

**Embracing the Distinctives of Traditional African American Baptist Churches in the 21st Century
and Beyond**

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By

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APPROVAL SHEET

Embracing the Distinctives of Traditional African American Baptist Churches in the 21st Century and Beyond

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Abstract:

The distinctiveness of African American Baptist churches (worship practices, profoundly emotive music, powerful preaching, and close-knit congregational bonds), the African American Baptist churches are at a crossroads in this complex and evolving landscape, with questions of identity, relevance, and sustainability. This study attempts to exhort African American Baptist churches back to a liberation theology of its past to address present social justice concerns and embrace other changes to help the church stay relevant in the 21st century and beyond.

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I. Introduction

A. Background and Context

The African American Baptist Church, a denomination within itself, has long stood as a pillar within the African American community, serving as a place of worship and a cornerstone of cultural and social identity. Rooted in a rich history of faith, resilience, and resistance, these churches have played a significant role in shaping the religious and socio-political landscape of the United States. However, as the 21st century unfolds, these venerable institutions find themselves at a crossroads, grappling with the need to evolve and adapt to a rapidly changing world.

African American Baptist churches, with their distinctive worship practices, profoundly emotive music, powerful preaching, and close-knit congregational bonds, these distinctions have been integral to their identity, providing a sense of belonging and continuity for generations. Nevertheless, the challenges of contemporary society, including shifting demographics, generational divides, technological advancements, and evolving social norms, prompted a critical examination of the role and relevance of these traditions in the modern era.

In this context, "Embracing the Distinctives of Traditional African American Baptist Churches in the 21st Century and Beyond" becomes timely and imperative. This study attempts to exhort African American Baptist churches back to a liberation theology of its past to address present social justice concerns and embrace other changes to help the church stay relevant in the 21st century and beyond. It offers insights into how the church can remain a vital institution that uplifts and empowers its communities.

The African American Baptist tradition traces its roots back to the late 18th century when enslaved Africans in America began to adopt Christianity. They often blend their new faith with their African spiritual practices. Over time, this faith took shape in Baptist congregations, providing a space

for worship, education, and community-building for African Americans amid segregation and oppression. These churches played pivotal roles in the Civil Rights Movement of the 20th century, offering spiritual guidance and mobilizing communities for social change.

However, the 21st century brings with it a set of unique challenges and opportunities. Demographic shifts have altered the makeup of congregations, with younger generations expressing different expectations and preferences in their religious experiences, which will be shared in this study. Technology has transformed how people communicate and access information, impacting how churches engage with their members and the wider world. Moreover, for some people and churches, but not for others, the ongoing struggle for social justice and equality has prompted a renewed emphasis on the role of churches in advocating for change.

African American Baptist churches find themselves at a crossroads in this complex and evolving landscape, grappling with questions of identity, relevance, and sustainability. This study attempts to exhort African American Baptist churches back to a liberation theology of its past to address present social justice concerns and embrace other changes to help the church stay relevant in the 21st century and beyond. It aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding the evolution of religious institutions and their vital role in the African American community and society.

B. Purpose of the Study

This article highlights the premise of Baptist churches and their autonomy and how we can fall away from our original proclamation in our inception. With an eye towards the purpose of the study, going back to George Truett in 1920, who was a pastor of the First Baptist Church, Dallas, and who happened to speak at the Southern Baptist Convention on the steps of the Capitol building during meetings in Washington, D.C. spoke on the theme of Baptists and religious liberty—voicing that we have always been the vanguard for calls of freedom, civil as well as religious. That, as Baptists, we have been rigorous in our demands for freedom of conscience from the start of our existence does call

for scrutiny. Furthermore, our stance represented a significant break with the long tradition, which has been dominant since the time of emperor Constantine in the fourth century, that any Christian ruler should even try to promote true religion within his or her realms by the sword if necessary.¹ With our autonomy causing us to lose sight of our original messages of liberation, social justice, and all the church stood for in its inception, it is paramount in the foreseeable future if the church will remain relevant, especially with populations looking for messages that impact the lives of individuals in a relevant way, the church must find its way back.

With these distinctive worship practices, emotive music, powerful preaching, and close-knit congregational bonds, how can we best meet the challenges in the 21st century? This study will tackle why young people leave African American Baptist churches. Furthermore, does liberation theology improve church growth? What has been the African American stance on liberation theology and social justice?

C. Significance of the Topic

The topic of "Moving Beyond the Distinctives of a Traditional African American Baptist Church in the 21st Century and Beyond" is necessary because the church is losing its membership, especially young people, which is vital if it continues its existence. Nevertheless, this demographic requires changes within the African American Baptist churches because this population is much different from previous generations, which will be explained in this study. It gives voice to those who believe the opposite in this study.

D. Methodology

Using a questionnaire and comparing the results against embracing a 21st century and beyond mandate (so the church does not die) if the church will be relevant, bridging the gap and helping the church to embrace what is essential in the years to come. Help the church embrace case studies of

¹ David Bebbington, *Baptists through the Centuries: A History of a Global People*, Second edition (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2018), 198.

innovative African American Baptist Churches on the cutting edge of ministry, not allowing culture to hinder their progress. Should the church seek to be relevant? Why, or why not? Furthermore, what are the pros and cons of the church seeking relevancy in the 21st century and future centuries?

II. Historical Overview of African American Baptist Churches

A. Origins and Development

The first Baptist evolved from a group of Puritans compelled to take refuge in Holland because of persecution in their homeland. While in Holland, what we called Separatist Puritans persuaded that only baptism of adult believers and baptism only by immersion were doctrinally correct. They encountered Anabaptists, a radical wing of the Protestant Reformation that gave primacy to the separation of church and state. These practices gave rise to the first English Baptist Church in 1609. Returning from England, this group organized a Baptist church in London around 1612. A second church was established in 1616, splitting over doctrinal differences in 1638, and the resulting new church split in 1641, becoming a third variation of the proliferating Baptist movement.²

In the American Baptist, what we believe to be a movement emerged in the colonies during the same period as the movements in England. With the arrival in America of a Puritan by the name of Roger Williams in 1631, who was exiled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony because of what we believe to be a fierce opposition to the intermingling of church and state interests, and Williams obtained a charter from the British monarch to establish the Rhode Island colony, and the first Baptist Church in America established by Williams in Providence in 1639. Furthermore, a second Baptist church by John Clarke in 1641 was organized in Newport, Rhode Island. Moreover, there were a few other congregations established in Massachusetts.³

With the Baptist churches in Rhode Island and throughout the Middle Colonies becoming more

² C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black church in the African-American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 22.

³ Lincoln and Mamiya, 22.

like Calvinists in the Eighteenth Century in contrast to the earlier General churches, there was this group of churches called the General churches. They were called "Particular" Baptists, and by 1707, five such churches in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware unified in the formation of the Philadelphia Baptist Association. It was in 1767 that these associations were organized in New England, Virginia, and the Carolinas. The growth in the Baptist movement attributed to the Great Awakening made many people receptive to the Baptist appeal. Moreover, at the same time, the awakening led to a division of Baptists into two distinct groups: the "New Light" or Separate Baptists, who were concentrated in New England, and they were more extreme in their Calvinistic emphasis and the intensely emotional tactics of revivalism. The "Old Light" or Regular Baptists, mainly of the Philadelphia Association, were moderate in the doctrinal requirements and more traditional and decorous in their worship rituals.⁴

The first known Black churches in America were the African Baptist or "Bluestone" Church on the grounds of William Byrd's plantation near the Bluestone River in Mecklenburg, Virginia, in 1758, and the Silver Bluff Baptist Church located on the South Carolina bank of the Savannah River not far from Augusta, Georgia. Silver Bluff was established by an enslaved person named George Liele sometime between 1773 and 1775; the cornerstone of the present church building claims the founding date of 1750. Liele embraced Christianity during the evangelistic revivals that followed the Great Awakening—having been licensed as an exhorter to perform mission work among other enslaved people on neighboring plantations, including the Galphin plantation.⁵

We know now that several enslaved people worshiped clandestinely in hidden enclaves on the plantations as units called the "invisible institutions." Even though secrecy was not mandated, they were not allowed to develop formal Black associations, but some did join existing White Baptist

⁴ Lincoln and Mamiya, 23.

⁵ Lincoln and Mamiya, 24.

organizations.⁶

It has been determined that approximately 388,000 Africans shipped directly from the continent of Africa to North America; approximately 210,000 of them came to the Carolinas and Georgia, and approximately 50 percent came to the port of Charleston. Many enslaved people were practicing Muslims before they were introduced to Christianity in the United States of America.⁷

The colonies such as Virginia and South Carolina were considered Britain's New World colonies because many Anglican missionaries attempted but failed to persuade slaveholders of the merits of converting enslaved people with the entire message of Christianity because the masters wanted to enforce docility, illiteracy, and blind obedience in a rigid and systematic effort perpetuating the institution of slavery breeding generations of human beings believing they were inhuman.⁸

Christianity in the nineteenth century in the American South protected and supported slavery. Believing that free meant free because they were White, and Africans and their descendants were enslaved because they were Black or Christian.⁹

We know now that enslaved persons who accepted Christianity found ways to make this new religion their own, infusing the religion of their captors with their African spirituality because there is no Black church without music and dancing. The drum and dance were unifying forces of Black forms of worship, expressing adulation and exaltation, signifying inheritance and belonging. The enslaved people incorporated the ring shout because the body remembered the rituals. The ring shout was an African practice that came across the ocean and was practiced by free and enslaved African Americans.

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We did not lose descendants of Africa; we brought our worldviews with us. We continued to believe in a sacred cosmos created and preserved by a supreme deity. Everything we think and do

⁶ Lincoln and Mamiya, 25.

⁷ Henry Louis Gates, *The Black church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song* (New York: Penguin Press, 2021), 23.

⁸ Gates, 30.

⁹ Gates, 31.

¹⁰ Gates, 34.

reflects the sacred nature of the cosmos. Our words, cultural creations, songs, music, dances, stories, and art transcended any secular-sacred dichotomy. They were considered relevant to life: work, play, and worship. ¹¹

For George Liele, already mentioned in this paper, having started the first African American Church in the United States, liberation included solidarity and strategies of resistance as Africans organized for healing and exodus from the traditions that demeaned and diminished themselves. Going back to being relocated to Jamaica, he was placed in prison for preaching on Romans 10:1: "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer for Israel is that they might be saved," a charge was brought against Liele for which he was imprisoned was that "he was exciting the slaves to rebellion." However, what Liele did was equivocate between notions of survival and liberation. Moreover, should he speak out against the evils of slavery and challenge the forces of oppression to let God's people go free, or should he work within the system of slavery and cooperate with the status quo? However, the story of the role and function of the Black church as the midwife of healing and survival has consistently highlighted the need not only to make decisions concerning enculturation and acculturation. ¹²

Also, in the nineteenth century, Africa experienced the great age of European Christian missions. It was across Africa along the western coast north of the Cameroons and the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean coasts, becoming the Union of South Africa, where thousands of missionaries from Europe and North America traveled to the continent to preach the Christian message. Their mission achieved their goal when tens of thousands of Africans became Christians. The Africans did accept the Christian faith and thanked the missionaries for bringing them the good news of the gospel of Christ. However, many African Christians aspired to imitate the missionaries by becoming missionaries themselves. However, European missionaries dismissed their efforts, suggesting that Africans as a race

¹¹ Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 34.

¹² Noel Leo Erskine, *Plantation Church: How African American Religion Was Born in Caribbean Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 170.

were not yet sufficiently mature to take the lead in evangelization, even of other Africans. ¹³

Before becoming Christian, the people of Africa believed in an invisible world inhabited by spiritual forces or entities deemed adequate powers over the material world. So, their definition of religion emerged from the specific context of Africa, where they perceived the spirit world had a considerable and authentic presence. It differs from the definitions derived from modern Western experiences, which tend to consider religion as a search for the ultimate meaning of life. What the Africans understood comes closer to the meaning of the Latin original *religio*, a word that first appeared in the third century B.C.E. about Roman religion, of which divination was a central figure. Cicero, in particular, glossed *religio* as the conscientiously performed worship due to the gods. This worship to which Cicero referred was a response to the continuous stream of revelatory messages that the Roman gods were believed to send to the world of humans, the content of which could become known through divination. ¹⁴

The role of the enslaved people conflicted with the European tradition of Christianity because the planters inherited it. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Europeans believed that a baptized Christian was to be recognized as a free man or on the way to being free (as in the case of indentured White servants). So, the doctrine that "freedom was inherent in Christianity" or "that Christianization opened the way to freedom" clearly preceded the economic enterprise of the New World, with its concomitant exploitation of enslaved people. ¹⁵

So, tension increased into a theological dispute between the planters and their priests. If the planters were correct in their belief that Christianity and freedom were inseparable ideas, one of two things would occur, and either would interfere with the central concern of economic development, which means that thousands of enslaved people, cheaply bought for a lifetime of service, would have to be reverted to the earlier status of servitude, and given contracts, and finally integrated into the life of

¹³ Andrew Barnes, *Global Christianity and the Black Atlantic* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017), 7.

¹⁴ Gerrie ter Haar, *How God Became African* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 1.

¹⁵ Joseph Washington, *Black Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 166.

the economy. Moreover, this prospect took on nightmare proportions in the minds of the planters. "The other possibility was equally repulsive." The fact that conversion of enslaved people to Christianity and their baptism would require that they be set free immediately as natural human persons, potential brothers, entitled to be respected as sacred men and women. ¹⁶

Because racial identities emerged in the church in America, it created only a partial understanding of human identity. Because those who make race the primary category by which to define the mystery of humanity fall into false notions of what it means to be human. Because the power to define humanity usually resides with those who happened to be in power at the time. "In the American context, Europeans gained power to define race, especially in the need to justify the horrors of enslaving African peoples." This justification then led to the theological rationalization of a hierarchy of being, in which God made White people the trustees of creation. ¹⁷

Moreover, African people were simply part of a creation that needed the trustees of creation. Moreover, African people were simply part of a creation that needed to be ordered and dominated. Moreover, Europeans could enter a unique economic constitution of the self within the context of bringing enslaved people to America. "They could shape their own identity in the marketplace. When considering these new markets, liberty, rights, and freedom were discussed. The indigenous people were part of acquiring property for these markets." ¹⁸

The way Negroes were captured and enslaved, and inducted into the plantation regime tended to loosen all social bonds among them and to destroy the traditional basis of social cohesion. The organization of labor and the system of social control and discipline on the plantation both tended to prevent the development of social cohesion either because of whatever remnants of African culture might have survived or based on Negroes' role in the plantation economy. The Negroes were organized in work gangs; labor lost its traditional African meaning as a cooperative undertaking with communal

¹⁶ Washington, 167.

¹⁷ Michael Battle, *The Black church in America* (Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 62.

¹⁸ Battle, 62.

significance. There was hardly a community among the enslaved people, even though on the more extensive plantations, there were slave quarters. ¹⁹

Africans have a philosophy fundamentally based on solid religious understandings, which makes its basic presupposition not to question the existence of God but the unquestioned acceptance of his existence. They accept the existence of God as Africans not because they are foolish but because it is reasonable to do so because the world could not be reasonably understood with such reference to the existence of a supreme being. Thus, Africans begin with assumptions like those of the biblical world and continue from there to understand the claims of the Christian faith. Being mindful, many Africans were and still are polytheists. ²⁰

To understand our ancestors and how they perceived Jesus Christ despite the enslaver's interpretation, they had a three-fold understanding of salvation. They believed that salvation was available only in Jesus Christ. They viewed salvation from the primordial place where their ancestors of old handed down great wisdom, knowledge tools, customs, and lifestyles, through which they welcomed Jesus Christ as one of them, deep within the grove of initiation. In this ancestral hearth, vital energy determined their identity as a people, civilization, and culture. They also viewed salvation from their current socio-cultural and politico-economic challenges and the global crisis, against which we have been struggling from the dawn of modern times till today. Moreover, finally, they viewed Jesus Christ against the background of all our religious ideals and spiritual powers, where Christianity occupies an equal place alongside Islam and African traditional religions. ²¹

It was scholars such as the sociologist C. Eric Lincoln argued that during the 1960s, African American Christianity underwent a transformation from the Negro Church to the Black church. This radical discrimination and segregation proscribed the social context of pre-1967 African American

¹⁹ Edward Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (Schocken Books, 1963), 11.

²⁰ Matthew Michael, *Christian Theology and African Traditions* (The Lutterworth Press, 2013), 66.

²¹ Kä Mana, *Christians and Churches of Africa: Salvation in Christ and Building a New African Society*, Theology in Africa Series (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2004), 3.

Christianity. So, according to E. Franklin Frazier, African American Christianity under segregation represented an arena in which African Americans accommodated their subordinated status as Negroes. Moreover, the Negro Church and a few other institutions served as vehicles through which blacks could achieve social status and provide a pivotal route to respectability. The central achievement of status and respectability was a particular kind of cultural production that created Negro identity. “Negro cultural production lodged itself within the context of elite Western culture, a context that devalued African American folk culture and celebrated European and Euro-American elite cultural expression. The Negro Church became a site where the dominant ideology of African American inferiority was countered through the creative mastery of elite Western culture and competition with White Americans on their cultural terrain.”²²

What may escape us is assessing the origins of African American Christianity, and it is essential to keep several ideas in mind. The first development of Black Christianity was an Atlantic-world phenomenon. There were Black Christians in Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean long before people of color were converted in large numbers in North America. So, Afro-Christians, moreover, moved around the Atlantic basin with startling regularity. Most went unwillingly to work, struggled, and died on New World plantations; others began their lives as enslaved people but used their wits and sometimes their religion to gain freedom and new homes; some, already free, traveled the Atlantic in search of opportunity.²³

Historically, there were proscriptive practices by White Christians directed against Black members, and auditors in local churches were potentially the motivation behind the separatist movement. Events are less overt but symbolically as powerful as the confrontation at Saint George’s Church, often provoking a schism. The same church mentioned in this paper, where Richard Allen,

²² Jacob Obafemi Kehinde Olupona and Regina Gemignani, eds., *African Immigrant Religions in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 51.

²³ John W. Catron, *Embracing Protestantism: Black Identities in the Atlantic World* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016), 17.

Absalom Jones, and other leaders, from their knees during prayer for refusing to go to the gallery, abruptly left the service, but the incident involved White pastors refusing to take Black infants into their arms to christen them (Washington, D.C.), of Blacks having to wait until all Whites were served the Lord's Supper before being admitted to the table (Ohio), of conflicts over access to burial grounds (Charleston, South Carolina) and of constraints on freedom of expression in worship (Cincinnati, Ohio) served to set off Black resistance. ²⁴

As already mentioned in this paper, the Baptist faith started when English Separatists who eventually became Baptists fled from England to Holland to enjoy the exercise of their religion due to James I's policy of making his subjects conform to Anglicanism or harrying them out of the land. ²⁵ Martin Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is that each Christian is, by faith, free, sovereign lord and subject to none, but this means that each believer in Jesus Christ has direct access to God and is responsible for others. ²⁶

King James I (1603-25) developed a variant to the priesthood of all believers and believed in the divine right of meaning to him; God established monarchy as the government for human society, and a king represents God on earth and therefore has authority to determine his subject's religion; and obedience to God requires obedience to the king in all matters, religious as well as civil, and disobedience to the king in religious matters is tantamount to disobedience to God. ²⁷

B. Role in African American Community

The African American Church has always played a role in our communities. Like this church many years ago, these community activities still exist. It was the Concord Baptist Church of Brooklyn, with a membership of 15,000 members on the roll, showing and illustrating the relationship between

²⁴ Gayraud S. Wilmore, *African American Religious An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989), 303.

²⁵ G Hugh Wamble, "Baptist Contributions to Separation of Church and State: Baptist History and Heritage," *Baptist History and Heritage* 20, no. 3 (July 1985): 2.

²⁶ Wamble, 2.

²⁷ Wamble, 8.

the size of the church, a socially aware clerical leadership, and church sponsorship of social service programs in the community. Located in a depressed Bedford-Stuyvesant area, Concord Baptist had three full-time professional social workers. At that time, the church contributed towards their salaries and office expenses, and the social workers also used grants and private consulting services to make ends meet. The church had a credit union, which the members and non-members used. The church had space for a gym that served the church and the community. The pastor at that time, the Rev. Dr. Gardner C. Taylor, built a complex of buildings to serve as a nursing home for the senior citizens and elderly. Church members visited the sick and shut-ins, and the pastor's wife then had an active private elementary school and junior high school offering quality education to combat the deteriorating public educational system. They offered youth recreation programs and sponsored clothing banks and child-care centers. These are only a few community outreach ministries this church offers, and many other Baptist churches in the 21st century offer the same and more.²⁸

The impact of the Black church, it is natural that today the bulk of organized efforts of Negroes in any direction should be centered in the church. The Negro Church is the only social institution of the Negroes that started in the African forest and survived slavery; under the leadership of the priest and medicine man, and afterward of the Christian pastor, the church preserved the remnants of African tribal life and became after emancipation the center of Negro social life. Therefore, today the Negro population of the United States is virtually divided into church congregations, which are the fundamental units of the race life. Moreover, it is natural, therefore, that charitable and rescue work among Negroes should be found in the churches and reach there its most significant development.²⁹

C. Evolution of Worship Practices

Our ancestors, the gods, in Africa, had a thousand faces and names. According to historians Linda Heywood and John Thornton, the Igbo, Mandinka, Fulbe, Kongo, Akan, and Wolof were most

²⁸ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black church in the African American Experience*, 190.

²⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois and Robert Wortham, *W. E. B. Du Bois and the Sociology of the Black church and Religion, 1897-1914* (Lanham: Lexington, 2017), 190.

numerous, each bringing their belief systems. Moreover, our African American ancestors arose from this marvelously diverse blend of customs, religious faiths, and practices. It should be no surprise that enslaved Africans in North America did not accept Christianity. They were finally offered a chance to embrace it precisely as White Americans practiced it or pictured it. ³⁰

It was Anglican missionaries articulating a vision of Christianity that brought religion to enslaved men and women while at the same time placating their owners and making the enslaved docile, hardworking, and easier to manage, and this was a concept of Whiteness and White supremacy becoming the new way of justifying enslavement. ³¹ It took until the nineteenth century for this idea to spread across the American South. Christianity, from then on in the southern states, would protect and support the idea of slavery, and free men were free not because they were Christian but instead because they were White. Africans and their descendants were enslaved because they were Black, Christian, or not. ³²

Published in 1810, at the end of his antislavery pamphlet, Daniel Coker, a Black Methodist preacher and schoolmaster in Baltimore, appended four significant lists. He named thirteen ordained Black clergy (including himself), another eleven licensed local preachers, and eight writers and orators whose public works had proven their talents, and this was a compilation of fifteen "African churches," representing four denominational polities and ten cities and was an early primary source for what has been called the "the independent church movement" in Black American religion. ³³

D. Conclusion

The first Baptist movement in England emerged in 1609, followed by the American Baptist movement in the colonies. The Philadelphia Baptist Association was formed in 1707, leading to the division of Baptists into two groups: "New Light" and "Old Light." The first known Black churches in

³⁰ Gates, *The Black church*, 16.

³¹ Gates, 31.

³² Gates, 31.

³³ Timothy E. Fulop, ed., *African American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 135.

America were the African Baptist or "Bluestone" Church in Mecklenburg, Virginia 1758, and the Silver Bluff Baptist Church in South Carolina. Enslaved people worshipped clandestinely on plantations but were not allowed to develop formal Black associations. Christianity in the nineteenth century in the American South protected and supported slavery, with many Africans and their descendants being enslaved because they were Black or Christian.

Africans believed in an invisible world inhabited by spiritual forces, differing from modern Western definitions. The role of enslaved people conflicted with the European tradition of Christianity, as the planters inherited it. The emergence of racial identities in the church in America created only a partial understanding of human identity, as those who make race the primary category fall into false notions of what it means to be human.

The origins of African American Christianity can be traced back to the Atlantic-world phenomenon, with Black Christians in Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean long before people of color were converted in large numbers in North America. The Baptist faith started when English Separatists fled England to Holland due to James I's the policy of making his subjects conform to Anglicanism or harriving them out of the land.

III. Traditional Characteristics of African American Baptist Churches

A. Worship Services

The church consists of the covenant community, in which God and its members gather to have fellowship with God and one another. We understand that Christ is Lord of the church, and we, the church's members, are servants under the authority of Christ and are called to share in the suffering of Jesus Christ. Moreover, all decisions about the church's life, work, mission, and ministry are made as the church meets to "seek the mind of Jesus Christ."³⁴

When we seek the mind of Jesus Christ, we are open to His leadership. When we seek the mind

³⁴ Karen E Smith, "A Baptist Vision of the Church: Journal of European Baptist Studies," *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 15, no. 3 (May 2015): 2.

of Jesus Christ, we do so in prayer and worship - joining together to hear the word of God, sing hymns, and observe the ordinances, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Moreover, given the centrality of the scriptures, it is primarily through the proclamation of the Word that we believe the mind and will of God are revealed. ³⁵

When we seek the mind of Jesus Christ, our views on specific issues (depending on the issue) are to agree to disagree or not let differences of opinion hinder our fellowship in Him. ³⁶ When we are in union with Jesus Christ, we share life in this world and the next. ³⁷

Baptist churches are the freest among free churches because they are neither defined nor limited by creeds, theological principles, or practices. Because Baptists are free to borrow from all the experiences of the whole church, past and present, or to create new experiences, we Baptists can celebrate the priesthood of individual believers- "soul competency" among believers-worship is less concerned with an exact definition of a corporate community and more concerned with leading individuals into a practical and satisfying relationship with God. So, worship among Baptists is guided by theology, which shapes its resources for those who engage in it. For us Baptists, worship deepens a spiritual awareness of God around and within. It urges its participants first to confess Christ as Lord and Savior, deepening their commitment to Christ in work and witness. Baptist worship, therefore, most often seeks to assist humankind in confronting God's presence, understanding God's mind through his Word and revelation, and committing to God's work as God continues to ordain. ³⁸

For Coker, this was the embodiment of the cultural and religious transformation of enslaved Africans into free Afro-Americans, and he indicated as much by framing the entire appendix of lists with biblical images drawn from 1 Peter 2:9-10: "a chosen generation," "royal priesthood," "holy nation," and "peculiar people." For Coker and us, the symbolic references for "what God [was] doing

³⁵ Smith, 12.

³⁶ Smith, 13.

³⁷ Smith, 14.

³⁸ Everett C. Goodwin and Edward Thurston Hiscox, *The New Hiscox Guide for Baptist Churches* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1995), 106.

for Ethiopia's sons in the United States of America were not a people but are now the people of God" – testifying to the emergence of an Afro-American community in the new United States. ³⁹

The relevant consideration of the origins of Black religious independence is White proscription, the conscious exclusion from positions of power of Black members in biracial congregations and denominations. With a historiographical emphasis on the famous incident, she was traditionally dated as November 1787, when trustees from St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia pulled several Black members and local preachers from their knees during prayer at a public service. They abruptly left the service because they refused seats set aside for their race in the gallery, and Richard Allen and Absalom Jones as leaders. They embarked on a course that formed the first two African congregations with their buildings in the city, and this was the start of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. ⁴⁰

The formation of separate Black churches repeatedly made the Black community's maturation visible, becoming the institutional core of free Black community life, serving as an educational venture, housing literary societies and libraries, and hosting schools and benevolent associations. Their buildings were meeting houses of Black freedom and often of the White abolitionist movement. "Mirroring the communities they served, the churches enabled Blacks to celebrate themselves as a collectivity, and they provided the protective space whereby each could content with other about common concerns." ⁴¹

With Baptists, the effective use of scriptures should be at the heart of worship in every experience, especially going forward into the 21st century and beyond. For Baptists, scripture is the remembrance, revealed Word of God we approach in worship. The scriptures can guide and shape our approach to God in worship. The words of the ancient scriptures were always on Jesus' lips: "It is written," he might say in introducing a teaching, or "You have heard it said," in calling to mind a

³⁹ Fulop, *African American Religion*, 136.

⁴⁰ Fulop, 137.

⁴¹ Fulop, 140.

memorized text for interpretation. The use of scripture for worship among all Christians is essential, moreover, for Baptists, who should continue well into the 21st century and beyond, being encouraged in interpreting the Word of God by each believer. We Baptists understand the scriptures as a significant guide for understanding God, and some Baptists view them as the sole guide. So, we need not casually use or neglect Baptists' worship and the nonuse of scriptures, especially in worship. "Those who plan worship experiences should first turn to the scriptures for guidance and direction." Those who participate in worship should strive to understand their significant role in enabling them to approach God's presence. ⁴²

When we look at the contributing streams and traditions in Christian worship, we form perspectives and understand the meaning of worship. The Methodist (or Wesleyan), Lutheran, and Reformed reflect the perspectives of the African American tradition seen through the eyes of distinguished scholars. Professor Paul W. Hoon, writing from the tradition of the Methodist stream, states that Christian worship is Christo-centric, and the Christ-Event informs such worship and is, therefore, incarnational. Moreover, the core of worship is God's initiating action in giving God's divine life and bringing humankind to partake of that life. So, worship then is an all-embracing aspect of the life of the individual and church, making the Christian life a liturgical life. ⁴³

Hoon asserts that Christian worship is bifocal because it focuses on divine revelation and human response and because it is "God's revelation of himself [God's self] in Jesus Christ and man's [humankind's] response. Moreover, God communicates and discloses God's very being to humankind through God's Word. At the center of this revelation and the response is "Jesus Christ, who reveals God to us, and through whom we respond." ⁴⁴

With the Lutheran stream also providing valuable insights, Peter Brunner's view is like Hoon's

⁴² Goodwin and Hiscox, *The New Hiscox Guide for Baptist Churches*, 108.

⁴³ Frederick Hilborn Talbot and William B. McClain, *African American Worship: New Eyes for Seeing* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 63.

⁴⁴ Talbot and McClain, 63.

focus on the duality of worship mirrored in the revelation and response, for Brunner promotes the view that the primacy, "the initiative of God" that God gives God's self to us in past and present events, and God's action takes place through our actions in the proclamation of the Word and the sacraments. So, responding to God's acts of revelation, humans communicate with God through prayer and singing hymns. Moreover, prayer for Brunner is "the permission which God accords to His [God's] sons or daughters [children] to join their voices in the discussion of His [God's] affairs. Moreover, Brunner's conceptions are overshadowed by God's self-giving activity and our response to God. ⁴⁵

African American worship, according to Dr. Edward P. Wimberly, Professor of Pastoral Theology at The Interdenominational Center in Atlanta, Georgia, "Worship is the response of praise, adoration, and reverence to God who enters the lives of Black people and brings meaning, healing, sustenance, and wholeness to them as a group." He says, "Black worship grows out of what God has done, is doing, and will do on behalf of people of color." Moreover, this affirms liturgy as the "work of the people" because Wimberly states that "praise, adoration, and reverences are *work* and *relational life* developed in *response* to God's presence amid that life." ⁴⁶

One can only conclude that early services among Black worshipers constituted a blend of European hymns because Europeans infiltrated our ancestors, bringing them to the United States of America. The only hymns they knew were from their captors. However, they added our traditional African rhythms. Because of our struggles, the spirituals containing double meanings of religious salvation and freedom from slavery were sung. Moreover, over time, African American Baptist churches adapted their worship practices, incorporating liturgical dance and other forms of expression in the church.

The Black church is pivotal in African Americans' history, providing spiritual support, community, and empowerment. Moreover, despite the challenges, it remains a resilient institution that

⁴⁵ Talbot and McClain, 63.

⁴⁶ Talbot and McClain, 64.

shapes Black communities' cultural and social fabric.

For Black Christians, the freedom-seeking agenda plays out in worship. For Black churches, the manifestation of religion responded to terror by seeking to establish blacks as agents of will, and Christian gatherings orchestrated by churches served as a ritual of "exorcism" in that they fostered a break with status as will less objects. They encouraged new forms of relationship and interaction premised upon Black intentionality. The Black body constructed as ugly and only of importance as a tool of labor was signified during church gatherings from the period of slavery to the present and was transformed into a ritual device through the glory of God, and the beauty of human movement was celebrated. When one gets a sense of this early in the development of the "Black church" in the form of ring shouts, a rhythmic movement of the body must have resembled the swaying and jerking of bodies associated with trances and "ecstatic" behavior in many traditional African religions. ⁴⁷

The Black church is more than a place where we practice worship and activism because if we think that way, we fail to recognize how the church activity is informed by what the church thinks. Moreover, there have always been links between what the church does and what it says. "Within all seven major denominations, African American Christians exercise their thoughts on God's will and its relationship to the world in ways that are felt." ⁴⁸

B. Music and Hymnology

For the Baptist Church, music should always be an essential part of worship, like in the past, even into the 21st century and beyond, to prepare and lead our congregations into the presence of God and to provide, like prayer, a vehicle to express our yearnings and concerns to God. "In unpretentious Christian services, singing is often the only corporate act that can be called worship in the most accurate sense." A song can express adoration, confession, supplication, and praise, and we know that it can be done in unison or harmony, which underlines the unity and shared experience of God's people.

⁴⁷ Anthony B. Pinn, *What Is African American Religion?*, Facets Series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 25.

⁴⁸ Anne H. Pinn and Anthony B. Pinn, *Fortress Introduction to Black church History* (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 2002), 126.

Even the ancient Hebrew pilgrims approached the Holy City by singing songs we now have received as the Psalms. So, for the same reason, worship in the primitive Christian church was commended "in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart" (Ephesians 5:19).⁴⁹

The music of worship, especially in the 21st century and beyond, should be simple, lyrical, and either familiar or made familiar to the congregation. The combined hymnody resources of the church are enormous, far surpassing the pages of any hymnal. Now we know the creativity of the young and the young in spirit who create new music in the tones and rhythms of popular music and the rediscovery of ancient music. Those who plan congregational music for worship should be eager to increase their knowledge of hymns and spiritual songs, letting them encourage both familiarity and diversity in the life of the congregation.⁵⁰

Our music of worship in the 21st century and beyond should include, like in the past, prelude and postlude music provided by an organ or instrumentalist, choral anthems and responses, and other presentations within the resources and capability of the congregation. Moreover, like in the past, such music can add immeasurably to our approach to God, for it helps to soothe our spirits, focus our minds, and approach a prayerful attitude. "Because music is a universal language, it can attract the unbelieving, encourage the doubting, and calm the troubled." So, other than common prayer, that can unite a whole congregation in one voice or ear. Therefore, it is no accident that its subset, sacred music, has a firm place in the history of worship.⁵¹

In keeping with Baptists in the past, in developing worship, greater attention should be devoted to including the congregation in developing music rather than providing music for their passive entertainment. "Let all the peoples praise thee, O God: let all the people praise thee!" (Psalm 67:5). "That is not to say that a choir should not sing or that an organ or ensemble does not play. However, it

⁴⁹ Goodwin and Hiscox, *The New Hiscox Guide for Baptist Churches*, 123.

⁵⁰ Goodwin and Hiscox, 124.

⁵¹ Goodwin and Hiscox, 124.

is to say that congregations should occasionally be taught to sing responses with a choir." Realizing that music should lead to community expression rather than entertainment, and whenever possible, musically gifted congregation members should be included in offering worship music because God is not as pleased by the perfection of our music in worship as by our passion and participation.⁵²

What can be an asset to the African American Baptist Church in the 21st century and beyond for the church? A resource in the *Africana Worship Book* where this paper will lift a few pages to show how it relates to the Black church's and community's real-life experiences, affirming both for the gospel's sake. A confession from Romans 12:9-21, "Precious Lord, strip away the mask I wear during the week to 'get by.' Lay my soul bare before you today. Let me see genuine love. Show me the love that hates evil and holds onto what is good. Strip away the mask that holds my emotions in check when I should share your love with someone. Let me see the joy of giving to others. Show me the power of blessing those who persecute me. Strip away the mask that grins and lies, and let the world think otherwise about a child of God."⁵³

C. Preaching and Sermon Style

For the Black church, biblical preaching is defined as preaching that allows a text from the Bible to serve as the leading force in shaping the sermon's content and purpose. The preaching type is considered the most faithful to the traditional understanding of the proclaimed Word of God.⁵⁴

It is no secret that the Bible occupies a central place in the religious life of Black Americans because more than a mere source of texts, in Black preaching, the Bible is the single most important source of language, imagery, and story for the sermon because of biblical literacy in Black churches is greatly diminished from earlier years, it has yet to reach a state where the Bible's primary as a rich resource for Black preaching is no longer the case. The Bible is depicted as the experiences of many

⁵² Goodwin and Hiscox, 124.

⁵³ Valerie Bridgeman Davis and Abena Safiyah Fosua, eds., *The Africana Worship Book* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2006), 149.

⁵⁴ Cleophus LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 10.

Black people from slavery to contemporary times. "Consequently, knowledge of the Bible, along with the ability to apply Bible verses to every phase of life, is indeed regarded by many African American preachers as crucial ingredients in effective preaching."⁵⁵

For the Black preacher, creative language provides African American preaching with its distinguishing feature. So many Black preachers seem to possess a genius for the melody of words and scene details. A man named Henry Mitchell noted African American congregations' enthusiastic response to beautiful language and well-turned phrases. The traditional Black church expects and appreciates rhetorical flair and highly poetic language when preaching the gospel.⁵⁶

In many European and mainline American denominations, where architecture and classical music inspire a sense of the holy, Blacks seek to accomplish this act by displaying well-crafted rhetoric. Because the listening ear becomes the privileged sensual organ as the preacher attempts through careful and precise rhetoric to embody the Word. Because of this, the rhythm, cadence, and sound of words and their ability to "paint a picture" in the hearers' minds are essential in the African American sermon. The Black preacher's careful search for precise words and phrases is evidence of the importance of rhetoric and the modest circumstances that initially gave it a place of primacy in the Black sermon.⁵⁷

The appeal to the emotions is the distinctive feature of African American preaching. It was at the turn of the century that W.E.B. DuBois described "the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy" as the three distinct, historical characteristics of Black worship experience: "The frenzy or Shouting, when the Spirit of the Lord passed by, and, seizing the devotee, made him mad with the supernatural joy, was the last essential of Negro religion and the one more devoutly believed in than all the rest." This unabashed, emotional fervor, which DuBois wrote nearly a century ago, continues to impact both the sermon's preaching and the worshipping community's response. Because of this highly charged nature, the Black worship experience is the most associated with the antiphonal call-and-response ritual that

⁵⁵ LaRue, 10.

⁵⁶ LaRue, 10.

⁵⁷ LaRue, 11.

the preacher and the congregation engage in during the sermon. "Many Black preachers, contemplating the audible participation of those in the pew, intentionally slow their cadences, time their pauses, and chant or semi-chant their phrases most adeptly and deliberately. Their timed delivery is structured to meet the requirements of the adage: start slow, rise high, strike fire, and sit down in a storm."⁵⁸

If history has served us well as African Americans, we can only look to one of the most prolific preachers of our time, and that is none other than Rev. Dr. Gardner C. Taylor. We can learn so much from his preaching that can propel the Black church in the 21st century and beyond when we do not lose sight of this great preacher regarding his sermons. His methodology can still be meaningful today because when Rev. Dr. Gardner C. Taylor said, "Blacks are enough of a part of the total culture to understand it. However, they are enough apart from the total culture to see it from the side, from another angle. It is the experience of having one foot in the larger culture and one foot out of the larger culture that gives the unique angle of vision to the Black preacher." Dr. Taylor's preaching combined warm devotion to the risen Christ in prayer and trenchant pointed social commentary. He called then, and we should now call all of us to a deeper and more profound commitment to Christ while at the same time blowing the trumpet for righting wrongs, helping the oppressed, and standing for justice. Dr. Taylor preached the Social Gospel.⁵⁹

It was in 1898 that the Morehouse College graduation speech of Du Bois asserted that Black preachers' critical role must be to foster moral and social reforms. He emphasized that for the church to carry out this function, ministers must actively preach and provide the quality of leadership that inspires Black Christians to participate in bringing needed social and moral reforms. However, Cleophus La Rue argued that Black preaching defines the message and mission of the Black churches and the message about power conveyed through Black preaching. Sermons should reflect on the mission of the church today. For Peter Paris, Black sermons give their attention exclusively to a

⁵⁸ LaRue, 11.

⁵⁹ William H. Crouch and Joel C. Gregory, *What We Love about the Black church: Can We Get a Witness?*, 1st ed (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2010), 2.

reliance on God's power and ignore what Black Christians can do themselves using their own personal and collective agency to bring about needed social changes. A failure to emphasize the personal agency of Black Christians limits the sense of freedom and independence available through Black church experience to the confines of Black church buildings. It does not substantively foster the degree of empowerment needed to express this freedom in the broader society; moreover, the African American Baptist Church in the 21st century and beyond must do the opposite.⁶⁰

The opposite looks like the dean of Black preachers, already mentioned in this paper, the Rev. Dr. Gardner C. Taylor; he was one of the leaders during the 1960s Civil Rights movement and one of the founders of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, known for his social and political activism despite being widely criticized in the Black church that the pulpit was no place for politics. His sermons shifted to a greater urgency for justice and more strongly held people accountable for the work of justice. "He spoke beyond the normative parameters of the Black preaching tradition, which perceived racism as distinctive from other social ills and proclaimed that the root of racism and other social ills was spiritual. His sermons unambiguously promoted liberating socioethical values and practices."⁶¹

Prophetic preaching is acts of utterances or imagination that carry generative power to evoke new perceptions of reality. So, in the spoken word, prophets rise to engage in life-and-death matters. Whether functioning as crisis addresses or evokers, prophetic utterances carry the divine response into a material reality. This idea runs as the central thread throughout Walter Brueggemann's work on prophetic speech. Moreover, his book on Prophetic Imagination is about the prophetic consciousness of Moses and how that consciousness continues in the work of other prophets, derivatively, and consummates in Jesus of Nazareth. In Brueggemann's assertion, rejecting the status quo and speaking of resistance constitute the two determinant factors for developing and nurturing a prophetic or

⁶⁰ Cari Jackson, *For the Souls of Black Folks: Reimagining Black Preaching for Twenty-First-Century Liberation* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 54.

⁶¹ Jackson, 55.

“alternative consciousness” based on the Mosaic outlook. So, when dialectically related, these elements call for both a healthy suspicion of power and a self-awareness about the seductive influences of culture. Moreover, against commitments to imperial consciousness, the politics of silencing revolutions and criticism suppression in scripture-Israel’s prophets waged a poetic war to negate the dominant imagination through image and metaphor-symbol-laden discourse spoken concretely and directed toward spaces of particularity.⁶²

D. Congregational Dynamics

Congregational dynamics in our African American Baptist churches are influenced by various historical, cultural, and theological factors that will shape the church in the centuries to come because they are foundational. The African American Baptist churches emerged because of the struggle for freedom and continued equality. The church came into existence under complex circumstances, one of which was slavery. Enslaved people were concentrated on farms in the Southland, so the Black church, like the White church, "was in its major development a rural institution." During 1619-1775, indentured Black servants landed in Jamestown, Virginia; it ended with the War of Independence. After the War of Independence, 1775-1783, Northern American colonies won freedom from Great Britain, and the nation's spiritual condition was deficient. Enslavers believed enslaved people were more valuable workers than non-Christian enslaved people were. In the minds of Whites, "Black people were undeniably eligible for heaven but not for the full benefits of the church on earth."⁶³

Some features of congregational dynamics in African American Baptist churches are the pastor, the chief office-bearer in the Baptist churches (also called elder or bishop), who is to preach, teach, counsel, admonish, and administer. The deacons are to assist the pastor by looking after the church's temporal affairs so the pastor's attention is not diverted from the primary responsibilities.⁶⁴

⁶² Kenyatta Gilbert, *A Pursued Justice Black Preaching from the Great Migration to Civil Rights* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2016), 59.

⁶³ William L. Banks, *A History of Black Baptists in the United States* (West Conshohocken, PA: Infinity Pub, 2005), 17.

⁶⁴ Norman H. Maring and Winthrop Still Hudson, *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice*, Rev. ed (Valley Forge, PA:

The dynamics of the African American Baptist Church afford the congregation the pastor's calling but also encourage them to support the pastor, with the congregation participating in the worship experiences. Within the Baptist church, the congregation can dismiss the pastor if necessary, but prayerfully, this does not come to pass.

The bylaws and constitution of the Baptist church flow from the structure of the church, establishing boards and committees and the lines of accountability from subgroups through the coordinating council to the congregation - all boards, committees, and everyone else report to the pastor.⁶⁵

Most Baptist churches belong to national and state conventions for the sole purpose of meeting changing circumstances. "The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have seen numerous attempts to develop organizations with the twofold aim of enabling churches to work together without making commitments that would threaten local independence."⁶⁶

The underlying principle of the Christian experience is the members of the Body of Jesus Christ. Ephesians 4:25b (NRSV) proposes that this is the nature of the Christian community, "for we are members of one another." "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Cor. 12:26 NRSV). Consequently, the Black religious community has always found a way to maintain this fundamental African and early Christian belief system. The primary community and those community ties among our members are important because people are connected within a more profound sense of community. Thus, communal bonds among Black religionists are strong. Furthermore, these socio-religious group ties are a significant indicator of the importance of community in the African American context.⁶⁷

Judson Press, 1991), 98.

⁶⁵ Maring and Hudson, 123.

⁶⁶ Maring and Hudson, 196.

⁶⁷ Stephen Charles Rasor and Michael I. N. Dash, *The Mark of Zion: Congregational Life in Black churches* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 91.

E. Leadership Structure

The Apostle Paul conveyed to the church at Ephesus the importance of ordained ministry. He said that Christ gave gifts, some to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (Eph. 4:11). And the purpose of these ministries is "for the building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:12-13). The leadership of the Baptist church calls and encourages Christians who aspire to the likeness of Christ and challenges the church to be a living example of his work and witness on earth.⁶⁸ In keeping with the Apostle Paul's conveying to the church at Ephesus and us, the leadership structure of a traditional African American Baptist Church, we have the pastor, associate, and assistant ministers, missionaries and special-purpose ministers, deacons, other church officers, trustees, Board of Christian Education, Board of Missions and Outreach, church clerk, treasurer, financial secretary, church-school superintendent, and committees.

The pastor provides general oversight and care of the church. He or she is ordained to preach, proclaiming the Good News, winning souls for Christ, expanding the spiritual sensitivity of the congregation, and proclaiming the day of the Lord. The pastor must be the administrator, caring for congregational life's orderly processes and mundane concerns. The pastor must be an educator, providing opportunities for a clear understanding of the gospel and its meaning for salvation, practical living, and growth in grace.⁶⁹

When churches have achieved large size and complex ministries, there is a need for associate and assistant ministers—working with the pastor, the associate, and assistant ministers to expand ministries or assist the pastor in a specific area of responsibility.⁷⁰

Missioners and special-purpose ministers often engage ministers who are a part of the work of the whole church and related to the ministry staff but who have a particular ministry function apart

⁶⁸ Goodwin and Hiscox, *The New Hiscox Guide for Baptist Churches*, 52.

⁶⁹ Goodwin and Hiscox, 66.

⁷⁰ Goodwin and Hiscox, 68.

from the central life of the congregation. "Their work is by nature different from that of the church's pastor or associates and assistants. The pastor provides supportive supervision and encourages the congregation to empower their ministry for the purpose they have called them to serve." ⁷¹

Deacons or diaconates are the lone nonpastoral office found in the early church. The *deacon* comes from the Greek *diakonos*, meaning "minister" in the specific meaning of servant, as one who "ministers to" or serves others. According to the scriptures, the meaning applied to the apostles and Jesus Christ. The term most often refers to specific officers in the church. Their primary duty is to serve the congregation, exercise ministry, care for the sick and needy among the members, and, when appropriate, act as counselors and assistants to the pastor and other ministers, advancing the church's spiritual welfare. ⁷²

These other church officers primarily delegate functions from what were originally pastoral or diaconal roles. Because many individual offices, committees, and leadership roles are commonly found in Baptist churches, individual offices often include moderators, clerks, treasurers, financial secretaries, and church-school superintendents. Committees are appointed to provide nominations for church offices, organize ushering, auditing, finance and budget concerns, and programmatic issues such as evangelism, music, and unique community concerns or denominational programs. ⁷³

Trustees are persons responsible to the state and federal government on behalf of the church. They are responsible for establishing requirements for reporting status, filing of reports and fees, and especially for exemption of taxes on the property. People typically have expertise or experience in real estate, insurance, legal liability, and other corporate responsibility matters. ⁷⁴

The Board of Christian Education is responsible for training, Christian nurture, family life, and other spiritual growth opportunities. This ministry may be carried out as a whole or through

⁷¹ Goodwin and Hiscox, 69.

⁷² Goodwin and Hiscox, 90.

⁷³ Goodwin and Hiscox, 93.

⁷⁴ Goodwin and Hiscox, 94.

subcommittees for specific programs, such as children's work, youth work, leadership education, child-care committee, and nursery school committee, which depends on the church's complexity. ⁷⁵

The Board of Missions and Outreach leadership and supervision of the church's mission programs are usually provided by the diaconate and support groups within the church. In most Baptist churches, oversight for supporting and encouraging mission projects and programs is vested in a board identified for that purpose. ⁷⁶

A church clerk is usually an elected church officer responsible for keeping accurate records of church meetings, writing official correspondence of the church (regarding reports to denominations, transfers of membership letters), and maintaining membership roll in good order. The person is meticulous and accurate in detail and able to participate in the meetings and administrative work of the church. ⁷⁷

In the Baptist Church, the treasurer is an elected officer working closely with the Board of Trustees as the custodian of the church funds and working with the Finance Committee to administer the church's budget. The treasurer supervises as the administrator related to finances being bonded. ⁷⁸

The Financial Secretary is responsible for maintaining accurate financial records. These duties can include unique gifts for designated purposes, memorials, building funds, or unique offerings. This position requires one to send contributors a written status of the account at the end of the year or when needed. ⁷⁹

The Church School Superintendent in many Baptist churches provides ministry oversight of the Sunday School. The person is an officer of the church and a member of the Board of Christian Education. In conjunction with the Board of Christian Education, the curriculum for the church was

⁷⁵ Goodwin and Hiscox, 95.

⁷⁶ Goodwin and Hiscox, 95.

⁷⁷ Goodwin and Hiscox, 95.

⁷⁸ Goodwin and Hiscox, 96.

⁷⁹ Goodwin and Hiscox, 96.

chosen.⁸⁰

The committees differ from the boards but oversee specific areas of concern or activities or provide for a specific function, such as property management, financial management, or sponsorship of a particular church program. Some committees are standing, elected, or appointed to maintain a function or solve a problem, or they may even be ad hoc or temporary committees created for a limited term and function.⁸¹

Administration is the process of identifying, conserving, cultivating, and utilizing the resources of an organization or an institution to achieve the organization's goals, objectives, and purposes. Moreover, church administration is the ministry of identifying, organizing, and effectively utilizing the total resources of a local body of believers in Jesus Christ to accomplish their divine mandate.⁸²

Church administration involves knowing the believers and putting them into ministries to become the best possible while giving their best. It involves using available human resources to reach out to others yet to accept Jesus Christ's lordship. Moreover, when the church is growth-oriented, the administration also makes believers good stewards of their possessions.⁸³

Church administration involves understanding the mind of Jesus Christ and doing his will. Administration is spiritual because it involves leading the church to discover and determine its purpose and objectives, and it calls for identifying the needs of persons and designing and developing the church's response to these needs.⁸⁴

When the church goes to conference, we can share our ideas, discuss our vision, develop our strategies, empower our committees, and evaluate our work. Most Baptist churches work through committees, and these committees carry out their delegated assignments since the entire church cannot

⁸⁰ Goodwin and Hiscox, 97.

⁸¹ Goodwin and Hiscox, 98.

⁸² Jerry Akinsola, "Pitfalls in Contemporary Baptist Church Administration: Practical Theology (Baptist College of Theology, Lagos)," *Practical Theology (Baptist College of Theology, Lagos)* 4 (2011): 1.

⁸³ Akinsola, 1.

⁸⁴ Akinsola, 1.

do all the work all the time. Wise congregations entrust the decision-making authority to committees and pastoral leadership so that church business is not hindered.⁸⁵

F. Cultural Significance

Before getting into the history of the Black church, it would be necessary to visit a question that was asked many years ago because, indeed, it does have an impact on the African American Baptist church, and that is “Was Jesus the founder, or rather the foundation of the Christian religion?” We know this statement was made by historicism and liberal theology in the age of the Enlightenment. Because people from the history of Christianity asked about its founder because Christianity (unlike many other religions) harks back to a central figure, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who taught, suffered, and died under the Roman empire, must somehow have founded Christianity, instead as Romulus and Remus founded Rome, or Plato was the foundation of Platonism or Aquinas of Thomism. So, in this way of thinking, the founder lays the foundation stone without leaving behind any binding regulations about what should be built on top of it and how. “One can continue to build on this foundation or deviate from it. With the help of this idea, the church can certainly appeal to Jesus of Nazareth as its founder, but it need not allow itself to be disturbed in its historical development by his remembrance. Everything we find disconcerting about his mission, fate, and hope can be reduced to its historical context and thus made innocuous.”⁸⁶

We know the Black church, particularly the African American Baptist Church, holds immense historical and cultural significance for African Americans. We already know it emerged during slavery, and it was and continues to be a sanctuary for spiritual expression, community building, and resistance against any form of oppression.

In 1619, our ancestors from Africa were forcibly removed from our homeland and landed in Jamestown, Virginia. It is documented that this was the first arrival of Africans to the United States. It

⁸⁵ Akinsola, 5.

⁸⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, 1st Fortress Press ed (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 70.

was European colonizers debating whether Africans could become Christians because some believed they lacked a soul and were, therefore, subhuman. ⁸⁷

However, we know that despite slavery in the beginning, our ancestors found solace, hope, and a sense of empowerment within the church, even though they faced unimaginable hardships. Yes, paradoxically, Africans did preserve much of their religious belief and practices from Africa. Henry H. Mitchell, an author of numerous theological books, including *Black church Beginnings*, explains: "Slaves, not masters, took the initiative to translate their African beliefs into English and inescapably Christian terms. They also sorted through the Christian Bible and selected ideas useful to them in the new slave experience. By the time the masters were willing to concede souls to enslaved people, satisfied that the Christian faith could be used to enforce obedience and increase market value, the enslaved people had long since established their underground version of the true faith." ⁸⁸

The distinctiveness of African American Baptist churches goes back to praise houses. Where African Christians eventually moved from secret places of worship to visible places known as "Praise Houses." These spaces included cabins, barns, cotton houses, and small one-room buildings. Because of the numerical growth of enslaved Christians and to keep a watchful eye on them, some slaveholders built Praise Houses on their plantations, designating an overseer to supervise them. ⁸⁹

However, the central turning point in African American Christianity and the Black church's historic creation occurred in the 1730s and 1740s, during religious revivalism known as the Great Awakening. Historian Carter G. Woodson called this period the "Dawn of a New Day." Congregationalist preacher Jonathan Edwards and English Anglican preacher George Whitfield aimed to convert people to Christianity by emphasizing repentance, baptism, and conversion. These doctrinally proclaimed that all people were born sinners, that the penalty of sin is hell, and that God's

⁸⁷ Wayne E. Croft, *A History of the Black Baptist Church: I Don't Feel No Ways Tired* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2020), 4.

⁸⁸ Croft, 5.

⁸⁹ Croft, 10.

grace can save everyone if they repent and seek forgiveness. They taught that all people could have a direct and personal connection with God without religious formalities and institutional structures. However, there were fears that Christianity and baptism would emancipate the enslaved; the Great Awakening also brought a challenge to what Blacks heard from slaveholders because the Great Awakening revivalism emphasized the spiritual equality of all persons before God. Soon afterward, not only Baptists opened their doors to both enslaved and free Africans, but the Anglicans, Methodists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians did the same.⁹⁰

African American Churches serve as the centers of many communities because they are not just places of worship but hubs for education, social support, and activism. With our distinctiveness, the worship of new Black churches is tailored to our past, present, and future experiences, also incorporating elements derived from African spiritual traditions, such as call and responses, in music and preaching.

From the social and political influences of the African American Baptist churches, the horrors of slavery, lynching, Jim Crow Laws, and other forms of racism, oppression, and marginalization could have obliterated our hope for survival.⁹¹ Consequently, African American church members and leaders played a significant role in the Civil Rights Movement, infusing it with religious reasoning and doctrine. The church became the platform for activism, continuing to foster unity and resilience in the face of many adversities.

In symbolic structure and equality, we need only look at our brothers and sisters of the Black Methodists who were the first to take control of their church property, finances, and government on the denominational level. When Black Baptists were also becoming independent of Whites, with Black Baptists evolving to the point of addressing the inequities caused by racism and discrimination, we began forming our congregations because we refused to accept second-class status within White

⁹⁰ Croft, 11.

⁹¹ Croft, *A History of the Black Baptist Church*.

Baptist churches. According to historian James Melvin Washington, when surveying Baptist history, "the history of Black Baptists is intimately interwoven with the general history of Baptists in the United States." ⁹²

During the Great Awakening and the second Great Awakening, those movements swept the North American continent, leaving an indelible imprint on all Christians who witnessed their successive swells. What the Awakenings did was capture not only Whites but also American Blacks. In Logan Country, the year was 1860, the tremendous revivalist William McReady, among others, exhorted both Blacks and Whites who were "throbbing with fatigue, fear, and exhilaration." A year later, some 20,000 frontier settlers assembled at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, and experienced one of American history's most incredible revival sessions. The crowd was so large that the preachers had to establish several pulpits at various intervals, and it was noted that Blacks had their own "exhorters." It was reported that even skeptics fell "slain in the Spirit," and one person noted a seven-year-old child shouting, "Do not call me poor, for Christ is my brother, God my father, and I have a kingdom to inherit, therefore, do not call me poor for I am rich in the blood of the Lamb." ⁹³

The African American Baptist Church in the 21st century and beyond will always, unfortunately, have to deal with racism, so it would behoove the church to continue to give Blacks a sense of recognition and somebodiness is essential in a society where Blacks are regarded as inferior vis-à-vis all Whites. On an objective status index, most Afro-Americans fall into the bottom level. So, the janitor can elevate his self-esteem via his role as a superintendent of the Sunday school. The domestic servant can gain appreciation by serving as leader of the church choir, and the railroad porter could achieve a sense of importance and prestige in his role as a senior deacon. Because the Black church has always provided a place where individuals could participate and be accepted and valued by the standards of their community rather than that of the White majority at the time of this writing, it has preserved the

⁹² Croft, 37.

⁹³ James Landing, *Black Judaism Story of An American Movement* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2002), 17.

self-respect of many Blacks who would have been otherwise overwhelmed by their humanizing experience. ⁹⁴

We have already noted that the Black church has been recognized as the oldest and most influential institution founded, maintained, and controlled by African American people. Even historical African American scholars have affirmed that the Black church has consistently been a dependable source of support for African American families and individuals. Some consider it the genesis of a self-controlled corporate entity through which African Americans could organize and mobilize their resources. ⁹⁵

Unsurprisingly, counseling professionals have begun to address the Black church's significance in African Americans' lives. It has been asserted that distinct beliefs and practices (e.g., promoting civil rights awareness and providing a haven for expressing and validating the African American experience of the African American religious experience) should be incorporated into the counseling process. ⁹⁶

A tool used by the Black church to foster the health and wellness of its congregants is prayer. Prayer is an active agent that brings physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual relief and revitalization, and it is liberating. For the members of Black churches, prayer is an integral part of relieving the pain and suffering often associated with everyday life. ⁹⁷

Another method used was music in the Black church, which fostered the mental wellness of its congregants. Because music served a dual function for enslaved people, it was an outlet for the free expression of their feelings of simultaneous despair and hope that their God would ultimately liberate them from their woefully abhorrent status of servitude and subjugation. Music also served as a form of

⁹⁴ Hans A. Baer, *The Black Spiritual Movement: A Religious Response to Racism*, 2. ed (Knoxville, Tenn: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2001), 163.

