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950 North Main Street, 2nd Floor
Findlay, OH 45840

Mailing Address:
PO Box 479
Findlay, OH 45839

419-434-4200

An Exploration of the Relationship Between the Black Church and Its Community:

Mission, Ministry, and Message

A Project Report

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Doctor of Ministry

By

Spencer Ellis Hardaway

Winebrenner Theological Seminary

Findlay, Ohio

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Abstract

Historically, the Black Church has been a cornerstone institution, empowering Black Americans to endure and overcome racism, crises, grief, and trauma. It served as the central authority and the primary voice of advocacy for the Black community. However, in recent years, the Black Church has seen a decline in its role and influence within the community.

The spirituality of Black Americans has been forged, developed, and shaped by the influence of extended families, a commitment to social justice, prophetic preaching, spirited worship services, and a profound vision of eternal life beyond earthly existence.

This study focuses on the factors contributing to the decline in the prominence of the Black Church within the Black community. Its primary purpose is to examine the perspectives of three key groups: individuals who actively attend church, those who have recently joined, and those who have walked away due to disillusionment with the church's perceived neglect in addressing critical issues within the Black community.

The research utilizes a qualitative methodology, incorporating a survey focused on three key areas of the church: Mission, Ministry, and Message. Data collection involved recorded interviews with seventeen participants, providing rich insights for analysis and interpretation.

The results of this study reveal several factors contributing to the decline in the prominence of the Black Church within the Black community. Three significant issues include the loss of a family-centered atmosphere and the extended family dynamic that once permeated the community, the neglect of critical social issues affecting the Black community, and the growing tension between prophetic preaching and prosperity preaching.

Based on these findings, this research provides recommendations to address these challenges and work toward revitalizing both the Black Church and the Black community.

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Chapter One:

Introduction to the Problem

The Black Church once stood as the most authoritative voice within the Black community. Since its inception during slavery, it has been the bedrock of Black religious, political, economic, and social life for centuries.

However, over the last two decades, the Black Church has experienced a decline in its authoritative influence. The exact moment when this decline began is a matter of debate. Nonetheless, the prevalent discussions about the Black Church today affirm its diminished authority. Raphael Warnock claims, “the prevalence of literature from the turn of the century to the present marks a perpetual decline of the ‘Black Church’.”¹

Statement of the Problem

While the Black Church still holds relevance within the Black community, there is a palpable sense that it has relinquished its authoritative voice.

Voices lamenting the decline of the Black Church point to a significant drop in attendance and the fading of the once vibrant family atmosphere that permeated both the church and the community. The Black Church has undergone a cultural shift, moving away from its traditional role of addressing social and racial issues on behalf of the community.

This change has led some to claim that the message of the Black Church has fundamentally shifted. “Throughout the social changes since the 1970’s and 1980s that Black

¹ Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety & Public Witness* (New York, NY: New York University Press), 78.

Americans have undergone the Black Church has minimized prophetic preaching to align with a culture that emphasizes the individual to the exclusion of the community.”²

Voices from outside the Black Church believe Black leadership within the church has abandoned the community in favor of the message of prosperity and ceased having a prophetic voice.³

Young Black Christians are disillusioned with the Black Church due to its lack of social activism, outdated liturgical practices, and insufficient support for gender and social issues. Young adults view the Black Church as being complicit in maintaining and espousing a capitalist gospel that conflicts with the values espoused by the Black Lives Matter Movement.⁴ Danielle Buhuro’s observations highlight a significant concern for the Black Church’s gradual loss of its identity and defined mission.

Another criticism voiced is that the Black Church once sought to create and rebuild families, but now the rise of an extended family outlook is absent in the Black Community.

Purpose Statement

This research aims to delve into the evolving dynamics within the Black Church and the Black community, pinpointing the factors that have led to this perceptible shift in the community’s perception of the Black Church and/or the demise of the Black community.

² David Everett, *The Future Horizon for a Prophetic Tradition: A Missiological, Hermeneutical, and Leadership Approach to Education and Black Church Civic Engagement* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick), xiv.

³ Anthony J. Davis, *Why Black Men Don’t Like Church: The Good Men Project*, September 19, 2014, <https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/why-brothers-dont-like-church-kerj/>.

⁴ Danielle J. Buhuro, *Spiritual Care in an Age of #BlackLivesMatter: Examining the Spiritual and Prophetic Needs of African Americans in a Violent America* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 28.

This research examines how the Black Church has diminished in its role as an authoritative voice within the Black community. “The single greatest threat to the historical legacy and core values of contemporary Black Church leadership is their reluctance to walk in the prophetic tradition of critiquing and challenging the society in which they live.”⁵

Through the criticism expressed regarding the decline of the Black Church, this project will explore the changes occurring within the Black community and shed light on how these shifts have contributed to the waning authority of the Black Church. Through interviews, the study explores the Church’s mission to build and strengthen families, its outreach efforts to address social issues and racism, and the messages it conveys to both its congregation and the wider community.

Significance

This study has the potential to spark meaningful discussions about the factors that have contributed to the decline of the Church’s authority and centrality within the Black community. It seeks to explore and provide insights into the pressing question: Why has the Church lost its effectiveness in this vital role?

