized citizens.”<sup>26</sup>

Black civic engagement takes on formal and informal connotations as it relates to civil processes. In this context “formal and informal” means that Blacks have been socialized into employing tactics that lie within and on the margins of mainstream civic processes. In other words, boycotting, picketing, and marching are just as legitimate as tools of civic expression as are voting, canvassing neighborhoods, or letter writing campaigns. This mix of “formal and informal” institutionalized and organic behavior has deep roots in Black Church civic engagement. It evolved as a participatory norm following the collapse of Reconstruction and, depending on the opportunities for

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 275-76.

mobilization, has ebbed and flowed since that era.<sup>27</sup> While the exclusion of Blacks from the nation's civic and social life with the onset of Jim Crow cemented a racialized public sphere, these conditions also nurtured what political scientist Michael Dawson has referred to as a "black counterpublic."<sup>28</sup> This counterpublic, which included Black religious institutions, social movements, civil rights organizations, Black magazines and periodicals, social groups and clubs, etc., encouraged a variety of civic tactics and strategies that challenged White supremacist discourse and practice.<sup>29</sup>

Black civic engagement also differs in the level of commitment actors devote to civic action. Voting, for instance, takes relatively less effort than boycotting a store or organizing a neighborhood association. Taking part in a southern protest during the civil rights movement, for instance, required a greater level of personal commitment and risk than campaigning for a candidate in a northern city. Thus, religion's effect on Black civic engagement varies not only because of multidimensionality, but also because of the multifunctional nature and context of civic action.

### **Gadamer's Fusion of Horizons**

Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical project sought to explore the phenomenon of understanding as it pertained to a *kind* of knowledge and truth that can be gained and transformed from multiple vantage points. Gadamer's attempt is not a methodology of the human sciences, "but an attempt to understand what the human sciences truly are,

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<sup>27</sup> See Hart M. Nelsen, Raytha L. Yokley, Anne K. Nelson, editors, *The Black Church in America* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1971).

<sup>28</sup> Michael Dawson, "A Black Counterpublic? Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agenda(s), and Black Politics," *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (1994): 195-223.

<sup>29</sup> See Glenn Usry and Craig S. Keener, *Black Man's Religion: Can Christianity Be Afrocentric?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

beyond their methodological self-consciousness, and what connects them with the totality of our experience of world.”<sup>30</sup> Gadamer argued that individuals have a “historically-effected consciousness” that embeds them in a particular history and culture by which they are shaped. Thus, any interpretation involves a “fusion” of the object being interpreted and the background of the interpreter. In order for thought to be conscientious, Gadamer argues that it must become aware of anterior influences—habits of thought, language, environment, and experience.<sup>31</sup>

Gadamer argues that to “acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand, not in order to look away from it, but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion.”<sup>32</sup> This hermeneutical philosophy makes sense out of the way the Black Church views its sense of purpose—anticipating the future in light of the past. Gadamer maintains that while historical consciousness observes horizons of the past, hermeneutical consciousness merges the horizons of the past and present:

Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.<sup>33</sup>

Inasmuch as understanding is taken to involve “fusion of horizons,” then it involves the formation of a new conceptual meaning that allows for integration. So what may be conceptualized as a true historical object, may in fact be recontextualized as a relationship which comprises both the reality of history and historical understanding in a

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<sup>30</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. and rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 2004), xxii.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiv.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.



contemporary context saturated with future implications. Reflecting a hermeneutical commitment to dialogue and engagement, Gadamer's philosophy can serve as a template to place the historicity of the Black Church in conversation with a prophetic reclamation—given, of course, his understanding that a fusion of present and past, old and new, is a continual growth that together makes something of living value while not explicitly distinguishing one apart from the other.<sup>34</sup>

Given that understanding always occurs against the background of experience, it just as much occurs on the basis of history. For Gadamer, understanding is an “effect” of history, while hermeneutical “consciousness” is itself that mode of being that is conscious of its own historical “being effected,” so:

In the process of understanding, a real fusing of horizons occurs—which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded. To bring about this fusion in a regulated way is the task of what we called historically-effected consciousness.<sup>35</sup>

Awareness of the historically-effected character of understanding is, according to Gadamer, identical with an awareness of the hermeneutical situation and he also refers to that situation by means of the phenomenological concept of “horizon.” Thus, understanding and interpretation always occur from within a particular “horizon” that results from a historically-determined situational location—meaning, “in a tradition this process of fusion is continually going on, for there old and new are always combining into something of living value, without either being explicitly foregrounded from the other.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 305.

Only in the past twenty years have scholars of African-American history, culture, and religion begun to identify that Black people created their own unique and distinctive forms of culture and worldview as parallel to, rather than replications of, the culture in which they were involuntary guests.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, a Black horizon of understanding is neither static nor unchanging, as understanding is not confined to the immediate horizon of its situation. Just as biases, preferences, and prejudices are brought into question in the process of understanding, so, in the encounter with another, is the horizon of our own understanding susceptible to change. For the Black Church, this took the form of varying degrees of emphases and valences in theological views—like the Old Testament notion of God as an avenging, conquering, liberating paladin, which remains a formidable anchor of faith in most Black churches.<sup>38</sup> The direct relationship between the holocaust of slavery, the notion of divine rescue, communal identity, and holistic scriptural application color the understandings of the Black Church in decisively implicit and explicit manners.

Gadamer views understanding as a matter of negotiation between oneself and one's partner in the hermeneutical dialogue, such that the process of understanding can be seen as a matter of coming to an "agreement."

[I]n being understood, the phenomena of historical life are seen as manifestations of universal life, of the divinity. Understanding and penetration mean, indeed, more than a human cognitive achievement and more than merely the creation of an inner universe.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*, 2. They identify the historical work of Melville Herskovits, John Blassingame, Eugene Genovese, Herbert Gutman, and Albert Raboteau as examples in recent scholarship that recognize Black slaves as not merely respondents to the demands of the slave system, but also active creators of individualized forms of culture and worldview.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 208.

Coming to such an agreement means establishing a common framework or “horizon” and as the result of a process of the “fusion of horizons.” This notion of an “horizon” means that every particular situation gains its meaning(s) only within its larger context.<sup>40</sup> Insofar as understanding is taken to involve a “fusion of horizons,” the task also involves acquiring an appropriate historical horizon to form a new context of meaning that enables integration of what is otherwise unfamiliar, strange, or anomalous.<sup>41</sup> In this respect, all understanding involves a process of mediation among two extremes and dialogue between polarities—where neither extreme remains unaffected. This leads us to adopt a “dialectical model” of the Black Church. Black churches are institutions undergoing a constant series of dialectical tensions involving polar opposites, constantly shifting between the polarities in historical time—priestly and prophetic, other-worldly and this-worldly, universalism and particularism, communal and personal, autocratic versus bureaucratic, resistance versus accommodation. While there is no Hegelian synthesis or ultimate resolution of the dialectic, the polarities give a comprehensive view of the complexity of Black churches as civil institutions, including their roles and functions in Black communities. The advantage of the dialectical model of the Black Church is that it leads to a more dynamic view of Black churches along a continuum of tensions, struggle, and change—thus assuring that the historical dynamism of institutions transitioning back-and-forth in response to certain issues or social conditions is not overlooked.<sup>42</sup> The most important aspect of both is the emphasis on constant interaction,

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>42</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*, 11-16.

the ongoing process of horizontal engagement which does not result in finality or complete elucidation.

In arguing that “historically-effected consciousness” exists and that it is shaped by, and embedded in, a particular history and culture, Gadamer conceptualized a mediational movement indispensable to understanding and arguing.

[H]istorical consciousness fails to understand its own nature if, in order to understand, it seeks to exclude what alone makes understanding possible. To think historically means, in fact, to perform the transposition that the concepts of the past undergo when we try to think in them. To think historically always involves mediating between those ideas and one’s own thinking.<sup>43</sup>

A disengaged observer cannot arrive at a fusion of horizons since the disengagement precludes the observer’s horizon from taking part in the conversation. As the only stable and coherent institution to emerge from slavery, the Black Church was not only engaged, but immersed in Black civic life. While the social processes of migration, urbanization, and differentiation had mitigating effects on this centrality and influence of the Black Church, the social gospel continued to inform and interact within the spheres of politics, economics, education, and other areas of civic life. Hence, the complexities of the Black Church as a civil institution require a more dynamic and integrative theory because it has played, and continues to play more complex roles and will continue to assume more comprehensive burdens. Just as social class factors cannot be adequately applied to Black people without taking into account what Billingsley terms their “definition of the situation”<sup>44</sup> in assessing the Black Church, one must consider what it has done before professing what it needs to do.

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<sup>43</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 398.

<sup>44</sup> See Andrew Billingsley, *Black Families in White America* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall 1968) as cited in Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*, 163.

As slavery, segregation, and the high degree of racism in the United States began to reflect the difficulties in American society, the Black Church became the primary institution to carry the hopes and dreams of an outcast people. The enduring search for respect, acceptance, and equality marked the situational limit of one moment, yet provided the optimistic hope for another. So, it was the Black Church that provided a transforming philosophy of knowledge and understanding through a reinterpretation of events stemming from an appropriation of scripture. Self-understanding is always realized only in the understanding of a subject matter, and that is what theology really says—that faith is just such an event, in which a new entity is found.<sup>45</sup> Gadamer helps us to see the error in viewing Blacks and Black institutions as merely being reactive to changes in larger society. A pro-Black historical perspective has correctly pointed out that American slaves were not automatons responding only to the conditions of the plantation system, but they were visionaries who formulated ideas about the possibilities of tomorrow—a heritage and creative impulse directly resulting from the transformative philosophy and practice of the Black Church.<sup>46</sup>

For most Whites during slavery, Christianity contained an aspect of control, intended to produce obedient and docile slaves. Speaking metaphorically, horizons can provide perspective by being the implicit and explicit beliefs that contextualize understanding. By establishing what is relevant and irrelevant, horizons mark the boundaries of comprehension as background beliefs and knowledge affect what and how something is understood. If taken as the beliefs that make understanding possible, one

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<sup>45</sup> See David E. Linge, ed. and trans., *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

<sup>46</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*, 195.

can view Gadamer's fusion of horizons as the manner in which the context of a subject can be weighted and interpreted differently from what was initially perceived. Thus, the mountains of slavery, oppression, segregation, and racism become moveable, not immutable. Negro spirituals like "Come This Far by Faith" and marching slogans such as "We Shall Overcome" provide a new horizon—or at the very least, a different hermeneutic—that then offers a new understanding.

For Gadamer, understanding is essentially open, and thereby also a risk. The tentative nature of understanding is unsettling because it involves anticipation and experience, both of which come with prejudice, and require temporal distance to distinguish the true prejudices, by which we understand, from the false, by which we misunderstand.<sup>47</sup> Hence, a newly-constructed hermeneutic for the Black Church will include historical consciousness and make conscious the prejudices governing its present understanding. For Gadamer:

Real historical thinking must take into account of its own historicity. Only then will it cease to chase the phantom of a historical object that is the object of progressive research, and learn to view the object as the counterpart of itself and hence understand both. The true historical object is not an object at all, but the unity of the one and the other, a relationship that constitutes both the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, through the foregrounding of prejudices and suspension of judgments, the logical structure of a question is presented whose essence is to open up possibilities and keep them open. Most experience, true experience specifically, that delivers insight is negative, drawing from this the conclusion that true experience must thus lead to openness to newer experience. Gadamer's Socratic wisdom clearly finds expression in

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<sup>47</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 298.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

this hope that the insight in the prejudiced character and negativity of hermeneutic understanding can only lead to further openness.<sup>49</sup>

Openness rather than closure provides a hermeneutic situation for the Black Church, and therefore, it can never transcend the realm of prejudices, but it can transcend those that have proven inept or ineffective. How does the Black Church go about this? Gadamer counsels against seeking quick fixes because this would only be a delusion fostered by the era, expectation, and effort. The Black Church must learn to work through shared experience, as it is often shared experience that allows recognition of what is appropriate, purposeful, meaningful, and necessary.<sup>50</sup> On the eve of his assassination, Dr. King apocalyptically announced,

... if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of general and panoramic view of the whole human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, "Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?"—I would take my mental flight by Egypt through, or rather across the Red Sea, through the wilderness on toward the promised land. And in spite of its magnificence, I wouldn't stop there. I would move on by Greece, and take my mind to Mount Olympus. And I would see Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Euripides, and Aristophanes assembled around the Parthenon as they discussed the great and eternal issues of reality. But I wouldn't stop there. I would go on, even to the great heyday of the Roman Empire. And I would see developments around there, through the various emperors and leaders. But I wouldn't stop there. I would even come up to the day of the Renaissance, and get a quick picture of all that the Renaissance did for the cultural and esthetic life of man. But I wouldn't stop there. I would even go by the way that the man for whom I'm named had his habitat. And I would watch Martin Luther as he tacked his ninety-five theses on the door at the church in Wittenberg. But I wouldn't stop there. I would come on up even to 1863, and watch a vacillating president by the name of Abraham Lincoln finally come to the conclusion that he had to sign the Emancipation Proclamation. But I wouldn't stop there. I would even come up to the early thirties, and see a man grappling with the problems of the bankruptcy of his nation. And come with the eloquent cry that we have nothing to fear but fear itself. But I wouldn't stop there.

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<sup>49</sup> See Jean Grondin, "Gadamer's Basic Understanding of Understanding," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 36-51.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty, and say, “If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will be happy.”<sup>51</sup>

The hermeneutical situation highlights the manner in which we are thrust into a history or set of stories that we did not begin and cannot end, but which we must continue in one way or another.<sup>52</sup> The action, therefore, must have a strategic focus and direction, as well as an accountability to keep moving toward a goal because without these elements, interest is soon lost and action wasted.<sup>53</sup> So in determining how to act, the Black Church must possess a comprehension of itself as well as the unfolding narrative in which it finds itself—thus, if it has to act, it has to understand, for better or worse, who and where it is and who and where it wants to be. From the beginning then, it is involved in the practical task of deciphering the narrative of which it is a part so that it can know how to move forward.<sup>54</sup>

In the hermeneutical situation the actions we take also react back upon our action-oriented understanding. They become part of what we understand when we understand our past and ourselves, as well as part of how we anticipate our future. So, not only are we constantly navigating the narrative of which we are a part so that we know how to move forward, but also we are always already in the process of moving forward. In this regard, the Black Church’s present understanding of these stories is an understanding

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<sup>51</sup> Taken from “I See The Promised Land,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), 279-80.

<sup>52</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row Publishing, 1962).

<sup>53</sup> Robert M. Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 23.

<sup>54</sup> See Georgia Warnke “Hermeneutics, Ethics, and Politics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 79-101.



from the middle of an ongoing narrative with the future still outstanding.<sup>55</sup> It has to reflect on and understand itself in the process of continuing to live and act as it has already understood itself. In other words, the Black Church lives or writes its narrative according to the meanings it has possessed and understands those meanings according to the ways it continues to live and write its narrative.<sup>56</sup> Taken in this manner, Gadamer's account for the Black Church's hermeneutical situation has important implications for civil society. If it attempts to understand itself and to consider how it ought to act proceeding only on the constantly shifting ground of an ongoing history, it cannot hope to transcend that history. To combat this, Gadamer offers an institutional ethic that can accommodate a human nature and reason that is also historical.<sup>57</sup>

Gadamer's hermeneutical use of "horizon" and "fusion" presents a useful inroad to understanding the historical Black Church as it moves forward. Horizon, in his sense, is the larger context of meaning in which the Black Church is set. The horizon is a never completed, situated awareness that provides a limited range of vision at any given time, and allows the horizon of the present and the horizon of the past to converge in a hermeneutical circle. This circle can be wrongly thought of as a circular track of question and answer where the horizons are discrete poles instead of a "contextually fulfilled circle" which joins the horizons of the Black Church into "a processual whole."<sup>58</sup> As a result, the horizons are always and intimately bound with the interactive engagement

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<sup>55</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 180-83.

<sup>56</sup> See Warnke, "Hermeneutics, Ethics, and Politics."

<sup>57</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 310-12.

<sup>58</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," in *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 103-62.

occurring in the sphere of shared context. Thus the horizons and interactive engagement are comprised in a closed circuit of shared influence where the past that situates the present is changed when engaged and in turn transforms again the context of the present. Neither horizon can be viewed as static or isolated from the other. Bounded by a bond of tradition, the “fusion” does not bring together two dislocated phenomena, but revisits and revises the related two horizons through engagement. “Fusion” therefore stands as a process of historical adaptation and contemporary application, making it a constructive alternative to pragmatic accommodationism.

### **Leadership, Change Theory, and Networked Organization**

According to Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, leadership would be a safe undertaking if organizations and communities only faced problems for which they already have the solutions.<sup>59</sup> This is a critical lens through which to view the Black Church. Heifetz and Linsky distinguish *technical* challenges, those which people have the necessary know-how and procedures to tackle, from *adaptive* challenges, those that require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places within the organization or community.<sup>60</sup> As adaptive challenges present themselves, the tendency is for members of an organization, particularly the Black Church, to look to an expert, specifically the pastor, to provide a technical solution—thus, running the risk of dysfunction, dissatisfaction, and dissolution. “For this reason,” Heifetz and Linsky offer, “people often try to avoid the dangers, either consciously or subconsciously, by treating

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<sup>59</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 13.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

an adaptive challenge as if it were a technical one.” Which is why, the two conclude, routine management is more prevalent than leadership.<sup>61</sup>

To define leadership as an activity that addresses adaptive challenges not only considers the values that a goal represents, “but also the goal’s ability to mobilize people to face, rather than avoid, tough realities and conflicts.”<sup>62</sup> The most difficult and valuable task of pastoral leadership may be advancing goals and articulating strategies that promote adaptive solutions. The role of leadership is to undertake an iterative process of back-and-forth between the balcony and the dance floor, obtaining a clearer view of reality and big-picture perspective while simultaneously being immersed in the action.<sup>63</sup>

The assertions of Heifetz and Linsky suggest that, in reference to the Black Church, pastoral leaders would not only have to be conscious about the challenges facing the Church and community, but be careful to interpret those challenges in adaptive terms as well. If, as Barbara Crosby and John Bryson argue, that in order to “coordinate action and make headway on resolving a complex public problem, the organizations involved need to be aware of the whole problem system and recognize that it has to undergo significant change,”<sup>64</sup> then evaluating and engaging the broad scope of systems, structures, and policies affecting the external community would be essential.

Additionally, the internal challenges facing the Black Church require a multi-tiered process that addresses the various dimensions collectively. For instance,

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>62</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), 23.

<sup>63</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 53.

<sup>64</sup> Barbara C. Crosby and John M. Bryson, *Leadership for the Common Good: Tackling Public Problems in a Shared-Power World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 9.

theological reflection on mission, identity, and purpose would need to accompany careful attention to contextual realities, both relying heavily on the Church's theological heritage and confronting the current social, economic, and political situation. As one pastor who was interviewed mentioned, "the clues will have to come from the pews."

Translation—moving forward, community and congregation members must have an active role in any effort of the Black Church's reclamation of its prophetic position because they are the ones immersed in the social, economic, and political conditions. Yet throughout this process, a clear focus on stewardship and partnership must be maintained to avoid the Church's prior pitfalls of accommodationism, isolation, and dysfunction. John P. Kotter explains that "needed change can still stall because of inwardly focused cultures, paralyzing bureaucracy, parochial politics, a low level of trust, lack of teamwork, arrogant attitudes... and the general human fear of the unknown."<sup>65</sup>

Given the pattern of accommodationism currently, it would be prudent for the Black Church to mirror the manner in which change actually occurs in organizations. Traditional strategic planning processes, in which an identified "upper" management team creates a plan with a set of "S.M.A.R.T." goals—specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-framed—and then systematically disseminates it into the system for implementation tend to incorporate linear methods to obtain complex, dynamic outcomes. Since, according to Kotter, attempting to create major change with simple, linear, analytical processes almost always fails,<sup>66</sup> *situational management* must be replaced with *directional leadership*. Within voluntary organizations such as the church, it is very

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<sup>65</sup> John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School, 1996), 20.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

difficult—arguably impossible—to enforce change from the pulpit without pushback from the pew. In the case of the Black Church, the history of grassroots mobilization and liberal democratic leadership embodied in many of its internal and external practices suggests that a traditional approach to change will be unsuccessful because it inadequately engages the grassroots.

John Kotter defines management as a set of processes that can keep a complicated system running smoothly, whereas leadership is a set of processes that create or adapt organizations to significantly changing circumstances.<sup>67</sup> Unfortunately for the Black Church, a management emphasis has been institutionalized, resulting in a culture that discourages pastors from learning how to lead. Ironically, this institutionalization is a direct result of past successes and hence the repetitious pattern of “doing what’s always been done”. Kotter diagnoses the syndrome as follows:

Success creates some degree of market dominance, which in turn produces growth. After a while, keeping the ever-larger organization under control becomes the primary challenge. So attention turns inward, and managerial competencies are nurtured. With a strong emphasis on management but not leadership, bureaucracy and an inward focus take over. But with continued success, the result mostly of market dominance, the problem often goes unaddressed and an unhealthy arrogance begins to evolve. All of these characteristics then make any transformation effort much more difficult.<sup>68</sup>

The combination of organizations that resist change and managers who have not been taught how to create change is lethal, particularly because sources of complacency are rarely adequately addressed since urgency is not an issue for managers, masquerading as leaders, who have been asked to simply maintain a current system of practices.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 29.

For Christians, there are even more fundamental theological reasons to target a holistic approach for change. First, we begin with our realization that Jesus always involved the disciples in His ministerial work—a dynamic collaborative of community and shared responsibility. Whether through actual “hands-on” participation, cognitive enlightening, or spiritual awakening, a simple developmental aspect of Jesus’ leadership was to model a practice from which the disciples could move the ministry forward following His ascension.<sup>70</sup> This pervasive theme, referred to by John Howard Yoder as participation or correspondence, is where “the believer’s behavior or attitude is said to correspond to or reflect or partake of the same quality or nature as that of the Lord.”<sup>71</sup>

Second, social, economic, and political factors shaped ministry. In general, the social setting of Jesus’ ministry was characterized by a pronounced social and cultural divide—in particular the urban/rural schism. In several instances in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus specifically addresses the spiritual and psychological toll on the community caused by the elitism and arrogance of the priests and city dwellers.<sup>72</sup> The presence of poverty is deeply reflected throughout Jesus’ ministry: Judas complained that the cost of the expensive perfume used to anoint Jesus’ feet should have been “given to the poor;”<sup>73</sup> the Roman tax structure was such a significant issue that the Pharisees used it in an attempt to trap Jesus;<sup>74</sup> and the suffering that the Roman colonial presence visited on the Jewish

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<sup>70</sup> See John 14:12

<sup>71</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 113.

<sup>72</sup> Luke 6:20

<sup>73</sup> John 12:4-5

<sup>74</sup> Matthew 22:17

people was so prevalent and brutal that its influence on the political consciousness of Jesus is inescapable—it must not be lost that while He was worshiped as the Son of God, His earthly time was also spent as an oppressed Roman colonial subject. In fact, the priests' political quietism and accommodation of Roman policies made Jesus' stance against them unquestionably political in nature.<sup>75</sup>

Third, an interactive, interdependent understanding of the Trinity points toward a dynamic, communal approach to leadership and change. If, according to Leonardo Boff, the Spirit of God is the power of the new and of a renewal in all things; the memory of Jesus' deeds and words, with a mission is to liberate the oppressed; and the principle that creates differences and communion, then one could agree that the Spirit is the originator of differences and instigator of communion seeking to strengthen the community in working to fulfill its needs.<sup>76</sup> Thus, the many expressions of vitality and services in the community are not a threat to unity, but an opportunity for all to be enriched because communion does not suppress or reduce differences, but integrates them into the purpose of the common good.<sup>77</sup> Leadership, therefore, becomes a relational practice that places those who lead and those who follow in a mutually-empowering dynamic, one that calls on the Spirit for creativity and innovation, and never in an individualistic sense or for self-advancement.

Finally, targeting a holistic approach for change is consistent with a key Christian tenet—liberation. As Gustavo Gutierrez reminds us, the proper understanding of history

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<sup>75</sup> See Obery M. Hendricks, Jr., *The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus' Teachings and How They Have Been Corrupted* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).

<sup>76</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1988), 192-95.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

is one in which the human being is seen as assuming conscious responsibility for human destiny, yet Jesus Christ liberates humanity from sin, which is the root of all disruption of love, justice, and community.<sup>78</sup> The liberating Spirit of God gives the Black Church a future horizon working in present circumstances toward God's missional and ecclesial purposes for the Church and all of creation. Since leadership and change address the future, liberation must be at the core of any approach because it was this quest that birthed, nurtured, and sustained the Black Church and community through times of social inequality, economic disparity, and political perfidy. The biblical narrative challenges the Black Church, and Christians as a whole, to take part in God's unfolding action in the world—an eschatological definition identified with hope that gives rise to a critical, prophetic voice—fostering an activist, liberative, and revolutionary stance grounded on faith in God.<sup>79</sup>

The liberation premise, which ascribes the message of the prophets to justice and describes the mission of Jesus as a revolution,<sup>80</sup> is a biblical interpretation of a call to action whose principal methodological innovation was to view theology from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed. This means that systemic practices and institutional policies should be called into question, challenged, critiqued, and corrected as they relate to creating and perpetuating a marginalized, minimized, and

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<sup>78</sup> See Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM Press, 1974).

<sup>79</sup> An older eschatological focus did not blossom into a social, economic, and political framework. While eschatology had been a prime concern of theologians since the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it had been apolitical—private, individual, and in existential terms. With the advent of a social gospel, eschatology was given a historical, collective, and future-directed orientation. See Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967); Johann Baptist Metz, *Theology of the World* (New York: Seabury, 1969); Helmut Gollwitzer, *The Christian Faith and the Marxist Criticism of Religion* (New York: Scribner's, 1970); Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*.

<sup>80</sup> Isaiah 61:1, Matthew 10:34



disenfranchised segment of society. This emphasis on praxis over doctrine defines a position that advocates a circular relationship between orthopraxis and orthodoxy—seeing the two as having a symbiotic relationship. Liberation, therefore, contradicts a politically-docetic interpretation of scripture which leaves oppressive structures unchallenged and thus abdicates Christian responsibility to wage struggle against social, economic, and political realities. This misconception can be traced to two crucial developments: first, Paul’s transformation of Jesus’ concern for collective social, economic, and political deliverance into an obsession with individual personal piety, and second, Constantine’s transmutation of a radical faith of the oppressed founded upon Jesus’ teachings to the official, militaristic religion of the oppressor.<sup>81</sup>

Coupled with being more reactive than proactive (or, practicing situational management versus directional leadership), another common error made by the Black Church is to pursue change from an individualistic, isolated silo versus a larger, integrative collaborative. Crosby and Bryson distinguish two types of organizations: the in-charge organization and the networked organization (see Figure 2.1). The in-charge organization has at the apex, an individual or small group that establishes organizational direction, determines guiding policies, and transmits directives downward. Embedded in this ideal type is the assumption that the organization engages in highly rational, expert-based planning and decision making to address issues. Arguing the inadequacy of this structure in today’s interconnected and interdependent world, they see a networked

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<sup>81</sup> See Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus*.

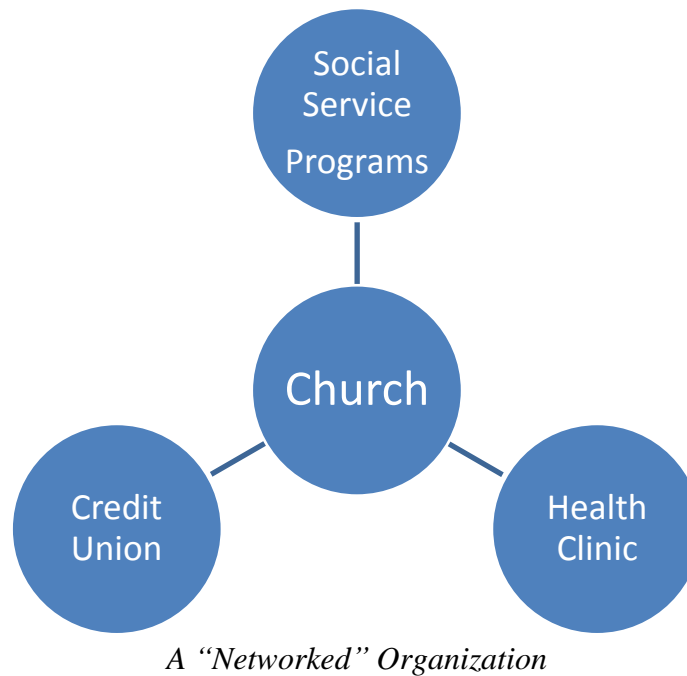
organization which is a part of a variety of external networks that are fluid and chaotic as a better, more beneficial model to influence change.<sup>82</sup> As Crosby and Bryson point out,

change advocates have to engage in political, issue-oriented, and therefore messy planning and decision making, in which shared goals and mission are being developed as the process moves along. New networks must be created, old ones coopted or neutralized. These networks range from the highly informal, in which the main activity is information sharing, to more organized shared-power arrangements.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Crosby and Bryson, *Leadership for the Common Good*, 5.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



**Figure 2.1: Hierarchical and Networked Organizations**

In order for the networked model to be effective, two premises must be accepted. First, a certain loss of autonomy will be experienced. The Black Church and its leadership have historically served as the primary source of solutions for the Black

community. From food shelves to clothing drives, what may not have been formal, integrative processes were in fact informal, institutional practices that addressed needs in the community. From the time of their birth up to the present, Black churches have stood in their respective communities as symbols of independence from White domination, subtly transmitting by their ubiquitous presence, a spirit of dignity and self-respect. Consequently, as Peter Paris points out, the principle of autonomy and its impact on the Black community are deeply rooted in religious, moral, and political values.<sup>84</sup> But, from the Black Church perspective, while it may have had the connection to the community, it lacked access to the resources of the wider community to effect systemic change. Within a networked model, the wider community may possess the resources and know-how, but lack the trust from, and relationship with, the Black Church and community. Here, what Geoffrey Vickers calls “acts of appreciation,” becomes a useful lens because appreciation merges judgment of what is *real* with judgment of what is *valuable*. Identifying problems involves new appreciation of how something works, what is wrong with it, and how it might become better—this “appreciation subsequently shapes the way a public problem is defined, the solutions considered, and the accommodation of stakeholders interests.”<sup>85</sup>

Second, an understanding of culture is pivotal. Edgar Schein distinguishes three levels of organizational culture: artifacts, which are visible organizational structures and processes; espoused beliefs and values, which are strategies, goals and philosophies; and underlying assumptions, which are unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions,

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<sup>84</sup> See Peter J. Paris, “The Public Role of the Black Churches,” in *The Church’s Public Role*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993).