⁹⁵ Carla Adksion-Bradley, "Forging a Collaborative Relationship between the Black church and the Counseling Profession: Counseling and Values," *Counseling and Values* 49, no. 2 (January 2005): 1.

⁹⁶ Adksion-Bradley, 2.

⁹⁷ Adksion-Bradley, 4.

worship in what has been described as "invisible communities." ⁹⁸

The Black church believes in faith healing, whether physical, mental, or emotional, is an essential aspect of what many theologians have deemed as the contemporary renewal of the Pentecostal method of worship associated with the Christian faith. This healing was first seen during the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, California, when in April 1906, William J. Seymour and others recognized this movement of the Spirit, and he was the founder of the contemporary Pentecostal movement. ⁹⁹ Counselors make an integrated treatment plan that connects the healing methods that their clients are familiar with in their church and the scientific community. ¹⁰⁰

G. Conclusion

The church is a covenant community where God and its members gather to fellowship with one another. Members are servants under Christ's authority, called to share in the suffering of Jesus Christ. All decisions about the church's life, work, mission, and ministry are made as the church meets to "seek the mind of Jesus Christ." When seeking the mind of Jesus Christ, individuals are open to His leadership through prayer and worship, joining together to hear the word of God, sing hymns, and observe ordinances, baptism, and the Lord's Supper.

Baptist churches are free from creeds, theological principles, or practices, allowing them to celebrate the priesthood of individual believers and lead individuals into a practical and satisfying relationship with God. Baptist worship deepens spiritual awareness of God and encourages participants to confess Christ as Lord and Savior, deepening their commitment to Christ in work and witness.

The origins of Black religious independence can be traced back to White proscription, which led to the formation of separate Black congregations and the African Methodist Episcopal Church. These churches enabled Black communities to celebrate themselves as a collectivity and provide a protective space for each other about common concerns.

⁹⁸ Adksion-Bradley, 5.

⁹⁹ Adksion-Bradley, 5.

¹⁰⁰ Adksion-Bradley, 7.

The effective use of scriptures should be at the heart of worship, especially in the 21st century and beyond. Baptists understand the scriptures as a significant guide for understanding God; some view them as the sole guide.

Christian worship is Christo-centric, focusing on divine revelation and human response. It is an all-embracing aspect of the life of the individual and church, making the Christian life a liturgical life. Christians communicate with God through prayer and hymns, and prayer is the permission given to God's children to join their voices in discussing His affairs.

African American worship, as defined by Dr. Edward P. Wimberly, is a response of praise, adoration, and reverence to God, who enters the lives of Black people, bringing meaning, healing, sustenance, and wholeness to them as a group. It grows out of what God has done, is doing, and will do on behalf of people of color. Early services among Black worshipers constituted a blend of European hymns and traditional African rhythms, with spirituals containing double meanings of religious salvation and freedom from slavery. Over time, African American Baptist churches adapted their worship practices, incorporating liturgical dance and other forms of expression.

The Black church is pivotal in African Americans' history, providing spiritual support, community, and empowerment. For Black Christians, the freedom-seeking agenda plays out in worship, as they seek to establish blacks as agents of will and encourage new forms of relationship and interaction based on Black intentionality. The Black church is more than just a place for worship and activism; it is an institution that shapes Black communities' cultural and social fabric.

Music and hymnology should always be an essential part of worship for the Baptist Church, providing a vehicle to express yearnings and concerns to God. In the 21st century and beyond, music should be simple, lyrical, and familiar and include prelude and postlude music provided by organ or instrumentalists, choral anthems and responses, and other presentations within the congregation's resources and capability.

In developing worship, greater attention should be devoted to including the congregation in developing music rather than providing music for passive entertainment. Music should lead to community expression rather than entertainment, and musically gifted congregation members should be included in offering worship music.

Biblical preaching is a crucial aspect of the Black church, allowing the Bible to shape the sermon's content and purpose. The Bible is seen as the experiences of many Black people from slavery to contemporary times, making it a central source of language, imagery, and story in Black preaching. African American preachers value creative language, with many possessing a genius for melody and scene details. Rhetorical flair and poetic language are essential in African American preaching, as the listening ear becomes the privileged sensual organ. The appeal to emotions is a distinctive feature of African American preaching, with the preacher intentionally slowing their cadences, time their pauses, and chanting or semi-chanting their phrases. Rev. Dr. Gardner C. Taylor, one of the most prolific preachers of our time, can be seen as a model for the Black church in the 21st century. His preaching combined warm devotion to the risen Christ in prayer with trenchant social commentary, calling for a more profound commitment to Christ while advocating for justice.

In 1898, Du Bois emphasized the role of Black preachers in fostering moral and social reforms in Morehouse College. However, Cleophus La Rue argued that Black sermons should focus on the church's mission today and emphasize the personal agency of Black Christians. Peter Paris argued that Black sermons often rely solely on God's power and ignore the potential for Black Christians to bring about social changes themselves. Gardner C. Taylor, a leader during the 1960s Civil Rights movement and founder of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, promoted liberating socioethical values and practices.

Prophetic preaching is an act of utterances or imagination that carries generative power to evoke new perceptions of reality. Walter Brueggemann's work on prophetic speech emphasizes rejecting the

status quo and speaking of resistance as determinants for developing and nurturing a prophetic or "alternative consciousness" based on the Mosaic outlook.

Historical, cultural, and theological factors influence congregational dynamics in African American Baptist churches. The church emerged due to the struggle for freedom and continued equality, and its structure includes the pastor, who is responsible for preaching, teaching, counseling, admonishing, and administering. Deacons assist the pastor by looking after the church's temporal affairs.

The bylaws and constitution of the Baptist church flow from the structure of the church, establishing boards, committees, and lines of accountability from subgroups through the coordinating council. Most Baptist churches belong to national and state conventions to meet changing circumstances. The underlying principle of the Christian experience is the members of the Body of Jesus Christ, and communal bonds among Black religionists are strong.

The leadership structure of a traditional African American Baptist Church is based on the Apostle Paul's teachings about the importance of ordained ministry. The church's leadership includes pastors, associate and assistant ministers, missionaries and special-purpose ministers, deacons, other church officers, trustees, Board of Christian Education, Board of Missions and Outreach, church clerk, treasurer, financial secretary, church-school superintendent, and committees.

The pastor provides general oversight and care of the church, preaching, proclaiming the Good News, and expanding the spiritual sensitivity of the congregation. As churches grow, associate and assistant ministers work with the pastor to expand ministries or assist in specific areas of responsibility. Missioners and special-purpose ministers engage ministers with a specific ministry function apart from the central life of the congregation.

Deacons or diaconates are the lone nonpastoral office found in the early church, serving the congregation, exercising ministry, caring for the sick and needy, and acting as counselors and assistants

to the pastor and other ministers. Committees are appointed to provide nominations for church offices, organize ushering, auditing, finance and budget concerns, and programmatic issues.

Trustees are responsible to the state and federal government on behalf of the church, establishing requirements for reporting status, filing of reports and fees, and exemption of taxes on property. The Board of Christian Education is responsible for training, Christian nurture, family life, and spiritual growth opportunities.

The treasurer is an elected officer working closely with the Board of Trustees and the Finance Committee to administer the church's budget. The Financial Secretary maintains accurate financial records and oversees the Sunday School.

Church administration is the process of identifying, conserving, cultivating, and utilizing the resources of an organization or institution to achieve its goals, objectives, and purposes. It involves understanding the mind of Jesus Christ and doing his will, leading the church to discover its purpose and objectives, and identifying the needs of persons. Church administration is spiritual, involving leading the church to discover and determine its purpose and objectives.

The African American Baptist Church holds immense historical and cultural significance for African Americans. It emerged during slavery and remains a sanctuary for spiritual expression, community building, and resistance against oppression. Africans who were forcibly removed from their homeland in 1619 found solace, hope, and empowerment within the church despite facing hardships. They preserved much of their religious beliefs and practices from Africa, as they translated their African beliefs into English and inescapably Christian terms.

The distinctiveness of African American Baptist churches goes back to praise houses, where African Christians moved from secret places of worship to visible places known as "Praise Houses." These spaces included cabins, barns, cotton houses, and small one-room buildings designed by slaveholders to keep a watchful eye on them.

The Great Awakening, a religious revivalism in the 1730s and 1740s, marked a pivotal moment in African American Christianity and the Black church's historic creation. Congregationalist preacher Jonathan Edwards and English Anglican preacher George Whitfield aimed to convert people to Christianity by emphasizing repentance, baptism, and conversion. However, there were fears that Christianity and baptism would emancipate the enslaved, and the church opened its doors to both enslaved and free Africans.

African American churches serve as centers of many communities, serving as hubs for education, social support, and activism. They incorporate elements from African spiritual traditions in their worship and preaching. The church played a significant role in the Civil Rights Movement, infusing it with religious reasoning and doctrine. The church became a platform for activism, fostering unity and resilience despite adversities.

The movement captured Whites and American Blacks during the Great Awakening and the second Great Awakening. The Black church has always provided a place where individuals can participate and be accepted and valued by their community standards, preserving the self-respect of many Blacks who would have been otherwise overwhelmed by their humanizing experience.

The Black church is recognized as the oldest and most influential institution founded, maintained, and controlled by African American people. Counseling professionals have begun to address the church's significance in African Americans' lives, asserting that distinct beliefs and practices should be incorporated into the counseling process.

Prayer is an active agent that brings physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual relief and revitalization. Music is an outlet for expressing despair and hope for liberation from servitude and subjugation. The Black church believes in faith healing, essential in the contemporary renewal of the Pentecostal method of worship associated with the Christian faith.

IV. Challenges Faced by Traditional African American Baptist Churches

A. Declining Membership

What has contributed to declining memberships in our African American Baptist churches is the changing demographics and urban shifts, one of which is gentrification and suburban migration. We can conclude that one's community, whether a congregation, neighborhood, or school, profoundly affects one's health because a community does aid in decreasing isolation and meaninglessness.¹⁰¹ It is a belief that one's health profoundly affects one's view of oneself within a community, affecting one's lifestyle and health.¹⁰²

People of color, in particular Black people, face racial discrimination trying to move into predominantly White neighborhoods, and half of them experience it more than once. However, at the same time, White people were able to scatter throughout the city without incident. However, the people of color tended to relocate together in "small pockets" within the city. Those who tried to move into predominantly White areas tended to be met with resistance, even found some real estate agents would not sell or rent to non-Whites, and, for those who were willing, many of the homes were of poor quality.¹⁰³

Having witnessed urban neighborhoods where just the opposite is happening, whereby African Americans have moved out of the neighborhood because older family members have died, and because of gentrification happening and property taxes rising, sell their properties, and Whites purchase the properties, fixing them up; and African Americans now unable to return because of housing prices. Consequently, many African American families fled to the suburbs.¹⁰⁴

When gentrification happens, we see major construction projects designed to bring more people

¹⁰¹ Tina Kieckhafer et al., "Displacement and Gentrification," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 47, no. 3 (2020): 1.

¹⁰² Kieckhafer et al., 1.

¹⁰³ Kieckhafer et al., 1.

¹⁰⁴ Kieckhafer et al., 1.

from the suburbs into the city and create an economic boom.¹⁰⁵ When a family is forced to leave their home because of a loved one's death or for various reasons, usually the anticipated increase in property values and amenities tied to gentrification makes properties in the area out of range, forcing families of color to relocate elsewhere. The church can play an essential role in gentrification by acquiring property before the neighborhood changes, offering those properties to those who may not be able to afford such - maintaining the properties, making them affordable to those with less income, and offsetting the difference with city funding.¹⁰⁶

B. Generational Divide

When we start in ministry, the question of sustainability never enters our minds. However, even though starting in ministry with a flourishing congregation, the thought ought to occur because change is inevitable in all our lives, even in the church.¹⁰⁷ It is believed that Matthew Jesus's gospel often conflicts with the religious leaders of his day over the questions of laws, observances, and religious things of deep comfort to the leaders. However, without rejecting these things, Jesus wants our communities to focus first on the people around us, not our religious systems, for their own sake. In Seminary, we are not taught to pay attention to those we are in fellowship to the extent of generational trends. However, the question of sustainability ought to dominate our minds.¹⁰⁸

Whether we know it or not, we long in our congregations to see young families with children filling the pews and clogging our Sunday Schools. Our congregations with grandparents incredibly long for this, too, but it is an unrequited longing because millennials do not long for the church of the 1950s, 60s, or 70s. Our millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, give or take a year or two, are not even sure they long for church. Nevertheless, they try us on for size; the same worship that can be rich, meaningful, and life-changing for those already in the congregation often does not seem to fit. There is

¹⁰⁵ Kieckhafer et al., 1.

¹⁰⁶ Kieckhafer et al., 2.

¹⁰⁷ Matthew L Erickson, "Embracing Discomfort," *Word & World* 38, no. 2 (2018): 210.

¹⁰⁸ Erickson, 210.

a disconnect that we need to acknowledge.¹⁰⁹ With this silent generation, those born between 1928 and 1945, and millennials, it is simple not to seem to experience faith the same way we do. Moreover, as we move forward, the problems will likely only be exacerbated because of the pace of technology and information advancements, which are increasing alarmingly.¹¹⁰ We should ask ourselves how we create space for the silent generation, boomers, Gen X (Gen Z between 12 and 27), and millennials to experience faith in the living God together.¹¹¹ Maybe we should attempt the homogeneous unit principle (HUP) that illuminates the path to successful missionary endeavors and church growth - because HUP suggests that, when trying to communicate the gospel, it is easiest to gather a group that has as many cultural experiences in common as possible. Furthermore, the group will become more inclined toward others who share those same cultural norms.¹¹²

The Apostle Paul meant in Rom. 12:1-18 and 1 Cor. 12:4-31 that each member of Christ's body needs the others. Furthermore, to be the church, we need the intersection of a diversity of cultural norms.¹¹³ Moreover, according to the author, each generation needs the other more than we can imagine. Furthermore, we have no choice; we are called to be where divergent social, racial, economic, and even generation norms converge and shape one another.¹¹⁴ Being around those different from us requires us to change our thinking and behavior, literally requiring how our brain is wired, a process called neuroplasticity. Furthermore, unless our bodies are convinced that change is necessary, the brain will always steer us toward experiences that use the already-established wiring.¹¹⁵ We tend to gravitate toward people who share our cultural experiences and norms. Part of our humanity is that, psychologically and physiologically, our brains want us to join homogeneous units so that they can avoid the hard work of rewiring themselves, which is not bad if we give this premise further thought.

¹⁰⁹ Erickson, 211.

¹¹⁰ Erickson, 211.

¹¹¹ Erickson, 211.

¹¹² Erickson, 212.

¹¹³ Erickson, 212.

¹¹⁴ Erickson, 212.

¹¹⁵ Erickson, 215.

In the insights of Martin Luther in his dispute with Erasmus regarding the nature of the human will, Luther argued that the idea of a genuinely free will is an illusion, and our will is only free enough to serve itself. Furthermore, we are not free to love God or our neighbors; only God's grace can allow this. However, the illusion of free will allows us to love and serve our sinful selves. In our humanity, we feel free to make what seem to be free choices, but our brain is constantly steering us toward serving what is known, comfortable, and already established in our neuropathways. Furthermore, our flesh can sever itself, but the results will always be sin. "That is unless the working of the Holy Spirit frees us to love God and neighbor." ¹¹⁶ We must actively seek out and continue dismantling those places where we use tradition or religious expediency to isolate ourselves from the discomfort we need. Believing that Christ desires our hearts to be transformed so that what comes out of our lives, including our words, will build up the kingdom of God. ¹¹⁷

Tradition is what we are used to doing with no changes, and it has its place not to maintain homogeneity or comfort—needing to juxtapose time-honored worship with patterns with current innovations. “Children are allowed to be themselves while we strive to honor our elders. We have a long way to go, but our little church has already changed for the better, and I have grown as a pastor and disciple of Christ,” according to the author. Nevertheless, learning to disagree well should be emphasized culturally. Valuing understanding over the agreement and trusting the faithful followers of Jesus with the same gospel desires can lead to very different conclusions about how we bring those realities to fruition. ¹¹⁸

C. Societal Changes

As the African American Baptist Church, we realize that the church and society are two distinct entities, yet they are intertwined and related in that the church is part of society. Furthermore, Jesus described this relationship as "sheep among wolves" (Matt. 10:16). Because this has generated friction

¹¹⁶ Erickson, 215.

¹¹⁷ Erickson, 217.

¹¹⁸ Erickson, 218.

resulting from the conflict of influence and opposition of ideas and values. However, the church must minister and purge society of its evils, ills, and malaise. ¹¹⁹ As a metaphor from Matthew's gospel chapter 10, 1-4, the disciples were to only go to the "lost sheep of Israel" or the Jews. In this context, the disciples are sheep. At the same time, the people in society are wolves, which adequately reveals the incompatible nature of the disciples and the people they minister to. What has not changed despite societal changes is that the disciples were to experience severe persecution, like the way wolves strive to take prey on the sheep. Furthermore, Jesus would want the disciples and us to feel helpless by providing two vital instruments: wisdom and innocence. These are drawn from the similarity of the serpents and doves (10:6). Matthew elaborates on the disciples and our opposition during their mission (10:17-24). So, even though our society is changing all around us, they will always be in opposition to us, the church of Jesus Christ. With sheep, their qualities make them appropriate for spiritual exhortation, especially their total dependence on the shepherd for protection, watering, shelter, and tending to them. ¹²⁰

Like sheep (us) spiritually, they are considered unintelligent and need guidance. Furthermore, figuratively, therefore, the word "flock" is commonly used for God's people (Psa. 28:9; 7, 74:1) while Matthew 10:16 presents Jesus's disciples of the future, i.e., the church or a collection of those that have openly confessed their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior to fulfill his Great Commission. The societal changes we are witnessing in the 21st century and certainly in the future will be unchurched because we see that trend before our eyes. Nevertheless, the church is still responsible for teaching the world how to live in God's kingdom by nurturing souls into maturity in the Christian faith under the empowerment or enablement of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the church is also charged to be prayerful (Lk. 22:40; Eph. 6:15), prayer being an indispensable instrument to achieve Jesus' aims. The Apostle Paul illustrated the weapons needed by the church to be successful through the imagery of a Roman soldier

¹¹⁹ Simeon F Kehinde, "Sheep among Wolves: A Quest for the Right Christian Response to Societal Ills," *Ogbomosho Journal of Theology* 11 (2006): 11.

¹²⁰ Kehinde, 12.

in Ephesians 6:10-17. ¹²¹

What can we say other than given the changes we see in society, which are nothing new? Contemporary society is synonymous with "a maddeningly volatile century" characterized by moral corruption and spiritual degradation where nothing is generally agreed. However, emphasis is always placed on personal opinion and perspective. Nobody agrees with another person's opinion; personal interpretation of morality replaces the objective societal standards for law and order. The so-called civilization and relativism bewitch the community no longer cherishes establishing societal norms or respecting the norms already in place. ¹²²

The church is faced with a contemporary society that values personal recognition. We see this in our youth and others choosing to free themselves from society's cultural and religious bonds. The result is a society celebrating immorality by pouring encomiums on those claiming to stand out of societal norms through abominable or deviant behavior. We take ourselves promoting and amplifying out of proportion, resulting in a level of human deification and a tacit denial of God's existence. ¹²³

It is the opinion of the journal author pointing out what he believed to be the depravity of society when he said, furthermore, we constantly see societal changes, and contemporary society has been clouded by Darwin's "survival of the fittest," wanting to be a boss. Thus, people's rights occasion such obnoxious acts as armed robbery, gangsterism, cultism, ritual killings, kidnapping, thuggery, drug addiction, and human trafficking. Capitalism is the accepted norm in which few rich ones control the economy, which we know to be a fact because we have seen and heard these statistics before, not picking sides. The other side of this discussion warrants discussion, too. Furthermore, the rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer. "This domineering spirit is reminiscent of wolf dominance of its prey." Amid these social ills and societal changes, which, if we are honest, have always existed, the church must therefore apply her God-given instruments to achieve this aim, and that

¹²¹ Kehinde, 13.

¹²² Kehinde, 14.

¹²³ Kehinde, 14.

includes prayer (Lk. 18:1; 22:40) and the power of the Holy Spirit, (Acts 1:8). And the church needs the wisdom and purity which Jesus commanded his disciples to possess, to overcome the societal menace and hostility. ¹²⁴

To face these societal changes in the 21st century and beyond, the church needs to rise to the challenge of training its members to be intellectually sound to match up with contemporary times. Moreover, the church needs learned men and women in all facets of life: those who will introduce Christian ethics and ideas into the vocation, more Christian lawyers, doctors, engineers, pharmacists, economists, politicians, teachers, and businessmen/philanthropists who will provide much-needed money for evangelism. In these societal changes, the church must not adopt a nonchalant attitude to contemporary issues such as cloning, alternative lifestyles, the pro-abortion movement, antinomianism, and individualism. The church must not pretend these elements are secular ideas that have nothing to do with its members because the church must, as a matter of necessity, devote the time and money to train men and women to have adequate knowledge to negate these monstrous ideas because society does infiltrate the church. ¹²⁵ As disciples of Jesus Christ, according to Jesus' prayer for his disciples, "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (Jn. 17:16). We are in the world, but not of the world does not devoid us from issues the church in the past has frowned. However, the church must balance its theology because younger generations want it to be more of an advocate. In the 21st century and beyond, the African American church must be more accountable for people's lives; many of these issues touch us today.

It must be noted that great reformers in the church's history were not mediocre but learned men knowledgeable in both the Word of God and the society in which they lived. Moreover, the Apostle Paul demonstrated this in Athens when he confronted the Epicureans and Stoic philosophers in Areopagus (Acts 17: 22-34), and he used his intellectual wisdom to command their attention and win

¹²⁴ Kehinde, 15.

¹²⁵ Kehinde, 16.

converts as we should do amid societal changes.¹²⁶

Amid societal changes, we, the disciples of Jesus Christ, should live holy lives to respond to society's opposing and repressive ideas. Moreover, as disciples, we must not join society in doing wrong; instead, we should distinguish ourselves from moral perversion and corruption in our environments.¹²⁷

For 40 years studying the Black church, E. Franklin Frazier was considered an expert at the time of his death in 1962. At the peak of his career, he served as chief of the Division of Applied Social Sciences in the Department of Social Sciences of UNESCO in Paris. He was invited to give the Frazier Lecture in Social Anthropology at the University of Liverpool and chose to lecture on Black religion and the Black church in America without hesitation. Frazier was not a churchgoing man, but he did appreciate the social significance of the church as a central feature of Black life and made the church a central feature of his scholarship. He saw the church as “a nation within a nation,” and he credited it for being “the chief means by which a structured or organized life came into existence among the Negro masses” after emancipation. He believed this social cohesive or social integration function of the Black church was a radical departure from the role played by the invisible institution under slavery. He observed the history of the evolution of the Black church and held that this cohesive effect broke down entirely as the Black population shifted from the rural South to the urban industrial North during the 1940s. He believed the Black church was an agent of social control. He recognized the economic functions of the Black church; by owning their real estate, Black churches made an economic investment in the community. They purchased and built churches, parishes, and other facilities. They even established Mutual Aid Societies after emancipation, and throughout the 19th century, these evolved into black-owned insurance companies.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Kehinde, 16.

¹²⁷ Kehinde, 17.

¹²⁸ Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like A River The Black church and Social Reform* (New York Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8.

Two preachers were called to preach; one was Rev. Jarena Lee and the other was Sojourner Truth. Rev. Lee was the first female preacher of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, born in Cape May, New Jersey 1783, and worked as a house servant near Philadelphia. She acknowledged her call to preach in 1809 but was refused to preach by Richard Allen, the pastor of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal church. He did not believe God called women to preach. ¹²⁹

Black women attending seminary are joining White denominations because of more significant ordination and employment opportunities. ¹³⁰ The reasons why women are not allowed to preach are because the twelve apostles were men, the narrative of Adam and Eve, and the Apostle Paul's narrative that women should be silent in the church—believing that God is all-powerful and can do anything, such as calling women to preach. ¹³¹

D. Technology and Communication

It is common knowledge that some African American churches have faced challenges around technology and communication. Furthermore, the problem is not widespread among all churches. Believing that some churches have embraced technology, others, especially very traditional ones, saw no need for such and were slow to adopt. Because of this, the lack of access to technology has made it difficult for some churches to communicate with their members and the broader communities.

According to a Brookings report acknowledging the importance of the African American Baptist churches being central pillars for community health compensating for a highly inequitable public health infrastructure, and in communication, the Black church has been an extension of sites during COVID-19, partnering with public health institutions to deliver essential services. The number of churches closing during the pandemic was in Black communities. However, what else constituted these closings were changes in worship attendance, patterns by age and race, possible internal issues,

¹²⁹ Rosemarie Green, "Gender Parity in the Black church: Daughters of Thunder Struggling for Two Centuries: Daughters of Sarah," *Daughters of Sarah* 21, no. 3 (1995): 35.

¹³⁰ Green, 36.

¹³¹ Green, 37.

and probably gentrification, where market conditions and real estate costs (and predatory development) forced churches to vacate or sell their property. Furthermore, we know that these closures mean that marginalized demographic groups (i.e., immigrants, unstably housed, elderly, low income) will have to look elsewhere for health and community service, which comes back to a communication problem because these institutions are no longer serving these communities.¹³²

NBC News reported that smaller churches refused or did not use technology before the pandemic. However, it is obvious now that the pandemic has changed how followers and others tithe and receive other services—having embraced technology, realizing again how the Black church has longed to be a haven for Black communities, a place for spiritual nourishment, social connection, and community organizing. The pandemic hit Black populations disproportionately; the church had to reimagine how to operate. Some churches did not have a website, let alone Zoom technologies.

Churches ignored Zoom, a technology that allows one to see an individual and speak to them on a computer or other electronic means. Many churches had to shift out of necessity, or they could have lost their memberships. COVID-19 accelerated the innovation and creativity of the Black churches. Today, many churches are hybrid, using technology and in-person gatherings to reach their congregations because some people prefer a different approach to worship.¹³³

The National Black Church Initiative (NBCI) is a coalition of 150,000 African American and Latino churches working to eradicate racial disparities in healthcare, technology, education, housing, and the environment. If churches wanted to know more about these initiatives and others, this organization would be helpful, significantly closing the gap in communication in helping the Black and other communities in need of these services and closing the digital divide in our country.¹³⁴

¹³² “Churches Are Closing in Predominantly Black Communities – Why Public Health Officials Should Be Concerned,” Brookings, accessed November 20, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/churches-are-closing-in-predominantly-black-communities-why-public-health-officials-should-be-concerned/>.

¹³³ “‘It’s Been Shattering’: Heartache and Hope in America’s Black churches,” NBC News, December 23, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/it-s-been-shattering-heartache-hope-america-s-black-churches-n1252099>.

¹³⁴ “National Black church Initiative,” accessed November 20, 2023, <https://naltblackchurch.com/>.

E. External Perceptions

The African American Baptist churches face several challenges around external perceptions, realizing the Black church has been and continues to be a significant institution in the African American community, serving as a place of worship, social gatherings, and political activism. However, the church has been the subject of external scrutiny and criticism.

The Pew Research Center reported that African Americans are the most likely to attend a church, according to this report, than any other racial group or ethnic group in the United States of America. Nevertheless, despite this account, predominantly Black churches are less likely to be viewed positively by the public. According to a Pew Research Center survey in 2019, 51% of Americans view predominantly Black churches positively, compared to 73% for predominantly White churches. What we believe causes this percentage for Black churches is the criticism of the church's stance on LGBTQ+ rights. In a 2019 survey, 54% of Black Protestants said that homosexuality should be discouraged by society, compared to 34% of White evangelicals during this survey.¹³⁵

Nevertheless, we know that despite the perception of the Black church, it has played a significant role in promoting social justice and civil rights. The church has been and continues to be a place of refuge and hope for African Americans during times of struggle and has served as a platform for political activism. The Black church has been an instrument in promoting health and wellness in the African American community.^{136 137}

What the African American Baptist Church in the 21st century and beyond must wrestle with is White Christians insisting upon compartmented religion because they are unaware that racial exclusion always has and permanently will deny Negroes the opportunity to be an integral part of these Christian

¹³⁵ Pew Research Center, "5. Churches and Religion in Black American Life," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), February 16, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/02/16/churches-and-religion-in-black-american-life/>.

¹³⁶ Latiena F. Williams and Lakeshia Cousin, "'A Charge to Keep I Have': Black Pastors' Perceptions of Their Influence on Health Behaviors and Outcomes in Their Churches and Communities," *Journal of Religion and Health* 60, no. 2 (April 1, 2021): 1069–82, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-021-01190-0>.

¹³⁷ Janeé R. Avent, Craig S. Cashwell, and Shelly Brown-Jeffy, "African American Pastors on Mental Health, Coping, and Help Seeking," *Counseling and Values* 60, no. 1 (April 2015): 32–47, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-007X.2015.00059.x>.

communities: faith, church, and Protestantism. Moreover, without these communities, the Negro has no way of increasing his understanding of and commitment to the “Body of Christ.” It is White communicants have yet to see that their exclusion of the Negro from the Christian community is not the same as segregation in seating arrangements. Because the withholding of full responsibilities and rights with the Christian life has left the Negro with only cheap substitutes. “Theologically speaking, White Christians have been concerned with the establishment and disestablishment of the churches, American independence, religious revivals, denominational growth, frontier movements, urban life, overseas missions, social gospel, alcohol, church and state relations, unity of Christendom, war, and peace, economic problems—all the great issues of society over which or within which they have some influence.” However, laypeople and theologians have refused the responsibility of nurturing the Negro. Having been willing to offer the Negro salvation in the next world if he plays the game and allows Whites to work out the meaning of salvation in this world. However, we know that salvation is not the proper province of the churches; salvation was the mission of Jesus Christ.¹³⁸

The Black church is believed to be hesitant to embrace Racial Reconciliation (RR). For the Black church, we have focused on fighting for social justice and seeking to be the hands and feet of Jesus, not focusing on racial reconciliation. Some multicultural churches seldom greet Black churches as equals.¹³⁹

We must come to the table as equals, not endorsers or tokens of other faith traditions. If several cultural groups are represented within the local fellowship, it is believed to be a sign of a biblically healthy church. We can conclude that the spiritual well-being of the church that pleases God is not derived from the cultural composition but from the character and nature of Christ, which its members are living out.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Joseph Washington, *Black Religion The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 239.

¹³⁹ Dirke D Johnson, “Multicultural and Racial Reconciliation Efforts Fail to Attract Many in the Black church: Great Commission Research Journal,” *Great Commission Research Journal* 2, no. 2 (2011): 222.

¹⁴⁰ Johnson, 223.

So, truth is how we live life as a Christian, but we find our identity in Jesus Christ and how we live out that identity through the culture. We must give deference to those cultures that are different from our own, and that is the challenge for believers who are in Jesus Christ.¹⁴¹ When Black, White, and Latino cultures come together, they will be blended; the experience is monocultural, creating a unique culture.¹⁴²

When we look at the word of God, the Gentiles were permitted not to adopt a Jewish cultural expression of faith, and the Jewish believers are not asked to change their cultural expression of faith either. There should be freedom of ecclesiology, allowing for the distinct cultural practices of Christianity. Moreover, it is the same understanding in which the Jewish-Gentile “tearing down the wall” (Ephesians 2:14, Galatians 3:28, Colossians 1:21-22, Romans 7:4) can be understood. There is access to God for all cultures; that is what the church should strive for in the 21st century and beyond if we want multiple cultures.¹⁴³ The African American Baptist Church in the 21st century and beyond should strive for unity amid diversity, using all gifts, abilities, talents, and kinds of people, including cultural expressions of worship, to be valued and appreciated.¹⁴⁴

What happened when Whites and Blacks came together years ago? Black Christians had been demeaned by the White man's presumption of racial superiority. What the church did for Black people gave us a sense of dignity and self-fulfillment, which was impossible to contemplate even in the White Church in America. The Black church created its literature, established its own publishing houses, elected its bishops and other administrators, founded its colleges and seminaries and developed its unique style of worship.¹⁴⁵

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. shaped the Black church with his contributions to America's moral

¹⁴¹ Johnson, 224.

¹⁴² Johnson, 225.

¹⁴³ Johnson, 229.

¹⁴⁴ Johnson, 230.

¹⁴⁵ C Eric Lincoln, “The Power in the Black church: Cross Currents,” *Cross Currents* 24, no. 1 (1974): 3.

and political experiences, which were enormous and transcended relationships.¹⁴⁶ Not believing the Black church has chosen to struggle with the problem of whether to struggle at all with the power and principalities of this world and whether such a struggle might not question the righteousness and sufficiency of God, who, in His way and in His own good time sets all things right.¹⁴⁷

F. Conclusion

The declining memberships in African American Baptist churches can be attributed to changing demographics and urban shifts, such as gentrification and suburban migration. Communities play a significant role in decreasing isolation and meaninglessness, and people of color often face racial discrimination when trying to move into predominantly White neighborhoods. However, the church can play an essential role in gentrification by acquiring property before the neighborhood changes, offering it to those who may be unable to afford it, and offsetting the difference with city funding.

The generational divide is another issue that needs to be addressed in the church. While Matthew Jesus's gospel often conflicts with religious leaders, Jesus wants communities to focus first on the people around them, not their religious systems. In seminary, we are not taught to pay attention to these generations, but the question of sustainability should dominate our minds.

Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, do not long for the church of the 1950s, 60s, or 70s. They may not experience faith the same way we do, and the pace of technology and information advancements will likely exacerbate the problems. To create space for the silent generation, boomers, Gen X (Gen Z between 12 and 27), and millennials to experience faith together, we should attempt the homogeneous unit principle (HUP) that suggests gathering a group with as many cultural experiences in common as possible. Being around those different from us requires changing our thinking and behavior, which is a process called neuroplasticity.

Martin Luther argued that free will is an illusion and that our will is only free enough to serve

¹⁴⁶ Lincoln, 4.

¹⁴⁷ Lincoln, 12.

itself. We cannot love God or our neighbors only through God's grace. Tradition and religious expediency should be dismantled to allow for transformation and build up the kingdom of God.

The African American Baptist Church recognizes the interconnectedness of the church and society, as described in Matthew 10:16. The church must minister and purge society of its evils and ills while providing wisdom and innocence to those who oppose it. The church is responsible for teaching the world how-to live-in God's kingdom by nurturing souls into maturity in the Christian faith under the Holy Spirit's empowerment.

Contemporary society is synonymous with moral corruption and spiritual degradation, where nothing is generally agreed. Emphasis is placed on personal opinion and perspective, replacing objective societal standards for law and order. Thus, this has led to a society celebrating immorality and encomiums on those who stand out of societal norms. The church must continue challenging and dismantling these societal changes to foster a more inclusive and influential church.

The journal author highlights the depravity of society and the domineering spirit of capitalism, leading to societal changes such as armed robbery, gangsterism, cultism, kidnapping, thuggery, drug addiction, and human trafficking. To address these issues, the church must apply its God-given instruments, such as prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit, and possess the wisdom and purity commanded by Jesus Christ.

To face these societal changes in the 21st century and beyond, the church must train its members to be intellectually sound and educated in all facets of life, including Christian ethics, lawyers, doctors, engineers, pharmacists, economists, politicians, teachers, and businessmen/philanthropists. The church must not adopt a nonchalant attitude to contemporary issues such as cloning, alternative lifestyles, pro-abortion movement, antinomianism, and individualism.

Great reformers in the church's history were learned men knowledgeable in the Word of God and society. The church must balance its theology to be more of an advocate for younger generations.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we must live holy lives to respond to societal opposing and repressive ideas and distinguish ourselves from moral perversion and corruption. E. Franklin Frazier, a renowned expert on the Black church, believed that the church was a socially cohesive institution that broke down as the Black population shifted from the rural South to the urban industrial North during the 1940s.

Rev. Jarena Lee and Sojourner Truth were the first female preachers of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church but were refused to preach due to their belief in God's call for women to preach. Black women attending seminary are joining White denominations due to more significant ordination and employment opportunities.

Some African American churches have experienced technology and communication challenges, with some slow to adopt technology, making it difficult for them to communicate with their members and broader communities. The pandemic has accelerated the innovation and creativity of Black churches, leading to hybrid churches using technology and in-person gatherings to reach their congregations.

The National Black Church Initiative (NBCI) is a coalition of 150,000 African American and Latino churches working to eradicate racial disparities in healthcare, technology, education, housing, and the environment. By learning more about these initiatives, churches can help close the gap in communication and help marginalized demographic groups.

External perceptions of African American Baptist churches face scrutiny and criticism, with 51% of Americans viewing predominantly Black churches negatively compared to 73% for predominantly White churches. Thus, this is primarily due to criticism of the church's stance on LGBTQ+ rights, with 54% of Black Protestants stating that homosexuality should be discouraged by society.

The Black church has significantly promoted social justice and civil rights, serving as a refuge and platform for political activism. However, the church must address the issue of compartmentalized

religion and racial exclusion, which denies African Americans the opportunity to be integral members of Christian communities. White Christians have focused on various issues, such as the establishment and disestablishment of churches, American independence, religious revivals, denominational growth, frontier movements, urban life, overseas missions, social gospel, alcohol, church and state relations, unity of Christendom, war, peace, and economic problems.

The Black church is hesitant to embrace Racial Reconciliation (RR) and should focus on fighting for social justice and being the hands and feet of Jesus. The church should strive for unity amid diversity, using all gifts, abilities, talents, and kinds of people, including cultural expressions of worship, to be valued and appreciated.

The Black church has been shaped by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who contributed to America's moral and political experiences. The church must strive for unity amid diversity, using all gifts, abilities, talents, and kinds of people, including cultural expressions of worship, to be valued and appreciated.

V. Theological Foundations of the African American Baptist Church

A. Theology of Liberation

In moving forward in the 21st century and beyond, the church should not lose sight of its history, realizing how vibrant it served those, especially in the South—going back to slavery and the Christian beliefs we accepted. Baptist doctrine guided our responses to discrimination and obstacles in our way. It was and continues to be our Baptist emphasis upon the scriptures that were and continue to be our faith and practice - which led us to embrace the ancient Israelites, who wandered for forty years in the wilderness before they reached the Promised Land. For our ancestors, the Promised Land did not come with emancipation in 1863, so their eschatological hope had to adjust to more decades of waiting. The church does not have to wait for such an eschatological hope today, but we can be as hopeful that it will

remain as strong as it was many years ago.¹⁴⁸

The 21st-century church, particularly the Baptist Church, can look to the biblical witness of the ultimate conquest of Canaan by the Israelites, requiring their faithfulness and realizing that in this century and beyond, we, too, must have that same faith moving forward. That is slavery, which was a mindset to monitor inward, giving them more explicit ideas of the Christian faith than our masters in the past, so when they were finally allowed to read the Bible for themselves, they only confirmed their suspicions that Whites neither interpreted it correctly the Bible nor lived according to it. We were confident the gospel would be more accurate to New Testament Christians if unfettered by Whites' interpretations. So, we have a history of overcoming and moving forward, and that same history should propel us into the future.¹⁴⁹

With the history of how the churches organized before the 1860s and 1870s, that effort ought to propel the church today in the 21st century and beyond because it was soon after freedom was afforded; formerly enslaved people organizing hundreds of Baptists Churches, and thousands joined. Moreover, thousands joined the church back then; what does that say about the church today? With such a rich history of keeping it moving, we can look back. Because of that effort, they formed the National Baptist Convention, which is still standing today, and many of us are still a part of that convention today and will prayerfully be into the centuries.¹⁵⁰

Unlike the Calvinists who believed that God predestined some men and women to eternal life, we Baptists do not believe such; consequently, we must go out into the byways and highways to share the gospel of Jesus Christ, believing that God wants all humanity to be saved. That should be the mandate in the 21st century and beyond until Jesus returns to the church. Nothing and nobody should

¹⁴⁸ Floyd T Cunningham, "Wandering in the Wilderness: Black Baptist Thought after Emancipation," *American Baptist Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (September 1985): 268.

¹⁴⁹ Cunningham, 270.

¹⁵⁰ Cunningham, 271.

preclude that effort of the church. ¹⁵¹

Our ancestors' religious concepts were profoundly and continue to be even in the 21st century and beyond embedded in Black consciousness to the extent they and we determined our place in the universe according to such convictions, offering us a brighter future like our ancestors firmly believed. Theirs and ours in the sacred past began with Adam and Eve, extending through the history of the Hebrews to their enslavement and ours, and finally reaching the present age. With that type of history, the African American Baptist Church stands on such a firm foundation of our ancestors moving forward in this century and beyond. ¹⁵²

What is Black theology is a theology of Black liberation. Moreover, it seeks to plumb the Black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ so that the Black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of Black humanity. The message ought to be that liberation is the revelation of God as revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Freedom should be, and is, the gospel because Jesus is the liberator! ¹⁵³

In the 21st century and beyond, we must have a vision of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a hermeneutic of liberation, justice, equal opportunity, and racial integration, and this should help shape our fundamental beliefs and core values as African American males and females as Christians. Like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., our philosophy should be rooted in a careful reading and complex treatment of the Holy Bible, the Declaration of Independence, and the United States Constitution. Furthermore, those three manuscripts should constitute the articles of our faith of free Negro Christians in America. ¹⁵⁴

The church must not lose sight of those Baptists being freedom fighters-whether fighting for freedom from the tyranny of state-sponsored religion and soul freedom in the tradition of Roger

¹⁵¹ Cunningham, 271.

¹⁵² Cunningham, 272.

¹⁵³ Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1972), 262.

¹⁵⁴ Jeffrey Haggray, "The Black Baptist Experience in the D.C. Baptist Convention," *American Baptist Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (June 2004): 206.

Williams and John Leland or fighting abolition of slavery in the spirit of Luther Rice, Jeremiah Moore, George Liele, and Andrew Bry, or fighting Jim Crow segregation in the tradition of King, Fred Shuttleworth, Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, John Lewis, and Jesse Jackson. We have a rich history of those who fought for us, and we must take the mantle and do the same now and into the future because the fight will continue until all hearts are changed and all people are treated equally. ¹⁵⁵

For the church to remain forthright in its mission in the 21st century and beyond, we must be missionally aware of the implications of rapidly shifting demographic trends in most cities. In some of our cities, African Americans were the predominant racial minority in urban America, and we could utilize our influence to mobilize resources for our interests. "However, Latinos, Asians, Arabs, and other ethnic groups are rapidly increasing in population. These persons bring vast needs and concerns that Christian churches can address. Moreover, from an evangelical point of view, they are prime candidates for evangelization by Baptist churches." ¹⁵⁶

We believe Christ redeemed man to reach the perfect state through his soul. Moreover, the symbol of Christ was the cross in sentiment. Therefore, man adores the cross. The Black man is believed to have a more extraordinary claim to the cross than all other men. "If it is a symbol of Christ's triumph, then the Negro should share in that triumph that Simon the Cyrenian who bore it did." Believing that every Negro, therefore, should claim the cross as Simon the Cyrenian did. ¹⁵⁷

Moreover, the shortest prayer we may give to God, even if we never pray otherwise, is by making the sign of the cross and saying simultaneously, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and this would be a powerful prayer, and it supersedes all others, and if the words are repeated sincerely and earnestly from the heart, God answers that prayer. ¹⁵⁸

What is liberating for the African American Baptist Church in the 21st century and beyond is

¹⁵⁵ Haggray, 206.

¹⁵⁶ Haggray, 211.

¹⁵⁷ Randall Burkett, *Black Redemption* (Temple University Press, 1978), 41.

¹⁵⁸ Burkett, 41.

embracing the fact that the Bible stories originated in Africa. Moreover, it is essential to read the Bible and make that connection. It is so important to draw parallels between the physical and cultural similarities between biblical actors and African Americans. Through this Afrocentric reading of the Bible, we instill pride and a sense of spiritual specialness. It should be the church's core message that people of African descent have a particular and unique relationship with God and that, to understand ourselves as African-centered people truly, we need to be aware of and celebrate this connection. ¹⁵⁹

In the 21st century and beyond, the African American Baptist Church must correct this notion going forward that Christianity is a slave religion, a religion introduced by the White master to keep his slaves meek and traceable with a promise of better treatment in the next life. It is a belief that Islam or the traditional African religions are the only faiths appropriate to religious Blacks. Christianity, in some sense, is a slave religion, though not quite in the same sense its detractors mean. It is what we believe to be a religion that originated in slavery for and among the oppressed. The Apostle Paul says (1 Cor. 1:26) of the original Christians that “not many ... were wise ..., not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.” Not many such people care about the liberation of people experiencing poverty and discrimination. ¹⁶⁰

We are asserting that the gospel is liberation- that the thrust of the gospel is toward freeing people from objective and subjective oppression so that they may be fulfilled. So, these people may realize that they have an abundant life. However, the truth is that the church has not always seen its mission in this fashion at all. The New Testament and early church literature are references to combat with the devil and the objective powers of oppression. Moreover, there is a lively understanding of the principalities and powers. The Book of Revelation, for instance, is a case of seditious literature of the most inflammatory kind, containing thinly veiled judgments on current oppressive structures and

¹⁵⁹ Andrea C. Abrams, *God and Blackness: Race, Gender, and Identity in a Middle Class Afrocentric Church* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 72.

¹⁶⁰ Warner Traynham, *Christian Faith in Black and White a Primer in Theology from the Black Perspective* (Massachusetts: Parameter Press, Inc., 1973), 17.

critiques of those of the past. “But there is another strain in this literature also. The strain that concentrates on perfection and the concern best represents this expressed, when taken out of context, in the Epistle of James (1:27) to keep oneself unspotted from the world – the concern for the few ransomed out from the lost” and this is the contention of Black theology, that the strain of liberation is determinative and far outweighs that strain known to religious history as sanctification. Because of the source of revelation, liberation predominated in the New Testament and the early church period.¹⁶¹

Our Black churches have been a mechanism for liberation, affirming Black heritage and challenging the status quo of inequality.¹⁶² The Domination and the Arts of Resistance disclosed that during these times, enslaved people were creating subversive "hidden transcripts" challenging their oppressed conditions. It is described as a hidden transcript as any discourse or act that occurs beyond the observation of those in power that mocks, contradicts, or challenges those who hold power. The theology that enslaved Blacks produced when they gathered together was a hidden transcript that opposed their oppressed conditions.¹⁶³

Such lyrics like "Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus, steal away, steal away home. I ain't got long to stay here. My Lord He calls me" on the surface appear to be a desire to be in heaven. However, these lyrics simultaneously communicate a message that encourages enslaved people to flee their oppressive conditions.¹⁶⁴

Blacks shaped Christianity to their own particular experience while simultaneously, the symbols and values of Christianity helped to shape the slave community's image of itself. Enslaved Blacks created songs reflecting their experience of enslavement, such as "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?" and at the same time, enslaved Blacks interpreted the biblical stories of bondage and freedom in

¹⁶¹ Traynham, 18.

¹⁶² Kendra Barber, “Whither Shall We Go?: The Past and Present of Black churches and the Public Sphere: Religions,” *Religions* 6, no. 1 (March 2015): 246, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel6010245>.

¹⁶³ Barber, 248.

¹⁶⁴ Barber, 249.

Exodus as a counter-narrative against their "God ordained" enslavement. ¹⁶⁵

During Reconstruction, Black churches became more than just religious institutions; they were autonomous social institutions from schools to meeting halls to social clubs to community kitchens. Black churches served every role the newly emancipated community needed. After emancipation was achieved, Black churches looked to address racial and economic oppression. Black churches stepped up where the government lacked the means or failed Blacks and gathered resources to provide Black families with food, clothing, shelter, land, and education. Black ministers filled multiple roles, and over one hundred were elected to political offices during the Reconstruction. "The political activities Black churches engaged in could occasionally create problems for their congregations, who would sometimes find their churches burned down by Whites who felt they upset the status quo." ¹⁶⁶

The Black church succeeded in a White-dominated society because of Black liberation theology. Black theology suggests that Blacks stop victimizing each other. Black theology should be the method of analyzing the gospel's concern with breaking the chains of oppression. Black theology sees Jesus as the liberator, and God sides with the oppressed. We must use liberation theology on a micro scale-within the local church. The Black church has a moral obligation to free its people from the despair and powerlessness that grip our bodies and souls using Black theology. Black theology ought to combat sexism against women in the church, especially given that women outnumber men by two to one. ¹⁶⁷

What Black theology does is it teaches self-respect and self-esteem despite social and political condescension to and oppression of Blacks. Black theology uses the masses' language to make plain the feelings, hopes, dreams, experiences, and practices of Black people. ¹⁶⁸

We know that Black theology of liberation was and remains intrinsically linked to the Black

¹⁶⁵ Barber, 252.

¹⁶⁶ Barber, 252.

¹⁶⁷ James Henry Harris, "Practicing Liberation in the Black church: The Christian Century," *The Christian Century* 107, no. 19 (June 13, 1990): 2.

¹⁶⁸ Harris, 3.

church and, subsequently, the Black community. From the inception of the Black church, it set out to do for its peculiar constituency of enslaved Black people and freed men and women what no one else was willing to do for them or to have them do for themselves. What we were offered in White churches was a God who had cursed us and ordained our travail and debasement in perpetuity. In the early Black church, what was first emphasis was to know that God wanted to be intimate with us and to get us to know the idea that we were not cursed by God, nor condemned by God to be hewers of wood and drawers of water for White people who called themselves our masters. ¹⁶⁹

The achievement of the Black church is creatively worthy of being recorded in church history. The struggle of the Black church is known through this paper, but there has always been a struggle against dismantling White supremacy, capitalism, sexism, and racism, which is not stranger to the church. However, sexism is another problem of the church. Cone believed that central to the oppression of Black people by White supremacy was a deliberate division of human essences, namely the body and the soul. So, the separation of body and soul is a perverted version of the Christological quest that is meant to reconcile the bodied divinity's full divinity and whole human, as Cone posits. ¹⁷⁰

Having a God who does not see women and will not liberate them is a false narrative, believing that demoniacal realities emanate from the collusion of White women and men across racial lines. Yes, the Black church has taught perseverance, incited the establishment of a Black Christian ethic, fueled the fight for freedom, and provided the people with a text, context, pretext, and subject to confirm human dignity among the people of God. The church has always been a place of justice in its totality, firstly against the oppressors who dehumanize others through the gospel and the drive towards justice, providing the new vitality of the church being the source of empowerment, protest, resistance, and a

¹⁶⁹ Rothney S (Rothney Stok) Tshaka, "The Black church as the Womb of Black Liberation Theology?: Why the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) Is Not a Genuine Black church?: *HTS Theological Studies*," *HTS Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015): 3, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.2800>.

¹⁷⁰ "The Bride of Christ with a Hellish Existence on Earth: Insights from Eboni Turman, the Black church and Black Liberation Theology: *HTS Theological Studies*," *HTS Theological Studies* 79, no. 1 (2023): 2, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.7595>.

place one can call home. Believing there is a perverted logic in the fact that the separation of the body and the soul has extended the problem of race and sexism, is it the fact that women remain with bodies and souls unreconciled to completeness and therefore not seen as complete humanity? ¹⁷¹

In Black spirituals, heaven represents transcendent coded language affirming the transcendent. In Black theology, heaven is located within reach and informs a grasp of a transcendent God within creation while transcending all of history and materiality. So, the history of sexism is a long history of exclusion of Black women in the church despite the history of Black women ministers as critical in the Black Christian experience. ¹⁷²

B. Social Justice and Activism

When we combine crucial religious purposes of ministry with a conception of the political, political consciousness defines those cultural beliefs and ideological expressions utilizing the realization and maintenance of group interests. It is an ongoing process in which participants reevaluate their subjective experiences and shared interests. ¹⁷³ Our churches have had critical roles in organizing boycotts and activism throughout the South and being an integral presence in local movement centers that mobilized and coordinated collective action against segregation and oppression. ¹⁷⁴

Churches have used religious rituals as cultural tools to facilitate local organizing and activism among African Americans. They display how they operate as political resources in the mobilization process by legitimizing political goals. Equipping political actors with organizational and institutional resources, including: "the indigenous leadership, the communication networks, the easy availability of mass membership and the social interaction of political actors." ¹⁷⁵

Even preaching to ignite the church's shift from conservatism so that it became one of the most

¹⁷¹ "The Bride of Christ with a Hellish Existence on Earth," 3.

¹⁷² "The Bride of Christ with a Hellish Existence on Earth," 5.

¹⁷³ Shayne Lee, "The Church of Faith and Freedom: African American Baptists and Social Action," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 1 (March 2003): 31.

¹⁷⁴ Lee, 31.

¹⁷⁵ Lee, 32.

socially and progressively active African American Baptist churches has been used in the past.¹⁷⁶ If a pastor holds to an "old fashioned style of pastoring" that could become incommensurable with emerging Black consciousness and social activism, making the church ripe for a shift to a more progressive model because the issue of social change is before us all and should be addressed from our pulpits, and mentioned in our sermons with scripture's support.¹⁷⁷

"Many African American Baptist churches of the 1960s were quite effective at countering civil rights activism and the rise of Black consciousness with conservative counter-framing activity that reinforced their other-worldly congregational model."¹⁷⁸ When a clergy person embraces the socialization processes that influence some to become involved in public affairs - often studies or the theology of a seminary exposes one to reading Tillich and Niebuhr and Karl Barth and these theologians were writing out of the milieu of Germany and the Nazi regime; were reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer, all the existential philosophers.¹⁷⁹ When the approach to theology is analytical and critical, which differs from the traditional approach to biblical hermeneutics at Baptist evangelical seminaries, it gives one more advantage to being socially conscious.¹⁸⁰ When the leader, in this case, the pastor, is an existentialist such as Tillich, his or her theology begins with the human condition rather than the constraints of dogma, which treats religion as something always open-ended rather than fixed to a biblical canon. Then, the clergyperson is more committed to the existential concerns of the congregation than to strict doctrinal tenets. When a clergy person's education is from a prominent university-related divinity school, they are customarily most disposed to political action.¹⁸¹

The Black church has always had a social activist mandate because the church was concerned about those who were in shackles being seen as anti-slavery. Anti-slavery was a term bespoke

¹⁷⁶ Lee, 32.

¹⁷⁷ Lee, 34.

¹⁷⁸ Lee, 34.

¹⁷⁹ Lee, 36.

¹⁸⁰ Lee, 36.

¹⁸¹ Lee, 36.

association with social action groups by that name and a great tradition of oratory at public gatherings to rally support for the abolitionist cause. It was related to oratory, which was persuasion sought by pamphleteering and other publications. What the Black church did was supply great speakers and influential authors. Opposite of publication and communication was the secret Underground Railroad—furthermore, the Black church's cooperation with a military involved in liberating actions. There was extended mutual family assistance, plus aid to all humanity in personal and public disasters. Moreover, our African American religion played a part in slave rebellions. ¹⁸²

The Black church should never lose its advocacy for others since the Antebellum Period. During the colonial and revolutionary periods, the framework and the ability to develop the Black church was provided, and the antebellum period demonstrated the two realities that blacks and the Black church existed. In the North, Blacks received fluctuating access to political institutions, as some Northern states extended suffrage and legal protection to Blacks, thereby allowing Black religious associations, clergy, and members to lobby for an end to slavery and equal rights, and the South slave system, however, prevented Blacks, a free or enslaved person, from speaking out or gaining any access to government officials, a situation that led the southern Black church to endorse accommodation or revolt. ¹⁸³

We must not lose sight, especially while being in the 21st century and even beyond, to forget our past when institutions of higher learning and professional schools excluded American citizens of African origins, and the Black religious community became one of the few avenues for Blacks to gain leadership positions and challenge inequality. Black pastors, ministers, and other religious figures became the country's most prominent activists and Black intellectuals. What they became were writers and orators, interpreting and debating issues that had a direct impact on people of the African diaspora.

¹⁸² Henry Mitchell, *Black church The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years Beginnings* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 130.

¹⁸³ Eric L. McDaniel, *Politics in the Pews: The Political Mobilization of Black churches*, *The Politics of Race and Ethnicity* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 61.

It was because of the brutal impact of racism that Black intellectuals combined political activism with their intellectual work. ¹⁸⁴

Gentrification and the high cost of housing would behoove Black churches like the church of old Abyssinian Baptist Church, building housing for the elderly and renovating rundown apartments for the homeless in Harlem under the leadership of Reverend Samuel Proctor, who succeeded Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. as pastor of the church from 1972 to 1989. Since then, Abyssinian continued to build and renovate housing in rundown Harlem neighborhoods through their Abyssinian Development Corporation. Moreover, the current pastor, Calvin Butts, regularly speaks out on issues of concern to the Black community, explicitly criticizing cigarette and liquor advertisers for targeting Black consumers. ¹⁸⁵

As we forge forward in the 21st century and beyond for the Black church, it is feasible to revisit Grant Shockley, the premier interpreter of religious education in the Black church, to the larger academic and church worlds in the second half of the twentieth century. He had a theological and historical approach because he sought to discern what we would now call the Afrocentric origins of the church's education. ¹⁸⁶

Shockley extended and deepened his quest for a religious education that is a primary source for social change in and through the Black church. He realized the liberating consequences of an education that produced prophets to speak to the racism and oppression of Black people (and all people) and also spoke prophetically to Black and White institutions. In studying the evolution of pastoral leadership in ethnic and Black churches (in response to past, continuing, and present needs and demands for justice, equality, and liberation in the church and the general society), which is a paradigm for "an integrated

¹⁸⁴ Clarence Taylor, *Black Religious Intellectuals: The Fight for Equality from Jim Crow to the Twenty-First Century*, Crosscurrents in African American History (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1.

¹⁸⁵ Albert J. Raboteau, *African American-Religion [Sic]*, Religion in American Life (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 129.

¹⁸⁶ Charles R. Foster, Fred Smith, and Grant S. Shockley, *Black Religious Experience: Conversations on Double Consciousness and the Work of Grant Shockley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 10.

social justice ministry for local congregations that is prophetic, holistic, and transformational. ¹⁸⁷

The Black church is not a monolithic institution, and there are as many names, belief systems, pastors, congregations, and hermeneutics as there are in so many cultures. Moreover, being rooted in this cultural imperative that all must be free, the Black church already mentioned in this paper began in the woods, swamps, caves, and secret places of institutional slavery in the early days of the Americas. There was a continuing struggle for a space to worship God, who affirmed our personhood and the dominion of all creation, leading to protests, walkouts, and “stealing away to Jesus.” We already know the Black preacher became the leader, social activist, counselor, and economic liaison for the Black community. The “man of God” had the right connections, and even enslavers and later segregationists diplomatically dealt with the Black preacher. Voices within the Black community ascribe the Black church as the “cradle of freedom,” the womb of education, and the community's social center. However, the difficulty arose when those who made up the institution began their form of oppression of another group within its walls that might not even fit its model. When Black women voiced their call to a preaching ministry, the church officials closed the ranks and adopted the motto “Just say no!” This cognitive dissonance of proclaiming freedom for all yet continuing to enslave some is curious. We know that God is the one who chooses and calls persons to preach. However, some have swept out pulpits, refused admission to women, banned women preachers from churches, and charged them with being “rebellious,” “un-Christian,” “home wreckers,” and “subversive speakers.” If the African American Baptist Church in the 21st century and beyond is going to reach and hold younger generations, this form of oppression must be lifted because this population will not stand for this because they are more open-minded to the move of God in our midst and inclusivity in those days. ¹⁸⁸

When the African American Baptist Church in the 21st century and beyond has the correct meaning of social justice, the church can align itself to do the work now and into the future. Thus,

¹⁸⁷ Foster, Smith, and Shockley, 128.