The Black Church and African American families are facing a critical crisis. The faith, hope, and love that once empowered our forefathers to demonstrate resilience amidst horrific conditions, tumultuous circumstances, and dehumanizing oppression are rapidly diminishing. Today, many African Americans find themselves grappling with despair and a pervasive sense of helplessness brought on by the challenging conditions of modern life.

⁵ David L. Everett, *The Future Horizon for a Prophetic Tradition*, 30.

The Church must refocus on understanding its true meaning, mission, and message. For generations, the Church and the Christian faith of our ancestors provided the resilience needed to confront and endure crisis, grief, and trauma.

This research aims to inspire today's Black community to align their faith in a similar way, fostering a renewed sense of purpose and strength. By cultivating such faith, Black Americans can draw upon the enduring legacy of their ancestors to face the crises, grief, and trauma of the 21st century with an unwavering, overcoming spirit.

Research Methodology

A qualitative approach was selected as it is the most suitable design for collecting and analyzing data to understand the factors contributing to the decline in attendance and the shift in community significance. The researcher employed open-ended questions, observations, and document analysis to gather comprehensive insights.

Seventeen individuals were interviewed, comprising twelve participants from three historic churches, four from each—and five individuals from the unchurched community.

A standardized questionnaire was used, and the collected data was systematically coded to analyze participants' responses. Each participant met individually with the researcher in a comfortable, relaxed setting at a prearranged time that suited their schedule.

The researcher developed a series of demographic questions for seventeen (17) participants, encompassing young adults (ages 18–25), adults (ages 30–50), and seniors (ages 65–75). To enrich data collection, person-to-person interviews were also conducted. All survey responses were systematically collected, recorded, transcribed, and coded for in-depth analysis.

The study strictly adhered to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines for the ethical collection and management of survey data and personal information.

Research Question

The central research question guiding this study is: *How has the Black Church lost its authoritative voice within the Black community?* This inquiry has given rise to a range of subsidiary questions, underscoring the multifaceted nature and enduring relevance of the topic. As Reverend Raphael Warnock observes... “If one accepts the prevalence of the claim in the literature from the turn of the century to the present, perpetual decline of the black church.”⁶ This researcher addressed one major question along with two subset questions.

1. How has the Black Church lost its prominence in the Black community?
 - a. How can the Black Church adapt and minister to the present generation’s experience of cultural, social, and technological changes?
 - b. What is the Black Church mission, message, and ministry?

In light of the persistent crises, grief, and trauma that Black Americans endure, it is crucial to empower the community to draw on the strength of their ancestral faith in order to confront today’s challenges. “Hardly any question is more vociferously argued in the black community, even among those who do not attend, than the meaning, message, and mission of the black church.”⁷

⁶ Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*, 75.

⁷ Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*, 1.

Assumptions and Bias

The study contains inherent assumptions and potential biases. The researcher assumes that the selected Black Churches and participants adequately represent Black Churches in Asheville, North Carolina. While Black Churches may differ in doctrine, their social teachings and emphasis on fostering a family-oriented atmosphere are generally consistent across congregations. Paris in his research discovered “no distinctive differences in social thought of respective Black Baptist and Methodist denominations.”⁸

Paris’ research findings establish a precedent for viewing African American churches as having strong similarities, regardless of denominational doctrines. The creation of a family-like environment has been an unwritten yet foundational principle in Black churches, transcending differences in denominational orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

This shared commitment is rooted in the collective experience of systemic racism and oppression endured by Black people. Consequently, the Black Church serves as a vital sanctuary—a place where individuals can find solace, belonging, and a sense of family. “The church became, for all intents and purposes, a reincarnation of the African extended-family and community.”⁹

Another key assumption revolves around the three central topics that shaped the research question: Ministry, Mission, and Message. The data collected and analyzed substantiated the relevance and validity of these topics, reinforcing their significance in the study.

⁸ Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), xi

⁹ Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 166.

The researcher acknowledges that as an African American Pastor, inherent bias and predispositions may influence his thinking and, consequently, the writing process. However, the investigation remains focused on objectively addressing the issue of the Black Church's decline. The research involves gathering perspectives and experiences from a diverse group, including long-standing members, individuals with recent involvement, and those who have left the church, disillusioned.

The ultimate goal is to interpret insights from these varied experiences to uncover potential solutions for revitalizing the Black Church. The researcher's conclusion is not a sermon but comprises "the decisive results of the study, moving the academic research from the classroom to the field."¹⁰

Project Outline

The study analyzed church attendance, mission, assessed the effectiveness of ministries and outreach initiatives, and dissected the evolving content of sermons and messages conveyed from the pulpit to understand how the Black Church has fallen from its traditional status. In order to do so it is necessary to understand how the Black Church came into existence and what it represented in the Black community.