<sup>85</sup> Crosby and Bryson, *Leadership for the Common Good*, 15.

thoughts, and feelings.<sup>86</sup> The culture of the Black Church is inextricably linked to the historical condition, treatment, and needs of the Black community. A non-acceptance of this interrelationship will undermine the efforts of any network with which it becomes involved. As Schein points out:

The most central issue for leaders, therefore, is how to get at the deeper levels of a culture, how to assess the functionality of the assumptions made at that level, and how to deal with the anxiety that is unleashed when those levels are challenged.<sup>87</sup>

Schein defines culture as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.”<sup>88</sup> Given this definition, one can see not just the historical connection between Black Church culture and leadership, but also the problem posed by a networked model—any challenging or questioning of basic, underlying assumptions will release anxiety and defensiveness.<sup>89</sup>

For the purposes of this dissertation, the researcher’s use of “*culture*” builds on Raymond Williams’ notion of culture “as the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life.”<sup>90</sup> On the basis of the cultural lifestyles of the Black community—from slavery to emancipation, and ideally from emancipation to liberation—I adopt Dwight Hopkins’ modification of Williams’ definition:

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<sup>86</sup> Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 26.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>90</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1961), 63.

Culture is always religious insofar as the way of life of all human beings entails some yearning for, belief in, and ritualization around that which is ultimate—that which is both part of and greater than the self. Culture is religious because the ultimate concern is both present in cultural material and transcends it.<sup>91</sup>

### Conclusion

I have woven together Franklin’s leadership characterizations with organizational theory and principles, the purpose of which is to convey that while Black Church leadership differs in perspective, content, and style from the Western theological tradition, its affirmation enabled Black people to experience another definition of their humanity:<sup>92</sup>

In the context of a society structured as a racial hierarchy, those who shared “European” features controlled political and economic power and used it for the benefit of their community. The Black Church emerged as one of the only communities Europeans could not control.<sup>93</sup>

Coupled with its independence, came the autonomy and control offered to the Black preacher that served as a training ground to learn and cultivate traits necessary for leadership in a Black context. Gadamer’s ‘fusion of horizons’ encourages the Black Church to use its past to inform its present and future in a critical manner that confronts brutal facts and continually refine its path.<sup>94</sup> A drawback to the autonomy and control is the identification with the leader opposed to the mission, to which Jim Collins warns,

[T]he moment a leader allows himself to become the primary reality people worry about, rather than reality being the primary reality, you have a recipe for

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<sup>91</sup> See Dwight N. Hopkins, “Self (Co)Constitution: Slave Theology from Everyday Cultural Elements,” in *Converging On Culture*, edited by Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, Kathryn Tanner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>92</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll: Seabury Press, Inc., 1975), 3.

<sup>93</sup> Michael Battle, *The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality*, 29.

<sup>94</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2001), 69-70.

mediocrity, or worse. This is one of the key reasons why less charismatic leaders often produce better long-term results than their charismatic counterparts.<sup>95</sup>

The Black Church is a complex organization but not a typical bureaucracy—behavior and processes are organized, but not highly formalized. A striking feature of the Black Church is the considerable loyalty and commitment displayed by church members toward their pastor, as demonstrated by the “spontaneous” outpouring of cash to Bishop Eddie Long during a recent worship service. Positively and negatively, the relationship between the pastor and members is often one of charismatic leader to followers rather than the formalized levels of command practiced by corporations, or White churches. This proves to be pivotal if the Black Church is to claim a relevant position on the future horizon. I look to now explain the research method and design in hope to articulate its contributions to the field of missional ecclesiology.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 72.

CHAPTER 5  
RESEARCH METHOD & DESIGN

**Introduction**

Based on the history and perspectival changes recounted in chapters 2 and 3, it is clearly evident that a different approach to mission and leadership would be required to remedy the acculturation, stratification, and disconnection of the Black Church. Such an approach would have to overcome the loss of historical identity characterized by the lack of relationality between church and community. It would have to encompass not only an intentional level of theological reflection upon mission, but a focused perspective on practical, preparatory theological education for pastoral leadership as well. The approach would have to embrace African Americans' own culture and heritage of "community" as an augmentation rather than an impediment. And, while addressing community crises and developments, it would have to avoid the social, economic, and political trap of compromise and cooptation. These needs point toward an opportunity to renew the Black Church's prophetic engagement through a process of missional and leadership transformation—a development with wider implications for the future.

**Mixed-Methods Research**

Before proceeding with a definition of mixed-methods research, it is important to distinguish between several terms that will be used throughout this chapter: *methodology*, *design*, and *methods*. A *methodology* refers to the philosophical framework and the



fundamental assumptions of research—because philosophical framework influences procedures of research, methodology is defined “as the framework that relates to the entire process of research.”<sup>1</sup> *Design* calls attention to the plan of action that connects philosophical assumptions to particular methods—whether experimental or survey research, ethnography, or mixed-methods, all fall under the umbrella of research designs. Lastly, *methods*, represent the techniques of data collection and analysis, “such as a quantitative standardized instrument or a qualitative theme analysis of text data.”<sup>2</sup> As a result, mixed-methods research can be defined as follows:

A research design with philosophical assumptions as well as methods of inquiry. As a methodology, it involves philosophical assumptions that guide the direction of the collection and analysis of data and the mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches in many phases of the research process. As a method, it focuses on collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or series of studies. Its central premise is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone.<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes referred to as a strategy of mixed designs,<sup>4</sup> such integration of qualitative and quantitative research provides a deeper understanding of the examined topic or at least a better idea of the meaning behind what is occurring. The inferences made with mixed-methods research can be stronger and more divergent while also including culture in the design by giving voice to everyone involved in the topic being examined. According to

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<sup>1</sup> John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>4</sup> See M. B. Miles and A. M. Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.).

research professors Abbas Tashakkori and Charles Teddlie, research on any given question at any point in time falls somewhere within a cycle of inference processes:

The cycle may be seen as moving from grounded results (facts, observations) through inductive logic to general inferences (abstract generalizations, or theory), then from those general inferences (or theory) through deductive logic to tentative hypotheses or predictions of particular events/outcomes.<sup>5</sup>

In this project, there was an initial attempt to inductively build a theoretical framework on the basis of previous work which could then be used as a basis for planning this course of research.

Although the main intent of this study is one of social description and civic prescription, providing historical overviews as well as statistical data and analyses, I would like to make clear what my underlying assumptions are in regard to the study of the historic Black Church. To date, a general theory for the social analysis of Black religious phenomena and sociology of Black churches has already been approached,<sup>6</sup> but I want to contribute the following theoretical assumptions to the scholarly dialogue: (1) the cultural dimension; (2) the Black Church as central mediating structure; and (3) the Black Church tradition as civic-minded.

### **The Cultural Dimension**

As farm and plantation slaves, then as domestic servants in White households, Blacks witnessed the most intimate aspects of White life and culture, but very few Whites knew anything about Black people or their culture. In fact, some scholars have viewed

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<sup>5</sup> Abbas Tashakkori and Charles Teddlie, *Mixed Methodology: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.), 24.

<sup>6</sup> See Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington: Associated Publishers, 1921); E. Franklin Frazier and C. Eric Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America/The Black Church since Frazier* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974).

aspects of Black cultural creations as aberrational attempts to mimic mainstream White culture,<sup>7</sup> while other scholars have claimed that Blacks are simply American and, having been ‘Americanized,’ possess no values or culture to guard and protect.<sup>8</sup> Such arguments refrain from giving Blacks the minimum presuppositions granted to other hyphenated American populations, “which is to say that their origins were elsewhere and that coming from elsewhere, if they have a viable history, they must also have an effective culture.”<sup>9</sup> This concession, however, recognizes that all persons come from, and live within particular contexts, therefore, “they possess specific cultural perspectives that are historically conditioned and shape the way they understand, see, and experience life.”<sup>10</sup>

Culture is the form of religion and religion is the heart of culture. Paul Tillich’s insight about the relationship between religion and culture is important in a discussion about the Black Church.<sup>11</sup> Religion is expressed in cultural forms like music and song, prayer and preaching, and modes of worship, to provide a few examples. But religion is also the heart of culture because it raises the core values of that culture to ultimate levels, giving them legitimacy. The core values of Black culture like liberation, justice, equality,

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<sup>7</sup> Examples of this view are found in the works of E. Franklin Frazier and Gunnar Myrdal.

<sup>8</sup> See Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Cambridge: MIT Press and Harvard University Press, 1963).

<sup>9</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 40.

<sup>11</sup> Tillich’s theology of culture involved a dialectical relationship between religion and culture. His broad definition of religion as “ultimate concern” or “ultimate value” makes it possible to see how religion sacralizes the central values of a culture or a group of people. In his view of Christianity however, Tillich also provided for the possibility of religion transcending culture and offering a critique of it in his notion of the “protestant principle.” See James Luther Adams, *Paul Tillich’s Philosophy of Culture, Science, and Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

and equity on all levels are raised to ultimate heights and legitimated in the Black Church, and on many occasion, were given birth and nurtured in its womb. According to Newbigin, culture is human behavior in corporate aspect—where the Black cultural heritage was vibrant and alive, so was the Black religious tradition, as much of Black culture was forged in the heart of Black religion and the Black Church.<sup>12</sup> A demise of the Black Church would have profound implications for the preservation of Black culture.

### The Black Church as Central Mediating Structure

Common in the American understanding of Black subculture is the assumption that the Black Church constituted the central institutional sector in Black communities. Reliable investigators such as Du Bois, Woodson, Frazier, Raboteau, Lincoln and Mamiya have consistently underscored the fact that the Black Church was one of the few stable and coherent institutions to emerge from slavery.<sup>13</sup> Among quasi-free Blacks, mutual aid societies and churches stood as the first institutions created by Black people. For example, the Free African Society, a mutual aid society founded by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones in 1787, gave birth to Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church in 1794.<sup>14</sup> During Reconstruction, according to Lincoln and Mamiya, the pattern for their central and dominant institutional role was established when churches became “the centers of the

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<sup>12</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 188.

<sup>13</sup> See W. E. B. DuBois, *The Negro Church* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1903); Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*; E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*.

<sup>14</sup> Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 66.

numerous Black communities in the South” that were formed as former slaves but separated from the plantation base to which they previously belonged.<sup>15</sup> Not only did the Black Church give birth to new institutions such as schools, lending institutions, insurance companies, and low-income housing, it provided multifarious levels of community involvement such as an academy and arena for political activities, in addition to the traditional concerns of worship, moral fabric, and social standing.

Some of the more astute visionary church leaders such as Adam Clayton Powell of Harlem, New York, Joseph Lowry of Mobile, Alabama, Ralph Abernathy of Montgomery, Alabama, and C.K. Steele of Tallahassee, Florida, saw the need to develop secular vehicles in order to cope with more complex and pluralistic urban environments. However, a partial differentiation of these institutions, spheres, and functions did not require separation from the Black Church. The resultant interplay and interaction allowed clergy and church members to influence the systems and practices of the larger society. King speaks of this in terms of “alliance politics,” where deep structural changes can be achieved by a broad coalition of organizations representing a variety of interests, “based upon some self-interest of each component group and a common interest into which they merge.”<sup>16</sup> This view challenges contemporary Black churches to enhance their activities and power by accessing all of its potential resources from inside and outside the traditional ecclesiastical framework. In contrast, most views of religion, based on the rhetoric of separation of church and state, “assume a posture of complete differentiation, where the spheres of the polity and the economy are completely separated from religion,

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<sup>15</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> See Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

do not intersect, and have very little interaction.”<sup>17</sup> My contention is that such a view, when applied to the Black Church, distorts the mediating significance of the Black Church and confuses its civic-mindedness.

### The Black Church Tradition as Civic-Minded

Although it has been variously expressed in both religious symbols and political concepts, the Black Church’s appropriation of the Christian faith is grounded in the principle of God’s involvement in humanity and humanity’s participation with God. In brief, the life and the mission of the Black Church have been integrally related to the sovereignty and activity of God and the social condition of His people. From this standpoint, civic-minded encompasses more than engagement on behalf of a constituency, it also includes community and capacity building, or as Paris states, a politics that builds structures for human associations.<sup>18</sup> The origins of most civic engagement were rooted in the reality of racial discrimination and the desire for independence, but nonetheless, it maintained a constant critical posture against American social, economic, and political practices.

The civic engagement of the Black Church offers two lessons on the relationship between religion and politics. First, it illustrates the potent point that American electoral politics depend upon the role of voluntary associations, and in the Black community, the Black Church is the dominant voluntary association. Second, as Paris highlights, politics is often too narrowly defined as “electoral,” that restricts the inclusion of the kind of community organizing and empowering activities which constitute the usual form of

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<sup>17</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 9-10.

<sup>18</sup> See Peter J. Paris, *Black Leaders in Conflict* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1978).

Black Church politics—food shelves, housing programs, and tending to the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the people are ultimately means of civic engagement because measurable civic power grows out of organized and mobilized people whose dignity and status have been acknowledged and affirmed.<sup>19</sup>

Due to their social location and independent existence, Black churches often formed a potent civic base, particularly larger congregations. With a civic understanding and political meaning, Black voices, votes, and activity began to extend beyond the structural confines of the church and into the systemic realities of society. Lincoln and Mamiya believe that “because their voices and votes counted in the universe of black activity, the black churches were able to enlist the deepest loyalties of their constituents.”<sup>20</sup> In all of the micro varieties of Black civic engagement that have unfolded over several hundred years, the target has always been the macro system of domination and oppression that has often attempted and succeeded in defining the limits and choices of the Black subculture.<sup>21</sup> It is in relationship to this history of domination that the civic-mindedness of the Black Church must be seen.

### **An Account of Research Design**

Mixed-methods research is presented as the “practical” process because it tends to solve problems using both numbers and words, combining inductive and deductive

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<sup>19</sup> Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, 110-17.

<sup>20</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 207.

<sup>21</sup> Genovese has also argued in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* that Black political choices during slavery were limited by the White system of domination. Such a view corresponds to my emphasis on the historical and contemporary mediating significance of the Black Church in relationship to other institutional spheres of society.

thinking, and incorporating means of observation and recording.<sup>22</sup> The aim of the synchronous design is to generate definitions and themes related to the understanding of the Black Church and give plausible indication to the actualization of that understanding. In other words, what *is* the historic Black Church? And *how* does that relate to being a Black Church? I will briefly account for the design of the research method developed, from congregation selection and focus group make up, to data collection and interpretation.

### Congregation Selection

I selected six congregations that represent a wide-range of characteristics and were most likely to offer an interpretation of social gospel, a demonstration of civic engagement, as well as a conceptualization of prophetic principles. I sought churches that exhibited ties to the “historical” Black Church, “social gospel” tenets, current practices of civic engagement, and a strong, charismatic pastoral leader. 300 surveys were provided to each congregation with a total of 698 received for analysis. Table 5.1 contains the survey total from each congregation.

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<sup>22</sup> Creswell and Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 10.



**Table 5.1. Congregation Survey Total**

<b>Congregation</b>	<b>Total Number of Surveys Received</b>
A	117
B	113
C	154
D	91
E	116
F	107

The selection of the six congregations occurred in three-stages. First, an in-depth look was undertaken to evaluate which congregations were historically rooted in a social gospel that informed their civic engagement. Second, the focus group of ten pastors along with the researcher identified the congregations that possessed a charismatic, pioneering leader who believes, articulates, and cultivates the historical tradition of the Black Church. Third, the focus group and I dealt with accessibility—that is, which congregations and leaders would make themselves available.

Given the multi-faceted dynamics across the national and international landscape, accessing congregations in areas where civic engagement factored into capacity building and community empowerment was important. Of the six congregations selected, all have ministries located in socially-stratified, economically-disparate, and politically-challenged cities—Oakland, Minneapolis, Chicago, Boston, New York, and Atlanta. Oakland has a 16.2% unemployment rate and a crime-index consistently higher than the national average, Minneapolis has the nation’s highest disparity of Black/White unemployment, Chicago has an estimated \$500 to \$650 million city deficit, the percentage of Bostonians living in poverty has increased from 16% to 22%, homeless rate

in New York City has increased 50%, and Atlanta has a reported homosexual male index of 419, 319 percentage points higher than the national norm.<sup>23</sup>

Congregation A is a Baptist church that was organized in 1919 and has a rich heritage of making a positive difference in the community of the Bay Area and around the world. Under the leadership of its senior pastor, the membership has grown from 50 to 5,000 and the pastor was named by Essence magazine as one the most influential Black Church leaders. It has a rich history that ties into the civil rights movement and the Black Panther Party and currently offers a host of capacity and empowerment activities ranging from a Digital Media program for middle-school children to economic development opportunities for minority small-business owners.

Congregation B is a Pentecostal church whose history dates back to the great economic depression of the 1930s. With only three pastors in that timeframe, the ministry has flourished to become a significant community pillar and presence in the Twin Cities. With weekly worship in the 1,000s, it ministry offers employment training, GED/High School completion assistance, and food drives. Recently, the ministry started a 501c3 non-profit entity to work toward community empowerment, economic capacity building, and grassroots organizing.

A Baptist church, Congregation C began in 1985 with the intent to represent and teach peace to all people. During a 5-year period, the church experienced steady growth and purchased properties that included a church auditorium, school, parsonage, and covenant. Out of concern for the quality of inner-city education, the church established a Christian academy for 500 children from pre-school to eighth grade. In 2002, the pastor

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<sup>23</sup> All statistics obtained from census information related to each city except for Bahamas which was taken from its National Economic Outlook report (2009).

successfully ran for Illinois State Senator in the 15<sup>th</sup> Legislative District and considers his senatorial position and duties an extension of his ministry. With over 20,000 members, this congregation represents the largest Black Church in Illinois and one of the fastest growing in the nation.

Congregation D, a Pentecostal church, was founded in 1984. It boasts a limited number of members and yet maintains a monumental presence in the community. It launched a non-profit organization which sought to confront child criminals and offer an alternative to gang life—a successful work that contributed to a sharp drop in homicides during the mid to late 90s. The pastor serves as president of a national leadership foundation whose mission is to build new grassroots leadership in forty of America's worst inner-city neighborhoods.

Congregation E is a long-standing Baptist church with a rich history tracing back to 1808. Once identified as the largest Protestant congregation in the United States, the church served as a major musical site during the Harlem Renaissance, cultivated the social justice understanding of a renowned German philosopher, and housed as pastor the first person of African-American descent elected to Congress from the state of New York. The church continues its vital social and political work through its non-profit arm that focuses on community development and social services. It has created \$500 million in development, including the first new high school in Harlem in 50 years, the first large supermarket, a retail shopping center, and low-income housing.

Congregation F, a Baptist church, began in 1928 with a storefront as its first place of worship. In addition to a worldwide prophetic ministry that includes active mission work in Kenya, Jamaica, Haiti, Romania, and India, Congregation F also has an emphasis

on children and youth education creating a Learning Center and Christian Academy in 1999. Beginning with 6 members and growing to a membership of over 14,000 with 6 weekly services at three locations, Congregation F continues in the Black Church tradition of concern for the community and a holistic ministry perspective.

### Pastoral Backgrounds

Nine pastors were interviewed to give a leaders' perspective on the Black Church, its role in the Black community, as well as its position within civil society. Therefore, the opening set of questions allowed each pastor to construct a personal interpretation of specific terms in addition to identifying a perceived change in Black Church focus or emphasis. The next set of questions dealt with the role of pastoral leadership and effectiveness of Black Church. These led to responses on developing institutional partnerships and assessing competing streams within the Black Church, and Black theology as well. Finally, the interview concluded with the individual suggesting how the Black Church can move forward in a relevant manner. The responses, which were written down and collected by the researcher, reveal consistent themes such as the valued role of the Black Church when it comes to civic engagement, the changing views regarding pastoral expectations, and the practical shifts within the Black Church and Black community that would emerge in the conducted survey.

Pastor A has nearly sixty years in ministry. For two consecutive years, he was named one of the most influential Black Americans Top 15 Greatest Black Preachers by Ebony magazine. As Pastor Emeritus and professor of Preaching and Church Ministries, Pastor A continues to function in a leadership capacity for the Black church and community. An acclaimed preacher, renowned scholar, and accomplished author of more

than sixteen books, Pastor A has served as a prophetic voice in the pulpit of the church as well as in the streets of the community, challenging individual living, institutional policies, and systemic practices.

Pastor B has served as senior pastor for over twenty years. With an educational background in Counseling Psychology, his pastoral perspective focuses on healing and helping individuals, families, and community. As presiding bishop, he works in an administrative and management capacity for his denomination on the local and national level. Pastor B has guided the congregation through facility expansion, ministry growth, and community outreach, believing that “in order for the church to be a part of the community, the community must be a part of the church.”

Pastor C has served in the role of senior pastor for twenty-six years. He draws on the Black Church tradition of emphasizing preaching and teaching to highlight biblical principles and bring spiritual truths to everyday reality. He has guided the congregation through several property purchases, opening of a Christian academy, and various ministry and outreach services. As an elected State Senator, Pastor C also serves as the joint chairman of his state’s Legislative Black Caucus. With an educational background in religion and philosophy, Pastor C also serves as Executive Vice President for a local non-profit that focuses on community issues such as teenage pregnancy, alcoholism, and education disparities.

An ex-gang member and current activist, Pastor D has been in the ministry for over 27 years. Ordained within his denomination, he is recognized as one of the most effective crusaders against gang violence in the city and has served as president of a non-profit that targets such community issues. With a background in street-level organizing

and Black Church politics, Pastor D serves as Special Advisor to the denomination's national presiding bishop. With appearances on numerous talk shows, the street minister has received national attention for his fiery and critical comments on Black Church leadership, politics, and agenda.

Pastor E comes from a long-line of Black prophetic preachers having been taught and mentored by one of the greatest, Samuel DeWitt Proctor. With more than forty years in ministry, Pastor E learned how to incorporate church activity into every aspect of community life and believes that "the church should be measured by its community effectiveness." Pastor E has spearheaded numerous boycotts targeting racist practices of institutions such as employment discrimination, disparate hiring policies, and exploitive advertising. As pastor, he founded and led a community non-profit responsible for housing and commercial development and was also instrumental in the establishment of two educational academies.

Pastor F has been in the ministry since the age of sixteen, and spent over sixteen years in his current senior pastoral role. With a background in community activism and urban ministry, Pastor F's dedication and commitment to the teachings of Jesus Christ and concern for the community provide a holistic ministry perspective on ecclesial work. As a scholar and community leader, Pastor F has worked diligently to merge the goals of the church and the needs of the community, being recognized by his state's Senate and home county for his outstanding commitment to ministering to the spiritual needs of his community.

Pastor G recently retired from pastoring following over fifty years of service. His legacy includes working with Martin Luther King, Jr., partnering with an area hospital to

build a medical center, and promoting justice from the pulpit of some of the largest Black churches across the country. Named by Ebony magazine as one of the top 15 Black preachers, Pastor G incorporated a civil rights mentality with a scholarly intellect in his pastoral approach, causing a colleague to refer to him as “a bridge to a glorious part of American history.” Identified as a theologian and civic leader, Pastor G has been involved in civil rights advocacy, human rights activism, and social justice issues for most of his adult life.

Pastor H has been in the ministry for over 33 years with the unique experience of leading his childhood church home early in his career. With pastoral positions in the “Bible Belt” as well as the Midwest, his perspective has been shaped by both conservative and liberal theological positions. An active office holder within his denomination for 8 years, Pastor H has been instrumental in its development of Christian education materials, minister training curriculum, and layperson practicum. His commitment to community and activism is clearly evidenced by his presence and participation in various activities and assemblies, from school board meetings to town hall gatherings.

Pastor I comes directly from the civil rights tradition having been mentored by pastors and activists such as Joseph Lowery and Andrew Young. His religious philosophy of “meeting people where they are” has contributed to the increase in church attendance and membership. He has held the position of State President in his denomination for two consecutive terms and is credited for expanding its religious purview to include mental illness as a dilemma in the Black Church and community. His community activism and organizing led to a “Poor People’s March” on the state capital

that brought together various denominational, organizational, and faith-based leaders from across the state to address the social, economic, and political policies of the state government.

#### Focus Group Make-up

A 10-person panel of pastors who agreed to help construct the interview questions spent three one-hour sessions outlining and developing the targeted points of perspective. At the forefront of their collective thought was a desire to understand how various leaders viewed the historical Black Church as well as how they envisioned it moving forward—as one pastor opined, “If there’s no understanding of its premise, there can be no consensus on its purpose.” So the approach of the researcher, guided by the panel, sought to involve insights from key Black Church leaders and congregations nationally and internationally beginning with qualitative one-on-one pastoral interviews separate from the congregations and concluding with quantitative survey distribution.

This panel of pastors was convened, some in-person and others via conference call, for group discussions in hopes that the setting would stimulate memories, ideas, and experiences of participants. Given a specific topic, the focus group provided an opportunity for disclosure where findings were either validated or dismissed. This process generated a common language that took the form of a “native tongue” relative to the Black Church as well as the Black experience. Members of the focus group were selected because of their pastoral experience, position in another civic institutional sphere, and presence at the grassroots level. Table 5.2 contains the breakdown of the 10-person group.



**Table 5.2. Focus Group Breakdown**

<b>Individual</b>	<b>Background</b>
Group Member #1	Current pastor, 27 years of experience, Bible-college education, community activist background
Group Member #2	Current pastor, 35 years of experience, seminary-trained doctorate degree, education background
Group Member #3	Retired pastor, 52 years of experience, civil rights activist lineage, civic leader, seminary-trained doctorate degree
Group Member #4	Licensed minister, federal government employee, seminary-trained doctorate degree
Group Member #5	Current college administrator and educator, social activist and author, seminary-trained doctorate degree
Group Member #6	Current pastor, 40 years of experience, president of denomination-based educational congress, seminary-trained doctorate degree
Group Member #7	Current pastor, 17 years of experience, seminary-trained master's degree
Group Member #8	Licensed minister, educator and capacity-building consultant
Group Member #9	Current pastor, 31 years of experience, recognized president of state denomination, community activist
Group Member #10 (International)	Former pastor and federal government employee, current president of seminary institute

### Data Gathering

As a mixed-methods study, I sought a process that included stakeholders in the design and research process and allowed them to be complimentary and critical to help ensure that they had an equitable impact on the research. As such, data was gathered in the following ways: first, I attended public worship and other open activities involving the ministry of the church; second, I began to gather information on particular church and

pastor histories while journaling personal reflections and interpretations; third, I conducted one-on-one interviews with the individual pastors using the 7-question template outlined in *Appendix B* where the pastors were afforded opportunities to make tangential comments and reflections pertaining to ideas and thoughts generated by questions which covered the areas related to pastoral understanding of Black Church, social gospel, and prophetic engagement, focus of Black Church, role of leadership, effectiveness of Black Church, and recommendations; and fourth, surveys, noted in *Appendix A*, were distributed during a single Sunday worship, or Wednesday evening Bible Study, in each of the six congregations.

#### Data Analysis

In terms of analyzing the nine interviews with senior pastors and the focus group sessions, I identified and isolated broader theological and theoretical concerns that I might bring as a researcher wherever possible in order to attend to the narratives and interpretations as they emerge. This process was done in three steps: first, the 2-hour interviews with the nine senior pastors and the three 1-hour focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed so that exact language, order, and stories served as a ‘thematic narrative’ to which my work attempted to remain faithful; second, the language, order, and stories that made up the ‘thematic narrative’ were coded to quantify the qualitative data;<sup>24</sup> and third, the in vivo coding procedure followed methodical processes developed in some mixed method designs.<sup>25</sup> The coding process helped to bracket trends and label

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<sup>24</sup> Tashakkori and Teddlie, *Mixed Methodology: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 128-30.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 139-48.

ideas to reflect increasingly broader theological perspectives that once assorted, could be thematically-grouped into larger dimensions, related and/or compared.<sup>26</sup> The result is both a theological interpretation of Black Church history, culture and practice, and a theoretical opportunity to explore civic engagement possibilities.

In terms of analyzing the 698 surveys, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) descriptive analysis was used to determine general trends, frequencies, and significant relationships. The next step included a presentation of the results in summary form, including models and tables. The information presented in both followed the standard information format presented in various statistics books.<sup>27</sup> The survey asked respondents to provide personal background and assess ministry activity, practices, and focus. Survey collection followed worship service with measures employed during worship to encourage participation, mainly in the form of ‘pulpit prodding’ by the pastor and, on occasion, brief explanation given by researcher. The purpose of the study was explained with assurance of complete anonymity and minimal time commitment. Upon submission, surveys were examined for completion errors.

### Rationale

Researchers have been conducting mixed-methods research for several decades and referring to the process by an array of names. Early reports on the application of such designs have employed terms such as multi-trait/multi-method research, integrated,

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<sup>26</sup> Creswell and Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 132.