¹⁸⁸ Christine M. Smith, ed., *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 44.

“social justice” focuses on the primary causes of oppression, inequality, and disenfranchisement. It should seek to change public policies and public priorities. Moreover, it works to empower people to take initiative in ways that are positive and constructive. The movement for social justice should understand that oppressed people have strengths, skills, cultural assets, and the responsibility to act corporately for their common good. Charity is the opposite; it is reactive to specific material needs, and justice is more proactive, working for changes in systems that create such needs. ¹⁸⁹

In the African American Baptist Church in the 21st century and beyond, we cannot lose our prophetic voice, and the core of prophecy is critiquing injustices, wrongheadedness, and the political and social evils bedeviling the social order. For they stood up and spoke out against what was wrong in society. “They used good judgment and were not reckless but did not count the cost. They chose where they spoke and ensured who spoke to whom and who should speak, but they did not jockey around to find the safest spots and the points of least resistance. They spoke the truth of God as they knew it and were faithful to their calling.” It is a belief that millennials, Gen Xers, and Gen Zers want the church to be more prophetic concerning what we all are experiencing. ¹⁹⁰

We must never lose sight of our story as African Americans. When we investigate our religious history, we are reminded that the struggle for political freedom did not begin in the 1950s and 60s but had roots stretching back to slavery. We are reminded that the struggle for political justice in the United States has always been associated with our churches. Whether in the independent northern churches (AME, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Baptist, etc.) or in the so-called invisible institution in the south (which merged with the independent Black church after the Civil War) or as members of White denominations, Black Christians have always known that the God of Moses and Jesus did not

¹⁸⁹ Danielle L. Ayers and Reginald W. Williams, *To Serve This Present Age: Social Justice Ministries in the Black church*, 1st ed (Valley Forge PA: Judson Press, 2013), 5.

¹⁹⁰ Iva E. Carruthers, Frederick D. Haynes, and Jeremiah A. Wright, eds., *Blow the Trumpet in Zion! Global Vision and Action for the 21st-Century Black church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 82.

create us to be enslaved people or second-class citizens.¹⁹¹

Because of one's sexual identity, the marginalized or the closeted-in, in this case, are those who are being singled out for civil and religious persecution because of their lack of legal recognition, which will soon be threatened again in the 21st century and beyond. Unlike the times of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Black church has not risen to a similar majestic height as a prophetic "drum major."¹⁹²

What we have achieved is being threatened with the insistence that same-sex marriage will not be given what we believe to be in the future the moral recognition and civil rights protection, and the issue even today has opened the door wide to re-envisage what was one thought biblically and theologically inerrant and to insert moral agency into a sexual domain that has historically been entrusted to the custody of heterosexual covenant marriages.¹⁹³

When it comes to women, it is believed that men typically control the sexual agenda of the institutional church, and the notion of women's sexual freedom and autonomy has always been a highly contested terrain in social situations that are heavily laden with male power politics. Many Christian women have reconciled that the dominant teaching "be not unequally yoked," that they are exhorted to divorce themselves from being sexual beings until sex is legitimized or authorized, if ever, by marriage because this lifestyle is considered the biblical way.¹⁹⁴

Such scholars as Kelly Brown Douglas, Cornel West, and Michael E. Dyson all have spoken out on the church's position on same-gender loving unions because the moral intent of these thinkers is to "challenge the rituals of sexual behavior that restrict the Black community to some particular notions of

¹⁹¹ JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African American Experience*, The Bishop Henry McNeal Turner/Sojourner Truth Series in Black Religion, v. 15 (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1998), 63.

¹⁹² Sallie M Cuffee, "On Sex and Sexuality in Black churchwomen's Lives: A Womanist Call for a Moral and Justice Conversation in the Black church: The Journal of Religious Thought," *The Journal of Religious Thought* 59, no. 1 (2006): 46.

¹⁹³ Cuffee, 47.

¹⁹⁴ Cuffee, 50.

intimacy." ¹⁹⁵ Have we done wrong by our theological sexism or traditional male-dominated interpretation of the scriptures oppressing those who think and act differently from us in homosexual behavior? ¹⁹⁶

It is time for the church in the 21st century and beyond to stand up for women because the church is that powerful socioreligious institution with an enormous influence and control over Black religious and spiritual destiny and to enter a moral and justice conversation over women's spiritual and earthly sexual destiny. ¹⁹⁷ The Black church in the 21st century and beyond cannot condone blatant sexism in thought or deed with impunity when it comes to women and the double standard we have on the sexes when it comes to sexuality and what women have been tolerating for years. ¹⁹⁸ It is essential for the church to stop subverting Black women's sexual agency and to take the lead in providing moral guidance as an act of solidarity with women. ¹⁹⁹ The Black church is accused of being progressive regarding racial justice and being insular about issues of gender equality, and during the HIV/AIDS crisis, the Black church was silent. ²⁰⁰

The Black church has an unfavorable reputation regarding women's issues as well as that towards gay and lesbian concerns with how the church reacted to the HIV/AIDS crisis, which led to scrutinizing the church's standing as a liberating agent for Black women and men. Moreover, homosexuality is a challenge to social justice. ²⁰¹

The Black church should always be what W. E. B. Dubois said, "the Negro church of today is the social centre of Negro life in the United States and the most characteristic expression of African character. Various organizations meet [in Negro church buildings]-the church proper, the Sunday School, two or three insurance societies, women's societies, secret societies, and mass meetings of

¹⁹⁵ Cuffee, 54.

¹⁹⁶ Cuffee, 59.

¹⁹⁷ Cuffee, 61.

¹⁹⁸ Cuffee, 62.

¹⁹⁹ Cuffee, 64.

²⁰⁰ Kelly Brown Douglas and Ronald E Hopson, "Understanding the Black church: The Dynamics of Change: The Journal of Religious Thought," *The Journal of Religious Thought* 56, no. 2-1 (2000): 95.

²⁰¹ Douglas and Hopson, 96.

various kinds. Considerable sums of money are collected and expended here, employment is found for the idle, strangers are introduced, news is disseminated, and charity is distributed. At the same time, this social, intellectual, and economic centre is a religious centre of great power. Back of its more formal religion, the Church often stands as a real conserver of morals, a strengthener of family life, and the final authority on what is Good and right." ²⁰²

The Black church is one of the few Black institutions to survive slavery; it is the one Black social institution that remains virtually free from White control. The Black church does not typically differentiate between the sacred and the secular realms when meeting the needs of its people because there is a clear line of demarcation between religious or church concerns and civil or social concerns, how the church has taken some of us, who were lowly in the society like a janitor domestic worker and became head of the deacon board or Sunday School Superintendent. The Black church essentially creates its independent hierarchies and networks of power, which become avenues for people to garner ecclesiastical privilege. ²⁰³

For the Black church, what it should continue to do in the 21st century and beyond is provide social benefits that are racially distributed into the broader society - for example, banking, legal, educational, health, and other services for its people. The church has established schools, banks, insurance companies, credit unions, health clinics, and low-income housing, and pastors became local and national leaders in society because of their leadership skills. ²⁰⁴

Moving forward, the core of the Black church should be love, inclusiveness, justice, freedom, and equality. ²⁰⁵ On the issue of sexism and homosexuality, the church tends to act in ways that would set itself apart from the mainstream of society. The church tends to move toward the center of social and public opinion and, thus, to assert the values that move it toward the center. These are times of

²⁰² Douglas and Hopson, 97.

²⁰³ Douglas and Hopson, 98.

²⁰⁴ Douglas and Hopson, 99.

²⁰⁵ Douglas and Hopson, 101.

racial antagonism when the Black community is more likely to be nationalist in its thinking, highlighting how Black people are different from the mainstream Black church and are more disposed to be critical of society and more progressive in what it promulgates.²⁰⁶

Many of us, we have both within and outside of the church communities, have struggled to accept lesbians and gays as moral and equal human beings within a predominantly heterosexual society. For us as African Americans, we have entered the dialogue on homosexuality grudgingly or in reactionary ways, as was true in recent Civil Rights debates, including those on gays in the military back in the days and the legalization of same-sex marriage back in the days.²⁰⁷

The church should understand that African American lesbians and gays should not be viewed as a problem, but rather that the problem is African American homophobia and the Black church teaching that homosexuality is immoral. What the church has done historically kept heterosexual women, lesbians, and gay men in a subordinate place. So, we must not be too dismissive of the typical response of African American heterosexuals that homosexual oppression is not the same as racial oppression.²⁰⁸

Oppression is wrong and must be condemned as an unacceptable human practice. It is essential because human beings, whether heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual, generally do not experience their sexual desire or attraction as a choice; given the unending trials of a racist society, African American lesbians and gays would have nothing to gain by choosing a sexual identity and relationship so despised by the church and society; and if heterosexual relationships were fulfilling for all people, there would be no need to choose same-sex sexual relationships.²⁰⁹ Every individual must be able to make choices if those choices do not coerce, physically harm, or destroy others within a free society.²¹⁰

There is no difference between the behavior of African American Christians who use biblical

²⁰⁶ Douglas and Hopson, 103.

²⁰⁷ Horace L Griffin, "Their Own Received Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black churches: Theology & Sexuality," *Theology & Sexuality* 12 (March 2000): 88.

²⁰⁸ Griffin, 90.

²⁰⁹ Griffin, 91.

²¹⁰ Griffin, 91.

texts to categorize lesbians and gays as immoral and that of eighteenth and nineteenth-century European American Christians who used the same Bible to identify African Americans as cursed people characterized by their immorality.²¹¹ Using scriptures to support slavery, for example, Eph. 6:5, "Slaves be obedient to your masters." Some of the strongest proponents of the theological view that it was God's will for African Americans to be enslaved were Baptist ministers and congregations.²¹²

In comparing, White men justified their sexual lust for and rape of Black women and lynching of Black men, arguing that lynching was done in order to protect White womanhood. Furthermore, gay men have shared aspects of history whereby gay bashing and the killing of gay men have been justified as also protecting society from sex predators.²¹³

For the African American Baptist Church in the 21st century and beyond, there should be a revision of the present stance for some on homosexuality, which is necessary for a true liberation theology for Black churches.²¹⁴ Like slavery and oppression, any human being lacks moral justice and is, therefore, contrary to the divine will of God. We need to conclude as the church that homosexuality is part of human sexuality, just as African Americans are part of the human race. What the Apostle Paul could not envision in the first-century pre-scientific mind could not have known the fullness of human sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular.²¹⁵

When the church has a political consciousness, it is defined as "those cultural beliefs and ideological expressions utilized for the realization and maintenance of group interests." Furthermore, it should be an ongoing process in which participants reevaluate their subjective experiences and shared interests. For the African American Church, liberation is the chronic theme. The church should be progressive, and our mission and goal should be to improve African Americans' position in American

²¹¹ Griffin, 91.

²¹² Griffin, 94.

²¹³ Griffin, 95.

²¹⁴ Griffin, 99.

²¹⁵ Griffin, 100.

society.²¹⁶

Preaching ought to construct a shared meaning and group cohesion and contribute to a collective identity with the church.²¹⁷ When preaching and employing the social gospel in the framework of Jesus's requirement to be the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world," then stressing the church's political, rather than spiritual, role in affecting society.²¹⁸

The gospel calls us to better the experience of African Americans by meeting their full range of needs-social gospel. In the social gospel sphere, churches provide job training, childcare, educational opportunities, and housing as part of their religious instruction.²¹⁹

The social gospel is rooted in Jesus Christ, who provides an example of proper conduct, thus challenging injustice in the contemporary world. Our young people want the church to flex its protest muscles in ways White America would respect us.²²⁰

The Black church is acquainted with the struggle for a liberated assertion that Jesus Christ was a radical Black Messiah who, in keeping with the will of God, was concerned with disrupting the status quo institutions and mindsets. For Black people, God is ontologically Black-God is so strongly identified with the oppressed that it is best understood in the United States concerning African Americans that God is being (or identity) becomes synonymous with us as Black people.²²¹

African Americans wanted like-minded people who had dealt with segregation and injustice and, at the same time, moved into the community to bring about social change.²²² We must work to continue improving the conditions in our society.²²³ For us, the church ought to be the sanctuary, our

²¹⁶ Lee, "The Church of Faith and Freedom," 31.

²¹⁷ Lee, 37.

²¹⁸ Lee, 38.

²¹⁹ Anthony B Pinn, "Jesus and Justice: An Outline of Liberation Theology within Black churches: Cross Currents," *Cross Currents* 57, no. 2 (2007): 2.

²²⁰ Pinn, 3.

²²¹ Pinn, 7.

²²² Keith Watkins, "Social Capital in a Black church: Encounter," *Encounter* 78, no. 3 (2018): 95.

²²³ Watkins, 97.

training program for more confident lives in the broader world that tended to suppress us. ²²⁴

Even though the United States of America is more accepting of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) identities, Black people are still disapproving of the population. Our Black churches do not affirm non-heterosexuals. ²²⁵

Why homophobia exists within the Black church is that the history of slavery, oppression, and sexual violence against Blacks in the United States informs intolerance of non-heterosexuality. This limited sexual agency hindered the ability to establish individual identities, let alone a collective Black identity. So, the Black church was one avenue through which Black people could reclaim their identities and establish a collective identity. ²²⁶

For Blacks to dispel claims we were hypersexualized savages, we encouraged our people to adopt conservative sexual ethics that prioritized heterosexual marriages and the establishment of male-headed solid Black family units. Understanding that homosexual relations were stigmatized among all groups of people, Blacks notably distanced themselves from homosexuality since homosexual identities countered the narrative of respectability that we were attempting to construct. ²²⁷ So, for the Black church, intolerance of non-heterosexuality is seen as an effort to protect the Black community, which does explain the pervasiveness and persistence of homophobia in Black congregations. ²²⁸

C. Scriptural Interpretations

For our ancestors, it was essential and explicit in their theology or racial redemption that God was a liberator God who was calling oppressed Blacks out of the land of their captivity to a place that he had appointed for them and their posterity forever, and this was a salient contribution of an elite group of churchmen to formulating a theological perspective that explicated the subtle and clandestine

²²⁴ Watkins, 98.

²²⁵ Luther Jr Young, "To Condemn or Not to Condemn: Perceived Climates Concerning Sexual Orientation in Black churches: Sociology of Religion," *Sociology of Religion* 83, no. 2 (2022): 169, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srab031>.

²²⁶ Young, 171.

²²⁷ Young, 171.

²²⁸ Young, 171.

meaning of much of the preaching and many spirituals of the folk religious tradition. We know it never became the official, recognized theology of any major Black denomination, but it had its systematizers and propagators in both Black and White denominations. Furthermore, it was a theology of racial destiny achieved by struggling against the powers of evil once represented by the mysterious forces of nature and spiritual beings that African religious specialists and our early plantation preachers sought to control and manipulate. Furthermore, those powers were now understood to represent and be operative in social and political events, but no less violent and intractable. ²²⁹

The focus of this perspective is a biblical revelation of the justice of God who "put down the mighty from their seats and exalted them of low degree" (Lk. 1:52) and who gathered the scattered children of Israel under Nehemiah and helped them to build the wall of Jerusalem – "because the people had a mind to work" (Neh. 4:6). It was Martin R. Delany who believed in such a God. His conviction that God had decreed greatness for Blacks and that they could claim a glorious future only by their power is sung with lyrical passion in his writings. The time has now fully arrived when the colored race is called upon by all the ties of common humanity and all the claims of consummate justice to go forward and take their position and battle in the struggle now being made for the world's redemption. Our cause is the greatest at present, eliciting the world's attention. For if there is a remedy, that remedy is not at hand. As assuredly as God rules the destinies of nations and entereth measures into the "heart of men," he has presented these measures to us. Our race is to be redeemed; it is a great and glorious work, and we are the instrumentalities by which it will be done. However, we must go from among our oppressors; it can never be done by staying among them. God has, as sure as he has ever designed anything, designed this significant portion of the New World for us, the colored races, and as inevitable as we are stubborn in our hearts and stiffen our necks against it, his protecting arm

²²⁹ Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, 3rd ed., rev.enl (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1998), 138.

and fostering care will be withdrawn from us.²³⁰

When Israel left Egypt and wandered in the wilderness for forty years, they needed to reconstruct their culture. They needed to see things from God's point of view. However, they become the new leadership generation when Joshua and Caleb seem to have shown this insight (Num. 14:6-9). During those forty years of wandering in the wilderness, God had to restructure Israelite culture based on the law and the covenant. God gave them a new way of looking at their history, present situation, and destiny; we can learn from Israel's history that Moses restored Israel a correct view of their history (Gen. 12-50; Ex. 1-18).²³¹

Moreover, many of God's dealings with the family of Abraham may have been forgotten or distorted by the four-hundred-year ordeal of Egyptian slavery. As Black people, we must get back in touch with our history. (20, Ellis, Jr)²³²

We know that history is never an account of all past events—instead, it is an account of events that have been sifted and evaluated to determine their significance. So, history is a collection of significant events. An event is somewhat significant if it changes the course of history. We can conclude that history is a record of events that changed history's course. Moreover, it will help us if we have a God-centered view of the world. Because when we leave God out, we will have a distorted view. We need to reflect on the word of God if we want to understand our past adequately. We know God restored Israel to a correct view of destiny through Moses.²³³

Moreover, after four hundred years of bondage in Egypt, the people had forgotten where they were going. So, what is the destiny of Black people in America? Where are we going? We will never know until we return to our roots, to the authentic aspects of Black culture, which includes the Black church, because our destiny will be found there as we reflect on the word of God. "God is the Lord of

²³⁰ Wilmore, 139.

²³¹ Carl Ellis, *Beyond Liberation The Gospel in the Black American Experience* (Illinois: Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship of the United States of America, 1983), 20.

²³² Ellis, 20.

²³³ Ellis, 20.

destiny, and if we leave God out, we lose our sense of direction.”²³⁴

It is believed that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave great care and thought to the problems of evil and how the structures of evil oppressed people. King focused on the structures of evil, not against the people or persons who were doing the evil.²³⁵

Dr. King was taught as a systematic theologian and articulated a radical, relevant, and redemptive theology. He sought to give theology a human shape and placed it at the service of the human community. With the ability to encapsulate for us the central tenets of his theology, he believed and taught that the life and teachings of Jesus are not just radical but relevant and redemptive, and he was convinced that life at its source and center is personal and that every person has inherent worth, thus dedicating himself to serve the needs of persons, and to do the service in the spirit of trust and love.²³⁶

Dr. King's theological commitment to the work of justice of those edged out on the margins of society; he believed that God was involved in the stuff of history.²³⁷ Like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., our faith should be to struggle against injustice and oppression; our faith should make us the instruments of reconciliation, being faithful to God as one lives out one's commitment to a restored and reconciled community. Our faith is the mission to create a reconciled and restored community, and the moral task of a theologian like Dr. King is to become the proclamation of the kingdom of God and the struggle in history to make this a present reality for all of us.²³⁸

Baptists believe the scriptures can be understood and interpreted by the typical reader. A man by the name of John Smyth drew up a covenant for the Separatist church in Gainsborough, England; believing as the Lord's people, they pledged to walk in all God's ways which were made known, which

²³⁴ Ellis, 21.

²³⁵ Noel L Erskine, “King and the Black church: The Journal of Religious Thought,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 48, no. 2 (1991): 9.

²³⁶ Erskine, 10.

²³⁷ Erskine, 13.

²³⁸ Erskine, 15.

meant for Baptist Christians, the Bible is the final authority. Moreover, human understanding of the Bible is never final, complete, or finished.²³⁹

Given how African Americans suffered during slavery, this is not a direct parallel in any way, but certainly how Jurgen Moltmann raises the analogy of the Father suffering the death of the Son. Moreover, he suffers the infinite pain of his love for the Son. "The death of the Son, therefore, corresponds to the pain of the Father. Moreover, the Son loses sight of the Father when descending into hell. Here, the divine consistency, the inner life of the Trinity, is at stake." Moreover, the self-communicating love of the Father becomes infinite pain over the death of the Son. For African Americans, our ancestors, too, suffered under slavery, but we can be assured that God was and will always be aware of our suffering. Furthermore, ultimately, our suffering will bring God glory because, as a people, we have persevered.²⁴⁰

D. Spiritual and Religious Traditions

We are to understand tradition as "a set of observances, a collection of doctrines or teachings, a particular type of behavior, a way of thinking about the world or oneself, a way of regarding oneself or reality." So, we can conclude that tradition is more than just a cultural rule about how things should be done; instead, it is a "normative universe" to be inhabited, a lens through which to view and make sense of the world.²⁴¹

In defining "denomination," it is an inclusive term ecumenical, implying that the group referring to is. However, one member is called or denominated by a particular name of a larger group church to which all denominations belong. Moreover, this does drag the church toward reductionism, where to "secure unity," faith is reduced to its lowest common denominator for there to be room at the cross for

²³⁹ George D Younger, "The Authority of Scripture for Baptists: American Baptist Quarterly," *American Baptist Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (June 2002): 147.

²⁴⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, 1st Fortress Press ed (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 173.

²⁴¹ Quinton Hosford Dixie, "Organizing God's Children: The Denominational Tradition and the Problem of Black Baptist Unity," *Baptist History and Heritage* 42, no. 3 (2007): 2.

all who believe in Jesus Christ, regardless of what they believe.²⁴²

In the 21st century and beyond, for the African American Baptist Church, we must continue to foster our spirituality, and for us, as African descendants, “there is no separation between the sacred and the secular.” It is the energy of African spirituality that brings unity to life. Spirituality is more significant than any religious system; it is an integrative process and the driving force for living humanely. It holds life as the highest value and promotes life as the most profound expression. Spirituality unifies all of one’s parts into a whole self. Moreover, all relationships are brought together into a harmonious community.²⁴³

With spirituality having both active and passive roles, the active understanding of spirituality is activities seeking to reform living conditions, and this is understood to be sociopolitical action. Passive understanding considers spirituality as activities seeking to transform personal and individual emotions to endure harsh living conditions. We consider this to be meditative, or the “inward journey.” It is believed it is essential to know how people tend to describe spirituality as active and passive, which are both expressions of spirituality; when spirituality is seen as sociopolitical action, it is understood as actively seeking to bring God’s justice into the world. “So, righteous indignation, marches for peace, and rallies are active manifestations of spirituality.”²⁴⁴

As a people of God, our spirituality from an African American perspective seeks to connect and maintain the connection between all aspects of living. For us, the charismatic stirring within the soul stimulates and perpetuates our commitments to live wholly holy lives. To be spiritual should not mean that we are disconnected from the world, but spirituality should mean that one is fully engaged in relationships and life. What spirituality leads us to have a public witness seeking justice and liberation and a vital personal relationship with the Divine? Spirituality is the active integration of our humanity. “Through its expression, we cease to function in parts and begin to live up to our potential as whole

²⁴² Dixie, 3.

²⁴³ Lee H. Butler, *Liberating Our Dignity, Saving Our Souls* (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2006), 107.

²⁴⁴ Butler, 108.

human beings. Spirituality results in a singularly directed effort to be in communion with God, self, and others.”²⁴⁵

We all remember the United States was touted as the land of opportunity, yet instituted slavery was present. Moreover, the nation had a veneer of equal prosperity, but a layer of disenfranchisement seethed beneath it. A rumbling of dissent and revolution rocked the nation out of its sleep in 1965. The Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution enfranchised Black men and women. There were Southern poll taxes, literacy tests, intimidation, assault, and state laws that denied us the right to vote. However, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 reinstated the right to vote for Southern Blacks and was to be enforced by the attorney general of the United States. “The act was extended for five years in 1970, seven years in 1975, twenty-five years in 1982, and twenty-five more years in 2006. It was federal legislation in 1970 protecting voting rights for non-English-speaking citizens. Wrote all this, “Wake up and strengthen whatever you have left, teetering on the brink of death, for I have found that your works are far from complete in the eyes of my God.” – Rev. 3:2.²⁴⁶

John’s message to the church at Sardis had a reputation for being alive but spiritually dead. Moreover, John tells the people that God is not pleased with their actions and inaction. Moreover, the good news is that there was time to change their ways. Moreover, God recognized that people in Sardis followed God’s commandments. Finally, John says that if the people wake up and change their ways, God will forgive them and blot out their sins – Rev. 3:1-6.²⁴⁷

We know the Black church has conceptually been the foundation providing stability and comfort for older African Americans. It would behoove social workers and other mental health professionals to be willing to discuss spirituality with their clients and to apply spirituality to social

²⁴⁵ Butler, 108.

²⁴⁶ Teresa L. Fry Brown, *African American History & Devotions: Readings and Activities for Individuals, Families, and Communities* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 40.

²⁴⁷ Brown, 40.

work assessments and interventions.²⁴⁸

Spirituality is integral to successful aging. So, spirituality is defined as the inwardly focused quality that allows us to connect with ourselves, others, and the natural world. Spirituality is also referred to as communing with nature, making that spiritual connection with self, other people, and the divine or inward purpose of reflections and centeredness.²⁴⁹

Understanding one's spirituality is a belief in a supernatural being that provides the grounding emanating from a faith tradition larger than we are in the present. Spirituality contextually with older African Americans came from our slave ancestors. It was and continues to be essential to the survival of African American tradition to maintain our links and community, and these truths are constant in maintaining our African roots in American religious life.²⁵⁰

We already know the Black church was this haven and a respite place for interacting with God and a place to act out the essential recognition of God and the ethical principles espoused by God on a personal level. It was since the U.S. Civil War that African Americans became affiliated with and had a role in the Black church, particularly in the Baptist tradition and among Methodists. Moreover, the Black church grew and provided support for enslaved African Americans and post-Civil freedmen. The African tradition of worship and community support was familiar to African Americans and, though waning in recent years, has provided a strong foundation and tradition for older African Americans.²⁵¹ What young people believe about the African American church is that it exists in a time warp, with slavery as its originating marker and civil rights as its culminating goal.²⁵²

E. Conclusion

The 21st-century church, particularly the Baptist Church, should not lose sight of its history,

²⁴⁸ Robert Cosby, "Older African American Adults: Understanding the Role of the Black church's Support in the Community: *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 39, no. 4 (2020): 355, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2020.1780183>.

²⁴⁹ Cosby, 355.

²⁵⁰ Cosby, 357.

²⁵¹ Cosby, 358.

²⁵² Cosby, 361.

particularly in the South, which includes slavery and Christian beliefs. Baptist doctrine guided responses to discrimination and obstacles, emphasizing the scriptures and the ancient Israelites. The church should look to the biblical witness of the ultimate conquest of Canaan by the Israelites and embrace the same faith moving forward.

The history of organizing churches before the 1860s and 1870s should propel the church today, as it was soon after freedom was afforded, with formerly enslaved people organizing hundreds of Baptist churches and thousands joining. The National Baptist Convention, still standing today, is a testament to the church's rich history.

The African American Baptist Church stands on a firm foundation of its ancestors' religious concepts, which remain embedded in Black consciousness. Black theology seeks to plumb the Black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, emphasizing that freedom should be the gospel.

In the 21st century and beyond, the church should have a vision of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a hermeneutic of liberation, justice, equal opportunity, and racial integration. This philosophy should be rooted in carefully reading and complex treatment of the Holy Bible, the Declaration of Independence, and the United States Constitution.

In the 21st century, the African American Baptist Church must be aware of the changing demographic trends in urban America, particularly African Americans. These demographics bring vast needs and concerns that Christian churches can address. The church believes that Christ redeemed man through his soul and that every Negro should claim the cross as Simon the Cyrenian did. The shortest prayer to God is by making the sign of the cross and saying simultaneously, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

Embracing the Bible stories that originated in Africa and drawing parallels between biblical actors and African Americans is liberating for the church. It should be the core message that people of

African descent have a unique relationship with God and that understanding themselves as African-centered people is essential.

The church must correct the notion that Christianity is a slave religion, as it originated in slavery for and among the oppressed. The gospel is a liberation-focused religion, freeing people from objective and subjective oppression. However, the church has not always seen its mission in this way.

Black churches have been a mechanism for liberation, affirming Black heritage and challenging the status quo of inequality. The *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* revealed that enslaved people created subversive "hidden transcripts" challenging their oppressed conditions. These hidden transcripts, such as the lyrics "Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus, steal away, steal away home. I ain't got long to stay here. My Lord He calls me," encourage enslaved people to flee their oppressive conditions.

Blacks shaped Christianity to their own experiences, and the symbols and values of Christianity helped shape the slave community's image. During Reconstruction, Black churches became autonomous social institutions, serving the newly emancipated community. Black churches aimed to address racial and economic oppression, providing resources to Black families. Black ministers filled multiple roles, and over one hundred were elected to political offices during Reconstruction.

Black liberation theology succeeded in a White-dominated society by suggesting that Blacks stop victimizing each other and breaking the chains of oppression. Black theology sees Jesus as the liberator, and God sides with the oppressed. Black theology should be used on a micro scale within the local church, freeing its people from despair and powerlessness.

Black theology teaches self-respect and self-esteem despite social and political condescension to and oppression of Blacks. The Black church has always been a source of justice, fighting against oppressors who dehumanize others through the gospel and the drive toward justice. The separation of body and soul is a perverted version of the Christological quest to reconcile the bodied divinity's full

divinity and whole human.

In Black spirituals, heaven represents transcendent coded language affirming the transcendence in Black theology. The history of sexism is a long history of exclusion of Black women in the church, despite the critical role of Black women ministers in the Black Christian experience.

The combination of religious purposes and political beliefs defines political consciousness. Churches have played a crucial role in organizing boycott activism and mobilizing collective action against segregation and oppression. They use religious rituals as cultural tools to facilitate local organizing and activism among African Americans, legitimizing political goals and equipping political actors with organizational and institutional resources.

Churches have historically been effective at countering civil rights activism and the rise of Black consciousness with conservative counter-framing activity. The Black church has always had a social activist mandate, providing speakers and influential authors and cooperating with the military in liberating actions. The Black church has also played a part in slave rebellions.

During the colonial and revolutionary periods, the framework and ability to develop the Black church were provided, and the antebellum period demonstrated the two realities that Blacks and the Black church existed. Black pastors, ministers, and other religious figures became prominent activists and intellectuals, interpreting and debating issues directly impacting African diaspora people.

Gentrification and the high cost of housing led to Black churches like Abyssinian Baptist Church building housing for the elderly and renovating apartments for the homeless, and Grant Shockley, the premier interpreter of religious education in the Black church, sought to discern the Afrocentric origins of the church's education and found that it produced prophets to speak to racism and oppression of Black people and all people. This evolution of pastoral leadership in ethnic and Black churches can be seen as a paradigm for integrated social justice ministry for local congregations.

The Black church, rooted in the cultural imperative of all being free, has a rich history dating

back to the early days of institutional slavery. It has been a space for worship and a social center for the Black community, but it has faced challenges in oppressing certain groups within its walls. For example, when Black women voiced their call to a preaching ministry, church officials closed the ranks and adopted the motto "Just say no." This cognitive dissonance highlights the need for the African American Baptist Church to address social justice issues by focusing on the primary causes of oppression, inequality, and disenfranchisement, changing public policies and priorities, and empowering people to take positive initiatives.

The church must not lose sight of its prophetic voice and must continue to critique injustices, wrongheadedness, and political and social evils. The struggle for political freedom has roots in slavery and has always been associated with the Black church. The marginalized or closeted-in are those who are singled out for civil and religious persecution due to their lack of legal recognition.

The issue of same-sex marriage is a threat to the church's moral recognition and civil rights protection. Scholars like Kelly Brown Douglas, Cornel West, and Michael E. Dyson have spoken out on the church's position on same-gender loving unions, challenging the rituals of sexual behavior that restrict the Black community to certain notions of intimacy. The church must continue to work towards social justice and equality for all, regardless of their background or beliefs.

The church in the 21st century and beyond must stand up for women, as it holds significant influence over Black religious and spiritual destiny. The church must stop subverting Black women's sexual agency and provide moral guidance as an act of solidarity with women. The Black church has an unfavorable reputation regarding women's issues and gay and lesbian concerns, with accusations of being progressive regarding racial justice and being insular about gender equality.

The Black church should continue to provide social benefits that are racially distributed into society, such as banking, legal, educational, health, and other services. The church should focus on love, inclusiveness, justice, freedom, and equality, moving toward the center of social and public

opinion.

African Americans have struggled to accept lesbians and gays as moral and equal human beings within a predominantly heterosexual society. The church should understand that the problem is African American homophobia and the Black church teaching that homosexuality is immoral. Oppression is wrong and must be condemned as an unacceptable human practice.

There is no difference between the behavior of African American Christians who use biblical texts to categorize lesbians and gays as immoral and that of eighteenth and nineteenth-century European American Christians who used the same Bible to identify African Americans as cursed people characterized by their immorality. Baptist ministers and congregations should revise their stance on homosexuality for a true liberation theology for Black churches.

Human beings lack moral justice and are contrary to the divine will of God. The church must conclude that homosexuality is part of human sexuality, just as African Americans are part of the human race.

The church's political consciousness is defined as cultural beliefs and ideological expressions used to realize and maintain group interests. For the African American Church, liberation is the chronic theme, and the church should be progressive in improving African Americans' position in American society. Preaching should construct shared meaning and group cohesion, contributing to a collective identity within the church. The social gospel is rooted in Jesus Christ, who exemplifies proper conduct, challenging injustice in the contemporary world.

The Black church is familiar with the struggle for a liberated assertion that Jesus Christ was a radical Black Messiah who disrupted the status quo institutions and mindsets. For Black people, God is ontologically Black-God, and God is so strongly identified with the oppressed that it becomes synonymous with them as Black people. The church should continue improving the conditions in society and serve as a sanctuary for more confident lives in the broader world.

Homophobia exists within the Black church due to intolerance of non-heterosexuality, informed by the history of slavery, oppression, and sexual violence against Blacks in the United States. The Black church was one avenue through which Black people could reclaim their identities and establish a collective identity. Martin R. Delany believed in a biblical revelation of the justice of God who "put down the mighty from their seats and exalted them of low degree" (Lk. 1:52). The colored race is called upon to take their position and battle in the struggle for world's redemption, as their cause is the greatest at present.

The story of Israel's forty-year wandering in the wilderness demonstrates the importance of reconstructing their culture and understanding God's perspective. Moses restored Israel's correct view of their history, and many of God's dealings with the family of Abraham may have been forgotten or distorted by the four-hundred-year ordeal of Egyptian slavery. As Black people, we must get back in touch with our history and reflect on the word of God to understand our past.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a systematic theologian who focused on the problems of evil and how structures of evil oppressed people. He believed that life at its source and center is personal and that every person has inherent worth. Dr. King's faith should be to struggle against injustice and oppression and to be an instrument of reconciliation, faithful to God.

Baptists believe that the typical reader can understand and interpret the scriptures, but human understanding of the Bible is never final, complete, or finished. African Americans, like their ancestors, suffered under slavery, but God was and will always be aware of their suffering and will bring God glory because they persevered.

Tradition is a set of observances, doctrines, and teachings that form the basis of thinking about the world and oneself. It is a cultural rule and a lens through which to view and make sense of the world. The African American Baptist Church must continue to foster spirituality, as it brings unity to life and promotes life as the most profound expression. Spirituality has both active and passive roles,

with active understanding focusing on reforming living conditions and passive understanding transforming personal emotions to endure harsh living conditions.

African spirituality, from an African American perspective, seeks to connect and maintain the connection between all aspects of living, leading to a public witness seeking justice and liberation. Spirituality results in a singularly directed effort to be in communion with God, self, and others. The Black church has been a foundation providing stability and comfort for older African Americans, and social workers and mental health professionals need to discuss spirituality with their clients and apply it to social work assessments and interventions.

Spirituality is integral to successful aging and is the inwardly focused quality that allows us to connect with ourselves, others, and the natural world. Understanding one's spirituality is a belief in a supernatural being that provides the grounding emanating from a faith tradition larger than we are in the present. The Black church has been a haven and respite place for interacting with God and acting out the essential recognition of God and ethical principles espoused by God on a personal level.

VI. Adapting to the 21st Century

A. Embracing Technology

The similarities between the African American church at the beginning of the twentieth century and the church at the twenty-first century are strikingly similar; the church standing at a pivotal point looking back at itself on a century included degradation, humiliation, victories, and exaltation. Some one hundred years ago, W. E. B. DuBois gave a voice to the pain and promises felt by African Americans in the nineteenth century in the classic work *Soul of Black Folk*. It was the tensions within the African American church related to the allure of Booker T. Washington's "gospel of wealth" and echoes of the prophetic voices of a man by the name of Bishop Henry M. Turner, focusing on the inner life of the Black church when he suggested the formation of the major Baptist conventions, and the push of Black Social Gospelers like Bishop Reverdy C. Ransom; pushing the passivity and the politics

of progressivism.²⁵³

We can say the African American church is confronted with historical tensions structurally like the past century, with a gospel of wealth repackaged as the "prosperity gospel" with the gospel of cultural pride submerged in and being co-opted by a materialistic culture. Moreover, the focus on the church's inner life reappears as a near-exclusive emphasis on "praise and worship," with the whispers of the social gospel refusing to be silenced. Moreover, some high-profile ministers continue pushing political passivity while lesser-known ones continue to cry out and work for justice.²⁵⁴

Du Bois declared that the color line was a significant problem of the twentieth century. If we were to ask the twenty-first century what the problem is now, there would be a similar problem with the emergence of technology as a critical variable in the quality of life and the inequalities that attend to its availability, creating a technical divide in our society. We hope Biden's infrastructure act will close the divide in the years to come. The economic divide has grown more expansive, exacerbated by policies with depressing wages and increased costs for those who can least afford it. Furthermore, we are living in a nation in which the wealthy are becoming wealthier and more prominent, and a more significant number of our brothers and sisters living below the poverty line. Appearing to be an economic gap to the rest of America is an unbridgeable chasm for the African American underclass. What appears to be a temporary economic setback for the rest of America is becoming a permanent condition for African Americans, and this peculiar and disproportionate nature of suffering is a source for the emergence of the prophetic voice in our times. Because economic inequality affects the lives of those living below the "poverty line," there are groups who, despite the economic success, continue to experience a kind of powerlessness. "These are persons who are middle income but not middle class." The problem in the twenty-first century is the power line.²⁵⁵

²⁵³ "The Prophetic Role of the African American Churches in the 21st Century | Reflections," accessed November 3, 2023, <https://reflections.yale.edu/article/future-prophetic-voice/prophetic-role-African-American-churches-21st-century>.

²⁵⁴ "The Prophetic Role of the African American Churches in the 21st Century | Reflections."

²⁵⁵ "The Prophetic Role of the African American Churches in the 21st Century | Reflections."

In reclaiming its prophetic voice, we will see in this study that the largest population of our millennials, particularly Black millennials, want this very thing. The prophetic mandate is a mission and a message appropriate to the post-civil rights era. In the 21st century, the church must contribute to realizing the transformation and reconciliation that is called for and needed. The church must speak to the powerful on behalf of the powerless. ²⁵⁶

Fifty years after the appearance of Du Bois's narrative, the Civil Rights Movement emerged on the American scene, and the tremendous social and spiritual awakening of the progressive dimension of the African American was broad, not universal in its appeal. Two deep human needs are addressing the movement: the need for freedom and the need for power. Furthermore, these needs remain in the African American community and onward. ²⁵⁷

What should drive the prophetic witness in the twenty-first century? Moreover, surprisingly, this is precisely what Black millennials desperately are looking for: a "consistent theology of liberation" and the second is a "consistent ethic of empowerment." The church must recognize and defend its historical claim that no form of oppression is consistent with God's will or cease to use liberation as its fundamental theological touchstone. We know the African American church has been a beacon of liberation in America. From the resistance movement during slavery to the Civil Rights Movement, liberation has been its hallmark, and currently, the African American church, in too many instances, proclaims a "limited liberation." "This is a liberation that includes race but excludes gender. It is and should include the liberation of race and gender, but what we see excludes class. "It is a liberation that includes race and gender but excludes sexual orientation." ²⁵⁸

We pray that groups come to share a commitment to liberation for themselves and others, whether they experience oppression in the same way. There is a consistent theology of liberation not bound by the narrow and occasional moralities of a privileged and powerful minority. It would call us

²⁵⁶ "The Prophetic Role of the African American Churches in the 21st Century | Reflections."

²⁵⁷ "The Prophetic Role of the African American Churches in the 21st Century | Reflections."

²⁵⁸ "The Prophetic Role of the African American Churches in the 21st Century | Reflections."

beyond our social locations, personal preferences, and group allegiances to recognize that if oppression exists anywhere, it does exist everywhere, and a consistent theology of liberation keeping the church at the forefront of the battle against sin (alienation) and its historical manifestations of (oppression).²⁵⁹

With a practice of the *ethic of empowerment*, the church must defend its historical claim that faith is essential to empowerment, and any ministry or sociopolitical or economic structure fostering dependence, degradation, or despair is not the product of a true faith. The church should not mimic society with a cult of dependence. A cult of dependence is characterized by leadership that is served rather than served, which is essential to Black millennials. We see in some contemporary settings where the pastor rather than Christ is the object of veneration and where the worship serves as entertainment rather than edification. Moreover, millennials know that it is a fake and a turn-off for them. "The church must be more than the occasion for empty ritual having the form of religion, but no power." However, a consistent ethic of empowerment should keep the church at the forefront of all people's battle for salvation (reconciliation) and its historical manifestation (the kingdom of God).²⁶⁰

The prophetic voice is more than an objective critique of the church. However, the dangers of self-righteousness and hypocrisy are present, and this can threaten the Christian community's prophetic efforts. In its best moments, the African American church can avoid its deleterious effects. Becoming aware of the dangers of self-righteousness when one's righteousness is continually disputed, one becomes aware of the dangers of hypocrisy when the truth is the key to life itself. When we look at the church historically, the African American church has stood for the righteousness of freedom during the unrighteousness of slavery. The church has stood for the truth of human dignity amid the lies of Black inferiority.²⁶¹

However, history does not absolve the African American church from its critique. The church must preach liberation and practice empowerment in its own life. If it does this, it gives voice to more

²⁵⁹ "The Prophetic Role of the African American Churches in the 21st Century | Reflections."

²⁶⁰ "The Prophetic Role of the African American Churches in the 21st Century | Reflections."

²⁶¹ "The Prophetic Role of the African American Churches in the 21st Century | Reflections."

relevant leadership paradigms for the church. Give voice to more effective methods for church ministries and speaking truth to power. Moreover, from this robust base, it will be able to, once again, "Shout the Victory!"²⁶²

For the African American Baptist church, the concern in the twenty-first century should be who controls information and who owns knowledge. Because knowledge is a popular commodity, corporations have obtained copyrights for everything from software programs to genetic sequences and new life forms. So, complex decisions about technology cannot belong to private corporations alone; they require Christians to bear social responsibility as well.²⁶³

When we talk about technology, most people think of computers or the Internet, not cell phones, barcode scanners, or ATMs, when they hear "technology." However, these devices are ushering us into real-time interaction right now. Dutch physicist and theologian Willem Drees speaks of layers of technology that humans experience: the material dimension of devices, the social dimension of organizations and skills, the psychological dimension of attitudes, and the daily dimension of life in a technological culture. Moreover, the global transformation into a network society has profound and lasting implications for Black people and the Black church. Industry growth and emerging technologies have propelled rapid innovation and social change during the twentieth century.²⁶⁴

For the Black church, we are experiencing three paradigm shifts affecting its mission: changing how we experience church, redesigning the global context for ministry, and challenging our spiritual beliefs. Historically, the church has participated in Black people's struggle for economic, educational, and environmental justice. However, to continue this ministry into the twenty-first century, the Black church must talk about the shape of faith and mission in the Information Age.²⁶⁵

Ordained minister David McKay, chief information officer, wrote in *The Ministry of*

²⁶² "The Prophetic Role of the African American Churches in the 21st Century | Reflections."

²⁶³ Elonda Clay, "Subtle Impact: Technology Trends and the Black church," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 31, no. 1–2 (2003): 153.

²⁶⁴ Clay, 154.

²⁶⁵ Clay, 155.

Information Services: "The church must be engaged with technology's advancement and usage to protect human rights, equality, and justice. If the tools of the Digital Age are left solely to the secular powers, the church is unilaterally disarming itself. It will not have an informed, credible voice to lend to the oppressed, the disenfranchised, and the powerful." ²⁶⁶

With the growing movement to use technology in the local church, resources include software, hardware, technical volunteers, and technology staff (or maintenance outsourced). The church should avoid a trend leading to haphazard acquisition and maintenance of information systems. The church should adequately plan for needed resources; the Black church must focus on strategic technology planning, utilizing church administration, worship, education, and evangelism. Administration equipment includes computers, local area networks, church management software, calendar and graphics software, antivirus software, desktop publishing software, phone systems, uninterruptible power supplies, and data storage systems. ²⁶⁷

It is suggested that churches form a committee (Technology Systems Committee) that makes purchase suggestions, researches best practices, follows through on implementations, and operates media resources for the church. Traditional ministries should plan for technologies used only by their ministries; however, they need a holistic view of how computers and multimedia could improve all the churches' ministries. ²⁶⁸

The Black church should view the use of technologies for worship, such as multimedia and communication media, as vital components in the daily activities of the church because multimedia technologies include sound systems and microphones, lighting systems, computers, duplication devices, video projection systems (cameras, projectors, screens, graphic software), and recording studios. Communications media include broadcast television, video editing, production, the Internet

²⁶⁶ Clay, 155.

²⁶⁷ Clay, 156.

²⁶⁸ Clay, 156.

(church websites), and audiotape/compact discs.²⁶⁹ Audiotapes and compact discs are no longer used; cloud storage houses this data, and it is retrievable everywhere.

For small and large churches, planning for technologies for worship is essential. Because a lousy sound system or poor acoustics in the sanctuary distracts people from the worship experience, consulting advice from acoustic and video engineers during a church building project can make all the difference—moreover, planning the management of media ministry volunteers.²⁷⁰

B. Engaging Younger Generations

Millennials (African American individuals born between 1982 and 2000) are increasingly disinterested in traditional church experiences. Despite our best programming and outreach efforts, many churches have been unable to attract, retain, and spiritually develop a substantial number of this generation. Moreover, many pastors and congregational leaders are grieving this perceived loss of the church's youth, vitality, and possibly even the church's relevance in a strange new digital world. Can our churches survive and thrive for the next 60 years or more, or have we already become “the walking dead?”²⁷¹

For the African American Baptist Church, the Apostle Peter's conversation with Jesus in Matthew's gospel, chapter 16, verse 18, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” The gospel writers identified Peter as the first disciple called by Jesus and beckoned to learn from Jesus. This relationship, this mutual knowledge of each other, ultimately sets the stage for Peter to trust Jesus by engaging him on the lake in Matthew 14. This mutual knowledge and understanding of one another must also exist between the Christian church and the Black millennials, and we hope this will engage us in the waters of spiritual formation. As much as we want this population to be a part of our fellowship, we know little to nothing

²⁶⁹ Clay, 157.

²⁷⁰ Clay, 157.

²⁷¹ Joshua Mitchell, *Black Millennials and the Church: Meet Me Where I Am*, First edition (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2018), 3.

about these young adults or what makes them tick.²⁷²

The church must understand that these young people have been overly exposed to the church's negative aspects, with congregations' scandals and shortcomings becoming all too frequent, launching pads for blog posts, Twitter wars, and television series. It is long before they darken the doors of our churches that many Black millennials have preconceived notions of the Christian church that the church must contend with the same way that many older members of congregations have preconceived notions of these young people.²⁷³

Throughout history, the Black church in the U.S., the church's physical building, has often provided sanctuary and safe space for spiritual development, community engagement, strategic planning, and civil disobedience when public education was widely unavailable (or illegal) in many states across the Union, inside our churches where Sunday school classes doubled as literacy clinics for poor Black pupils from week to week. "Throughout the Civil Rights Movement in America, Black churches opened the doors of their edifices to house rallies and strategic planning meetings to push various causes forward."²⁷⁴

What we need to understand is that millennials (and just about everyone else) will turn to the web to get information about the companies, organizations, and services that they seek with regularity, and a company's website is often a primary factor in whether a young person will invest time and talent in that organization's products. In the twenty-first century, a church's online presence is a must, and to serve this present age, churches must invest in maintaining their online platforms with the same seriousness as they invest in maintaining their brick-and-mortar structures. Young people will drive by the church building to check out a service or Bible Study, but many will hear about the congregation and make an initial "drive-by" of the church's website. The vibrant, clear, colorful images and videos that feature the worship experiences, community service, and leadership all help communicate volumes

²⁷² Mitchell, 14.

²⁷³ Mitchell, 14.

²⁷⁴ Mitchell, 27.

to would-be disciples about the ethos of a church community.²⁷⁵

Millennials are looking for traditional settings promulgating a more relevant gospel message. Millennials are deeply interested in things directly affecting their lives. They want gospel teachings and preachings that directly improve the listener's day-to-day activities and relationships.

“Convenience is essential in our culture, and traditional churches are beginning to adopt tools and technology that make it easier for people to encounter God and engage in the church's work.”²⁷⁶

For these digital natives who are educated and influenced using images, sound bites, and video content, many of these young people's views of the church, her pastors, and her agenda are shaped by mass media long before they ever enter our church buildings. Our generation does not trust the church with the same ease its predecessors did. This generation is suspicious of the church's agenda and why it seeks them to come into the fold.²⁷⁷

For Black millennials, relationship-building is essential for any congregation seeking to engage this generation. The relationship-building task extends beyond church leadership, knowing the names and faces of individual congregants on Sunday morning. However, effective relationship-building requires congregations to build the infrastructure to maintain awareness of the significant moments and movements in the lives of their congregants while becoming a persistent presence in the everyday lives of the young adults they seek to serve. Remember that “commuter congregations” exist where most members no longer live in the community. The challenge is strategizing how to empower and equip church leaders to shepherd small congregational groups responsibly (often based on age demographics or shared community) through “check-ins,” fellowships, or Bible study sessions.²⁷⁸

In creating a safe place for millennials, we are reminded of Matthew's account of the Apostle Peter, “Lord, if it is you, Peter replied, tell me to come to you on the water. Come, he said. Then Peter

²⁷⁵ Mitchell, 35.

²⁷⁶ Mitchell, 41.

²⁷⁷ Mitchell, 47.

²⁷⁸ Mitchell, 51.

got down out of the boat, walked on the water, and came toward Jesus” Matthew 14:28-29. Creating a safe space is critical for Black millennials to engage in their spiritual formation process in various contexts. In our case, the church, the creation of safe space is the cultivation of physical, emotional, intellectual, and theological places of engagement where principles can be explored, explained, and even expelled without being silenced or devaluing the experience or personhood of those within the community. Being mindful that our millennials are living in a world of increasing cultural, economic, racial, religious, and sexual diversity, safe space is an invaluable quality for any organization or congregation seeking to minister to the souls of our millennials effectively. ²⁷⁹

Millennials prefer a teacher to facilitate explorative conversations within a community of learners. The leader who prepares the lesson and is trained in biblical exegesis and cultural scholarship is as much a learner as anyone else, fostering open dialogue where no one’s interpretation or insight of the text is dismissed. We look at Jesus’ illustration of this principle when he asks his disciples in Luke 10:26, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” Jesus allows open dialogue and interpretation among the listening community while skillfully providing correction and direction as needed. ²⁸⁰

With the murder of Trayvon Martin, millennials have a sense of activism and a desire to be a part of social change in the sphere of justice and quality of life for people of color. They want the congregations to remain relevant among Black millennials and win souls while engaging in community activism and organizing, public policy reform, and social initiatives that increase the vitality of Black and Brown life. ²⁸¹

Black millennials are interested in how the Black church is willing to have serious conversations on LGBTQ+ identities, especially around the subject of theology and ethics on human sexuality. The question is, will the church survive the shift related to spiritual formation choices for

²⁷⁹ Mitchell, 60.

²⁸⁰ Mitchell, 63.

²⁸¹ Mitchell, 80.

Black millennials? ²⁸²

What the church must understand when it comes to Black millennials are navigating unstable job markets (despite their high levels of education and proficiency), gentrification, exorbitant living costs, and craziness of love and relationships. Moreover, it is crucial for these young people to know that God indeed has plans for them and to be given the tools to forge ahead in faith in God until they begin seeing what they expect by faith. ²⁸³

Millennials want the church to discuss dating and relationships for the church and also to address numerous questions around sexuality (such as sexual purity, sex before marriage, and sexual orientation). What should be the qualities of a potential spouse? Furthermore, what is the difference between courtship and dating? Moreover, what are the boundaries employed in Christian dating? ²⁸⁴

For Black millennials, an innate hermeneutic of suspicion and not text, tradition, or teaching is exempt from being questioned and critiqued because the freedom to question is a part of the wiring of this generation, sometimes called Generation “Y” (Why), not only because they follow Generation X but because they have allowed and emboldened from childhood to express objection and dissension and to question authorities in their lives in ways Baby Boomers never dared. ²⁸⁵

What Black millennials have doubts about is twenty-first-century churches doubting the validity and calling of women who work as leaders in every other space but the church. They believe much of this tension, as with issues of sexuality, is rooted in scriptural interpretations that shaped church doctrine and tradition. ²⁸⁶

For Black millennials, identity formation, and religious practice happen primarily within many congregations’ walls, which is why the people who have chosen not to participate in the traditional Black church have created spaces outside the church walls and are disinterested in the traditional

²⁸² Mitchell, 83.

²⁸³ Mitchell, 88.

²⁸⁴ Mitchell, 89.

²⁸⁵ Mitchell, 93.

²⁸⁶ Mitchell, 93.

practices. Services continue to be narrowly updated versions of what they have historically been on Sundays. The devotion is praise and worship; announcements may happen digitally, through print newsletters, or on a screen mimicking the news. Moreover, Sunday School may or may not exist as a place of Christian education, but it is a familiar pillar for millennials.²⁸⁷

There is a relationship and knowledge between young Black adults and millennials, which makes for complicated programming and evangelism for a generation. Our millennials seek authentic relationships instead of engagement in a mediated understanding of the generation. Moreover, while seeking to understand a generation who wants to be understood, the Black church must become open to transformed thinking for a vibrant, organic body of believers with a bright future and shameless hope. We must be mindful of the uniqueness of Black millennials who experience racial oppression. This unjust correctional system seems to consume both men and women of their generation in unprecedented numbers and experience socioeconomic hardships specific to race, which does not leave room for appropriate comparison to their White counterparts.²⁸⁸

For millennials, the technology works to their advantage in evangelism, where they can share their testimony through multiple avenues and mediums within seconds. Technology is being used to draw people closer to relationships by sharing stories, ideas, and challenges. Millennials believe it is not enough to wait for the local news to report a few times a day or watch the chosen headlines on CNN and MSNBC because too much can only be reported swiftly via social media.²⁸⁹

The Black church must acknowledge the power of social media in the news, remembering it is also a way to share the gospel because several apps, social media influencers, and focused pages give their followers a message of encouragement and empowerment. “We cannot ignore the opportunity to

²⁸⁷ Rev. Dr. Brianna Parker, *What Google Can't Give: The Relevancy of the Church for Black Millennials in the Tech Age* (Black Millennial Cafe', LLC, 2018), 35.

²⁸⁸ Parker, 39.

²⁸⁹ Parker, 47.

“speak truths to the people scrolling aimlessly.”²⁹⁰

“Millennials are the most degreed generation the United States has ever produced, so mediocre mocking of an education system is repulsing. Too many models of Christian education are misinformed presentations lacking innovation, design, and excellence.”²⁹¹

It should be no surprise that millennials are interested in outreach since many blogs have noted that millennials- Black, White, or others- believe they are making a difference. “Black millennials surveyed chose justice as the top issue that the church should address, and the author does not believe that would be true for White millennials.”²⁹²

For millennials, family dynamics are essential along with the realities of social justice, and outreach is an opportunity to lessen the impact of injustices in a structured way while attacking policies behind such injustice. They are concerned with economic development because some have experienced or can see the beginnings of gentrification. They know of people who own homes pushed out of their neighborhoods, unable to keep up with the ever-increasing taxes or sell at a rate they believed profitable, only to find that it was worth far more than expected.²⁹³

For millennials, gender equality and sexuality in the church want to hear words of encouragement for the exploited and condemnation for the oppressors from the pulpit, and they believe the church should offer biblical guidance for gender equality but continue to be unable to share any scriptures or biblical stories to support their desire. Moreover, sexuality for millennials believes the church should address it but has little hope that it will be done in a way that is transparent, open, and non-offensive.²⁹⁴

Millennials will not build our fellowship halls or churches because there was a time when the membership would replace the church roof before the roof on their homes. For millennials, this is less

²⁹⁰ Parker, 48.

²⁹¹ Parker, 50.

²⁹² Parker, 53.

²⁹³ Parker, 55.

²⁹⁴ Parker, 56.

about the selfish attitudes of a generation and more about the irresponsibility and poor stewardship of some who have gone before them. It is essential for millennials that when our churches campaign to build, they tell churches how the community will benefit from the facility.²⁹⁵

Millennials are looking for highly organized services from the parking lot ministry that allow persons to park seamlessly, engaging a friendly greeter to get assistance to a place in the sanctuary (organization and production). They are also looking for streamlined services with artistic visuals that reflect the message in addition to the scriptures, songs, and set. The pitch-perfect production arts also allow what attendees often unintentionally miss: the need to engage every learning style in every experience. Millennials know the goal of worship is to praise God and gain a practical understanding of the word of God. “Visuals throughout the church or sanctuary, charts, graphs, words, and images on the screen; dance; drama; and such cannot continue to be a treat for the congregation but intentional methods of learning and engagement.”²⁹⁶

Millennials want to hear the pastor’s mistakes and experiences and learn how to remove the erected chains. Millennials want what is practical and applicable to their lives.²⁹⁷ For millennials, this cannot be emphasized enough. Telling ancient stories in the Bible is not enough if we do not mention the application to our lives.

For millennials, a secure future is not solidified biblically and historically, and the goal is strategizing for change and building funds for fellowship halls and basketball courts that the average person in the community cannot access. Black millennials want relevant ministries to exist and correct immoral policies and practices in overpoliced neighborhoods, challenge police forces that lack diversity, agitate policies set out to destroy them, and bring discomfort to people who refuse to see their humanity.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁵ Parker, 64.

²⁹⁶ Parker, 90.

²⁹⁷ Parker, 91.

²⁹⁸ Parker, 94.