Chapter Two: The Birth and Growth of the Black Church

This chapter provides a brief overview of the evolution of the Black Church alongside the Black community, highlighting its pivotal role in shaping lives and addressing community

¹⁰ Nancy Jean Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain Robertson, *Your Guide to Writing Quality Research Papers: For Students of Religion and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 2-78.

challenges. The Black Church emerged as one of the only communities Europeans could not control.¹¹

Chapter Two will trace the development of what E. Franklin Frazier called the “Invisible Institution,”¹² and explores how the Emancipation Proclamation led to the merging of the “Invisible Institution” with the Institutional Church, but will also delve into what W. E. B. DuBois called a “double conscience” dilemma:” ““We are of two minds.”” “The attempt of Black Americans to come to terms with the implications of their faith and the problem of being Black in white America.”¹³

This chapter explores challenges the Black Church faced in the post-civil rights era as it navigated the evolving landscape of a post-radical America. Amid these societal shifts, both the Black Church and the Black community wrestled with profound questions of identity and mission. Striving to balance internal solidarity with outward engagement, they confronted the ongoing journey of self-definition and purpose, shaping their role in a changing world. After reviewing the historic role of the Black Church and its decline, attention turns toward considering how the Black Church is perceived today.

Chapter Three: Collection and Analysis of Data

This chapter explores the researcher’s application of a qualitative model for this study. A total of seventeen individuals participated in interviews, including twelve members from three

¹¹ Michael Battle, *The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2006), 29.

¹² E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, with C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Frazier* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1974), 23.

¹³ Fraizer and Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America*, 107-108.

historic churches, four participants from each congregation—and five individuals from the unchurched community.

A standardized questionnaire guided the interviews, and the collected data was systematically coded for analysis. Each participant engaged in a one-on-one interview with the researcher in a relaxed setting at a mutually convenient, prearranged time.

Over the past fifty years, the mission of the Black Church has regressed significantly. Several decades removed from the post-civil rights era, the Black Church focus has shifted from its earlier role of building and supporting families. Analysis gathered from participants acknowledges changes have occurred in the Black Church. The participants saw changes within the Black Church in its mission, ministry, and message.

While not an exhaustive or definitive study of the Black Church, this research offers valuable insights into its diminishing influence within the Black community. The perspectives shared by the diverse group of participants interviewed support the broader perception of this decline.

Although the study is based on a relatively small sample size, the social views and perspectives expressed are reflective of trends observed across most Black Churches, regardless of denomination in this researcher's experience. Paris, in "*The Social Teaching of the Black Church*," discovered no distinctive differences in the social thought of various Black Churches, regardless of denomination.¹⁴

The next three chapters highlight shifts in the Black Church's mission, ministries, and message, as well as external factors that have exacerbated these changes.

¹⁴ Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, xi.

Chapter Four: A Shift Within the Black Church, and Changes Within the Community.

This chapter highlights how the unwritten mission of the Black Church has shifted over the past four decades. Historically, the mission of the Black Church was not formalized in written documents or charters. The manacles and subjugation of slavery forced upon Africans prevented them from forming families. Blacks were initially taken from their homes and denied any connection with their family or cultural identification and stripped of their social heritage.

The institution of slavery systematically deprived African Americans of the legal and social recognition necessary to establish marriages and stable family structures, thereby obstructing the formation of the foundational unit of social organization—the family.

" In response, the early 'Invisible Institution' which becomes the Black Church reached out comprehensively to support and uplift the Black community through social cohesion within the confines of the Black Church.

The unwritten mission of the Black Church was to gather the community together and create families. "The Black Church models a concept of sufferers reaching out to fellow sufferers (a concept very consistent with a theology of the cross). Single mothers, orphans, widows and widowers were all sought out to come as they were.¹⁵ The Black Church became the place in which everyone was considered part of the church family.

The significant comment from the participants is that there has been a shift within the Black Church in fostering an atmosphere of family. The Black Church is accused of not meeting the needs of families. Historically Black families around the country turned to the church as the source of hope and inspiration in times of crisis.

¹⁵ Wallace Charles Smith, *The Church in the Life of the Black Family* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press), 18

“Black people have always been mission minded. The mission of the Black Church was to reach out to those in need. Black Baptist churches are still called Missionary Baptist because of the powerful sense of reaching out historically to touch black families.”¹⁶

This chapter delves into the factors and events, both internal and external, that have influenced the Black Church’s mission to support and fortify families. The Black Church has historically achieved this mission through three key avenues: church attendance, fellowship, and active participation.

Chapter Five: Ministries: Inward and Outreach

This chapter probes into the Black Church’s dual mission, both its internal commitments and its outreach efforts—while examining the profound changes of its vision and purpose. It also explores the resulting shift in community perceptions, highlighting how these transformations have reshaped the Church’s role and influence.

Historically, the Black Church has been at the forefront of addressing critical social issues affecting the community. It has actively engaged in challenges such as education, evangelism, and liberation, striving to uplift and empower its members amidst these complex struggles. “No other area of black life received a higher priority from black churches than education.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Wallace Charles Smith, *The Church in the Life of the Black Family*, 18.

¹⁷ Eric C. Lincoln and H. Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), , 251.