<sup>27</sup> See Lawrence F. Locke, Stephen J. Silverman, Waneen Wyrick Spirduso, *Reading and Understanding Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2004); Tashakkori and Teddlie, *Mixed Methodology: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*; Creswell and Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*.

combined, hybrids, methodological triangulation, and mixed methodology.<sup>28</sup> The bases for employing such a design are varied, but can be basically categorized as an approach to expand the scope or breadth of research that offsets the deficiencies of either qualitative or quantitative alone.<sup>29</sup> Mixed-methods strategies involve collecting data in a synchronous, not sequential, manner whereby the data collected in one phase contribute to the data collected in the next. Data collected in these designs tend to: provide more data about results from the earlier phase of data collection and analysis, select participants who can best provide that data, or generalize findings by verifying and augmenting study results from members of a defined population.<sup>30</sup> Figure 5.3 illustrates the process.

The collection and analysis of structured survey responses and open-ended interviews in an iterative analytic process can provide significant information pertaining to emergent and unexpected themes. For example, a statistical analysis of the survey responses may reveal an unrealized association between variables that interviews do not uncover. The use of simple statistical measures of association, in this case chi-square, could then be used to discover whether a significant difference of opinion may have been missed or overlooked. In sum, the research strategy integrating different methods is likely to produce better results in terms of quality and scope of findings.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, it encourages the investigator to probe the underlying issues assumed by mixed-method—the perception of pastors and the impression of members.

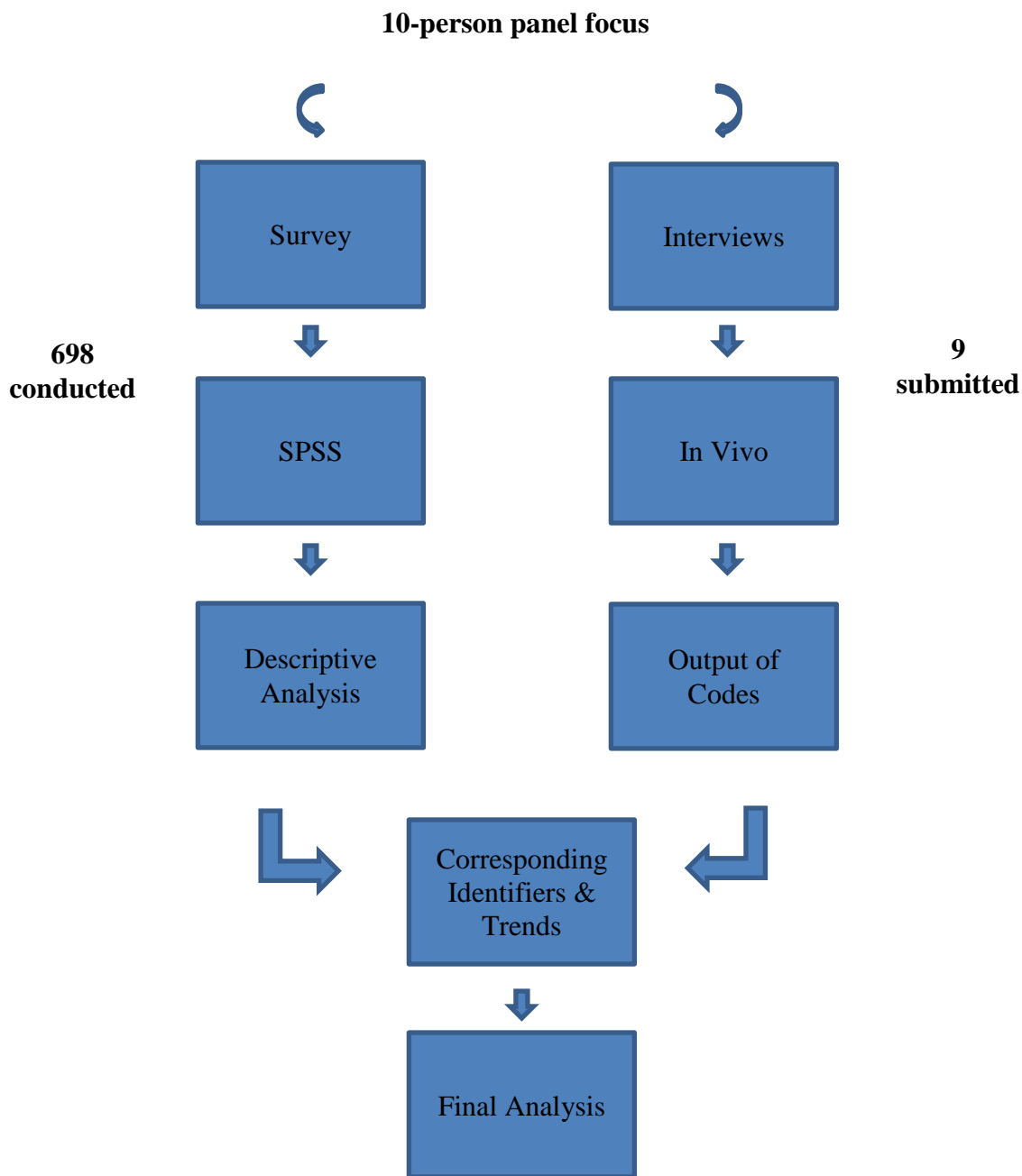
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<sup>28</sup> Creswell and Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 5-6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-10.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.



**Figure 5.3. Mixed-Method Design**

### Ethical Considerations

#### Role of Researcher

As a minister ordained in one of the seven major historic Black denominations, National Baptist Convention, Incorporated, I have professional, not to mention, personal

ties to the phenomenon being studied. I was welcomed as an insider and as a researcher, given full access to congregations, leaders, and members. At times, steps had to be taken to provide a formal introduction of myself and the research to the pastoral leaders in order to establish a level of trust—a standard barrier when it comes to research on, work in, and collaboration with the Black Church.

As one who has preconceived notions and ideas related to the diminishing role of the Black church as it pertains to civic engagement, I had to separate preconceptions from actual findings. Throughout the process, I sought to test theories and hypotheses with members of the focus group allowing for significant ongoing reflection about the process as it was unfolding. At the same time, this dual role of affecting and being affected by the process means that the researcher was a stakeholder in the findings and implications. Thus, the researcher's personal and professional interests were aligned in large measure with the findings.

#### Data Collection and Storage

In addition to the ethical issues of conflicting interest, research perception, and pastoral/congregation anxiety, the collection, analysis, and storage of research also required ethical considerations. The survey promised anonymity to respondents, and any references that would identify individuals or congregations were removed from public reports and analysis. Upon collection of data, each congregation and respondent was given numerical codes to ensure anonymity during analysis. Data will be stored for a three-year period and electronically-protected or lock-box secured. Names of interviewees were changed in the published accounts of the research, unless they granted

permission for use of actual names. Each congregation has access to the overall research findings.

### **Conclusion**

There have been many important contributions made in an attempt to define the “Black Church,” like those of James Cone, J. Deotis Roberts, C. Eric Lincoln, and Lawrence M. Mamiya, just to name a few. All sought to identify the distinct Black experience, and yet clarify the White mainstream conditions that colored the experience. In doing so, they furnished an understanding of how the liberating message of Jesus Christ functioned to empower Blacks, create a distinct community, and call for a different style of leadership and civic relationship. In many ways, each contribution targeted God’s transformative work in the lives of Blacks and the possibilities for society as a whole. I have attempted here to demonstrate how and why this mixed-methods research is a work of public theology. Just as with Cone, Roberts, Lincoln, and others have done, the subsequent chapters will seek to help the Black Church move forward. It will draw on the multitude of voices heard along the way, describing discussions, identifying challenges, and outlining suggestions. Theological and theoretical reflections will be placed in conversation, and historical and practical insights will be integrated in an attempt to create a new horizon for the Black Church—one that connects the heritage and legacy of the past with the needs and hopes for the future.

CHAPTER 6  
DATA ANALYSIS

**Introduction**

With the rise of social sciences and other social disciplines in the past two decades, the creation and normative description of the “Black Church” took place. Most Black interpreters, trained in or familiar with social sciences, outlined and defined the theoretical and practical boundaries of the Black Church. These interpreters sought a unified Black church, or at the very least, cooperation among Black churches to address the political, social, and economic problems of Black oppression.<sup>1</sup> However, the early constructive discourse of W.E.B. Du Bois regarding “the Negro Church” was descriptive and prescriptive, articulating “a particular conception of what black churches ought to do in light of the depressing situation of blacks in the south at the end of the nineteenth century.”<sup>2</sup> Although centrally responsible for the creation of “the Negro Church,” Du Bois’ work in comparison with other Black interpreters indicates a struggle to articulate “older notions of a unique spirituality alongside the new social scientific notion of ‘the Black Church’ as the principal social institution in Black life.”<sup>3</sup> Time and again, when

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<sup>1</sup> Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 141.



comparing “the Negro Church” to White churches, Du Bois noted that the former was more than “simply an organism for the propagation of religion.”<sup>4</sup>

This chapter examines the combined effects of pastoral leadership, historical understanding, social awareness, and biblical comprehension evidenced in my qualitative and quantitative findings. I consider here the multidimensionality of Black Church practices (such as preaching and teaching) as well as the direct effects of various factors on the interpretation and understanding of social justice, public policy, and civic engagement. Throughout this analysis and interpretation, three themes emerge across our qualitative and quantitative findings: 1) the church and community, as resources, need to be connected to the resources possessed by larger civil society institutions, which demonstrates the integral role of the church as it pertains to the community awareness of, and ability to access resources from, the wider external community; 2) pastoral leadership impacts the knowledge, understanding, and participation in civic engagement and access of resources; and 3) apparent congregational deficiencies affect the extent of capacity building, strategic alliances, and civic engagement. We will unfold the analysis of this chapter first by highlighting the concept that the Black Church provides mediating accessibility; second, we will analyze survey responses to determine significant correlations and variables; third, we will relate and interpret the interviews to identify patterns and trends; and fourth, we will bring together survey and interview findings in conversation to derive general conclusions.

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<sup>4</sup> Dan S. Green and Edwin D. Driver, eds., *W.E.B. Du Bois: On Sociology and the Black Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 228.

### Mediating Accessibility

As Martin Kilson has observed, much of the interaction between the Black Church and civil society was characterized by “patron-client relationships” between urban machines and Black leaders, which worked through “a small group of blacks who fashioned personalized links with influential whites, becoming clients of the whites for a variety of sociopolitical purposes.”<sup>5</sup> Hence, the Black Church and community would be better served by more vested relationships that allow institutional and systemic access on a wider scale. As a community with limited access to resources, Blacks rely heavily on the Church to be either an end, or no less than a means to an end. Religious institutions within the Black community are important resources for Black mobilization and participation. An extensive study of volunteerism in the United States conducted by Sidney Verba and colleagues found that many individuals learn civic skills through their religious institutions. The research reported that while over two-thirds of individuals in the United States have learned civic and organizing skills in their workplace, about two-fifths practice such skills in nonpolitical spaces, and nearly one-third reported practicing such skills in their worship environments.<sup>6</sup> The study concludes that for several reasons, Blacks derive more participatory benefit from their churches stemming from the higher

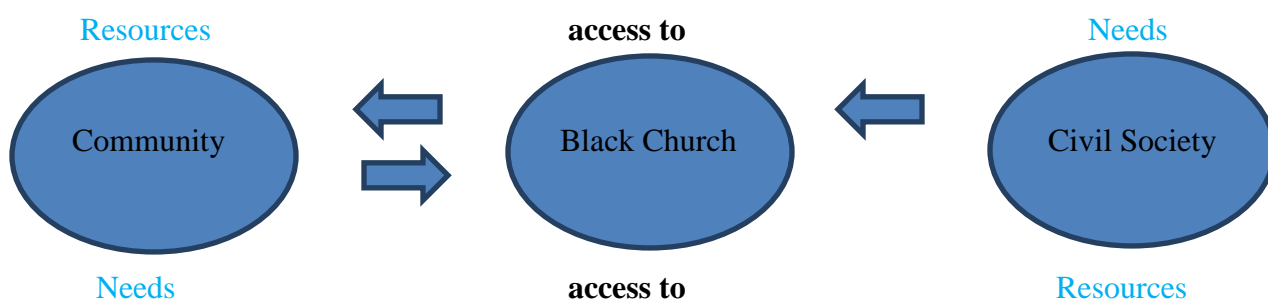
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<sup>5</sup> Kilson also points out that the exclusionary systemic practice of treating the Black community as an accessible resource rather than partner undermined Black development. See Martin Kilson, “Political Change in the Negro Ghetto, 1900-1940s,” in *Key Issues in the Afro-American Experience*, ed. Nathan I. Huggins, Martin Kilson, and Daniel M. Fox (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971).

<sup>6</sup> See Sidney Verba, Kay L. Schlozman, Henry Brady, and Norman Nie, “Race, Ethnicity and Political Resources: Participation in the United States,” *British Journal of Political Science* 23 (1993): 453-97.

likelihood of church membership, Protestant affiliation, and exposure to relevant stimuli at their place of worship compared to the general population.<sup>7</sup>

During an initial conversation, one minister, when asked to identify the difference between the Black Church in a historical and contemporary context articulated, “The pulpit and pew have become so selective that the Black Church is very ineffective.” As he continued to explain, the link between pulpit consciousness and pew cognizance became apparent. The idea of “selective” preaching, or “selective” service, according to this pastor, follows the self-interest models of American individualism and totally counteracts the mediating role that should be played by the Black Church.



**Figure 3.1. Connective Model of Community, Black Church, & Civil Society**

Figure 3.1 illustrates the mediating position I hypothesize is held by the Black Church. The Black Church provides access to its constituency as needed by other social, economic, and political institutions, but provides no access for its constituency to those same institutions. As figure 3.1 shows, the Black Church has complete access to the resources and needs of the community, which directly foster its positioning as a pillar in and for the community. Involvement of, as well as in, the church—a macro resource for

<sup>7</sup> See Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie, “Race, Ethnicity and Political Resources: Participation in the United States.”

civil society—nurtures skills that can be used in a larger context, so the presence of the Black Church might encourage political participation directly, or mobilize congregants and community members to challenge the practices of local, state, or federal agencies. Both direct political participation and mobilization emerge as a result of the Black Church's reciprocal relationship with, and commitment to, its community. Figure 3.1 also illustrates the potential reciprocal relationship between the Black Church and civil society. Church visits by political candidates, for instance, provide congregants with more knowledge of political affairs and candidates' agenda, but do nothing to include the community in strategic alliances.

As an indigenous institution that has survived everything from Reconstruction to a host of social and political movements throughout the late nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, the need for the Black Church to operate as a mediating resource for its community is critical, its sustainability over time making it the only Black institution which consistently promoted the affirmation and resistance of Blacks. This research will assess how the Black Church can heighten that participatory process given its communicative networks, capacity to promote institutional interaction, and capability to provide essential resources.

Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk describe three zones of organizational life: the *emergent* zone, where pioneering leaders innovate and establish organization; the *performative* zone, when norms and skills are clearly known and organizational life proceeds on a linear path; and the *reactive* zone, which represents discontinuous change where old patterns no longer work, the system declines, and crisis and chaos ensue.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 40-58.

Contextually mapped onto the Black Church, the reactive zone corresponds to its current disposition, position, and configuration. For an organization in the reactive zone, the turning point is the moment of crisis. In that zone of confusion—which Roxburgh and Romanuk liken to the biblical wilderness<sup>9</sup>—the Black Church can begin intrinsic theoretical and theological work around identity and role as it relates to civic engagement.

### Surveys

Consistent with Robert Franklin’s progressive read on the needs of the Black Church, this aspect of the research sought to investigate the membership perception of specific church practices as they relate to social consciousness, civic engagement, and the church’s civic responsibility. As scholarship on political participation demonstrates, any organizational activity, religious or secular, is likely to promote civic engagement,<sup>10</sup> and scholars such as Aldon D. Morris, Anthony B. Pinn, and Curtis J. Evans, inter alia, have documented the role of the Black Church as an indigenous, mobilizing agent of protest as well as a contemporary catalyst of civic engagement.<sup>11</sup> In this regard, the survey asked members to assess frequency of certain activities, topics and themes addressed, as well as organization in hopes of clarifying the interrelationship of its nature, its ministry, and its organization. According to Craig Van Gelder, these three aspects must be defined and

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 52-53.

<sup>10</sup> Fredrick C. Harris, *Something Within: Religion in African-American Political Activism* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1999), 58.

<sup>11</sup> See Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984); Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003); Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion*.

related to one another “in developing a more full-orbed missional ecclesiology.”<sup>12</sup> He goes on to say that church beliefs and confessions shape identity and give direction to its life and ministry which has historically tended to develop “by affirming certain biblical principles in response to problems within historical settings.”<sup>13</sup> Given the historical narrative of the Black Church, the survey attempted to find a functional connection between the Black Church’s historical understanding and Black churches’ congregational practices.

### Bible Significance and Priority

The Black Church has developed symbols, rituals, sayings and spirituals based on biblical stories to help interpret historical events, social conditions, and civic responsibilities. Using symbolic framing, the Bible is both a means and an end that is especially important for launching, supporting, and sustaining civic engagement in the Black Church. From this perspective, the Bible provides meaning and clarity for historical and present-day events, as well as possible avenues for collective redress. More importantly, when steps are taken to effect change, the inspirationally-derived action often has biblical backing imbued with drama, metaphors, and spiritual potency.<sup>14</sup> The data in table 6.1 illustrates that the Black Church is helping congregants discover how the activity of the church is informed by biblical and theological knowledge.<sup>15</sup> The table shows that 18.8% and 55.3% of respondents respectively believe “highly” and “very

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<sup>12</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*, 37.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>14</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South,”* 319-20.

<sup>15</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 357.

highly” that all ministry decision-making is informed by the Bible; the resultant redaction is a Black religious tradition that views the biblical narrative as the primary guide to its implementation and integration of ministry.

**Table 6.1**<sup>16</sup>

Q: <i>The Bible informs all decision-making.</i>	
Very low	2.1%
Low	2.6%
Moderate	10.8%
High	18.8%
Very high	55.3%
Don't Know	4.7%

*N* = 662

A God who is unquestionably for His people is what Blacks see when they turn to the scriptures, and as one preacher put it, “we are foolish enough to believe that the Bible is what it is, says what it says, and does what it does!” To understand the Black Church in its most profound sense, it is necessary to identify and describe the deeply-embedded biblical hermeneutic that is at the center of its “sacred story.”<sup>17</sup> It is plausible to suggest that the Black sociocultural experience can lead to a markedly different view of scripture than that of other Christian communities, a claim that is supported by David Kelsey. In *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, Kelsey argues that all faith communities have some master interpretive lens that guides their interpretation and use of scripture. He contends that decisions about how to interpret texts are not made on the basis of some normative understanding of scripture, but on a prior decision, based on social location.

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<sup>16</sup> 36 responses were missing. For the full SPSS-generated table, see appendix D: question #22.

<sup>17</sup> Sacred stories are stories that lie too deep in the consciousness of a people to be directly told. They form consciousness rather than being among the objects of which consciousness is directly aware. What Blacks believe the scriptures reveal about the power of God on their behalf operates at this level. It becomes a way of being in the world, a way of looking at life that over a period of time constitutes their reality. See Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” in *Why Narrative?* ed., Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 69-72.

What is perceived to be the most important aspect of Christianity is the key factor that determines its construal and usage.<sup>18</sup> For the Black Church, the most important aspect is the social gospel dimension of the Bible and how it informs missionary praxis.

Kelsey's point—how a faith community's understanding of the essence of Christianity serves as the lens through which it views all of scripture—supports the claim of a distinctly Black biblical hermeneutic on two levels. First, it dismantles any notion of a single normative understanding of scripture and legitimates diverse uses of scripture on the basis of different understandings at the heart of Christianity. Second, it validates a Black perception of God that is a result of experiences and interpretation of scripture based on those experiences. LaRue agrees:

The manner in which blacks believe God to be present on their behalf and their absolute certainty that this is what God is about when they interpret scripture is a belief so firmly grounded in black religious life that it indeed becomes the template for how blacks understand all of scripture.<sup>19</sup>

The Bible is central to Black Church culture, activity, and engagement. Its primary positioning posits the Black Church as a conduit between commonly held beliefs, Black experiences, and subsequent attempts at addressing social, political, and economic problems. To this end, common recognition of, and reliance upon, an impartial and just God through biblical examples and themes of suffering and victory by individuals who anticipate and participate in deliverance contribute to continued commitment to the church and community, provide a common, reassuring language, and frame pending events. In doing so, references to common biblical illustrations, stories,

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<sup>18</sup> David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 4.



and examples in which God intervenes via human agency firmly ground specific events and theological interpretations that correlate ministry with social ills, reflecting a reliance upon the Holy Spirit and biblical insight that can be used as fuel for civic engagement.

### Biblical Study and Reflection

Given that the Bible plays such an integral role in informing decision-making, it would be reasonable to assume that biblical study and reflection play an equally critical role in shaping one's understanding and interpretation of civic engagement. As previously mentioned, biblical interpretation helped socialize Blacks in regard to other-worldly and this-worldly pursuits—the former being viewed as more “accommodating” or “priestly,” the latter being thought of as more “radical” or “prophetic.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, biblical interpretation could placate the masses or evoke liberation, promote or undermine community involvement, or encourage or discourage civic engagement. Table 6.2 shows only 12.6% and 11.7% respectively reported that Bible study and reflection never or seldom takes place at civic engagement meetings. However, it is important to note that specific Bible study and reflection that ties together biblical premise and civic practice is ideal. As such, table 6.3 shows that only 13.3% and 14.7% respectively reported that Bible study and reflection never or seldom address public policy work.

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<sup>20</sup> See Robert M. Franklin, *Another Day's Journey: Black Churches Confronting the American Crisis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

**Table 6.2**<sup>21</sup>

*Q: Biblical study and reflection takes place at social justice/public policy ministry meetings.*

Never	12.6%
Seldom	11.7%
Sometimes	24.0%
Regularly	29.0%
Always	17.1%

*N = 661*

**Table 6.3**<sup>22</sup>

*Q: Biblical study and reflection addresses social justice/public policy and advocacy work.*

Never	13.3%
Seldom	14.7%
Sometimes	25.4%
Regularly	24.4%
Always	15.5%

*N = 654*

This posits that contemporary Black churches recognize the usefulness of the Bible as a support for civic engagement. Furthermore, it promotes a common understanding of the Bible that provides the impetus to organize such ministries and sustain such activities that are informed, inspired, and influenced by scripture. More significantly, it establishes a belief system that is essentially communal in its biblical interpretation and prophetic in its civic engagement.

#### Individual Growth in Biblical Understanding of Social Justice and Public Policy

One of the interesting dynamics within the Black Church and community is their social understanding and interpretation of scripture. Many Black leaders, both religious and political, stress the moral-spiritual dimensions of public issues, often alluding directly to God and the Bible. In order for the masses to remain civically engaged, their

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<sup>21</sup> 37 responses were missing. For the full SPSS-generated table, see appendix D: question #8.

<sup>22</sup> 44 responses were missing. For the full SPSS-generated table, see appendix D: question #9.

individual growth in biblical understanding must be maintained. One of the factors contributing to the rise of prosperity preaching is its biblical focus and interpretation of scriptures that refer to health, wealth, and abundance.<sup>23</sup> In a similar fashion, a major factor in the Black Church renewing its prophetic role is the growth among membership relative to biblical understanding of social justice, public policy, and civic engagement. According to table 6.4, only 4.0% and 6.7% of respondents respectively felt that the church never or seldom helped in their biblical understanding of social justice and public policy work.

**Table 6.4**<sup>24</sup>

*Q: Our congregation helps me grow in my biblical understanding of social justice/public policy work.*

Never	4.0%
Seldom	6.7%
Sometimes	20.5%
Regularly	27.4%
Always	40.8%

*N = 660*

This is particularly interesting because 88.7% report that the congregation sometimes, regularly, or always helps one to grow in biblical understanding of social justice/public policy work, providing partial insight as to how to address the fundamental challenge of integrating religious motivation with civic practice. Black religious worldviews—perspectives carved from slave acceptance of Christianity and Black historical experience with social, economic, and political oppression—have provided, and continue to provide, members of Black churches and citizens in Black communities with a biblically-informed civic understanding through which to articulate injustice and

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<sup>23</sup> Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It? Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 51.

<sup>24</sup> 38 responses were missing. For the full SPSS-generated table, see appendix D: question #10.

participate in its removal. Scholars of social movements call these articulations and participations “collective action frames,” defined as “emergent action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimize” civic engagement activities and campaigns.<sup>25</sup> Growth in biblical understanding can construct collective action frames out of the Black Church’s traditional culture that lead to a different, yet functional, approach to missional ecclesiology.

### Intentional Conversations

When asked which is a more helpful way of describing the conversion process, a Christian discovery of indigenous societies or the indigenous discovery of Christianity, and what’s at stake in the distinction, Missions and World Christianity scholar Lamin Sanneh responded:

The Christian discovery of indigenous societies describes the process of missionaries from the West coming to Africa or Asia and converting people, often with political incentives and material inducements. The indigenous discovery of Christianity, by contrast, describes local people encountering the religion through mother tongue discernment and in the light of people’s own needs and experiences. The indigenous discovery places the emphasis on unintended local consequences, leaving the way open for indigenous agency and leadership, while the Christian discovery looks to the originating impulses and the Western cultural binding of religion. The one stresses external transmission, and the other internal appropriation.<sup>26</sup>

His response brings to bear a critical point—perspectives from the margins rarely garner the attention afforded at the center. But when given, the perspectives from the margins

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<sup>25</sup> See David Snow and Robert D. Benford, “Master Frames and Cycles of Protest,” in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, ed. Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 55.

generate such specific narratives that culturally, contextually, and critically add innovation to the whole.

According to Franklin, such is the case with the Black Church, as it has “earned a noble place in the complicated history of American democracy and American Christianity.”<sup>27</sup> In fact, much of prophetic Christianity in America stems from the prophetic Black Church tradition—from the Socratic questioning of White supremacy dogma, to the prophetic witness of love and justice, to the hard-earned hope that sustains long-term commitment to the struggles of Black folk—all are the rich heritage and legacy of the historic Black Church.<sup>28</sup> In fact, the rationale for the questions highlighted in tables 6.5 and 6.6 was to explore whether congregations were embracing and educating the history of the Black Church, as some scholars believe that many, inside as well as outside, do not know basic information about the Black Church, are unaware of its history, mission, and achievements, and do not immediately appreciate the fact that the Black Church is an American institution with which they should become familiar.<sup>29</sup>

**Table 6.5**<sup>30</sup>

Q: *Our congregation has intentional conversations about the historical role of the Black Church.*

Never	5.3%
Seldom	8.3%
Sometimes	25.7%
Regularly	33.4%
Always	23.4%

*N* = 673

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<sup>27</sup> Robert M. Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 106.

<sup>28</sup> Cornel West, *Democracy Matters* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 158.

<sup>29</sup> Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities*, 106.

<sup>30</sup> 25 responses were missing. For the full SPSS-generated table, see appendix D: question #11.

**Table 6.6**<sup>31</sup>

Q: *Our congregation has intentional conversations about our present obligation to the historical heritage of the Black Church.*

Never	6.4%
Seldom	8.8%
Sometimes	23.8%
Regularly	33.1%
Always	22.4%

*N* = 663

Interestingly, for both questions, respondents said that the congregation regularly has intentional conversations about the historical role of the Black Church and their obligation to its heritage, with 33.4% and 33.1% respectively. This points out that not only is the Black Church continuing to nurture in a cultural and educational capacity, but it also maintains the legitimacy to lead in other areas. The Black Church has long been criticized and scrutinized for its lack of relationality, so much so that some arrive at the conclusion that its failure to relate is the main contributor to membership decline,<sup>32</sup> like social researcher R. Drew Smith, who underscores the social isolation of low-income, urban residents from employment, social services, and other poverty-alleviating networks in metro areas that either go unnoticed or underserved by local congregations.<sup>33</sup> The potential of Black churches to bridge that distance to help provide people with information and access to resources is significant.

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<sup>31</sup> 35 responses missing. For the full SPSS-generated table, see appendix D: question #12.

<sup>32</sup> See Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*.

<sup>33</sup> See R. Drew Smith for the Leadership Center at Morehouse College, "Beyond the Boundaries: Low Income Residents, Faith-Based Organizations and Neighborhood Coalition Building," Annie E. Casey Foundation report (November 2003).

### Congregation Focus Should be Social Justice/Public Policy

Religious life in the prophetic tradition does not isolate secular matters, actually, it is all encompassing; and it was prophetic engagement that made liberation the principal agenda for the Black Church with an embedded responsibility of pursuing social justice. Even during times of subjugation, prophetic consciousness addressed the principal disposition of its subculture and critiqued the contemporary social order, directing it toward reform.<sup>34</sup> However, table 6.7 reflects an overall tempered disposition among respondents regarding congregational focus on social justice and public policy.

**Table 6.7**<sup>35</sup>

Q: *The focus of this congregation should be social justice/public policy.*

Very Low	12.6%
Low	12.3%
Moderate	26.8%
High	14.3%
Very High	16.5%
Don't Know	12.1%

*N* = 663

Observing that those that moderately agreed (26.8%) is more than ten percent higher than the other categories (ranging from 12.6% to 16.5%), one can conclude that progressive viewpoints pertaining to congregational focus currently exist in the Black Church that did not previously, which could be a symptom that has led to the heightened popularity of prosperity preaching.<sup>36</sup> Sustaining a general consensus regarding church focus is a much simpler task when the problems, issues, and constraints facing congregants are overtly shared, such as slavery, lack of civil rights, and unrecognized

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<sup>34</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 13-14.

<sup>35</sup> 35 responses were missing. For the full SPSS-generated table, see appendix D: question #18.

<sup>36</sup> Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities*, 112.

voting opportunities. But, as the social status line becomes skewed—meaning, not all problems, issues, and constraints are perceived to be shared or shared to the same extent—then obtaining a majority consensus becomes more difficult. West classifies this trend as an Enlightenment ethos combined with an American Dream enchantment that interprets the human condition based on experiences and an understanding of those experiences through the medium of an Enlightenment worldview that promotes Victorian strategies in order to realize an American optimism.<sup>37</sup> In other words, the distance between congregants—stemming from culture, class, education, etc.—works against building a clear consensus on focus.