It is crucial for pastors and others that millennials tweet the exact words without context and do more damage. Moreover, pastors must think through our words, not just what they mean and how they will land with several people in the congregation. "Churches treat everyone like they are on the payroll, and they are not. Churches should create distance in volunteers' responsibilities; it is only fair." ²⁹⁹

As the African American Baptist Church embraces the 21st century and beyond, the church must not lose sight of the social gospel, especially because Gen X and Gen Z are looking for our engagement, and God forbid we return to the 1960s when it came to an end, many in the nation's Black churches lost their commitment to social activism. Moreover, this retreat from progressive politics was amplified by the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968. In the words of one of the fathers of liberation theology, James Cone, "The lack of vision in the churches is mirrored in the Civil Rights Movement because the two have been and are closely related...With many persons wanting to be leaders and few wanting to follow, and with many leaders more concerned about their media image than about creating the structures for the liberation of the poor, it becomes clear why there have been no new visions." The redirection of the church's focus and the appeal to individualism marked the theology of many ministers and resulted in a public relations nightmare for the church. Moreover, as the 1970s got underway, the Black church began to feel the consequences of its turn toward political and social conservatism as Black Americans looked to other organizations for guidance and support.

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There is a consensus that younger churchgoers and those willing to join the church are looking for churches willing to communicate by email, text messaging, meeting in small groups for dinner parties with other Christian input, and spending six weekends a year getting together to deepen their faith with Christian teachings and meditation exercises. They would be interested in being helpers in

²⁹⁹ Parker, 99.

³⁰⁰ Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black church in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2002), 16.

Christian outings with their children on Friday evenings.³⁰¹

This concept of McChurch based on McDonald's feeding us fast is what these churches do: singing, dancing, a message, opportunities to build relationships, community, and a moment of respite from life's issues in a very short time; people might see the church service as beneficial. This method of doing church may be appealing to the younger generation, and this thought has been included in this paper to foster thought and possible consideration for the church going forward in the 21st century and beyond.³⁰² Looking past the McChurch approach, the tool for making disciples of all nations is good if the focus remains on people over processes and protocol.³⁰³

For Black awareness is to give answers to the question- who am I; and to give pride in ourselves, our history, and our ancestry. From the Black church's inception, it specialized in disproving the myth of Black inferiority and White superiority. Today, our Black youth are passionately concerned with this same issue and are determined to shock the White establishment into the realization that man is a man regardless of skin color.³⁰⁴

So, if the White church had accepted the Black man as a human being, there perhaps would have been no need for a separate Black church. The inception of the Black church was born in response to the tremendous humanitarian and sociological needs of the powerless, deprived, isolated, and mistreated Black people in and outside of the Christian church.³⁰⁵

Our youth today are interested in a world of peace; this does make them anti-war; they are interested in full equality for all people, so this makes them anti-establishment, and they are willing to put themselves on the altar of sacrifice for what they believe. The church must involve these young

³⁰¹ Bob Jackson, *Hope for the Church: Contemporary Strategies for Growth*, Explorations (London: Church House, 2002), 150.

³⁰² Richard M Smith 1978, "Becoming McChurch: A Case Study of a Black church Organization's Transition from Leading in the Local Community to Creating a Global Brand: Journal of Religious Leadership," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 15, no. 1 (2016): 61.

³⁰³ Smith, 76.

³⁰⁴ Andrew White, "Why the Church Should Evangelize Black Youth: Religious Education," *Religious Education* 64, no. 6 (November 1969): 446.

³⁰⁵ White, 447.

people because they could be vigorous agents of change. The church has always been concerned with human characteristics; our youth would have an additional opportunity to add these virtues to their vim, vitality, and vigor. Furthermore, it should be the church's duty to inform the youth of what it offers and let them know that a partnership relationship is desirable and that the church is ready to assist. ³⁰⁶

C. Contemporary Worship Styles

When we examine the cultural makeup of a congregation, we should not contrast it with contemporary or traditional, as it relates to its racial makeup and the socio-economic, educational, and cultural backgrounds of its members. All this influences church culture and affects our cultural approach and style of church worship. ³⁰⁷

Scripture ought to have an impact concerning the church's relationship to culture in a contemporary context, and the nature of that relationship affects the church's worship. We must grapple with the teachings of the Bible, quarrying timeless principles from it and seeking to ascertain how these principles apply to diverse cultures characterized by modern Western societies. ³⁰⁸

Is there a relationship between the church and contemporary cultures, especially regarding worship? Believing the Bible does teach the church, and we must express a unique Christian culture, especially when it comes to worship. There should be a distinctively Christian culture. ³⁰⁹ We all should realize that the whole of our lives is worship and that we come together to worship in a specific way. Worship should be a communal and corporate affair, and there is a biblical injunction that we do not forsake, not the assembling of ourselves together, that we might encourage each other. We are to minister to one another. Even the Apostle Paul makes abundantly clear in his treatment of the Lord's Supper that grace is most emphatically not privatized. However, instead, it is communal, where we are

³⁰⁶ White, 448.

³⁰⁷ Stephen Clark, "Worship Today: Contemporary Expression of Worship in One's Own Culture(s)," *Foundations (Affinity)* 76 (2019): 131.

³⁰⁸ Clark, 132.

³⁰⁹ Clark, 135.

to have regard for one another.³¹⁰

We should not associate the pipe organ or an electronic version of the same, that which is stuffy. Some in the church believe the pipe organ is associated with “sweet and solemn pleasure,” while others feel forced into being stiff, stuffy, and starchy. We know some who have come to faith in Christ and joined the church with high-brow musical tastes. Should people feel they must genuinely deny themselves the opportunity to worship God? Even some years ago, culturally conservative evangelical churches began having an organ and piano playing together-thinking they were leaping forward.³¹¹

We know that contemporary hymns and Christian songs are written to be sung in unison. C.S. Lewis said: I dislike their hymns, which we considered fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music. But as I went on, I saw the great merit of it. I came up against different people with different outlooks and educations, and then, gradually, my conceit began peeling off. I realized that the hymns (which were just sixth-rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you are not fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit.³¹²

In the Old Testament, many instruments accompany God’s praise, proving they should be used today. The church does not need to negotiate when biblically rather than traditionally the latest fads when thinking through the whole issue of contemporary expressions of worship in one’s own culture, bringing us to the point where we need to ask if there is a case to be made for a specifically “Christian culture,” especially when it comes to praise, prayer, teaching, fellowshiping, and celebration of the sacraments. Because of cultures, they will be distinctive and different from any other cultures. Because the church consists of people from diverse backgrounds who are one in Christ Jesus, unity can be expressed in diversity. This unity in diversity is to be expressed as much in the church’s praise and

³¹⁰ Clark, 140.

³¹¹ Clark, 147.

³¹² Clark, 147.

“worship services” as in every other aspect of life. ³¹³

Even the New Testament churches were made up of converted Jews and Gentiles. Singing together was a feature of the gatherings, and the Apostle Paul tells the Ephesians and the Colossians that psalms are to be a feature of their singing together. We know that many of the psalms written by David were thousands of years old, but the Apostle Paul expected Gentile Christians to sing these. We believe many of these psalms had been sung in the temple to traditional tunes, so Gentile Christians were singing old compositions but singing them to quite old music. ³¹⁴

For the church today, Jewish Christians had to get used to Gentle Christians bringing their fresh compositions, so Gentile Christians had to get used to psalms. “Today, Christians who have been raised in churches and who have been used to doing things in a certain way need to be prepared to allow Christians converted straight from the world to bring some of their cultural background into the church,” and that includes contemporary music which is different from traditional gospel music. ³¹⁵ Gospel music originated with African Americans and our pain, which is derived from slavery. Contemporary music praises the majesty of God and Jesus Christ and typically has more lyrics. Gospel music usually has more repeated lyrics to zero in on one’s struggles.

For many of the words in the Bible, there is no mention of one musical note. In the messages to the seven churches in Asia Minor in Revelation, chapters 2 and 3, Jesus does not mention the quality of their singing or music; Jesus was concerned with their faith, repentance, love, obedience, humility, patience, or the absence of these things. The emphasis should always be on the word of God, which we see in the Old and New Testaments. ³¹⁶

Let us not say to older believers, who have expressed their praise for decades, that very well-known hymns are told such things belong in the past and that they are meaningless to new converts,

³¹³ Clark, 151.

³¹⁴ Clark, 152.

³¹⁵ Clark, 153.

³¹⁶ Clark, 155.

and only what is contemporary is to be sung.³¹⁷ However, a mixture of traditional hymns and gospel music should be sprinkled with contemporary music because we want to appeal to a younger generation, particularly millennials. Let us be mindful that many hymns are prayers, and all generations need to pray, and the psalms help us structure our prayer life.³¹⁸

In looking at this subject matter, there needs to be a broad and deep knowledge of both contemporary hymns and hymns reaching back to the early church, and a need to link between what is sung and what is preached. This deep knowledge, as mentioned, does not mean that Christian spirituality and “real worship” must be marked by informality, spontaneity, and freedom. However, the biblical metaphor of the church as a body teaches that both elements are essential in the church's life; the human body is remarkably structured and framed, and its structure and form enable it to express itself freely and spontaneously. The total life of the church is needed for both these elements to be expressed in the church’s worship.³¹⁹

In the Book of Psalm, we have a collection of 150 poems, songs, hymns, and prayers in the Old Testament. This book is an incredible collection of works, many of which are musicals, specifically about our contemporary worship expressions.³²⁰

Because contemporary worship is emotional, the Book of Psalm expresses the deep and most profound emotions of the writer(s), such as the joy one feels, despair and lament, anger, and fear, all of which are examples for us in contemporary worship. By escaping rituals in our worship, we are to be our authentic selves, visible and emotionally in worship.³²¹

The Book of Psalm teaches us to express our love and awe of God. The writers of the Book of Psalm not only want us to express our praise unto God but encourage us to “My mouth will speak in

³¹⁷ Clark, 156.

³¹⁸ Clark, 156.

³¹⁹ Clark, 158.

³²⁰ Brian Clay, “WORSHIP IN A NEW KEY: What Do the Psalms Teach Us about Contemporary Worship?,” *Cross Accent* 31, no. 1 (2023): 1.

³²¹ Clay, 1.

praise of the Lord. Let every creature praise his holy name forever and ever” (Psalm 145:21). “He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him” (Psalm 40:3). “Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Psalm 8:9). “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord” (Psalm 150:6).³²²

In contemporary worship, which can be learned from the Book of Psalm, a recurring theme is confession, reflecting the honesty and humility of the writers, acknowledging their sins, and asking for God's forgiveness. We know that confession is an expression of lament or a plea for help, and many of the psalms express what we believe to be a deep sense of remorse and a desire to turn away from sin. In Psalm 130, we see this: “If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you, there is forgiveness so that we can, with reverence, serve you” (vs. 3-4).³²³

As the Book of Psalm shows us, contemporary worship should show us gratitude for God's provisions, which inspire us to offer thanks to God, and is demonstrated in Psalm 107:1a, which says plainly, "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good." Words such as “thanks,” “thanksgiving,” and “praise” appear countless times, reflecting the concept's importance.³²⁴

Contemporary worship, like the Book of Psalm, calls us to be in community with each other because the Book of Psalm was written for communal singing and was used in group worship settings, calling the people to God to come together in worship and praise and reminding all of us of the importance of worshipping together as a community.³²⁵

There is agreement among theologians and historians that the words of the Book of Psalm we read today were initially written for musical accompaniment. However, we do not know what that music would have sounded. We know the lyrics survived as our scriptures but not the musical notations. We know our musical concepts have changed and evolved, and the push and pull of worship

³²² Clay, 8.

³²³ Clay, 2.

³²⁴ Clay, 8.

³²⁵ Clay, 8.

expressions and styles continue; the timeless words of inspired praise are appropriate, applicable, and reliable for every generation.³²⁶

D. Inclusivity and Diversity

Among older persons, spirituality has increased appreciably in gerontology and the sociology of religion among African Americans.³²⁷ What the Black church has meant to people of color: it is the social institution and cultural womb of the Black community, and it is comprised of independent churches that organize our communities' religious activities, provide a haven, facilitate a solid social network; disseminate knowledge about moral, professional, and educational life; mobilize us to contest injustice; mediate Black communities and the broader social world; and generate untold social capital.³²⁸

The Black sacred canopy is the cosmos formed of cultural capital that reflects Black people's African heritage, the holocaust of slavery, a society built around the "color line" or "veil," disenfranchisement in Jim Crow America, glass ceilings, and the ongoing injustices in our racialized society as much as the emotional experience of belonging and worship. Our powerful, culturally formed worldview moves the individual to sustain a proud identity and core values like justice, equality, and freedom, regardless of institutional affiliation.³²⁹

There are many opinions as we grapple with inclusivity and diversity in the African American Baptist church. A topic that the church is grappling with is homosexuality, whereby some churches institute in their bylaws and constitutions their position on homosexuality and what the church will not do. However, what if the church left a judgmental spirit behind and let God do the judging? What the church has done is let a few scriptures on homosexuality condemn persons of that persuasion, and

³²⁶ Clay, 9.

³²⁷ Edward H Thompson, Andrew Futterman, and Maureen McDonnell, "The Legacy of the Black church: Older African Americans' Religiousness: Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging," *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging* 32, no. 3 (2020): 247, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15528030.2019.1611521>.

³²⁸ Thompson, Futterman, and McDonnell, 248.

³²⁹ Thompson, Futterman, and McDonnell, 249.

maybe the church should see this condemnation as a social justice issue instead. So, let us first delve into the social justice issue of homosexuality and the traditional argument against homosexuality regarding both around inclusivity.

Theologian Kelly Brown Douglas wrote a book entitled *Sexuality and the Black church – a Womanist Perspective*. Even though she comes at the subject from a womanist perspective, the church can glean from this perspective meaning (1) to understand why sexuality, in general, has been a “taboo” subject for the Black church and community; (2) to advance the womanist discourse on Black sexuality; and (3) to promote the kind of theological discourse and analyses that might nurture healthier attitudes and behaviors toward sexuality-related concerns within the Black church and community, especially concerns about homophobia/heterosexism.³³⁰

Christian ethicist James Nelson provides a definition that is operative throughout the book when he said: “Sexuality is a sign, a symbol, and a means of our call to communication, and this is the most apparent regarding other human beings and other body-selves. The mystery of our sexuality is the mystery of our need to reach out to embrace others both physically and spiritually.... [Sexuality] is who we are as body-selves who experience the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual need for intimate communion-human and divine.”³³¹

To understand why sexuality, in general, has been a “taboo” subject for the Black church and community, one can look to slavery as the cauldron out of which demeaning attacks on Black sexuality were formed, with these attacks grounded in ideologies and attitudes that preceded slavery. When Europeans first encountered Africans, and during these encounters, Europeans were struck by the stark differences in appearances between themselves and Africans. What was despicable was the myth fabricated by European travelers to Africa involving apes. With Englishmen comparing these animals with Africans. “One sixteenth-century writer on the subject advanced that men that have low and flat

³³⁰ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black church - A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Oris Books, 1999), 202.

³³¹ Douglas, 213.

nostrils [that is, the Africans] are libidinous as apes that attempt women.” Stories developed as European intruders into Africa alleged actual sexual contact between apes and African women. “By forging a sexual link between Negroes and apes, Englishmen were able to give vent to their feelings that Negroes were lewd, lascivious and wanton people.”³³²

To advance the womanist discourse on Black sexuality, the most prominent stereotypes characterizing the Black female as “a person governed almost entirely by her libido.” The women are described as having an insatiable sexual appetite, being extraordinarily passionate, and being sexually aggressive and cunning. This stereotype produces images of Black women as Jezebel. In the scriptures, she is symbolized as evil, scheming, and seductive. “This symbol no doubt owes its meaning to the ninth-century Phoenician princess and wife of the Israelite king Ahab, who was accused of destroying the kingdom with her idolatrous practices and otherwise diabolical ways (1 Kings 16:29-22:53).”³³³ And we know that each enslaved person, whether female or male, was brought up to the block, and sometimes stripped entirely of all clothing, that the buyer may examine as to any defect. Their persons were handled like oxen and horses, each sold separately to the highest bidder.³³⁴ For the Black church, we have not lost sight of these degrading ways our sexuality was exploited.

Moreover, to promote the kind of theological discourse and analyses that might nurture healthier attitudes and behaviors toward sexuality-related concerns within the Black church and community, especially concerns about homophobia/heterosexism, we hear these words – I can love the sinner, but not the sin. That homosexuality is an abomination. Moreover, to be gay goes against nature. Moreover, if we were supposed to be homosexual, God would have created Adam and Steve, not Adam and Eve. I really do not mind gay people, but why do they have to be so vocal and pushy about their rights? Moreover, homosexuality is a White thing. Moreover, Africa did not have

³³² Douglas, 655.

³³³ Douglas, 725.

³³⁴ Douglas, 749.

homosexuals before Europeans went there, and homosexuality is detrimental to the Black family.³³⁵ Douglas believes that Black homophobic attitudes and practices stem from the complexity of Black people's oppression at the hands of White culture. We know that significant Black voices have forthrightly supported gay and lesbian rights, and civil rights leaders such as Jesse Jackson, Joseph Lowery, Coretta Scott King, and Benjamin Chavis have publicly decried discriminatory policies or behaviors toward gay and lesbian persons.³³⁶ Douglas does not propose to provide a complete analysis of Black homophobia. Instead, she outlines the general contours of this analysis, seeking to understand the relationship between Black homophobia and Black oppression, particularly the exploitation of Black sexuality. It is churchgoers using the scriptures to argue that the Bible makes clear that homosexuality is a sin. The Bible becomes a tool for censoring a group of people. It is believed that biblical scholars have painstakingly shown that the Leviticus Holiness Codes (Lev. 18:22; 20:13), the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:1-9), and Paul's Epistles to the Romans (1:26-27) do not present a compelling case against homoeroticism.³³⁷

When it comes to the New Testament, many scholars have pointed out that neither the words nor the actions of Jesus, as recorded in the gospels, suggest an antigay or anti-lesbian stance. However, Jesus shows virtual indifference to matters of sexuality. Moreover, the only sexual issue Jesus seems to mention is fidelity, in that he prohibited divorce except in the cases of infidelity. "Jesus made no pronouncement and indeed no condemnation concerning homosexuality."³³⁸

We know the Bible has been used against us to support slavery, and let us be cautious not to use the Bible to oppress ourselves. As Douglas mentions, "The Bible then becomes a tool of oppression and taken up as a weapon to censor the behavior and restrict the life possibilities of others, and this has

³³⁵ Douglas, 1613.

³³⁶ Douglas, 640.

³³⁷ Douglas, 1670.

³³⁸ Douglas, 1676.

been true for White exploitation of Black people.”³³⁹ “Black biblical scholars are beginning to discern that Black people’s approaches to biblical texts bespeak a judicious sense of biblical authority born during the period of enslavement and honed throughout their history of struggle in America.”³⁴⁰

When it comes to the Bible, Black people should use a hermeneutic based on the text to support the life and freedom of all Black people. Suppose Black men and women find themselves utilizing the Bible in a way that terrorizes other human beings. In that case, we should disavow such usage, and most importantly, we should critically reevaluate the text that has led to such terror.³⁴¹ It was the White culture that racialized sex and “sexuated” race by equating blackness with sexual deviance, and the Black community has been diligent in its efforts to sever the link between such deviance and blackness by recognizing homophobia as a response to White sexual exploitation.³⁴² Moreover, homophobia, not homosexuality, does lead many of them away from their families, their communities, and their places of worship.³⁴³

Scholars have noted that homosexuality in the Black community is so frowned upon because gay men are perceived to be willingly giving up their male privilege – their masculinity – and often, in the Black community, this is the only privilege that Black men have. Bell Hooks argues that lesbianism provokes a similar confusion regarding Black women. Because Black lesbians are perceived as giving up their femininity, not procreating, nor letting the Black man have his due, the Black church scholar by the name of Kelly Brown Douglas (2003), and has been mentioned in this paper, argues that Blacks have been trying to distance themselves from deviant forms of sexual expression for over 100 years, which leads to the denial of homosexuality in the Black community and extremely homophobic beliefs on the part of the church. Douglas argues that it is not homosexuality that is at the root of homophobia within the Black community and church, but it is sexuality, or better yet, deviant sexuality, and the

³³⁹ Douglas, 1684.

³⁴⁰ Douglas, 1694.

³⁴¹ Douglas, 1794.

³⁴² Douglas, 1811.

³⁴³ Douglas, 1987.

oppression that Blacks faced based on their sexuality.³⁴⁴ When the church discriminates against those who are homosexual or lesbian, it is akin to discrimination. Moreover, as Black people, we know what it is like to be discriminated.

A woman by the name of Jacquelyn Grant maintains that Black women "have to keep the issue of sexism going in the Black community, in the Black church, and Black Theology until it has been eliminated." Moreover, to do otherwise means that Black women will be pushed aside until eternity. She believes Black women must be self-determined in recognizing the importance of fighting their battles.³⁴⁵

James Cone said these words written in the Garrett-Evangelical Seminary in 1976, "We cannot pretend any longer that all is well, and that the problem of male-female relations is limited to the White community. It is in the Black community as well, and it is time that we face up to the need to speak openly and frankly about what is right and wrong in our community concerning Black men and women."³⁴⁶

If sexism is defeated in our churches, we must ensure that the by-laws of the church government and discipline are in harmony with the best in the Christian faith. Sexism is a matter of attitude and a structural problem as well.³⁴⁷

We must remember that by denying the ordination of Black women, there seems to be an implication that Jesus Christ is but half a Savior since only men are allowed to be ordained to preach and to be pastors. Moreover, it is ironic that men would insist that there are no scriptural grounds for the ordination of women when men had nothing at all to do with the birth of the one they preach.³⁴⁸

Sojourner Truth said, "I feel that if I have to answer for the deeds done in my body just as much

³⁴⁴ Angelique Harris, *AIDS, Sexuality, and the Black church: Making the Wounded Whole*, Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Studies in Religion, Culture, and Social Development, vol. 11 (New York: P. Lang, 2010), 58.

³⁴⁵ Rufus Jr Burrow, "Sexism in the Black Community and the Black church: The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 13, no. 2 (1986): 317.

³⁴⁶ Burrow, 318.

³⁴⁷ Burrow, 320.

³⁴⁸ Burrow, 320.

as a man, I have a right to have just as much as a man. There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights but not a word about colored women, and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, the colored men will be the masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before." ³⁴⁹

E. Community Outreach and Service

When the African American Baptist Church focuses on community outreach and service, it will behoove the church to do so with an emerging theology grounded in the word of God because in doing so, the church will not be wayward in its approach to outreach and service, not being caught up in gimmicks. What we know is that the emergent church with a theology of the same (emergent) is anointed and Spirit-led to point the way forward with a theology of John the Baptist pointing into the world and saying, "Here is the lamb of God" (John 1:29). ³⁵⁰

An emerging church must be missional, meaning our only existence is wrapped up in the world's continuing mission of Jesus Christ (the Messiah). We should be like Jesus arising out of the water of baptism, being anointed by the Spirit, and most importantly, moving into the streets and marketplace to heal, promote justice, and seek peace. ³⁵¹

Our theology ought to be revelational, a theology of the Word of God. The Word of God which came down from heaven; and it speaks truth and opens the minds and hearts of people, if they open their hearts to God, which the Holy Spirit will take residence after believing the testimony of Jesus Christ and receiving Him as their Lord and Savior, and most importantly from that day forward living for Him in the world. ³⁵²

The African American Baptist Church's community outreach and service must be reformatinal. It must seek to put new wine into new wineskins because the church should want to renew the existing

³⁴⁹ Burrow, 321.

³⁵⁰ Ray Sherman Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Press, 2006), 16.

³⁵¹ Anderson, 16.

³⁵² Anderson, 16.

church and translate the older formulas of the faith into new paradigms of contemporary communication. The church must be relatable in the 21st century, understanding the times we live in and packaging the word of God so that new converts can understand and grasp how the word of God can impact their lives.³⁵³

When approaching community outreach and service, the church should emphasize a kingdom-coming theology with an emerging theology. “An emerging theology proclaims a new order of God’s reign already present as a transforming spiritual, social and economic power of liberation and rehabilitation of humankind.”³⁵⁴

Suppose the African American Baptist Church would promote a kingdom-coming theology around community outreach and service. In that case, it only makes sense to promote a kingdom living where the church seeks to be the gathering of all who seek the blessing of being grace-filled believers and the empowering community sending forth as Spirit-filled disciples.³⁵⁵ Our world needs more disciples for Jesus Christ, ultimately winning more souls for Him.

Eschatological should be at the forefront of our theology toward the community and the service we offer, a theology of and mind of the risen and coming to Christ and the heart and soul of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. The African American Baptist Church ought to have a theology that keeps hope alive by preparing the way of the future into the present and, at the same time, keeping the faith alive by looking “forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10).³⁵⁶

Finally, around community outreach and service, the African American Baptist Church, especially in the 21st century and beyond, ought to be incarnational, meaning a language is that of the people; our message is communicated through culture; our presence in the world is ordinary to get

³⁵³ Anderson, 16.

³⁵⁴ Anderson, 16.

³⁵⁵ Anderson, 16.

³⁵⁶ Anderson, 16.

within arm's length to embrace others with extraordinary love.³⁵⁷

The Million Man March on October 16, 1995, called by Minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam, brought together many faith traditions, including Alice Walker, a womanist, and Black theology, which includes womanist thought. She said seeing the brothers involved in our struggle to be free was encouraging. "In the absence of a movement that would provide a space to focus our pain, to analyze it, and devise ways to stop it, our men (and a few of my sisters, too) seemed to have resigned themselves to powerlessness, given up on the ability to make our communities work, and retreated from responsibility to and for Black youth." This march showed that as a people, we can come together for the greater good of all people and make a difference in our lives and the lives of others in the United States of America, and the African American Baptist Church can continue to partner for this more significant cause in the 21st century and beyond.³⁵⁸

F. Conclusion

The African American church has faced historical tensions in the past century, with a focus on wealth and cultural pride being co-opted by materialistic culture. The church's inner life is often emphasized as praise and worship, while political passivity and progressivism continue to be promoted. The color line has become a significant problem in the twenty-first century, with technology becoming a critical variable in the quality of life and inequalities creating a technical divide. The economic divide has grown more expansive, with depressing wages and increased costs for those who can least afford it.

The power line is a disproportionate issue for African Americans, and the church must reclaim its prophetic voice in the 21st century. The Civil Rights Movement has broad appeal, but deep human needs remain in the African American community. To drive the prophetic witness in the 21st century, the church must recognize and defend its historical claim that no form of oppression is consistent with God's will and use liberation as its fundamental theological touchstone.

³⁵⁷ Anderson, 17.

³⁵⁸ Garth Baker-Fletcher, ed., *Black Religion after the Million Man March: Voices on the Future* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1998), 13.

A consistent theology of liberation is essential for Black millennials, as they desire a commitment to liberation for themselves and others, regardless of their experiences of oppression. A consistent ethic of empowerment should keep the church at the forefront of the battle against sin and its historical manifestations of oppression. The church should not mimic society with a cult of dependence, which is essential to Black millennials. A consistent ethic of empowerment should keep the church at the forefront of all people's battle for salvation and its historical manifestation.

The prophetic voice is a critical aspect of the Christian community but can lead to self-righteousness and hypocrisy. The African American church must confront these dangers by preaching liberation and practicing empowerment in its own life. In the twenty-first century, the church must consider who controls information and owns knowledge, as technology has profound implications for Black people and the church.

The church must engage with technology's advancement and usage to protect human rights, equality, and justice. By planning for needed resources, the church should focus on strategic technology planning, utilizing church administration, worship, education, and evangelism. A committee (Technology Systems Committee) should be formed to make purchase suggestions, research best practices, follow through on implementations, and operate media resources for the church.

The use of technologies for worship, such as multimedia and communication media, is vital for the daily activities of the church. Consulting advice from acoustic and video engineers during church building projects can make a difference in the worship experience.

Engaging younger generations, such as millennials, is essential for the church's survival and relevance in a new digital world. The Apostle Peter's conversation with Jesus in Matthew's gospel highlights the importance of mutual knowledge and understanding between the church and Black millennials. The church must understand that many Black millennials have preconceived notions of the Christian church, which the church must contend with to ensure their spiritual formation.

In conclusion, the African American church must address the challenges of self-righteousness, hypocrisy, and the digital age to continue its mission and serve the needs of its younger generation. Historically, the Black church in the U.S. has provided sanctuary and safe space for spiritual development, community engagement, strategic planning, and civil disobedience during the Civil Rights Movement. In the twenty-first century, churches must invest in maintaining their online presence to serve this generation, as young people turn to the web for information about companies, organizations, and services. Millennials seek traditional settings that promote relevant gospel teachings and preachings that directly improve their day-to-day activities and relationships.

Creating a safe space for millennials is crucial for any congregation seeking to engage this generation. Thus, this includes cultivating physical, emotional, intellectual, and theological places of engagement where principles can be explored without silencing or devaluing the experience or personhood of those within the community. The church must empower leaders to shepherd small congregational groups responsibly through check-ins, fellowships, or Bible study sessions.

Millennials prefer a teacher facilitating explorative conversations within a community of learners, fostering open dialogue and interpretation without dismissing interpretation or insight. With the murder of Trayvon Martin, millennials have a sense of activism and a desire to be part of social change in the sphere of justice and quality of life for people of color.

Black millennials are interested in how the Black church is willing to have serious conversations on LGBTQ+ identities, especially around the subject of theology and ethics on human sexuality. The church must understand that Black millennials are navigating unstable job markets, gentrification, exorbitant living costs, and the craziness of love and relationships. These young people must know that God has plans for them and be given the tools to forge ahead in faith until they begin seeing what they expect by faith.

Millennials, particularly Black millennials, are seeking the church to address dating,

relationships, and sexuality issues. They believe that the church should not question the validity and calling of women in other spaces, as much of this tension is rooted in scriptural interpretations. Black millennials have a unique hermeneutic of suspicion, which they believe is exempt from being questioned and critiqued. They also doubt the validity and calling of women who work as leaders in other spaces, such as the church.

The relationship between young Black adults and millennials complicates programming and evangelism, as they seek authentic relationships instead of engagement in a mediated understanding of the generation. The Black church must become open to transformed thinking for a vibrant, organic body of believers with a bright future and shameless hope.

Millennials are interested in outreach, believing they make a difference in family dynamics, social justice, and economic development. They also want biblical guidance for gender equality and sexuality but are unable to share any scriptures or biblical stories to support their desire.

Millennials are unwilling to build fellowship halls or churches, as they believe it is more about previous generations' irresponsibility and poor stewardship. Churches must communicate how the community will benefit from the facility when campaigning to build.

Millennials seek highly organized services, streamlined services with artistic visuals that reflect the message, and intentional learning and engagement methods. They want practical and applicable experiences, not just biblical stories. The goal is to strategize for change and build funds for fellowship halls and basketball courts that the average person in the community cannot access.

Black millennials want relevant ministries to exist and correct immoral policies and practices in overpoliced neighborhoods, challenge police forces that lack diversity, and bring discomfort to people who refuse to see their humanity. Pastors must create distance in volunteers' responsibilities and think through their words to avoid doing more damage.

As the African American Baptist Church embraces the 21st century and beyond, it must not lose

sight of the social gospel, especially for Gen X and Gen Z. Many Black churches lost their commitment to social activism, which was amplified by the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 1970s, the Black church began to feel the consequences of its turn toward political and social conservatism.

Younger churchgoers and those willing to join the church are looking for churches willing to communicate through email, text messaging, small group dinner parties, and spending six weekends a year getting together to deepen their faith with Christian teachings and meditation exercises. This method of doing church may appeal to the younger generation, but the focus should remain on people over processes and protocol. The church must involve young people in promoting peace, equality, and anti-establishment. By providing opportunities to add virtues to their vim, vitality, and vigor, the church can help them become vigorous agents of change.

The cultural makeup of a congregation should not be compared to contemporary or traditional, as it relates to its racial makeup, socio-economic, educational, and cultural backgrounds. Thus, this influences church culture and affects the style of worship. The Bible's teachings should impact the church's relationship with culture in a contemporary context, and the nature of that relationship affects the church's worship.

There should be a distinctively Christian culture, where worship is a communal and corporate affair, encouraging each other and ministering to one another. Contemporary hymns and Christian songs are written to be sung in unison, and the church should not negotiate when biblically rather than traditionally the latest fads.

The Old Testament used many instruments accompanying God's praise, proving they should be used today. The church should consider a specific "Christian culture" for praise, prayer, teaching, fellowshiping, and celebration of the sacraments. Unity in diversity can be expressed in the church's praise, worship services, and every other aspect of life.

New Testament churches comprised converted Jews and Gentiles, and the Apostle Paul

expected Gentile Christians to sing psalms. Today, Christians must be prepared to allow their cultural background into the church, including contemporary music that praises the majesty of God and Jesus Christ and typically has more lyrics.

The Book of Psalm, a collection of 150 poems, songs, hymns, and prayers from the Old Testament, is an essential resource for contemporary worship. It teaches us to express our love and awe of God, expressing deep emotions such as joy, despair, anger, and fear. Contemporary worship should also show gratitude for God's provisions, as demonstrated in Psalm 107:1a.

The Book of Psalm calls for communal singing and reminds us of the importance of worshipping together as a community. Although the Book of Psalm lyrics were initially written for musical accompaniment, our musical concepts have evolved. The timeless words of inspired praise are appropriate, applicable, and reliable for every generation.

Inclusivity and diversity are important aspects of spirituality among older persons, particularly among African Americans. The Black church has become a social institution and cultural womb for people of color, organizing religious activities, providing a haven, facilitating a solid social network, disseminating knowledge about moral, professional, and educational life, mobilizing them to contest injustice, mediating Black communities, and generating untold social capital.

The Black sacred canopy represents the cultural capital that reflects Black people's African heritage, the holocaust of slavery, a society built around the "color line," disenfranchisement in Jim Crow America, glass ceilings, and ongoing injustices in racialized society. As we grapple with inclusivity and diversity in the African American Baptist church, it is crucial to consider the social justice issue of homosexuality and the traditional argument against homosexuality regarding both inclusivity.

Kelly Brown Douglas' book, *Sexuality and the Black church – a Womanist Perspective*, aims to understand why sexuality has been a taboo subject for the Black church and community, advance the

womanist discourse on Black sexuality, and promote healthier attitudes and behaviors towards sexuality-related concerns, especially concerns about homophobia/heterosexism. The book focuses on the historical context of slavery, where Europeans fabricated myths about Africans and African women, leading to demeaning attacks on Black sexuality.

The book also addresses the stereotypes of Black women as "governed almost entirely by her libido," portraying them as passionate, aggressive, and cunning. This stereotype is rooted in the ninth-century Phoenician princess and wife of the Israelite king Ahab, who was accused of destroying the kingdom with her idolatrous practices.

Douglas believes that Black homophobic attitudes stem from the complexity of Black people's oppression at the hands of White culture. She outlines the general contours of this analysis, seeking to understand the relationship between Black homophobia and Black oppression, particularly the exploitation of Black sexuality. The Bible is often used to argue that homosexuality is a sin, but biblical scholars have shown that the Leviticus Holiness Codes, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Paul's Epistles to the Romans do not present a compelling case against homoeroticism.

The New Testament does not seem to show an anti-lesbian stance, but Jesus' words and actions show virtual indifference to matters of sexuality. He only mentions fidelity and prohibits divorce except in cases of infidelity. The Bible has been used against Black people to support slavery, and it should not be used to oppress themselves. Black people should use a hermeneutic based on the text to support the life and freedom of all Black people.

Homophobia is a response to White culture's racialization of sex and "sexuated" race, leading to the denial of homosexuality in the Black community and extremely homophobic beliefs on the part of the church. It is not homosexuality that is at the root of homophobia within the Black community and church, but sexuality, or deviant sexuality, and the oppression that Blacks faced based on their sexuality.

Black women must continue to fight sexism in the Black community, church, and theology until it has been eliminated. If sexism is defeated in churches, it is essential to ensure that the by-laws of the church government and discipline are in harmony with the best of the Christian faith. Denying the ordination of Black women implies that Jesus Christ is only half a Savior, and it is ironic that men insist on scriptural grounds for the ordination of women when they had nothing to do with the birth of the one they preach.

The African American Baptist Church should focus on community outreach and service with an emerging theology grounded in the word of God. This approach will avoid being wayward and avoid being caught up in gimmicks. The church should be missional, aiming to heal, promote justice, and seek peace. The theology should be revelational, focusing on the Word of God, which speaks truth and opens people's minds and hearts.

The church should be reformational, seeking to renew the existing church and translate older faith formulas into new paradigms of contemporary communication. It should be relatable in the 21st century, understanding the times we live in and packaging the word of God for new converts.

A kingdom-coming theology should be at the forefront of the church's theology, promoting a kingdom-living where the church seeks to be the gathering of grace-filled believers and the empowering community sending forth Spirit-filled disciples. The church should also be eschatological, focusing on the mind of the risen and coming to Christ and the heart and soul of the historical Jesus of Nazareth.

VII. Case Studies of Innovative African American Baptist Churches

A. Examples of Progressive Worship Practices

This article centers on the Catholic Church but applies to this writing because the author emphasizes that all of us hunger for a place to be known, a place to be still in the face of the mystery and confusion of life, that thing that draws us to sit in the back pew of a great stone church on a Sunday

morning when one might have been at brunch with friends – too often seems tertiary and any church we might attend like some of us who have been trained for ministry. This millennial longed to minister in the church but is unsure if church leaders will welcome their talent and pastoral abilities.³⁵⁹

Suppose the African American Baptist Church wants to be innovative in the 21st century and beyond. In that case, we must make room for millennials to serve in ministry and, most importantly, lend their ideas and creativity to ministry.

Realizing the importance of millennials around innovative African American Baptist churches, turning the attention to innovative returns to tradition, especially when using core teachings of the church at large (looking at other denominations) as the foundation for innovative accommodations. “From the first sects immigration to America (e.g., the Puritans, Baptists, and Methodists) to those born on American soil (e.g., the Disciples, Assemblies of God, and Jehovah’s Witnesses), the upstarts have charted the most dramatic growth throughout American history.” Because these sects, unlike their mainline counterparts, these sects have made intense demands of their members and have claimed a return to the teachings and traditions of their past, the upstarts have made intense demands of their members.³⁶⁰

What we need not do is be too strict to attract new members or retain a second generation, realizing that some do seek religions at the extremes of the continuum. However, most seek a religion offering close relations with the supernatural and distinctive demands for membership without isolating individuals from the culture around them. The author would argue that religious organizations sustaining organizational vitality must find avenues for developing and adapting organizational innovations, such as new developments in organizational design, recruiting members, worship, and leadership selection. What does all this look like when organizational vitality refers to the

³⁵⁹ Jamie L Manson, “Progressive Millennials Offer the Church Much Hope and Promise,” *National Catholic Reporter* 56, no. 24 (September 4, 2020): 29.

³⁶⁰ Roger Finke, “Innovative Returns to Tradition: Using Core Teachings as the Foundation for Innovative Accommodation,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 1 (March 2004): 19.

organization's ability to attract and retain members and generate commitment from these members?

Religious organizations face two seemingly contradictory goals: (1) to guard core religious beliefs and practices that are held as timeless and (2) to generate innovations for local congregations adapting to a changing world. We need defenders of one true faith; on the other, they must respond to an ever-changing environment. ³⁶¹

We must remain loyal to the core teachings, believing in the beliefs and practices considered essential for full membership in a religious movement and based on the commands and promises of a supernatural God. These core teachings are embedded in a unique history, making specific claims to the truth about the supernatural. They are typically supported by sacred texts, narratives, divine revelations, and writings from the movement's most respected and charismatic leader, in this case, Baptist leader(s). The justification is the very existence of the religious organization and often providing distinctive beliefs (e.g., new prophecies, spiritual gifts, worldview) and distinctive practices (e.g., special diets, required prayers, moral codes); these core teachings help form the unique identity of the denomination. ³⁶²

Core teachings define an organizational boundary by establishing the religious group's level of tension with the surrounding culture. This tension (e.g., distinctiveness, separation, and antagonism) with the culture leads to a unique identity providing clear boundaries between those falling in the group and those opposing the group's values and norms, in this case, the African American Baptist Church. The membership must master their religion by learning the teachings and rituals necessary to interact with others in their religious group comfortably: when to say amen, how to follow the liturgy, and interpretations of critical religious stories because the core teachings serve as the foundation for religious activities (e.g., prayer, rituals, miracles, and mystical experiences) that build emotional ties to

³⁶¹ Finke, 20.

³⁶² Finke, 20.

a specific religious culture and provide certainty for religious claims of the religion.³⁶³

In striving for innovation, it is essential to sustain the core teachings, but this alone does not secure organizational vitality. Because the core teachings appeal to a sizeable segment of the religious market, religious organizations must continue adapting to their changing environment. However, organizations must be capable of introducing innovations as we preserve core teachings. In religious organizations, innovations will introduce changes in how congregations provide services for members, secure resources from members, or support the core teachings of the larger institution. What innovations do and support changes in educational programs, forms of worship, methods for recruiting members, new service programs, leadership training, offering alternative organizational structures, and a host of other areas? Realizing the innovations and core teachings might sometimes conflict, emphasizing change and other constancy- the most successful innovations build on core teachings.³⁶⁴

The church does have the ability to mimic and conform to peer institutions, becoming a roadblock to developing innovations. Following the critical insight of new institutional theory, organizations' efforts to conform to peer organizations' norms, traditions, and social influences result in homogeneity or isomorphism. When religious organizations, in the case of the African American Baptist Church, make efforts to mimic and conform to peer institutions, they serve as a stimulus for changing core teachings. "Because other religious professionals and organizations may or may not share the religious organization's core teachings, conforming to the larger networks will tend to reduce their unique and distinctive religious teachings."³⁶⁵

Looking at our Methodist brothers and sisters, they were quick to borrow the innovations of others. "As the mainline denominations debated the dangers of revival techniques, the early Methodist bishop Francis Asbury aggressively promoted revivalistic camp meetings throughout Methodism." It was the Methodists who were quick to borrow the latest printing technologies to promote their

³⁶³ Finke, 21.

³⁶⁴ Finke, 23.

³⁶⁵ Finke, 24.

message. These efforts began with John Wesley's commitment to providing cheaper and more accessible books on religion, but it reached a new high in America. Through the efforts of the American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, and others, the Methodists helped transform the availability of religious literature.³⁶⁶

What COVID-19 taught the church was transformative and should be continued in the 21st century and beyond, and that is the practice of silence, which Zoom cannot replicate. The pandemic forced the church to do ministry differently, and those examples forced many of our churches to adopt a hybrid model moving forward. As much of the nation migrated online then, Facebook partnered with various denominations to develop digital spaces for online worshippers. This technology formed our possibilities and practices. Some churches debated the blessings and woes of digital worship, but only a few discussed the role of silence because silence cuts against the grain of disembodied online chatter. Moreover, shared, instructive silence is one thing that Zoom cannot facilitate, which we all have witnessed and are still witnessing online.³⁶⁷

However, we learned that silence is antithetical to most online interactions. Moreover, social media generates interest and revenue from our urge to speak. We know that it implores us to talk and to talk often. Moreover, we derive social capital from witty or poignant posts that garner likes and responses on social media. Describing a user's passive, quiet participation on social media is common as "lurking," demonstrating how silence is pathologized once speech becomes normative. However, what if the church in our progressive worship practices continues to use social media because it has become the norm in a hybrid model? That silence, however, is gratuitous because it assumes that everything we need is already available to us without additional words or sounds. The cultivation of "rich interior lives of prayer and stillness" that she invites feels like the lifeblood of faithful Christian social practice: prayer and stillness, amid social movement, offer individual moments of sabbath on the

³⁶⁶ Finke, 27.

³⁶⁷ Chris Palmer, "Bodies in Silence: A Worship Practice Zoom Can't Replicate," *The Christian Century* 139, no. 1 (January 12, 2022): 12.

road to justice.³⁶⁸

The church in the 21st century and beyond because we should not retreat to the past when social media and Zoom were not a part of our lives in ministry, and that silence in the Christian tradition is a corporate activity as much as an individual one. “It is not just a private interlude before returning to the streets. It is an act of the church’s public and visible worship to seek the Spirit’s presence anew.”³⁶⁹

Moreover, the moment in a church service when we are most aware of the people around us is not during the hymns or collective prayer but when the pastor asks us to confess our sins in silence and then holds that silence for what seems like an eternity. Moreover, the more profound the silence, the more influential the liturgy, which has been the principle we have taken to every congregation, even in the Baptist traditions. We have even asked ourselves, “How long will the pastor hold the bread and wine up before affirming the gifts of God for the people of God?” Knowing that silence makes us acutely aware of the presence of others, gives us room to speak, and gives God room to speak to us. Silence is felt, and it is not a mere negation but a pregnant stillness that raises the heart rate and releases endorphins within our bodies' pathways.³⁷⁰

Even Jesus’ most breathtaking moments in the gospels are wordless; when standing before Pilate, his refusal to speak is also a refusal to recognize Pilate’s power over life and death. Moreover, his wordlessness speaks louder than any words could because even Christ’s political impotence is flipped on its head, and in that moment, his incarnate, physical presence will not shrink to the demands made by his adversaries.³⁷¹ Let us focus on practicing making perfect in corporate worship and forming spiritual virtue essential to the church, particularly the African American Baptist Church, in the 21st century and beyond.

As much as we want to be progressive in our worship, which is very important moving forward

³⁶⁸ Palmer, 12.

³⁶⁹ Palmer, 12.

³⁷⁰ Palmer, 13.

³⁷¹ Palmer, 13.

in the 21st century and beyond in the African American Baptist Church, much must stay the same, and that is the church's mandate to make disciples. To make disciples, pastors must continue to employ biblical liturgies that reenact the gospel of Jesus Christ and aesthetically embody values consistent with God's holiness. The church can shape the inclinations and impact the ethical behaviors of the people in the church, influencing their habits. One of the primary means to do this is through corporate liturgies, which are scripture-shaped liturgies informing people's liturgies of life and helping congregants turn from their moral behavior.³⁷²

We know the corporate nature of life heightens the church's awareness as an ethical community, and our discipleship must never be abstracted from the sense and duty of membership in the church. However, the development of Christian maturity comes primarily through "modeling virtue: keeping promises, honoring commitments, speaking to edify, showing forgiveness and other examples. We know that spiritual formation is the synergistic process wherein the Holy Spirit of God works in the life of a believer to "work out [his or her] salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12-13). We know the Holy Spirit is the agent that differentiates a person who is enslaved by legalistic habits and who intentionally nurtures habits that will shape his or her soul. Individuals without the Holy Spirit can develop all the proper habits, but this does not transform his or her lives without the Holy Spirit's activity in the heart.³⁷³

Because the cultivations shape spiritual virtue through habitual behavior in the community, thus Christian living is the behavior of a people. We must consider moral behavior in this way, revealing the significance of corporate worship cultivating such behavior.³⁷⁴

We can conclude that liturgies are behaviors; they are works that inform our beliefs and reflect values, but as their essence, liturgies are what people do externally. Liturgies are connected to moral

³⁷² Scott Aniol, "Practice Makes Perfect: Corporate Worship and the Formation of Spiritual Virtue," *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 10, no. 1 (2017): 104.

³⁷³ Aniol, 97.

³⁷⁴ Aniol, 97.

behavior, people's work, and communal behaviors.³⁷⁵

They are being mindful that all communal behaviors are not liturgy. Liturgies are habitual practices, doing the same thing repeatedly, to the point that Christians have been conditioned to see habitual, repetitious rituals as inauthentic, hypocritical, and ultimately “vain repetitions inauthentic, hypocritical, and ultimately vain repetitions.”³⁷⁶

We know that liturgies shape behaviors because inclinations organized through trained habits are formed through rituals and cultivated habits. After all, the form of the liturgies embodies specific values. “Liturgies are developed over long periods, at first with deliberate values in view, which are worn into the liturgies through regular use. Moreover, when people practice such liturgies, they are shaped by the values that have formed them, whether they recognize it or not.”³⁷⁷

As Christians, we consider corporate worship as a Christian expression of authentic devotion toward God. Nevertheless, ethics is grounded in and is the fruit of the fear of the Lord. Worship determines our behavior, and understanding the formative nature of liturgy uncovers how Christian worship significantly affects their behavior, and this is how corporate worship fits into the Great Commission. How the church worships week in and week out forms the people molding our behavior and inclinations through habitual practices because liturgies transmit values.³⁷⁸

In our progressive worship practices, we cannot lose sight of the scriptures when God prescribed a liturgical year for Israel that shaped their relationship with him by reenacting the covenant he had established with them and how he had redeemed them. What biblical liturgies did was rehearse what God had done so that worshippers' affections and lives might be formed and shaped. Even the most holy day for Israel was the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), whereby this Feast Day contained a very carefully prescribed liturgy that pictured spiritual realities through reenactments. The cleanings, the

³⁷⁵ Aniol, 98.

³⁷⁶ Aniol, 98.

³⁷⁷ Aniol, 100.

³⁷⁸ Aniol, 101.

sacrifices, the sprinkling of blood, and the scapegoat all formed the people through participation into those who recognized the holiness of God.³⁷⁹

It has been concluded that liturgies form disciples because they embody and shape our beliefs and values. How we worship reveals our beliefs and values; this is why liturgies shape our inclinations and lives. The structure of the biblical liturgies follows the logic of the gospel and the reenactment of the gospel. The logic is that God reveals himself and calls us to worship Him, and individuals respond with adoration and confess their sins as we recognize our unworthiness to be in his presence. God responds by forgiving our sins through Jesus Christ and welcomes us into his presence, where we can hear him speak in his word, commit to obedience, bring our petitions to him, and enjoy open and accessible communion.³⁸⁰

B. Successful Community Engagement Initiatives

On February 14, 2021, President Biden relaunched the White House Office of Faith-Based and Secular Community Organizations. In reestablishing this office, Biden established what existed 20 years ago under then-President George W. Bush. The country was working through the COVID-19 pandemic when this executive order was signed. Biden knew then what we know now: "Leaders of different faiths and backgrounds are the front lines of their communities in crisis and help us heal, unite, and rebuild. It would behoove the church, particularly the African American Baptist Church, to utilize the federal government's resources for ministry. Some churches are reluctant to do so, afraid the government will be in their business. However, the church should embrace this funding, especially if it will help their community."³⁸¹ The church does not need to worry about the cherished guarantees of church-state separation and the freedom for people of all "faiths and none," adding that the office "will

³⁷⁹ Aniol, 102.

³⁸⁰ Aniol, 104.

³⁸¹ Alexandra Jaffe, "Biden Order Reestablishes White House Faith Office," *The Christian Century* 138, no. 5 (March 10, 2021): 1.

not prefer one faith over another or favor religious over secular organizations" to pursue its work. ³⁸²

Then, President George W. Bush and President Joe Biden continued in their administration, providing government money for churches and other houses of worship and offering social services for Americans in need. At the time, the president said, "When we see social needs in America, my administration will look first to faith-based programs and community groups, which have proven their power to save and change lives." Bush said, "We will not fund the religious activities of any group, but when people of faith provide social services, we will not discriminate against them." At that time and now, it is the most critical initiative that his administration discusses, but it was also implemented then and now in the Biden administration. ³⁸³

Because of what President Bush signed, he paved the way for faith-based organizations to "compete with secular agencies for government dollars." Believing the current administration allowed faith-based organizations to "compete with secular agencies for government dollars" like the Bush administration did some years ago. ³⁸⁴

Historically, churches and other faith-based organizations in the United States are often prohibited from receiving direct government grants, and it was not because the government chooses to discriminate against religion but because the courts have usually understood the constitutional purpose for restrictions on funding for religion to be grounded in the notion that religion functions more effectively if it is autonomous, not tied to government, and not threatened by government supervision and control. That is the hesitance for some churches, but the African American Baptist Church, in the 21st century, must do ministry at a higher level and not refuse to use these monies for ministry. ³⁸⁵ The church could use its own money to share the gospel with a recipient of its services; that is entirely legal.

³⁸² Jaffe, 1.

³⁸³ Derek Davis, "President Bush's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives: Boon or Boondoggle?," *Journal of Church and State* 43, no. 3 (2001): 411.

³⁸⁴ Davis, 411.

³⁸⁵ Davis, 412.

Even today, it is believed that some leaders are leery of the effects that direct federal funding of religious charities would have on the independence of these organizations. Nevertheless, we need to move beyond this hesitancy to do effective ministry, especially if our churches do not have the money to do ministry at a higher level and make a tangible impact on people's lives.³⁸⁷ It is good to know then that many urban Black ministers embraced the idea of federal financial assistance more than their White, suburban counterparts.³⁸⁸

Some entities believe this money compromises their witness, but many believe the opposite.³⁸⁹ African American ministers seemed to view the Bush plan at the time as both a major new antipoverty initiative and an endorsement for the Black churches that have long served as a safety net in poor communities. It was determined then that 64 percent of the predominantly Black congregations were willing to apply for government funds, compared with 28 percent of predominantly White congregations.³⁹⁰

Bush's proposal at the time specified that religious programs would not be required to omit their religious components and teachings to receive government money. Moreover, the example was a drug recovery program that included prayer and Bible study, which could receive financing as long as the government money did not directly pay for the Bibles.³⁹¹ Do not believe faith groups receiving public dollars would justifiably be subjected to government audits and monitoring. Moreover, they do not believe that religion will become the servant of the government and will no longer be the "prophetic voice" and conscience against ill-advised governmental policies.³⁹²

Let it not be said that religious entities sacrificed their theology by not being able to deliver

³⁸⁶ Davis, 412.

³⁸⁷ Davis, 413.

³⁸⁸ Davis, 413.

³⁸⁹ Davis, 414.

³⁹⁰ Davis, 415.

³⁹¹ Davis, 417.

³⁹² Davis, 419.

social services in the context of the religious rationale for doing so, the initiative at the time and more than likely now, because President Biden followed what President Bush initiated, allows churches and other religious groups to become partners with government in administering social programs, but without losing their autonomy as they pursue their other spiritual goals. ³⁹³

What the African American Baptist Church in the 21st century can do with government help is help the disadvantaged and the poor - running soup kitchens, homeless shelters, crisis pregnancy centers, job counseling services, and even drug rehabilitation centers. We know that lives are changed not because of the cup of water, piece of bread, or pair of shoes that are offered but because, in most cases, they are given in the name of a God who has commanded his followers to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and love the unlovable. Churches and other houses of worship cannot separate the act of charity from the reason we feel compelled to offer the act. ³⁹⁴

The church does encourage political activism among us, and religious scholars Lincoln and Mamiya refer to the Black church as the "womb" of the community because it gives life to significant social, economic, and cultural institutions of African American life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and if I would dare to say even in the 21st century and beyond what we must acknowledge today that African Americans are increasingly un-churched. Many believe in God, they pray daily, they believe in the Bible to be the inspired or literal word of God, and they use religious beliefs as a guide to daily life choices; however, fewer Black Americans are members or regular attendees of the church. The decline of the church mirrors a more significant trend in American society; what the church does provide for African Americans is reliable and regular contact with elected officials, political information, opportunities for mobilizations, and advice about identifying political interests. ³⁹⁵

In politics, the church is where political entrepreneurs and groups can mobilize Black people. Because candidates, parties, and organizations come to Black churches to find voters, campaign

³⁹³ Davis, 419.

³⁹⁴ Davis, 420.

³⁹⁵ Harris-Lacewell, 2.

workers, and community organizers. Moreover, the church has also served as a place where African Americans develop psychological resources of self-esteem and efficacy. What we have in Black Christianity is distinct theologically because of its specific theodicy, which means the issue of reconciling God's justice in the presence of human suffering.³⁹⁶

So, we grapple with how an all-loving and all-powerful God can coexist with evil. For us, as African Americans, we see evil taking the particular and identifiable form of White supremacy first through enslavement, then through Jim Crow and lynch mob rule, and continuing in seemingly intractable racial inequality. So, the evil of racism must be reconciled with the idea of a loving and powerful God.³⁹⁷

What we have done since the nineteenth century and onward, African Americans consistently and systematically attempted to make use of the Bible to force "biblical" America to honor biblical principles. Being guided by this hermeneutical key, African American religiosity chooses to emphasize elements of the Bible, the adventures of the Hebrews in bondage and escaping from bondage, and those about the wondrous works, compassion, and resurrection of Jesus and the prophecies, especially the prophetic denunciations of social injustice and the visions of social justice.³⁹⁸

For African Americans, we reimagine a Black Christ who sides with us as we struggle against social, political, and economic marginalization. Moreover, this liberation theology reasons that Christ takes on the position of the poorest and most despised in any historical moment; thus, in the American context, Christ must be understood as Black.³⁹⁹

C. Leadership Transformations

To concur with an author that in 1922, as a young upstart-Baptist pastor, J. Pius Barbour penned an editorial circulated in the National Baptist Convention's paper, the National Baptist Voice, and his

³⁹⁶ Harris-Lacewell, 4.

³⁹⁷ Harris-Lacewell, 4.

³⁹⁸ Harris-Lacewell, 5.

³⁹⁹ Harris-Lacewell, 6.

text described the tension among Black Baptist clergy. They challenged the denomination's standards for ministry excellence, which is needed in the 21st century and beyond. Like many preachers, the author said that some of us can howl and think, too, but howling and thinking should be put on a level. The author was convinced that Baptists have both more ignorance and intelligence than any other denomination, but we smother it with lung gymnastics. He pleaded with leaders not to go unthinkingly on without looking out for the interest of the denomination. It is simply a matter of choosing between lungs and brains and which we will select. ⁴⁰⁰

Like J.W. Bailey (1863 - 1951), who headed the Evangelism Department of the National Baptist Convention, USA, from the 1920s to the 1930s, his primary work and the work of the church today should be to carry on religious revivals to save souls being primary but seeing the easy solution to the race crisis in America which still exist, is salvation. As he believed, we should believe the world would be better if everyone knew Jesus as Lord. "Heaven allowed for a community of all races, but humans, he suggested, could choose their social groups on earth." He believes, and there is a belief today, in interracial harmony and peaceful separation. ⁴⁰¹ The duties of a Black pastor will always be community leadership and every aspect of politics, education, civil rights, feeding people, and housing.

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D. Conclusion

The article discusses the importance of millennials in the African American Baptist Church, highlighting the need for innovative approaches to ministry. It emphasizes the need for religious organizations to adapt to a changing world and maintain organizational vitality. The author suggests that religious organizations must remain loyal to core teachings, which are embedded in a unique history, and make specific claims to the truth about the supernatural. These teachings define an organizational boundary by establishing the religious group's tension with the surrounding culture,

⁴⁰⁰ Adam Bond, "Recasting a Black Baptist Narrative," *American Baptist Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2013): 150.

⁴⁰¹ Bond, 154.

⁴⁰² Bond, 160.

leading to a unique identity providing clear boundaries between those falling within the group and those opposing the group's values and norms.

Core teachings define an organizational boundary by establishing the religious group's level of tension with the surrounding culture. Members must master their religion by learning the teachings and rituals necessary to interact comfortably with others in their religious group. However, sustaining core teachings alone does not secure organizational vitality. Organizations must continue adapting to their changing environment while introducing innovations as they preserve core teachings. Innovations can support changes in educational programs, forms of worship, recruitment methods, leadership training, and alternative organizational structures.

The article also highlights the potential for the church to mimic and conform to peer institutions, becoming a roadblock to developing innovations. Conforming to more extensive networks may reduce the organization's unique and distinctive religious teachings.