As the primary social and cultural institution, the Black Church tradition is deeply embedded in Black culture in general so that the sphere of politics in the African American community cannot be easily separated.”¹⁸

Chapter Six: Messages From the Pulpit

Chapter Six investigates the powerful messages conveyed by the Black Church. Traditionally, the Church’s narrative has echoed themes of liberation, encompassing both spiritual freedom and tangible social advancement. This message radiated hope, rooted in the core belief that every individual is inherently valued as a child of God. The chapter analyzes the influence of both prophetic and prosperity preaching on this narrative. Additionally, this Chapter discusses topics such as vision, integrity, leadership development, hope, worship, salvation, and eschatology.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This research does not seek to criticize the Black Church but rather to offer a constructive analysis of its challenges. The changing dynamics within the Black Church mirror the broader shortcomings of social structures within the Black community. Both the Black Church and the Black community strive to define their own identity while grappling with the tension of double consciousness—existing within the world yet striving not to be wholly defined by it.

This chapter synthesizes insights gathered from participant contributions and literary analysis of the Black Church—its mission, ministry, and message—to draw meaningful conclusions. It also offers recommendations that pave the way for a hopeful and forward-looking vision for the future.

Definition of Terms

1. African Americans and Black Americans. African Americans is a term used for the initial Africans brought to American as Slaves or freedman. Black Americans is a termed use in referring to Black American beyond the Emancipation and present-day Blacks.

¹⁸ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church In the African American Experience*, 234.

2. Black Church: One of the only institutions not created or control by Europeans; the Black Church” has long been used by Black scholars and clergy as an umbrella term for all historically Black Protestant denominations as well as nondenominational churches with predominantly Black congregations. The Black Church is the locus of the Black community.
3. Black Church Worship: Black worship...is based on the cultural and religious experience of the oppressed. Its liturgy and its theology are derived from the cultural and religious experience of black people struggling to appropriate the meaning of God and human life in the midst of human suffering. Worship in the black tradition is a celebration of the power to survive and to affirm life, with all its complex and contradictory realities.
4. Black community: the Black community is Black America. Members of Black America are citizens of the United States of America. Also, they are citizens of the states, counties, cities, and municipalities in which they reside. The Black community is a concept that goes far beyond the color of one’s skin. It is the experience of being Black in the United States. The Black community is a society whose culture is waiting to be re-defined.
5. Black Consciousness: Black consciousness, as defined by Steven Biko, was the awakening of self-worth in Black populations. The movement’s leaders hoped to redefine “Black,” recognizing that the term was no longer a simple racial classification but a positive, unifying identity.
6. Blackness: all victims of oppression who realize the survival of their humanity if bound up with their liberation from Whiteness as that which demonizes black human identity to denote criminality, sub-humanity, and anarchy.

7. **Black is Beautiful:** The phrase “Black is beautiful” is meant to uplift the emotional and psychological well-being of black people. It promotes the Black culture and identity, where the Black past is seen as an inspirational source of cultural pride. It affirms the beauty of Black people’s natural features, such as their variety of skin colors, hair styles and textures, as well as physical characteristics.
8. **Black Power Movement:** The black power movement can be termed as a political and cultural revolution that changed the African American society. This movement encouraged black people to be proud of their skin color, history, culture and heritage and challenged the accepted white notions.
9. **Black Preaching is dialogical,** a cooperative effort between the pulpit and the pew. Preaching often was a Call given and Response; an expectation that from the pew would come a response, ““Let somebody say, Amen.””
10. **Brother and Sister in the Black Church** means people of shared experiences, faith, and convictions. There were no Mr.’s like on the plantation.
11. **Call-and-Response:** patterns of interaction and communication in which expressions, both verbal and nonverbal encouraging, affirming, or redirecting the discourse are spontaneously engaged, most often with a rhythmic interplay. In the African American Christian worship experience, there is frequently a dynamic discourse between the pulpit and the congregation which is more reflective of African spirituality than Eurocentric Christianity.
12. **Call-to-preach:** term used to indicate the emergence of an urge, vision or intention to enter the ministry; for some the receiving call to preach can be a dramatic, life-changing experience, for others it is the conclusion arrived at after much contemplation; from the

antebellum period to the present the “call to preach” for Black Preachers has often been a means of obtaining recognition and leadership status in the community.

13. Civil Rights Movement: Centered in the Black Churches and led religious leaders. American civil rights movement, mass protest movement against racial segregation and discrimination in the southern United States that came to national prominence during the mid-1950s.
14. Double Consciousness: W. E. B. DuBois stated, “we are of two minds,” the ambivalence of seeing self through the eyes of white people and self as seen through Black life: the dual loyalties that Black Americans have to the nation on the one hand, and to the race on the other--conflicting loyalties because Blacks have always felt a moral obligation to both the nation and the race in spite of the moral conflicts between them.
15. Extended Family: in the Black community the family is not always limited by blood relationship. The Church became a place where families were cared for, children learned value, morals, mentoring, help families overcome the challenges of daily living.
16. Great Migration: the migrations of millions of African Americans from the rural South to cities in the North, Midwest, and Western United States from the turn of the century through the 1950s. This movement significantly altered the demographics of some northern cities and opened a new era of social and economic opportunities for many African Americans.
17. Home Going Celebration: A homegoing (or home-going) service is an African-American Christian funeral tradition marking the going home of the deceased to the Lord or to heaven. It is a celebration that has become a vibrant part of African American history and culture. As with other traditions, practices, customs and norms of African American

culture, this ritual for dealing with death was shaped by the African American experience.