#### Specific Social Justice/Public Policy Leadership

In their 1934 study of “The Negro’s Church,” Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson expressed concern about the problem of over-churching, because in their view too many churches in urban and rural Black communities existed.<sup>38</sup> However, since that time, Black communities have come to value the myriad functions that these churches, small or large, perform, from providing spiritual and counseling needs to addressing social problems affecting the community. Nevertheless, a major problem for the future of the Black Church will almost certainly be the insufficiency of specific congregational leadership to meet the particular needs of existing and changing congregants and communities. Table 6.8 indicates that almost 70% of respondents from a moderate to

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<sup>37</sup> Cornel West, “Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization,” in *The Cornel West Reader*, ed. Cornel West (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 89.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church* (New York: Russell and Russell Publishing, 1969), ch. 11.



very high level of strength of agreement (24.1% moderate, 20.3% high, 25.1% very high) felt that their congregations should have a social justice/public policy leader.

**Table 6.8**<sup>39</sup>

Q: *This congregation should have a social justice/public policy leader.*

Very Low	6.1%
Low	7.3%
Moderate	24.1%
High	20.3%
Very High	25.1%
Don't Know	11.7%

*N* = 663

Two implications can be drawn here. First, the historical model of the sole Black pastor servicing the entire needs of a congregation is, if it isn't already dead, dying. And second, the traditional grassroots approaches to diagnosing and dealing with social problems are being accompanied by more systemic-focused efforts that tend to have more of an effectual and lasting impact. Research clearly indicates that the most creative and productive forms of social justice and public policy ministry in Black churches have been carried out by congregations that allocate time, energy, and resources toward encouraging, enabling and empowering leaders to become more knowledgeable and proficient in specific areas affecting congregants and communities.<sup>40</sup> And in so doing, they become more aware of the internal needs of their congregations, the external struggles in their surrounding communities, and the resources available to help deal with both. In any case, such a consensus could be an indication of a lack of resources, or a reflection of the multiple pressures and demands placed on the resources available.

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<sup>39</sup> 35 responses were missing. For the full SPSS-generated table, see appendix D: question #19.

<sup>40</sup> R. Drew Smith, ed., *Long March Ahead: African American Churches and Public Policy in Post-Civil Rights America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 4.

### Social Justice/Public Policy Focus Should Come From Congregation

Despite technical, tactical, and sometimes theological barriers to public policy advocacy, there is a potential for, and perhaps an expectation of, Black Church public policy influence. Whether or not this is an appropriate burden to place on the Black Church, it is inherited as a result of its leadership throughout the various movements pursuing human, civil, and voting rights. However, the limited Washington presence of Black denominations and national bodies reflects the priority given by the denominations and national bodies to ecclesiastical matters of protocol and polity rather than methods and means for political interaction. Only the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the Progressive National Baptist Convention have had institutional lobbying branches operating under their denominational auspices, with the National Baptist Convention, USA and the Church of God in Christ recently taking steps to form denominational divisions devoted to public policy.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps this reality captured the minds of the 55.8% of respondents that felt on a moderate (22.7%), high (18.4%), and very high level (14.7%) that social justice/public policy focus should occur at the congregational level (see table 6.9).

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 4.

**Table 6.9**<sup>42</sup>

Q: *Social justice/public policy focus should come from congregation as opposed to the pastor and/or national body.*

Very Low	13.1%
Low	8.6%
Moderate	22.7%
High	18.4%
Very High	14.7%
Don't Know	15.1%

*N* = 649

Since the 1960s, Black institutions have consistently grown in their dissatisfaction with the national bureaucracies through which much of their activity is channeled. Some scholars, like Craig Dystra and James Hudnet-Beumler, have noted that denominational structures are examples of national bureaucracies whose institutional relevance and support have diminished over the years, arguing that denominations, Black and White, began losing considerable moral influence and institutional clout in the 1960s, owing to an erosion of ideological consensus within denominations as the society became more distanced and polarized.<sup>43</sup> Due to the combined effect of this broad institutional trend and the monumental reforms of the 1950s and 1960s that led to the dismantling of politically constrictive Jim Crow policies, “the context of Black Church activism in recent years has been characterized by greater political variegation and decentralization than it had been prior to and during the civil rights movement,”<sup>44</sup> giving support to the survey data that

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<sup>42</sup> 49 responses were missing. For the full SPSS-generated table, see appendix D: question #20.

<sup>43</sup> Craig Dykstra and James Hudnet-Beumler, “The National Organizational Structures of Protestant Denominations: An Invitation to a Conversation,” in *The Organizational Revolution: Presbyterians and American Denominationalism*, ed. Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 318-20.

<sup>44</sup> R. Drew Smith, “Assessing the Public Practices of African American Churches,” in *Long March Ahead: African American Churches and Public Policy in Post-Civil Rights America*, ed. R. Drew Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 10.

congregations may have more of a finger on the pulse of the public policy needs of the community.

#### Church Should be Involved in Social Justice/Public Policy Work

Researchers Dona Hamilton and Charles Hamilton point out that since the 1930s, the public policy focus of the Black community, including leading organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League, has revolved around a two-tiered agenda of social welfare, which includes socioeconomic development, and civil rights, encompassing racial justice politics in a broad sense. They also note that various balances have been reached between the two agendas since that time, with priority given to socioeconomic development during the 1930s and 1940s, civil rights during the 1950s and 1960s, and both from the mid-1960s through the 1990s.<sup>45</sup>

Logically, throughout most of the 1990s, the public policy commitments of the Black Church largely mirrored the policy agenda of the broader Black community as outlined by Hamilton and Hamilton—a fact that validates the inclusion of broader social culture when studying church phenomenon because the macro dynamics of cultural production always inform and influence the micro dynamics of ecclesial behavior, activity, and trends. Culture understood in this way moves from concept to concrete, in direct contact with the contextual reality with which it finds itself.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Dona Hamilton and Charles Hamilton, “The Dual Agenda of African American Organizations since the New Deal: Social Welfare Policies and Civil Rights,” *Political Science Quarterly* 107, no. 3 (Fall 1992): 435-52.

<sup>46</sup> Anthony Pinn, “In the Raw: African American Cultural Memory and Theological Reflection,” in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, ed. Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, Kathryn Tanner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 107-08.

Given this history, one can reasonably presume, then, that those in the Black Church would agree that it should be involved in social justice/public policy work—a presumption that table 6.10 confirms, revealing that 61.8% of respondents agree with that statement on a high (23.0%) and very high (38.8%) level. One can also reasonably assume, then, that social justice and public policy expectations are limited to the traditional aforementioned categories of socioeconomic development and racial justice—an assumption that data from a Black Churches and Politics (BCAP) survey confirms by identifying the six public policy issues receiving the greatest attention from Black churches, which were public education, civil rights, public welfare, affirmative action, criminal justice, and government economic development—revealing a relatively strong two-fold emphasis.<sup>47</sup>

**Table 6.10**<sup>48</sup>

*Q: The church should be involved in social justice/public policy work.*

Very Low	4.1%
Low	4.9%
Moderate	16.8%
High	23.0%
Very High	38.8%
Don't Know	5.3%

*N = 651*

These findings not only suggest the potency of problems related to racial and economic fairness in the United States, but also the relative impotency of the Black Church to broaden its focus in ways that reflect the contemporary diversity of civic

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<sup>47</sup> Data taken from the 1999-2000 Black Churches and Politics Survey examining the public policy priorities of Black churches. In particular, the percentage responding to the question: *During the last ten years has your congregation been directly involved with any of the following as part of their congregational mission?* (Choices: U.S./Africa policies, U.S./Caribbean/Latin America policies, Social rights and women empowerment policies, Government economic development policies, Criminal justice policies, Affirmative action policies, Public welfare policies, Civil rights policies, Public education policies).

<sup>48</sup> 47 responses were missing. For the full SPSS-generated table, see appendix D: question #23.

demands and interests in the current globalized context. Since the American social context has become more diversified, polarized, and decentralized following the civil rights movement, the public policy involvement of the Black Church has the potential to expand in additional directions—in particular, entering into civil institutional partnerships that can help overcome the infrastructural weaknesses and lack of capacity plaguing most Black churches. Given its diversity and complexity, its impact and influence within the current American public policy context will be achieved quite differently than during the era of the civil rights movement, when Black churches “derived a noticeable degree of influence through the concentration of their institutional strengths on one or two issues.”<sup>49</sup> Attaining that level of impact and influence will require a rethinking, repositioning, and recontextualizing of the Black Church.<sup>50</sup>

#### Congregation Needs versus Community Needs

Black life has revolved around the Black Church, which was not only the center of worship, but the focal point of all communal activities. As a result, any analysis of the Black Church will unveil a constant refrain of its fundamental connection to the community, as theologians, social scientists, and religious scholars have argued that Black churches are “central social institutions” that have “long been compelled to take up more responsibilities and a broader range of roles than [White churches].”<sup>51</sup> From slavery to civil rights, the fact that the Black Church and Black community have always been

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<sup>49</sup> Smith, “Assessing the Public Practices of African American Churches,” 25.

<sup>50</sup> In April 2009, The Institute of Church Administration and Management’s (ICAM) Board of Trustees made a formal decision to revise its purpose and transition its mission. The newly constituted Conference of National Black Churches (CNBC) was launched and aimed at affecting public policy in areas that have typically gone unaddressed by Black churches.

<sup>51</sup> Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion*, 224.

inextricably linked is irrefutable. In this way, the Black Church “put forward perspectives that encouraged both individuality and community fellowship.”<sup>52</sup>

The social gospel dimension predominant in the Black Church does not primarily concern political struggle, but rather cultural solidarity, with cultural practices that embody a basic reality—sustained Black solidarity in the midst of a hostile society.<sup>53</sup> The linguistic communal spirituals and hymns of the Black Church—“Pass Me Not” and “We’ll Understand It Better By and By”—exemplify the intimate and dependent personal relationship between God and individual, as well as between individual and community. Interestingly, the majority of survey respondents believe this still to be the case. When asked whether more attention should be given to congregational needs versus community needs, 34.7% agreed at a very low level, more than doubling the next closest category, moderate, at 17.0% (see table 6.11).

**Table 6.11**<sup>54</sup>

*Q: The focus of the staff should be more on the needs of the congregation than the needs of the community.*

Very Low	34.7%
Low	14.1%
Moderate	17.0%
High	8.1%
Very High	11.8%
Don’t Know	6.8%

*N = 649*

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<sup>52</sup> Cornel West, “Prophetic Christian as Organic Individual: Martin Luther King, Jr.” in *The Cornel West Reader*, ed. Cornel West (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 428.

<sup>53</sup> Cornel West, “Subversive Joy and Revolutionary Patience in Black Christianity,” in *The Cornel West Reader*, ed. Cornel West (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 437.

<sup>54</sup> 49 responses were missing. For the full SPSS-generated table, see appendix D: question #21.

The overarching implications drawn here are how aware are clergy of community needs, and also, how competent are they in addressing them—both of which have significant bearing on the relevancy of the Black Church.

The recent debate of whether or not the historical Black Church plays the same role in the lives of Black Americans as it did in the past is gaining traction as some contend that the once politically progressive and prophetically theological Black Church has diminished to the point of death.<sup>55</sup> As Black communities become much more differentiated, they also become much more complicated, requiring those who interact with, among, and on their behalf to grow and expand in similar fashion—a far cry from what many contend are a cadre of conservative leaders unable, or unwilling, to deal with the progressive realities of Black communities. The question becomes: what will the leadership of the Black Church do to address the social conditions facing Black communities, such as the highest Black unemployment in 25 years, thirty-five percent of Black children living below the poverty line, and a significantly high uninsured Black population?<sup>56</sup>

#### Activity Level

Most scholarly assessments label White churches as far less civically-engaged than their Black counterparts, which could be due to White churches' intentional or unintentional adherence to the systemic status quo,<sup>57</sup> a formed or uninformed Christian

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<sup>55</sup> See Eddie Glaude, "The Black Church is Dead," in *The Huffington Post*, February 2010.

<sup>56</sup> Taken from National Urban League, "The State of Black America 2010: Responding to the Crisis."

<sup>57</sup> See Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).



understanding of White privilege,<sup>58</sup> or simply the omitted or committed compromise of faith tenets.<sup>59</sup> A major focus of the prophetic Black Church tradition was neither an escapist, pie-in-the-sky heaven, nor a political paradise on earth. Rather, the emphasis was on marshaling and merging resources from fellowship, *in* and *with* community, to cope with overwhelmingly limited options dictated by individual and systemic evil.<sup>60</sup> In short, its activity focused on survival and struggle in a context that called for a combative and sustaining spirituality to deal with “the absurd in America and the absurd as America.”<sup>61</sup>

In this regard, table 6.12 identifies respondent recognition of considerable activity by public policy groups within their congregations (42.1%). An interesting aside, however, is table 6.13, which reports that almost forty-eight percent of respondents have no knowledge of the activities that have been engaged in by the congregation’s public policy groups (47.5%). These two tables signify that while the Black Church may be continuing in its effort to respond to the Black existential situation, a significant portion of its members have no idea how.

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<sup>58</sup> See Daniel B. Lee, “A Great Racial Commission: Religion and the Construction of White America,” in *Race, Nation, and Religion in the Americas*, ed. Henry Goldschmidt and Elizabeth McAlister (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>59</sup> See Robert D. Putnam, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

<sup>60</sup> Cornel West, “Prophetic Christian as Organic Individual: Martin Luther King, Jr.” in *The Cornel West Reader*, ed. Cornel West (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 427.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 428.

**Table 6.12**<sup>62</sup>

Q: Which of the following describes the activity level of public policy groups in your congregation?

No activity	3.7%
Minimal activity	5.6%
Some activity	22.7%
Considerable activity	42.1%
Don't Know	24.1%

*N* = 688

**Table 6.13**<sup>63</sup>

Q: In the last 5 years, my congregation has engaged in the following public policy activities.

None	4.4%
Letter writing only	1.4%
Speaking at policy hearings or with policy makers	19.0%
Letter writing and speaking	24.7%
Don't know	47.5%

*N* = 680

Three conclusions can be drawn here: first, there is little congruency between the public policy activities of congregations with the awareness of members; second, this lack of congruency stems from a lack of information sharing between clergy and congregations; and third, the lack of congruency and information sharing contributes to a monotonous prophetic witness characterized by a constant retrospective glance that defines the content of its present stance in an attempt to justify its continued relevance and authority. As such, the Black Church loses its transforming power of Christian love to make a difference in personal and social life, where the dignity and sanctity of human persons combine with the moral obligation and social responsibility of Christians to resist

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<sup>62</sup> 10 responses were missing. For the full SPSS-generated table, see appendix D: question #15.

<sup>63</sup> 18 responses were missing. For the full SPSS-generated table, see appendix D: question #14.

individual as well as institutional evil. And, as such, its prophetic tradition withers away from neglect.<sup>64</sup>

### Summary

Historically, according to Black Church scholar Aldon D. Morris, the institutions of the larger society were of little use to Blacks. Blacks were never equal partners in the economic, political, and cultural institutions of a White-dominant society and were systematically excluded from their decision-making processes. As a result, the Black Church filled a large part of the institutional void by providing direction and support for activities such as civic engagement represented by an organized mass base, clergy leadership, and a collective understanding of community causes.<sup>65</sup> The Black Church is unique “in that it was organized and developed by an oppressed group shut off from the institutional life of larger society”<sup>66</sup> and continues to function in that manner though some have argued that larger institutional exclusion is not as expansive, pervasive, and oppressive.<sup>67</sup>

The social gospel tenets and public policy intentions of the Black Church appear to be recognized by survey respondents, though not clearly identifiable. As remarked previously, indigenous culture and institutions of marginal groups are critical to the formation and legitimization of social movements, and the Black Church has functioned

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<sup>64</sup> Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 12-13.

<sup>65</sup> Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 4-5.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> See Mary Pattillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

as both advocate and antagonist.<sup>68</sup> The surveys highlighted congregant assessments of social justice and public policy work, distinctly identifying clear perceptions of ministry emphasis, activity, and focus. The fact that the Black Church remains a viable social instrument and still possesses a platform to effect change is clear, however, the research indicates that its approach and method may need to be broadened, better-tended, and more constructively-communicated if it hopes to channel its resources and renew its prophetic engagement.

### **Interviews**

Church culture and churches themselves could not provide the kind of social network that would enhance mass movements. That particular need was satisfied by the formal and informal interaction among Black Church leaders that were not only anchored “in the center of the ebb and flow of the social and cultural forces of the Black community,” but were reliable channels for disseminating information to and for the Black community.<sup>69</sup> The Black minister presides over the church hierarchy and is ultimately responsible for the overall functioning of ministry activities, hence, the present inquiry would be greatly enhanced by the input and perspective of such leaders.

In the context of the Black Church, soliciting pastors that you do not know and asking them for a two-hour interview is an interesting experience. The people you actually want to interview are always one or two persons removed, very busy, and often somewhat suspicious. Whether by my attempt alone, or coupled with that of a well-

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<sup>68</sup> Gary T. Marx, *Protest and Prejudice: A Study of Belief in the Black Community* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1967), 94-98.

<sup>69</sup> Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 7.

known and very well-respected intermediary, most of the pastors solicited almost always said yes. Despite knowing little about me, they agreed to meet because they felt strongly about the topic, wanted to contribute to the scholarly endeavor, and probably, had a keen interest in seeing if their skepticism was warranted.

#### Pastor A

Such was the case with Pastor A, a Baptist preacher who has challenged his congregation to be of service to its membership and the larger community for forty years. When I followed my letter with a phone call to discuss this research, he first asked a few questions: to what church did I belong, who was my pastor, and which seminary did I attend being the main inquiries. After his concerns had been addressed—all quite natural in the Black Church context as many among leadership express a certain level of discomfort and distrust with scholars, researchers, and academicians who are not directly connected to the Black Church by either membership or motive—he graciously agreed to an interview.

As in most interviews, I did not turn to my protocol questions right away. I shared my calling into the ministry and this endeavor and listened astonishingly to the calling, experiences, and service of the great pastor. By that time, after swapping seminary stories, tales of children and grandchildren, and favorite reading materials, we delved into the questions. When asked of his understanding of the terms “historic Black Church,” “social gospel,” and “prophetic engagement,” his response took several turns. He asserted that the historic Black Church was always, will always be, a coalition of Black churches and Black leaders that pulled from White churches “systematized governance and structure, but not politicized practice.” From his perspective, social gospel had to be

defined in terms of those churches that provided “in addition to worship, works that attended to the total needs of [the] community.” Therefore, according to him, the prophetic tradition meant speaking truth to power and people in a way that called individuals, institutions, and systems to task. Interestingly, he noted that the prophet does not have to be a pastor. He felt that on occasion, a secular individual may be in a better position to challenge a practice or process, pointing in particular to individuals that hold positions within certain institutions and systems, such as scholars, researchers, and academicians. In this way, he articulated the need for more “public theologians who utilize their placement and position for more purposeful causes than their professional careers.”

When asked how the focus and emphasis of the Black Church have changed, Pastor A immediately jumped to the ecclesial trend of megachurches “that seem more concerned about social acceptance than social justice.” I encouraged him to say more, and he profoundly continued:

The foundations of the Black Church have been lost and nato-alienation has occurred—the current Black Church has nothing to do, or a desire to, with its radical theological roots. And because of this, the megachurches have created “micro-denominations” capitalizing on a generation more interested in style than substance, a fake use of drums instead of “talking drums.”<sup>70</sup>

I followed up with a question asking Pastor A to assess the role of pastoral leadership in the Black Church. After a brief moment of thought, he stated that pastoral leadership has played a major role in the development and underdevelopment of the Black Church. Pointing to what he believed to be more holistic approaches to ministry,

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<sup>70</sup> “Talking drums” referring to the African belief and traditional practice of drumming to communicate. It is believed that “talking drums” told of problems facing the people, how to overcome the problems and challenges, as well as methods by which to do so. Also, the “talking drum” served to transmit history, passing on stories, practices, and traditions across generations. In a spiritual sense, it is used to praise gods and invokes ancestral spirits and deities.

activity, and mission, Pastor A felt that the role of Black Church leadership was more prominent when it understood Black Christianity as more evangelical than fundamentalist<sup>71</sup>—a result he attributes to the influence of White-dominant thought proliferated in White seminaries. Holding on to fundamentalist Christology, he furthered, doesn't allow one to see the powerlessness of the life, so

one avoids feeding the hungry, an economic practice; one avoids healing the sick, a political practice; and one avoids the woman at the well, a social practice. So methods become domesticated, message gets distorted, and mission is redefined with no understanding that public responsibilities come with private faith.

He went on to say that the greatest mission field is the marginalized, and not the secularized, noting that seminaries needed to do better a job of reaching, relating, and receiving Black students. From faculty staffing to evaluation of curriculum, Pastor A asserted that seminaries are “strong on White, Eurocentric theory, but weak on non-White, contextual praxis.”

The next question seemed to “stir up” something inside Pastor A. Knowing all too well the temptation of Black pastors to take any speaking opportunity as a platform to preach, I did not get the impression that Pastor A was fighting this temptation while addressing the earlier questions. But throughout this segment, his consistent asking of, “Am I saying anything young man?” reminded me of the constant oratorical interplay

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<sup>71</sup> Cornel West makes an argument that Black Christianity is more evangelical than fundamentalist. He opines this so because fundamentalist Christianity is preoccupied with the claims of science and historical criticism of biblical texts, viewing the Bible not only in literalist terms, but, more importantly, in the form of propositions in light of a notion of *closed* revelation—only certain biblically derived propositions constitute divine revelation. By contrast, Black evangelical Christianity is primarily concerned with human fallenness, including our readings of the Bible. Biblical texts indeed remain the authoritative guide to Christian life, yet the focus is on moral conduct and spiritual development in light of *continued* revelation—that is, openness to divine purpose, especially through the Holy Spirit—grounded in the Bible *and* appropriated by individuals and communities in the present. In short, according to West's argument, fundamentalist Christianity is *rationalistic* in orientation and *legalistic* in effect, hence it leans toward bibliolatry, whereas Black evangelical Christianity is *dramatic* in orientation and *moralistic* in effect, hence it affirms a biblically-informed perspective. See West, “Prophetic Christian as Organic Intellectual: Martin Luther King, Jr.,” 429.

between Black preachers and congregants during a Sunday morning worship service. When asked whether the Black Church is presently effective, he stoically replied, “No it isn’t Reverend. And I say that it isn’t in its historical sense of being a progenitor of Black culture, norms, and ideals because it is mimicking the White church and culture, acting as though ‘White’ is right and ‘White’ is the norm. But, if ‘White’ is right, why aren’t White mainline denominations growing? And if what White is doing isn’t working, why in the hell are seminaries teaching it and the Black Church emulating it?”

He also mentioned that the Black Church is fighting internally destructive elements as well as external hostile forces, a direct result of “an abandonment of communal philosophy and an adoption of rugged individualism.” Hence the candid comment, “our elders got us out of Egypt, but we’re still in the wilderness.” Pointing to a lack of identity to the Motherland (Africa) and a lost Jewishness (the Chosen People), Pastor A believes the Black Church’s ineffectiveness can be directly attributed to its minimal, almost muted, prophetic voice in today’s culture and society. Critically identifying what he coined “an ontological blur within leadership,” he insisted that far too many pastors “yearn for the title, but aren’t yoked to the labor,” leaving the Black Church internally underdeveloped, and externally ineffective.

Pastor A felt that partnerships were a key component to the resurgence of Black Church effectiveness. He specifically identified ecumenical as well as secular partnerships as integral in serving expanding community needs. He noted several established congregational partnerships: the California Labor and Workforce Development Agency, Alameda County Health Department, East Bay Community Foundation for Cultural and Performing Arts, NBA Players Association, California State



University of the East Bay, and Oakland Unified School District. He was very quick to note two things: first, that without key partnerships, many of the ministry accomplishments and services provided would not have been, or be, possible; and second, “the partnerships could not be done out of sense of guilt or pressure, but out of a desire to be authentic to the gospel, and authentically Christian.”

The next question asked him to identify competing streams within the Black Church, to which Pastor A immediately replied, “Without a doubt, prosperity gospel.” He noted that though popular, prosperity gospel is spiritually-lacking because it promotes a religion without a historical narrative, “no stories of suffering and deliverance, no identification of shared community, and no personal relationship developed through wilderness and valley experiences”—all of which Pastor A believes is the true story encapsulated in the Bible. He finds himself asking a constant question relative to the historical and spiritual nurturing of the prosperity gospel: what is, and where is, “our” story?

In addressing the final question of recommendations moving forward, Pastor A began with a guiding thought: the Black Church needs to keep in the forefront of its mind what it was that allowed Black ancestors to believe in a future that they couldn’t presently see. Through this lens, he suggested a “creative communion” with God that informs political alliances and economic community investments to help reclaim the Black Church’s prophetic platform and social effectiveness. He asserted that God is still speaking and that the Black Church needs to stop mimicking popular practices and come to grips with who it is prophetically, and what its people need communally.

## Pastor B

Following a series of miscommunications and rescheduled meetings, Pastor B, a Pentecostal minister and presiding Bishop, and I were finally able to sit down to conduct the interview over a two-day period. The first day, a Tuesday morning following a week-long congregational revival, found the pastor in refreshed and rejuvenated spirit. The theme for the week, “Can You Hear Me Now,” focused the congregation on being in tune with the voice of God for individual and congregational direction. The pastor’s disposition appeared to be very reflective, perhaps due to the time in, and reflection afforded by, the revival. When asked to express his understanding of “historic Black Church,” “social gospel,” and “prophetic engagement,” Pastor B responded,

[W]hen I think of historic Black Church, what comes to mind is a machinery of justice, rooted in the cause for equality that united individual churches and leaders in the everyday lives of community. When I think of social gospel, what comes to mind is the effort to address tangible and intangible realities affecting congregants and community. And, when I think of prophetic engagement, what comes to mind is an approach that seeks to change policy through changed hearts, a transformation that can only come from the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Without formerly being asked the second question, he continued by saying that a lack of spiritual guidance and direction is how the focus and emphasis of the Black Church has changed. How influenced this response was by the recent revival isn’t quite clear, but he highlighted his belief that culture has too much of the church’s ear and not Christ, stating that

sincere, genuine interest and identification in the welfare of others has somehow been replaced with a “not get involved” mentality that is reflective of the “don’t snitch” Black culture that lends itself to an absence of community—a direct contradiction to the communal sentiment, teaching, and practice of the historic Black Church.

He believed that the sense of community was stronger when larger societal issues facing the Black community were perceived to be shared, conversations were unilateral, and

outcomes were all-encompassing. Authoritatively, he asserted, “The devil is attacking the culture of the church, not the gospel of it!”

We concluded this portion of the interview with Pastor B responding to the role that pastoral leadership has played in the development and progression of the Black Church. He began by saying that pastoral leadership was and is crucial—*was* because it provided a unified, coalition of individual pastors who collectively represented the cause(s) of the community; *is* because without that unified voice, will contribute to the further fragmentation of the Black Church. What stood out, as he continued, was his insistence that as the culture of the church became more influenced by the world and not the Holy Spirit, pastors “began to frame messages concerned with erudition and geared toward intellectual stimulation instead of eros messages targeted toward heart transformation,”<sup>72</sup> a homiletical gaff also noted by Samuel DeWitt Proctor:

The preacher who sets out primarily to display erudition does a disservice and leaves the sheep still hungry. Intellectual depth is revealed in more subtle ways than simply reminding the people of how bereft of learning [ministers] are. A friend of mine often says that Jesus asked us to feed his sheep, not his giraffes!<sup>73</sup>

Our next session picked up the following week with Pastor B jumping right in as though a scripted actor in a role reading. “The Black Church isn’t presently effective,” he began, “because it looks to entertain rather than edify.” When pushed to elaborate, he continued,

The church is suffering because of a customer-based approach that is constantly consumed with what goes over well—large choirs and meatless messages with no

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<sup>72</sup> Eros, in the Platonic sense, means the yearning of the soul for the realm of the divine which contributes to an understanding of spiritual truth. See James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986).

<sup>73</sup> Samuel D. Proctor, *The Certain Sound of the Trumpet: Crafting a Sermon of Authority* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1994), 5.

conviction—versus what sayeth the Lord. Making absent the power to transform [Holy Spirit], rendering the Black Church being ineffective.

Pastor B also highlighted a second aspect in response to this question: ill-equipped leaders. He felt that the ineffectiveness of the Black Church can be directly traced to the inability of pastors to teach, train, and support congregational leaders. In his words, “the success of the Church depends on staff and other ministerial clergy, not just the pastor. God sends workers and servants, not just preachers.” In his perspective, the effectiveness of the Black Church during the civil rights era has tragically been lost, in part, due to the lack of mentorship, guidance, and direction received by younger clergy, staff members, and those targeted with leading ministerial efforts.

In assessing whether partnerships were a key component in the resurgence and effectiveness of the Black Church, Pastor B hesitantly responded “yes.” When pushed about the hesitation, Pastor B alluded to a fear of the Black Church losing its identity in partnerships. As an example, he pointed to the congregation’s past partnership with a Hennepin County program that removed individuals from the program after a single infraction, but program quality, effectiveness, and funding was based on the number of final participants. In his eyes, the operating premise of the Church and program did not sync—the church believing that forgiveness is always available, the program offering no forgiveness whatsoever. This, he fumed, was a “detrimental partnership because it compelled the Church to acquiesce to a mandate contradictory to its calling.” So, in true Pentecostal fashion, he insisted that the Black Church be “resensitized” through a partnership with the Holy Spirit, and that be the guide in working with other churches and institutions such as seminaries, social service programs, healthcare providers, and lending institutions.