The Methodist Church has adapted to the changing landscape of the 21st century through the practice of silence, which Zoom does not replicate. The pandemic forced many churches to adopt a hybrid model, with Facebook partnering with various denominations to develop digital spaces for online worshippers. However, silence is antithetical to most online interactions, as it generates interest and revenue from the urge to talk. Silence is not just a private interlude before returning to the streets but an act of the church's public and visible worship to seek the Spirit's presence anew.

In church services, a pastor asks a congregation to confess their sins in silence, which is the most aware moment. Silence is felt, raising the heart rate and releasing endorphins within our bodies' pathways. Even Jesus' most breathtaking moments in the gospels are wordless, as his refusal to speak speaks louder than any words could.

To make disciples, pastors must continue to employ biblical liturgies that reenact the gospel of Jesus Christ and aesthetically embody values consistent with God's holiness. Corporate liturgies, which

are scripture-shaped, can help shape the inclinations and ethical behaviors of the people in the church, influencing their habits. By practicing making perfect in corporate worship and forming spiritual virtue essential to the church, the African American Baptist Church can continue to grow and thrive in the 21st century and beyond.

The corporate nature of life emphasizes the church's ethical community and the duty of discipleship. Christian maturity is primarily developed through modeling virtue, such as keeping promises, honoring commitments, speaking to edify, and showing forgiveness. Spiritual formation is a synergistic process where the Holy Spirit works in a believer's life to nurture habits that shape their soul. Liturgies are behaviors that inform beliefs and reflect values, but as their essence, they are connected to moral behavior, people's work, and communal behaviors.

Liturgies shape behaviors because inclinations organized through trained habits are formed through rituals and cultivated habits. Corporate worship is a Christian expression of authentic devotion toward God, and understanding the formative nature of liturgy uncovers how Christian worship significantly affects their behavior. The structure of biblical liturgies follows the logic of the gospel and the reenactment of the gospel, revealing our beliefs and values.

The White House Office of Faith-Based and Secular Community Organizations was relaunched in February 2021, recognizing the importance of leaders of different faiths and backgrounds in helping communities heal, unite, and rebuild. The office will not prefer one faith over another or favor religious over secular organizations to pursue its work, ensuring that government interference does not compromise the church's mission.

President George W. Bush and President Joe Biden provided government funding for churches and other religious organizations to provide social services for Americans in need. Bush's initiative allowed faith-based organizations to compete with secular agencies for government dollars, paving the way for them to function more effectively without government supervision. Historically, churches and

faith-based organizations have been prohibited from receiving direct government grants, but the African American Baptist Church in the 21st century must use these funds for ministry.

While some leaders are leery of the effects of direct federal funding on religious charities, it is essential to move beyond this hesitancy to do effective ministry. Many urban Black ministers embraced the idea of federal financial assistance, viewing it as a significant new antipoverty initiative and an endorsement for Black churches that have long served as a safety net in poor communities.

Bush's proposal specified that religious programs would not be required to omit their religious components and teachings to receive government money, and faith groups receiving public dollars would not be subjected to government audits and monitoring. The initiative allows churches and religious groups to partner with the government in administering social programs without losing their autonomy. In the 21st century, African American Baptist churches can help the disadvantaged and the poor by running soup kitchens, homeless shelters, crisis pregnancy centers, job counseling, and drug rehabilitation centers.

The church is crucial in African American life, providing social, economic, and cultural institutions. However, African Americans are increasingly un-churched, and the church provides reliable contact with elected officials, political information, opportunities for mobilization, and advice on identifying political interests. The church also serves as a place for African Americans to develop psychological resources of self-esteem and efficacy.

Black Christianity is distinct theologically due to its theodicy, which focuses on reconciling God's justice with human suffering. African Americans have consistently attempted to make use of the Bible to force "biblical" America to honor biblical principles. They emphasize elements of the Bible, the adventures of the Hebrews, and the prophecies, particularly the prophetic denunciations of social injustice.

Leadership transformations are essential for African Americans as they reimagine a Black

Christ who sides with them in their struggle against social, political, and economic marginalization. J.W. Bailey, who headed the Evangelism Department of the National Baptist Convention, USA, believed that salvation was the easy solution to the race crisis in America. Black pastors are vital in community leadership, politics, education, civil rights, feeding people, and housing.

VIII. Overcoming Resistance to Change

A. Addressing Cultural Attachments

The concept of racism for Black Americans is that we were brought up in a pro-White culture, and we tend to think, feel, and act in pro-White ways. Moreover, recognizing our cultural biases places us on a common ground where we need to be neither judgmental nor defensive but accepting.⁴⁰³

What we know of the Mediterranean world is that it was a mixed world of people with Asiatic, African, and northern Mediterranean and were called ancient Near Eastern people. They were racially composite, which all of the people of the Old and New Testament. They were darker than the northern Europeans, and the Socrates, who represented only one of several Grecian types, were African. So, such was the racially composite and cosmopolitan nature of the ancient Christian world, although this fact has been glossed over by the developed or prevailing Euro-centric literature regarding Christian beginnings.⁴⁰⁴

So, much of the so-called scholarly debate as to whether Augustine of Hippo or Cyprian of Carthage-both of whom were great religious, literary, and political giants (or whether Jesus and his mother) - were Black or White grows out of a false reading of both the map and the mindset of the present day northern Europeans. It has long been established in the circles of biblical criticism that Genesis, with its J, E, P, and D sources, represented a unique collection of largely variegated African lore, especially in the mythic or poeticized creation presentations. Most of Genesis comes from ancient

⁴⁰³ "Four Keys to Black church Action: Saint Luke's Journal of Theology," *Saint Luke's Journal of Theology* 22, no. 4 (September 1979): 248.

⁴⁰⁴ "Four Keys to Black church Action," 252.

central Africa and was learned by the Israelites (who intermarried, as did Moses, with persons of central African stock) during their sojourn in Egypt. ⁴⁰⁵

What the Black church ought to do is inspire life-giving alternatives to the death-dealing work of racism within our nation. When we are faced with hatred, how should the church respond? What the Black church represents is an inspiring life-giving alternative to the death-dealing work of racism within our nation that is religious and political and devoted to White supremacy. Often, the church is confronted with this resistance headlong, and how should we respond? The killings of these four young Black girls at the 16th Street Baptist Church in the morning of September 1963 ushered the church back then, provoked outrage, and propelled the Civil Rights Movement. Resistance, when confronted by the church, ought to cause us to rethink our mission even in the Christian church when such terrible things as these killings confront the church. ⁴⁰⁶

Even with the election of President Obama, the nation was not beyond its racist self; we had made no progress when it came to supremacy. Moreover, that supremacy still exists, and the church must speak out, even more so today, because the racist individuals are not hiding from us. They are telling us their plans ahead of the events. For the church, White supremacy is the default understanding of human beings. Are White men the template for measuring who is a human, and is the White community the ideal living space? The argument should be the opposite; we should resist such a notion. ⁴⁰⁷

Do we believe that White men are the only ones who are gifted with the image of God, and they are burdened with the task of saving the world? We should beg to differ and resist such a notion in the United States of America, and the church should be at the forefront of such change. Are we to believe that in protecting White space, there remains life in the heart of the republic and in the sanctuary of

⁴⁰⁵ "Four Keys to Black church Action," 252.

⁴⁰⁶ Reggie L Williams, "Emanuel AME Church: Christianity as Resistance," *Dialog* 57, no. 4 (December 2018): 245, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12431>.

⁴⁰⁷ Williams, 245.

popular Christianity, where historically, violence and even death are tolerable for the entire demographics in the country, where even the efforts to secure ritually sacred White spaces remains a priority for far too many. In moving the African American Baptist Church forward in the 21st century and beyond, we must grapple with being Black Christians and acknowledging the historical impact of race on our potential to live a safe and productive life in the United States of America. We should be forced to wrestle with the veracity of the existence of a just and loving God who has made us Black in America, where we are always subject to the possibility of dying a violent, untimely, yet civically tolerable death. ⁴⁰⁸

Where the rubber meets the road when resistance confronts the church, even the most reluctant Baptist church would have to stand up for this resistance damaging our country. What racism does is an enduring moral evil that prohibits Black people from living out their God-given potential for productive, embodied life in the United States of America. "A life of opportunity, where one may pursue one's potential, is a hegemonic good, historically meant for Whites only." It is believed that the rest of us who are not White are subject to the will of the privileged, who will violently protect idyllic White space by depicting Black people as pollutants and objects of scorn in White space. We are designed for contempt and suffering. We know this premise is a lie, straight from hell. Whether we want to admit it or not, that is the struggle for the church because this issue and many others are confronting it. We have people struggling to see the role of the Black church as anything but a problem because many are saying to help us with the difficulties of daily life for Black people amidst the shape-shifting evil of racism. ⁴⁰⁹

What we must grapple with is that racial uplift offers the Black person no response because the United States has stolen Black lives, Black labor, Black opportunities, Black ideas, and Black wealth to build systems and structures that demand the elimination of Black people, leaving Black people in the

⁴⁰⁸ Williams, 246.

⁴⁰⁹ Williams, 246.

United States with limited access and little opportunity to advance, and this is real even though some would think differently. Even though this resistance is outside of the church, the church ought to be the mecca in dealing with these issues because these issues affect our congregations in a mighty way. In overcoming resistance to change in the broader context because the issue of racism confronts the Black church, we as Black Christians should not be offended by politics of personal responsibility in the role of the Black church in the United States because we ought to be brokering life-affirming resistance and revolution does enable a view of life that is other than the world imagined by White supremacy and to make completely different life possibilities for Blacks in the United States. ⁴¹⁰

Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, is like many African American Baptist churches, representing the historical role of Christianity within the Black communities as a testimony to "God with us," even during oppression, standing in critical opposition to depictions of humanity that endorsed systems and structures for Whites only. Let us, like the church, not be so caught up in the singing and shouting like the enslavers wanted us to be because it served their purpose, believing we would do so, that we would forget the troubles of this world. Our frenzy of rhythm and religion, we laid problems at the cross of Jesus, would make us obedient to the enslavers. ⁴¹¹

A spirit of resistance Black fugitive religion is a spirit of resistance that takes the cross of Christ to mean something completely different; instead of seeing the cross of suffering as evidence that life in oppression is the burden of subjection that Black Christians must carry, Black fugitive Christianity sees Jesus' crucifixion as evidence of God's partiality for the oppressed. Kelly Brown Douglas argued: "That Jesus was crucified not only reaffirms God's partiality for the oppressed; it also reifies that this partiality is much more than an impassive identification with those least regarded in society. The crucifixion unquestionably reveals compassionate solidarity with them...God, through Jesus, exalts

⁴¹⁰ Williams, 246.

⁴¹¹ Williams, 247.

them as an indispensable, vital witness to God's self-disclosure." ⁴¹²

This resistance to change, especially outside of the church, affects the church inside because we are in the world but not in the world. Hence, should the role of the Black church in a White supremacist society be to witness the work that God is doing in the world in Jesus Christ, the one in compassionate solidarity with the outcast (us) through whom we see God and know life? Another subject of resistance will be discussed further in this paper. ⁴¹³

What the church should be about in the world is promoting activism and developing a culture within the church. There is a struggle within our churches because many congregants think this is not necessary in the 21st century. However, if the world around us is any evidence, the church must move from beyond the walls of the church and act on behalf of its people and all people for the change we want to see in this country and the world. The church ought to be a change agent in being the change.

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As an African American Baptist Church, we seek to build long-term commitments to activism by framing socioeconomic problems, especially racial disparities and other systemic injustices, as religious issues that call for our sustained activism. We would argue that group efforts to build commitments revealed a more profound, ongoing cultural struggle in understanding, defining, and practicing religious culture. Many struggled with this calling, believing they were comfortable and there was no need to shake things up in the communities where we resided. There is tension emerging from contrasts between the systemic, structural, and political understanding of religious commitments that activist groups espouse and the individualistic cultures prevailing in many American congregations. ⁴¹⁵

It does require us to build cultural commitments within congregations, which constitutes a

⁴¹² Williams, 248.

⁴¹³ Williams, 248.

⁴¹⁴ John D Delehanty, "Prophets of Resistance: Social Justice Activists Contesting Comfortable Church Culture," *Sociology of Religion* 77, no. 1 (2016): 37, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srv054>.

⁴¹⁵ Delehanty, 38.

reorientation of church culture. We must help our churches with clergy and faith-based organizations to encourage the congregants to move from comfortable church cultures with roots in individualistic cultural frameworks and towards an alternative culture emphasizing the systemic and structural dimensions of theology and religious commitments.⁴¹⁶ We must pursue a cultural transformation by strategically rejecting the comfortable church culture and constructing alternative religious cultures challenging the dominant American religious culture of individualism.⁴¹⁷

The African American Baptist church should align itself with community faith-based organizations working to better the lives of others, and our congregations do so by bringing discrete groups, such as congregations, labor unions, racial advocacy organizations, and neighborhood associations into culturally unified movements, building a collective power challenging entrenched interests.⁴¹⁸ As the church, we have congregations, especially in the African American Baptist Church congregations, possessing unique attributes that facilitate organizing, including rich veins of social capital that allow the mobilization of many people, organizational cultures that laud civic engagement, and a strong sense of civic identity.⁴¹⁹

When the church works with other faith traditions, we must construct faith narratives that make sense according to diverse theological and cultural traditions. What should be forthright when uniting with other faith traditions is a commitment to two cultural narratives: that organized faith communities can effectuate social change and that activism is essential to religious commitment.⁴²⁰

When moving beyond resistance in our congregations, we must remember that some congregations may disagree over the best uses of church resources, and we must realize that we often mobilize around issues in which some sections of our memberships have more significant direct stake than others. These faith-based organizations, alongside our churches, help best to utilize organizations

⁴¹⁶ Delehanty, 38.

⁴¹⁷ Delehanty, 38.

⁴¹⁸ Delehanty, 39.

⁴¹⁹ Delehanty, 39.

⁴²⁰ Delehanty, 40.

using methodologies of cultural narratives bringing together constituencies with concerns about issue areas, such as immigration policy, criminal justice reform, housing, or labor policy, into stable, culturally unified, multi-issue movements attracting diverse member congregations and articulate expansive social justice discourses.⁴²¹

When faith is in action by constructing organizing as religiously meaningful work that transcends the specific policy changes pursued at any given moment in history, ultimately for the betterment of society and the use of prayer, which helps our members focus on common religious understandings that underlie specific issues, and narrative practices, which use storytelling to demonstrate the effects of structural problems on individuals' lives and community well-being and to amplify the cultural and religious connections between discrete issues. What this does is that such practices help activist groups develop lasting cultural commitments by reframing the issues they target in the short term as components of a broader, long-term religious project.⁴²² The church has seen legislative changes through these efforts, including affordable housing, voters' rights, and criminal justice reform.⁴²³

Nevertheless, despite this success at both political and organizational levels, activist models of religious culture have yet to take root in most American congregations. We have already shared that young people want the church to pursue issues that actively improve their lives. Moreover, our young people want to see how faith and society intersect for the good of all people.⁴²⁴

The church must deny the variation in American church culture, with congregations abiding by and promoting individualistic styles of religious commitments, which engender individualistic orientations to socioeconomic issues. Our churches are good at charitable and civic activities but fail to seek change to the underlying structural causes of socioeconomic and racial disparities. We must

⁴²¹ Delehanty, 40.

⁴²² Delehanty, 41.

⁴²³ Delehanty, 41.

⁴²⁴ Delehanty, 41.

change this resistance in our congregation and do whatever to confront the structures that prevent equal means for all people. ⁴²⁵

In moving beyond resistance in our churches, preferences for individualistic solutions have created a highly individualistic approach to public issues, such as charity and volunteering, as appropriate activities for church life but viewing collective analysis of systemic social problems as something to do elsewhere, if at all. We must move beyond a comfortable church culture: a cultural orientation to religious life found in our congregations of diverse denominations and characterized by the widespread belief among laity and clergy that civic activities appropriate for our congregational life are those reproducing individualistic dimensions of religious commitment comfortable and familiar to most religious Americans. ⁴²⁶

The Black church has a historical connection to the Civil Rights Movement, and contemporary trends toward increased activism and protest in our communities might give the impression that Black Protestant churches resist the comfortable church culture, which we should, but this resistance is only partial. What we see in research is that the Black church culturally processes a degree to which charity and direct service provisions, forms of engagement typical of comfortable church cultures, characterize many Black churches' community actions, and other work highlights the typical status of Black pastors as charismatic leaders as a force that works against Black churches' tendency to join activist networks. Do not let this be the church moving forward in the 21st century because it will not be able to attract young people wanting to be active for their good and the good of all people. They want to see where their tithes and offerings are going, and that is to improve the social construct of our society. ⁴²⁷

What resistance we see in the church is that we have activist clergy and other leaders as challengers to the dominant culture of individualism, seeking to force "their way" of being religious upon a group of congregants preferring to choose their worship styles and activism. We must fight

⁴²⁵ Delehanty, 42.

⁴²⁶ Delehanty, 43.

⁴²⁷ Delehanty, 44.

against systemic injustices even if our memberships believe it is unchurchly.⁴²⁸ When the church becomes so comfortable, a culture that reinforces and intensifies through historical legacies of influential public discourses such as individualism and American exceptionalism patterning public debate about power, justice, and inequality in the United States.⁴²⁹

We must acknowledge the struggle that does exist in our churches because there is a robust cultural commitment with congregations directly confronted with comfortable churches when we are trying to seek to replace it with an alternative religious culture produced within the local church settings yet situated within a broader discourse that does challenge common assumptions about the churches' public and political roles. The comfortable church culture only reproduces and intensifies an individualistic understanding of social issues. Suppose we are going to be activists in the church construct. In that case, we must articulate explicit and compelling theological imperatives for systemic analysis and associated social justice activism by convincing members and potential members that the dominant cultural narrative of religious engagement with social problems today lauds charitable giving and volunteering but eschews structural analysis and sustained political engagement does not have to be problematic.⁴³⁰

As leaders in our churches, especially pastors, we must confront the people who question social justice activism, misunderstand what the church should be, and realize that reconfiguring the church's priorities is part of a pastor's calling. He or she should suggest to "exercise the power God has given them" and to "really believe what God says" are imperatives to continue striving to build commitments with organizations that help the church to organize and to speak to power, helping the church establish discourse of what the church means and signifies to many in American society.⁴³¹

The comfortable church is okay with feeding people and giving them clothes. "Charity, people

⁴²⁸ Delehanty, 44.

⁴²⁹ Delehanty, 45.

⁴³⁰ Delehanty, 45.

⁴³¹ Delehanty, 47.

are comfortable with that. However, charity is not justice. People give money or food and feel they have done good deeds. It is easy. Asking why people are hungry that is outside their comfort zone." As clergy, we must articulate a discourse of the church that is inextricably linked to power, social justice, and, thus, politics as well. When leaders adopt this alternative discourse, positioning themselves as challengers to church culture, they perceive themselves as too comfortable and too privileged to reflect God's intentions.⁴³²

To introduce churches to social issues by inviting the congregation to participate in face-to-face small-group discussions with local politicians. When we do these listening sessions, we help churches establish a presence moving forward in removing social ills in our society. How should we frame such a conversation in our groups bringing Christians together to work for social justice, inclusion, and equity by having us work on issues in the legislature because we are called to be a prophetic voice for [our state] to make it our society a place of common human dignity and compassion. We, as Christians, should work for those who are denied God's abundance. We check in with leaders, ensuring they listen to our concerns about the denial of human dignity and justice that some community members are struggling with, and learn about our leaders' plans for addressing these issues.⁴³³

Whether we want to admit it or not, there are changes taking place in contemporary religion. Moreover, there may be some broader patterns the church may need to conform to – or deviate from these patterns. There are some qualitative changes in the character of religion. These may be evolutionary stages of what we believe to be modern religion's development, providing clues about its possible future.⁴³⁴

The church does not have to accept some theorists' strong statements about cultural evolution, finding the value in theories trying to organize what we know about historical development according

⁴³² Delehanty, 48.

⁴³³ Delehanty, 49.

⁴³⁴ "Chapter 4: Perspectives on Religious Evolution – Religion Online," accessed January 24, 2024, <https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-4-perspectives-on-religious-evolution/>.

to some broad evolutionary schema. They only provide a general framework highlighting aspects of the modern situation, permitting comparisons made to earlier periods.⁴³⁵

The present period is often portrayed as an infinitely better arrangement than anything experienced previously, or the present period is fraught with deep crises that pose a dire threat to modern society. However, new ideas being formulated will save humanity from destruction. It is valuing judgments rather than confusing them with the historical record itself.⁴³⁶

Robert N. Bellah's theory distinguished five ideal-typical patterns of religion, each having a distinct stage or “relatively stable crystallization” in the development of religion from early societies to the present, with the five stages: primitive, archaic, historic, early modern, and modern. There is a progression from each stage to the subsequent involving processes of increasing differentiation and complexity of the organization, endowing the organism, social system, or whatever unit in question may have a greater capacity to adapt to its environment, which is its less complex ancestors.⁴³⁷

According to Bellah, archaic religions are internally complex and differentiated from primitive religions in their view of the world with the kinds of religious actions and organizations embodied; historic religions were more complex than archaic religions. So, the modern stage requires consideration tracing its origins well back to the nineteenth century and argues for its prevalence, even at the popular level, in the contemporary United States.⁴³⁸

On the other hand, according to Bellah, there is a “collapse of the dualism that was so crucial to all the historic religions.” With a sharp distinction between “this world” and some “other world” between what we believe to be the natural and supernatural – modern religion tends to miss the sacred with the profane. Religious claims are grounded more in the considerations of the human condition than in arguments about supernatural revelation. Consequently, the “divine” becomes more

⁴³⁵ “Chapter 4.”

⁴³⁶ “Chapter 4.”

⁴³⁷ “Chapter 4.”

⁴³⁸ “Chapter 4.”

approachable and more imminent.⁴³⁹

The collapse of the supernatural into the natural appears to represent a return to the more undifferentiated worldview evident in primitive or archaic religions. So, there is an increase in symbolic differentiation. With reality being perceived in dualistic terms, it now takes on this multiplex character with religious symbols standing not so much in contradistinction to the secular world but as signals of deeper meanings.⁴⁴⁰

These religious symbols are held in a uniquely self-conscious way. We look through these symbols to see the truths they convey, which is a greater appreciation of their capacity to shape our reality. For Bellah, this capacity to differentiate symbols from the truths they convey is a prime example of modern religion's more complex, highly differentiated character.⁴⁴¹ We tend to have a heightened capacity to work with symbols to manipulate them to our advantage, subjecting the sacred symbols to textual criticism, recognizing them as truth, distinguishing myth from literal fact, and gaining meaning from both.⁴⁴² Encountering a White Jesus, the congregation was horrified to remove what they thought was sacred only to be taught the biblical stories took place on the continent of Africa and the White Jesus was a European depiction of Jesus going back as far as the slavery of African people who were brought to America in slave ships. That is how the truth has been manipulated.

According to Bellah, these close connections between religious symbolism and personal integration play a self-occupying role in modern culture that is not only prominent but also problematic. Moreover, we know that it becomes emancipated from all sustaining collectives and is free to determine its destiny – even choosing its own identity and being shaped by a myriad of experiences in a complex society, rendering itself fragile and needing integration. Individuals must continue to accept the responsibility not only for the duties that God prescribes but also for God's

⁴³⁹ “Chapter 4.”

⁴⁴⁰ “Chapter 4.”

⁴⁴¹ “Chapter 4.”

⁴⁴² “Chapter 4.”

choice to worship.⁴⁴³

Habermas departed from Bellah, who was trained as a German social philosopher with intellectual roots in Marxist tradition in the Frankfurt school of critical theory, and this departs from Bellah paying more attention to the economic development and the state, crediting the social sciences with the prominent role in cultural evolution and stressing the secular procedures as elements of legitimation rather than emphasizing sacred or religious values rejecting Marxist emphasis on historical materialism seeking an evolutionary framework providing a description but also a normative guide for the discussion of modern culture.⁴⁴⁴

Habermas distinguishes four stages of cultural evolution: neolithic, archaic, developed, and modern, and the first three correspond to Bellah's primitive, archaic, and historic stages with Bellah's earlier modern and modern stages. Habermas' stages are the basis of different principles of institutional organization, from different levels of productive capacity to different capacities for societal adaptation to complex circumstances.⁴⁴⁵

For Habermas, more significant differentiation of human action from nature, allowing a greater sense of individual identity to develop a unified picture of the forces governing the universe, contributed to the internalization of a coherent set of moral principles turning to facilitated greater unity of the self, and as Weber observed, religious explanations for the misfortunes of nature helping individuals and collectives to function more effectively in the face of risk, grief, and ultimate doubt.⁴⁴⁶

This "privatization" of religion is an emphasis that Habermas shares with Bellah, and many other contemporary observers like Bellah recognize that much of religion's traditional importance lies in its capacity to instill a sense of community and perform socially integrative functions.⁴⁴⁷

For Habermas, religious symbols perform the function of facilitating communication, and there

⁴⁴³ "Chapter 4."

⁴⁴⁴ "Chapter 4."

⁴⁴⁵ "Chapter 4."

⁴⁴⁶ "Chapter 4."

⁴⁴⁷ "Chapter 4."

is the fact that religious people generally seem to be unable to abandon their suppositions long enough to consider the interests and values of others truly. With scattered passages remaining largely undeveloped, there is little reference to the possibility that some understandings of modern religion promote rather than inhibit communication. ⁴⁴⁸

Niklas Luhmann is a German sociologist critical of Habermas; he has emerged as one of the foremost theorists in contemporary sociology. He contends that modern societies differ from traditional societies in that they have more clearly differentiated social spheres of subsystems. “Luhmann believes that modern religion has largely lost its capacity to legitimize and unify society. Religion is not likely to die out, he says; it may even flourish among reactionary groups critical of political and economic processes.” ⁴⁴⁹

For Luhmann, “the plentitude and void of a paradoxical world is the ultimate reality of religion. The meaning is both richness of references and tautological circularity.” For religion, forms absorb paradox, resolving it by revealing that seemingly opposites are the same. ⁴⁵⁰

Religious systems undergo continuous transformations, altering their social contexts and being altered by them. So, they are endangered by their successes, resolving paradox to their long-term detriment and necessitating new conceptions of paradox itself. ⁴⁵¹

For Luhmann, these landmarks have mostly to do with developments in communication, and where one was the invention of the alphabet. This invention led to the capacity to produce written religious texts, which, along with the gods and their utterances, became objects of religious reflection. It was no longer the priests and prophets simply offering their renditions of the supernatural; they were now constrained by what the scriptures said. Luhmann suggests, not entirely facetiously, that the development of Christianity itself is seen as a desperate attempt by religious specialists to survive the

⁴⁴⁸ “Chapter 4.”

⁴⁴⁹ “Chapter 4.”

⁴⁵⁰ “Chapter 4.”

⁴⁵¹ “Chapter 4.”

invention of the written word.⁴⁵²

The written word continues to affect the course of modern religion insofar as scripture and “the word” have maintained a high degree of objects of self-conscious reflection in the Christian religion, for the New Testament canon itself seems to reflect a pattern of faith that is more closely circumscribed by religious texts than is the Old Testament.⁴⁵³

From theory to evidence to the broach, mythology or textual criticism remains the mark of extreme heresy among a third of the public, believing that the Bible is not only divinely inspired but to be taken literally. A substantial number of believers have achieved some degree of mental differentiation between their faith and the symbols expressed. Of those who believe the Bible to be divinely inspired, only half regard it as absolutely free of errors. Studies of new religious movements are replete with evidence of the self-conscious application and manipulation of symbols because many of these movements grew from small groups in which symbols were invented or synthesized from other sources, with members tending to be keenly aware of the power of symbols. There were those able to remake their rituals and ideologies, and seeing the immediate effect of these symbols on group life developed a heightened sense of “symbolic consciousness.”⁴⁵⁴

A high degree of supernaturalism may remain in American religion as a formal tenant; the operational relevance of the supernatural primarily collapsed into the interior concerns of the self. This conclusion is supported by the high degree of interest documented in questions of personal meaning and purpose and the number of quasi-religious self-help movements developed since the 1960s.⁴⁵⁵

Much evidence suggests that despite considerable erosion of religious practices in other areas, the attempts to communicate with the divine remain strikingly prominent. Prayer seems to have remained a vital feature of contemporary life compared to other religious behavior. At the time of this

⁴⁵² “Chapter 4.”

⁴⁵³ “Chapter 4.”

⁴⁵⁴ “Chapter 4.”

⁴⁵⁵ “Chapter 4.”

study, 60 percent of the American public considered prayer very important, and another 22 percent regarded it as necessary. In comparison, only 39 percent thought reading the Bible was very important, with 38 percent thinking that attending religious services is very important. Only 28 percent documented high levels of interest and involvement in prayer, a high degree of belief in the efficacy of prayer, and a strong tendency to regard prayer as actual communication with God.⁴⁵⁶

In conclusion, American religion does demonstrate many of the characteristics that theorists have identified in modern culture. Many religious beliefs and practices remain in evidence, contrary to more straightforward predictions that have envisioned a simple decline in religious vitality. These beliefs and practices have retained their vitality through accommodations to contemporary cultural situations.⁴⁵⁷ From a cultural perspective, we see the impact of religion and vice versa on addressing cultural attachments when invading the religious realm.

There are cultural dimensions of religion that suggest the presence of a close connection between religions. We know that religion is constituted by symbolisms-whether primitive amulets, totems, and rituals, the earth and sky god mythologies of ancient civilizations, crucifixes and relics of medieval churches, formalizing texts, and creeds of the world's greatest modern religions, or even the sacred rites and markers we continue to use to define ourselves, our relations to nature, our sense of personal identity, and our collective loyalties and destinies. Because symbolism is the essence of culture, then religion is an important cultural dimension.⁴⁵⁸

The author is not saying that religion consists only of symbolism and nothing more than culture. However, religion consists of power and status relations depending on financial contributions, making possible the provisions of salaried professionals, and its strength or weakness in any society depends significantly on the bonds that inhere within its membership, the organizational resources mobilizing

⁴⁵⁶ "Chapter 4."

⁴⁵⁷ "Chapter 4."

⁴⁵⁸ "Chapter 2: The Cultural Dimension – Religion Online," 2, accessed January 24, 2024, <https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-2-the-cultural-dimension/>.

pursuing the ends in competition with other organizations, and its relations do broader patterns of wealth distribution, time allocations, and communications media. When emphasizing the cultural dimensions of religion, it is not to deny the importance of any of these other characteristics. Reflecting a conviction that religion is something more than the nuts and bolts of social networks, that there truly is something more than the population ecology of competing organizations, and its essential features cannot be understood entirely in the same terms might understand a political party or an economic transaction. ⁴⁵⁹

In classical theoretical traditions from which sociologists have drawn inspiration looking at the close connection between religion and culture with Marx discussing religion within the framework of criticizing Hegel, Feuerbach, and other more popularized versions of what he and Engels described as the “alienated life elements” and “false consciousness” of bourgeois society. ⁴⁶⁰ From these traditions inherited specific substantive emphases distinguishing each from the others with a legacy of common themes: (1) a theoretically grounded rationale for the importance of studying religion in a severe effort to understand the significant dynamics of modern societies, (2) viewing religion recognizing the significance of its cultural content and form, and (3) the perspectives on religion that draws a strong connection between studies of religion and studies of culture generally-specifically, studies of ideology in Marx, studies of rationalization in-and studies of the symbolism of moral community in Durkheim.

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Geertz, an anthropologist, provided a concise definition of religion and a solid epistemological and philosophical defense of the importance of religion as a topic of inquiry. For Geertz, an interpretation focusing on the subjective characteristics of religious culture with (1) drawing distinctions between culture and the more tangible realities of social structures and behavior of which social systems are composed; (2) conceiving of culture as a system of general values, goals, or value

⁴⁵⁹ “Chapter 2.”

⁴⁶⁰ “Chapter 2.”

⁴⁶¹ “Chapter 2.”

orientations defining a desired end-states of individual and collective actions; and (3) to emphasize the ways which religious culture reinforces cognitive, cathectic, and conative commitment to these end-states. ⁴⁶²

In problematizing the modern conception of religion, an understanding of religion privileging its connection to the individual, its location within the inner part of the individual (beliefs, outlooks, felt needs, emotions, inner experiences), and its role with the individual's personality (providing meaning, wholeness, comfort, psychological compensations, even a sense of attachment or belonging). When we think of religion in this way, tending to underemphasize its collective features or lead to conceptions of collective features depicted in ad hominem terms, such as "collective conscience," "soul of the nation," "group spirit," and the like. We think of religious culture reinforcing a view of the world in which social structures are equated with behaviors or the way things "really are." In contrast, culture becomes nonbehavioral – mood, attitude, feeling – and only a perception or interpretation of the way reality is (an "aura of facticity," in Geertz's words). ⁴⁶³

They believe that religious culture is too difficult to observe or measure. Some argue that religious culture cannot be observed adequately at all. Consequently, one can explore the life of faith, the richness of the spirit, and the complexities of inner convictions. "Others are more confident of their ability to create adequate measures, but these measures tend to entail many assumptions about the observer's ability to probe the inner psyche of the individual." ⁴⁶⁴

The connection between the person's inner life and the subjective aspects of religious belief and conviction is especially significant. However, the studies of individual religious commitments remain vital to understanding modern religion. With the many aspects of religion, few would argue that the social-psychological approach alone is adequate. When studies of churches, sects, cults, and

⁴⁶² "Chapter 2."

⁴⁶³ "Chapter 2."

⁴⁶⁴ "Chapter 2."

denominations – all conceived of as concrete organizational entities – abound. ⁴⁶⁵

The modern religion is distinctly a matter of belief that it depends on a particular understanding of the individual. There are clues about how reality is categorized, obtaining the language of religious discourse. When a person tries to convert a colleague by saying, “Let me share something that I have found to be true in my own life,” we learn something vital about the location of religion concerning the person’s sense of identity. ⁴⁶⁶

We have observed that contemporary religion has become acutely individualistic. We can decry the loss of community and predict the eventual demise of religious traditions as we know them. At the same time, we can credit religious discourse with a more active, influential role and, in keeping with that, pay closer attention to what is said. “Religion discourse lies at the intersection of the individual and the community. It individuates conviction, as these examples suggest, but it also reinforces some sense of connectivity at the same time. The act of attempting to convert one’s colleague may be an act of solidarity, a way of creating a mutual bond, and the pastor who preaches in individualistic terms still invoking a sense of community by calling – in the collective setting of the morning worship service – for unity amid diversity. ⁴⁶⁷

When we have conversations about religion, which supplies a plausibility structure, a social context which is a shared conviction strengthening the commitment of all by making subjective belief an intersubjective reality, this social interaction with like-minded believers is an important phenomenon that we should know more about how often, with whom, and in what settings this sort of social interaction takes place. ⁴⁶⁸

A sermon carrying conviction and authority does so not only because it is presented to a large audience in a large auditorium by a pastor but carries the conviction and authority because of the

⁴⁶⁵ “Chapter 2.”

⁴⁶⁶ “Chapter 2.”

⁴⁶⁷ “Chapter 2.”

⁴⁶⁸ “Chapter 2.”

content. The pastor does not simply preach a sermon; he or she constitutes authority within the sermon through a strategic choice of examples and self-disclosures. Stories in the newspapers about religious leaders do not offend or persuade us simply because we bring them certain educational levels and political inclinations, offering or persuading because something in the stories signals to us the reported event violates specific standards of common decency or can be understood within a familiar framework.⁴⁶⁹

The new cultural sociology regards culture as something tangible, explicit, and overtly produced, consisting of texts, discourse, language, music, and the symbolic-expressive dimensions of interpersonal behavior, organizations, and economic transactions. Proponents holding the view of any specific cultural artifact should be examined in terms of its production, relations with other cultural elements, internal structures, and the resources determining how well it becomes institutionally.⁴⁷⁰

Religious discourse speaks to the distinctive realm of existence, suggesting that religion speaks to our desire for personal meaning by clothing concepts of a general order of existence with a powerful and enduring sense of facticity. This discourse does differ from the talk we engage in about yesterday's ballgame or tomorrow's excursion; it requires a level of seriousness and sincerity but also a substantive scope that exceeds most other forms of discourse.⁴⁷¹

B. Navigating Theological Differences

Within counseling, a person's spirituality is integral to the healing process. When providing counseling to incorporate spirituality and faith into one's life, which improves the overall physical and psychological health of individuals if it affords one to do so, those of us who provide counseling should include spirituality and religion when determining one's mental health and overall well-being. Because of what African Americans constantly face, overt racism, and various other challenges, it behooves those of us who provide counseling to tap into one's spirituality as a source of support. The statistics

⁴⁶⁹ "Chapter 2."

⁴⁷⁰ "Chapter 2."

⁴⁷¹ "Chapter 2."

show that 80% of African Americans identify religion as necessary when compared to only 50% of the general population. Most African Americans are believed to identify as Christian, and roughly 50% of African Americans attend church. Many African Americans identify God as a core aspect of their coping and relying on their religion and spirituality during some difficult life transitions.⁴⁷² The opportunity afforded African Americans to attend worship services, Bible Study, be involved in our churches, have devotion time, and listen to religious sermons and gospel music allows us to conceptualize our struggles within the larger struggle between good and evil or God and the devil.⁴⁷³

Because of our spirituality and religious experiences, it does behoove professional counselors to increase their knowledge and awareness of the African American religious experience as it relates to psychological health. In navigating theological differences, we need to understand the Black church and the people worshipping therein, with counselors becoming more familiarized with the historical context and theological underpinnings that frame the Black church and its influence on individual parishioners' help-seeking behaviors.⁴⁷⁴

In navigating theological differences in the African American Baptist Church, we must revisit our history as we discern our differences as a denomination. Like our African American communities, the Black church has experienced changes, progressions, challenges, struggles, and resilience. In the area of counseling, which that church has always provided to a certain extent, counselors must understand the historical role and relevance of the Black church in the African American communities to understand African American mental health help-seeking behaviors better. When navigating theological differences in the African American Church, let us not forget that during slavery, many plantation owners forbade more than five enslaved people to gather at a time without supervision by a White overseer. Moreover, although enslaved persons possessed a desire for religious and spiritual expression, this rule continued to complicate their ability to assemble for worship services. It stifled

⁴⁷² Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, "African American Pastors on Mental Health, Coping, and Help Seeking," 81.

⁴⁷³ Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, 81.

⁴⁷⁴ Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, 82.

their sense of community and opportunities for fellowship. Because there was a fear of repercussions for breaking these rules, enslaved people resorted to informal worship gatherings in secret locations (e.g., swamps and wooded areas.) During the mid-1700s, these informal gatherings became less secretive and more visible, which laid the foundation for the institution that would become the Black church. It would become the epicenter of enslaved people's community and a place of education and fellowship that enslaved people lacked elsewhere on the plantation. The foundation of the church meeting the needs of African American ancestors cannot be lost in our theological differences, especially as we move forward in the 21st century and beyond, what the church meant to us, past, present, and even into the future. ⁴⁷⁵

Back during slavery, plantation owners feared that if enslaved people were able to read the Bible, their proclivity to defer hopes of freedom until after death would decrease. There would be a surge of strength, and a demand for emancipation would emerge. "Slave masters feared that slaves would acquire a comprehensive knowledge of scriptures that illuminated the flaws of biblical inconsistencies of a despotic slave system." When we have a comprehensive knowledge of the scriptures, our ancestors would and did have an increasingly difficult time reconciling a biblically based system that would capture and enslave innocent people. We know now that our ancestors became discontented with their situation and used the Church to bring about change. ⁴⁷⁶

What we know from history cannot be lost in navigating theological differences in the African American church when we realize that enslavers and their families treated enslaved people poorly even though they worshiped together in the same buildings. The church was supposed to be a sacred haven away from maltreatment; it was another opportunity for Whites to exert their power when it became overwhelming for many Blacks. So, enslaved people incepted their churches out of a desire to have their worship places on southern plantations and escape discrimination on Sunday mornings. Richard

⁴⁷⁵ Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, 82.

⁴⁷⁶ Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, 82.

Allen inaugurated the first Black church of the Methodist denomination in 1807. The formation of the Black Methodist churches was considered a visceral response to the Methodist tradition, having segregated churches for Blacks and Whites. Looking back, this departure of Blacks from the Methodist Church was one of the first major civil rights protests by African Americans. So, subsequently, African Americans formed African American congregations of Baptist, Presbyterian, and Episcopal denominations, setting the stage for the prominent emergence of the Black church during the Civil Rights Era. Enslaved people felt that they could be themselves, and their status as enslaved people did not subsume their identity in these churches. These services provided therapeutic relief and a departure from the pressure and brutality experienced on the plantation.⁴⁷⁷

What our ancestors determined has not changed, and that is church services and religious and spiritual resources operated much like counseling sessions, which our ancestors found hope in the scriptural promises of a future void of oppression. They were looking forward to death as a transition from suffering on earth to a promise of reward and deliverance in heaven. Our ancestors could relate to the persecution and torment of Jesus Christ, the pivotal figure of Christianity. Our ancestors likened the crucifixion experienced by Jesus Christ to the popularized practice of lynching Black men. There was a connection between Jesus and our ancestors relating to the Bible story of Judas betraying Jesus for economic compensation because our ancestors knew that White plantation owners betrayed and brought them to America for others' economic gain.⁴⁷⁸

Because our ancestors faced horrendous conditions on plantations, we know that counseling services were not available as a support and therapeutic release. Nevertheless, at the time, the church was the primary resource for support and change during life challenges. So, the proclivity seeking from the church began during slavery and continues today, and the theological differences have not

⁴⁷⁷ Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, 83.

⁴⁷⁸ Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, 83.

changed for Black people.⁴⁷⁹

When navigating theological differences between the African American Baptist Church and the Black church, it was in the 1950s and 1960s that the church became increasingly more autonomous, expanding doctrinal beliefs, electing leaders, and creating seminary institutions educating its leaders. It was and still is for the Black church, offering activists a platform to promote equal rights for African Americans. It was the Black church working at society's macro and micro levels. At the macro level, large institutions such as the NAACP garnered support (e.g., financial and emotional) from the Black church. Individuals with difficulties fulfilling financial obligations receive economic assistance at the more micro level. It was and still is the Black church's growing financial independence that initiated the self-help doctrine, as African Americans were not relying on support from outside sources.⁴⁸⁰

In the 21st century, the Black church of the past struggled with achieving equal rights in the community; the contemporary Black church faces its unique challenges. Moreover, these challenges relate to health (e.g., HIV/AIDS) and social issues (e.g., welfare reform disproportionately high unemployment rates for African Americans).⁴⁸¹

In navigating the theological difference in the African American Baptist Church, and the Black church in particular, let us not forget that theology does unite the collective church. However, it also differentiates between local congregations. We have seen that individual churches and denominations vary in theological principles and, therefore, differ in how they execute beliefs and their purpose, roles, and responsibilities. The Black church is often mistaken as a homogenous grouping of individual churches. However, theological differences make this a pretense. These theological positions can serve as overarching guiding principles and influences for parishioners' individual lives and choices, including decisions about seeking help from professional counselors.⁴⁸²

⁴⁷⁹ Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, 83.

⁴⁸⁰ Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, 83.

⁴⁸¹ Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, 84.

⁴⁸² Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, 84.

It has been determined that most Black churches unite in the theological belief that their members experience a personal visitation from Jesus during worship services. This theological notion guides the way services are conducted. Moreover, this visitation can be manifested through rituals and practices such as shouting, singing gospel songs and hymns, and speaking in tongues. These are examples of liberal and animated worship behaviors often indicative of the Black church.⁴⁸³

So, the members of the Black church likely reference God and Jesus Christ interchangeably in spiritual practices, such as prayer, which could be confusing to some outside observers.⁴⁸⁴ With these complexities confusing some counselors not immersed in the Black church, many observers question the variation in theology and often the ambivalent character of an institution that can be progressive on the one hand and yet rooted in traditional theology, and this is a theology guiding the Black church providing helpful insight for counselors interested in increasing multicultural competence and understanding of African American clients.⁴⁸⁵

James Cone's liberation theology is foundational for the Black church, the church's most prevailing schools of thought. For liberation theology, African Americans took Christianity, traditionally perceived as a White man's religion, and adapted it to the plights and triumphs of African Americans. Compared to other theologies, liberation theology is seen as comprehensive because it considers how individuals view God and interact with one another. "According to liberation theology, the Black church offered oppressed Blacks a sense of freedom rarely experienced in their day-to-day lives. The Black church was where African Americans could gather and vent about the problems as a community."⁴⁸⁶

It was other theologies focused on Caucasians as oppressors; churches whose members ascribed to liberation theology tend to focus less on the oppression and more on the freedom that is felt when

⁴⁸³ Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, 84.

⁴⁸⁴ Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, 84.

⁴⁸⁵ Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, 85.

⁴⁸⁶ Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, 85.

congregation members experience fellowship with one another. However, it was slaves viewing the master-slave relationship as the epitome of evil; African Americans emphasized forming and preserving healthy relationships. Liberation theology addressed people holistically, emphasizing the connection of the body and the mind.⁴⁸⁷

In navigating theological differences, the idea of an alternate society is similar to liberation theology, proposing that the Black church operates as a sovereign society where African Americans can fully express their authentic selves. This theological perspective was founded on the belief that Caucasians did not understand African Americans and, therefore, could not adequately meet their needs. There was the idea that the Black church would be a separate nation within the United States and would meet African American communities' needs in ways beyond just the spiritual. With this notion, the Black church could produce education centers, financial institutions, housing, and social outlets. This alternate society would further inhibit Blacks from successfully acculturating the majority culture in which they were expected to live and function. So, churches ascribing to this theology believed they could meet the congregation members' psychological and spiritual needs. This philosophy exists in churches; members who seek guidance from church leaders may be discouraged from seeking professional counseling outside the Black church.⁴⁸⁸

With other-worldly and worldly theologies, those members believe in deferring freedom and reward until death. These members are more accepting of the present pain and suffering since they believe they will experience relief posthumously in heaven. So, spiritual songs to comfort, direct, and relieve enslaved Black people became a critical part of the other-worldly theology.⁴⁸⁹

Songs served as a reminder that earthly suffering is temporary and an eternal promise of heavenly peace awaits upon death. Pastors served as an essential mouthpiece for other-worldly theology. During slavery, preachers often delivered sermons reminding listeners of life after death, a

⁴⁸⁷ Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, 85.

⁴⁸⁸ Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, 85.

⁴⁸⁹ Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, 85.

life contrasted with the current reality of enslavement.⁴⁹⁰

For African Americans, even now, believing in worldly theologies, some pastors continue to uphold messages of enduring present suffering and awaiting the promise that accompanies death. Attendees of other-worldly churches may be less likely to present counseling. However, when they do, the counselor must understand that the client may be less oriented to solving his or her problem and more oriented to focusing on life after death. We are focusing on the different denominations used to identify the Black church (es) and Black religious choices of the early republic.⁴⁹¹

What Richard Allen did was momentous in that he boldly charged forward for what he believed was right when confronted with injustice. So, in 1792, Allen and his colleague, Absalom Jones, were dragged from their knees while at prayer at Philadelphia's St. George's Methodist Church. It was Jones and Allen who lingered while Methodist preachers attempted to serve communion to White members; church elders expected Black members to retreat until all Whites had been served. However, Allen led Blacks out of St. George's and toward creating the first African Methodist Episcopal Church, the most prominent of the antebellum Black Christian denominations.⁴⁹²

It is believed that Allen was the founding father responsible for creating the American Republic more so than the White founders of Washington, Jefferson, or Adams. Allen's departure from St George complemented the Black independence and empowerment narrative. Before Allen and Jones left Philadelphia's St. George's Methodist Church, they joined Philadelphia's nondenominational Free African Society. Allen left the group shortly after its founding as he was unwilling to compromise his Methodist principles or desire to proselytize for the Methodist faith.⁴⁹³

The Black church has been central to Black life in America. With the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 and the march on Washington in 1963, the American historical narrative assumes that a

⁴⁹⁰ Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, 86.

⁴⁹¹ Avent, Cashwell, and Brown-Jeffy, 86.

⁴⁹² Kyle T. Bulthuis, "The Difference Denominations Made: Identifying the Black church(Es) and Black Religious Choices of the Early Republic," *Religion and American Culture* 29, no. 2 (2019): 255, <https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2019.3>.

⁴⁹³ Bulthuis, 255.

fundamental, essential connection links the Black church to the Black community. It is an attractive package that once was an act of civil disobedience in the collective American memory that looks like civil religion. For the scholarly world, this can be complicated because church history generally has fallen out of favor, in part. After all, its methodology is institutionally driven, top-down and elitist, overly masculine and heteronormative, tuned to clerical interests, focused on theology, and generally triumphalist. The studies of Black churches have fared better when recent scholars have similarly questioned the significance of the Black church as a historical field because anthropological, gendered, or political approaches promised to yield richer results.⁴⁹⁴

Some believe the Black church as a single, unitary concept may have lost its value, which is a consideration of Black church history should not because Richard Allen's choice to remain a Methodist and, in so doing, to become an African Methodist was undoubtedly significance in the paths it traced in Black history. We know that Allen did not create the Black church. Allen and Jones contributed individually to a plural creation of the Black churches, considering the Black church plural and multifaceted.⁴⁹⁵

Unable to downplay religion as a component of Black religious identity, instead finding in the Black community socioeconomic division, or with religious identity strong gendered and class divides.⁴⁹⁶ Black denominational choices- theological and religious identities- coexist alongside socioeconomic, racial, and reform communities, yielding a deeper and richer understanding of the Black antebellum experience and revealing both the positive and negative positions among Black religious actors and points of separation and cooperation between them.⁴⁹⁷

In navigating theological differences in African American Black churches, we have these choices in religious affiliation in the nineteenth century: the Episcopalian, the Presbyterian and

⁴⁹⁴ Bulthuis, 256.

⁴⁹⁵ Bulthuis, 256.

⁴⁹⁶ Bulthuis, 256.

⁴⁹⁷ Bulthuis, 257.

Congregational, the Methodist, and the Baptist, with a look at the theological and religious imperatives of each denomination and the institutional or ecclesiastical structures. These groups represent the most recorded religious expressions for American Blacks in the antebellum era. The author conveying this is not exhaustive. ⁴⁹⁸

For Blacks, this suggests our religious experiences were multifaceted. That intellectual and social influences on Black religion rarely worked in simple or linear ways, for the intellectual and bureaucratic limits of each church's theology and organization created a possible framework within churchgoers. The theology and ecclesiology serve as brakes on some aspects of reform, galvanizing other forms of resistance, depending on the group. ⁴⁹⁹

Because of the dominance of Episcopalian and Presbyterian Black church leaders and the institutional and theological requirements that leaders worked closely with Whites, helping to ensure that uplift ideology was the driving force in early Black reform. Even numerically dominant Black Methodists and Baptists did not initially dominate discussions of Black church leadership, and consequently, their pietistic and personal theology did not immediately influence reform movements.

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After the American Revolution, any formal church-state bond was disavowed, and similar state-level dissolutions allowed for implicit pluralism among religious bodies. Consequently, no single church was privileged, resulting in a multiplication of competing sects and organizations, and these organizations varied on local, regional, and national levels. ⁵⁰¹

There were diverges on theological issues, ecclesiastical organizations, involvement with the public sphere, and political tendencies. No single denomination encouraged a single and straightforward movement without alternative theological interpretations or social imperatives towards

⁴⁹⁸ Bulthuis, 257.

⁴⁹⁹ Bulthuis, 257.

⁵⁰⁰ Bulthuis, 257.

⁵⁰¹ Bulthuis, 257.

other positions. Church history considers denominations as legitimizing bodies for the individuals within them and the nation in which they reside. The creation of Black denominations in the antebellum era implied some level of Americanization, and there was and is a willingness to work within the system rather than overturn it. It is too bad the denominations employed bureaucratic rather than charismatic organizational forms; however, their spiritual leaders may have appealed to noninstitutional authority; denominations also instituted forms that paralleled those in White churches, while Black churches employed a dialectical, rather than oppositional, relationship with White American Protestantism. We could conclude that Episcopalians and Presbyterians, properly speaking, were not Black churches in the sense that they were part of larger, White-dominated, and controlled bodies.⁵⁰²

Presbyterians and Episcopalians are formalist denominations that sell established connections to civil authorities. The Church of England created the first Black missions in the British Atlantic world, providing the foundation for the first Black church in Anglo-America. The Anglican Church related to the British government and claimed a unique right toward spiritual and temporal authority. Its members were also representatives of government and finance in their communities.⁵⁰³

So, as representatives established church, churchmen held they owed a missionizing duty to all the empire's subjects, including enslaved Black people and Native American tribes. These tendencies toward clerical authority, social prestige, and universal mission remained even after the American Revolution, destroying the formal religious establishment of the Anglican Church in America. So, Anglicans became Episcopalians, and the Church of England, the Protestant Episcopal Church, was one denomination among many.⁵⁰⁴

Thus, the Protestant Episcopal Church's theological and institutional imperatives intertwined; theologically, the Protestant Episcopal Church in America retained the roots of the religious

⁵⁰² Bulthuis, 258.

⁵⁰³ Bulthuis, 258.

⁵⁰⁴ Bulthuis, 258.

establishment even though it was no longer formally connected to the state. The Episcopal ecclesiology or church organization did retain a hierarchical structure, with only the presence of authorized, ordained clergy rendering worship service legitimate; such clergy ranked, lower to higher, from liturgical worship leaders to deacons, priests, and vicars to bishops and archbishops.⁵⁰⁵

The Episcopal Church contains hundreds of Black worshipers, some of whose ancestors' church roots began in colonial-era missionary efforts. Few were in a Black church, representing individual believers within larger, White-dominated congregations. Few Black Episcopalians who were part of the Black church were disproportionately significant in their range and influence.⁵⁰⁶

Two congregations specifically represented an Episcopalian version of the Black church in antebellum America. St. Thomas African Episcopal Church in Philadelphia was formed alongside Richard Allen's more well-known Bethel African Methodist Church in the 1790s. The St. Philip's African Episcopal Church was formed in New York City a decade after Black Methodists organized in Philadelphia.⁵⁰⁷

With a theology like Presbyterian-Congregationalist, it was Calvinist. They have a complex and varied system. One common feature of Calvinism is that it emphasizes the sovereignty of God. God was and is the lawgiver and judge, and God's moral laws of nature and just laws given by society's leaders were to be obeyed. That just, morally perfect, and all-powerful Calvinist God demanded punishment for sin. Moreover, this insistence could cut in different ways: the universal reality of sin meant that all humans, Black and White, shared a common nature and a common need to seek God's justice, which led to an insistence on the importance of following God's higher laws, over those flawed laws created by man.⁵⁰⁸

The Calvinists, recognizing sin as limiting human action, fought against what they saw as the

⁵⁰⁵ Bulthuis, 259.

⁵⁰⁶ Bulthuis, 259.

⁵⁰⁷ Bulthuis, 260.

⁵⁰⁸ Bulthuis, 264.

hubris of moral crusaders, who often ignored church order and sound theology in pursuing their higher aims. For Calvinism insisting on the centrality of the scriptures, Bible reading lay at the heart of individual devotions, and preachers' exposition of scriptural passages organized community worship. Proper biblical preaching required a clergy fully trained in a university-level education as well as theology, and many recognized that training should be accessible to potential Black pastors, too. ⁵⁰⁹

Black Methodists were considered the first group of the Black church, as the African Methodist denominations began separating from White-run bodies in the 1790s. However, Methodism as a formal body reached out to Blacks later than Episcopalians or Calvinists, a group that had started in the North American colonies late, achieving a Black religious identity and forming separate bodies before the other two. ⁵¹⁰

Black Methodist groups were among the first to take the name African, creating a national identity as a point of resistance that Blacks in America would embrace for over a generation. Methodism promoted a greater emphasis on the individual believer than either the Episcopalians or Presbyterians. Methodism derived from an initially derogatory term directed at the group's founder, John Wesley, in that believers worked disciplinary "methods" to progressively move toward salvation. The individual believer employed prayer, scriptural study, almsgiving, good works, and worship in a community of believers to accompany the faith in Christ that brought salvation. So Methodist theology was much blunter and more straightforward than Episcopalian or Calvinist models, insisting that a common understanding of the scriptures was sufficient to receive the gospel. ⁵¹¹

Black Methodists' emphasis on formal training and uplift differed from that of the Episcopalians and Calvinists. Their results-oriented theology, Methodism for Blacks, focused on the material rather than the culture. Richard Allen embodied uplift but achieved it through manual labor; he purchased his freedom through hard work and undertook several manufactory and merchandising businesses, even as

⁵⁰⁹ Bulthuis, 264.

⁵¹⁰ Bulthuis, 268.

⁵¹¹ Bulthuis, 268.

he remained a gospel minister. "Methodist uplift did not focus on literary or philosophical education itself, and literacy was necessary as a means to an end, primarily through scripture reading; literacy for its own sake was more likely provenance of Episcopalians and Presbyterians."⁵¹²

During antebellum Black Christianity, Baptists included groups whose sheer diversity belies any attempts to put a singular label on us. In the American colonies, the term Baptist referred to a branch of Calvinist Congregationalists rejecting the sacrament of infant baptism, instead requiring adult baptism as a sign of repentance and forgiveness of sins. During the Revolution, Baptists represented a large and diverse body of believers like the Methodists; however, without that latter group's institutional scaffolding, the Baptist location centered on the local community of believers, not its national or international affiliation.⁵¹³

Baptist theology emphasizes the importance of the individual, particularly the necessity of each individual to achieve a conversion experience, a sense of divine grace, that would offer proof of salvation. The dynamics of that experience could vary considerably. Baptists fell into General (Arminian) and Particular (Calvinist) camps, although most Blacks during the nineteenth century tended to fit the former category.⁵¹⁴

Baptist theology tended to be less corporate and more individual, more precisely, more applicable to the individual setting of the believer and the congregation rather than the larger society. Thus, Baptists were less likely to support group action or social reform beyond those movements such as temperance, which helped shepherd individual believers towards right actions on a personal (or, at most, congregational) rather than national level.⁵¹⁵

C. Building Consensus within Congregations

We have already covered the rich history of African American Baptist churches rooted in faith,

⁵¹² Bulthuis, 269.

⁵¹³ Bulthuis, 272.

⁵¹⁴ Bulthuis, 272.

⁵¹⁵ Bulthuis, 272.

resilience, and community. Moreover, throughout history, African American churches have been the centers of spiritual nourishment, social justice, and cultural expression. We have discussed generational shifts within the church; younger congregants want a gospel that speaks directly to their immediate needs and what they are experiencing in the world. However, our study has uncovered that we must build consensus, bridging the generational gaps while honoring diverse perspectives within the church.

With social and cultural changes afront, a rapid societal change impacts our congregations – with technologies, social media, and the evolving worship styles we have already mentioned in this study. Technology will drive our mission’s effort to spread the word of God worldwide and remain hybrid in the years to come because the church will never be the same after COVID-19.⁵¹⁶

With the current political climate in the United States of America and the social justice concerns confronting all of us, congregations must continue to grapple with how to engage in social justice issues while maintaining unity within the church. That will continue to be a balancing act for the church moving forward in the 21st century and beyond because society is deteriorating before our eyes. We must build consensus by discussing these matters openly.⁵¹⁷

We have already discussed inclusivity and diversity with the church, embracing diversity within our congregations while fostering consensus. We must recognize the value of different backgrounds, ages, and experiences enriching the church community.⁵¹⁸

In empowerment and leadership, we must encourage active participation and leadership roles for all members, building consensus. While simultaneously empowering our congregations to contribute to decision-making and vision-setting.