18. Hush Harbors: secluded locations where African slaves gathered so they could hear sermons, sing spiritual, and rally to support one another.
19. Institutional Church: A termed used by E. Franklin Frazier to describe the fusion of invisible institution which had taken root among the slaves and the institutional church which had grown up among the Negroes who were free before the Civil War.
20. Invisible Institution: secret the name was given because Blacks assembled to worship under a shroud of secrecy because such gatherings were outlawed by those who had the mind to know if a slave had a filled spirit, it would be a matter of time before he/she came into a sense of self. The Negro Church.
21. Jim Crowism: the systematic practice of discriminating against and segregating black people, especially as practiced in the American South from the end of Reconstruction to the mid-1900s.
22. Spirituals: the religious songs composed by the negroes themselves, never written or printed, but passing from one generation to another with such addition and variations as circumstances may suggest. Most of the spiritual which have been gathered from all areas in the south, Christian Ideology or theology is revealed in the negro's conception of the world.
23. We had Church today: Having church means somebody preaching the word. Preaching is essential and central in the black worship tradition. Not just a homily or comments on current events or didactic statements on doctrine, but a word delivered with preparation

and power and passion. Powerful prophetic preaching, music, people getting happy and shouting and dancing.

24. Young, Gifted, and Black: Young, Gifted, and Black is a phrase that celebrates the potential and achievement of African American students. It is used to empower and uplift Black youth who are gifted and achieving in their studies.

Chapter Two: The Birth and Growth of the Black Church

Introduction

“And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”¹⁹

This chapter provides a concise exploration of the growth of the Black Church from slavery through the Civil Rights era and its subsequent decline of the Black Church during the post-civil rights era. While it does not claim to be comprehensive analysis, it offers valuable insights into the tumultuous evolution that has shaped the Black Church’s present-day status and significance.

Historically, the Black Church has played a multifaceted and pivotal role within the Black community. It has been a steadfast beacon of spiritual guidance, a champion of social justice, and a proponent of liberation, offering profound teachings that resonate across generations.

“The Black Church was born into a culture that did not separate private devotion from public duty. Invariably, this meant that the church had to move beyond the strictly spiritual and ecclesiastical to promote positive change in the social, economic, and political aspects of life.”²⁰

Through its rich and enduring history, the Black Church has remained the vibrant heart of the Black community, shaping, and nurturing its members with unwavering commitment.

¹⁹ Acts 2:47 (KJV).

²⁰ David L. Everett, *The Future Horizon for a Prophetic Tradition*, xi.

In addition to nurturing spiritual growth, the Black Church has been a powerful catalyst for societal change. It has actively contributed to the creation of educational institutions and has been instrumental in strengthening community resilience. “By every measure it was an amazing institution ... the church converted thousands, stabilized family life ... and provided the social, economic, political, and cultural base of the entire black community in the United States.”²¹

“The Black Church created its own literature, established its own publishing houses, elected its own bishops, and seminaries, and develop its own unique style of worship.”²² The Black Church influence reaches well beyond the walls of its sanctuary, reshaping family dynamics and seamlessly integrating into the fabric of daily life, extending far beyond the confines of religious ceremonies.

During the times in which Carter G. Woodson wrote, the Black Church was referenced as the Negro Church. “The Negro Church as a social force in the life of the race is nothing new. Prior to the emancipation the Church was the only institution which, in the few places in the South and throughout the North, the Negro was permitted to maintain for his own peculiar needs.”²³

The decline of the Black Church can be attributed to its departure from its foundational role of fostering community, reconstructing families, and offering social guidance. Originally, the Black Church provided a crucial message of hope that helped Black individuals endure

²¹ Reginald F. Davis, *The Black Church: Relevant Or Irrelevant In The 21st Century?* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys 2010), 18.

²² E. Franklin Frazier and C. Eric Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America: The Black Church Since Frazier* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1974), 113.

²³ Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1972), 242.

slavery and the systemic dehumanization of racism. Over time, however, its focus has shifted away from these essential functions. “The Black Church has been dislocated from its prior social role of champion of the community and carriers of culture and has lost its once privileged position of influence.”²⁴

The Black Church was established as a means to secure religious freedom and physical liberation from the bonds of slavery. In its pursuit of both spiritual and physical freedom, the Black Church developed three core ministries, mission, ministry, and message designed to support Black individuals in their survival and community-building efforts.

The Black Church had an unwritten mission to create, recreate and strengthen families. The Black Church developed an outreach ministry to address the needs of the community. and the Black Church proclaimed a prophetic message of salvation and liberation.

The Black Church has shifted its mission of creating extended families, and a ministry shifted focus from inward and outreach ministry that address social issues on behalf of the community. This transition also has led to a shift in the prophetic message, which once centered on faith, hope, and love.

In the present era, the Black Church no longer holds the prominent authority it once had within the Black community. Despite its significant role during the Civil Rights era, the influence of the Black Church has waned in the decades since.

Emergence: The Ascendance of the Black Church

The genesis of the Black Church stems from an imperative to grapple with the theological dimensions of divine presence amidst the harrowing trials of slavery. At the heart of the birth of

²⁴ David L. Everett, *The Future Horizon for a Prophetic Tradition*, 100.

the Black Church is African Slaves embraced the Christian faith but had a need to worship secretly away from their masters and overseers.