When asked to identify competing streams within the Black Church, Pastor B immediately identified the prosperity gospel. He offered that the prosperity gospel was an entrapment which has no bearing on important contemporary community issues:

It is a pseudo-faith, with an emphasis on self that promotes the loss of communal love, support, and care for others. Its visions of grandeur have led to a fake doctrinized “American Dream” as the message of Christ, intimating that true prosperity is simply financial.

After reiterating that the true gospel of Jesus Christ is not about self, Pastor B noted a current defect in the prosperity gospel, and the Black Church: not recognizing culture as an enemy. He highlighted two scriptures: “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God,”<sup>74</sup> and, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of flesh, lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world.”<sup>75</sup> In this way, Pastor B pointed to worldly admiration and adoption versus its admonition and transformation as where the church has gone astray—the prosperity gospel as emblematic.

Concluding this session with recommendations moving forward, Pastor B targeted a strengthened partnership between the Black Church and Black scholars. Sternly he stated that the two need each other to be effective in their respective arenas:

Black dynamics are changing, and Black academia can assist the Black Church in its attempt to understand and minister to those changes, and the Black Church can help Black academia by providing the contextual learning opportunities necessary to diagnose those changing dynamics, inform practical curriculum, and develop ministry leaders.

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<sup>74</sup> Romans 12:2.

<sup>75</sup> 1 John 2:15-16.

In his opinion, the right to determine who or what is scholarly does not give the person authority or make what s/he teaches authoritative; what gives authority and makes material authoritative is its practicality and usefulness for the context in which it is to be shared. So, he ended our time with a wink of the eye, stating, “How practical and useful is *your* seminary education? The Black Church and Black scholarship are grassroots endeavors—White Christianity and European philosophers didn’t march, so they can’t walk alone in a Black context, and Black scholars seeking to help the Black Church can’t march alone in the White seminary context!”

#### Pastor C

Given Pastor C’s current senatorial position and my enchantment with faith and politics, I was very excited about this interview opportunity. After extensive contact, sharing of voicemails, and conversations with his assistant, we were finally able to arrange for some time together. After exchanging pleasantries and expressing gratitude for his time, I asked his understanding of “historic Black Church,” “social gospel,” and “prophetic engagement.” In labeling the first, Pastor C used the following in a word-association format, “family—immediate and extended,” “community,” and “mobilized single churches on a collective missional journey.” In similar fashion, when defining the second term, Pastor C referenced “holistic,” “all-encompassing,” “grassroots,” and “defined on the margins.” However, in addressing the third, he went away from the previous word-association format, and offered the following: “Prophetic engagement is the faithful civic agitation of individuals and institutions in an effort to change unfaithful systemic policies and practices.” When asked about the change in response format, Pastor C simply underscored it as a component of his priestly vision and philosophy.

In Pastor C's opinion, the focus and emphasis of the Black Church has not changed, but the issues and concerns that it attempts to address have. He felt that the needs and well-being of the community continue to receive the attention of the Black Church, but that needs and well-being encompass different variables than in years passed. For instance, he pointed to public education and rhetorically asked, "What sense would it have made for the Black Church to fight for quality textbooks when our children weren't allowed in the classroom?" In this regard, Pastor C believed that the Black Church needed to grow in its approach and scope at the same rate, if not faster, as the needs of the community. "The Black Church, can no longer afford to be reactive. In these tumultuous times, proactive means planning and preparing as much as possible, [being] reactive finds you struggling with whatever underdeveloped resources you have available." A typical occurrence, he felt, for most Black churches.

Pastor C deemed the role of pastoral leadership as pivotal in the development and progression of the Black Church. He believed that the growth of the institution is directly linked to the growth of its leaders, saying,

[T]he civil rights leaders were effective because they broadened the spiritual horizon of the church and the people. They were astute enough to do that respectfully, articulate enough to promote it rationally, and conscious enough to do it radically—the pulpit led the movement because the people trusted leaders and their competency. The danger now is leaders who are given that trust because of their position in the pulpit, but their preparation and qualification, and some point their lack of production, doesn't warrant the trust placement. And the church suffers.

As an interesting tangent, he mentioned that pastoral leaders needed to be "delivered" from the iconic mentality that "causes them to have a hand in everything" related to the work of the church. "Empowering others," he stated, "is just as much a part of kingdom

building because it ensures that when your kingdom building days are over, kingdom building still continues.”

As far as the present effectiveness of the Black Church, Pastor C was divided. On one hand, he felt that it is presently effective because it continues to serve in its “immediate vicinity of needs—food shelves, clothing pantries, etc.—but its ineffectiveness is that it has not reached the rest of the world.” In his mind, the White church has been more engaged in the Pan-African countries of the world than the Black Church, a charge he attributes to the Black Church’s “refusal to engage outside of a Eurocentric focus.” But he believes that as the Black Church reaches outside of its borders, “it will learn, develop, and grow in true biblical fashion because of the engagement.”

Unequivocally, Pastor C saw partnerships as a key component to the resurgence and effectiveness of the Black Church. In addition to Pan African church partnerships, he identified the government and non-government sectors as critical. When asked to elaborate, he said,

The Black Church needs to reform its missionary endeavors. It has largely been involved in evangelizing, which brings people to Christ, but doesn’t change the situations they’re in. If the Black Church would constructively partner with institutions and programs, to investigate and alleviate social ills, the burden wouldn’t be so strongly felt by each. The church may not house a credit union, but it houses classrooms where credit management can be taught—provided it pursues relationships in that arena and in that way. These are the kinds of strategic partnerships that will holistically help the community.

He too felt that seminaries could be involved on a deeper level with local churches as well as larger denominational bodies to develop curriculum, programs, and degrees that are “practical, worthwhile, meaningful, and useful.” That several of his associate ministers have graduated from seminary, only to have to be “retrained” because they



lacked public policy courses, political advocacy familiarity, or civic engagement experiences, he found “extremely disappointing.”

When asked about competing streams within the Black Church, Pastor C identified “the desire and effort to achieve megachurch status.” While he did not condemn megachurches (how could he, having over 20,000 members?!), his condemnation was pointed at the pastoral desire for “numbers and seats, instead of knowledge and souls.” He touched on the presence of the prosperity gospel, but quickly returned to his original point, saying, “the prosperity gospel is only popular among pastors because of the desire for a megachurch.” As a prophetic-minded, civically-engaged Baptist minister who began with under 200 members, Pastor C takes issue with what he called “a lack of sacrificial spirit among pastors who are unwilling to labor for the reward they seek.” Ironically, he likened this to today’s culture of wanting the most benefit with the least amount of effort.

In providing recommendations for moving forward, Pastor C emphatically uttered, “Educate leaders, train leaders, support leaders.” He left little doubt of his belief in the importance of leadership development in the Black Church. So strong is his belief that he offered the following as a guideline:

- Listen and follow the voice of God
- Maintain a sense of biblical purpose and mission
- Project a commitment to excellence
- Understand that unity is strength
- Outreach with a sense of determination
- Help without compromise

He reverted back to his point of the “impracticality and out-datedness” of seminary education, and further stressed his belief that churches and seminaries would be better served by more critical collaboration.

Pastor D

In another scenario riddled with countless messages and multiple conversations with his wife and assistant, I was able to connect with Pastor D. An Ivy League graduate, former gang member, and product of parents who belonged to the Nation of Islam, Pastor D's social activist and analyst track record speaks volumes. For instance, he was one of the few Black pastors that openly criticized Reverend Jeremiah Wright for his highly-publicized and politicized sermons condemning American foreign and domestic policies, and encouraged then-Senator Barack Obama to judiciously distance himself from his former pastor. Given his progressive work in the Boston area, I couldn't wait to hear his responses, thoughts, and ideas regarding the Black Church.

Opening with his interpretation of the terms "historic Black Church," "social justice," and "prophetic engagement," Pastor D said the following:

To me Doc, "historic Black Church" represents a coalition of churches that collaboratively sought to deal with community issues. They recognized strength in numbers, but also recognized that resources were more plentiful en masse. I also think of Jeremiah Wright's interpretation of the Trinity. "Social gospel" represents a comprehensive effort of educated clergy to change individuals and affect conditions; for the most part, small to medium size churches. Most people forget that King pastored a medium-size church, and most of the major players led medium-sized congregations. And "prophetic engagement," well, that's you and me doc, a synthesis of Malcolm and Martin trying to give voice to those who otherwise won't be heard, and to things that many otherwise would not hear.

When asked whether the focus and emphasis of the Black Church has changed, Pastor D, after a long pause, replied that it had not. He said that it grieved him to respond that way, but the sad truth is that the Black Church has the same focus and emphasis as it did in the sixties:

This wouldn't be sad if the rest of the world didn't change as well. But as we can see, no other institution has stood still in a time machine—conditions have worsened, effects more lasting—and the Black Church is still doing what is has

always done—meeting, marching, and moaning.<sup>76</sup> Right now, the Black Church is in an intellectual and immoral crisis of direction because it does not know what to do with the Black underclass and it has no traction with 20 to 40-year old Black males. It is simply a “buppified,” motivational variation of Reverend Ike.<sup>77</sup>

He asserted that more action needs to be taken by the Black Church, action “that is relative to the crises facing Black communities, and not relative to the comfort levels of leadership.” He again pointed to the civil rights era, saying, “None of those church leaders were comfortable, nor were the struggles comforting, but they took a stance because the need was there and that forever changed the focus and emphasis of the Black Church. So it can happen.”

This seemed to dovetail right into the next question, so I hurriedly asked about pastoral leadership and how he viewed its role in the development and progression of the Black Church:

Its huge Doc. I mean think about, how can the Black Church address the much-needed issues and concerns of the community without committed, educated, and quality leadership? Sadly, though, many Black congregations are stuck in the tradition of hearing good sermons and songs on Sunday, and not doing anything in the world on Monday. And that has to come from leadership! What we’re seeing though Doc, is defunct leaders that will cultivate a sermon all week, but won’t walk the streets! So what does that do? That leads to a “boxed-in” perspective that is so out-of-touch with the reality of the people that disconnect begins to happen. Leadership has to stay in touch with the people. That is what made the civil rights movement so powerful—everyone felt connected.

After a pause, which seemed to convey a heightened sense of sincerity to what was about to come, Pastor D said,

Doc, I go into gang areas, bullet-ridden housing projects, but I also go on CNN and Oprah’s show. That’s commitment, Doc. I don’t do either for recognition, and I definitely don’t do one as opposed to the other because they’re both necessary to

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<sup>76</sup> “Moaning” referring to the slave practice of singing hymns and spirituals in lamenting fashion while working on the plantation.

<sup>77</sup> “Buppified” represents a Black contextualization of “yuppie,” a young city resident or suburbanite with a well-paid professional occupation and an affluent lifestyle.

bring light to the lament of people. What kind of leader would I be if I went to the White House to talk about drugs and not the crack house where there are drugs?

When asked of the Black Church's present effectiveness, Pastor D replied that it is effective for those that attend, and ineffective for those who do not. He identified one reason for its effectiveness (Black people don't have any place else to go) and two reasons for ineffectiveness (stubbornness to change and refusal to hold leaders accountable), saying, "the Black Church has not presented a new paradigm and you can't use an 8-track player in an iPod world." At the time of the interview, *The New York Times* had released an article reporting ill-advised and inappropriate Congressional Black Caucus spending, which included a \$700,000 expenditure for a caterer—significantly more than scholarships awarded, according to federal tax records.<sup>78</sup> Pointing to this story, Pastor D began to elaborate on what he believes to be the hypocritical and hindering practices of the Black Church:

If this were a story on the Republican Party, or anyone related to the Republican Party, Black folks would be in an uproar! And the uproar would be led by Black religious leaders! There's no consistency and accountability, Doc. Why isn't the Black Church calling these representatives to an account? Why isn't the Black Church probing into these allegations? Why isn't the Black Church being prophetic regarding this situation? And why is the community letting the Black Church off the hook? Could you imagine what would happen if this story were about Bush and the Republicans? Come on, Doc. This is why the Church makes no progress and has no credibility. Those of us charged with effecting change, Church or otherwise, adopt and live the status quo.

His theme of accountability continued into his next response dealing with partnerships. Pastor D felt that partnerships were a key component to a resurgent and effective Black Church, especially when dealing with limited resources, but asserted that partnerships could not come at the expense of mission. He explained:

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<sup>78</sup> "In Black Caucus, a Fund-Raising Powerhouse," in *The New York Times*, February 13, 2010.

The Black Church has to be strong in its conviction and not compromise its mission, values, or beliefs. What typically happens in partnerships is that the Black Church takes on the mission, values, and beliefs of its partners, instead of vice-versa, which is huge. Doc, can you imagine the impact a lending institution could have in the hood if touched by the Spirit of God through a relationship with the church?! But the lending institution becomes the power broker in the partnership and somehow the purpose, ideals, and goals of the church fall by the wayside.

From his perspective, ecumenical, interfaith, and private/public sector partnerships would only be fruitful “if built on a foundation that respected the church’s faith, established trust among institutions, and remained transparent as far as motives.”

Pastor D identified the prosperity gospel as a competing stream within the Black Church. What the prosperity gospel offers is a “no holds barred invitation to pursue and accumulate wealth with no responsibility to community, commitment to causes, or service with respect to injustice.” He went on to say that he wouldn’t be where he is today if the prosperity gospel was as prevalent when he grew up:

While there were prosperity preachers such as Father Divine, Sweet Daddy Grace, and Reverend Ike, the difference is that prosperity approaches looking to answer the longing of Black economic justice were shaped by the realities of legal segregation. With a less restrictive American economy, the pursuit of wealth cannot only be encouraged, it can be made to look spiritual.

Pastor D offered no solution to tackling the prosperity problem, but did believe that it shall remain viable until people find no happiness in its message of accumulation. He drew a comparison of a drug addict who has to hit rock bottom, “when the use of the drug can no longer pull them out. That’s when the prosperity gospel will lose its flavor... or,” as he begins to laugh, “at Jesus’ return.”

When giving recommendations for moving forward, Pastor D remained true to his activist roots and suggested that the Black Church heighten its critical-engagement with institutions and systems that have a direct impact and influence on the conditions

affecting Black communities, but ardently insisted that theological education play a significant part: “Public policy must become increasingly a centerpiece of theological education. We must put pressure on seminaries to ask, ‘How do we restructure curriculum?’” Reaffirming that this would require “a shift in approach to leadership as well as a shifting in the training of leaders,” he believed that

To truly be prophetic moving forward, the Black Church can’t put new wine in old wineskins, and expect new wine taste. I am all for tradition, but at some point we have to be honest and say, “what we’re doing isn’t working.” And, if we are truly prophetic, our voice should be self-critical as well as socially-critical. Let’s stop preaching and teaching what worked in the past and develop and design something that can work in the present.

#### Pastor E

I needed a letter of introduction to connect with Pastor E, Senior Pastor of a historic Baptist congregation. Interestingly, however, once the letter was received, Pastor E granted my request, extended himself in quite hospitable fashion, and was very accommodating. Given his affiliation and connection with many prominent Black pastors, I was intrigued and excited for the opportunity. So, after taking a few “digs” at one another about our fraternity associations, we jumped right into the interview. I asked his understanding of the terms “historic Black Church,” “social gospel,” and “prophetic engagement,” and he responded:

Historic Black Church represents an evangelical tradition that developed mostly out of early missionary efforts of White Baptists and Methodists, as well as the “invisible institution” that grew out of the indirect understanding of slaves from the preached gospel. Social gospel comes directly from the theology of Rauschenbusch that emphasized the physical along with the spiritual needs of human beings. And, prophetic engagement draws on James Cone and liberation theology—Jesus Christ preaching the Good News to the poor, John confronting Herod, Isaiah confronting the people of Judah, Adam Clayton Powell chastising government, and Martin Luther King admonishing society.

When asked whether the emphasis and focus of the Black Church have changed, Pastor E replied that they have not, “but are threatened by the song of the world.” I asked if he would say more, and he obliged:

The Black Church is relying less and less on the leading of the Spirit and becoming more concerned about social positioning. It is too worldly and less risky when it comes to walking by faith—worried about perception, forgetting that it is called to be faithful in the world, not successful by it.

He brought attention to the lack of boldness plaguing the Black Church, giving an example of how his congregation took over a tenement building that was being used to sell drugs and making the assertion, “Things like that cannot be done without the bold presence and empowering of the Spirit. We, as people of God, declared that house off limits and walked in the boldness of that declaration. But you can’t do things like that worried about how you’re going to be perceived.”

Without any prompting or skipping a beat, Pastor E growls, “And the way the pastor goes, so goes the church.” Here, he became very passionate and purposeful talking about leadership in the Black Church. He began by identifying what he labeled “the major flaw” in pastoral leaders—they believe the pews should sacrifice, but the pulpit shouldn’t. He recalled a colleague’s first pastorate where the church couldn’t afford a salary, but took a monthly “Love Offering” for his colleague. And, he continued,

My colleague stayed and, by the grace of God, labored to the point that the church could not only to pay him a salary, but provide him with a retirement package in addition to paying a higher salary to the incoming pastor. But pastors nowadays enter into negotiations with churches about 401K, vacations, and pensions and have no semblance of being called to the congregation. Yes, churches need to take care of ministers, but that shouldn’t be the focus.

He highlighted that example to make the case for the type of leadership that played a primary role in the development and progression of the Black Church. In his opinion, had

it not been for pastors such as his colleague, many churches would not be in the financial position to negotiate and meet the compensation packages of today's pastors.

Pastor E felt that the Black Church was presently effective, but identified better training—formal and informal—as key factors for future effectiveness. His idea of better training focused on two areas, seminaries and mentors:

Seminaries do not do enough in terms of practical theology. So students come out well-equipped in book knowledge, or the who said stuff, but are way off when it comes to practical application, or the “what do I do with what s/he said” stuff. Then couple that with a lack of mentorship from pastors and you get ministers who aren't ready to lead. But it's not their fault! When I was coming up, pastors would teach what seminaries didn't, in fact, that's what my mentor Dr. Proctor would say all the time, “Seminaries don't teach you guys this stuff.” So it was the combination of seminary and pastors that collectively taught my generation. That's why I believe that seminaries should look to pastors, especially Black pastors, to engage in teaching opportunities because they offer practical models of ministry.

Pastor E touched on the perception that there aren't enough qualified pastors who can in fact teach on a seminary level. His rebuttal was that it

Depends on how qualified is defined. If qualified is defined as letters behind the individual's name, there may not be as many “qualified” pastors to choose from, but they are still there. But, and this is really important, if “qualified” is defined as knowledge of a topic and experience in the area of that topic, which it should be, then there are a number of Black pastors to choose from.

He continued by saying that White seminaries need to recognize the phenomenon of the church represented in other cultures, and embrace, from a learning standpoint, other cultural contributions to the understanding of God's presence in the world, because “the world wasn't just White, isn't just White, nor will it ever be just White; though the strong perception in academia is otherwise.” He ended with what I consider one of, if not *the* most powerful statements I heard throughout the entire research process: “Teaching comfort may be Christian, but breeding comfort is a teaching casualty.” I asked for an explanation and he gave the following:



Comfort is a relief while being challenged, stretched, and tested; not necessarily the removal of it. When you examine biblical stories, God brings comfort while in the midst of challenges and storms, but the person still had to weather them. So when seminary professors don't challenge, stretch, or test students, particularly in uncomfortable areas, they are in fact breeding comfort and doing a discipleship disservice.

Pastor E felt that partnerships are a must in the resurgence and effectiveness of the Black Church, and once again, he placed the onus on leadership and implicated seminaries:

The Black minister will have to become “dually-competent.” The days where he [or she] could just preach on Sundays and teach on Wednesdays are gone, because problems in the community are so prevalent. Preachers are going to have to build competency in other areas because those areas hold the institutional and systemic partnerships that can effect change—banks, hospitals, county services, education boards. And how to go about these partnerships needs to be incorporated into seminary curriculum! Community development, coalition with other churches, healthcare providers all hold strategic places that can help bring forth a social gospel.

He talked about his church's partnerships with other institutions, which have led to a more effective ministry: banks and lending institutions that assist with housing and commercial real estate developments, the American Red Cross and a local hospital that help with prenatal screening and health clinics, and the YMCA that partners to provide children's programs. In his opinion, “God called the church to be an instrument, but He didn't say that it had to play a solo.”

Pastor E pointed to the prosperity gospel as a competing stream within the Black Church. He noted that the culture of the church is changing in the same manner as society's culture, “no bond with neighbor, no sense of individual or communal sacrifices; everything is me, me, me and have, have, have.” He pointed to deleterious influence of megachurch pastors, “from attire to desire,” saying, “There is one Black megachurch pastor who wears big suits because he's a bigger guy, but then you look around and see

all these other pastors wearing big suits who aren't big at all!" He was quick to say that while prosperity is in the Word of God, it isn't the only theme that can reach the masses. But, "when the desire is to become popular, then being prophetic takes a back seat."

Pastor E continued to push leadership training and development in his recommendations for the Black Church moving forward:

The Black Church has to get more involved in the root causes that are troubling Black communities to create more systematic solutions. And the only way to do that is to become more competent, build more capacity, and act more comprehensively—none of which can happen without education and training. So instead of continuing to work from the old Black Church adage, "God doesn't call the qualified, He qualifies those He calls," which implies schooling isn't necessary, and start preparing ministers for the work that will uplift the community socially, economically, and politically.

#### Pastor F

After multiple conversations with his assistant, and a "once over" by an assistant minister, I was able to connect with Pastor F. As a younger pastor, called to preach at the age of sixteen, Pastor F's charisma, conviction, and care give quick credence as to why. After a brotherly exchange of backgrounds, call to ministry testimonies, and dissertation struggles, we got to the interview. I opened with asking his understanding of the "historic Black Church," "social gospel," and "prophetic engagement," to which he responded:

Historic Black Church embodies a feeling that falls in line with the "invisible institution" and civil rights era of churches pulling together for causes in the community. There was camaraderie, civility, and unity. There wasn't always unanimity, obviously, but the cause of one did not supersede the cause of the whole. Historic Black Church also holds an idea, an idea that the people of God should work to withstand evil and injustice—to play a part in God's unfolding plan. Social gospel meaning things beyond, or outside, the spiritual that affect the lives of individuals. And more importantly, addressing those things in a spiritual way in an attempt to change, fix, or remove them. And prophetic engagement is quite simply speaking truth to power. Providing that voice that reminds, rebukes, or even refutes the thoughts, words, or actions of evil and injustice.

When asked whether the focus and emphasis of the Black Church has changed, Pastor F felt that it had not. But, he believed that the needs of the people that the Black Church serves have changed, thereby forcing the Black Church to rethink its focus and emphasis. According to him, the focus and emphasis of the Black Church are still the problems, issues, and ills of the community, but they have different measures now because times have changed somewhat:

Homeownership isn't an issue like it once was, but predatory lending is; dining in a restaurant isn't as much a problem, but feeling welcome and being treated fairly is; driving a luxury car isn't as far-fetched as it used to be, but "driving while Black" is. So the focus doesn't change, because wrong is wrong, but the dynamics have changed a bit, which can call for a change in approach.

He stated that pastoral leadership has a very important role in the resurgence and progression of the Black Church simply because people in Black communities always look to their church leaders, "it's embedded in the job description," he chuckled. Having extensive opportunity to see first-hand and learn from pastors in the prophetic tradition, Pastor F felt that leadership can either strengthen the presence and performance of the Black Church in the future or make it stagnant:

I have nothing against selling chicken dinners or bake sales to help the "Building Fund," but at some point, we've got to mature into the mindset of asset mapping, financial planning, and other economic development areas. And that spark has to begin with pastoral leadership. The pulpit is still a powerful platform in the Black Church and it's about time that we use it purposefully, not personally.

Pastor F felt that the Black Church is somewhat effective, but countered that it has deficiencies that prevent it from being as effective as it could. He listed lack of unity among leadership, low meaningful connection between church and community, minimal capacity building efforts, and resistance to change and varied approaches. He quickly asserted that this hasn't always been the case, but

we tend to forget that part of Martin's message—the part that holds Black folks accountable just as much as it indicts Whites. King put more pressure on Blacks to further the movement because he recognized that as rights were received and status achieved, the internal struggle “to get ahead” would become more prevalent in the Black community.

Due to those dynamics, he conceded that the Black Church can only be effective to a certain extent.

Pastor F strongly believed that partnerships were key in the resurgence and progression of the Black Church, “across ecumenical, sector, and secular lines.” The Black Church, and the Black pastor, “has to accept the fact that it can't do everything, nor should it have to. Don't get me wrong, there was a time when that was the case, but that was because of the realities of the social conditions. Now, though certain conditions exist, the Black Church and Black community have many more resources at their disposal, but the Black Church has to be prepared to deal with those partnerships on a spiritual, and yet professional, level.” When asked to elaborate on spiritual and professional, he stated:

Black churches have not always had the structure or processes in place that are indicative of good business practices. It has performed duties and tended to needs in the manner in which its resources allowed. But, in approaching partnerships, Black churches and leaders are going to have to accept that some practices may not be the “proper” way to do things and change them, for the better I might add. It is not an indictment against the church or the pastor, it is simply an indicator of how and where both can be strengthened and more effective.

Pastor F called attention to the prosperity gospel as a competing stream within the Black Church. In his response, he mentioned that there are plenty of “themes” in the Bible, but this particularly has taken root because of Black people's history with lack of wealth accumulation. Reaching back to the inability of slaves to own property, Pastor F articulated, “the best way to get people to buy into something is to provide what they've been deprived.” This history of deprivation, according to him, is what gives popularity to the prosperity gospel.

If someone constantly tells you that your breakthrough is coming, you start to anticipate and look for the breakthrough. But what about seeing God in the midst of your “break” and also seeing Him when He pulls you “through”? Prosperity gospel teaches that if you find yourself in situation of poverty, debt, or some other unfavorable financial situation, that somehow you are outside the will of God. Well you know what, I think I’ve been walking in the will of God for my life for 30 years and I’ve been broke, had a car repossessed, and no food in the refrigerator. But that wasn’t the end of my story, it was a chapter.”

As for suggestions moving forward, Pastor F believed that the Black Church would best served by investing in developing its leaders. He touched on the personal benefit of his seminary education and availability of mentors, and recalled how that allowed him to step into pastoring confident of his knowledge and conscious of his network:

When I first became pastor, my pastor and I would have weekly teleconferences about how I felt, how things were going, what concerns I had, what issues I was encountering, and things like that. So many of us need mentors because our seminary experience, more often times than not, are challenging to say the least. I know pastors that went through an entire seminary program and didn’t discuss liberation theology once! Can you believe that? So, Black pastors have to augment what seminaries are doing, and in some cases, demand that seminaries change some things, to make learning more practical.

#### Pastor G

Pastor G was the first to agree to an interview. There was no intermediary, letter of introduction, or flooding of emails—we met at a preaching conference where I introduced myself and my topic, asked if he was willing to be interviewed, and he obliged by passing on his card and contact information. Completely in awe of his experience in the civil rights movement, reputation in the Black community, and utter humility regarding his pastoral accomplishments, I couldn’t wait to hear his thoughts. After giving him a little grief about his hometown basketball team, I asked his

understanding of the “historic Black Church,” “social gospel,” and “prophetic engagement.” He responded:

Historic Black Church is an institution that isn't a single institution. It's more of an ideal or a practice that brought churches together with an understanding of fellowship and community. It represented a universal distance between “Saturday darkie” and “Sunday saint” that allowed Blacks to dictate, control, and have authority in one aspect of their lives. It was a unity forged by struggle that created space for Blacks. Social gospel embodies a spiritual and conditional transformation that targets the hearts, heads and hands of men—by that I mean the conceptions of, and constructions in, society. Prophetic engagement speaks to standing up on the Word of God in the face of power—whether that power be in the form of a person, such as Pharaoh, or in form of a system, such as the woman at the well.

When asked whether the focus and emphasis of the Black Church has changed, Pastor G said “yes.” According to him, the focus and emphasis are now on personal salvation and discipleship with little attention given to cultural identification or exaltation of praise. He added:

Black and White churches have borrowed from another, there's no question. But, the Black churches have borrowed to the point of cultural delinquency—changing worship styles, singing, etc. It seems that once integration happened, the pursuit changed from the desire to be equal to Whites, to being White, and all that White embodied. Integration can dilute, but it doesn't have to!

He also mentioned an absence of connection. He felt that many Black churches, while residing in certain neighborhoods, aren't connecting to the people and problems of that neighborhood because many congregants have transitioned out and commute in. So the congregants absorb the focus and emphasis and not the community—a growing tension in the Black Church from his perspective.

Pastor G asserted that pastoral leadership played a critical role in the development and progression of the Black Church. He was very quick to add “that the primary role must be assigned to the Holy Spirit, but we pastors played a very major part.” He identified that the pastor was to protect and proclaim, and in the struggle for social

justice, “was very dangerous because martyrdom at the cross was real... people, pastors were dying!” He added:

But ultimately, there’s always danger of crucifixion in protecting and proclaiming. The leadership of the Black Church reflected the redeeming, transformational love of Jesus Christ with its unwavering acceptance of that threat—which is why Black leadership played such a critical role because we had to preach reconciliation while being “healers” and “confronters” at the same time.

When asked if the Black Church is presently effective, Pastor G enthusiastically said “yes.” He went on and on about his hope and optimism with “the younger generation of intellectually-brilliant and dedicated pastors.” He affirmed:

With the rising tide of challenges that churches have to address, the young leaders whom I have come in contact and had the privilege of working with are well-trained, have unique preaching styles, and seem to connect very well with the hip-hop and forty-and-under generation. What I like most is that they have a spirit of social justice, but aren’t replicating what we did in the sixties, seventies, and eighties.

Ironically, he said that all pastors will not be prophetic, nor should they be. Some are required by God to be servant leaders. When asked to explain the difference, he offered the following:

Prophetic leaders listen to the voice of God to the furthest extent of human capacity and respond with great risk and commitment to human challenges and pains. Servant leaders are greatly pastoral in outreach, but may not always be as bold or daring as prophetic, but dutiful in the capacity and role in which they find themselves.