In community engagement, the African American Baptist Church will continue its historical role

⁵¹⁶ “The Prophetic Role of the African American Churches in the 21st Century | Reflections.”

⁵¹⁷ Robert K. Gnuse, “Seven Gay Texts: Biblical Passages Used to Condemn Homosexuality,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture* 45, no. 2 (May 2015): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107915577097>.

⁵¹⁸ Gnuse, 12.

as a community anchor through consensus building, collaborating with local organizations, and addressing community needs by facilitating conversations on important topics. We must continue to involve the membership in shaping worshipping styles and the church's mission and goals, not losing sight of addressing conflicts, seeking reconciliation and understanding, and emphasizing love and grace.⁵¹⁹

In education and training, we must continue to equip congregants with the tools for consensus-building, holding workshops on communication, conflict resolution, and leadership. We must not lose sight of spiritual formation first in prayer; seeking God's guidance and consensus building is a spiritual endeavor, and we must pursue biblical principles grounded in the word of God, like scriptures on unity, love, and community (e.g., Ephesians 4:3; 1 Corinthians 12:12) providing the foundation.

The ability of all Baptist churches to unify behind the oneness of the people of God is the redeeming work of God in Christ, endeavoring all Baptist churches to be united in this writing for the betterment of the church at large. The church should do all in its power to preserve this unity, spare no effort to recover and sustain the fellowshiping in the Body of Christ, and give it an expression that at present exists.⁵²⁰

D. Conclusion

Racism is a complex issue that affects Black Americans, who were raised in a pro-White culture and tend to think, feel, and act in pro-White ways. The Mediterranean world was racially composite, with people from Asiatic, African, and northern Mediterranean backgrounds. The debate over the race of Augustine of Hippo and Cyprian of Carthage stems from a false reading of the mindset of present-day northern Europeans. With its diverse African lore, Genesis is a unique collection of largely variegated African lore.

The Black church should inspire life-giving alternatives to racism within the nation, religiously

⁵¹⁹ Gnuse, 21.

⁵²⁰ Neville Callam, "Baptists and Church Unity: The Ecumenical Review," *The Ecumenical Review* 61, no. 3 (2009): 309, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.2009.00028.x>.

and politically, devoted to White supremacy. The church must speak out against racist individuals who are not hiding their plans ahead of events. The church should resist the notion that White men are the only ones gifted with the image of God and are burdened with saving the world.

In moving the African American Baptist Church forward, it is crucial to grapple with the historical impact of race on Black Americans' potential for a safe and productive life in the United States. Racism is an enduring moral evil that prohibits Black people from living out their God-given potential for productive, embodied life. The church must stand up for this resistance, as many people struggle to see the role of the Black church as anything but a problem.

The African American Baptist Church, like many other African American churches, must address the issue of racism and racial uplift by promoting activism and developing a culture within the church. This resistance is not only outside the church but also affects the church inside, as it is in the world but not in the world.

Black fugitive religion sees Jesus' crucifixion as evidence of God's partiality to the oppressed, reaffirming God's compassion and solidarity with those least regarded in society. The church should be a change agent in the change we want in this country and the world.

As an African American Baptist Church, we seek to build long-term commitments to activism by framing socioeconomic problems, especially racial disparities and systemic injustices, as religious issues that call for sustained activism. We must help our congregations move from comfortable church cultures rooted in individualistic cultural frameworks to an alternative culture emphasizing the systemic and structural dimensions of theology and religious commitments.

We must align ourselves with community faith-based organizations working to better the lives of others by bringing discrete groups into culturally unified movements. When working with other faith traditions, we must construct narratives that make sense according to diverse theological and cultural traditions. This commitment to two cultural narratives is essential when uniting with other faith

traditions: organized faith communities can effectuate social change, and activism is essential to religious commitment.

The church must move beyond resistance in its congregations by utilizing faith-based organizations and churches to mobilize around issues with specific stakeholder interests. By constructing organizing as religiously meaningful work, the church can create stable, culturally unified movements that attract diverse members and articulate expansive social justice discourses. This approach involves prayer, storytelling, and narrative practices that focus on common religious understandings and the effects of structural problems on individuals' lives and community well-being.

Despite legislative changes, activist models of religious culture have yet to take root in most American congregations. Young people want the church to pursue issues that actively improve their lives and see how faith and society intersect for the good of all people. The church must deny the variation in American church culture, which promotes individualistic styles of religious commitments and engenders individualistic orientations to socioeconomic issues.

The church must move beyond a comfortable culture characterized by the widespread belief among laity and clergy that civic activities appropriate for congregational life are those reproducing individualistic dimensions of religious commitment. The church must fight against systemic injustices and articulate compelling theological imperatives for systemic analysis and associated social justice activism.

As leaders, especially pastors, we must confront people who question social justice activism, misunderstand what the church should be, and realize that reconfiguring the church's priorities is part of a pastor's calling. By exercising the power God has given them and believing what God says, we can continue striving to build commitments with organizations that help the church organize and speak to power, establishing discourse of what the church means and signifies to many in American society.

The church must address social issues and work towards social justice, inclusion, and social

equity. Thus, this can be achieved through engaging with local politicians and addressing the denial of human dignity and justice. As Christians, we should work for those denied God's abundance and check in with leaders to ensure they listen to our concerns.

Contemporary religion is evolving, and evolutionary stages may need to be addressed. Robert N. Bellah's theory distinguishes five ideal-typical patterns of religion: primitive, archaic, historic, early modern, and modern. Each stage has a distinct stage or stable crystallization, with the modern stage tracing its origins back to the nineteenth century.

The collapse of dualism in historic religions has led to increased symbolic differentiation, with religious symbols as signals of deeper meanings. This ability to manipulate symbols and their truths is a prime example of modern religion's more complex character.

The connection between religious symbolism and personal integration plays a self-occupying role in modern culture, which is both prominent and problematic. As individuals become emancipated from all sustaining collectives, they must continue to accept responsibility for their duties and God's choice to worship. By engaging with local politicians and addressing social issues, churches can establish a presence and contribute to a society that values human dignity and compassion.

Habermas, a German social philosopher, differs from Bellah, who focused on economic development and the state. He distinguishes four stages of cultural evolution: neolithic, archaic, developed, and modern. Habermas emphasizes the privatization of religion, which has traditionally been essential for instilling community and performing socially integrative functions. Religious symbols facilitate communication, but religious people often fail to abandon their suppositions long enough to consider others' interests and values.

Niklas Luhmann, a German sociologist, contends that modern societies have more clearly differentiated social spheres of subsystems. He believes that modern religion has lost its capacity to legitimize and unify society and may even flourish among reactionary groups critical of political and

economic processes. Luhmann believes that religious systems undergo continuous transformations, altering their social contexts and being altered by them.

The invention of the alphabet led to the production of written religious texts, which became objects of religious reflection. The New Testament canon seems to reflect a pattern of faith more closely circumscribed by religious texts than the Old Testament. A high degree of supernaturalism may remain in American religion as a formal tenant, with the operational relevance of the supernatural primarily falling into the interior concerns of the self.

Despite considerable erosion of religious practices, attempts to communicate with the divine remain prominent. Prayer remains a vital feature of contemporary life compared to other religious behavior, with 60% of the American public considering it very important and 22% regarded it as necessary.

American religion demonstrates many characteristics of modern culture, with many religious beliefs and practices remaining relevant in contemporary situations. Symbolisms, power, and status relations constitute religion, the bonds within its membership, organizational resources, wealth distribution, time allocations, and communication media. It is essential to recognize that religion is more than just social networks and cannot be understood entirely in the same terms as political parties or economic transactions.

Classical theoretical traditions have drawn inspiration from studying religion to understand the dynamics of modern societies, recognize its cultural content and form, and draw a strong connection between studies of religion and culture. Anthropologist Geertz provided a concise definition of religion and a solid epistemological and philosophical defense of its importance.

Modern conceptions of religion often underemphasize its connection to the individual, its location within the inner part of the individual, and its role in the individual's personality. However, studies of individual religious commitments remain vital to understanding modern religion. The

language of religious discourse plays a crucial role in identifying reality and determining the location of religion concerning a person's sense of identity.

Contemporary religion has become acutely individualistic, leading to the loss of community and the eventual demise of religious traditions. However, religious discourse plays a more active and influential role, reinforcing a sense of connectivity while individuating conviction. Conversations about religion provide a plausibility structure and social context, strengthening the commitment of all by making subjective belief an intersubjective reality.

A pastor presents a sermon's conviction and authority through strategic examples and self-disclosures. The new cultural sociology views culture as tangible, explicit, and overtly produced, consisting of texts, discourse, language, music, and symbolic dimensions. Religious discourse speaks to the distinctive realm of existence, addressing personal meaning and enduring facticity. It requires seriousness and sincerity but has a substantive scope that exceeds most other forms of discourse. In counseling, a person's spirituality is integral to the healing process.

Counselors should consider spirituality and religion when assessing mental health and well-being, especially for African Americans who face challenges like racism and overt racism. 80% of African Americans identify religion as necessary, with most attending church. Spirituality and faith are essential for coping during difficult life transitions. Professional counselors should increase their knowledge of African American religious experiences and navigate theological differences within the Black church. The denomination must revisit its history and theological underpinnings to understand its impact on help-seeking behaviors and theological differences within the community.

Counselors must understand the historical role and relevance of the Black church in African American communities to understand mental health help-seeking behaviors better. During slavery, plantation owners prohibited enslaved people from gathering without supervision, complicating their religious expression. Informal worship gatherings became less secretive and more visible, laying the

foundation for the Black church. The church became the epicenter of enslaved people's community and a place of education and fellowship. Theological differences in the church must be considered, especially as we move forward in the 21st century.

Our ancestors struggled to reconcile a biblical system that enslaved innocent people. They used the church to bring about change, as enslaved people sought sanctuary and escape discrimination. The first Black church of the Methodist denomination was inaugurated in 1807, a response to segregation. African Americans formed African American congregations of Baptist, Presbyterian, and Episcopal denominations, setting the stage for the Black church during the Civil Rights Era. These churches provided therapeutic relief and a departure from the pressure and brutality experienced on plantations.

Our ancestors found hope in church services and spiritual resources, similar to counseling sessions. They compared Jesus Christ's persecution to the lynching of Black men and the Bible story of Judas betraying Jesus for economic compensation. Despite facing harsh conditions on plantations, counseling services were not available, and the church was the primary resource for support and change. Theological differences between the African American Baptist Church and the Black church have not changed, with the Black church providing activists a platform to promote equal rights for African Americans at both macro and micro levels.

The Black church, a community of African Americans, has faced unique challenges in the 21st century, including health issues like HIV/AIDS and social issues like high unemployment rates. The church's theological differences unite the collective church and differentiate local congregations. Most Black churches believe in a personal visitation from Jesus during worship services, manifested through rituals and practices like shouting, singing gospel songs, and speaking in tongues. This theological notion can confuse outside observers, as members may reference God and Jesus Christ interchangeably in spiritual practices.

The Black church, rooted in traditional theology, is a progressive institution that offers

multicultural competence and understanding of African American clients. James Cone's liberation theology is foundational, focusing on how African Americans adapt Christianity to their plight and triumphs. Liberation theology emphasizes the connection between the body and the mind, emphasizing the connection between the body and the mind. The Black church operates as a sovereign society where African Americans can express their authentic selves, arguing that Caucasians do not understand African Americans and cannot adequately meet their needs.

The Black church envisioned a separate nation within the United States to meet African American communities' needs beyond spirituality, including education, financial institutions, housing, and social outlets. This alternative society hindered Blacks from acculturating into the majority culture. Church members believed in worldly theologies, deferring freedom and reward until death, and used spiritual songs to comfort and relieve enslaved Black people. Pastors play a crucial role in upholding these beliefs, and counselors must understand that clients may be more focused on life after death than on solving their problems.

Richard Allen, who boldly faced injustice at St. George's Methodist Church in Philadelphia, influenced the Black church and Black religious choices of the early republic. Allen led blacks out and created the first African Methodist Episcopal Church, a prominent antebellum Black Christian denomination. Allen is considered the founding father of the American Republic, and his departure from St. George's complemented the Black independence narrative. The Black church has been central to Black life in America, with the Montgomery bus boycott and the march on Washington.

The study of Black churches has been criticized for its institutional focus, elitist methodology, and focus on theology. However, recent scholars have questioned the significance of the Black church as a historical field, focusing on anthropological, gendered, and political approaches. The Black church is seen as plural and multifaceted, with socioeconomic and gendered divides contributing to its development. Black denominational choices, including the Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Congregational,

Methodist, and Baptist, reveal the multifaceted religious experiences of American Blacks during the antebellum era.

The influence of intellectual and social factors on Black religion was complex and varied. Episcopalian and Presbyterian Black church leaders, who worked closely with Whites, influenced early Black reform through uplift ideology. Post-American Revolution, a lack of formal church-state bonds led to a multiplication of competing sects and organizations. Disavowal of church-state bonds allowed for implicit pluralism among religious bodies, with no single denomination encouraging a single movement. Black denominations, created in the antebellum era, aimed to work within the system rather than overturn it.

Episcopalians and Presbyterians were not Black churches but were part of larger, White-dominated bodies. The Church of England created the first Black missions in Anglo-America, and its members held a missionizing duty to all the empire's subjects, including enslaved Black people and Native American tribes. After the American Revolution, the Anglican Church in America was destroyed, and Episcopalians became one of many denominations. The Protestant Episcopal Church in America retained its roots of religious establishment but retained a hierarchical structure with authorized clergy. Few Black Episcopalians were disproportionately significant in their range and influence.

In antebellum America, two congregations, St. Thomas African Episcopal Church in Philadelphia and St. Philip's African Episcopal Church in New York City, represented an Episcopalian version of the Black church. These congregations were Calvinist, emphasizing God's sovereignty and the importance of following God's higher laws. Calvinists fought against moral crusaders who ignored church order and sound theology. Bible reading was central to devotions, and preachers' exposition organized community worship. Black Methodists were the first group of the Black church, as African Methodist denominations separated from White-run bodies in the 1790s.

Methodism, a Black religious movement, emerged later than Episcopalians or Calvinists, forming separate bodies. Black Methodist groups were the first to adopt the name African, creating a national identity for over a generation. Methodism emphasized individual believers through prayer, scriptural study, almsgiving, good works, and worship. It was more straightforward than Episcopalian or Calvinist models, emphasizing a common understanding of the scriptures. Black Methodists focused on formal training and uplift, focusing on material rather than culture. Baptists included diverse groups during antebellum Black Christianity.

The term "Baptist" in the American colonies refers to a Calvinist Congregationalist branch that rejected infant baptism and required adult baptism for repentance and forgiveness of sins. Baptist theology emphasizes individual conversion and divine grace, with Baptists falling into General and Particular camps. They were less likely to support group action or social reform, but they helped shepherd believers toward personal actions. African American Baptist churches have a rich history of faith, resilience, and community and have been centers of spiritual nourishment, social justice, and cultural expression. Building consensus within congregations is crucial to honoring diverse perspectives.

The African American Baptist Church is adapting to rapid societal changes, including technology, social media, and evolving worship styles. It must navigate social justice issues while maintaining unity to remain a hybrid church. The church should embrace inclusivity and diversity, encourage active participation and leadership, and continue as a community anchor. The church should also involve its members in shaping worshipping styles and missions while addressing conflicts and seeking reconciliation. Education and training should focus on consensus-building tools and equipping congregations with the necessary skills.

Spiritual formation in prayer is crucial for consensus building and pursuing biblical principles. Baptist churches should strive to unify under the oneness of God's people, preserving unity for the

church's betterment. They should preserve fellowship in the Body of Christ and express it.

IX. Preserving Cultural Identity while Evolving

A. Strategies for Maintaining Traditions

We need to know about our history and why we have such a rich history because after the fall of Carthage, the Roman Empire encompassed a sophisticated and flourishing civilization in North Africa and southern Europe. Many historians credit North African theologian Tertullian with creating what became the traditional form of Latin Christianity. By the end of the second century, North Africa was thoroughly Christianized, and Tertullian could have protested the emperor. He said, "We have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods!" Because Christianity developed earlier and spread faster in North Africa than in most other parts of the Empire, Latin Christianity originated there, ultimately shaping the thought of the Roman Church. European scholar Theodor Mommsen said, "Through African Christianity became the religion of the world."⁵²¹

Moreover, nearly half of the most prominent church leaders in the first few centuries (such as Origen, Cyprian, Athanasius, and Augustine) were North African; probably a fair number of these were dark in complexion. Christianity spread in Egypt so widely that that country remained predominantly Christian into the tenth century, and to this day, at least ten percent of its population remains Christian.⁵²²

The Black church, having been denied a presence and rendered invisible in the broad scope of Church history, which was due to enslavement, segregation, and the persistence of racism, the Black church has been believers much longer than they have had access to institutional modes of religion and worship. We came to Christianity not simply through the church but through faith in the God of love and liberation. So, from slavery to freedom, Black Christians have historically upheld Jesus' cross,

⁵²¹ Craig S. Keener and Glenn Usry, *Defending Black Faith: Answers to Tough Questions about African-American Christianity* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 14.

⁵²² Keener and Usry, 14.

affirming their humanity in a world that sought to deny the equality of all God's children. Our history reflects that Black Christians' faith in God's love and liberating power led and continues to lead to establishing the institution and tradition known as the Black church.⁵²³

It was historian Gayraud Wilmore asserting that the radical nature of the historic Black church tradition was defined by three factors: the quest for independence from White control, the revalorization of the image of Africa [and African people], and the acceptance of protest and agitation as theological prerequisites for Black liberation and the liberation of all oppressed people. So, from its origins in traditional African societies to its contemporary manifestations, religion has permeated every dimension of African American history and culture, art, music, and literature, to the formation of social institutions, economic collectives, and political philosophies.⁵²⁴

In the last four decades, there has been a tremendous change in Black Christianity in the United States and elsewhere worldwide. There has been an increasing number of Black churches having castigated mainstream White religious groups for their complicity with racism, demanded reparations, and agitated for substantive power or leadership roles within the governing structures of American society, both sacred and secular. Because of an interracial conflict and tension having emerged, various Black theologies criticized racism and other social injustices within modern society, and the foremost leader in the development of Black Liberation Theology is theologian James H. Cone, whose early works include *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969), *Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (1972), and *God of the Oppressed* (1975). "Black Liberation theology asserted the importance of conjoining religious practice and faith with political activism and social change for the betterment of the Black community."⁵²⁵ In preserving the cultural identity while evolving strategies for maintaining traditions in the African American Church, we should continue this struggle as articulated previously in the 21st century and beyond because we still have this

⁵²³ Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, ed., *Black church Studies: An Introduction* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 3.

⁵²⁴ Floyd-Thomas, 3.

⁵²⁵ Floyd-Thomas, 39.

struggle as a people.

When going beyond viewing the Black church and the social contexts in which it is embedded as being static and fixed, this perspective sees the Black church as fundamentally dynamic as Lincoln and Mamiya expressed this tension as a “dialectical model of the Black church,” which is fundamental to Black church development. Understanding Black faith and culture is necessary linked and contentious areas in which social meaning is constructed, interpreted, and reinterpreted. So, the Black faith and culture are conceptualized as encompassing multiple ways of being religious and Black: within the Black church, in other religious traditions practiced by Black people, and even in the broader social, political, and cultural contexts. We see differences in location between urban and rural churches and social classes, which have also historically contributed to diverse experiences of Black church development. As we move into the future of the Black church evolving strategies for maintaining traditions, particularly the African American Baptist Church, various Black churches and Black Christian worship experiences exist.⁵²⁶

Moving forward, we need to avoid the tendency to construct the African American religious experience as a monolithic category called the Black church because it obscures the variety of Black religious expression, including non-Christian traditions. Historically, looking back and moving forward, we remember W.E.B. Du Bois, who wrote *The Souls of Black Folks*, a collection of essays on Black culture, politics, and society. It was he who introduced the concept of double consciousness as a way of expressing the contradiction of being both Black and American in a racially segregated United States, which had historically-through law, custom, and practice recognized the humanity of Black people. He noted that being both Black and American was to simultaneously experience an authentic sense of self through mores, values, and practices of Black communal life while at the same time having an acute awareness of how the dominant, mainstream, Eurocentric American culture viewed

⁵²⁶ Floyd-Thomas, 101.

Black people as subordinate and radically other. For Du Bois, this tension was “two warring ideals in one dark body.”⁵²⁷ Our evolving strategies for maintaining African American Baptist Church traditions cannot lose sight. Racism still exists in America and will exist until Jesus comes back for the church.

We know from the evidence and testimonies of enslaved people that the Black church signified the oppositional witness pioneers of independence. This freedom for which the Black church fought was internal and external, expressing itself politically and spiritually, always embracing Black bodies and souls. It was Black pastors engaging in politics tending to emphasize their preachments and privilege in their ministries, the pietistic side of Black faith aiming at the freedom of the soul. Black theology informed their distinctive and undeniable trajectory in Black faith, focusing primarily on the political side, radical protesting aimed at the freedom of the body in this world, and expressing eschatologically by enslaved people who bore witness to in their subtle songs about the next world. However, it was Black theologian Gayraud Wilmore explaining the political character of Black faith in his classic text *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, where he asserts “there has been and continues to be a significant difference between Black religion and White religion in their approaches to social reality and social change-whether about theological liberalism or to fundamentalism.” He argued, “Black faith has been more radical in the proper sense of that much-maligned term.”⁵²⁸ As we explore the African American Baptist Church in the 21st century and beyond while preserving our cultural identity while at the same time evolving strategies for maintaining traditions, we cannot lose sight of what made the church authentic in its witness. We only own our unique political consciousness that was shaped in the brutal context of chattel slavery, racial oppression, and state-sanctioned terrorism in North America, which this fundamental posture of resistance applies to Black religion in general and,

⁵²⁷ Floyd-Thomas, 103.

⁵²⁸ Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness*, Paperback, Religion, Race, and Ethnicity (New York London: New York University Press, 2020), 14.

notwithstanding its “ambiguous politics,” the Black church. ⁵²⁹

What the Black church did was a distinctive emphasis on the gospel messages of salvation and a creative hermeneutics of freedom shaped by the experience of engaging biblical texts through the lens of slavery and segregation, with the circumscriptions of that experience ensured that it would be well within at that time the twentieth century before the Black church had the benefit of trained theologians providing systematic theological reflection on the significance of its witness among the churches and their varying theological claims. Men like Richard Allen did not have the benefit of theological training or, for that matter, formal education. However, even their bold enterprise had to do with forming an egalitarian communion that did not discriminate against church members. ⁵³⁰

Since its emergence in the 1960s, Black theology has endeavored to give substance and systematic expression to a theological perspective to broadly see the work of salvation, underscoring and explicating the theme of liberation as the central message of the gospel and the church's essential mission. So, in that regard, men like James Cone and other leading interpreters of the Black theology movement called on Black Christians and their churches to make a decisive theological break with White Christianity and, for the first time, do theology for themselves. Because the radical roots of the Black church and the academic reflections of Black theologians are inextricably linked by a specific set of claims regarding the holistic character of salvation in the biblical witness, by what we believe is the reality of racial oppression in America, and by an identifiable trajectory of Black religious resistance to that oppression from slavery to the contemporary moment. ⁵³¹

With an eye toward a hermeneutics of freedom, there is widespread agreement among interpreters of the Black religion that central to the difference between slave Christianity and slaveholding Christianity was their respective appropriation of the Exodus motif of the Old Testament. Vincent Harding observed that one of the abiding and tragic ironies of American history is that while

⁵²⁹ Warnock, 14.

⁵³⁰ Warnock, 16.

⁵³¹ Warnock, 19.

European colonists conceived their adventure in the New World as the establishment of the New Israel, enslaved Black people came to think of themselves as the Old Israel, enslaved by Pharaoh and awaiting their liberation from Egypt. ⁵³²

This single factor propelled the Black church toward its political consciousness and the search for the radical side of its mission than the ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr. During the twentieth century, his prophetic voice and public theology raised and refocused that latent theme of liberation prominent among certain nineteenth – and twentieth-century figures of the Black church, and recalling his praxis so crystallized the radical side of the Black church’s mission that it unwittingly laid the necessary foundation for the emergence of a new phenomenon in Black religious history—a Black theology of liberation. What King’s ministry did for the church is it pushed the boundaries of the American churches’ self-understanding, insisting that they see the work of social transformation as essential to their identity and mission. ⁵³³

Because nothing has changed during the time of Martin Luther King, Jr., racism is alive and well proliferating in the United States of America at an alarming rate; we see it and hear it in the rhetoric of Donald Trump and echoing in one political party, so when Martin Luther King, Jr stood up at the Ebenezer Baptist Church counseling his congregation that “When you know God, you can stand up amid the agonies and burdens of life and not despair. When you know God, you can stand up amid tension and tribulation and yet smile in the process...When you know God, you can have on some shoes that can help you walk through any muddy place.” ⁵³⁴ We, too, can stand and not only stand but speak out and act to fight back against racism and all forms of oppression with God’s help.

It was a man by the name of Joseph Washington, who wrote an essay in 1964, *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States*. In his essay, he argued that while the Black churches carried the nomenclature of the Christian communions from which they separated, they lacked the

⁵³² Warnock, 25.

⁵³³ Warnock, 32.

⁵³⁴ Warnock, 41.

following: “a sense of the historic church, authentic roots in the Christian tradition, a meaningful theological frame of reference, a search for renewal, an ecumenical spirit, and a commitment to an inclusive church.” He was concerned that Black churches and denominations lacked what he had identified in the 1963 essay as “a dynamic theology” capable of explicating for Black Christians the meaning of faith and serving as corrective theological error regarding the church’s reason for being. Washington understood the goal of integration, justice, and equality in the civic realm to be “Christian and human,” and he judged the means to the goal, namely, “massive and militant noncooperation in nonviolence,” to be “unchristian and inhuman.” For Washington and us, Christian faith begins with the Christological affirmation that “Jesus Christ is Lord.” “Thus, love of neighbor, centered around the Sermon on the Mount and emphasized by King as a universal principle, should be seen as the ethical extension of the essential truth that God acted in Christ. In this way, America’s most well-known systematic theologian had erroneously conflated Gandhian principles with the unique personality behind the New Testament message and had confused the Christological essence of the faith with the ethics of faith, leveraging the latter in an activist methodology that distorted the meaning of faith.” What was evident was that Washington did not see the concern and struggle for justice in society as central to one’s Christian identity or essential to the church’s mission. ⁵³⁵

The Black church has addressed itself to the work of social transformation and political involvement for the expressed purpose of racial uplift, longing to be an abiding expectation within the African American community. The expectation was largely nontheological and among intellectuals manifesting in a history of Black church interpretation that recalls, among others, such names as W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Carter G. Woodson, St. Clair Drake, and the Black researcher who worked under his direction, Horace Cayton, the Swedish researcher Gunnar Myrdal, Benjamin E. Mays, and E. Franklin Frazier. For obvious reasons, African American scholars and scholars of African

⁵³⁵ Warnock, 55.

American life are not exempt from this deep investment and have a sharp focus on what sits at the center of the community's life. Having active participants in the debate and bringing their scholarship and concerns to the conversation, disciplined critical insight, impassioned political agendas, scientific research, and class bias. ⁵³⁶

In maintaining evolving strategies for maintaining traditions in the African American Baptist Church in the 21st century and beyond, we cannot lose sight of what we call womanist theology, giving Black women's experience ensuring that God-talk is multidimensional in scope, raising challenges regarding the doctrinal assertions of orthodox Christian speech and its implications for Black women, men, and children, inside and outside of the churches. "Womanist theological reflections about the nature and scope of divine liberation are essential to the discussion both because of womanism's principled challenge to the patriarchal structure of the Black church, a church born fighting for freedom and its challenge to the androcentric assumptions of Black theology, a theology of freedom." Womanist theology challenges the church's development of a vision of salvation that is truly holistic and a mission for liberation that embraces all people, bearing prophetic witness against the violence perpetrated against them and the earth." ⁵³⁷

Black theology focuses on the Black experience under White racism; feminist theology concerns women's revolt against male-chauvinist structures of society; third-world theologies developed from the struggle for national liberation. The Black church must engage thoroughly in what the church does well for men, women, families, and communities. What does need to emerge is a sustained and serious conversation in which the church learns from womanism. Womanism learns from the church, for Black women who claim and are claimed by both churchwomen and womanist-are raising new questions that prompt the church to take an honest and self-critical look at the broad ethical implications of its liberationist mission (for women and gays and lesbians) while reexamining the

⁵³⁶ Warnock, 78.

⁵³⁷ Warnock, 155.

theological and practical import of its pietistic pronouncements for the most marginalized members of the human family.⁵³⁸

Martin Luther King, Jr., was caught up in a revolutionary moment much more significant than himself and came to see revolution as central to the church's primary reason for being, and this is what he meant when he said, "Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion." So, sociological evidence suggests that the Black church, even while continuing to focus on race and other issues of justice, has, in considerable measure, embraced a bifurcated understanding of salvation that privileges individual souls, not seeing the redemption of Black bodies and the transformation of the whole of society as central to its vocation as an instrument of God's salvation.⁵³⁹

When preserving the cultural identity while evolving strategies for maintaining the traditions of the African American Baptist Church, sermon content may well be one of the indicators revealing Black consciousness, for the Black church places a premium on the charisma of the pastor as the most essential expression of which is preaching. The sermon assumes a degree of importance in the Black worship service that cannot be matched by its institutional counterparts in other religious communities because, throughout the historical development of the Black church over the past two hundred years, the sermon served a wide variety of functions and purposes: its primary purpose has been to glorify God, but it has also served as theological education and Sunday School; ritual drama and show time; singing and humming; encouragement and political advice; and moralizing and therapy-all rolled into one. So, everything in the sermon is directed toward emotional climax and catharsis. We would hear shouts of amen, preaching it to fill the air to show agreement, while the ubiquitous calls of well. What these gestures do urges the preacher on. The congregational members do not sit passively but are

⁵³⁸ Warnock, 160.

⁵³⁹ Warnock, 177.

intimately engaged. Sermons reflect any changes in Black consciousness [Black pride, Black is beautiful, Black power, etc.] since the Civil Rights Movement indicated that age and education were firmly related variables. Younger clergy and those with more education reflected more positive attitudes toward emphasizing aspects of Black consciousness in their sermons. ⁵⁴⁰

The significance of the present new movement of Black liberation theology is that, for the first time in American religious history, there was a group of Christian theologians in primary divinity schools and theological seminaries attempting to construct systematic theologies from a Black perspective. They were influenced by the period of Black consciousness and Black power in the late 1960s; James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power*, which appeared in 1969, elaborated the first seminal ideas. "Since then, a host of other theologians and scholars such as Gayraud Wilmore, DeOtis Roberts, Major Jones, William Jones, Charles Long, Pauli Murray, Jacqueline Grant, and Cornel West have elaborated their views of what a program of Black theology should include." This theological movement legitimated the study of Black churches and Black religious phenomena in academic institutions. However, it gained recognition for the intellectual perspectives and writings of Black people in a way and to an extent that had never existed before in the United States. This movement has been valuable both for the external critique it provided of American society and for the internal dialogue it stimulated within the Black community dialogue, involving both affirmation and criticisms of Black churches and leaders, thus helping to forge a progressive path to the future. ⁵⁴¹

B. Incorporating African American History and Heritage

In incorporating African American History and Heritage, we need to look no further than the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr in Memphis, bringing the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s to a tragic and violent end, and for the Black churches will they continue to lead the fight for liberation onto new and changing battlefields? Because the forces of progressive change, both within

⁵⁴⁰ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black church in the African-American Experience*, 175.

⁵⁴¹ Lincoln and Mamiya, 178.

the church and without, would soon become almost irreparably fractured, and the next four or more decades would witness a battle for the soul of the Black church, a fight not only over political tactics or God's valid message and its very future.⁵⁴² From this tragic event, looking back at our history and the church's importance in this endeavor, the African American Baptist Church in the 21st century and beyond cannot and should not lose sight of its past moving forward.

For the Black church in America, we have continuously extended our reach well beyond the front steps of the sanctuary because we were emboldened by an unshakable belief that the liberating God of their fathers and mothers was on our side and a rising generation would deploy the prophetic gospel in a bold new battle for freedom and civil rights. The church was and should remain a powerful force against sin: "the sin of racism, the sin of oppression, particularly when the focus has been threefold: prophetic social justice, holiness, and spiritual empowerment and worship." These were the words of Reverend William J. Barber II, an NAACP activist and pastor of the Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, North Carolina.⁵⁴³

The church needs to remember that when Blacks were stifled in the South, having dismantled Reconstruction, it was Black people migrating north in search of economic and political opportunities, dreaming that coming north would be their Canaan, and this was a Great Migration lasting from the early 1900s through the 1970s, many went North and West from rural areas to cities themselves in Pittsburgh, New York, Detroit, Chicago, even as far as Los Angeles. These Black families migrated, bringing their social customs, music, and, most importantly, faith. Even some congregations migrated along with their pastors.⁵⁴⁴

Seeing the same discrimination Northward and Westward, it was difficult to find work; housing was conditions that made people think that, in some ways, it was "up South" and not the kind of transformative promised land they had imagined. However, these conditions influenced the Black

⁵⁴² Gates, *The Black church*, 148.

⁵⁴³ Gates, 110.

⁵⁴⁴ Gates, 110.

church; people were looking for other sorts of social and economic opportunities, and religion became part of that as well because Black people began to ask themselves, “What is God’s plan for us as a people?”⁵⁴⁵

It was out of that commitment to help their Black churches built upon the framework known as the social gospel: Christianity’s attempting to address social and economic problems, drawing upon the tenets of the Bible to scale these persistent, seemingly unmovable mountains. The work of Adam Clayton Powell of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York uses his role as a young gospel giant elected to the United States Congress, but prior to his election to Congress, his church offered classes tailored towards learning how to read.⁵⁴⁶ For Powell, religion and politics went hand in hand: “I belong to a group of people that God, omniscient, omnipresent God, God of all power said, ‘You are my children, and you are the same as anyone else.’ Moreover, with that kind of faith and courage, I know I am as good, if not better than anybody that walks the halls of Congress.”⁵⁴⁷

It was many critics from the early twentieth century called for an educated clergy, one who could bring the power of intellect, study, learn, and critique the scriptures, someone who was humble and politically committed to the community rather than toward themselves and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was that person. Having attended seminary and earned a Ph.D. from Boston University, serving alongside his father at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, his father succeeded his maternal grandfather, Adam Daniel (A.D.) Williams. However, at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, where he served as pastor from 1955 to 1956, a bus boycott catapulted Dr. King to the center of the Civil Rights Movement.⁵⁴⁸

Our music, particularly the freedom songs, was taken from the gospels and congregational hymns. Changing the lyrics to fit the occasion. Music was and should continue to be critical back then

⁵⁴⁵ Gates, 113.

⁵⁴⁶ Gates, 115.

⁵⁴⁷ Gates, 140.

⁵⁴⁸ Gates, 132.

during the Civil Rights Movement because the songs kept us from being afraid; even walking down the street during a march, policemen would tell the people, “You are gonna be hit, or whatever.” Moreover, the people would start singing, “Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me round, not even the chief of police, not even a billy club.”⁵⁴⁹

What history shows us is that Dr. King, partnering with Malcolm X, the son of a Baptist preacher who became a Nation of Islam follower while in prison, preached that Christianity was the religion of the White man and asserted that Black churches were complicit in the White power structure. However, he was the most remarkable prophetic voice emerging out of the Black community in the twentieth century. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King were portrayed as opposites in the press. However, when it came to civil rights legislation, Malcolm X, who left the Nation of Islam in 1964, came to agree with the goals of most southern civil rights activists, even agitating for a revolution” “We want to make them pass the strongest civil rights bill they have ever passed, and in order to do this, we are starting a voters’ registration drive....There will not be a door in Harlem that will not have been knocked on to see that whatever Black face lives behind that door is registered to vote.”⁵⁵⁰

We have already mentioned the Black church as the first social institution owned and administered by African Americans. The Black church is the cultural womb of the Black community, giving birth to schools, hospitals, and banks and providing forums for social and political issues. These churches served as ecclesiastical courthouses, adjudicating family disputes, promoting moral values, and monitoring the community for illicit behavior. Given the central role of the Black church in Black communities, Black preachers would inevitably play a prominent role in political issues during Reconstruction. A man by the name of Charles H. Pearce, who was an officeholder during Reconstruction in Florida and an A.M.E. minister, commented that it was “impossible” to separate religion from politics. Ministers quickly grasped the ministry’s interests, and politics coincided

⁵⁴⁹ Gates, 135.

⁵⁵⁰ Gates, 143.

regarding the well-being of the Black community. Black ministers were often the best prepared and most respected in their communities, and they often played the roles of mayor, state representative, senator, and even governor during the “mystic years” of the Reconstruction period.⁵⁵¹

Henry McNeal Turner, born in South Carolina on May 1, 1834, became one of the most influential ministers of the period and one of the most courageous to embrace political involvement. He was never enslaved because his mother was an African princess, and according to customs at that time, the British refrained from enslaving African royalty. However, it had nothing to do with respect but was a scheme to corrupt and disarm the leaders by giving them a false sense of entitlement and privilege, making them less likely to oppose the wholesale exploitation of the masses of Blacks they were supposed to be leading. Turner, growing up in Abbeville, South Carolina, worked in the cotton field, and after his father’s death, he became an apprentice to a blacksmith, helping to support his family. He also did errands for a lawyer; while working for him, he learned to read and write. Turner was licensed to preach in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in Georgia 1853. Turner learned Latin, Greek, and Hebrew at Trinity College in Baltimore, and at the height of the Civil War, he was assigned to the Israel A.M.E. Church in Washington, D.C., immediately becoming involved in the politics of the war. Turner called for President Lincoln to free the enslaved people, and he predicted the Union would lose the war without Black soldiers. Because of his outspoken stance, his church was threatened with being burned to the ground, and with the war turning badly for the North, Lincoln and his advisors realized that including Black troops would give them a need to boast. Turner organized a regiment of Black soldiers, and Lincoln commissioned him to be their chaplain with a rank of major. After the Civil War, President Andrew Johnson renewed Turner's appointment in the Regular Army, assigning him the nation’s first African American chaplain to work with the Freedmen’s Bureau in

⁵⁵¹ L. H. Whelchel, *The History & Heritage of African-American Churches: A Way out of No Way*, 1st ed (St. Paul, Minn: Paragon House, 2011), 138.

Macon, Georgia.⁵⁵²

We know the Black church movement emerged as the result of the struggle to hold on to a sense of dignity and self-worth in the face of enslavement, degradation, and humiliation. The church became the first (and continues to be the most essential) institution owned and controlled by Black people. The church has long been the pivotal training ground for developing political leaders, musical talent, rhetorical skills, and business acumen in the African American community. We already know the independent Black church movement manifested itself on the Bryan Plantation, previously coming forth as the Invisible Institution, hidden in the bush harbors and thickets beyond the prying eyes and ears of the slaveholders. With the origins of the Invisible Institution lying beyond the shores of America, the Black church and the Black preacher became the transformed vehicles of the various traditional African spiritual systems that helped African Americans survive the horror of the Middle Passage, the process of natal separation, slavery, and the spiritual and cultural holocaust inflicted on our ancestors. For the Black preacher, they are the longest and most storied tenure of leadership in the African American community.

Moreover, no other profession can claim the level of influence or heritage that stretches back to the very beginning of the African American experience. The Black church became and still is the center of all institutional activities for Black people until the end of segregation. It was W.E.B. DuBois who said at the end of the nineteenth century, “as the only social institution of Negroes’ which started in the African forest and survived slavery under the leadership of the priests and after emancipation became the center of Negroes’ social life.”⁵⁵³

We know that for as long as African Americans or Black Americans have grappled with the problem of being both Christian and Black in a racist society, some form of Black Christian theology has existed in America. It was the slaves finding a relationship between the God whom they had met in

⁵⁵² Whelchel, 139.

⁵⁵³ Whelchel, 146.

Africa, whose sigh was heard in the African wind, and the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus. Moreover, we know that when White people said one thing about their God, the Africans heard something else. Moreover, when the White preacher, as a tool of the enslaver, stressed the demands of God for the Africans to be enslaved and obedient to their masters, the Africans heard the unmistakable call of a righteous God for justice, equality, and freedom.⁵⁵⁴

For much of the Black theology reflecting in the religious traditions and worship experiences of Black people, our understanding of God through Black experiences that searched for meaning, relevance, worth, assurance, reconciliation, and our proper response to God revealed. Moreover, this is what religion is all about; it is where the Black worship experience was born. “And at any historical point, the gathering of the community is central to what happens later and is the support of the souls of Black folks.”⁵⁵⁵

During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, hundreds and thousands of people protested segregation and discrimination in the South, willing to face fire hoses, police dogs, cattle prods, inhumanly cruel sheriffs, police, and state troopers. It was children and adults marching in Selma and Saint Augustine, in Birmingham and Montgomery to decry second-class citizenship and segregation. Before marching, they gathered in the church to engage in songs of praise and protest, to entreat the God of history to be their guide. They would listen to sermons and testimonies about the gospel and their unjust social situation and constantly be challenged to act. It was a gathering of Black folks in worship services, revealing their rich culture and the ineffable beauty and creativity of the Black soul.⁵⁵⁶

It was the Negro spirituals speaking of life and death, suffering and sorrow, love and judgment, grace and hope, justice, and mercy, that were born out of this tradition. These songs were of Negro

⁵⁵⁴ James Abbingon, ed., *Readings in African American Church Music and Worship* (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001), 315.

⁵⁵⁵ Abbingon, 315.

⁵⁵⁶ Abbingon, 316.

people who were unhappy and yet had a beautiful expression of human experience. The music is more ancient than the words because these songs are the siftings of centuries, telling of exile and trouble, of strife and hiding; they grope toward some unseen power and sigh for rest in the end. ⁵⁵⁷

The northern gospel songs became theirs, and urban counterparts of the Negro spirituals of the South were different. The gospel songs combined the sheer joy of living with a deep religious faith, and it arose during the early exodus from the farms and hamlets of the South when Black folks arrived in Chicago, New York, Detroit, and other northern cities, finding themselves in a strange land. Furthermore, the simple lines of the gospel were written on their minds and hearts and were translated into songs on their lips with praise. ⁵⁵⁸

For Black people, our religion and mode of worship are derived from our experiences, the physical and psychological realities of our day-to-day existence, and this does lead to a particular manifestation in preaching and the use of scriptures, for Black preachers taking much liberty elaborating and using the imagination in telling biblical stories for the benefit and enjoyment of their listeners. Black preachers do not distinguish between the Old and the New Testaments, as if the New superseded the Old. Instead, Black preachers tend to preach more often from the Old Testament, and even when they preach from the New Testament, the text is more often drawn from the gospels rather than the epistles. ⁵⁵⁹

The Black experience in worship must be authentic with a celebration of what is most accurate and serves to sustain life. To be Christian worship, it must necessarily and inevitably relate to the eternal God revealed in Jesus Christ, and it must involve transcending and deciphering the existential dilemma, discovering the transcendence grounded in being. The styles of worship and the theologies are determined by the context in which a people's faith is experienced. Because the mode of worship, religious practices, beliefs, rituals, attitudes, and symbols are inevitably and inextricably bound to one's

⁵⁵⁷ Abbingon, 316.

⁵⁵⁸ Abbingon, 316.

⁵⁵⁹ Abbingon, 317.

psychological and physical realities of day-to-day life, it is evident that the Christian faith and life flowed through the contours of the souls of Black folks, a new interpretation, a new form, a new worship style emerged. Reflecting the cultural and historical background of transplanted Africans, it moved with the rhythms of a soulful people and rolled like a prancing river, for Black people responded to the Christian faith in our way, not in the way of our oppressors. ⁵⁶⁰

For Black people, music is as close to worship as breathing is to life because of the songs of Zion in this strange land that have often kept Black folks from “starting down the steep and slippery steps of death” in suicide. Instead, these songs have cut a path through the wilderness of despair. Commenting on spirituals John Wesley Work who was a professor of Latin and history at Fisk University and one of the pioneers in collecting, arranging, and presenting Negro spirituals in his book, *Folk Songs of the American Negro*: “To our fathers who came out of bondage and who are still with us, these songs are prayers, praises, and sermons. They sang them at work; in leisure moments; they crooned them to their babies in the cradles; to their wayward children; they sang them to their sick, wracked with pain on beds of affliction; they sang them over their dead. Blessings, warnings, benedictions, and the very heartbeats of life were all expressed to our fathers by their song.” ⁵⁶¹

In Africa, ritual dances and emotional religion were among the most substantial contributions of African culture to African Americans. But it was the puritan Christian Church saw dancing as an evil, worldly excess, but dancing as an integral part of the African’s life could not be displaced by the still Whites notes the Wesleyan hymnal from the earliest times when Black sang: “Oh, freedom! Oh, freedom all over me! When I am free! An’ befor’ I’d be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave, an’ go home to my Lord an’ be free.” (#102) ⁵⁶²

C. Balancing Tradition with Progress

As the African American Baptist Church in the 21st century and beyond continuing the balance

⁵⁶⁰ Abbington, 317.

⁵⁶¹ Abbington, 322.

⁵⁶² Abbington, 323.

of tradition, the church cannot lose sight of pastoral care and counseling, especially in the politics of oppression and empowerment. We have seen unemployment of African Americans remain twice as high as that of Whites. Blacks seem to have withdrawn from fruitful involvement in politics. “Homicide and AIDS, STDs, cancer, infant mortality, hypertension, and other illnesses are disproportionately represented among African Americans. When it comes to how African Americans are portrayed in the media, we are insignificant as participants in the cultural reality of America, does not even warrant portrayal on the television screen, and (2) our resentment and protest at being ignored is of little concern to us.” We can conclude that African Americans are disregarded and made invisible.

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The Black church must be a vehicle for the recovery of the village, for the church should embrace the larger plot that undergirds all activities of African American Christians and the wider community. The church must continue our sense as an eschatological people working in partnership with God so that we can hope to begin to rebuild our communities and enable African Americans to thrive. Pastoral counseling should be seen as a political process, meaning this process enables human beings to become fully involved and engaged in life so that each person can identify, develop, and exercise his or her full human capacities while at the same time enabling others to do likewise to contribute to the common good. For African Americans, it would be our aim that participation in all levels of life, which presupposes living in a democratic society, is what the political process is. Ascertaining enabling people to participate in the political process of self-governing and community building is not a privilege but a God-given right, which God expects us to exercise even when that right is denied and obstacles to exercising it are erected. What pastoral counseling does is facilitate and enable persons to have the motivation and courage to get involved and participate.⁵⁶⁴

Because very little has changed, the process of political disenfranchisement subtly entices

⁵⁶³ Edward P. Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care and Counseling: The Politics of Oppression and Empowerment* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 19.

⁵⁶⁴ Wimberly, 21.

African Americans to internalize negative conversations, images, and stories about themselves such that there is no need for overt forms of racism. What we see in such a mechanism is the negative portrayals of African Americans in the media. This media's portrayals stimulate internal conversations, lead us to deny our worth and value, and put down our institutions and communities. ⁵⁶⁵

For the African American Baptist Church in the 21st century and beyond balancing tradition with progress, we must realize that real political power lies in the ability to control the practices of discourse and conversation. “Moreover, real power enables selected groups to not only define reality but then recruit others into realities that may be alien to who they are. Consequently, the power to define reality is determined socially by who is accorded the right to speak first, the status of the one given the privilege to speak, their competence and knowledge, pedagogic norms, legal conditions, hierarchical attributions, and others; all these contribute to who gets the power to define what is real and not real.” ⁵⁶⁶

It was zeroing in on the historical, doctrinal, ethical, and social aspects of African American theology, particularly the challenges of the twenty-first-century audience of accountability. There has been a backlash in retaliation for the gains of the Civil Rights Movement, having resulted in a “double assault” on the African American community. It was a right-wing, conservative assault that began in 1968 with the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the subsequent election of President Richard Nixon, which continued through the presidential administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. It constituted the familiar, external displays of overt racism as well as subtle, internal attacks fostered by a climate “in which racist attitudes became not only acceptable but respectable.” During that time, the manifestations of this attack within the African American community included the excessive spread of HIV/AIDS and other health threats, the inundation of drugs, the preponderance of Black-on-Black violence, and the disproportionate rate of incarceration.

⁵⁶⁵ Wimberly, 22.

⁵⁶⁶ Wimberly, 25.

At that time, it was determined by Dennis Wiley, a systematic theologian, that Black theology had been deficient (1) in helping the Black church develop an internal, “ongoing process of self-critique” and (2) in empowering the Black church not simply to receive theology taught by academic theologians “from the top down,” but to do theology as grassroots theologians “from the bottom up.” Wiley challenged Black theology and, more specifically, Black theologians to be accountable for the salvation and empowerment of the Black church, and he charged the Black church, clergy, and laity to be accountable for the salvation and liberation of the African American community.⁵⁶⁸

There was a presumption that the Black church and the African American community were identical was a thing of the past, according to Wiley, because the latter faced “a severe crisis of spirituality:” because it was no longer assumed that Africans, particularly of the younger generations have any affinity for the Black church, or that they know anything about it. “Indeed, we are living in a time when a generation of our young people has grown up knowing nothing about the Black church, nothing about Jesus Christ, and nothing about God.”⁵⁶⁹

If we balance traditions with progress for the African American Baptist Church in the 21st century and beyond, we must solve the disconnect with our younger population. It was in 1999, on the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of James Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power*, that Gayraud Wilmore confirmed some of Wiley’s concerns about Black theology’s negligible impact on the Black church and the Black church’s increasing irrelevance to African American young people. Wilmore proposed three steps to help Black theology and the Black church mend their strained relationship and form an effective partnership for the twenty-first century. First, it recommends a “new institutional base” for Black theology that fosters the relation between practical theological issues and action-

⁵⁶⁷ Katie G. Cannon and Anthony B. Pinn, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*, First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 2018, Oxford Handbooks (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 297.

⁵⁶⁸ Cannon and Pinn, 297.

⁵⁶⁹ Cannon and Pinn, 299.

oriented public policy advocacy. Secondly, it recommended developing age-appropriate curricula and Christian education materials to provide the “biblical and theological foundations for Black religious thought” and helping Black people apply their faith to political, economic, and cultural activities. Finally, he recommended that this base incorporate a “new African-centered pluralism” to embrace a broad spectrum of beliefs and foster a new bond with Blacks in the diaspora.⁵⁷⁰

In the furtherance of Black theology and what it means going forward in the 21st century and beyond for the Black church, let us look back to 1969, when James Hal Cone, an AME minister and professor at Union Theological Seminary having published this book entitled *Black Theology and Black Power*, the book has been mentioned but delving more into it, in defining Black theology, Cone took on White theology. “White theology,” Cone said, “basically is a theology which has defined the Christian faith in such a way that it has no relationship to Black people.” He argued that Jesus so strongly identified with the oppressed that he was metaphysically synonymous with this group. God is Black, Cone believed, updating Henry McNeal Turner’s “God is a Negro” bringing the 1960s Black pride movement inside the church walls. Cone believed that God was so intimately connected with struggle and against oppression that God, according to Cone, in effect, God had been Black all along. “God is on the side of the oppressed,” he said, “and since the oppressed are the ones who need to be liberated, he must be identified with their condition.”⁵⁷¹

With Cone’s philosophy, “Black theology is a new way of looking at the relationship between Black religion and Black political struggle and an embrace of the tenets of Black is beautiful and comfortable with African-inflected practices. Cone’s work is indebted to Martin Luther King, according to Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., professor of African American Studies at Princeton University, saying that King’s witness is making its way into seminaries with James Cone, who is trying to figure out how to translate King’s moral call to the nation and express it in a way that will speak to the rage of

⁵⁷⁰ Cannon and Pinn, 298.

⁵⁷¹ Gates, *The Black church*, 153.

the moment.⁵⁷²

What Jeremiah Wright did at Trinity United Church of Christ is what will sustain the church in the 21st century and beyond, and this is precisely what younger congregants are looking for in their churches; when Wright was called to the church, he devoted the next thirty-six years to transforming Trinity from a middle-class church to one concerned with Black liberation and serving the poor. The church raised money for the homeless, helped the elderly find housing, hosted childcare programs, and created a welcoming environment for the marginalized, including those addicted to drugs, serving prison sentences, and, later, suffering from AIDS. Wright's most influential community programs were prison ministry teaching GED and computer skills in prisons.⁵⁷³

D. Conclusion

The history of the Black church in Africa is rich, with its roots in North Africa and southern Europe and its influence on the Roman Church. The Black church, which emerged from the struggle for independence from White control, revalorizing Africa's image, and accepting protest and agitation as theological prerequisites for Black liberation, has been a significant part of African American history and culture.

In recent decades, there has been a significant change in Black Christianity, with Black churches criticizing mainstream White religious groups for their complicity with racism and demanding reparations. Theologian James H. Cone, a prominent leader in developing Black Liberation Theology, emphasizes combining religious practice and faith with political activism and social change to better the Black community.

Understanding Black faith and culture is essential for understanding the dynamic nature of the Black church and its social contexts. The Black faith and culture encompass multiple ways of being religious and Black, including within the Black church, other religious traditions, and broader social,

⁵⁷² Gates, 153.

⁵⁷³ Gates, 156.

political, and cultural contexts. Differences in location between urban and rural churches and social classes have contributed to diverse experiences of Black church development.

The African American religious experience should not be viewed as a monolithic category, as it obscures the variety of Black religious expression, including non-Christian traditions. W.E.B. Du Bois introduced the concept of double consciousness, expressing the contradiction of being both Black and American in a racially segregated United States. The Black church symbolized the oppositional witness pioneers of independence, expressing itself politically and spiritually, always embracing Black bodies and souls. Black theologian Gayraud Wilmore explained the political character of Black faith, arguing that Black faith has been more radical in the proper sense of the term.

The Black church emphasized gospel messages of salvation and creative hermeneutics of freedom shaped by the experience of engaging biblical texts through the lens of slavery and segregation. Since its emergence in the 1960s, Black theology has endeavored to give substance and systematic expression to a theological perspective, underscoring and explicating the theme of liberation as the central message of the gospel and the church's essential mission. Leading interpreters of the Black theology movement called on Black Christians and their churches to make a decisive theological break with White Christianity and do theology for themselves.

The difference between slave Christianity and slaveholding Christianity lies in their respective appropriation of the Exodus motif from the Old Testament. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s prophetic voice and public theology refocused this theme, laying the foundation for a Black theology of liberation. King's ministry pushed the boundaries of American churches' self-understanding, insisting that social transformation is essential to their identity and mission.

Racism continues to proliferate in the United States, as seen in Donald Trump's rhetoric and one political party. In his 1964 essay, Joseph Washington argued that Black churches lacked a sense of the historic church, authentic roots in the Christian tradition, a meaningful theological frame of reference, a

search for renewal, an ecumenical spirit, and a commitment to an inclusive church. He believed that Christian faith begins with the Christological affirmation that "Jesus Christ is Lord" and that love of neighbor should be seen as the ethical extension of the essential truth that God acted in Christ.

The Black church has addressed itself to the work of social transformation and political involvement for the expressed purpose of racial uplift, longing to be an abiding expectation within the African American community. African American scholars and scholars of African American life are not exempt from this deep investment, focusing on the center of the community's life and addressing issues such as disciplined critical insight, impassioned political agendas, scientific research, and class bias.

In the 21st century, the African American Baptist Church must continue to evolve its traditions by incorporating womanist theology, which challenges the patriarchal structure of the church and its implications for Black women, men, and children. Womanist theology challenges the church's development of a holistic vision of salvation and a mission for liberation that embraces all people, bearing prophetic witness against violence.

The church must engage in what it does well for men, women, families, and communities, learning from womanism and reexamining the ethical implications of its liberationist mission. Martin Luther King Jr. saw revolution as central to the church's primary reason for being, and sociological evidence suggests that the church has embraced a bifurcated understanding of salvation that privileges individual souls.

Sermon content may be one of the indicators revealing Black consciousness, as the Black church places a premium on the charisma of the pastor as the most essential expression of preaching. Sermons serve various functions and purposes, including glorifying God, theological education, ritual drama, singing, encouragement, political advice, and moralizing and therapy.

The new movement of Black liberation theology is significant in American religious history, as it legitimized the study of Black churches and religious phenomena in academic institutions and gained

recognition for Black people's intellectual perspectives and writings. This movement has been valuable for both the external critique it provided of American society and the internal dialogue it stimulated within the Black community, involving affirmation and criticisms of Black churches and leaders, thus helping to forge a progressive path to the future.

The African American Baptist Church in America has a long history of extending its reach beyond the sanctuary, driven by the belief that the liberating God of their fathers and mothers was on their side. The church has been a powerful force against sin, particularly regarding social justice, holiness, spiritual empowerment, and worship.

During the Great Migration from the early 1900s to the 1970s, Black people migrated north for economic and political opportunities. Thus, this led to the development of the social gospel framework, which aimed to address social and economic problems using Christianity's tenets. The church played a crucial role in this movement, with music playing a critical role in keeping people safe during the Civil Rights Movement.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a prominent figure in the Civil Rights Movement, was an educated clergyman who could bring intellect, study, learn, and critique scriptures. He was the most remarkable prophetic voice emerging from the Black community in the twentieth century. Malcolm X, who left the Nation of Islam in 1964, agreed with the goals of most southern civil rights activists, even agitating for a revolution.

The Black church is the first social institution owned and administered by African Americans, providing forums for social and political issues. These churches served as ecclesiastical courthouses, adjudicating family disputes, promoting moral values, and monitoring the community for illicit behavior. Black preachers played a prominent role in political issues during Reconstruction, with ministers often playing the roles of mayor, state representative, senator, and governor. Incorporating African American History and Heritage in the 21st century and beyond is essential for the Black church

to continue its fight for liberation and progress.

Henry McNeal Turner, born in South Carolina in 1834, was a prominent minister and courageous advocate for political involvement during the Civil War. He was never enslaved but was involved in the exploitation of Black people. Turner's upbringing in Abbeville, South Carolina, included working in the cotton field, apprenticeship to a blacksmith, and doing errands for a lawyer. He later became licensed to preach in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in Georgia in 1853.

The Black church movement emerged because of the struggle to maintain dignity and self-worth in the face of enslavement, degradation, and humiliation. The church became the first institution owned and controlled by Black people, serving as a training ground for developing political leaders, musical talent, rhetorical skills, and business acumen in the African American community.

Black preachers have the longest and most storied leadership tenure in the African American community. The Black church has been the center of all institutional activities for Black people until the end of segregation. Black theology has existed in America since the slaves found a relationship between the God they had met in Africa and the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus.

During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, hundreds of thousands protested segregation and discrimination in the South. They gathered in churches to engage in songs of praise and protest, entreating the God of history to be their guide. Negro spirituals, which expressed life and death, suffering and sorrow, love and judgment, grace and hope, justice, and mercy, were born out of this tradition.

The African American Baptist Church has a rich history of spirituality and religious practices, deeply rooted in Black people's experiences and physical realities. These spirituals, such as gospel songs and Negro spirituals, are a reflection of the cultural and historical background of transplanted Africans, reflecting their way of life and responding to the Christian faith in their way.