Thus, the “Invisible Institution” began.²⁵ E. Franklin Frazier coined the term “Invisible Institution” to describe the clandestine sanctuaries where the earliest slaves congregated for worship. In these hidden gatherings, slaves found a source of continuity, community, identity, and transcendence from slavery. As Wallace Charles Smith observed, “The Church evolved as a new family and community for Blacks.”²⁶

The emancipation period witnessed the convergence of the “Invisible Institution” with the Institutional Church. Throughout history, the Black Church has served as a pivotal locus for spiritual growth, reshaping notions of family, influencing social interactions, fostering collective action, building schools and educational institutions, and advocating for both spiritual and physical liberation. The Black Church was the essence of spiritual freedom, social integration and vision to provide all things necessary to survive and thrive on its own understanding of the Word of God.

The Church became the central voice of authority for Black Americans. As Reverend Al Sharpton puts it, “The Black Church was more than just a spiritual home. It was the epicenter of Black Life.”²⁷ The Black Church displayed tremendous resilience during the horrific era of slavery, it was during the post-Emancipation period where the Black Church experienced

²⁵ E. Franklin Frazier and C. Eric Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America: The Black Church Since Frazier* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1974), 23.

²⁶ Wallace Charles Smith, *The Church in the Life of the Black Family* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1993), 22.

²⁷ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2021), 5.

tremendous growth, and expansion to build churches but also to envision independence and while still confronting racism as a community.

Resilience and Expansion: Emancipation

As emancipation ushered in new economic realities, Black men seized positions of authority within both their families and communities. Emancipation also led to the great migration of Black people moving from southern cities into northern cities. According to Lincoln and Mamiya, “During the year of the first Great Migration from 1910 to 1930, 1.2 million black people left the south, over the century from 1870 and 1970 more than 7 million black people had become part of the largest internal migration America has experienced.”²⁸ As Blacks moved from rural south to northern cities Black Churches and Black communities were formed to provide places of worship and communities to inhabit.

Lincoln and Mamiya note that the “leaders in creating a new community life were men who with their families worked the land or began to buy land or worked as skilled artisans, it is important to observe that these pioneers in the creation of a communal life generally built a church as well as homes.”²⁹

The Black Church has wielded a profound influence in shaping social norms and values, while also playing a crucial role in nurturing and mentoring children and youth, preparing them to take on leadership roles within their communities.

²⁸ Lincoln, and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 118.

²⁹ Lincoln, and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 39.

“Black Churches were growing in status in some circles based on middle-class membership as well as the more general stability that comes with age.”³⁰ As the Black Church rose in prominence, the Black Church began to suffer from what W. E. B. DuBois called “we are of two minds.”³¹ Black Americans have always had a tension of living out their faith while confronting the issue of being Black in white America. Double consciousness is a perspective of looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the measuring tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.

Black churches have long held the belief that educating Black individuals was a key strategy for altering white public opinion. Education was seen not merely as an end, but as a means to challenge and change stereotypes.

Many Black individuals believed that if white people witnessed more educated Black individuals embodying refined manners, eloquence, strong moral character, and diligence, it would counteract the stereotypes based on the more exaggerated or negative behaviors often associated with the Black community.

“Black churches embraced prominent causes of white churches as their cause: smoking, gambling, dancing, divorce, foreign missions, sexual promiscuity, revivalism, which assists in constructing a viable social order in the Black community enhancing social norms promulgated by the white churches, however, these issues often have taken precedence over the original

³⁰ Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002). 11.

³¹ Frazier and Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America*, 107.

purpose of the Black Church independence movement aimed at religious, moral and political freedom from racial oppression.”³²

The Decline of the Black Church

Initially, the decline of the Black Church did not manifest as an immediate loss of membership or a decrease in attendance. Instead, it emerged as a gradual redefinition of its foundational role within the Black community. From the post-civil rights movement era to the present day, the church faces the ongoing challenge of navigating forward to address contemporary issues.

“The 1970s marked a general decline in the reputation of Black churches, coinciding with the end of the Civil Rights Movement era. During this time, more radical voices emerged, seeking to represent the community and questioning the merits of the Black Church.”³³

Leadership: The Rise of Alternate Voices

The Civil Rights Movement unified Black Churches and African Americans in a collective effort to confront racism and advocate for civil rights. However, not all Black Churches and Black leaders were involved with the movement. During the “Birmingham movement of the early 1960; some 400 Black Churches existed around Birmingham with only 60 actively engaged in the fight and only, about 15 percent, were willing to provide shelter....”³⁴

³² Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Church*, 74.

³³ Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church*, 18.

³⁴ L. H. Welchel, Jr, *The History and Heritage of African American Churches: A Way Out of No Way*, (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2011), 214.

As Welchel notes, “Black people came together for a common cause, the greater good of the community, and this effort transcended denominations and the pursuit of more narrowly focused agendas.”³⁵

The Black Church not only provided individuals willing to engage in direct action, disseminate information, and finance protest activities, but also offered the ideological and theological foundation for the movement.