He also touched on the role that media plays in the perception of effectiveness, saying, “Transformative and redemptive actions don’t receive headlines, but tragic and scandalous actions do.” He argued, “sometimes great things need moments of hiddenness to come to fruition, better way to prepare and equip.”

Pastor G believed that partnerships were very important to the resurgence and effectiveness of Black Church, particularly between megachurches and smaller churches.

He said that there should be cooperation and not competition, because the ministries could complement each other:

There's always tension between megachurches and smaller churches. Could be jealousy or envy, but if you really think about it, what a wonderful opportunity it could be to cooperate, learn, and serve in ministry. The megachurches have resources that the smaller churches don't, and the same goes for the smaller church. Taking the time to find out how they could come together would be a glorious vision of God's kingdom.

He also highlighted seminaries as key partners because the church could inform the seminary of the changing dynamics in congregations and communities, and help develop curriculum that is relevant and related to those changes. He posed this question: "Are we producing scholars or leaders who are able to face the world's challenges with credibility, intentionality, and spirituality? The seminaries have to ask themselves, 'What kind of disciples are we sending forth?' and be sensitive to public policy and social matters in what they teach."

When asked about competing streams within the Black Church, Pastor G touched on the megachurch phenomenon once again. He stressed that it borders on idolatry because the temptation is to define ministry success based on quantity. "And when that happens, you miss the prophetic aspect of the gospel message and fail to measure the quality of work." In his opinion, motive and method can get in the way of mission and what the megachurch represents for most is "the" way to do ministry, when in fact, it may not:

Just because someone else built a large worship center doesn't necessarily mean that the next person, if following the same steps, will also. May not be in God's plan. The megachurch approach begins with what man wants and then consults God. That's not how it works. God already has the plan and we have to fall in line. And for some, it may not be a megachurch. But that doesn't devalue the ministry or the service.



As for recommendations moving forward, Pastor G offered two: more attention to developing international partnerships and a focus on healthcare in the Black community. He felt that as a Black institution, the Black Church could do more to connect with its Pan African brother and sister nations around the globe, arguing, “There are more White institutions and congregations doing more in Africa than Black [institutions].” In regard to healthcare, he provided a series of health facts related to the Black community such as a high proportion of hypertension, increasing obesity, and improper nutritional habits and felt it is a great field for discipleship, “A comprehensive approach that includes spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being. An issue that is affecting the Black community significantly and disproportionately and an approach that could quite possibly bring more people to Christ.”

#### Pastor H

Pastor H is considered one the country’s finest educators among Black preachers as his service as Vice President for his denominational conference’s Educational Congress for two consecutive terms proves. His soft-spoken demeanor comes across as thoughtful and thought-provoking, while his “Bible Belt” preaching style echoes of great preachers long past. With no middle-men to get through, he and I were able to connect rather quickly which was far from the norm throughout this entire process. Upon my arrival, we discussed current events, chatted about my research, and caught up on information pertaining to people we knew in common. After a brief interruption by the church secretary, I began with the opening question, of his understanding of the “historic Black Church,” “social gospel,” and “prophetic engagement.” He explained:

Historic Black Church has its roots in the African-American diaspora and Black experience. While it obviously isn’t a single institution, it represents a one-

mindedness that comforted, supported, empowered, and inspired Blacks beginning from slavery. I interpret social gospel as a holistic approach to the message of Jesus Christ—the earthly conditions of how to feed, help find jobs, confront systems in addition to the heavenly spiritual things of salvation, conversion, and transformation. And prophetic engagement is how the preacher/prophet relates to the political/social ills of society which may include addressing right and wrong, speaking against established religion, and addressing the sense of entitlement within religious ranks.

Pastor H believes that the community focus of the Black Church has been lost to, or traded for, an emphasis on personal gain. He acknowledged that there are more voices in the Black Church than ever before, and it seems to him that every voice wants to be dominant. He believed this to be the root cause for dissension within the Black Church:

There's room for disagreement and there's nothing wrong with that. But, at some point, we have to yield to the wisdom of God and present some level of uniformity. We can all have "a" voice, but we all can't be "the" voice" when it comes to collective activity. We have to trust that God will open our hearts as to who should be the voice, just as the civil rights pastors did when appointing King.

He also mentioned that the Black Church has to be true to what it is. If it is communal, then it has to be communal wherever it goes, and if it is prophetic, then it has to be prophetic no matter the situation. In his eyes, the focus and emphasis must be consistent and maintained throughout.

Pastor H asserted that pastoral leadership has played a "colossal" role in the development and progression of the Black Church because it was/is pastors that "lay out the where and how" as given to them from God. From there,

the pastor may have to take on a manager role by helping people and personalities find their place, may have to take on a mediator role to sort through problems and divisiveness, and may have to be a shepherd to establish boundaries and rules. In any type of role, the pastor is always involved [in] some kind of way.

From his perspective, the pastor is an overseer—a term which he believes gets "a bad rap"—having to do with everything from shaping a vision to empowering people to helping bring the vision to fruition. He hammered home the point that "the pastor has to

maintain a focus of what's important. Majoring in minors, and minoring in majors, won't get the job done. I, as an overseer, don't care who does the work, or who gets credit for doing the work, as long as what was done works."

Pastor H vehemently voiced that the Black Church is effective, although it suffers from what he identified as "a lack of sacrificial spirit among leadership that is crippling the church with personal expectations. To the point that it is now becoming obscene." He explained:

The Black Church is effective because it still meets the needs of the people. But it is going to have to find its way in doing that amidst a changing culture and post-modern world in a relevant way. In the meantime, pastors are going to have to assess what is success from a clergy perspective. Is it souls or seats? Is it salvation or syndication? I say this because every church is not supposed to be a megachurch, and every pastor is not supposed to be a "megapastor." Where is the personal relationship with God and how informed are leaders by it? Pastors have to learn the place that God has for him or her.

He also remarked that the Black Church needs to get back to "preaching and teaching, and forget about motivational speaking that does nothing to convict and challenge hearers. God's message can't be warm and fuzzy all the time."

Pastor H said that partnerships are "a definite must. Especially with seminaries and social agencies." He stated that seminaries have a role in sending out "practical-ready" leaders, but interjected,

who really sits down [with seminaries] to give "real" knowledge about the church? Seminaries can't operate out of comfort and need to explore the real practical aspects to classroom learning. How do you move from theologian to technician? One focuses on text, the other people. Seminaries need to teach curriculum that helps students be effective in the church.

He also touched on social agencies: "They're important because our people need services, and the church can't do everything. Individual pastors still have to serve, but not

in the same capacity as before. We have to be able to access the resources around us and younger pastors have to learn how to navigate and negotiate with institutional systems.

Pastor H identified the prosperity gospel as a competing stream within the Black Church. He felt that materialism and individualism are rampant:

The idea that I am supposed to have something, and if I don't it's because something is wrong with my faith is killing the church. It creates a "pursuant" journey instead of a "purposed" one. We have to be careful that our desires, wants, and yearnings aren't taking away from our spiritual connection to what God desires for us.

Interestingly, he felt that the Black Church is "still in a fight against the perception of Christianity as "the White man's religion." This fight, in his opinion, "comes from those who see Black pastors as 'sellouts' and believe they serve for the only the wishes of the establishment. Unfair and untrue, but until we consistently portray otherwise, this perception won't go away."

Pastor H recommended that the Black Church seriously address the issues facing the people: "It must be relevant, practical, and sacrificial in doing so, but more importantly, it has to teach responsible citizenship in every area of life. And that's going to take more than going to prayer meetings and Bible study." He also noted that the Black Church must encourage members to help themselves in a way that improves quality of living for themselves and the community:

We live in a selfish culture, and that culture finds its way into the church. What we have to do is become a "counter-culture" that reflects genuine care, comfort, and community so people don't think that the church, the people in it, are no different than the rest of the world. If we want people to start acting different, the church has to start being different.

### Pastor I

Pastor I has served as his denomination's state President for four years. One of the major hallmarks during his term was bringing awareness of mental illness to the Black Church and within the Black community. While he dismisses any credit thrown in his direction, his administration's focus brought many civil institutions together to discuss the problem and work toward solutions. As we sat down for the interview, he brought me up to speed on his continued efforts as I him regarding this study, and then, jumped right into the interview with me asking his understanding of the "historic Black Church," "social gospel," and "prophetic engagement." He began:

Historic Black Church is the collective of churches that came together to fight for the community. Some say that it fought injustice, or evil, or whatever, but really it wasn't so much that it fought than that it affirmed. It affirmed humanness, it affirmed rights, it affirmed self-respect. And so the historic Black Church became an affirmation source for the community. Social gospel confirmed what the historic Black Church represented because it dealt with the entire human condition—how a person felt, what was causing it, and why. Prophetic engagement is about the interrogation of what and why. Speaking justly to the actions and causes of why things are the way they are. This historical nature of commitment to community will not change. It may evolve because issues evolve, but it won't change.

Pastor I observed that the focus and emphasis of the Black Church has not changed, as it is still "the problems facing the pews. Whatever issues are troubling members of the church and community, that's the focus and emphasis of the church. Pews are still the same—they seat people that have problems; and the expectation of the church is the same—speak to the plight of the people." He followed up:

I do not believe in "emerging" issues. Social issues evolve because societies and cultures evolve. Gang violence didn't emerge, it evolved; teenage pregnancy didn't emerge, it evolved; Black folks staying in poverty didn't emerge, it evolved. So the focus and emphasis of the Black Church hasn't changed, it evolves to meet the evolving needs of the community. And, the churches that evolve more quickly will be most effective in meeting those challenges.

Pastor I also brought attention to what he called “the misleading of emerge,” claiming that, “what most are attempting to actually define as escalated, elevated, or growing, they choose to use ‘emerge or emerging’ which gives the impression that whatever is being labeled was at some point a non-factor, non-threatening, or even non-existent.”

Pastor I felt very strongly that pastoral leadership has played an integral role in the development and progression of the Black Church:

We were/are charged with pastoring the legacy of the Black Church forward, just as previous pastors did with us. That legacy touches all areas—social, economic, political. Pastors must continue to move the legacy forward, but some are totally afraid. They’d rather be mainstream and not rock the boat of the status quo. Some have even gone as far as to claim that we as pastoral leaders don’t have to be what Black pastors were in the past.

Pastor I mentioned that pastoral leadership has to remain “steeped in what we’ve been and what we’ve done, but can’t get stuck by it. It must continue to be prophetic and not let anything different define us, not even the White church. We can’t get caught up in ‘historical lip sync’ which sounds like prophetic engagement, but turns out to be just lip service.” He also highlighted pastoral leadership’s integral role by saying that “it provided constant consciousness to situations in supportive ways children and young people could see and learn.”

Pastor I felt the Black Church is presently effective because it continues to deal with issues facing the community and providing services for members:

The Black Church is involved in housing issues, transportation concerns, neighborhood safety, employment needs, and on larger scale, political happenings. It provides family life centers, food shelves, health clinics, and educational support. These activities are much needed in communities where Black churches are located. And, the expectation is that the church will provide them.

He noted that the Black Church must keep alive its social gospel tenets or else it will not survive: The institution is what it is because of the social gospel. When it ceases to embody that, it ceases being the Black Church.”

Partnerships were very important to Pastor I because “they will allow difficult conversations to take place in global spaces that will effect change.” He continued:

We have to get back to making the pew effective and realizing that different people can work toward the same goals. Ecumenical racism hinders partnerships because it doesn’t allow differences to make contributions. The Black Church needs to become more involved in varying conversations to not only directly confront the situation or system, but also to diversify the solution to make it more community applicable.

Pastor I also stated that partnerships will allow the Black Church to develop communities by being in a position of trust. “You just can’t walk into a Black community without being ‘vouched for,’ and people are going to be suspect. The Black Church can introduce these partnerships so people can see the usefulness and positive value.” The institutions that Pastor I identified key partnerships with include: seminaries, global churches, banks, and healthcare providers.

Pastor I counted the prosperity gospel as a competing stream within the Black Church. He stated that the prosperity gospel has become popular because Black pastors don’t spend any time redeveloping themselves with the Christian message:

There is no pastoral growth. So pastors preach the same messages with the same themes and the people are looking for more. I think the rise of the prosperity gospel is more of an indictment against those of us who have not redeveloped the social gospel in a way that today’s culture can see its value for their lives. So how do we get back to incorporating the pew in what we do, what we preach, and what we teach. What is God calling us to collectively do to change the world in which we live? And that can’t be answered by prosperity gospel.

Moving forward, Pastor I suggested that the Black Church needs to become more critically aware of and critically involved with policies and policymakers. What prohibits

that, he argued, “is the lack of preparedness and readiness among clergy who still spend most of their time with “march and boycott solutions.” He urged for “quality approaches by genuine leaders who are capable and willing to work with others to solve systemic problems.” He believed that such an undertaking would bring together “government, secular institutions, and churches that are willing to work together, not control one another, and benefit as a whole.

### Response Concurrences

**Table 6.14**

Question #1: *What is your understanding of the terms “historic Black Church,” “social gospel,” and “prophetic engagement”?*

Pastor A	HBC – coalition of Black churches and Black leaders that pulled from White churches systematized governance and structure, but not politicized practice; SG – churches that provided in addition to worship, works that attended to the total needs of community; PE – speaking truth to power and people in a way that called individuals, institutions, and systems to task
Pastor B	HBC – machinery of justice, rooted in the cause for equality that united individual churches and leaders in the everyday lives of community; SG – the effort to address tangible and intangible realities affecting congregants and community; PE – an approach that seeks to change policy through changed hearts, a transformation that can only come by the movement of the Holy Spirit
Pastor C	HBC – family—immediate and extended, community, and mobilized single churches on a collective missional journey; SG – holistic, all-encompassing, grassroots, and defined on the margins; PE – faithful civic agitation of individuals and institutions in an effort to change unfaithful systemic policies and practices
Pastor D	HBC – represents a coalition of churches that collaboratively sought to deal with community issues, recognized strength in numbers, also recognized that resources were more plentiful <i>en masse</i> ; SG – comprehensive effort in ministry that attempts to change individuals and affect conditions; PE – individuals trying to give voice to those who otherwise won’t be heard, and to things that many otherwise would not hear
Pastor E	HBC – evangelical tradition that developed mostly out of early missionary efforts of White Baptists and Methodists, as well as the “invisible institution” that grew out of the indirect understanding of



	<p>slaves from the preached gospel; SG – theology of Rauschenbusch that emphasized the physical along with the spiritual needs of human beings; PE – James Cone and liberation theology, Jesus Christ preaching the Good News to the poor, John confronting Herod, Isaiah confronting the people of Judah, Adam Clayton Powell chastising government, and Martin Luther King admonishing society</p>
Pastor F	<p>HBC – a feeling that falls in line with the “invisible institution” and civil rights era of churches pulling together for causes in the community, camaraderie, civility, and unity, an idea, an idea that the people of God should work to withstand evil and injustice, play a part in God’s unfolding plan; SG – things beyond, or outside, the spiritual that affect the lives of individuals, addressing those things in a spiritual way in an attempt to change, fix, or remove them; PE – speaking truth to power, providing that voice that reminds, rebukes, or even refutes the thoughts, words, or actions of evil and injustice</p>
Pastor G	<p>HBC – an institution that isn’t a single institution, more of an ideal or a practice that brought churches together with an understanding of fellowship and community, represented a universal distance between “Saturday darkie” and “Sunday saint” that allowed Blacks to dictate, control, and have authority in one aspect of their lives, a unity forged by struggle that created space for Blacks; SG – a spiritual and conditional transformation that targets the hearts, heads and hands of men, the conceptions of, and constructions in, society; PE – standing up on the Word of God in the face of power, whether that power be in the form of a person, such as Pharaoh, or in form of a system, such as the woman at the well</p>
Pastor H	<p>HBC – has its roots in the African-American diaspora and Black experience, not a single institution, it represents a one-mindedness that comforted, supported, empowered, and inspired Blacks beginning from slavery; SG – a holistic approach to the message of Jesus Christ addressing earthly conditions of how to feed, help find jobs, confront systems in addition to the heavenly spiritual things of salvation, conversion, and transformation; PE – how the preacher/prophet relates to the political/social ills of society which may include addressing right and wrong, speaking against established religion, and addressing the sense of entitlement within religious ranks</p>
Pastor I	<p>HBC – collective of churches that came together to fight for the community, summed as affirmation; SG – dealt with the entire human condition of how a person felt, what was causing it, and why, summed as confirmation; PE – interrogation of what and why, speaking justly to the actions and causes of why things are the way they are</p>

**Table 6.15**

Question #2: *How has the focus and emphasis of the Black Church changed?*

Pastor A	ecclesial trend of megachurches more concerned about social acceptance than social justice
Pastor B	lack of spiritual guidance and direction, culture has too much of the church's ear and not Christ, sense of community was stronger when larger societal issues facing the Black community were perceived to be shared, conversations were unilateral, and outcomes were all-encompassing
Pastor C	no change—change with issues and concerns that it attempts to address, needs and well-being of the community continue to receive the attention
Pastor D	no change—same focus and emphasis as it did in the 60s
Pastor E	no change—relying less on leading of Holy Spirit, more concerned about social positioning
Pastor F	no change—still needs, problems, issues, and ills of the community
Pastor G	personal salvation and discipleship with little attention given to cultural identification or exaltation of praise
Pastor H	personal gain emphasis instead of community focus
Pastor I	No change— still problems facing the pews

**Table 6.16**

Question #3: *What role has pastoral leadership played in the development and progression of the Black Church?*

Pastor A	major role in development and underdevelopment
Pastor B	crucial role—provided a unified, coalition of individual pastors who collectively represented the cause(s) of the community
Pastor C	pivotal—growth of institution is directly linked to the growth of its leaders
Pastor D	huge—Black Church could not address the much-needed issues and concerns of the community without committed, educated, and quality leadership
Pastor E	significant—“the way the pastor goes, so goes the church.”
Pastor F	very important—Black community always look for their church leaders
Pastor G	critical—protect and proclaim
Pastor H	colossal—lay out the where and how
Pastor I	integral—pastoring legacy forward, constant consciousness

**Table 6.17**

Question #4: *Is the Black Church presently effective?*

Pastor A	no
Pastor B	no
Pastor C	yes & no
Pastor D	yes & no
Pastor E	yes
Pastor F	somewhat
Pastor G	yes
Pastor H	yes
Pastor I	yes

**Table 6.18**

Question #5: *Do you see partnerships as key component in the resurgence and effectiveness of Black Church?*

Pastor A	yes
Pastor B	yes
Pastor C	yes
Pastor D	yes
Pastor E	yes
Pastor F	yes
Pastor G	yes
Pastor H	yes
Pastor I	yes

**Table 6.19**

Question #6: *What, if any, do you identify as competing streams within the Black Church?*

Pastor A	prosperity gospel
Pastor B	prosperity gospel
Pastor C	megachurch status
Pastor D	prosperity gospel
Pastor E	prosperity gospel
Pastor F	prosperity gospel
Pastor G	megachurch phenomenon
Pastor H	prosperity gospel
Pastor I	prosperity gospel

**Table 6.20**

Question #7: *How do you recommend the Black Church move forward?*

Pastor A	“creative communion” with God that informs political alliances and economic community investments to help reclaim the Black Church’s prophetic platform and social effectiveness
Pastor B	strengthened partnership between the Black Church and Black scholars
Pastor C	critical collaboration with seminaries, (educate leaders, train leaders, support leaders)
Pastor D	heighten its critical-engagement with institutions and systems that have direct impact and influence on the conditions affecting Black communities
Pastor E	more leadership training and development
Pastor F	developing leaders—seminaries and mentors
Pastor G	more attention to developing international partnerships and a focus on healthcare in the Black community
Pastor H	seriously address the issues facing the people—teach responsible citizenship in every area of life
Pastor I	more critically-aware of, and critically-involved with, policies and policymakers

### Summary

As a leader, the Black pastor oversees the work of the church, and more than anyone else, determines the vision and goals of the ministry along with identifying activities to be engaged in by congregation. The social power of the Black pastor stems from this position of access and acknowledgment of power within the Black community. Throughout the years, the intangible resources of the Black Church and community have been viewed as incomparable to and incompatible with the tangible resources of the larger community. The interviews underscored a high premium placed on the development of pastoral leadership for a civic engagement progression of the Black Church. The development process should involve assessing the practicality of learning curriculum, expanding the definition of “essential learning,” and using ministry practitioners as resources.

The bible reports that the prophet Ezekiel had the thankless job of proclaiming God's message on the crowded and hostile streets of Babylon. At one point, the prophet records,

The hand of the Lord came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones. Then He caused me to pass by them all around, and behold, there were very many in the open valley; and indeed they were very dry. And He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"<sup>79</sup>

The good news is that dry bones can live through the agency of the Holy Spirit and the activity of leadership. The leadership of the Black Church needs to critically speak to the dry bones, constructively engage the dry-bone-causing systems, and actively seek to dismantle dry-bone-causing policies. On many levels, this falls within the Black interpretation of the Christian gospel that believes in the dignity and sanctity of human persons, the moral obligation and social responsibility to resist institutional evils, and the power of Christian love to make a difference in personal and social life. The civic engagement practices of the Black Church should not only address the social, economic, and political factors that shape Black civic and political life, but assess the ecclesiastical and pastoral variables that contribute to its effectiveness as well.

### **Survey and Interview Findings Conversation**

My intention in utilizing mixed-methods research was to bring into conversation impressions of congregants and perceptions of pastoral leaders relative to the Black Church and civic engagement. Approaching the topic from both the pulpit and pew perspectives, I believe, provides a comprehensive view of leadership and member understanding of past, present and future horizons related to the Black Church. According

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<sup>79</sup> Ezekiel 37:1-3 NKJV

to Guder, the key to the formation of missional communities is leadership,<sup>80</sup> but one must also take into account that leadership occurs in groups, as it involves influencing a group of individuals who have a common purpose.<sup>81</sup> Consequently, looking from both the viewpoint of leadership and members provides a clearer picture from which to draw conclusions and make suggestions for moving forward.

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul asks, “And how shall they hear without a preacher?”<sup>82</sup> Nowhere is this more readily apparent than the context of the Black Church. From slavery to the present, the personality, charisma, and inspiring ability of the Black preacher has played a central role in structuring church activities. More importantly, a striking feature of the Black Church is the considerable loyalty and commitment usually displayed by church members toward their pastor.<sup>83</sup> We can draw three conclusions from this fact and the collected findings: 1) ministry emphasis and activity is heavily influenced by pastoral leadership; 2) members’ understanding of congregational focus falls in line with pastoral understanding of social gospel, prophetic engagement and the focus of the Black Church; and 3) members and pastors agree that public policy should be an area of focus of the Black Church moving forward.

Every pastor interviewed confirmed the primary role played by the pastor in the development and progression of the Black Church (table 6.16). Coupled with member response percentages from tables 6.1 to 6.5, we can see the direct correlation between the

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<sup>80</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 183.

<sup>81</sup> Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007), 3.

<sup>82</sup> Romans 10:14 NKJV

<sup>83</sup> Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 7.

educating role of leadership and the high level of activity within congregations. Given that senior pastors provide the majority of member knowledge, understanding, and awareness through preaching and teaching opportunities, the significance of pastoral leadership in direction and implementation is clear. Since the time of the civil rights and Black power movements, “many Black churches have sought to revise their educational ministries to be more relevant to the cultural and political needs of a new generation.”<sup>84</sup> It is a common practice that senior pastors require clergy and lay leaders, while encouraging members, to become active in Bible classes, setting the foundation for growth, intentional conversations, and social understanding of the gospel. Contextual theologian Stephen B. Bevans argues that the role of the preacher

is that of articulating more clearly what the people are expressing more generally or vaguely, deepening their ideas by providing them with the wealth of the Christian tradition, and challenging them to broaden their horizons by presenting them with the whole of Christian theological expression.<sup>85</sup>

The Black Church has always understood itself as part of the community. Black pastors are given priestly authority only as they are seen as being part of, and committed to, the needs of the larger context. With this in mind, more commitment expressed by the pastor usually lends itself to more commitment embodied in members. The survey respondents expressed a high understanding that the needs of the church and community are intertwined (table 6.11), while the pastors interviewed also identified the common theme of community focus within their separate understandings of social gospel, prophetic engagement (table 6.14), and focus of the Black Church (table 6.15). Many of the great strides achieved by the church and community have come from this sense of

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<sup>84</sup> Franklin, *Another Day's Journey*, 35.

<sup>85</sup> Stephan B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 18.

belonging to, believing in, and battling for one another. Jesus warns that a house divided against itself will not stand,<sup>86</sup> and the Black Church, functioning as a member and extension of the community, continues to contribute to a Black sense of identity and cohesion.

The mass support of the Black Church's civic engagement suggests a fairly broad agreement among pastors and members about the necessity of political interaction by their congregations. I emphasize the word "general" given the high percentage of respondents who had no knowledge of their church's specific public policy activities (table 6.13). Although a high percentage of congregants were unaware of specifics, it did not take away from their belief that the congregation should be involved in such activities (table 6.10) which coincides with the high number of pastors recommending that the Black Church pay more attention and commit more resources to public policy work (table 6.20). It is clear that the strong belief of congregants is matched by the strong desire of leadership related to the importance of public policy activity, despite factors that may account for a varied level of involvement.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Matthew 12:25.

<sup>87</sup> Data analysis conducted by R. Drew Smith and Corwin Smidt showed that variation in the political involvement of Black churches is shaped by variation in the size and income of the congregation, the theological heritage of the congregation, and social theology and educational attainment of the congregation's pastor. The fact that congregational resources more than affinity with the political system shape civic engagement suggests that there are resource requirements for involvement for engagement with formal political processes that are difficult to overcome—especially within congregations and contexts dealing with limited resources. R. Drew Smith and Corwin Smidt, "System Confidence, Congregational Characteristics, and Black Church Civic Engagement," in *New Day Begun: African American Churches and Civic Culture in Post-Civil Rights America*, ed. R. Drew Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 76-79.



## Conclusion

My research findings support the three conclusions: 1) the Black Church needs to continue its practice of biblical education which helps shape its internal understanding of social justice and public policy; 2) leadership should devise methods and means to better communicate ministry goals, practices, and objectives related to social justice and public policy; and 3) the church should begin to rethink and reinvent its civic engagement practices. This dual competency renewal depends on the sacrificial reckoning with significant social, economic, and political changes that have occurred in Black communities since the civil rights era which highlight three realities: first, congregations are not often taken seriously as change agents in the community because they appear to be preoccupied with the pursuits of the world, consumed by the culture of the world, and avoiding the pitfalls of others in the world; second, Black Church leaders are often viewed as inept because of their repeated use of practices and methods that do not take into account the changing dynamics facing individuals, families, and communities; and third, many civil society institutions offer advantages and access that would significantly benefit the Black Church.

CHAPTER 7  
INTERPRETATIONS

**Introduction**

The major task of this study was to historicize and contextualize the Black Church with the hope of reclaiming and recontextualizing its social gospel dimensions, which cannot be adequately addressed without first identifying the mutual enhancement that Black Church civic engagement and missional ecclesiology provide for one another. As the surveys and interviews indicate, the spiritual needs of congregants mirror the social, political, and economic ripples experienced in the community—hence, the recognition of historical, practical, contextual, relational, and educational components relative to the community being essential to the future relevance of the Black Church. Religious practices, discussions about the role of the Negro/Black Church, and Black cultural images have repeatedly come together in important ways, not least in their impact on the real conditions of Blacks in the nation.<sup>1</sup> As a result, identifying the social gospel dimensions of the historic Black Church that can be reclaimed and recontextualized for renewed civic engagement provides insight into the functional shift awaiting the Black Church as well as the implications for the larger Church-wide community.

Based on research findings that revealed high levels of intentional conversations (tables 6.5 and 6.6), strong connection between congregation and community needs (table

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<sup>1</sup> Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 10.

6.11), and the consistent recognition of the critical role of pastoral leadership (table 6.16), seminary education (table 6.20), and partnerships (table 6.18), the researcher has concluded three areas that will help the Black Church to effectively renew its prophetic engagement within civil society: 1) a repurposed understanding of Black issues that has been lost due to social power dynamics within Black culture, 2) a reformed practical approach to leadership education and training, and 3) a recontextualized relational model for partnerships.

### **Generating Systemic Energy**

I claim that intergenerational compatibility, power dynamics, leadership education and training, and partnerships can generate the necessary systemic energy for the Black Church as an institution to create and effect social, political, and economic change. Diane Lane argues that many “would be correct in asserting that the worst thing that ever happened to Black Americans in the twentieth century was the success of the Civil Rights Movement.”<sup>2</sup> This assessment comes close to my argument for reclamation and recontextualization as in less than forty years, we have witnessed a vibrant and active Black Church, in all of its myriad expressions with a focus on education, capacity-building, and elevation of race, become, for too many, a place of hopelessness and despair.<sup>3</sup> I begin this chapter by moving from a historical perspective to what I believe is a new conception of what it means to be, and become, the Black Church. Throughout this chapter, I plan to weave together the five components—historical, practical, contextual,

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<sup>2</sup> See Diana L. Hayes, “Movin’ on up a Little Higher: Resolving the Tension between Academic and Pastoral Approaches to Black and Womanist Theologies,” in *Walk Together Children: Black and Womanist Theologies, Church and Theological Education*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Linda E. Thomas (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

relational, educational—into four areas of focus: intergenerational compatibility, power dynamics, leadership education and training, and partnerships.

In its ever-increasing multi-cultural and diverse context, the church in the United States of America is in decline and in crisis. The decline and crisis can be directly attributed to two factors: a Eurocentric theology presented as normative theology and blindness to the oppressive practices that systematize, syncretize, and support that normative presentation. It is clearly evident that Western mission has “been very much a European-church-centered enterprise,” the subtle assumption of many being “that the church’s missionary mandate lay not only in forming the church of Jesus Christ, but in shaping the Christian communities that it birthed in the image of the church of western European culture.”<sup>4</sup> A reorientation of theological understanding that includes context and culture, as well as reflection and action, serves as contributory channels for Black Church civic engagement and missional ecclesiology.