Black preachers often use the Old Testament and gospels for their sermons, focusing on the

transcendence grounded in being. Music is considered as close to worship as breathing for Black people, as it helps them avoid suicide and provides a path through despair. Ritual dances and emotional religion were significant contributions of African culture to African Americans, but they were often seen as evil by the puritan Christian Church.

The church must continue to balance tradition with progress, particularly in the politics of oppression and empowerment. Unemployment among African Americans remains twice as high as that of Whites, and they seem to have withdrawn from fruitful involvement in politics. African Americans are disproportionately represented in various illnesses, and their resentment and protest at being ignored is of little concern to them.

The Black church must be a vehicle for the village's recovery, working in partnership with God to rebuild communities and enable African Americans to thrive. Pastoral counseling should be seen as a political process, enabling individuals to become fully involved in life and contribute to the common good.

Political disenfranchisement subtly entices African Americans to internalize negative conversations, images, and stories about themselves. Consequently, this leads to the denial of their worth and value, ultimately affecting their institutions and communities.

In the 21st century, the African American Baptist Church must balance tradition with progress by recognizing that political power lies in controlling discourse and conversation. This power allows selected groups to define reality and recruit others into unfamiliar realities. The power to define reality is determined socially by who is given the right to speak first, their status, competence, knowledge, pedagogic norms, legal conditions, hierarchical attributions, and others.

The backlash from the Civil Rights Movement has resulted in a "double assault" on the African American community, including the spread of HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, Black-on-Black violence, and incarceration rates. Dennis Wiley, a systematic theologian, argued that Black theology had been

deficient in helping the Black church develop an internal process of self-critique and empowering the Black church to do theology as grassroots theologians from the bottom up. He called for Black theology and the Black church, clergy, and laity to be accountable for the salvation and empowerment of the African American community.

To address this disconnect, Gayraud Wilmore proposed three steps to help Black theology and the Black church mend their strained relationship: developing a new institutional base for Black theology, developing age-appropriate curricula and Christian education materials, and incorporating a "new African-centered pluralism" to embrace a broad spectrum of beliefs and foster a new bond with Blacks in the diaspora.

Jeremiah Wright's work at Trinity United Church of Christ will sustain the church in the 21st century and beyond, as it focuses on Black liberation and serving the poor. Wright's most influential community programs include prison ministry teaching GED and computer skills in prisons.

X. The Role of Leadership in Transformation

A. Training and Equipping Church Leaders

In equipping leaders in the 21st century and beyond, particularly for the African American Baptist Church, the church should always create and implement effective means for engaging the culture. The church has always been in a transformational period (when God walked among us); during Gregory the Great, the Great Schism, and the Great Reformation, the church is in one of those transitions. So, change and adaptation are always happening in the various expressions of the Christian faith. This process may involve borrowing an idea from another faith tradition or a secular activity, pulling something from the rich religious heritage of the past, or creating something new and innovative. ⁵⁷⁴

Seminary did not equip us when facing aging congregations, declining income, expensive

⁵⁷⁴ Irceel Harrison, "A Word about: Equipping Leaders for Twenty-First Century Ministry: Review & Expositor," *Review & Expositor* 116, no. 4 (November 2019): 391, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637319878491>.

buildings, and an indifferent culture. We are aware that the same approaches are not achieving the desired results. We have realized this truth and are seeking ways to renew the church in its many local expressions, and at the same time, we understand that our skills to lead a process are limited. Seminary and other education did not equip us for this situation, and we seek assistance to develop the ability to lead our congregations into new ways of acting. ⁵⁷⁵

We should first identify and cultivate Christian practices as a source of strength for the church because a faith community's relational and spiritual vitality is based on many resources, including scripture, tradition, reason, and Christian experience. As congregational leaders, we can tap into two thousand years of Christian practice and our faith traditions to empower and encourage our congregations. ⁵⁷⁶

Next, we must train our leaders to engage in a changing social and cultural context to see culture as a friend rather than an enemy. If the church's message is relevant, leaders must learn to exegete the culture to communicate so that those enmeshed in the culture can hear. So, our ministries must be contextual, accounting for the giftedness of each congregation, its resources, and where it is situated. God calls the people to engage the world, and the mission begins at the doorstep of each congregation. "A key part of missional theology is gathering as the people of God to worship, learn, and grow; then the people scatter to fulfill God's mission." ⁵⁷⁷

Lastly, leaders of ministries must equip leaders who mobilize believers around a clear mission. Moreover, influential leaders ensure the future of ministry, calling out, equipping, and supporting people in service for missions. Participants must be aligned with a clear vision of the future. ⁵⁷⁸

Church renewal requires different types of leaders who can reach, teach, and support emerging populations for Christian service. The leadership requirement, in turn, calls for creative ways of

⁵⁷⁵ Harrison, 392.

⁵⁷⁶ Harrison, 392.

⁵⁷⁷ Harrison, 392.

⁵⁷⁸ Harrison, 392.

educating and equipping these leaders from both accredited and non-accredited programs, some church-based and some alternative structures within our denominations. "Seminaries and theological institutions recognize they can serve this diverse population of learners by working with churches and national entities, and theological institutions provide quality academic programs and develop necessary ministry competencies to meet those needs."⁵⁷⁹ Next, we look at equipping the next generations to speak their faith aloud.

They realize that congregants in the age range of forty or below know their generation is responsible for the church's future. The church continues to renew with each generation, and the younger congregants must realize they are needed if the church moves forward with the generations to come. Otherwise, the church will fall behind in achieving its goals of saving souls. What the church is seeing the church falling into the arms of the next generation dwindling because of the rapidly changing American religious landscape, and all research points to post-boomers as the primary contributors to the numbers of the ignorant and indifferent, which are the rising core in the so-called "rise of the nones."⁵⁸⁰

It is believed that post-boomers- the majority of whom are not "nones" and do believe in God- might be the ideal evangelist for people in their age group. However, neither generational nor evangelism literature specifically empowers and equips these members of this age to evangelize their peers. The ability of guided conversations about faith as a means of helping small groups of post-boomers talk about what they do and do not believe is helpful for them; finding words and language for their faith and offering them the opportunity to practice these conversations in a safe space is helpful.

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There is a challenge in developing evangelists these days because evangelism is both cultural

⁵⁷⁹ Harrison, 393.

⁵⁸⁰ Kit Carlson, "Equipping the Next Generations to Speak Their Faith Aloud: Anglican Theological Review," *Anglican Theological Review* 98, no. 4 (2016): 703.

⁵⁸¹ Carlson, 704.

and internal. What is being found is that conversations with older millennials and younger Gen Xers revealed taboos against publically speaking about faith to the broader secular culture and by denominations that have neglected to teach evangelism. Because the growth of evangelical movements over the last thirty years-with its cable television networks, high-profile preachers, conservative political activism, and megachurches-only serves to crush any desire among mainline, liberal Protestants to evangelize because there is a fear of becoming identified with that aspect of Christianity.

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In equipping new leaders for the church in the 21st century and beyond, we must acknowledge that internal challenges are powerful and difficult to identify and address because faith is perceived as personal and private and kept unspoken and unaddressed. For younger mainline Christians observing or personally experiencing the ways Christianity can be used as a club: one woman's father told her that her mother was going to hell for being an atheist; a queer teenager's neighbors asked her, "What church would have you?" There is the example of a spiritually questing postdoctoral student who had a lingering image of God as an ever-vigilant father figure like her own father, waiting to "whack you" if you messed up. ⁵⁸³

The challenge for the church when it comes to evangelism is to address the vulnerability and fear of being shamed but overcoming such anxiety in a postmodern, multifaith world, and the generations mentioned want to be accepting of their peers of other faiths or no faith at all, without insisting that the eternal salvation of these peers depends on whether they become Christians. ⁵⁸⁴

Younger believers are growing up in multiple faith traditions, and we find them church-hopping. Moreover, increasingly, they grow up with no faith tradition at all, and they may somehow stumble into it as they mature with no factual background in the teachings of the Christian faith. When having an active and engaged faith, there is a sense of the presence of God, the longing for a closer relationship

⁵⁸² Carlson, 704.

⁵⁸³ Carlson, 705.

⁵⁸⁴ Carlson, 705.

with God. So, beginning with those post-boomers already engaging with a faith community, they nourish their faith with a sense of God's presence and longing for deeper connections to God-is, a logical starting point for any long-term evangelical strategies with these generations.⁵⁸⁵

Awakening the hunger for more knowledge is essential. Helping post boomers develop a sense of God's presence in their past and present, an awareness of their faith as something alive and growing, and a language to express their faith wholeheartedly, rising above their fears of shame.⁵⁸⁶

The methodology would discuss why it is hard to talk about faith and conclude with a life review exercise where participants reflect prayerfully on how God has been present and absent, active and distant throughout their lives. They then explored how we know God and where we meet God in our lives. Finally, asking, "Who is the God we know?" creates a chance to articulate an understanding of God and explore the Trinity's persons—writing their own Baptismal Covenant, which would be a personal creed and a statement of how they would live in relationship with the God described in their creed.⁵⁸⁷

Fanning the sparks of faith inside the post-boomer Christians provided an approach providing this model and a direction forward in working with seekers, spiritual tinkerers, and skeptical Christians who feel a hunger for the divine but that faith is still unformed, inchoate, and contingent. "People attend church without feeling connected to God or learning something about God or Jesus. (One wonders why they come at all.)"⁵⁸⁸

According to John Westerhoff in *Will, Our Children Have Faith*, how do we usually come to faith? He said there are four stages of faith development theory, where people begin with an experienced faith, as children or new adult converts when the sights, sounds, and practices of Christian worship construct their faith lives. The next stage is the affiliative faith, where Christians define their

⁵⁸⁵ Carlson, 706.

⁵⁸⁶ Carlson, 707.

⁵⁸⁷ Carlson, 707.

⁵⁸⁸ Carlson, 708.

faith in a community or denominations, finding spiritual comfort in a shared personality and history to which the individual can contribute. With post-boomers appreciating the acceptance and love of a faith community characteristic of experienced faith, there is a distrust of authority combined with a sense that truth is relative. Thus, they might not be comfortable in a faith community too strongly identified with a clear sense of identity, history, and authority. Thus, affiliative faith is a challenging posture to sustain because boomers finding more liberal mainline churches will be far more likely to move quickly into the third stage of Westerhoff describing a place of searching for faith, a time of doubt, questioning, and critical judgment when people test the community's faith story and practices against their own experiences, learnings, and ideas.⁵⁸⁹

With Gen Xers and millennials already practicing their own internal, privately held, and privately constructed faith, combining religious traditions and teachings for themselves, the traditions and practices of all faith communities are already on trial. The post-boomers do not want culture wars. They want a truce between science and faith; they want to be known for what they stand for, not what they are against, and they want to ask questions without predetermined answers. They want churches that emphasize an allegiance to the kingdom of God over an allegiance to a single political party or nation. They want our LGBT friends to feel truly welcome in our faith communities. They want to be challenged to live lives of holiness, not only when it comes to sex but also to live simply caring for the poor and oppressed, pursuing reconciliation, engaging in creation care, and becoming peacemakers.⁵⁹⁰

Westerhoff's theory of owned faith comes when the individual claims for himself a faith that has been tested and questioned. Owning faith makes mature Christians ready to live out their faith daily with passion and commitment.⁵⁹¹

As much as we want others to join us in our journey with God and others, come with us on a journey to learn and experience more on the way and see God with others who are seeking. Moreover,

⁵⁸⁹ Carlson, 709.

⁵⁹⁰ Carlson, 709.

⁵⁹¹ Carlson, 710.

the church is only as powerful a guide or teacher as the people who comprise it. So, congregations must create robust "holding environments" where existing members can journey from affiliative to owned faith.⁵⁹²

Walter Brueggemann writes, "In every generation, the transmission of the blessing is problematic and mysterious. Transmission into the next generation is not fully accomplished through human intentionality. Thus, Isaac comes late to his blessing. We find these stories to be important models for our intergenerational work. They affirm to us that the arrival of the blessing is well beyond our control. One cannot dictate the shape of faith to the next generation. There is a freighted mystery between the generations which cannot be penetrated."⁵⁹³ Turning the attention to equipping members for ministry through small groups.

Small groups aim to lead those in such a way that truth engages life for spiritual growth. The benefits of small groups are that we get close enough to know each other, to care and share, to challenge and support, to confide and confess, to forgive and be forgiven, to laugh and weep together, to be accountable to each other, to watch over each other, and to grow together. It is believed that personal growth does not happen in isolation but results from interactive relationships. It is also believed that small groups are God's gift to foster changes in character and spiritual growth.⁵⁹⁴

Methods vary in small groups due to the diversity of church ministry practices. However, generally, the rhythms of small group life allow for a working out of faith through group discussions, living in community as part of a small group, opportunities for leading various components of small group life, and advancing the gospel through group and personal evangelism. Small groups show and share God's gracious love in the world by living in a community, and when members experience pain and hardship, the entire group is equipped for ministry by providing a supportive context in which

⁵⁹² Carlson, 711.

⁵⁹³ Carlson, 713.

⁵⁹⁴ Joshua Rose, "Equipping Members for Ministry Through Small Groups: Christian Education Journal," *Christian Education Journal* 14, no. 2 (2017): 362.

people can grapple with real pain—moreover, group members providing the opportunity to share the gospel with group members not yet in Christ. The environment ought to be safe for non-Christian group members to cognitively, affectively, and volitionally examine the claims of Christ and the offer of forgiveness and grace extended to them. ⁵⁹⁵

There is much diversity in our churches, and the first question we must ask ourselves is what is needed because there could be numerous answers, like a warm body and willing heart, cognitive ascent, affective surrender, psychomotor mastery, growth in maturity, volition to follow the examples of Jesus. Their answers all depend on the church's goals for small groups. If the church's goal is for small groups to connect and build relationships, how group members are equipped for ministry will differ from a small group ministry focusing on content acquisition. Secondly, the goals and objectives of a small group ministry notwithstanding, how a church defines a disciple will also impact how they would equip group members for ministry. ⁵⁹⁶

Ephesians is the blueprint for small groups, which teaches the church to be built up continually until unity is achieved and the knowledge of the Son of God is attained. This ongoing edification in the church results in church members being strong in faith and growing in all aspects of Christlikeness. The language a church uses to describe this process varies, but Ephesians 4:13-16 says, "Until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming. However, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together to what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each part, causes the growth of the body

⁵⁹⁵ Rose, 363.

⁵⁹⁶ Rose, 363.

for the building up of itself in love." ⁵⁹⁷

In small groups, it ought to be an environment where disciples grow or learn in all aspects of Christlikeness. Abraham Maslow (1968) said that a growing person is becoming rather than being. Small groups are committed to developing group members by engaging the entire person (cognitive, affective, psychomotor) in the truth of scripture, encouraging group members to grow up in Christ. What church-based small groups balance the tension between the facts of the faith and the life of the faith? Knowing that neither is more important than the other and through the process of growing in cognitive understanding that group members are equipped with the knowledge required for pursuing Christ and ultimately serving others and understanding learning styles is essential because "how a person sees or perceives things best and then processes or uses what has been seen is given strong consideration by church-based small group practitioners when writing literature for Bible study and training materials for leaders." Understanding the learning styles of each group member is essential for group leaders and, ultimately, for group members to be equipped for ministry. Because faith development infers changes in the learner, they are encouraged and expected to explore their feelings and emotions, considering scriptural truths to become more like Jesus. Exploration of one's feelings and emotions is complex, yet it is helpful and necessary if the change is to occur in the learner. Moreover, the social context of the learner, the constructivist nature of small groups, and a learner's readiness to examine feelings and emotions due to life circumstances result in differing levels of priority for learning. ⁵⁹⁸

This process corresponds with the scriptures in that the outcome for each group member results from engaging the whole self in learning, as group members learn to take every thought captive (2 Cor. 10:5) and begin to be transformed by the renewing of their minds (Rom. 12:2), putting to death the deeds of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21), and beginning to walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:25), they are equipped to

⁵⁹⁷ Rose, 363.

⁵⁹⁸ Rose, 365.

experience life in community. The giving and receiving, the loving and being loved, the serving and being served, and the celebrating and being celebrated become part of the rhythm of life for group members. Engaging the whole self in learning equips group members for ministry. ⁵⁹⁹

Another form of learning is self-regulated, described as the process by which students control their learning because as members attend regular gatherings for prayer, Bible study, worship, and fellowship, the learner's pace is completely self-selected. The prior knowledge and experiences of group members help advance or slow the pace of learning for church-based groups. Consequently, each member is challenged during Bible study because group members decide what they need and want to study. ⁶⁰⁰

Group processing is a methodology where group members spend a significant portion of their meeting time "expressing feelings, exploring interpersonal relationships, and sharing personal values. This methodology is necessary to change knowledge, understanding, and attitude, and this is when expressing feelings about relationships, life, and scripture, self-disclosure naturally occurs. A significant function of small groups is the mutual self-disclosure and trust among group members, and when members withhold the sharing of their true selves, the group is negatively affected. ⁶⁰¹

There must be social reinforcement in the form of acceptance and attention - and church-based small group leaders provide the environment for social reinforcement and are expected to encourage and care for each member. Leaders should use cueing and encouragement tools, asking probing questions about the passage being studied until group members provide a relevant reply. When using this method, the probing nature of the question and the repetition cues the student to begin searching for the exact nature of what the leader is asking, and the response the leader provides once an accepted reply is given is an encouraging behavior. Acceptance is always essential in small group leader training; leaders affirm the responses of those who provide them so that all responses are valued despite

⁵⁹⁹ Rose, 365.

⁶⁰⁰ Rose, 366.

⁶⁰¹ Rose, 366.

their relevance or correctness. ⁶⁰²

What leaders look for in group gatherings is members maturing in their faith walk which leads to the decrease in fleshly desires and behaviors such as immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, and carousing (Gal. 5:19-20) and an increase in the fruit of the Spirit, that is, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). When we practice living in the Spirit, as Paul referenced in Galatians 5:25, it propels group members to serve each other, the Lord, and the watching world. ⁶⁰³

To measure the goals of members coming together to learn from each other, it is up to senior church leadership to determine the goals and set the expectations for practitioners. Practitioners benefit from clarity either through senior leadership or their actions, specifically on how small groups will accomplish all they set out to achieve. For example, how will small groups equip members to serve, study the scriptures deeper, trust God boldly, or love without ceasing? ⁶⁰⁴

There are over fifty other commands in the scriptures, and the message is clear: life is to be lived with others. The notion of living alone and isolated is alien to the purpose of the church. God exists as a triune community of oneness, and as creatures made in His image, human beings are to live out their existence as a reflection of that image through biblical community. ⁶⁰⁵

In looking to the church's future in the 21st century and beyond, the congregation should always be a place to belong in a relationship, not only with one another but also with God, self, and others. Personal piety is expressed in vertical and horizontal relationships- upward to God and inevitably outward to others. Persons should be nurtured, assisted in learning the congregation's story, aware of its ethos, and given opportunities to share their gifts, thus becoming fully involved in the congregation's

⁶⁰² Rose, 367.

⁶⁰³ Rose, 367.

⁶⁰⁴ Rose, 370.

⁶⁰⁵ Rose, 370.

life. If persons do not have this experience, they tend to cycle out as readily as they cycle into the congregation's life. Our congregational life should provide many opportunities for people to grow their faith. "They should assist persons in their search and exploration into an integrated experience where faith coincides with values."⁶⁰⁶

B. Pastoral Leadership and Vision

Strong pastoral leadership will always need to transform individual members and congregations since the church's inception, and this will continue until Jesus comes back to receive the church. Many pastors experience burnout because they do not understand that our role as the leader of the church is broader than we thought, in that we must have a clear understanding of our biblical role as leader of the local church and our responsibility to bring transformational change to the lives of our members. What is happening is that many people are leaving the local church but declaring they love Jesus; however, they have lost their love for the church, which is no longer serving any purpose in their lives.⁶⁰⁷

Some members feel as though they are disconnected from their pastor and the leadership of the church; consequently, they are unwilling to allow the pastor to speak into their lives, whether it be instruction, correction, or edification, closing off any attempt of the pastor to influence their lives. Thus, the church is failing to bring the transformation needed in the lives of its members, which the scriptures call for (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:22-24).⁶⁰⁸

Thus, the pastor is an overseer of the affairs of God, a steward of the local church where he or she has been called to serve and oversee the affairs thereof. With this responsibility to be an overseer of the church, the pastor is concerned with the entire well-being of the church and its functions. As a steward of God's affairs, the pastor manages the household of God, looking after the members of the local church. Consequently, as an overseer, the pastor does not focus on any part of the church's

⁶⁰⁶ Michael I. N. Dash and Christine D. Chapman, *The Shape of Zion: Leadership and Life in Black churches* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 34.

⁶⁰⁷ Fulop Gregory Tim, "Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership - Transformational Pastoral Leadership," *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 9, no. 1 (2019): 56.

⁶⁰⁸ Gregory, 57.

operations but takes a leadership position where we can see all the working parts of the local church. In this position within the church, the pastor can ensure that all parts of the church are working in harmony towards the goals and mission of the church. The ability of the pastor to both know the scriptures and to be able to teach and expound upon them to others, saying, "He must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy following the teaching, so that he may be able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it" (New Revised Standard Version, Titus 1:9).⁶⁰⁹

Pastors must model like Jesus to His disciples, to teach all He had commanded them to those they had baptized, demonstrating that the Christian faith does not come naturally and that pastors must be capable of teaching those they lead. Pastors are charged with confronting others with biblical truths, and we are to be sure to do it in a manner that allows the teaching to be contextualized into the lives of those who hear the message. As pastors, we serve as educators who teach our congregations how to live in the world as a counter-culture, one that has been charged with interacting with the world to spread the gospel message, not allowing the world's culture to subvert them. "Pastors must be able to correctly teach the timeless scriptural truths to our congregants in a manner that allows them to understand and apply those truths to their lives."⁶¹⁰

As pastors, we are left with the total person, and this was demonstrated after the Protestant Reformation came to a shift in the expected duties of the pastor because before this movement, the pastor's primary function was as a conveyer of sacraments, but after the Reformation ushered in for the pastors to care for the souls of individuals. After the resurrection, as Jesus prepared to leave this earth, He left Peter with these instructions, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:17). John records Jesus telling this to Peter three times in a row, which caused some concern in Peter's mind, but Jesus was emphasizing the need of pastoral care for those who had chosen to follow Him. The pastor is to care for the souls of the

⁶⁰⁹ Gregory, 57.

⁶¹⁰ Gregory, 58.

sheep, which includes their total being: physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being.⁶¹¹

Pastoral care is comprehensive because we are called to embrace the responsibility to care for those entrusted to our leadership. Throughout the Old Testament and into the New, it depicts the shepherd as one called to lead His people as shepherds because God has depicted the shepherd as one who is willing to sacrifice for the sheep and has an honest concern for their well-being, as we take care of the sheep out of a pure heart not self-seeking.⁶¹²

As pastors, we are given the overseer of the local church body, setting a godly example of how our congregational members behave because our members will look to us to lead the way by words and deeds. It was the Apostle Paul telling the church at Philippi, "Brothers and sister, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us" (Phil. 3:17). What the Apostle Paul was doing as the leader and overseer of many churches, was to live as an example for them to follow, and Paul's character had to be above reproach, as the eyes of all the church were on him; he was responsible for setting an excellent example for them to follow.⁶¹³

Moreover, it was James who wrote, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1). It was James addressing the need for pastors and all who desire to lead in the church to be humble, understanding our words and actions are being judged by others. Therefore, we must make every effort to match up, demonstrating the excellent character that all of God's leaders are to portray.⁶¹⁴

It was when Jesus was betrayed, He then told His followers, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come" (John 16:12). We know the Holy Spirit reveals the will of Jesus to His church, which we as pastors have the privilege of leading. Moreover, because the Holy

⁶¹¹ Gregory, 58.

⁶¹² Gregory, 58.

⁶¹³ Gregory, 59.

⁶¹⁴ Gregory, 59.

Spirit directs the followers of Christ as they should go, the pastor must be entuned with the Spirit of truth if we are to lead our congregations rightly; this can only be done with a commitment to prayer. We must embrace prayer if we are to lead our congregations because prayer is directly linked to the church's evangelistic mission and how it focuses the church and its leaders on the will of God for the congregation and the world surrounding us. ⁶¹⁵

As pastors, we must be visionaries who can inspire our congregations toward a given goal or task. When we are visionary pastors, we can guide our congregants through many of the troubled and unstable waters they will face today. When we as pastors can generate a clear and concise vision, which congregants will embrace, it provides the church with a purpose for being and a direction to follow. When pastors function as charismatic leaders, having the ability to move congregants to passionately embrace a shared vision that will ultimately glorify God and expand His kingdom upon the earth. ⁶¹⁶

When the church has a shared vision, it creates the power of advancement within the minds of congregational members, achieving the goals and completing the mission of the pastor attempting to lead the local church. Vision can be a mighty motivating force that continues to motivate and empower us as pastors, but every local pastor must make sure their vision is not self-serving but instead serving to advance their Lord's kingdom. Once congregational members have embraced a shared vision, they will sacrifice to see it become a reality. Therefore, we as pastors must ensure the vision we are casting is centered on the church's sound and not merely the pastor's good. So, we as pastors need to look to the guidance of the Holy Spirit when attempting to cast a vision so that God will lead our vision and serve to benefit the church. ⁶¹⁷

As pastors, we perpetuate the church's mission and advance the gospel message worldwide.

Moreover, the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Ephesus, speaks of the role of the pastor and

⁶¹⁵ Gregory, 59.

⁶¹⁶ Gregory, 60.

⁶¹⁷ Gregory, 60.

other leaders in the church when he says, "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors, and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:11-12). So, local church pastors equip their congregations to effectively carry out the church's ministry of building up the body of Jesus Christ. ⁶¹⁸

In the Mediterranean world in the days of Jesus, when he said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:18-19), would not have been debatable or questioned when coming from an authoritative figure. However, it would have been followed. In the eighth chapter of Matthew's gospel account, Matthew tells us of the story of the Roman centurion who had a sick servant and requested Jesus to heal his servant. The Roman centurion knew he had the authority to tell anyone what to do. However, when it came to Jesus, he did not feel like an authority figure in Rome to tell Jesus to come to his house to heal his servant. The Bible tells us, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, go, and he goes, and to another, come, and he comes, and to my slave, do this, and the slave does it" (Matt. 8:7-9). During biblical times, it was what authority meant during Jesus' time: you did what you were told, no questions asked. We have no choice but to evangelize because Jesus tells us in Matthew's gospel, chapter 28:18-10. ⁶¹⁹

The word "go" Jesus asked his disciples and us to do today is sadly missing, for the most part, in the twenty-first-century church. "The word go, which Jesus spoke to His followers in the first century, was a command that provoked His servants to move with unquestionable obedience to what they perceived as a literal command." However, the twenty-first-century church has turned the command to go and make disciples of all nations into a request or choice that must be carefully considered. Has the Great Commission become a special calling for an elite few, instead of a command

⁶¹⁸ Gregory, 60.

⁶¹⁹ Gregory, 61.

given by a Master to all His servants, a literal command to be obeyed without hesitation or reserve?

"For congregants within the local church of the twenty-first century to embrace, they will need to undergo a powerful transformation. ⁶²⁰

For transformation to take place in the lives of congregants, the Apostle Paul wrote this to the church in Rome, "I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:1-2, ESV). The Apostle Paul wanted the church at Rome to offer themselves to the service of Christ without reservation, but to do this would require a transformed life, which could only be brought on by a renewed mind. Moreover, this renewal process enables the followers of Jesus to live a transformed life, and it is an ongoing re-programming process when the mind is made more like that of Jesus Christ and less like the world. ⁶²¹

It is believed that over half of all churchgoers have never heard of the Great Commission, and of all churchgoers surveyed, only 17% reported understanding what the Great Commission was all about. Moreover, many who heard about it had no idea what it meant. Research also revealed that even when scriptural references were given to define the Great Commission, many associated it with social justice and charity rather than spreading the gospel and making disciples of all nations. ⁶²²

When the church fails to understand the commission of Jesus Christ, it will hinder members of the local church from offering themselves as a living sacrifice to Christ to aid in the mission of making disciples of all nations. The Apostle Paul wanted believers to present their lives as sacrifices to further the gospel message. It is believed that this is the Great Commission. Moreover, the answer is found in Paul's writings because he is clear that all he does is for the furtherance of the gospel when he plainly

⁶²⁰ Gregory, 62.

⁶²¹ Gregory, 62.

⁶²² Gregory, 62.

says, "I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved" (1 Cor. 10:33). And the Apostle Paul made the salvation of those who have yet to experience the saving grace of Jesus Christ his priority, he had stepped beyond his own culture and people to touch the lives of others for the sake of the gospel. Following his words at the end of chapter ten, he tells the church, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). The Apostle admonishes the church at Corinth to imitate his behavior, which is merely a mirror image of Christ, living a life of humility, self-denial, giving of oneself, and in love, taking up the interest of others so that they may receive the life-giving message of the gospel. ⁶²³

What a transformational leader does he or she can bring transformation, comprised of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

Transformational leaders can motivate the members to go beyond what they thought they could do to raise their expectations and the effort they are willing to exert—having the ability to raise the awareness of our members in a manner that helps to transform their conscious perception of specific ideas. Transformational leaders have a charismatic nature that touches followers emotionally, causing our members to look to us as role models following the example we have brought forth.

"Transformational leaders can move followers to embrace the goals and values of their organization; they enable them to see a bigger picture that transcends their personal needs." ⁶²⁴

Transformational leaders change the culture. They shift the values and perception of an organization, bringing lasting change that significantly affects how a company operates. The ability of transformational leaders to bring about cultural changes is a powerful aspect of leadership, for organizations can strategize and plan with great precision. However, if the organization's culture is contrary to the strategies and plans that have been designed, they are sure to fail. ⁶²⁵

Transformational leaders garner commitment from their employees because research has shown

⁶²³ Gregory, 63.

⁶²⁴ Gregory, 63.

⁶²⁵ Gregory, 64.

that transformational leaders, to bring cultural change, were also able to positively affect the level of commitment subordinates demonstrated towards the organization where they were employed.

Transformational leaders show individual concern for those they lead, increasing their influence over their subordinates.⁶²⁶

There must be a drive to lead our congregations as transformational leaders into the work of the Great Commission. We should prepare and transform our congregations into fully functional, mature followers of Jesus Christ to fulfill our role in the Great Commission. We must care for the needs of our congregants in a manner that enables them to fulfill their God-given destiny. Our congregants have a purpose beyond merely having good lives and attending church. "They are redeemed and joined to a local church, which helps them to grow, mature, and overcome various challenges so that they may become part of the local church's efforts to fulfill the commission of Jesus Christ."⁶²⁷

Transformational leadership requires idealized influence, which is when the pastor positively and purposely affects the behavior of their congregants, demonstrating a high level of integrity in their behavior. The charisma factor for pastors draws members to them, fueled by the respect congregants have for their demonstrated character. Unfortunately, nearly two-thirds of pastors in the United States feel they have little influence over how their congregants believe and behave (Barn, 2017).⁶²⁸

James, the half-brother of Jesus, showed himself to be a leader who exercised influence over those following him, allowing for the church's commission of Christ to be advanced. When he was confronted with the debate over whether or not the new Gentile believers should be made to keep the Law of Moses, it was James determining that they should not (Luke 15:19). James had idealized influence exerted in his leadership being seen in the response of the elders, apostles, and the entire church's willingness to follow and come into agreement with his determination (Luke 15:22).⁶²⁹

⁶²⁶ Gregory, 64.

⁶²⁷ Gregory, 64.

⁶²⁸ Gregory, 65.

⁶²⁹ Gregory, 65.

Transformational leaders are inspirational, as seen by their members, to follow them into new and uncharted waters. "The pastor can inspire new desires in those they are leading. Inspirational motivation is often displayed in the language a pastor uses to communicate with their followers, the words spoken, and the emotional content which they are relayed." ⁶³⁰

We see the power to motivate followers in Jesus' instructions to go out and make disciples of all nations, but the disciples were curious about the restoration of the nation of Israel. Moreover, Jesus looks to focus their affection on a higher vision that will reach beyond the nation of Israel into the world. So, Jesus tells them, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:7-8). Jesus inspired His followers with a promise of power to complete the task He had given them, for He was not only giving them a command to follow, but He had also imparted a grander vision than the disciples currently held. ⁶³¹

The pastor must be able to intellectually stimulate the thoughts of congregational members, precisely thoughts that are counterproductive to the church's mission. When pastors have this ability, they can encourage creative thinking and support ideas that stretch traditional approaches to fulfilling the Great Commission. Pastors should take a teaching approach in correcting the behavior of congregants so they may understand how their actions influence the world around them and what effect they are having on the local church's work to fulfill the Great Commission. ⁶³²

We see this intellectual stimulation demonstrated by the Apostle Paul when he confronts the church at Corinth because the believers had received the gift of the Holy Spirit and were actively engaging in those gifts throughout their services. Moreover, the Apostle was concerned that their services had apparent order and that using the gifts of tongues without any structure or order would

⁶³⁰ Gregory, 65.

⁶³¹ Gregory, 66.

⁶³² Gregory, 66.

hinder fulfilling their mission to win the city's loss to Christ. Hence, the Apostle said to them, "If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your mind? However, if all prophecy, an unbeliever or outsider who enters is reprov'd by all and called to account by all. After the secrets of the unbeliever's heart are disclosed, that person will bow down before God and worship him, declaring, God is really among you" (Cor. 14:23-25, ESV). The Apostle Paul was concerned about those from outside the Body of Christ, and he desired for the Corinthians to be productive in the commission of the Lord, so he reasoned with them. The Apostle Paul engages with the church through intellectual stimulation as he attempts to reason with them, helping them understand how their current church environment could be counterproductive to the church's mandate to spread the gospel. What the Apostle did was further the gospel message, a picture he painted for the church at Corinth. The Apostle told them, "I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings" (1 Cor. 9:23).⁶³³

The pastor must be able to consider our followers' individual needs, as they demonstrate in both word and deed. We must be counselors and coaches in helping congregants with their needs so they may reach self-actualization when they can fulfill their God-given call. It has been discovered that this component of transformational leadership may be one that many local pastors fail to perceive the significance of in our labors to advance the church's mission. Of the top traits of a good pastor, 48% of adults thought that the number one trait needed to be successful was a love for people and a desire to help them fulfill their needs. However, when pastors were asked the same question, only 30% of them felt the idea of loving people and helping them to fulfill their needs was the most essential trait a pastor could possess.⁶³⁴

Barnabas was a person who helped others reach their full potential. Moreover, the practicality and positive effect of local pastors taking individualized consideration for their congregational

⁶³³ Gregory, 66.

⁶³⁴ Gregory, 67.

members can be testified to by Luke's account of a man named Joseph. Joseph is the biblical embodiment of a leader who can bring the best out of others, meeting them where they are and helping to bridge the gap between their God-given potential and their current life circumstances because Joseph was so adapted at taking into consideration the needs of others and helping them to reach their full potential his nickname was Barnabas (Acts 4:36). It was Barnabas who took the newly converted Saul into his care. Jesus called Saul to bear witness to the gospel. However, everyone in the church feared him and did not believe his conversion was true (Acts 9:26). But, it was Barnabas took Saul, who would eventually be referred to as Paul, and introduced him to the apostles in Jerusalem, testifying to the validity of his conversion (Acts 9:27). It was Barnabas, through individualized consideration showing Saul, effectively opening the door for him to begin the ministry he had been called to do. ⁶³⁵

Jesus prayed for us, his followers, when he said, "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17:15-17, ESV). When we look at this prayer of Jesus, we can reach some conclusions about the will of our Lord. Jesus wanted His followers in the world, for if they were taken out of the world, we could not complete the commission He was giving us. However, at the same time, He knew if we behaved like the world we lived in, we would be unproductive in the commission. So, the followers of Christ then and now need to be in the world, but we should strive with the help of the Holy Spirit not to behave like the world. This kind of living would require a transformation of thought and behavior, the transpired lives of the first Christ followers. ⁶³⁶

So, for the local churches to fulfill the mandate of Christ to make disciples of all nations, we need pastoral leadership that can transform its members. Moreover, new converts will continue to act

⁶³⁵ Gregory, 67.

⁶³⁶ Gregory, 68.

and behave in the world system they live in if they are not led by a leader who can transform their lives. Churches filled with new believers who have not experienced a transformation of thought and behavior will continue to think and behave the same way as the world. ⁶³⁷

Ultimately, a pastor's tenure will end, and the church must call another pastor to build on the previous pastor's work. Furthermore, transitions can be difficult, painful, and time-consuming. The congregation gives a new pastor permission to pastor them. Moreover, new pastors must realize that they must establish relationships while they have the title. New pastors must work at it; they must nurture it. They must intentionally love the people, and the people will love them back. When churches succeed in transitions, they learn to love their new pastor while not disparaging their former pastor. The congregation must buy into the fact that building a new relationship takes hard work and long hours.

⁶³⁸

The common bond between the new pastor and the church is in doing ministry work. When they labor together in love, the labor brings them together in kingdom building. Churches that do well in transition focus on doing ministry. The church focuses primarily on the five things it does: worship, fellowship, spiritual care and nurture, education, outreach, and service. It is during times of transition that a church must be intentionally mission-focused. While ministering to the transition and the pain of inevitable loss, they must still focus on the essentials of being the church of Jesus Christ. With this focus, the congregation is spiritually mature and will hear from God and follow God's plan for their future. ⁶³⁹

C. Collaborative Leadership Models

It would benefit the church to shift from the traditional approach to leadership, having a single leader, towards a more inclusive, shared approach to leadership. In the healthcare industry, which is

⁶³⁷ Gregory, 68.

⁶³⁸ Ralph C. Watkins, *Leading Your African American Church through Pastoral Transition*, 1st ed (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2010), 10.

⁶³⁹ Watkins, 11.

believed to be applied to the church, the collective approach has been defined as a dynamic team phenomenon, where leadership roles are distributed and shared among the team, and individuals adopt leadership roles with the expertise and motivation to do so. In the healthcare industry, and it may be applied to the church, collective and shared approaches to leadership have been found to enhance team effectiveness and team performance outcomes.⁶⁴⁰

Research on collective leadership in the healthcare industry was scarce, and we would imagine the same exists in ministries. It is precluded that pastors, associated ministers, and others work collaboratively in ministry, but this topic needs to be explored further by the church because its approach is not always evident. Healthcare research indicates the positive impact of collective leadership interventions on staff engagement, quality improvement, teamwork, and member satisfaction. When healthcare did this study, they retrieved the results in the review, focusing on the effectiveness of interventions rather than on the mechanisms through which they operated.⁶⁴¹

There was a need to address the gaps as an enhanced understanding of the mechanisms triggering the outcomes in specific contexts, enabling researchers and practitioners to develop strategies to support the successful implementation of evidence-based interventions. This co-designed collective leadership intervention is described as a complex intervention involving multiple stakeholders. Intervention components are interrelated and interdependent, involving complex tasks with multiple and variable outcomes.⁶⁴²

For the church in particular, the intervention should be co-designed by the pastoral members, who are coming together for several months. There should be a talk on the focusing implementation of the intervention with the intervention comprising a minimum of eight components, six one-hour core components relating to collective leadership for team performance and collective leadership for safety

⁶⁴⁰ Aoife De Brun et al., "Understanding the Impact of a Collective Leadership Intervention on Team Working and Safety Culture in Healthcare Teams: A Realist Evaluation Protocol," *HRB Open Research* 2 (March 26, 2020): 3, <https://doi.org/10.12688/hrbopenres.12860.2>.

⁶⁴¹ De Brun et al., 3.

⁶⁴² De Brun et al., 3.

culture in healthcare (but we would want to focus on safety in ministries), and at least two further intervention components targeted towards specific team types, team needs and team goals. Teams can select several targeted interventions to complete; however, six foundational components are compulsory, and the core first phase is for all teams. At the time, they debated the healthcare industry and the literature as to whether traditional, positivist methods were appropriate for the study of complex interventions because researchers had little or no control over the research setting.⁶⁴³

It was a person by the name of Pawson and Tilley, who were early proponents of realist evaluation and described it as a theory-driven approach to evaluation grounded in scientific realism. They argued that there was a need to understand more than intervention effectiveness and asserted that for evaluations to apply, researchers needed to explore "what works for whom, in what context, to what extent, how and why." "Thus, realist evaluation is a logic of inquiry that penetrates below the surface level inputs and outputs of an intervention and interrogates the inner mechanisms (M), that is, the implicit reactions and reasonings, that trigger or inhibit certain intervention outcomes (O) in specific contexts (C) of implementation."⁶⁴⁴

In this approach, the aim was to study the contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes and their interactions, building, and testing explanatory theory to interrogate how collective leadership and interventions can be effectively implemented to lead to desired outcomes (improved teamwork, safety culture (for healthcare) and practice of collective leadership.⁶⁴⁵

What the church should ask itself: does the intervention effectively enhance teamwork and member culture, and what works for whom, how, to what extent, and under what circumstances? The objectives are to describe and provide insight into the contextual conditions in the church's areas and understand how these contexts are linked to mechanisms and outcomes. The church should be able to describe how the intervention is working (or not) in specific implementation areas (mechanisms) and

⁶⁴³ De Brun et al., 3.

⁶⁴⁴ De Brun et al., 3.

⁶⁴⁵ De Brun et al., 4.

explore its impact (outcomes) based on the perceptions of staff engaging with the intervention and observation notes.⁶⁴⁶

For the church, the protocol identifies how the research will be conducted within the church (ministries, etc.), whereby the teams selected to participate in the research represent four different types of hospitals (and some churches have multiple sites). The teams selected were invited to participate based on an attempt to include diverse team types in line with the priorities of the church ministries. Thus, participation was voluntary and was agreed upon following a presentation from the research team that outlined the study's aims and design.⁶⁴⁷

Being guided by the realist approach by Pawson and Tilley, the candidate theory is where teams come together to engage in on-site training with the training perceived as relevant and valuable to the delivery, in this case for ministries; thus, intervention is likely to be implemented, and the team is more likely to work collectively during the implementation with this collective approach embedding as the team's leadership style. In the candidate theory next, where ministry is delivered by multiple ministry teams (in this case), the introduction of the intervention enhances staff engagement and development, working as a more collective mindset. The hope is to achieve a more positive work environment, staff satisfaction, teamwork, and ministry culture.⁶⁴⁸

In formulating the ministry's initial program theory (IPT), the team draws on multiple data sources informing the intervention's hypotheses and theory underpinning. Must create a realist synthesis of the literature on collective leadership interventions, in this case for ministry; interviews with members of the teams who have been identified as successfully working collectively in ministry; and feedback/input on formulating the IPT from expert panel members.⁶⁴⁹

The realist synthesis was conducted on papers retrieved during the systematic review of

⁶⁴⁶ De Brun et al., 4.

⁶⁴⁷ De Brun et al., 5.

⁶⁴⁸ De Brun et al., 5.

⁶⁴⁹ De Brun et al., 5.

interventions developed during the collective leadership in this ministry setting, and this review was conducted to identify approaches to developing collective leadership. These studies are eligible if they reported on developing, evaluating, and implementing training or interventions to foster collectivistic approaches to leadership. There should be a strong focus on development and implementation, compared to a review that focused on effectiveness only, synthesized many papers rich in detail, and provided a good starting point in the theory-building process. These papers evaluate and assess for rigor and ability to add to the developing program theory; thus, not all papers have sufficient information to contribute to theory building. There should be an identity of contextual conditions enabling or inhibiting mechanisms for collective leadership in practice; information gathered specific to the type of intervention, the setting in which intervention occurred, contextual data on factors enabling or inhibiting effectiveness, mechanisms enacted, and outcomes. ⁶⁵⁰

In order to test and refine evolving theories, additional data was collected to inform the program theory prior to undertaking the evaluation of senior ministry leaders and experts in ministries, helping the research team (in this case, the ministry) to identify up to four ministry teams currently working collectively and effectively in ministry. ⁶⁵¹ They are consistent with best practices in realist evaluation, studying the design adopted for the next phase informed by the IPT and the most appropriate methods to test the CMOC. There should be a consultation with the pastor of the ministry teams invited to be included in the study to support the range of team types' geographic dispersion across the region if the ministry is dispersed. These teams test the intervention and will enable the team (ministry) to test the intervention before more comprehensive testing across the ministry. ⁶⁵²

With data collection, an advantage of the realist approach is that it is a method-neutral approach and the most appropriate method for determining the research questions of the subject of the study by IPT and employing mixed methods approaching data collection, including individual semi-structured

⁶⁵⁰ De Brun et al., 6.

⁶⁵¹ De Brun et al., 6.

⁶⁵² De Brun et al., 6.

and realist interviews, quantitative surveys, and field notes (if there are off campuses for ministries) during non-participant observations of the teams' intervention sessions.⁶⁵³

There should be a reproductive approach to data analysis adopting an advocated realist research using both inductive and deductive logic to encourage researchers (ministries) to think through the causal factors that may operate to produce specific observed program outcomes. Because these causal factors may be hidden or implicit, reproductive approaches require the church to use the expertise and common sense to explore generative causation, providing insight into factors influencing outcomes. "Retroduction moves back and forth between inductive and deductive logic to interrogate both cases that are consistent and inconsistent with the IPT to enable confirmation, refinement as the analysis progresses."⁶⁵⁴

This process involves the completion of in-case analyses, which use the various data sources to triangulate findings within each case and compare the findings with the IPT. Then, there should be a cross-comparison of each case (ministry) to the CMOCs in the initial program theory conducted to develop plausible hypotheses regarding how various contexts have triggered (or inhibited) particular mechanisms leading to specific outcomes.⁶⁵⁵

In the healthcare case, which should probably be enforced in ministry, informed consent should be sought from all participants before their ministry participation in the intervention. Confirming participant information will be confidential, and the data will be aggregated so that individuals will not be identifiable from their responses or quotes. They employed unique personal identifiers so the ministry team could link survey responses pre-and post-intervention.⁶⁵⁶

Discuss the approach and methods adopted in developing a program (ministry) theory for the realist evaluation of a collective leadership intervention in ministry. The paper should describe the

⁶⁵³ De Brun et al., 6.

⁶⁵⁴ De Brun et al., 7.

⁶⁵⁵ De Brun et al., 7.

⁶⁵⁶ De Brun et al., 7.

systematic and iterative approach to developing and testing a ministry theory to evaluate the impact of a collective leadership intervention. "Realist evaluation is a method that enables the consideration of context and explores how an intervention may operate differently within different contexts to enable or inhibit certain mechanisms that lead to specific outcomes." The dissemination of the findings via peer-reviewed journals, targeting ministries and others interested in the results to our ministries, and circulating regular ministry updates via ministry newsletters, social media, and updates on dedicated ministry websites should be ongoing.⁶⁵⁷

With the ability to give visiting African evangelists sharing our pulpits in African American churches and others holding special programs in White churches or other church networks, this pulpit sharing enables a wide variety of ministries to do cross-cultural missions, thereby making it possible for African American ministries to engage in the evangelization of the motherland. Believing this would be amenable to the African American Baptist Church in the 21st century and beyond, given our historical beginnings, keeping our past before us as we move forward in these endeavors.⁶⁵⁸

D. Conclusion

In the 21st century and beyond, the African American Baptist Church must create and implement effective means for engaging with the culture. The church has always been in a transformational period, and change and adaptation have happened in various expressions of the Christian faith. To renew the church, congregational leaders must identify and cultivate Christian practices as a source of strength, train their leaders to engage in a changing social and cultural context and equip leaders who mobilize believers around a clear mission.

Church renewal requires different types of leaders who can reach, teach, and support emerging populations for Christian service. Creative ways of educating and equipping these leaders from accredited and non-accredited programs, some church-based and some alternative structures within

⁶⁵⁷ De Brun et al., 8.

⁶⁵⁸ Frieder Ludwig and J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, eds., *African Christian Presence in the West: New Immigrant Congregations and Transnational Networks in North America and Europe* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2011), 45.

denominations, are needed. Theological institutions provide quality academic programs and develop necessary ministry competencies to meet the needs of this diverse population of learners.

The church must also equip the next generations to speak their faith aloud. Post-boomers, who are not "nones" but believe in God, may be the ideal evangelist for people in their age group, but neither generational nor evangelism literature empowers explicitly and equips them. Developing evangelists' challenge addresses the vulnerability and fear of being shamed in a postmodern, multifaith world. Younger believers grow up in multiple faith traditions and may stumble into them as they mature without a factual background in the teachings of the Christian faith.

By beginning with those post-boomers already engaging with a faith community, they nourish their faith with a sense of God's presence and longing for deeper connections to God-is, a logical starting point for any long-term evangelical strategies with these generations.

Post-boomer Christians need to develop a sense of God's presence in their lives, an awareness of their faith as alive and growing, and a language to express their faith wholeheartedly. Thus, this can be achieved through a methodology that discusses the difficulty of discussing faith and concludes with a life review exercise. Participants should reflect on how God has been present and absent throughout their lives, explore how they know God, and write their Baptismal Covenant.

John Westerhoff's four stages of faith development theory help post-boomers come to faith. He suggests four stages: experienced faith, affiliative faith, searching for faith, and own faith. Post-boomers want a truce between science and faith, churches that emphasize an allegiance to the kingdom of God over a single political party or nation, and welcoming LGBT friends. Owning faith makes mature Christians ready to live out their faith daily with passion and commitment.

Congregations must create robust "holding environments" where existing members can journey from affiliative to owned faith. Walter Brueggemann's stories of Isaac coming late to his blessing serve as important models for intergenerational work, as they affirm that the arrival of the blessing is beyond

human control and cannot be dictated by the next generation.

Small groups are a powerful tool for spiritual growth and personal development. They foster interactive relationships, encourage personal growth, and are believed to be God's gift for character and spiritual growth. The methods of small group life vary due to church ministry practices but generally allow for working out of faith through discussions, living in the community, leading various components, and advancing the gospel through group and personal evangelism.

The church's goals for small groups depend on their focus on connecting and building relationships and their definition of a disciple. Ephesians is the blueprint for small groups, teaching the church to continually build up until unity is achieved and the knowledge of the Son of God is attained. This ongoing edification results in solid faith and growth in all aspects of Christlikeness.

In small groups, the focus should be on developing group members by engaging the entire person (cognitive, affective, psychomotor) in the truth of scripture, encouraging them to grow up in Christ. Church-based small groups balance the tension between the facts of the faith and the life of the faith, understanding learning styles and encouraging exploration of feelings and emotions. The social context, the constructivist nature of small groups, and a learner's readiness to examine feelings and emotions due to life circumstances result in different levels of priority for learning.

The group learning process aligns with the scriptures, as it involves engaging the whole self in learning, taking every thought captive, renewing their minds, putting the deeds of the flesh to death, and walking in the Spirit. Thus, this equips group members for ministry and experiences life in the community. Self-regulated learning occurs as members attend regular gatherings for prayer, Bible study, worship, and fellowship, with each member choosing their pace. Group processing involves members expressing feelings, exploring interpersonal relationships, sharing personal values, and fostering self-disclosure and trust.

Small group leaders provide social reinforcement through cueing and encouragement tools,

encouraging members to respond to the leader's questions. Thus, this encourages them to seek the exact nature of the passage being studied and respond with encouraging behavior. Group gatherings aim to help members mature in their faith walk, reducing fleshly desires and behaviors and increasing the fruit of the Spirit.

Senior church leadership determines the goals and expectations for practitioners, providing clarity on how small groups will accomplish their goals. The scriptures emphasize the importance of living with others, reflecting God's triune community of oneness. In the 21st century, the congregation should be a place to belong in relationships with God, self, and others, fostering personal piety and allowing individuals to grow their faith.

Pastoral leadership is crucial for transforming individual members and congregations, and this will continue until Jesus returns. Many pastors experience burnout due to a lack of understanding of their biblical role as leaders and their responsibility to bring transformational change. Many members leave the church despite loving Jesus and feel disconnected from their pastor and leadership. Thus, this leads to a failure to bring the necessary transformation in members, as the scriptures call for us to embrace. Pastors are overseers of God's affairs, managing the household of God and looking after the members of the local church.

As an overseer, a pastor leads the church, ensuring harmony among all parts. They must possess a firm grasp of the scriptures and be able to teach and expound upon them. Pastors must model like Jesus, teaching His disciples and confronting others with biblical truths in a contextualized manner. They serve as educators, teaching congregations how to live as a counter-culture, interacting with the world to spread the gospel message without allowing the world's culture to subvert them. They must teach timeless scriptural truths to their congregations.

Pastors are expected to care for the souls of individuals, including their physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being. This comprehensive responsibility is exemplified in the Old

and New Testaments, where Jesus instructed Peter to "feed my sheep." Pastors are called to lead His people as shepherds willing to sacrifice for their well-being and have an honest concern for it. As overseers of the local church body, pastors set a godly example for congregational members, as Apostle Paul encouraged them to imitate the example set by their followers.

The Apostle Paul, as the leader of many churches, set an excellent example for others to follow. James emphasized the importance of humility in leadership, stating that teachers will be judged with greater strictness. Jesus, when betrayed, promised that the Spirit of truth would guide His followers into all truth. Pastors must be entuned with the Spirit of truth to lead their congregations rightly, which can only be achieved through prayer. Prayer is directly linked to the church's evangelistic mission, focusing the church and its leaders on God's will for the congregation and the world.

Pastors must be visionaries who inspire congregations towards a shared goal, providing a purpose and direction for the church. They should function as charismatic leaders, motivating congregational members to embrace a shared vision that glorifies God and expands His kingdom. However, their vision should not be self-serving but serve to advance their Lord's kingdom. Pastors must seek guidance from the Holy Spirit to guide their vision, ensuring it is centered on the church's sound and serves its mission.

The Apostle Paul emphasizes the role of pastors and other church leaders in equipping saints for ministry and building up the body of Christ. Local church pastors equip their congregations to carry out the church's ministry effectively. In the Mediterranean, authority was not debatable when coming from an authoritative figure. In Matthew's gospel account, the Roman centurion requested Jesus to heal his servant, but Jesus did not feel worthy to have him come under his roof. Authority during Jesus' time meant doing what was told, no questions asked.

The twenty-first-century church has primarily overlooked the command to "go" and make disciples of all nations, as Jesus instructed His followers in Matthew's gospel. This command, once a

command for obedience, has become a request or choice that must be carefully considered. To embrace this command, congregants must undergo a powerful transformation. The Apostle Paul appealed to the church in Rome to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, renewing their minds to discern God's will and serve Christ without reservation.

The Great Commission is an ongoing process that enables followers of Jesus to live a transformed life, reprogramming the mind to be more like Jesus Christ. However, over half of churchgoers have never heard of it, and only 17% have understood its meaning. Many associate it with social justice and charity rather than spreading the gospel and making disciples of all nations. The Apostle Paul emphasized the importance of presenting believers' lives as sacrifices to further the gospel message, emphasizing the need for the church to imitate his teachings.

The Apostle encourages the church at Corinth to emulate Christ's humility, self-denial, and love, aiming to spread the gospel. Transformational leaders bring transformation through idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. They motivate members to exceed expectations and raise their awareness, transforming their perception of ideas. Their charismatic nature touches followers emotionally, making them role models. Transformational leaders change organizational culture, affecting how a company operates. They also garner employee commitment, as research shows that transformational leaders positively affect their subordinates' commitment to the organization.

Transformational leaders should lead congregations into mature followers of Jesus Christ, preparing them to fulfill their God-given destiny. They care for their congregants' needs, enabling them to grow and overcome challenges. Transformational leadership requires idealized influence, where pastors positively affect their congregants' behavior, demonstrating integrity. However, nearly two-thirds of pastors in the US feel they have little influence over their congregations' beliefs and behavior. James, the half-brother of Jesus, demonstrated idealized influence, leading the church's commission of

Christ. Transformational leaders inspire their members to follow them into new and uncharted waters.

Pastors can inspire followers through their language, words, and emotional content. Jesus' instructions to make disciples of all nations focused on the restoration of Israel and a higher vision. Pastors must intellectually stimulate congregational members' thoughts, encouraging creative thinking and supporting ideas that stretch traditional approaches to fulfilling the Great Commission. They should take a teaching approach to correct congregants' behavior, understanding how their actions influence the world and the local church's work to fulfill the Great Commission. This approach helps followers understand their impact on the church's mission.

The Apostle Paul confronted the church at Corinth, concerned about its lack of structure and order in their services. He warned that outsiders or unbelievers would be questioned if the church spoke in tongues. Paul aimed to encourage the Corinthians to be productive in the commission of the Lord and reason with them about how their current environment could hinder their mission to spread the gospel. He emphasized that the Apostle's actions were for the gospel's sake, sharing its blessings.

Local pastors must be counselors and coaches, helping congregations reach self-actualization and fulfilling their God-given call. However, many pastors fail to recognize the importance of love and helping others fulfill their needs. Barnabas, a biblical figure, exemplifies a leader who can bridge the gap between God-given potential and current life circumstances. Joseph, also known as Barnabas, was a leader who took the newly converted Saul into his care, introducing him to the apostles in Jerusalem and testifying to the validity of his conversion. Local pastors' practicality and positive effect can help advance the church's mission.

Barnabas showed Saul the door for his ministry, demonstrating Jesus' desire to protect his followers from the evil world. Jesus prayed for them to sanctify them in the truth, as he had sent them into the world. He wanted His followers to be in the world but not to behave like the world. Thus, this requires a transformation of thought and behavior, akin to the first Christ followers' lives. Pastoral

leadership is crucial for local churches to fulfill Christ's mandate of making disciples of all nations.

Transitions in churches can be challenging and time-consuming, but they are essential for the church's growth. New pastors must establish relationships and nurture them, loving the people while not disparaging their former pastor. The common bond between the new pastor and the church is in doing ministry work, focusing on worship, fellowship, spiritual care, education, outreach, and service. During transitions, churches must be mission-focused, focusing on the essentials of being the church of Jesus Christ, ensuring spiritual maturity, and following God's plan for their future.

The church should adopt a more inclusive, shared approach to leadership, similar to the healthcare industry. Collective leadership has been found to enhance team effectiveness and performance outcomes. However, research on collective leadership in the church is scarce, and it is essential to explore this topic further. Healthcare research indicates the positive impact of collective leadership interventions on staff engagement, quality improvement, teamwork, and member satisfaction.

A co-designed collective leadership intervention is proposed for the church, involving multiple stakeholders and complex tasks with multiple outcomes. The intervention should consist of at least eight components: six core components relating to collective leadership for team performance and safety culture in healthcare and at least two further components targeted towards specific team types, needs, and goals.

Pawson and Tilley, early proponents of realist evaluation, argued that researchers needed to understand more than intervention effectiveness and explore the inner mechanisms that trigger or inhibit certain intervention outcomes in specific contexts. The church should ask itself whether the intervention effectively enhances teamwork and member culture and what works for whom, how, to what extent, and under what circumstances.

The research protocol outlines how the research will be conducted within the church, with

teams selected from four different types of hospitals. The candidate theory suggests that teams engage in on-site training, embedding the collective approach as their leadership style and enhancing staff engagement and development. The hope is to achieve a more positive work environment, staff satisfaction, teamwork, and ministry culture.

The ministry's initial program theory (IPT) is used to develop and test a collective leadership intervention in ministry. It involves a realist synthesis of literature, interviews with successful teams, and feedback from expert panel members. The IPT is based on a systematic review of interventions developed during collective leadership in a ministry setting. The focus is on development and implementation rather than effectiveness.