The Civil Rights Movement also gave rise to divergent voices that challenged the passive resistance advocated by some of its leaders. “This new generation of activists, driven by impatience, leaned towards militant confrontation rather than the nonviolent approach championed by Dr. King and other civil rights leaders.”³⁶

As preparations for the “Meredith Mississippi Freedom March were underway, tensions rose among groups from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) during discussions about the approaches of nonviolence and violence.”³⁷

During the march young activists would not sing the traditional “We Shall Overcome” during the march. Afterwards a young activist cited “This is a new day; we don’t sing those words anymore. In fact, the whole song should be discarded. Not ‘We Shall Overcome,’ but ‘We Shall Overrun.’”³⁸ While earlier generations adhered to the principles of passive resistance,

³⁵ L. H. Welchel, *The History and Heritage*, 214.

³⁶ L. H. Welchel, *The History and Heritage*, 217.

³⁷ L. H. Welchel, *The History and Heritage*, 217.

³⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos Or Community?* (New York, NY: Harpers & Row, 1967), 26.

younger African Americans often feel disconnected from these peaceful tactics and seek new approaches to address ongoing racial issues.

In 1964 during the meeting in Greenwood, Mississippi, “Stokely Carmichael who advocate a slogan of black power, leaped to the platform to proclaim, “What we need is “Black Power.””³⁹ The phrase gave the implications of Black dominance, which was not the intent of the civil rights movement to confront racism.

“Greenwood, Mississippi turned out to be the arena for the birth of the Black Power slogan in the civil rights movement.”⁴⁰ Dr. King stated that after the meeting discussion around a slogan for the civil rights movement was needed and he suggested a compromise of not chanting either “Black Power or Freedom Now, since both may confuse the non-violent passive resistance ideology of the movement.”⁴¹ However, the news media news stories centered not on the injustices of Mississippi but on the apparent ideological division in the civil rights movement. Black Power is now part of the nomenclature of the national community.

During the era of the late 1960s and 70s, a surge of militant activism, Black Nationalism, and a burgeoning Black Consciousness swept through college campuses and urban centers, with middle-class Blacks embracing this cultural awareness burgeoning within the Black community. Young activists heralded the emergence of the Black Power Movement, the rise of the Black Panthers, and the fervent calls of a Black Manifesto.

³⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here*, 29.

⁴⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go From Here*, 29.

⁴¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here*, 31.

Movements will often use slogans, posters, phrases, and other symbolic expressions that are crafted and embraced by groups advocating for more assertive and innovative methods to address issues facing the Black. “It is a call for black people in this country to unite, to reorganize their heritage, to build a sense of community.”⁴²

Black activists in the 1970s advocated a “Black consciousness that took great lengths to avoid epithets such as “Negro” and “colored” because those traditional slave terms were dropped in favor of “Black.”⁴³ An entire genre was developed within the Black community and a sense of pride in being Black was shared throughout the Churches, community, and colleges.

The Black Power movement harnessed the energy and anger of young people throughout the country. As cited earlier by Whelchel, a plethora of social activist organizations were born in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) rose to prominence, with many of their leaders being younger than those of the civil rights movement.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was formed directly connected to the Civil Rights Movement, and the Rainbow Coalition was directly tied to Christian Social Gospel of responding to the needs of those in poverty.

The rise of more radical voices began to speak in the Black community. These young voices did not embrace Dr. King’s nonviolent ideology. “It was now clear that there was a sharp

⁴² Michael Battle, *The Black Church In America: African American Christian Spirituality* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 145.

⁴³ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church In The African American Experience*, 166.

philosophical difference between King's nonviolent approach and the more militant approach of Carmichael, McKissick and others."⁴⁴

"As a people we are indebted to Stokely Carmichael, Floyd McKissic, Angela Davis, Willie Ricks, and others for turning our attention toward an empowering reassessment of our own values and sense of self-worth."⁴⁵

"The Black Muslims (Nation of Islam) although predated back to the early 1930s, led by Elijah Muhammad from 1934 until 1975: The Nation made its greatest impact on the Black community and American society during the 1960s and early 1970s"⁴⁶

Malcom X's biting critique of the so called "Negro" impacted the Black community to change the language and vocabulary of an entire society from "Negro" to "Black."⁴⁷ "Written in 1968, James Brown's "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" became an unofficial anthem of the Civil Rights Movement. It asserted Black people's rights, pride, and beauty."⁴⁸

The Black Power Movement was a platform without a program; however, "the Black Power Movement did help to establish Black Studies programs at universities across the nation and the scholars in those programs would begin a dynamic discourse on the history."⁴⁹

The Black Power movement created a culture where Blacks were inspired to high consciousness of their value as gifted people. "The Black Consciousness movement and its

⁴⁴ L. H. Welchel, *The History and Heritage*, 218.

⁴⁵ L. H. Welchel, *The History and Heritage of African American Churches*, 219.

⁴⁶ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church In The African American Experience*, 389.

⁴⁷ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church In The African American Experience*, 389.

⁴⁸ *StudyCorgi*. "James Brown's Song "Say It Loud" and Its Impact." June 27, 2022. <https://studycorgi.com/james-browns-song-say-it-loud-and-its-impact/>.