As we begin to envision the church of Jesus Christ not as the purpose or goal of the Christian gospel, but rather as its instrument and witness, the context and culture of the Black Church adds to missional ecclesiology the premise that there is no mission without reflection and action. Without reflection and action, missional ecclesiology is reduced to a self-focused, institutional maintenance and enhancement effort with no interaction, integration, or interrogation of social institutions and systems that affect God’s creation:

Mission is not just a program of the church. It defines the church as God’s sent people. Either we are defined by mission, or we reduce the scope of the gospel

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<sup>4</sup> Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 4.

and the mandate of the church... The doctrine of the church, ecclesiology, can and is still taught with little or no reference to the church's missionary vocation.<sup>5</sup>

In order to avoid the dominant cultural experience becoming oppressive, exclusionary, and even racist, the infusion of Black Church civic engagement as reflective and active define a missionary people “whose witness will prophetically challenge precisely those dominant patterns as the church accepts its vocation to be an alternative community. The structures of leadership and community life must then carry through that prophetic vocation.”<sup>6</sup>

For the church to address its missional and ecclesial identity, it must carefully include the multiple cultural contexts that it seeks to enter, share, and shape because it will be shaped by those contexts “just as it will constantly challenge and shape” them. Such a calling never leaves the church in a finished, settled, or permanent position, but rather, a “dynamic interaction between the gospel and all human cultures” that always “lies at the heart of what it means to be the church.”<sup>7</sup> An authentic missional ecclesiology equips the church to engage the cultural realities for Kingdom advancement, and the Black Church offers a spiritual principle, perspective, and platform from which that can be done—a biblical understanding that incorporates liberation and reconciliation as components of mission. According to Cone, to “understand the biblical view of reconciliation, we must see it in relation to the struggle of freedom in an oppressed society. In America, that means seeing reconciliation in the social context of black

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

liberation.”<sup>8</sup> Missional ecclesiology, therefore, in a social context of cultural and racial oppression, must not be afraid to critically reflect and systemically act in regard to inclusive practices of the church. Or, in the words of James Cone, ask the hard questions and have the difficult conversations.<sup>9</sup>

### Intergenerational Compatibility

Can the Black Church be relevant to generations who know only of its foundational context through secondhand accounts and history books? This fundamental question needs to take into account the inherent element of the Black Church and its continued focus on the historical context in which it was formed, which, according to womanist theologian Brandee Jasmine Mimitzraiem, makes it difficult for those who did not experience that context to locate themselves in, and relate themselves with, the institution.<sup>10</sup> The lack of historical knowledge, familiarity, and identification is far too often viewed as a problem with the “younger generation” who neither knows nor understands “how things used to be.” It is clear, however, that younger generations only know what has been traditionally passed down, and if the Black Church is to become future-relevant, it has to approach missional ecclesiology as an intergenerational discipline, practice, and purpose.

The Black Church as the ideological institution to address Black struggles should be both relevant to and receptive of younger generations. This has not happened. Perhaps,

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<sup>8</sup> James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 207-08.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>10</sup> See Brandee Jasmine Mimitzraiem’s, “Too Young to Be Black: The Intergenerational Compatibility of Black Theology,” in *Walk Together Children: Black and Womanist Theologies, Church and Theological Education*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Linda E. Thomas (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010), 334.

as Mimitzraiem argues, because the Black Church has not been made to see that the experiences of the younger generations “are valid sources for theology.”<sup>11</sup> Their validity, however, is unquestionable. As Hopkins writes, the younger generation, on the one hand, has sought to pursue the older generation’s pioneering agenda, and on the other hand, has claimed its own distinct approaches. So, the younger generation is both an heir and harbinger of the Black Church.<sup>12</sup> Ironically, it was social, political, and economic discomfort and disenchantment from which the Black Church rose and an unwillingness to address the conditional experiences of Blacks that cultivated its growth, significance, and status. So, it is not surprising that the younger generation’s inclusion and infusion of issues such as Afrocentricity, gender discrepancies, and class disparities provide an opportunity for intergenerational compatibility as the struggles of the younger generation is a result of the historical Black experience in America. In short, the younger generation has grown up dealing with the advances, consequences, and implications of the 1960s and 1970s liberation movements led by the Black Church.<sup>13</sup>

The younger generation is conscious of, and definitely not callous about, its history. This presents an obstacle and an opportunity for the Black Church—the lived realities of the Black Church represent the historical sources of the younger generation. However, the caution for the Black Church is not to make history primary over and against the experiences of the younger generation. The worth and value of the Black Church to the Black community is undeniable and unprecedented, giving it a choice

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>12</sup> Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 88.

<sup>13</sup> See Mimitzraiem’s, “Too Young to Be Black,” 337-47.

according to Mimitzraiem: either assume that the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements had no effect whatsoever or acknowledge that the Black experience has changed since the 1960s.<sup>14</sup> The Black Church has the responsibility to negotiate between generations—it is the resource that maintains the language of historical tradition and the legacy of radical transformation. The missional ecclesiology of the Black Church is a theology of praxis, not of passivity. Therefore, a focused approach of praxis, as well as context, relative to bridging the generations serves as a foundational framework for the Black Church moving forward.

### **Praxis & Context**

In *Models of Contextual Theology*, Stephan B. Bevens puts forth a praxis model of contextual theology that focuses on Christian identity “within a context particularly as that context is understood in terms of social change.”<sup>15</sup> According to Bevens, the praxis model

is a never-ending process that gets its considerable power from the recognition that God manifests God’s presence not only, or perhaps not even primarily, in the fabric of culture, but also and perhaps principally in the fabric of history. [It] is a way of doing theology that is formed by knowledge at its most intense level—the level of reflective action. It is also about discerning the meaning and contributing to the course of social change, and so it takes its inspiration from neither classic texts nor classic behavior but from present realities and future possibilities.<sup>16</sup>

The praxis model can be traced to the prophetic tradition that grounded the civic engagement of the Black Church,<sup>17</sup> the New Testament dictum to not only be a hearer of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 361.

<sup>15</sup> Stephan B. Bevens, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 70.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Isaiah 6; Amos 1-5.



the word but a doer as well,<sup>18</sup> and the close connection of ethical behavior with theological thought.<sup>19</sup> So, to speak of the praxis model, I am articulating a model “the central insight of which is that theology is done not simply by providing relevant expressions of Christian faith, but also by a commitment to Christian action.”<sup>20</sup> But even more than this, I am suggesting that theology must be understood as the product of continual dialogue between two aspects of Christian life—missional ecclesiology and Black Church civic engagement.

All theology is contextual, which is to say that all theology is grounded in the very hearts, hands, and minds of those believing, living, and laboring, and there is no theology that is, or can be, set apart or distanced from culture, heritage, or tradition.<sup>21</sup> But, any context can be, or become, perverted and in need of liberation and reconciliation. However, context, as a human construct and humanizing product, posits culture, albeit varied, as essentially good. The church, as a context, might express a high degree of satisfaction with the spread of its beliefs, traditions, and customs, but as it reflects on the manner and practices in which they were and continue to be done, it might become “more and more convinced of the perversion of U.S. American individualism and the need for a greater sense and exercise of community.”<sup>22</sup> The rereading of the gospel and reapplication of the Christian tradition within this context, coupled with continual,

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<sup>18</sup> James 1:22, 2:17

<sup>19</sup> Augustine and Aquinas argued that faith informed behavior through a rational process that sought happiness, virtue, and the highest good.

<sup>20</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 72.

<sup>21</sup> See Diana L. Hayes, “Movin’ on up a Little Higher,” 17.

<sup>22</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 75.

communal reflection on ways to develop more of a cultural-communal sense, might produce a more challenging brand of missional ecclesiology.

#### What Does This Mean for the Black Church?

Just as Du Bois insisted that the time had come for “the Negro Church” to divest itself of broad responsibilities, it would seem appropriate to suggest that the Black Church begin to reflect on the approach that it has heroically assumed in a multitude of tasks. The Black Church has dutifully fulfilled an enormous task, shouldering the burden of being a spiritual refuge with social consciousness which has, at times and places, been more pronounced than at others. While this unevenness exasperates those who have a one-dimensional perspective of the Black Church, its genius is that it recognizes human beings as both spirit and body with a duality of needs which must be addressed, as both are constantly at risk in American society. Lincoln and Mamiya agree, stating:

effective mission is the ability to determine where emphasis should be placed in light of existing realities. Contemporary needs are both deeply spiritual and agonizingly physical, and the resultant burden of the Black Church has never been more critical or more challenging.<sup>23</sup>

How does the Black Church continue to apply a social gospel that provided hope through slavery, sounded the trumpet of equality during the struggle for civil rights, and liberated the minds and spirits of its adherents? In an era when the Black population possesses its highest collection of consumer spending power, how does the church bridge consumerism with Christianity? How does the Black church address social challenges such as health care, public education and unemployment, without abandoning its distinct

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<sup>23</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 397.

and divine missionary mandate? And can the Black Church regain its historical place as a significant institution with the collective power to effect change?

### **Power Dynamics**

*People in a revolution don't become part of the system; they destroy the system... The Negro revolution is no revolution because it condemns the system and then asks the system it has condemned to accept them.*

Malcolm X

James Cone argues that power offers the authority for a person to determine his or her own position in relationships in society.<sup>24</sup> It was through this lens that Europeans came to understand the enslavement of Africans as an extension or fulfillment of biblical mandate and continued to reap the social and economic benefits of the slave trade. In his opening paragraph, H. Richard Niebuhr makes a case for the church's corruption by power:

In dealing with such major social evils as war, slavery, and social inequality, it has discovered convenient ambiguities in the letter of the Gospels which enabled it to violate their spirit and to ally itself with the prestige and power those evils had gained...<sup>25</sup>

Niebuhr's point was that the church itself can use, and in fact had used, the Bible to not only justify atrocities, but place itself in a social position of power as well—power to inform, enforce, and invalidate. This social power positioning of the Christian church at times was used to serve the purposes of White social dominance,<sup>26</sup> causing the line

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<sup>24</sup> See James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

<sup>25</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1929), 3.

<sup>26</sup> See James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

between spiritual mission and social function to become blurred. Thus, religion came to be a mechanism of social control that also dictated the reality of those being oppressed:

[T]he life of the slaveholder and others of that culture was that of extending white inhumanity to excruciating limits, involving the enslavement of Africans and the annihilation of Indians [sic]. The life of the slave was the slave ship, the auction block, and the plantation regime. It involved the attempt to define oneself without the ordinary historical possibilities of self-affirmation. Therefore when the master and slave spoke of God, they could not possibly be referring to the same reality.<sup>27</sup>

The larger implication of this situation is that the conditional lack of power created contextual competition for its attainment, and, as individuals began to satisfy their need for personal, Westernized manifestations of social promotion, the power separation and distinction became more pronounced—fostering feelings of confusion, conflict, and contempt. An historical example of this being Bacon’s Rebellion, where a White property owner in Jamestown, Virginia developed plans to seize Native American lands in an effort to acquire more property for himself and others while nullifying the threat of Indian raids. When refused militia support by Virginia’s elite, Bacon condemned the oppressive practices of the rich and led an attack on their homes and property that inspired an alliance of White and Black bond laborers, as well as slaves. To protect their position of power, the elite planters shifted their reliance on indentured English-speaking servants in favor of importing more Black slaves. In addition, they extended special privileges to poor Whites: White settlers received greater access to Native American lands, White servants were allowed to police slaves through slave patrols and militias, and measures were taken to avoid competition between free and slave labor. According to Michelle Alexander, “these measures effectively eliminated the risk of future alliances between

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<sup>27</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 10.

black slaves and poor whites.”<sup>28</sup> Poor Whites suddenly had a direct, personal stake in the existence of a structuralized power dynamic and responded to the logic of their situation by seeking ways to expand their privileged position.<sup>29</sup>

Europeans found biblical and ideological justification for their imperialistic practices. The concept of the Great Commission was a religious belief held since the Puritan period that the United States had a providential mission to tame and Christianize the land, and, in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny reflected an ideology that the United States was destined to control the continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The creation and maintenance of inequality, through imperial practices, was based on domination and subordination, which we see, from the outset, created an extraordinarily complicated power dynamic—those with power increased in social standing, and those without were increasingly subject to the powerful’s ideals and practices. While the valiant efforts to end oppression and achieve greater levels of equality have brought about significant changes in the overt, legalized, and sanctioned practices of the United States, “these new rules have been justified by new rhetoric, new language, and new social consensus, while producing many of the same results”<sup>30</sup>—a “preservation through transformation” power dynamic where White privilege is maintained, though the rules and rhetoric change.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 25.

<sup>29</sup> See Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975).

<sup>30</sup> Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 21.

<sup>31</sup> See Reva Siegel, “Why Equal Protection No Longer Protects: The Evolving Forms of Status-Enforcing Action,” *Stanford Law Review* 49 (1997): 1111.

Making sense of this dynamic requires that we pay close attention to the social structure that resulted and the culture that it created.

### Social Structure

To make strides toward establishing a new framework, we must begin with the frank acknowledgement that White America has been historically “weak-willed in ensuring justice” and has continued to resist the full acceptance of those with less power.<sup>32</sup> This creates a social structure that has persistent, ordered, and patterned inequity among individual and institutional arrangements of society, specifically the systematic distribution of power and access to resources possessed by individuals and communities—a change identified by many throughout the pastoral interviewing process (table 6.15). This structure entails barriers and constraints that are more burdensome for those with the least amount of power and fewest accesses to resources, leading to “meaning-systems” that, “while originally only ideas, gain force as they are reproduced in the material conditions of society.”<sup>33</sup> The power inequity stems from the social actions of individuals and institutions that have accepted the social structure, which with the resulting material conditions become a part of and reinforcement for contingent applications and meanings.

Reviewing the original Constitution, it is clear that the structure and content was largely based on a power dynamic with economic and political implications, affording rights to Whites as a means of creating social distance and establishing the inferiority of

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<sup>32</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 7.

<sup>33</sup> Ian Haney López, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 10.

certain groups. These statutes both ideologically supported the dominant narrative of power and also fostered the material inequalities that gave social structure its stratifying force. Martin Luther King addressed this dynamic by saying,

Negroes are almost instinctively cohesive. We band together readily, and against white hostility we have an intense and wholesome loyalty to each other. We are acutely conscious of the need, and sharply sensitive to the importance, of defending our own. Solidarity is a reality in Negro life, as it always has been among the oppressed. On the other hand, Negroes are capable of becoming competitive, carping and, in an expression of self-hate, suspicious and intolerant of each other. A glaring weakness in Negro life is lack of sufficient mutual confidence and trust.<sup>34</sup>

The lack of individual and institutional trust, along with a limited access to resources, created a culture among Black churches and within the Black community counter to the one passed down from Black foremothers and forefathers that equipped Black folk “with cultural armor” to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness, and competitiveness.<sup>35</sup> This armor constituted ways of life and struggle, and consisted of cultural structures of meanings and feelings that created and sustained a sense of community.<sup>36</sup> Addressing what happened and how that changed, as the pastoral interviews indicate, begins with the changing culture of the Black community and larger society and the Black Church’s lack of adaptation.

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<sup>34</sup> James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1986), 307.

<sup>35</sup> West, *Race Matters*, 23.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

## Culture

Religion is a critical aspect of culture. Along with language, common folkways, mores, and a shared history, religion should be considered as one of the building blocks of culture. Thus,

culture is essentially a construct that describes the total body of belief, behaviors, knowledge, sanctions, values and goals that mark the way of life of a people... In the final analysis it comprises the things that people have, the things they do, and what they think.<sup>37</sup>

While the modern use of the term “culture” obscures the original, dynamic, and creative meaning of “tending, harvesting, or cultivating,” retaining this active sense alerts us to the fact that culture is not some inert abstract reality, but is always in process, both in the sense that it is always affecting and always being actively produced.<sup>38</sup> Meaning, specific historical context, may inform culture, but different functionality influences it.

Consequently, culture is not a monolithic stationary entity that should be rejected, accommodated, or even transformed as a whole, it is a dynamic process which should be interacted in a critical, discriminating, and constructive manner.<sup>39</sup>

So what is the implication for the Black Church? The internalization of a counter-culture that encourages and rewards accumulation, greed, and gain not only harms the individual, but hinders the sense of community as well—a critical component by which the historic Black Church and social gospel are understood (table 6.1). Acquiescing to a world view predicated on an inequitable social structure directly places the Black

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<sup>37</sup> Melvin Herskovitz, *Man and His Works* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 625, cited in Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 27.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Warren, *Faith, Culture, and the Worshiping Community* (New York: Paulist, 1989), 172 cited in Guder, *Missional Church*, 151.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*



community in the patterns of domination and subordination. And, in order for these patterns to be purged, the behavior must be identified and addressed as the tragic response of a people bereft of resources in confronting a power dynamic that results in “lives of what we might call “random nows,” of fortuitous and fleeting moments preoccupied with “getting over”—with acquiring pleasure, property, and power by any means necessary.”<sup>40</sup> Under these circumstances, Black existential angst deriving from a lived experience inflicted by a White social structure that has permeated Black culture<sup>41</sup> cannot be understood solely in spiritual terms. On some level, the Black Church has to engage and address the social reality of what Kimberlé Crenshaw labels “the relationship of coercion and consent.” She argues that Black people are boxed in largely because there is a consensus among many Whites that oppression is legitimate. This is where coercion and consent can be understood: ideology convinces one group that the coercive domination of another is legitimate, causing the dominated group to consent with the hope of someday being in a coercive position.<sup>42</sup>

As a culture-forming institution, the Black Church needs to rediscover its cultivating process, which produces Black people in a particular way—characterized by love and care for neighbor, taking into account the current social realities of the Black condition. Given that most Western Christian institutions have been birthed by the advantaged class, it is expected that they would minimize Jesus’ gospel of liberation for the powerless by interpreting lack of resources or access as a spiritual condition unrelated

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<sup>40</sup> West, *Race Matters*, 10-25.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>42</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law,” *Harvard Law Review* 101 (1988): 1331.

to social and political phenomena. The culture and structure of society's power dynamic have a stranglehold on the soul of the Black community, and until loosed, the air breathed by the Black community will be corrupt. In true prophetic fashion, Cornel West testifies, "any disease of the soul must be conquered by a turning of one's soul. This turning is done through one's own affirmation of one's worth—an affirmation fueled by the concern of others."<sup>43</sup> The first social gospel dimension for the Black Church to reclaim and recontextualize is the historical praxis of community, self-sacrifice, and speaking truth to power instead of the current social practice of individualism, self-interest, and pursuit of personal gain which has corrupted the soul of the Church and community.

The evangelical traditions of the past, which set the norm for the early Black Church, only required evidence of a sincere calling from God to enter the ministry. A second social gospel dimension for the Black Church to reclaim and recontextualize is the training of clergy. A prudent approach for the future would be to add *practical* education to address the inherent fractures of life in the Black community. It is to this second dimension that we now turn.

### **Leadership Education & Training**

*A wise man will hear and increase learning,  
And a man of understanding will attain wise counsel...*

Proverbs 1:5

A look at the history of Christianity in the context of slavery also reveals various perspectives in which to view leadership education and training. Gayraud Wilmore contends that the first religious leaders recognized by slaves were not appointed out of their number by White missionaries, "but those men and women who had either learned

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<sup>43</sup> West, *Race Matters*, 29.

their priestcraft in Africa, or were taught by someone else who had.”<sup>44</sup> He furthers that the inept practice of native religion (inept because it did not produce desired results) resulted in

the taking on of more and more of the language, ritual trappings, and symbolization of Christianity until the old African religions were overpowered and the first Christian exhorters began to emerge as confidants and assistants of the itinerant white preachers.<sup>45</sup>

By the eve of the Civil War, the vast majority if slaves were American-born, and the cultural and linguistic barriers which had impeded the evangelization and conversion of earlier generations of African-born slaves were no longer a problem.<sup>46</sup>

Preachers licensed by the church and hired by the master were supplemented by “slave preachers” licensed only by the spirit. The “slave preachers” became characterized by how well they told the story. Prohibited from reading, their knowledge of word structure carried less value than the feeling they could inspire, and the feeling was tied directly to how well they merged biblical stories with concrete images of the slaves’ social situation. This pattern continues in today’s contemporary context, as “Black churches usually do not emphasize academic degrees as a criterion for preaching, because they do not associate a learned discourse with storytelling.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, on some level, many Blacks are suspicious of academically-credentialed ministers in the pulpit because of their identification with the perpetuation of the White, slavemaster’s Christian gospel

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<sup>44</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 49.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 212.

<sup>47</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 53.

that kept Blacks in physical and psychological bondage. For many in the Black community, one does not need formal education in order to tell God's story, and this has created a perspectival rift based on the necessity, value, and contextual significance of formal education as it relates to Black pastoral leadership.

Much of the debate about education finds its roots in the story of the slave preacher: were slave preachers a force for accommodation to the status quo or a force for exercise of slave autonomy? On the one hand, slave preachers were criticized as being the "mouthpieces of the masters," on the other, the freedom messages given and insurrections led by slave preachers are well-documented. Likewise, the dualities regarding education exist: does it perpetuate dominant social structure ideals or assist in liberation from encountered social realities? A serious response to this question requires inquiry into the development of class stratification within the Black community, a sociocultural phenomenon/reality that made its way into the Black Church.<sup>48</sup>

### Class Stratification

According to Niebuhr, the division within the church has been caused more by "the direct and indirect operation of economic factors than by the influence of any other major interest of man." He was able to demonstrate that early church generations were usually comprised of those on the "lower economic and cultural scale" and that their church practices could be distinguished from other generations who had elevated up the economic scale.<sup>49</sup> This is to say that power helps to produce hierarchies; hierarchies in turn produce classism. What Niebuhr found was that the "organization which is loudest in

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<sup>48</sup> West, *Race Matters*, 53.

<sup>49</sup> See Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*.

its praise of brotherhood and most critical of race and class discriminations in other spheres is the most disunited group of all, nurturing in its own structure that same spirit of division which it condemns in other relations.”<sup>50</sup> This is reflected biblically in the relationship between the Sadducees and Pharisees, as the rift between the two had more to do with social differences than with any major religious distinction.<sup>51</sup>

The civil rights movement permitted a large number of Blacks to benefit from the American economic boom of the sixties. American culture presented the “American Dream” principally in terms of access to, and accumulation of, resources. According to West, like any American group achieving contemporary middle-class station for the first time, Black entrée into the culture of “*access and accumulation*” made social status an obsession.<sup>52</sup> Nowhere was this more clearly evident than in the Black Church, which began to splinter into different congregational types: ones that tended to reflect more an Africanized style of worship—equating “African” with “uncultured” and attended by those categorized as lower-class; and those that reflected more of Westernized style—equating Western with being “cultured” and preferred by most thought to be middle-class. This marked the Black community’s gross deterioration of personal, familial, and communal relations, and in this way, the class stratification produced by

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> The Sadducees were viewed as aristocrats, many of whom belonged to, or were associated with, the priesthood (cf. Acts 5:17). In *Antiquities*, Josephus records, ‘They win over the wealthy. They do not have the people on their side.’ Contrarily, the Pharisees were viewed more as commoners because they didn’t cut themselves off from society. See Graham Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 258-62.

<sup>52</sup> West, *Race Matters*, 55.

integration has resulted in the community's internal turmoil and existential meaninglessness.<sup>53</sup>

As noted by Pastor G, this caused Black Churches to no longer identify with the Black underclass—following the money of the middle-class, instead of following the ministry of Jesus. So, as the culture of the Black community began to change, the ethos and expectation of the Black pastoral leader began to change as well. Distant from the vibrant tradition of resistance, vital community bonded by ethical ideals, and a credible sense of political struggle, Black Church leadership began to reveal the tame and genteel face of the Black middle-class and reflect the values of Black middle-class life: professional conscientiousness, personal accomplishment, and cautious adjustment.<sup>54</sup> This created a schism in the tending of community needs as there were, and are, two perceived communities, one that had assimilated, acculturated, and ascended, and one that has not. In an interview, Bishop John Hurst Adams addressed this issue:

... an issue I ought to lift up because it is a real concern to me, is the model of ministry to which our young clergy look upon... the television preachers where they see big crowds and big money, both of which can have a corrupting influence. But the models of ministry I wrote about, for example, during the Civil Rights era were people who are cause oriented, and justice oriented. The models of ministry which our young clergy look to now are the success images of money and people, big crowds, and big money. And that's an issue which I think bears some responsibility...<sup>55</sup>

How can there be synergy and solidarity within the Black Church and community when the cultural cohesion has changed so drastically?

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Bishop John Hurst Adams, ICAM Ford Ethics Project, *op.cit.*, 21.

### The Reconciliatory Role of Education

In a recent CNN investigation, thirty-two percent of Black middle-class households met the education threshold for economic security, meaning that at least one member of the household has a bachelor's degree.<sup>56</sup> In contrast, the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, a consortium of six Black seminaries, has estimated that only ten to twenty percent of the Black clergy nationwide have completed their professional education.<sup>57</sup> The obvious dichotomy, as noted by Lincoln and Mamiya, is that the educational level of the Black middle-class has already surpassed that of the majority of this country's Black clergy. This is critical because it sets the stage for an institution with a low number of seminary-trained clergy for whom the tradition of being *called* is most important, attempting to pastor an increasing number of educated middle-class Blacks whose culture prefers *credentials*. This has led to alienation from the Black Church where traditional preaching styles, worship practices, and ecclesial formulas designed to elicit feeling no longer have an impact. Their expectation of more probing sermons, intellectual stimulation, and spiritual nurturing points to the challenge facing current and future pastoral leaders.

In 1990, a study conducted by C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya found the median age of all Black clergy to be 52 years old.<sup>58</sup> In a 2001 Pulpit and Pew survey, the median age for Black pastors was 53. Table 7.1<sup>59</sup> shows the percentage of Black and

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<sup>56</sup> Taken from CNN's *Black in America* initiative which expanded into the investigation series, "State of Black America," March 24, 2008.

<sup>57</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 343.

<sup>58</sup> See *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> See Becky R. McMillan, National Survey Results—By Race, Pulpit and Pew Research on Pastoral Leadership, Duke Divinity School, February 19, 2003.

White clergy in various age groups. We see that 61% of all Black clergy are 51 years of age and older, while only 49% of White clergy are in that category. Black clergy who are less than 50 years of age constitute 38% of the sample, while White clergy who are in the same age cohort are 51%.

**Table 7.1. Age of Black and White Clergy**

<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Black %</b>	<b>White %</b>
Less than 45	12%	30%
45 to 50	27%	20%
51 to 60	31%	31%
61 +	30%	19%

I highlight the age factor to bring attention to education level's compounding effect on the Black Church. With the majority of its pastors over the age of 50, with little to no seminary training, the Black Church is far from meeting the increasing education level of the community. Studies have shown that community outreach programs of Black churches, working with government and foundation funds, and working on gender advancement issues are highly correlated with the level of clergy education.<sup>60</sup> So what opportunity does this present for the Black Church?

Like Lincoln and Mamiya, I recognize that formal seminary education is not a panacea for all the ills of the Black Church, or for the Black community. But, it is my contention that a *practical* education combining the foundations of a formalized curriculum with a focus on the Black experience and public policy would benefit Black and White clergy, seminarians as a whole, and the entire Christian community, as well as civil society. Though not seminary approved, there is a wealth of pastoral knowledge within the Black community. Education presents a reconciling opportunity that brings

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<sup>60</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 130.



together the breadth and depth of learned experience represented by Black pastors, and the training and endorsement possessed by seminary institutions. Unfortunately, according to Cone, White seminarians, and some Blacks as well, have convinced themselves that only White experience provides the appropriate context for theological reflection. He continues,

they do not recognize the narrowness of their experience and the particularity of their theological expressions. They like to think of themselves as *universal* people. That is why most seminaries emphasize the need for appropriate tools in doing theology, which always means *white* tools, i.e., knowledge of the language and thought of white people. They fail to recognize that other people also have thought[s] about God and have something significant to say about Jesus' presence in the world.<sup>61</sup>

A *practical* education could help enhance the skills and effectiveness of Black clergy by fusing the areas of spiritual nurturing, theological understanding, and biblical interpretation, with accounting, financial management, economic development, capacity building, and public policy to build a comprehensive learning context. As workplace specialization increases, the ministry remains one of the few particular areas for generalists—as one interviewee quipped, “The Black pastor is expected to know a little something about everything.” Black Church clergy represent “those much needed people who attempt to relate to the whole spectrum of human needs in the interests of a broader and deeper humanity”<sup>62</sup> and a practical education that appreciates and understands the ideological roots and illuminates the content of White scholarship through that paradigm would be advantageous.

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<sup>61</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 14.

<sup>62</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 400.

While I believe that the Black pastor should be familiar with the various civil spheres affecting their members and the community, I must note that I am not a proponent of the Black pastor shouldering the burden to be and do everything. Older pastors can serve as mentors, as the Black Church tradition is blessed with a variety of extraordinary leaders who are approaching the end of fruitful careers, and become resources for the next generation of public theologians and public pastors in a constructive manner that encourages cooperation, collaboration, and building of partnerships.<sup>63</sup> A glaring omission in the Black Church tradition, and Black liberation theology for that matter, is a public policy agenda. The challenge for the future is whether Black clergy will become well-versed enough to transcend their institutional boundaries so that they may access resources to become intentional in this arena. It is to this fourth area that we now shift.

### **Partnerships**

*If I have a choice between a Christian whose heart isn't in the right place, and an atheist who's willing to help my cause, give me the atheist every time.*

Michael Eric Dyson

Equality, as understood within the Black Church tradition, is both problematic and redemptive.<sup>64</sup> It is problematic because its historical connotation and pursuit implied that once equal rights were achieved, the ills of the Black condition would be solved. It is

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<sup>63</sup> Robert M. Franklin, *Crisis in the Village* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 135.