Data is collected from senior ministry leaders and experts, identifying up to four ministry teams currently working collectively and effectively. The realist approach is method-neutral and employs mixed methods, including interviews, surveys, and field notes. A reproductive approach to data analysis is employed, using both inductive and deductive logic to explore causal factors influencing outcomes.

In-case analyses use various data sources to compare findings with the IPT. Cross-comparisons are conducted with the CMOCs in the initial program theory to develop plausible hypotheses about how different contexts trigger or inhibit specific mechanisms leading to specific outcomes. Informed consent is sought from all participants before participation in the intervention.

The paper discusses the systematic and iterative approach to developing and testing a ministry theory to evaluate the impact of a collective leadership intervention. The findings are disseminated through peer-reviewed journals, targeted ministries, and regular ministry updates. This approach enables African American ministries to engage in cross-cultural missions, benefiting the African American Baptist Church in the 21st century and beyond.

XI. Future Prospects and Possibilities

A. Vision for 21st Century and Beyond

An Overview of ReThinking Church in the 21st century, domestically and abroad - a group of scholars and others such as pastors and presidents of national Christian organizations came together. The discussions centered on "In light of the national and international turbulence in the life of the church in 2021, as well as for lack of spaces where the relevant issues about this could be discussed with diversity, honesty, and humility, it seemed urgent to gather some thoughtful Christian men and women for sustained and open conversation, and prayerful discernment." ⁶⁵⁹

The conversation centered on the following: its cruciform and resurrection identity vs its sociological and political identity; its inadequate, even absent, discipleship formation; its understanding, uses, and abuses of power; its many and varied divisions; its relationships within and between cultures, ethnicities, genders, and religions; its inadequate, sometimes alienated, relationship with theological education; its multi-generational losses and alienations; its economic and structural assumptions and systems; its technological disruptions and innovations; its life in the public square related to business, politics, media, arts; its post-pandemic imagination, fears, and hopes; and more. ⁶⁶⁰

For the church in the United States of America, the priorities were theology (including gospel, salvation, and the church's identity and mission); authentic Christian practices, immigration; repenting of past sins and assumptions (racial injustice, US patriotism, Whiteness, inequity, abuses of power, the tendency towards colonialism, etc); engaging/reengaging teenagers and young adults; technology: faithful use amid ubiquity; discipleship - new models; diversity, equity, and inclusion for the church to lead and racial equity; public theology and healthy political engagement; and church leadership. ⁶⁶¹

Church leaders who came together believe that in a world of singularities and diversities [and competing narratives and an array of cultural and social identities], how do we affirm our diversities

⁶⁵⁹ Francis Chan et al., "ReThinking Church in the 21st Century Phase One (5/21—12/21): Participants," n.d., 1.

⁶⁶⁰ Chan et al., 5.

⁶⁶¹ Chan et al., 5.

while claiming to live our life in relationship to one Lord, one faith, one baptism? The question is how we share a gospel center that avoids a collapse into relativism [and the centering of Americanity], on the one hand and knows/lives/embodies what it means to be knit together as the body of Christ, on the other. Moreover, what makes the church members, made up of every tribe, nation, and tongue, belong to one another? Furthermore, how can we have more elastic ecclesiologies that enable us to move dynamically from the micro to the macro, the local to the global, while maintaining our cruciform shape? ⁶⁶²

These leaders believe that when it comes to authentic Christian practice, discipleship is hindered because we do not have the kind of discipleship we should have - "we are choked by the weeds of Americanity (spectator/consumer, individualism, emphasis on belief over practice, settling for comfort and accepting injustice, lack of grace-forms that support all of this such as charismatic senior pastor leadership." It is believed that we are divided in ways that obscure our blending of culture with an apprenticeship to Jesus. We do not have access to communities of mutual discipleship in which we are seen, known, and loved so that we have deep accountability with grace, and we are not learning from people doing this. ⁶⁶³

These leaders also realize that the current vitality and future of the church are at risk if we do not embrace, develop, and release resilient, authentic disciples under the age of 30. There is a need to effectively engage young Christians and reach young non-Christians from all backgrounds and identities. These leaders understand that many gaps exist, including transforming experiences of the Spirit, bifurcations of the head and heart, not fitting into the identity and expectations of the American Church, and so on. They believe better solutions and approaches to welcoming and empowering them are necessary so they can contribute today and ensure the future strength of the church and its witness

⁶⁶² Chan et al., 6.

⁶⁶³ Chan et al., 7.

in the world. ⁶⁶⁴

In the area of Christian public witness, they believe the US church has lost its moral authority and credibility for public witness because of its hypocrisy (as exhibited by its embrace of secular political power at the cost of biblical truth and authentic Christian practice. These leaders also believe that the domination of Trumpism in our churches confused Christian faithfulness with a political ideology. In the name of "non-partisan" or false "fairness," the church yielded its prophetic voice to create moral equivalencies. There is a lack of examination of its theocratic ambitions. The church needs to examine its complicity and propagation of worship of empire, racism, and capitalism. ⁶⁶⁵

Moreover, the church has lost its orientation to King Jesus and, because of theological limitations, has lost its ability to interpret and help us understand the times we live in today. Moreover, the church confuses "pastoral accessibility" and neutrality when it ought to be taking clear and definitive stands. Churches have used political positions to signal belonging (home or family); disunity is repulsive (instead of drawing people in). ⁶⁶⁶

Believing the church has lost its ability to bear witness-bearing witness would be an alternative, transparent, authentic healing alternative to what the world offers and an embodiment of God's heart for the common good. Moreover, it was decided to produce a curriculum/liturgy for essential conversations (around issues of Christian identity, communion when issues and experiences divide us, and public square issues) that take place around the communion table, with the Lord's Table as the centerpiece by which the discussions unfold and conclude with the Lord's Table at each session. ⁶⁶⁷

It was decided that topic-oriented resources should be created targeting three prioritized topics for sustained, multi-part consideration using all the necessary resource modalities, primarily for pastors, small groups, church leaders, or congregations and networks. In the area of discipleship and

⁶⁶⁴ Chan et al., 7.

⁶⁶⁵ Chan et al., 7.

⁶⁶⁶ Chan et al., 8.

⁶⁶⁷ Chan et al., 9.

formation, the leaders decided that the overarching need is disciplining people in churches who may or may not realize they are under-formed or malformed as disciples, creating a discipleship program for adults to "start again" as disciples-this would be one to two years long. They saw a need to create pastor conversation groups developing resources for diverse pastors in a town, city, or region to meet monthly for sustained conversation, guided by a trained pastoral mentor and using resources for such gatherings. ⁶⁶⁸

Additionally, what they decided around seminars held in urban centers is the kind of diverse gatherings of pastors as a taste and an example of the crisis and how to find pastoral support and encouragement. These seminars lay out some concerns and invite pastors into ongoing in-person or online interaction with other pastors for encouragement and constructive conversation for them and their congregations. ⁶⁶⁹ Regarding alliances/broader gatherings, the leaders decided to discern and cultivate broader associations and partnerships with pastors, networks, congregations, denominations, and organizations as participants. ⁶⁷⁰

Members of Fuller Theological Seminary came together on the idea of “rethinking church for the 21st century,” and they believed they needed to get this right. It was significant as the church and its priorities primarily drove the degree and learning resources offered and the institutional structures needed to develop, deliver, and support them. The first topic they tackled was “In what ways is the church of today falling short of the good news of God’s love and justice in Jesus Christ?” They see failures in racism, classism, ableism, and creation care; failures related to truth-telling and accountability; failures related to how we love God and our neighbor; failures related to how we preach and teach the Bible and pray for the world God loves. “And when attempting to focus, you cannot help but notice the temptation to confess the sins of others with more care than to confess our own.” It was

⁶⁶⁸ Chan et al., 9.

⁶⁶⁹ Chan et al., 9.

⁶⁷⁰ Chan et al., 9.

believed the root of much of this was a failure to repent rather than talk about repentance.⁶⁷¹

It is believed that early in the 20th century, the church divided the body from the soul, with fundamentalists focusing on the state of people's souls and the social gospel, which focused on the state of the bodies. Moreover, when you divide a body from a soul, the person in question dies, and by the miracle of grace, the body of Christ has not died, but it has been walking around wounded, and its witness has been severely weakened. Did the church shock the world when it embraced all comers across ethno-racial, gender, and class divisions, recognizing the authority and power of the Holy Spirit coming through people who had been on the margins and at the bottom of society?⁶⁷²

The church is falling short of the evangel with a myopic vision of "church," which limits the gospel to personalized and ecclesiastical dynamics. With the emphasis on Jesus only as a "personal savior" blinding the church to the richness of the gospel in social dimensions, the early church only understood the social ministry. We see this in Acts 3 when Peter and John meet a socially outcast man with a physical and economic impediment after the chapter of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, this sequence of events implies that the church's birth was not merely for personal or ecclesial purposes but rather to empower believers to attend to the social and spiritual needs in the world. The church is believed to fall short in its uncritical alliances and allegiances to party politics.⁶⁷³

Furthermore, party politics is in the driver's seat on what is essential and what is not. "The gospel is prophetic and sets the moral agenda. However, too much of the church is giving up its moral conscience for political expediency- and perhaps for financial reasons." The church is falling short of the evangel because, for too long, it has been outwardly concerned about bearing witness to Christ's mission in the community. Moreover, by advancing God's work, we are not speaking of acts of kindness like giving food and having clothes closets but the prophetic work of pursuing social

⁶⁷¹ "Rethinking Church in the 21st Century," Fuller Studio, accessed March 28, 2024, <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/theology/rethinking-church-in-the-21st-century/>.

⁶⁷² "Rethinking Church in the 21st Century."

⁶⁷³ "Rethinking Church in the 21st Century."

transformation of policies and immoral structures creating problems in the first place. ⁶⁷⁴

The church is failing to show the social dimensions of the gospel, namely that Christ is redeeming all things, and as such, we, as Christians, should care about all things. Moreover, James 1:27 says we are to look after the widows and orphans, referencing the most destitute and vulnerable. So, by extension, we are to care for all destitute and vulnerable. A segment of the church has wholly neglected social righteousness and argued that it is not core to Christianity. The scriptures demand God's people to be righteous. ⁶⁷⁵

Furthermore, a segment of the church does not call for personal righteousness. "They are ignoring that Christ came to die for their sins, and they are not calling people to repentance." The emphasis on social righteousness causes them to lose sight of God's grace and the need for us to be justified through Christ. We know the gospel encompasses personal and social dimensions, and the church must regain this robust vision. ⁶⁷⁶

The church needs to find the right wineskins to embody the strong wine of the gospel in this historic moment. In Fuller's research, they found that young Latinx (millennials and Gen Z) want churches to be community centers in which people are free to be their authentic selves and to dialogue about controversial questions with the Word of God, caring for each other's needs (and the needs of their neighbors), utilizing and valuing the gifts and contributions of each person-and meeting God mystically in profoundly emotional and expressive worship, continuing to do the hard work of reconciliation when we sin against each other, standing for justice for the poor and marginalized. Again, this is like the Book of Acts, but aspects of modern society seriously impede the implementation of that vision because we are mobile, busy, connected, and disconnected by screens, with wildly different narratives that we rely on to explain reality. We have a global imagination, but we have what some believe to be little capacity to impact globalization, which affects our local lives and

⁶⁷⁴ "Rethinking Church in the 21st Century."

⁶⁷⁵ "Rethinking Church in the 21st Century."

⁶⁷⁶ "Rethinking Church in the 21st Century."

communities. So, if you are low-income, we are working multiple jobs to keep a roof over the heads of our families and food on the table, and God, please help us if we get sick. ⁶⁷⁷

It is a fact that racism is a central challenge for the church. Fuller is inspired, and we should be too, to see and follow women and men of color who are leading initiatives driven by an all-nations-and-cultures vision for the coming kingdom and to notice pockets of renewed resolve and chastened leadership in some contexts not yet known for their vision of diversity and inclusion. Regarding worship to see young pastors, musicians, and artists apprenticing themselves to the psalms and the basics of patristic trinitarian sacramental theology have been shaped faithfully by indigenous public worship practices in a host of local cultural contexts. ⁶⁷⁸

Fuller believed in the rampant polarization of the church, taking its cues from the broader political discussions and adopting a polarizing attitude, such that if you disagree with me, you are either heretical or a bigot. We have become hypercritical of folks who think and vote differently from us and are often willing to label them as non-Christian. Moreover, we know that historically, the Black and Brown church has modeled humility to partner with others and not write off those who are different for the sake of sharing goals. We have seen this in the Civil Rights Movement and other milestones in US history. Some Christians and Christian leaders are modeling, teaching, and encouraging the church to avoid this polarization. ⁶⁷⁹

A challenge confronting the church is a generation that claims to be spiritual but is either uninterested in Christianity or unwilling to join a local church. According to Pew, the combination of millennials and Gen Z is more spiritual than previous generations. Previous religiously oriented generations subscribed to religious guidelines and dogma about God and godly living. However, this generation tends to understand God within the framework of invisible institutions. Visible institutions are churches, synagogues, and mosques. “Invisible institutions are more relational than physical. They

⁶⁷⁷ “Rethinking Church in the 21st Century.”

⁶⁷⁸ “Rethinking Church in the 21st Century.”

⁶⁷⁹ “Rethinking Church in the 21st Century.”

include neighborhoods, sports, music, dance, etc.

Consequently, this generation does not draw lines between secular and sacred like previous generations.” They believe God is involved in all life and affirms all human existence. It challenges the church to adjust to bearing witness in a social framework inconsistent with its somewhat anachronistic approaches and understanding of God-related things.⁶⁸⁰

More Christians of color return to their neighborhoods and communities, raise local leaders, and care for their communities in ways a non-local could not do. The Crete Collective (TCC), a church planting network, exists to establish gospel-driven churches in distressed and neglected Black and Brown communities. They help pastors return to the neighborhoods they grew up in, the ones they know best, instead of waiting and expecting other denominations and networks to make inroads.⁶⁸¹

The church innovates, utilizes technology, creates additional income streams, and collaborates. If the church is to serve this present age and the age to come, it must participate more efficiently in the evolving technological age. With several innovative approaches, churches engage in e-church membership, Zoom small groups, and online church membership orientations. With e-church memberships extended to the local to the world. With the local church having an opportunity to be global without taking a flight, churches are finding ways to fund ministries. “While tithes and offerings remain the norm, more and more churches are creating for-profit organizations to create revenue streams helping to fund costly ministry efforts. Moreover, churches are learning the power of partnerships. For far too long, our churches and denominations have operated as silos.⁶⁸²

Hundreds of traditioned innovator-chaplains, songwriters, ushers, preachers, youth and children’s ministry leaders, educators, public theologians, and church administrators have come together in the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship work. “Their innovations include everything from more accessible websites, more pastorally oriented sermons, more scripturally robust songs, more

⁶⁸⁰ “Rethinking Church in the 21st Century.”

⁶⁸¹ “Rethinking Church in the 21st Century.”

⁶⁸² “Rethinking Church in the 21st Century.”

candid and constructive conversations about socioeconomic class and race, stronger accountability structures for leaders of all kinds, new learning about cultural intelligence, renewed disciplines of Sabbath-shaped retreats, deeper engagement with the wisdom of historical practices, new approaches to hospitality and generosity in giving, and more.”⁶⁸³

The question we must ask ourselves is, can the church sustain community? Like in previous centuries, the church of the twenty-first century will probably remain vibrant as long as it can provide people with a strong sense of community. We have already highlighted in this writing that Gen X and Gen Z are looking for community. Furthermore, the congregation remains at the heart of the church and, in turn, at the heart of Christianity. However, the question is, what exactly will it be able to do? Do we believe it will continue functioning as much as it currently does? Or do we believe corrosive forces on the broader society will undermine its ability to function at all?⁶⁸⁴

As the church moves forward in the 21st century and beyond, let us not forget the importance of small groups because in early Christianity, sermons were preached in public, but the church's life was lived in houses. It was the account of the Apostle Paul accepting hospitality in Christian households and the stories of entire households converting to the new faith corresponding to Jesus' commission in Luke 10:5-9, in which he instructed his disciples to go out into the towns. At that time, houses were the primary cells of the growing church, and the hosts of Christian house churches were expected to provide elaborate banquets for the congregants. These groups were socially inclusive, comprising enslaved people and freeborn persons, men, and women. (93, Chapman & Rasor)⁶⁸⁵

Black churches that function at a high level develop a more refined ability to wave together disparate elements of faith. Many of our churches operate in a compartmentalized, silo fashion, with programs taking on a life of their own and the ministry impact of any given effort isolated from the

⁶⁸³ “Rethinking Church in the 21st Century.”

⁶⁸⁴ Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-First Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead*, 1. issued as an Oxford Univ. Press paperback (New York Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 32.

⁶⁸⁵ Stephen Charles Rasor and Christine D. Chapman, *Black Power from the Pew: Laity Connecting Congregations and Communities* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 93.

totality of the person's faith experience; high-impact Black churches actively encourage their people to bring the various strands of ministry activity together for great cohesion and influence. The most striking aspect of this integration is blending evangelism, discipleship, and service into a muscular brand of genuine transformation. A past study of the Barna Group found that "evangelism without tightly integrated discipleship is spiritual abuse." The study of Black churches revealed that they had brought this relationship between evangelism and discipleship to a deeper level by wrapping those endeavors around efforts to serve the most pressing personal needs of the individual. Consequently, if the African American Baptist Church continues to embrace these methods in the 21st century and beyond, the church will be vibrant for years to come. ⁶⁸⁶

B. Potential Impact on the African American Community

When we look at the potential impact of the African American Community, the Black church must look at itself maybe with condemnation because it was said on February 24, 2010, at 10:18 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, Dr. Eddie Glaude, the William S. Todd Professor of Religion, and chair of the Center for African American Studies at Princeton University, morphed into a coroner when he pronounced that the Black church was dead. He said, "The Black church, as we have known it or imagined it, is dead...the idea of this venerable institution as central to Black life and as a repository for the social and moral conscience of the nation has but disappeared." Dr. Glaude said the cause of death was differentiation in the African American community, which for him meant that the African American community is sociogeographically dispersed in cities, and African Americans compete with White churches for African American members. The church is competing in a world where the sacred is no longer under the sole purview of the African American Christian church because African-Americans are looking at other traditions and means to express their spirituality and connect with God.

⁶⁸⁶ George Barna and Harry R. Jackson, *High-Impact African-American Churches* (Ventura, Calif: Regal Books, 2004), 121.

When we look at the potential impact of the Black church, the church critiques itself, according to Dr. Glaude, who said the Black church had lost its prophetic voice and is not speaking out on social issues or being that “moral conscience” it had been in the past. The church is looking back at its past through rose-colored glasses rather than dealing with the social crisis the African American community is facing. According to Dr. Glaude, the prophetic voice is the cause of the church’s irrelevance. According to Dr. Glaude, African American churches have large gatherings across the country that are, at best, financial empowerment conferences for the attendees and, at worst, no more than fundraising opportunities sponsoring ministries and their leaders. The question Dr. Glaude asked was, “Where are the protests in response to the social ills that are killing African American communities?” Moreover, the last line of the death certificate suggests that at this moment of death, there is the possibility of resurrection when the African American church reclaims its prophetic voice and witness. ⁶⁸⁸

For the church to have an impact on the African American community, the church must ask, “Are we dead or alive?” “With the church being the bride of Christ, living witness of Christ in the world. What should that bride look like in the 21st century?” The church must reframe and reclaim its mission to be the bride of Christ. Moreover, what makes a church dead or alive? Realizing there is no one way to be the African American church. Because the church has diverse worship styles, mission priorities, and ministry strengths, we know that churches are diverse in socioeconomic demographics and cultural expression. We have praise churches that are steep in great preaching and powerful worship. There are some prophetic or social activists’ churches, and these congregations have a strong community profile, excelling in outreach, feeding programs, and addressing social issues in their communities. They tend to be active Monday through Friday. ⁶⁸⁹

⁶⁸⁷ Ralph C. Watkins et al., eds., *The Future of the African American Church: An Invitation to Dialogue*, First Edition (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2014), 15.

⁶⁸⁸ Watkins et al., 16.

⁶⁸⁹ Watkins et al., 17.

Moreover, what does it mean to be a church? “The church is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27), and because the church is the body of Christ, we are the expression, the living witnesses of Christ on earth. Because we are the body of Christ, it means that Christ is the head (Col. 1:18). “The church should reflect Jesus as Jesus left witness in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts. From the scriptures, we know that Jesus was a healer; he preached and taught in such a way that his teachings were relevant. What we mean by relevant is that his teachings and preaching were related to people’s real-life situations, and because of his teaching, people were touched, empowered to live, and ultimately transformed as they followed the way of Jesus. He met people where they were; he did not judge or preach down to them based on their circumstances. Jesus stopped and met people's needs. Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick, cared for widows, and recognized the little things and little people. “Jesus sat and talked with sinners; in fact, Jesus was criticized for sitting and eating with sinners. Sinners were those whom the mainstream religious leaders of the day considered to be outside the mainstream. Jesus was also in the streets and in the homes of those with whom he was in a relationship; Jesus spent more time in the streets and people’s homes than he did in the temple. Jesus’ most memorable moments were when he went to the temple and got angry at religious people as he turned over tables (Matt. 21:11-13; Mark 11:14-16; John 2:14-16) and drove the moneychangers out with a whip.⁶⁹⁰

For the community, the church must make a real difference in the lives of the congregation and those who are not members whom we pass on our way to worship. Knowing how we are making a difference for real, do we see Jesus in our churches Monday through Saturday? Moreover, does the community outside the four walls of our churches see Jesus in the streets, the home, the familiar places, the coffee shops, the malls, the schools, the jails, the library, athletic events, community events, the virtual world of the Internet, and in the world of social media making the difference?⁶⁹¹

Dr. Gayraud Wilmore, to be a live African American church means to value the heritage of

⁶⁹⁰ Watkins et al., 18.

⁶⁹¹ Watkins et al., 18.

African American spirituality. What vibrant African American churches are rooted in and connected to the spirit of Africa and the Spirit's traveling down through the ages? "An alive African American church celebrates how the Holy Spirit has been manifested in Black churches. We hold onto and celebrate the shout, the dance, the ecstatic, and the demonstrative while being moved by the liberating initiation of the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit informs our moves toward social justice; the Holy Spirit empowers us to speak truth to power. The Holy Spirit should inform our preaching, inspire our singing, and breathe life through the voices of our choirs. "It was the Holy Spirit who met us at the worship and made our feet pat and hands clap, and it was that same Spirit who called us to quiet contemplation, to think, reflect, study, and act."⁶⁹²

The African American church is not seduced by the process and power of socialization that leads to assimilation, thereby losing its distinctive character of what it means to be an African American church. Moreover, to be countercultural means the African American church stands against the seduction of capitalistic greed and cultural assimilation. The church should hold onto and celebrate what it means to be African and American.⁶⁹³

To be distinctive, the church must love its people and cultural heritage. Moreover, this is not a love in opposition to others. Nevertheless, this love is Black, and it means being empowered to love others while celebrating the Creator's design in blackness and knowing that God made us with brown skin and black hair along with cultural norms rooted in our African genesis. We develop healthy personalities among our members and the community. "A healthy Black or African American personality is characterized by a strong awareness of and identification with African cultural heritage, a strong sense of motivation directed in ensuring the collective survival of African people and related institutions, and the active resistance of any force (i.e., racism) that threatens the survival and

⁶⁹² Watkins et al., 20.

⁶⁹³ Watkins et al., 20.

maintenance of one's people and oneself. ⁶⁹⁴

When the church is alive, it holds to a biblical standard that we cannot love others until we first love ourselves and our God. We know that African Americans receive so many negative images and messages about themselves in the larger culture; in contrast, the African American church provides an alternative message rooted in the African roots of our faith as the church continues to teach African Americans to love themselves. "We celebrate the fact that our Jesus comes from Africa, as the Bible says in Matthew 2:15, "Out of Egypt [Africa] I have called my son. The great history of Africa and the ability of people of African descent to thrive amid brutal conditions throughout our long history helps us realize that we have a lot to be proud of and should hold our heads up." ⁶⁹⁵

Wilmore suggests that being Black or African American church means the congregation we are a part of works for and on behalf of the interests and concerns of the members and community. Furthermore, the things that plague our members and community as a result of being members of a minority group are our concerns. We know that African Americans have experienced discrimination simply because they are African American, and when we add class status and gender to the experience, the discrimination becomes more brutal. ⁶⁹⁶

Historically, the Christian church has been the mainstay of community life in Western society for centuries. Even during the Middle Ages, people lived within walking distance of the church, woke to its bells, took their animals to it to be blessed, and followed its calendar. However, after the Reformation, people formed churches and called pastors who lived as they did. Historically, the church was an integral part of the colony, then of towns, and later of the urban and suburban neighborhoods. Our society seems to be at a loss for the community, and critics credit this to individuals obsessed with our jobs, bank accounts, and feelings. "We live in anonymous places, jealously protecting our privacy, and whatever hopes we entertain of finding a warm, supportive community are threatened by our

⁶⁹⁴ Watkins et al., 20.

⁶⁹⁵ Watkins et al., 21.

⁶⁹⁶ Watkins et al., 21.

incessant moving about and the pressures that impinge upon our time." So, the question that confronts the church in the 21st century and beyond is whether it can still be a vital community source or is it too beginning to succumb to the impersonal forces that fragment society. ⁶⁹⁷

The sustaining community of the church can be understood in several ways. In the Christian tradition itself, the word *koinonia* receives special attention. This word connotes a group of believers who support one another's commitments to faith and each other's physical and emotional needs. Then, there is the theological meaning, and the concept of community also holds historical connotations about the church. The fellowship of believers exists in space and time; it is of necessity related to its broader surroundings, particularly the village, town, neighborhood, suburb, or city where its members reside. There is an ethical meaning to the relation between church and community because the fellowship of believers is expected to be of service, not only to one another within its group but to the needs of others, whether this be the immediate neighborhood or the broader community of humankind. ⁶⁹⁸

C. Contribution to Interfaith Dialogues

The First Amendment of the American Constitution created the legal conditions for religiously diverse people to settle and flourish in America. However, the variety and complexity of faith traditions in the twenty-first century will provoke the legal system and American interpretation of it in new ways. America is a "marketplace" of world religions, and the social dynamics of encounter and experimentation occur among religiously diverse people. We know that religious diversity is intrinsic to American history, and America is undeniably a multifaith society because there have always been diverse religions represented among American people, and America is constitutionally structured to be such. We know that religious diversity in America has always been an immigrant tale, beginning with the immigration of Christians to the New World and their relatively quick domination of the religious

⁶⁹⁷ Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-First Century*, 33.

⁶⁹⁸ Wuthnow, 33.

conversation on the continent.⁶⁹⁹

What happened was that new and old religions flowed into one another in ways analogous to the commingling of cultures among immigrant and native populations. Despite this chimeric relationship between immigration and religion, framing religious diversity in America as an immigrants' tale is beneficial because it tethers the story of religious diversity to people and their interaction with others rather than abstractions about religious tropes. Indigenous people were already practicing their religion, and European explorers, conquerors, missionaries, and colonists in North America did not bring religion to the New World, but they brought certain Christian forms of religious expression.⁷⁰⁰

It is believed that Christianity was not the original religion of the New World into which other religions were later welcomed and that Columbus' Catholicism, the first form of Christianity to arrive, was not the form that pushed onto the continent. However, protestant Christianity arriving with the Pilgrim Fathers and many other colonists predominates the religious realm for most of American history.⁷⁰¹

During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, new immigration patterns challenged Protestantism's "informal establishment," but none did so definitively. In the 1850s, Chinese workers with their Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian traditions flocked to the California Gold Rush, but the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 ended Chinese immigration in that period. In 2012, Christians made up 61 percent of immigrants to the United States, a drop of 7 percent from 1992, when they made up 68 percent of immigrants, according to Pew's report on immigrant religion at the turn of the millennium. We are seeing the number of Christian immigrants declining, and the number of religious minorities

⁶⁹⁹ Mara Brecht, "An Unsettled Frontier: Religious Diversity and Interfaith Encounter in America: Studies in Interreligious Dialogue," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 25, no. 2 (2015): 242.

⁷⁰⁰ Brecht, 242.

⁷⁰¹ Brecht, 242.

has risen. In 2012, 25 percent of immigrants were religious minorities, up from 19 percent in 1992. ⁷⁰²

Moreover, the Pew Report on Religious Affiliation of U.S. Immigrants notes: "This includes growing shares of Muslims (5% in 1992, 10% in 2012) and Hindus (3% in 1992, 7% in 2012). The share of Buddhists, however, is slightly smaller (7% in 1992, 6% in 2012), while the portion of legal immigrants who are religiously unaffiliated (atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular) had remained relatively stable, at about 14% per year." ⁷⁰³

Diverse religious groups do factor primarily in public perception, given the World Trade attacks on September 11, 2011, and this was an "awakening" to the new religious America demanding America "face a world of understanding and relationships from which there is no retreat." God is very much alive among immigrant groups in America, and the presence and vibrancy of religiously diverse groups in America debunk the secularization paradigm, assuming that as a society becomes more modern and complex, it becomes more secularized. ⁷⁰⁴

It was the Pluralism Project reported that over the past three decades, "1701 Muslim mosques and Islamic centers, 741 Hindu temples and centers, 261 Sikh gurdwaras and centers, 109 Baha'i, 72 Jain temples and centers, 43 Taoist centers, and 40 Zoroastrian temples and centers have been founded." It is believed that the American Industrial Revolution, which concentrated on cities offering opportunities, played a significant role in developing America as a multifaith society. ⁷⁰⁵

The reality of the city as the frontier of religious diversity is changing, and it is no longer a significant city. The only spaces religiously diverse Americans turn into places. However, suburban areas "are fast becoming settlement areas for immigrant populations." "And so, the multifaith frontier is shifting in the twenty-first century to middle America, adding further to the complex dynamic of

⁷⁰² Brecht, 244.

⁷⁰³ Brecht, 244.

⁷⁰⁴ Brecht, 246.

⁷⁰⁵ Brecht, 246.

encounter, engagement, and exchange among diverse religious groups.⁷⁰⁶

Regarding interfaith encounters in America, research confirms that about half of the American population supports religious diversity and that a large portion of Americans say other religious traditions contain some truth about God and are meaningful ways of knowing God, and this is the main reason for interfaith encounters because tolerance for religious diversity is widely expressed by the American population goes on "without having to carry the burden of genuine interreligious understanding or interaction." Americans cannot understand and use the basic building blocks of religious traditions-their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, metaphors, and narratives if they do not actively pursue such.⁷⁰⁷

Because Americans might be reluctant, hesitant, or not forced by cultural pressures to learn deeply about religious traditions, communities, and practices of the world, this interfaith encounter would help us foster the bridge between faith traditions-examining the similarities and differences. Those who practice multiple religions are spreading because a Public Religion Research Institute found in a 2013 study that 16 percent of Americans report that they practice or follow teachings from more than one religion. Approximately 30 percent of Americans report exploring other religious traditions' teachings and practices. This finding supports interfaith encounters to learn why mixing faith traditions works for some people.⁷⁰⁸

There is a sentiment in America that 38 percent of Americans want to make it more difficult for Muslims to settle in the US, 23 percent of Americans want it to be illegal for Muslims to meet, and approximately 20 percent of Americans want it to be illegal for Hindus or Buddhists to hold meetings among themselves. These are all the reasons for us to talk among ourselves to move beyond this sentiment.⁷⁰⁹

⁷⁰⁶ Brecht, 247.

⁷⁰⁷ Brecht, 249.

⁷⁰⁸ Brecht, 250.

⁷⁰⁹ Brecht, 250.

Digital technologies are proliferating, providing multiple ways Americans can explore and engage diversity, expanding the potential modes of doing religion online to a seemingly infinite degree. Religion "online" heightens the sense of a religious marketplace and maximizes one's freedom to explore. The internet creates a "new spiritual space" where people can explore religious ideas, people, and traditions. What the internet does dramatically facilitates the American tendency to "craft one's spirituality" by shopping around the religious marketplace as it is presented online.⁷¹⁰

When people explore religions online, they do not leave their identities behind but rather bring them to bear on what they see, experience, and sample online. "Interreligious exploration in virtual space does not force sustained, emotional interaction like religious explorations in real space do."⁷¹¹

Because empirical accounts demonstrate that religious diversity is, has been, and will likely always be a part of America because of its frontier legacy. Furthermore, we ought to dialogue with others to help all people regardless of faith traditions if we believe all people originated from God. In our case, the God of the scriptures whom the Bible declares. In the 21st century and beyond, we have a multifaith society in which religiously diverse people actively seek to engage with one another, perform acts of mutual hospitality, and build peaceable communities - a distinctively interfaith society.⁷¹²

D. Conclusion

ReThinking Church in the 21st Century is a group of scholars, pastors, and national Christian leaders who discuss the challenges faced by the church in 2021. The focus is on the church's identity, discipleship formation, power abuses, divisions, relationships within and between cultures, ethnicities, genders, religions, and theological education. The leaders believe that the church must affirm its diversities while claiming to live in relationship to one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. They also emphasize the importance of authentic Christian practice and the need to engage young Christians and non-Christians from all backgrounds and identities.

⁷¹⁰ Brecht, 259.

⁷¹¹ Brecht, 259.

⁷¹² Brecht, 262.

The leaders believe that the church has lost its moral authority and credibility for public witness due to hypocrisy, Trumpism, and theocratic ambitions. They believe that the church needs to examine its complicity and propagation of worship of empire, racism, and capitalism. They also believe that the church has lost its orientation to King Jesus and its ability to interpret and help us understand the times we live in today.

To address these issues, they propose creating a curriculum/liturgy for essential conversations around Christian identity, communion, and public square issues. Topic-oriented resources targeting three prioritized topics should be created, primarily for pastors, small groups, church leaders, or congregations and networks. Discipline and formation programs should be created for adults to start again as disciples, and pastor conversation groups should be developed for diverse pastors to meet monthly for sustained conversation.

Seminars held in urban centers should serve as examples of the crisis and provide pastoral support and encouragement. Finally, broader associations and partnerships with pastors, networks, congregations, denominations, and organizations should be discerned and nurtured.

Fuller Theological Seminary is rethinking the church for the 21st century, focusing on issues such as racism, classism, ableism, creation care, truth-telling, accountability, love for God and neighbors, and preaching and teaching the Bible. They believe that the church is falling short of the good news of God's love and justice in Jesus Christ, with failures in racism, classism, ableism, creation care, truth-telling, accountability, love for God and neighbors, and preaching and teaching the Bible.

The church's early focus on the body from the soul and the social gospel has led to a division between the body and the soul, weakening its witness. The church must embrace all corners across ethno-racial, gender, and class divisions, recognizing the authority and power of the Holy Spirit coming through people who had been on the margins.

The church also falls short in its myopic vision of "church," which limits the gospel to

personalized and ecclesiastical dynamics. It also fails to show the gospel's social dimensions, such as Christ redeeming everything and caring for all destitute and vulnerable individuals.

To embody the intense wine of the gospel in this historic moment, the church needs to find the right wineskins to embody the gospel. Young Latinx (millennials and Gen Z) want churches to be community centers where people can be authentic selves, dialogue about controversial questions, care for each other's needs, and stand for justice for the poor and marginalized.

The church faces challenges in the 21st century, including polarization, a generation that claims to be spiritual but is either uninterested in Christianity or unwilling to join a local church, and the challenge of adapting to a social framework inconsistent with its somewhat anachronistic approaches. More Christians of color return to their neighborhoods and communities to address this, raising local leaders and caring for their communities.

The church must innovate, utilize technology, create additional income streams, and collaborate to serve the present and future generations. Innovative approaches include e-church membership, Zoom small groups, and online church membership orientations. Churches are also learning and embracing the power of partnerships.

The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship has brought together traditioned innovators to develop innovations such as more accessible websites, pastorally oriented sermons, scripturally robust songs, candid conversations about socioeconomic class and race, more robust accountability structures for leaders, new learning about cultural intelligence, renewed disciplines of Sabbath-shaped retreats, deeper engagement with historical practices, and new approaches to hospitality and generosity in giving.

The church of the twenty-first century will likely remain vibrant as long as it can provide people with a strong sense of community. The congregation remains at the heart of the church and, in turn, Christianity. High-impact Black churches actively encourage their people to unite various ministry

activity strands for great cohesion and influence. The African American Baptist Church will be vibrant for years by embracing these methods.

The potential impact of the African American community on the church is significant, as Dr. Eddie Glaude, a professor at Princeton University, declared the Black church dead in 2010. He attributed this to the differentiation within the African American community, where African Americans compete with White churches for members. The church has lost its prophetic voice and is not speaking out on social issues or being a moral conscience.

To have an impact on the African American community, the church must reframe and reclaim its mission to be the bride of Christ in the 21st century. There is no way to be an African American church; churches are diverse in worship styles, mission priorities, and ministry strengths. Some prophetic or social activists' churches excel in outreach, feeding programs, and addressing social issues in their communities.

The church should reflect Jesus as the body of Christ, reflecting his teachings and preaching in a relevant manner. Jesus met people where they were, met their needs, and met them where they were. The church must make a real difference in the lives of the congregation and those who are not members, making a difference in the streets, homes, and various places.

Dr. Gayraud Wilmore emphasizes the importance of a live African American church, which values the heritage of African American spirituality and is connected to the spirit of Africa. The church should celebrate the Holy Spirit's manifestation in Black churches, holding onto and celebrating its unique character. It should resist socialization and cultural assimilation and love its people and cultural heritage without opposition. A healthy Black or African American personality is characterized by a strong awareness of and identification with African cultural heritage, motivation to ensure collective survival, and active resistance against racism.

The church must also teach African Americans to love themselves and their God, addressing the

negative images and messages they receive in the larger culture. The church should work for its members' and community's interests and concerns, addressing discrimination and class status issues.

Historically, the Christian church has been a mainstay of community life in Western society, but today's society seems to be at a loss for the community. The question confronting the church in the 21st century is whether it can still be a vital community source or is too beginning to succumb to impersonal forces that fragment society.

The sustaining community of the church can be understood in several ways, including the theological meaning of *koinonia*, the relationship between church and community, and the ethical meaning of the fellowship of believers serving one another within its group and the broader community.

The First Amendment of the American Constitution established legal conditions for religiously diverse people to settle and flourish in America. However, the variety and complexity of faith traditions in the twenty-first century will provoke the legal system and American interpretation of it in new ways. America is a "marketplace" of world religions, and the social dynamics of encounter and experimentation occur among religiously diverse people. Religious diversity in America has always been an immigrant tale, beginning with the immigration of Christians to the New World. In 2012, Christians made up 61% of immigrants, a drop of 7% from 1992. The number of religious minorities has risen, with 25% of immigrants being religious minorities. The presence and vibrancy of religiously diverse groups in America debunk the secularization paradigm, assuming that as a society becomes more modern and complex, it becomes more secularized. The Pluralism Project reported that over the past three decades, 1701 Muslim mosques and Islamic centers, 741 Hindu temples and centers, 261 Sikh gurdwaras, 109 Baha'i, 72 Jain temples and centers, 43 Taoist centers, and 40 Zoroastrian temples and centers have been founded.

Research shows that about half of the American population supports religious diversity, and

many believe other religious traditions contain truth about God. This tolerance allows genuine interreligious understanding and interaction, fostering bridges between faith traditions. Interfaith encounters can help Americans understand and use the basic building blocks of religious traditions. A 2013 study found that 16% of Americans practice or follow teachings from more than one religion, and 30% explore other religious traditions' teachings and practices. Digital technologies are expanding the ways of doing religion online, allowing people to explore religious ideas, people, and traditions. Interreligious exploration in virtual space does not force sustained, emotional interaction like in real space. Religious diversity is a part of America's frontier legacy, and dialogue with others is essential to help all people, regardless of faith traditions. In the 21st century, a multifaith society is expected, where religiously diverse people actively seek to engage, perform acts of mutual hospitality, and build peaceable communities.

XII. Conclusion

A. Summary of Key Findings

The Doctoral Dissertation Questionnaire was posted on social media for friends of the doctoral student, first to sign the Informed Consent Form, sending to the student before completing the commencing with answering the following questions. The first question asked: “How familiar are you with the history and tradition of African American Baptist churches?” Several people said they were aware of the church’s history. Some were not familiar with most of the history of the church.

The second question asked: “How often do you attend religious services at an African American Baptist church or any other church?” Most respondents indicated that they regularly attend an African American Baptist Church. One other respondent indicated they were Caucasian and they attend an African American Baptist Church. Some indicated they attended occasionally.

The third question asked: “How important is religion in your life, and how does it influence your personal and social values?” Most respondents indicated that religion profoundly influences their

personal and social values and is central to their decision-making, although they are not always successful. Some see religion as very important in their lives; whatever they do is related to their religious beliefs. For some of the respondents, it keeps them strong in the Lord. For some, their faith influences everything they do, including how they vote.

The fourth question asked: “How do you express your spirituality, and what practices or activities do you engage in to enhance your spiritual well-being?” Many respondents attend multiple Bible Studies to hear different perspectives and discussions on the scriptures. Some respondents said they attend worship services and teach Christian classes, pray often, attend Christian Conferences, and attend Christian events and activities. Some believe that expressing their spirituality, practicing such, and participating in activities engage their spiritual well-being when helping others. Some are not afraid to express their faith through daily communication with anyone. Moreover, they work hard to include prayer and meditation in everyday life.

The fifth question asked: “What challenges or opportunities do African American Baptist churches face in the 21st century and beyond?” Some of the respondent's answers were not unique to African American Baptist churches, but false teachings are high on the list. They believe too many times that what comes from the pulpit appears to be another un-biblical agenda. Some respondents believe in the treatment of females in ministry, particularly in not accepting women as pastors and not giving them equal opportunities to lead in ministries. Some respondents believe the church needs to keep its faith. Some of the respondents believe the biggest challenge facing the African American Baptist churches is not practicing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our churches are becoming Democrats instead of Christians. Our churches are failing to operate as God would have us to operate. We are operating with a focus on monetary gain and not spiritual gain. We frequently hold on to tithes so tightly that we forget why we were formed in the first place. Respondence believes the African American Baptist church has relinquished its societal leadership role.

The sixth question asked: “What are some of the distinctive features or strengths of African American Baptist churches that appeal to you or make you proud?” Some respondents responded that pastors are extremely powerful and inspire us to do better. Some respondents believe the teachings are excellent. Some respondents believe the church has led the country towards doing better for everyone, and its music has touched the world. Some respondents believe our form of worship and being autonomous is distinctive. The church can become a member of a particular convention, and we do not have to dance to the beat of their drum. Moreover, we can conduct our services according to the needs of our congregants.

The seventh question asked: “What are some of the areas or aspects of African American Baptist churches that you think need improvement or change?” Some respondents said the church needs better organization and leadership beyond a single church. They believe oversight would help the church regarding false teachings and make our leaders more accountable. Some respondents said the church needs to accept females, especially in pastoring. Some responded that the leadership could be improved but did not specify precisely.

Moreover, some respondents said that change and improvement are always necessary. The church needs to become relevant and not compromise the gospel, welcome everyone, and prepare for the harvesting of souls, all souls.

The eighth question asked: “How do you think African American Baptist churches can better reach out to and engage with millennials and younger generations?” Many respondents believe the church needs to be relevant to where they are situated. Our churches should have weekly activities, inviting the community to participate. They believe that too many churches are open only on Sundays. We need to stop helicopter pastors who swoop in on Sunday, and we will not see them for a week. The church needs to develop new leaders and create opportunities for them to shine. Some respondents believe we must meet them where they are and show them Christian values of grace, dignity,

compassion, support, and love. They believe that fire and brimstone will not make it happen. Our churches need to engage each other.

Moreover, the older generation needs to be transparent. We all need to realize that we have not always been saved. We must let the younger generation know we need our young people, who need us too. The older generation must be more tolerant of the younger generation and vice versa.

The ninth question asked: “How do you view the relationship between African American Baptist churches and other Christian denominations or faith traditions?” One respondent said they grew up in First Baptist of Alexandria, and Alfred Street Baptist Church partnered with them. Alfred Street is a historically African American Baptist church founded in 1803, and First Baptist of Alexandria is a predominately White church. Moreover, these two congregations have combined themselves in ministry to the communities. Some respondents believe the church has a long way to go. The church is becoming more tolerant of other denominations. Some respondents believe collaboration brings about learning and stepping outside our tradition to learn from other faith traditions.

The tenth question asked: “How do you balance your cultural and religious identity as an African American Baptist with your civic and national identity as an American?” Many respondents said they are Christian first and foremost. A particular respondent said they were raised Southern Baptist in a predominantly White mega church but working with a non-profit, experiencing more African American Baptist church leaders working with disenfranchisement and impoverished people, and seeing the difference in the level of compassion from the pulpits of African American Baptist pastors; it drew this respondent to being more consistent and meaningful work and prioritizing service in Jesus’ holy name. Some respondents believe their participation in religious, civic, and national activities always expresses their religious and Christian beliefs wherever they are and who they are around. They always stand on the word of God, and they are not ashamed to let the world know. Some respondents said they would reach out to other organizations. Some respondents believe that America

is a Christian nation built on Christian values. They believe that living life through the prism of Christianity does not require balance in everything else. That being Black is a part of who we are and not the only part of our identity.

B. Implications for African American Baptist Churches

The African American Baptist Church has been a significant part of the African American community, serving as a place of worship and cultural identity. These churches have played a crucial role in shaping the religious and socio-political landscape of the United States. However, they now face the challenge of adapting to a rapidly changing world.

The distinctive worship practices, music, preaching, and close-knit congregations have been essential to the identity of African American Baptist churches. However, they must now confront the challenges of shifting demographics, generational differences, technology, and changing social norms.

To address these challenges, this study titled "Embracing the Distinctives of Traditional African American Baptist Churches in the 21st Century and Beyond" urges these churches to return to their liberation theology roots and address current social justice concerns. It provides insights on how the church can remain relevant and empower its communities in the modern era.

It is believed that many persons in our congregations do not know the history of the African American Baptist Church, and we need to take the time to teach such, certainly not on Sunday morning, but certainly during the week or on a Saturday because it is imperative we know our history. Moreover, it would help us embrace our ancestors more, given what they went through in history.

The first Baptist movement in England began in 1609 and was followed by the American Baptist movement in the colonies. The Philadelphia Baptist Association was established in 1707, which led to the division of Baptists into two groups known as "New Light" and "Old Light." The first known Black churches in America were the African Baptist or "Bluestone" Church in Mecklenburg, Virginia 1758, and the Silver Bluff Baptist Church in South Carolina. Enslaved people worshipped secretly on

plantations but were not allowed to form formal Black associations. Christianity in the 19th century in the American South supported and protected slavery, with many Africans and their descendants being enslaved because of their race or Christian beliefs.

Africans had a different understanding of the spiritual world, which was not in line with the European tradition of Christianity that the planters followed. The emergence of racial identities in the church in America only provided a limited understanding of human identity, as those who prioritize race as the primary category fall into false ideas about what it means to be human. The roots of African American Christianity can be traced back to the Atlantic world, with Black Christians existing in Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean long before people of color were converted in large.

Many would attend church more often if they had a better understanding of its importance and impact on their lives. The church is a community where God and its members unite to fellowship.

Decisions about the church's life and mission are made by seeking the guidance of Jesus Christ through prayer and worship. Baptist churches are free from strict creeds and practices, allowing individuals to have a personal relationship with God.

The origins of Black religious independence can be traced back to the forming of separate Black congregations. African American worship is a response of praise and adoration to God, which has evolved to incorporate various forms of expression. Historically, the Black church has played a crucial role in providing spiritual support and empowerment to African Americans. Music and hymnology are essential to worship, and congregational participation should be encouraged. Biblical preaching is central to the Black church, with the Bible serving as a source of language and imagery. African American preachers often use rhetorical flair and poetic language to engage their audience. The Black church has promoted moral and social reforms, and prophetic preaching is seen to challenge the status quo and inspire change. The structure of African American Baptist churches includes a pastor and deacons who assist with the church's affairs.

The importance of the Black church in our religious and social lives was highlighted in this paper. The Black community shaped Christianity to reflect their own experiences, and the symbols and values of Christianity played a role in shaping the image of the slave community. After emancipation, Black churches became autonomous institutions that aimed to address racial and economic oppression and provide resources to Black families. Black ministers held multiple roles; many were elected to political offices during Reconstruction.

Black liberation theology emerged as a way for Blacks to break free from oppression and stop victimizing each other. It sees Jesus as a liberator and believes God stands with the oppressed. Black theology should be applied locally within the church to empower its members.

Black theology promotes self-respect and self-esteem in the face of social and political condescension and oppression. The Black church has always fought for justice and against oppressors through the gospel and the pursuit of justice. The separation of body and soul is seen as a distortion of the quest to reconcile the divinity and humanity of Christ.

In Black spirituals, heaven is used as coded language to affirm the transcendence in Black theology. Despite the critical role of Black women ministers, sexism has historically excluded Black women from the church.

Churches have played a crucial role in organizing boycotts and mobilizing collective action against segregation and oppression. They use religious rituals as tools for local organizing and activism among African Americans, legitimizing political goals and providing resources.

The Black church has countered civil rights activism and the rise of Black consciousness with conservative counter-framing activity. It has always had a mandate for social activism, providing speakers with influential authors, and cooperating with the military in liberation efforts. The Black church has also been involved in slave rebellions.

During colonial and revolutionary periods, the framework for the Black church was established,

and the antebellum period demonstrated the existence of Blacks and the Black church. Black religious figures became prominent activists and intellectuals, interpreting and debating issues affecting African diaspora people.

Our spirituality is of utmost importance as people of God, and it should be evident in our lives. In the African American Baptist Church, we must continue to nurture our spirituality, as it is an integral part of our identity as African descendants. We believe there is no separation between the sacred and the secular, and the energy of African spirituality brings unity to our lives. Spirituality is more significant than any religious system; it is a holistic process that drives us to live humanely. It values life above all else and encourages us to express ourselves authentically. Spirituality brings together all aspects of our being and fosters harmonious relationships within our community.

Spirituality can be both active and passive. The active aspect involves improving living conditions, which is sociopolitical action. The passive aspect involves transforming personal emotions to endure difficult circumstances, often through meditation or inward reflection. Understanding that active and passive expressions are valid forms of spirituality is essential. When spirituality is seen as a sociopolitical action, it is about actively working to bring God's justice, and this can manifest in various ways, such as righteous indignation, peaceful marches, and rallies.

From an African American perspective, our spirituality seeks to connect and maintain a connection with all aspects of life. The charismatic stirring within our souls motivates and sustains our commitment to entirely holy lives. Being spiritual does not mean being disconnected from the world; instead, it means fully engaging in relationships and life. Our spirituality gives us a public witness for justice and liberation and a personal relationship with the Divine. It is the active integration of our humanity, allowing us to function as whole human beings. Through spirituality, we strive to be in communion with God, ourselves, and others.

The African American Baptist Church faces various challenges, including historical tensions,

wealth, and cultural pride being co-opted by materialistic culture, political passivity, and the color line. Responders of a doctoral dissertation questionnaire have mentioned these challenges below. In the 21st century, technology has become a critical variable in quality of life, creating inequalities and a technical divide. The church must reclaim its prophetic voice and recognize that no oppression is consistent with God's will. A consistent theology of liberation is essential for Black millennials, who desire a commitment to liberation for themselves and others. The church must use technology to protect human rights, equality, and justice. It should utilize strategic technology planning and involve a Technology Systems Committee. Engaging younger generations, such as millennials, is crucial for the church's survival and relevance. The church must address dating, relationships, and sexuality issues and create a safe space for millennials. It should empower leaders to shepherd small congregational groups and facilitate explorative conversations. Millennials seek relevant ministries that address social justice issues and challenge immoral policies and practices. The church should communicate through various mediums and involve young people in promoting peace, equality, and anti-establishment. Inclusivity and diversity are important aspects of spirituality, and the church should consider the social justice issue of homosexuality. The church should focus on community outreach and service grounded in the word of God. It should be missional, revelational, reformational, relatable, and have a kingdom-coming and eschatological theology.

The African American Baptist Church has unique strengths and features that set it apart. All highlighted below are distinctive, which the church has historically addressed and should continue well into the centuries. Racism is a complex issue that affects Black Americans who have been raised in a pro-White culture. The Mediterranean world was racially diverse, with people from different backgrounds. The debate over the race of specific historical figures stems from a misunderstanding of the present-day European mindset. The book of Genesis contains diverse African lore.

The Black church should actively oppose racism and White supremacy. It should speak out

against racist individuals and challenge the belief that only White men are made in the image of God. The African American Baptist Church needs to acknowledge the historical impact of race on Black Americans and work towards creating a safe and productive life for them. Racism prevents Black people from reaching their full potential.

To move forward, the African American Baptist Church must continue to address racism and promote activism within the church. It should resist individualistic cultural frameworks and focus on systemic and structural dimensions of theology and religious commitments. The church should collaborate with other faith traditions and work towards social change. It should engage with local politicians and advocate for social justice, inclusion, and equity.

Contemporary religion has evolved, and the study of religion should consider its cultural content and form. Religion plays a significant role in individual identity and personal integration. Religious symbols and discourse facilitate communication and reinforce a sense of connectivity. The church should recognize the importance of spirituality and religion in mental health and well-being, especially for African Americans who face racism.

The Black church has a rich history and has been a source of support and change for African Americans. It has faced challenges in the 21st century, such as health issues and high unemployment rates. The Black church operates as a sovereign society where African Americans can express their authentic selves. Theological differences exist within the Black church, and counselors should understand the historical role and relevance of the church in African American communities.

Intellectual and social factors have influenced the Black church, and different denominations have contributed to its development. Episcopalians and Presbyterians played a role in early Black reform through uplift ideology. Methodism emerged as a separate Black religious movement, emphasizing individual believers and formal training. Baptists have a rich history of faith, resilience, and community.

The African American Baptist Church must adapt to societal changes and navigate social justice issues while maintaining unity. It should embrace inclusivity, encourage active participation, and involve members in shaping worship styles and missions. Consensus-building and spiritual formation are crucial for the church's betterment.

The African American Baptist Church should continue to evolve by incorporating womanist theology, which challenges the church's patriarchal structure and promotes liberation for all people. The church should also reexamine its mission and ethical implications, learning from womanism and focusing on its liberationist mission. The content of sermons is essential in reflecting Black consciousness and serves various purposes, such as glorifying God, education, and political advice. The Black liberation theology movement has been significant in legitimizing the study of Black churches and promoting progressive dialogue within the community. The African American Baptist Church It is crucial for the church to collaborate with other faith traditions to prioritize serving the people and blessing God, and this involves partnering with community faith-based organizations that aim to improve the lives of others by bringing different groups together under a joint cultural movement. Creating meaningful and respectful narratives of diverse theological and cultural backgrounds is essential when working with other faith traditions. This commitment to embracing two cultural narratives is vital when joining forces with other faith traditions, as it allows organized faith communities to bring about social change and emphasizes the importance of activism in the history of fighting for social justice and spiritual empowerment.

If we reflect on how our ancestors saw their cultural identity shaped by their religious beliefs, perhaps more of us will embrace both aspects in the future, considering what our ancestors endured. To understand our ancestors' perception of Jesus Christ, despite the distorted interpretation by enslavers, they had a three-fold understanding of salvation. They believed that salvation could only be found in Jesus Christ. They saw salvation as rooted in the ancient wisdom, knowledge, customs, and way of life

passed down by their ancestors, through which they embraced Jesus Christ as one of their own. This ancestral connection was vital in defining their identity as a people, civilization, and culture. They also saw salvation in the context of their current socio-cultural and economic challenges and the global crisis they have been struggling against since modern times. Lastly, they viewed Jesus Christ as all religious ideals and spiritual powers, placing Christianity on equal footing with Islam and African traditional religions.

During the 1960s, scholars like sociologist C. Eric Lincoln argued that African American Christianity transformed the Negro Church into the Black church. This transformation was a response to the discrimination and segregation that defined the social context of African American Christianity before 1967. According to E. Franklin Frazier, African American Christianity under segregation provided a space where African Americans could adapt to their subordinate status as Negroes. The Negro Church, along with a few other institutions, served as avenues for blacks to achieve social status and gain respectability. The central aspect of this achievement was the production of a specific kind of culture that shaped Negro identity. This cultural production was influenced by elite Western culture, which devalued African American folk culture and celebrated European and Euro-American cultural expressions. The Negro Church became a place where the dominant ideology of African American.

C. Call to Action

This dissertation was exhaustive, looking at many areas of the African American Baptist Church in the 21st Century and beyond, focusing on the distinctiveness of the church. As mentioned in this paper, the church has a rich history that can be built on in the 21st century and beyond. Many of our African American Baptist Churches are shrinking while some are growing, which we call mega-churches, congregations with a membership of approximately two thousand on the role. This paper would help any Baptist church wanting to embrace academia and bridge the church to know how best to do ministry now and into the future.

D. Conclusion

What the respondents wrote and the scholarship annotated, it would behoove the African American Church to embrace some if not all the findings in this paper. There ought to be some improvement in any entity, and the church is no different. Thank those who responded to the doctoral dissertation questionnaire, the reader Professor Leighton Flowers of the Trinity College of the Bible and Theological Seminary, for many suggestions. Thank the scholar's wife for the time devoted to such intense scholarship.

Appendices

A. Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Rev. Anthony Edward Owens is pursuing a Doctor of Ministry at the Trinity College of the Bible and Theological Seminary.

The procedure used in his research is to fill out an online questionnaire in this social media post.

The participants will be expected to answer all questions within a week or less to the best of their knowledge.

There are no possible risks, discomforts, or benefits from participating in this study.

Your confidentiality will not appear in the final study.

If you want the researcher (Rev. Anthony E. Owens) to answer any further questions, email him at anthonyowens1212@gmail.com.

It is believed that this research should not cause any physical, psychological, social, or financial harm to your participation. If you believe the opposite, please contact the researcher using the email provided before answering any questions.

Please save this document, sign it, and send it to the email above.

Your participation in this research is strictly voluntary, and there will be no penalty for withdrawal.

Thank you for saving this document, signing it, forwarding it to me, and answering the questionnaire. God bless you and thank you again.

Participate Signature

B. Doctoral Dissertation Questionnaire

Doctoral Dissertation Questionnaire

B *I* U  

This form gathers online answers to questions in fulfillment of a doctorate in ministry.

Email *

Valid email

This form is collecting emails. [Change settings](#)

How familiar are you with the history and traditions of African American Baptist churches? *

Long answer text

How often do you attend religious services at an African American Baptist church or any other church? *

Long answer text

How important is religion in your life, and how does it influence your personal and social values? *

Long answer text

How do you express your spirituality, and what practices or activities do you engage in to enhance your spiritual wellbeing? *

Long answer text



What are some of the challenges or opportunities that African American Baptist churches face in the 21st century and beyond? *

Long answer text

What are some of the distinctive features or strengths of African American Baptist churches that appeal to you or make you proud? *

Long answer text

What are some of the areas or aspects of African American Baptist churches that you think need improvement or change? *

Long answer text

How do you think African American Baptist churches can better reach out to and engage with millennials and younger generations?

Long answer text

How do you view the relationship between African American Baptist churches and other Christian denominations or faith traditions?

*

Long answer text

How do you balance your cultural and religious identity as an African American Baptist with your civic and national identity as an American?

Long answer text

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