<sup>64</sup> See the definition of “the Black Christian tradition” in Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). Paris claims that “the moral and political significance of the black churches is derived from a common source of authority, the black Christian tradition. Here the thought and practice of religion, politics, and morality are integrally related. That is to say, the one always implies the other. Whenever religion, politics, and morality are isolated from one another, the tradition itself is severely threatened” (12). This critical principle, according to Paris, is fundamental for “justifying and motivating all endeavors by blacks for survival and social transformation.”

redemptive because Black Churches have dealt with the problematic in ways that have also addressed the underlying practice that makes social transformation possible and stands as the foundational principle in American democratic idealism—*access*.<sup>65</sup> This practice, according to Robert Franklin, has been the cornerstone of Black strivings within a society that has dehumanized, disenfranchised, and disabled Blacks in civic life because Black congregations “have extraordinary potential for transforming and enhancing human existence in both the personal and public zones” of life.<sup>66</sup> With this in mind, given the ironic, even paradoxical manner in which Black churches have continued to maintain loyalty to a system that has historically abused their commitment, I am suggesting a reclaiming and recontextualizing of a fourth social gospel dimension—institutional partnerships.

In September 1967, the National Council of Churches Division of Christian Life and Work sponsored a national conference on the urban crisis in America. Held in Washington, D.C., it brought together Black and White church activists and race relations executives. The Black delegates, many of whom were members of the National Committee of Negro Churchmen, insisted in the opening session that the conference be divided into two caucuses, one Black and the other White. They further proposed that the caucuses meet separately for most of the time and come together for a final plenary session. The motion to divide the conference was sustained and the two groups convened

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<sup>65</sup> This is an argument voiced by Walter Earl Fluker who believes that three underlying practices exist—recognition, respectability, and loyalty. See Walter Earl Fluker, “Recognition, Respectability, and Loyalty: Black Churches and the Quest for Civility,” in *New Day Begun: African American Churches and Civic Culture in Post-Civil Rights America*, ed. R. Drew Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 114.

<sup>66</sup> See Robert Michael Franklin, “The Safest Place on Earth: The Culture of Black Congregations,” in *American Congregations Volume 2: New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, ed. James P. Wind and James W. Lewis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 281.

to discuss the nature and feasibility of interracial alliances. In a drafted statement for the final session, the White caucus condemned the practices of the White church and, in an unprecedented display of maturity, unequivocally affirmed the position of Blacks and called upon Whites to stop trying to dominate liberal coalitions with Blacks.<sup>67</sup> According to Gayraud Wilmore, the Washington conference “was a dramatic demonstration of the influence of the black power movement within the precincts of the American religious establishment” and it “inaugurated an era of confrontation and negotiation between blacks and whites unprecedented in twentieth-century American Christianity.”<sup>68</sup>

The statement produced at the Washington conference highlights two points: 1) when the Black community is relatively integrated with White society, the elements of the Black community tend to recede from the interaction while the White elements come to the fore; and 2) the contribution of the Black community is no longer community-credible because it has been manipulated in ways that render it no longer community-reflective. Undergirding these points, or better even, practices, is what Robert Putnam terms *social capital*:

Connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. Moreover, social capital is related to civic virtue in that the latter is “most powerful when it is embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous, but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.”<sup>69</sup>

According to Walter Earl Fluker, this description of social capital and its role in creating and sustaining community is important in two ways: 1) social capital provides networks

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<sup>67</sup> See Gayraud S. Wilmore and James Cone, “The Church and the Urban Crisis, Statements from Black and White Caucuses,” *Black Theology* 43-47 (September 1967).

<sup>68</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 230.

<sup>69</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 19.

and alliances for civic engagement that can be inclusive and beneficial; and 2) social capital derives its life and power from the reciprocal norms that it engenders and sustains.<sup>70</sup>

### Strategic Alliances

Martin Luther King called the art of alliances complex and intricate.<sup>71</sup> You could make the argument that his assertion was accurate because building alliances is much more detailed than putting exciting combinations and ideas on paper. It involves an acknowledgement of self and common interests, validation of single and shared identity, and affirmation of individual and collective resources. If, as King argued, we employ the principle of selectivity along these lines, we will find millions of allies who, in serving themselves, also support the Black Church and Black community, “and on such sound foundations unity and mutual trust and tangible accomplishment will flourish.”<sup>72</sup>

Another social reality that is advantageous to look at is who has the power to assign, limit, or amend alliance construction. When Cornel West speaks of perpetrators of free-market fundamentalism and authoritarianism, he defines them as “plutocratic leaders, corporate elites, elected officials, [and] arrogant authoritarians.”<sup>73</sup> In other words, those in socially-constructed positions who have the ability and authority, based on access, to designate the parameters of association. In the realm of the Black Church, such persons would be the pastors, ministers, or any other “gate-keeper” within the

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<sup>70</sup> See Fluker, “Recognition, Respectability, and Loyalty,” 117.

<sup>71</sup> Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, 309.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>73</sup> Cornel West, *Democracy Matters* (New York: Penguin books, 2004), 21-23.

congregation, and in the larger civil society realm, they would be CEOs, executive directors, and any person assigned to manage a project. This is significant because in order for an alliance to be truly authentic, all parties must recognize and respect the position and resources possessed by each. The simple fact is that there cannot be authentic alliances without serious commitment to truth, integrity, and honesty—and not the principles of mendacity, manipulation, and misinformation.<sup>74</sup> Don Williams, Chairman of the Trammell Crow Company, recounts the following:

When I began this [community empowerment] work, I assumed that well-intentioned, well-connected business leaders like myself would be welcomed in the inner city. To the contrary, I found a deep—and often well deserved—distrust of outside institutions and their representatives, particularly businessmen. I heard stories about the many ways in which the business community misrepresented its intentions.<sup>75</sup>

#### Shared-Power

As they studied successful change efforts, Barbara Crosby and John Bryson “realized that organizations had to find a way to tap each other’s resources (broadly conceived) in order to work effectively on public problems. That is, they had to engage in sharing activities, which vary in level of commitment and loss of autonomy.”<sup>76</sup> This brings to bear a critical point: most leaders are either unwilling or uncomfortable forfeiting autonomy and/or power—this is especially true in the Black Church, an observation made earlier. In order for this theory to become praxis, the philosophical perspective has to change to visualize what can be accomplished by a shared-power

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>75</sup> Heather M. Humphries, *In the City for Good: Applying Business Sense and Faith to Empower Communities* (Dallas: Bethany Press, 2007), 99.

<sup>76</sup> Barbara C. Crosby and John M. Bryson, *Leadership for the Common Good: Tackling Public Problems in a Shared-Power World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 17.

structure that otherwise is less effective, impactful, and extensive. Social critics highlight the division between those who have access and those who do not as the relevant factor in the giving and silencing of voices<sup>77</sup>—shared-power arrangements may be most useful in reminding those with little *formal* authority how powerful they can be through collaboration, “and in reminding those in a supposedly powerful position just how much they rely on numerous stakeholders for any *real* power they have.”<sup>78</sup>

For instance, given that only 6.4% of congregations worship with over 500 participants,<sup>79</sup> shared-power arrangements could enhance collective group power by reducing the individual risk for participants and sharing responsibility—no one entity gets all the credit (a tough pill to swallow for some Black leaders!), no one entity shoulders all the blame. Smaller Black congregations that have little money and minimal infrastructure, but bring the energy of active citizens who can supply first-hand knowledge of community needs, can partner with larger megachurches that have financial resources and the necessary infrastructure. One of the major critiques against megachurches is their isolationism from the local community. As one executive director noted,

They [megachurches] feel that they have enough power as a church and community and that they don’t need to participate with or tie into a community organization... The pastor (of the large megachurch) is often in some relationship with the elected officials of the city...<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Robert C. Smith and Richard Seltzer, *Race, Class, and Culture: A Study in Afro-American Mass Opinion* (Albany: State University Press, 1992), 133-38.

<sup>78</sup> Crosby and Bryson, *Leadership for the Common Good*, 29.

<sup>79</sup> Taken from Hartford Institute for Religion Research Report, 2010.

<sup>80</sup> Larry Mamiya, “River of Struggle, River of Freedom: Trends among Black Churches and Pastoral Leadership,” *Pulpit and Pew Research on Pastoral Leadership* (2004).

Martin Luther King stated, “action is not in itself a virtue; its goals and its forms determine its value.”<sup>81</sup> The democratic work opportunity offered by shared-power arrangements is the type championed by political philosopher Mary Dietz whose interest in revitalized citizenship entailed the collective and participatory engagement of historically-situated and culturally-constituted “persons-as-citizens” in the determination of the affairs of their polity.<sup>82</sup> History has shown, just as Frederick Douglass found, that individual and collective power must be forcefully wielded if it expects to overcome entrenched power:

The key reason women could not vote until 1920, indigenous peoples until 1924, and most blacks until 1964 was that they could not bring organized democratic pressures to bear in order to limit the power of wealthy white male citizens. Yet, when they marshaled that organized force, they got the vote.<sup>83</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This is a time for a dramatically new vision. King urged the Black Church and community “to turn more of their energies and focus creativity on the useful things that translate into power.”<sup>84</sup> The current predicament of the Black Church requires more than a mere tinkering with long-assumed notions and traditionally-practiced methods about its identity and mission. The Black Church has been dislocated from its prior social role of champion of the community and carrier of culture, and it has lost its once privileged position of influence. So accommodated to a secular way of life, it is no longer obvious

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<sup>81</sup> Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, 179.

<sup>82</sup> See Mary Dietz, *Turning Operations: Feminism, Arendt, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 35 cited in Crosby and Bryson, *Leadership for the Common Good*, 32.

<sup>83</sup> West, *Democracy Matters*, 33.

<sup>84</sup> Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, 610-11.



what justifies the Black Church's existence as a particular spiritual community.<sup>85</sup> This research has tried to identify phenomena in the Black Church as well as trends in broader society that have an impact, and are impacted by, missional ecclesiology and pastoral leadership. The hope was to highlight implications and raise suggestions for the Black Church moving forward.

In the written Chinese language, the character signifying the idea of a “favorable opportunity” brings together characters that represent “good,” “time,” and “incipient moment.”<sup>86</sup> Long-established traditions and long-standing practices have strongholds on any community, and the Black Church is no exception. Paradoxically, an institution that utilized the pews and pulpits to begin social movements has become lifeless and soulless because it is divorced from the reality of everyday Black life. Darrell Guder argues that these traditions and practices “constitute a way of seeing what the church is and what it is for... Such assumed patterns are brought into question, however, when the church recognizes that it has been demoted from its prior social importance and may have accommodated away something of its soul.”<sup>87</sup> The call of the Black Church, in fact its commission, is to reclaim its soul, to take back the talking drums that were forcefully confiscated and have been willingly forfeited in order to recontextualize the social gospel dimensions of its prophetic history. God's action involves a recognition of the growing ability of God's people to work towards their own liberation with God's guidance and grace. This favorable opportunity awaits the Black Church to once again provide the

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<sup>85</sup> Guder, *Missional Church*, 78.

<sup>86</sup> Robert B. Zeuschner, *Classical Ethics East and West: Ethics from a Comparative Perspective* (Madison: McGraw Hill, 2001), 151-68.

<sup>87</sup> Guder, *Missional Church*, 78.

people with an imagination, so that “what is” does not automatically become “what will be.”<sup>88</sup> *The community needs it; the world can use it.*

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<sup>88</sup> See Patricia A. Reeberg’s, “Speaking in Tongues to a Valley of Dry Bones,” in Dwight N. Hopkins and Linda E. Thomas, editors, *Walk Together Children: Black and Womanist Theologies, Church and Theological Education* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010), 64.

## APPENDIX A

### SURVEY

<b>PART I. Background Information</b>
---------------------------------------

*Please fill in one circle per question. Please shade circles completely like •*

- Q1. Are you:
- Female                       Male
- Q2. Current Marital Status
- Married                       Divorced                       Never Married  
 Widowed                       Separated                       Don't Know
- Q3. What is the highest grade in school that you finished and got credit for? (Choose one.)
- |   |                                      |                                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> No School             | <input type="radio"/> 8th Grade      | <input type="radio"/> 4 Yr Undergrad |
| <input type="radio"/> 1 <sup>st</sup> Grade | <input type="radio"/> 9th Grade      | <input type="radio"/> 1 Yr Graduate  |
| <input type="radio"/> 2nd Grade             | <input type="radio"/> 10th Grade     | <input type="radio"/> 2 Yr Graduate  |
| <input type="radio"/> 3rd Grade             | <input type="radio"/> 11th Grade     | <input type="radio"/> 3 Yr Graduate  |
| <input type="radio"/> 4th Grade             | <input type="radio"/> 12th Grade     | <input type="radio"/> 4 Yr Graduate  |
| <input type="radio"/> 5th Grade             | <input type="radio"/> 1 Yr Undergrad | <input type="radio"/> Other _____    |
| <input type="radio"/> 6th Grade             | <input type="radio"/> 2 Yr Undergrad | <input type="radio"/> Don't Know     |
| <input type="radio"/> 7th Grade             | <input type="radio"/> 3 Yr Undergrad |                                      |
- Q4. What is the *highest* educational degree that you have earned?
- |   |  |                                      |
|---|--|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Certificate | <input type="radio"/> Associate Degree | <input type="radio"/> Other _____    |
| <input type="radio"/> GED/GRE                           | <input type="radio"/> Bachelors Degree | <input type="radio"/> Not Applicable |
| <input type="radio"/> High School Degree                | <input type="radio"/> Masters Degree   |                                      |
| <input type="radio"/> Trade Certificate                 | <input type="radio"/> Doctoral Degree  |                                      |
- Q5. On average, how many times do you attend worship services in this congregation?
- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="radio"/> Usually every week    | <input type="radio"/> Several times per year |
| <input type="radio"/> Several times a month | <input type="radio"/> Once a year or less    |
| <input type="radio"/> About once a month    | <input type="radio"/> Other _____            |
- Q6. Which one of the following statements describes your church experience prior to becoming a member of this congregation?
- I have always been a member of this congregation
- I was a member of another congregation before joining here
- I was a member of a church in another Christian denomination  
Please identify the denomination \_\_\_\_\_
- I was not a member of any church prior to joining this one
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- Not applicable
- Q7. In what year were you born? Please complete the year. 19\_\_\_\_\_

<b>PART II. Ministry Emphasis &amp; Activity</b>
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*Please indicate how often you engage in the following practices.*

	Always	Regularly	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
Q8. Biblical study and reflection takes place at social justice/public policy ministry meetings.	5	4	3	2	1
Q9. Biblical study and reflection addresses our social justice/public policy and advocacy work.	5	4	3	2	1
Q10. Our congregation helps me grow in my biblical understanding of social justice/public policy work.	5	4	3	2	1
Q11. Our congregation has intentional conversations about the historical role of the Black Church.	5	4	3	2	1
Q12. Our congregation has intentional conversations about our present obligation to the historical heritage of the Black Church.	5	4	3	2	1

**PART III. Church Practices**

*Please select one choice per question.*

Q13. Our church policies are guided by:

- 1 The Pastor alone
- 2 The Pastor and the Elder's Council
- 3 The Pastor, the Elder's Council, and specific committee
- 4 The Pastor, the Elder's Council, specific committee, and the congregation
- 8 Don't know

Q14. In the last 5 years, my congregation has engaged in the following?

- 1 None
- 2 Letter writing only
- 3 Speaking (at policy hearings or with elected officials)
- 4 Letter writing and speaking
- 8 Don't know

Q15. Which of the following describes the activity level of public policy groups in your congregation?

- 1 No activity
- 2 Minimal activity
- 3 Some activity
- 4 Considerable activity
- 8 Don't know

Q16. As it pertains to developing a social justice/public policy vision, the pastor is primarily:

- 1 The only person involved
- 2 Working with a few selected staff
- 3 Working with committee
- 4 Not involved
- 8 Don't know

<b>PART IV. Ministry Focus</b>
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*Please circle the number that best describes the strength of your agreement to the following statements.*

		Strength of Agreement					
		Very High				Very Low	Don't Know
Q17.	Pastor has no time for responsibilities outside the congregation.	5	4	3	2	1	8
Q18.	The focus of this congregation should be social justice/public policy.	5	4	3	2	1	8
Q19.	This congregation should have a social justice/public policy committee/leader.	5	4	3	2	1	8
Q20.	The social justice/public policy focus should come from the congregation as opposed to the pastor and/or national body.	5	4	3	2	1	8
Q21.	The focus of the staff should be more on the needs of congregation than the needs of the community.	5	4	3	2	1	8
Q22.	The Bible informs all decision-making.	5	4	3	2	1	8
Q23.	The church should be involved in social justice/public policy work.	5	4	3	2	1	8
Q24.	The primary purpose of church is worship.	5	4	3	2	1	8

***Thank you for your participation!***

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your understanding of the terms “historic Black Church,” “social gospel,” and “prophetic engagement”?
2. How has the focus and emphasis of the Black Church changed?
3. What role has pastoral leadership played in the development and progression of the Black Church?
4. Is the Black Church presently effective?
5. Do you see partnerships as key component in the resurgence and effectiveness of the Black Church?
6. What, if any, do you identify as competing streams within the Black Church?
7. How do you recommend the Black Church move forward?

## APPENDIX C

### SEVENTEEN BLACK CLERGY WHO MET WITH GENERAL WILLIAM T. SHERMAN AND SECRETARY OF WAR EDWIN STANTON, JANUARY 13, 1865

Name	Church	Years in Ministry
Rev. William Bentley	Andrew's Chapel Methodist Episcopal	20
Rev. Charles Bradwell	Andrews Methodist Episcopal	10
Rev. Abraham Burke	—	10
Rev. William J. Campbell	First African Baptist	10
Rev. John Cox	Second African Baptist	15
Rev. Adolphus Delmotte	Missionary Baptist Milledgeville	2
Rev. Garrison Frazier	Baptist	35
Rev. William Gaines	Andrew's Chapel	10
Rev. Jacob Godfrey	Andrew's Chapel	28
Rev. Alexander Harris	Third African Baptist	1
Rev. James Hill	—	16
Rev. Ulysses L. Houston	Third African Baptist	8
Rev. James Lynch	Methodist Episcopal	7
Rev. James Mills	First African Baptist	8
Rev. James Porter	St. Stephen	9
Rev. Glasgow Taylor	Andrew's Chapel	35
Rev. Arthur Wardell	Baptist	6

*Source:* Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like A River: The Black Church and Social Reform* (New York: Oxford Press, 1999).



APPENDIX D

**Single-Frequency – Bible Informs All Decision-making**  
*(Question #22)*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	very low	15	2.1	2.4	2.4
	low	18	2.6	2.9	5.2
	moderate	76	10.8	12.1	17.3
	high	132	18.8	21.0	38.3
	very high	388	55.3	61.7	100.0
	Total	629	89.7	100.0	
Missing	don't know	33	4.7		
	missing	36	5.1		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	72	10.3		
Total		701	100.0		

**Single-Frequency – Biblical Study & Reflection Occur at Public Policy Ministry Meetings**  
(Question #8)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	never	88	12.6	13.3	13.3
	seldom	82	11.7	12.4	25.7
	sometimes	168	24.0	25.4	51.1
	regularly	203	29.0	30.7	81.8
	always	120	17.1	18.2	100.0
	Total	661	94.3	100.0	
Missing	missing	37	5.3		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	40	5.7		
Total		701	100.0		

**Single-Frequency – Biblical Study & Reflection Address Public Policy Work**  
(Question #9)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	never	93	13.3	14.2	14.2
	seldom	103	14.7	15.7	30.0
	sometimes	178	25.4	27.2	57.2
	regularly	171	24.4	26.1	83.3
	always	109	15.5	16.7	100.0
	Total	654	93.3	100.0	
Missing	missing	44	6.3		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	47	6.7		
Total		701	100.0		

**Single-Frequency – Congregation Helps Growth in Biblical Understanding of Social  
Justice/Public Policy Work**  
(Question #10)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	never	28	4.0	4.2	4.2
	seldom	47	6.7	7.1	11.4
	sometimes	135	19.3	20.5	31.8
	regularly	181	25.8	27.4	59.2
	always	269	38.4	40.8	100.0
	Total	660	94.2	100.0	
Missing	missing	38	5.4		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	41	5.8		
Total		701	100.0		

**Single-Frequency – Intentional Conversations about Historical Role of Black  
Church**  
(Question #11)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	never	37	5.3	5.5	5.5
	seldom	58	8.3	8.6	14.1
	sometimes	180	25.7	26.7	40.9
	regularly	234	33.4	34.8	75.6
	always	164	23.4	24.4	100.0
	Total	673	96.0	100.0	
Missing	missing	25	3.6		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	28	4.0		
Total		701	100.0		

**Single-Frequency – Intentional Conversations about Present Obligation to  
Historical Heritage of Black Church**  
(Question #12)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	never	45	6.4	6.8	6.8
	seldom	62	8.8	9.4	16.1
	sometimes	167	23.8	25.2	41.3
	regularly	232	33.1	35.0	76.3
	always	157	22.4	23.7	100.0
	Total	663	94.6	100.0	
Missing	missing	35	5.0		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	38	5.4		
Total		701	100.0		

**Single-Frequency – Social Justice/Public Policy should be Focus of Congregation**  
(Question #18)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	very low	88	12.6	15.2	15.2
	low	86	12.3	14.9	30.1
	moderate	188	26.8	32.5	62.6
	high	100	14.3	17.3	79.9
	very high	116	16.5	20.1	100.0
	Total	578	82.5	100.0	
Missing	don't know	85	12.1		
	missing	35	5.0		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	123	17.5		
Total		701	100.0		

**Single-Frequency – Congregation Should Have Social Justice/Public Policy Leader**  
(Question #19)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	very low	43	6.1	7.4	7.4
	low	51	7.3	8.8	16.2
	moderate	169	24.1	29.1	45.3
	high	142	20.3	24.4	69.7
	very high	176	25.1	30.3	100.0
	Total	581	82.9	100.0	
Missing	don't know	82	11.7		
	missing	35	5.0		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	120	17.1		
Total	701	100.0			

**Single-frequency – Social Justice/Public Policy Focus Should Come from Congregation**  
(Question #20)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	very low	92	13.1	16.9	16.9
	low	60	8.6	11.0	28.0
	moderate	159	22.7	29.3	57.3
	high	129	18.4	23.8	81.0
	very high	103	14.7	19.0	100.0
	Total	543	77.5	100.0	
Missing	don't know	106	15.1		
	missing	49	7.0		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	158	22.5		
Total	701	100.0			

**Single-frequency – Church Should be involved in Social Justice/Public Policy Work**  
(Question #23)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	very low	29	4.1	4.7	4.7
	low	34	4.9	5.5	10.3
	moderate	118	16.8	19.2	29.5
	high	161	23.0	26.2	55.7
	very high	272	38.8	44.3	100.0
	Total	614	87.6	100.0	
Missing	don't know	37	5.3		
	missing	47	6.7		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	87	12.4		
Total		701	100.0		

**Single-frequency – Staff Focus Should be more on Needs of Congregation than Needs of Community**  
(Question #21)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	very low	243	34.7	40.4	40.4
	low	99	14.1	16.5	56.9
	moderate	119	17.0	19.8	76.7
	high	57	8.1	9.5	86.2
	very high	83	11.8	13.8	100.0
	Total	601	85.7	100.0	
Missing	don't know	48	6.8		
	missing	49	7.0		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	100	14.3		
Total		701	100.0		

**Single-frequency – Activity Level of Public Policy Groups in Congregation**  
(Question #15)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	none	26	3.7	5.0	5.0
	minimal	39	5.6	7.5	12.5
	some	159	22.7	30.6	43.2
	considerable	295	42.1	56.8	100.0
	Total	519	74.0	100.0	
Missing	don't know	169	24.1		
	missing	10	1.4		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	182	26.0		
Total		701	100.0		

**Single-frequency – Public Policy Engagement in Last 5 Years**  
(Question #14)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	none	31	4.4	8.9	8.9
	letter writing only	10	1.4	2.9	11.8
	speaking	133	19.0	38.3	50.1
	letter writing & speaking	173	24.7	49.9	100.0
	Total	347	49.5	100.0	
Missing	don't know	333	47.5		
	missing	18	2.6		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	354	50.5		
Total		701	100.0		

APPENDIX E

**Single-Frequency – Biblical Study & Reflection Occur at Public Policy Ministry Meetings**  
(Question #8)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	never	88	12.6	13.3	13.3
	seldom	82	11.7	12.4	25.7
	sometimes	168	24.0	25.4	51.1
	regularly	203	29.0	30.7	81.8
	always	120	17.1	18.2	100.0
	Total	661	94.3	100.0	
Missing	missing	37	5.3		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	40	5.7		
Total		701	100.0		

**Single-Frequency – Biblical Study & Reflection Address Public Policy Work**  
(Question #9)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	never	93	13.3	14.2	14.2
	seldom	103	14.7	15.7	30.0
	sometimes	178	25.4	27.2	57.2
	regularly	171	24.4	26.1	83.3
	always	109	15.5	16.7	100.0
	Total	654	93.3	100.0	
Missing	missing	44	6.3		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	47	6.7		
Total		701	100.0		



APPENDIX F

**Single-Frequency – Congregation Helps Growth in Biblical Understanding of Social  
Justice/Public Policy Work**  
*(Question #10)*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	never	28	4.0	4.2	4.2
	seldom	47	6.7	7.1	11.4
	sometimes	135	19.3	20.5	31.8
	regularly	181	25.8	27.4	59.2
	always	269	38.4	40.8	100.0
	Total	660	94.2	100.0	
Missing	missing	38	5.4		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	41	5.8		
Total		701	100.0		

APPENDIX G

**Single-Frequency – Intentional Conversations about Historical Role of Black Church**  
*(Question #11)*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	never	37	5.3	5.5	5.5
	seldom	58	8.3	8.6	14.1
	sometimes	180	25.7	26.7	40.9
	regularly	234	33.4	34.8	75.6
	always	164	23.4	24.4	100.0
	Total	673	96.0	100.0	
Missing	missing	25	3.6		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	28	4.0		
Total		701	100.0		

**Single-Frequency – Intentional Conversations about Present Obligation to  
Historical Heritage of Black Church**  
(Question #12)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	never	45	6.4	6.8	6.8
	seldom	62	8.8	9.4	16.1
	sometimes	167	23.8	25.2	41.3
	regularly	232	33.1	35.0	76.3
	always	157	22.4	23.7	100.0
	Total	663	94.6	100.0	
Missing	missing	35	5.0		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	38	5.4		
Total		701	100.0		

APPENDIX H

**Single-Frequency – Social Justice/Public Policy should be Focus of Congregation**  
*(Question #18)*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	very low	88	12.6	15.2	15.2
	low	86	12.3	14.9	30.1
	moderate	188	26.8	32.5	62.6
	high	100	14.3	17.3	79.9
	very high	116	16.5	20.1	100.0
	Total	578	82.5	100.0	
Missing	don't know	85	12.1		
	missing	35	5.0		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	123	17.5		
Total		701	100.0		

APPENDIX I

**Single-Frequency – Congregation Should Have Social Justice/Public Policy Leader**  
*(Question #19)*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	very low	43	6.1	7.4	7.4
	low	51	7.3	8.8	16.2
	moderate	169	24.1	29.1	45.3
	high	142	20.3	24.4	69.7
	very high	176	25.1	30.3	100.0
	Total	581	82.9	100.0	
Missing	don't know	82	11.7		
	missing	35	5.0		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	120	17.1		
Total		701	100.0		

APPENDIX J

**Single-frequency – Social Justice/Public Policy Focus Should Come from  
Congregation**  
*(Question #20)*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	very low	92	13.1	16.9	16.9
	low	60	8.6	11.0	28.0
	moderate	159	22.7	29.3	57.3
	high	129	18.4	23.8	81.0
	very high	103	14.7	19.0	100.0
	Total	543	77.5	100.0	
Missing	don't know	106	15.1		
	missing	49	7.0		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	158	22.5		
Total		701	100.0		

APPENDIX K

**Single-frequency – Church Should be involved in Social Justice/Public Policy Work**  
*(Question #23)*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	very low	29	4.1	4.7	4.7
	low	34	4.9	5.5	10.3
	moderate	118	16.8	19.2	29.5
	high	161	23.0	26.2	55.7
	very high	272	38.8	44.3	100.0
	Total	614	87.6	100.0	
Missing	don't know	37	5.3		
	missing	47	6.7		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	87	12.4		
Total		701	100.0		

APPENDIX L

**Single-frequency – Staff Focus Should be More on Needs of Congregation than  
Needs of Community**  
*(Question #21)*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	very low	243	34.7	40.4	40.4
	low	99	14.1	16.5	56.9
	moderate	119	17.0	19.8	76.7
	high	57	8.1	9.5	86.2
	very high	83	11.8	13.8	100.0
	Total	601	85.7	100.0	
Missing	don't know	48	6.8		
	missing	49	7.0		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	100	14.3		
Total		701	100.0		



APPENDIX M

**Single-frequency – Activity Level of Public Policy Groups in Congregation**  
*(Question #15)*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	none	26	3.7	5.0	5.0
	minimal	39	5.6	7.5	12.5
	some	159	22.7	30.6	43.2
	considerable	295	42.1	56.8	100.0
	Total	519	74.0	100.0	
Missing	don't know	169	24.1		
	missing	10	1.4		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	182	26.0		
Total		701	100.0		

APPENDIX N

**Single-frequency – Public Policy Engagement in Last 5 Years**  
*(Question #14)*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	none	31	4.4	8.9	8.9
	letter writing only	10	1.4	2.9	11.8
	speaking	133	19.0	38.3	50.1
	letter writing & speaking	173	24.7	49.9	100.0
	Total	347	49.5	100.0	
Missing	don't know	333	47.5		
	missing	18	2.6		
	System	3	.4		
	Total	354	50.5		
Total		701	100.0		

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