⁴⁹ L. H. Welchel, *The History and Heritage of African American Churches*, 219.

diverse manifestations in plays, novels, scholarly studies, songs, sermons, oral histories and genealogies have been the most recent products of this phase of the new Black revolution.”⁵⁰

(Lorraine) Hansberry’s unfinished play “To Be Young, Gifted and Black” became the source of Simone’s anthem of the same name, later adopted as a theme song of the NAACP.”⁵¹

Terms like Young, Gifted, and Black were applied to Black Students. Hair styles or afros were worn to display cultural pride, and this movement impacted Black fashion as the style of dress became more reflective of African traditions.



#1 Fashion Styles **#2 Natural Hair** **Rocketed the First Black** **#3 Young Gifted and Black**

Many Black people identified with this new Black consciousness by wearing dashikis, while Black Studies programs were developed in colleges. The epitome of Black consciousness expression was the numerous historic changes in Black Communities and the broader culture.

“Maulana Karenga, an African American activist, creates Kwanza, a celebration held annually between Christmas and New Year’s Day to “restore and reaffirm African heritage and culture.””⁵² Although Kwanzaa is not a Christian holiday, it is loosely embraced within the Black Church. However, it is more widely celebrated by organizations throughout the broader Black community.

⁵⁰ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American*, 195.

⁵¹ Malik Gaines, *Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left: A History of the Impossible* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2017).

⁵² Michael Battle, *The Black Church In America*, 198.

The Black Church was a place where people could recapture their dignity and self-worth, and hear positive messages of hope and liberation, even in the face of poverty. However, now Black individuals were finding inspiration from groups outside the Black Church.

During the 1960s and 1970s, some Black churches denounced groups within the Black Power movement that advocated for separation and violence. These violent groups and their ideologies were seen as dangerous and inflammatory, contradicting the principles of tolerance and non-violent brotherhood.⁵³ “Conversely, other Black churches were unwilling to be so dismissive and instead attempted to reconcile the Christian principles of the civil rights movement with the demands for Black Power. sought to reconcile Christian principles with the demands inspired by Black Power.”⁵⁴

In 2020, while hearing echoes of the civil rights movement, the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement of the 2000’s is fueled by the passion of young adults. However, the Black Lives Matter social activist sets itself apart by eschewing the traditional use of spirituals from the Church in favor of innovative forms of protest advocacy. Those who are dismissive of the Black Church’s invaluable participation in any civil rights movement have not understood or known the history of the Black Church. “The Black Church was born as a protest movement. The Black Church has demonstrated a capacity for providing leadership to meet the challenges of the day.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church*, 15.

⁵⁴ Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church*, 15.

⁵⁵ L. H. Welchel *The History and Heritage of African American Churches: A Way Out of No Way*, 224.

Black activists in the 1960s and 1970s did not necessarily seek the approval or collaboration of the Black Church, with some of the more radical activists rejecting its involvement. Similarly, the Black Lives Matter movement has often distanced itself from the Black Church. “Organizations and groups that rejected the societal vision of interracial nonviolence did not receive official support from Black churches.”⁵⁶ As the civil rights and Black Power movements reached their zenith, the economic conditions and mobility of Black Americans improved.

As the wave of Black Church involvement in civil rights and Black Power movement the Blacks experience tremendous upward economic and community mobility. A wave of Blacks migrated to the north from the south.

The Great Migration and Religious Diversification

The initial Civil Rights movement truly began with the Great Migration, which spanned from 1910 to 1970. This migration saw Black Americans move from the South to escape the harsh treatment of Jim Crow laws and to seek better economic opportunities. “Historian John Hope Franklin noted that Black farm workers made \$10.79 in pay each month in South Carolina compared to the \$26.13 a month earned by workers in New York.”⁵⁷

As Blacks moved from the South, they also brought their religious beliefs and formed new denominations. “The Great Migration started around 1910 went on through 1970. The

⁵⁶ Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Church*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 103.

⁵⁷ Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, 7.

estimate that from 1900 to 1930, two million Blacks migrated from the south and by 1970 some 6 million Blacks had relocated from the American South to North, Midwest, Western States.”⁵⁸

“By 1954, 65 percent of all African Americans live in urban areas. The first time in America’s history that the majority of blacks live outside the South and marks a completion of the population shift begun during the Great Migration. The migration to urban centers institutes the rise of store front churches.”⁵⁹

Blacks sought to remain connected to the church because their southern church was a place where that fostered a familial relationship. “The ‘storefront’ church represents an attempt on the part of the migrants, especially from the rural areas of the South, to reestablish a type of church in the urban environment to which they were accustomed. They want a church, first of all, in which they are known as people.”⁶⁰

Black Americans found better employment but still faced racial discrimination. They were often the last hired and the first fired, and they remained excluded from skilled jobs. Despite these challenges, their rate of pay was better than what they had received in the South. However, the average income of African Americans is still three-fifths of that of a white family.”⁶¹

This newfound affluence endowed Black families with social prominence and fostered greater political engagement within the public sphere. Consequently, this rise in status cultivated a semblance of power that left an indelible imprint on Black middle-class communities.

⁵⁸ Michael Battle, *The Black Church In America*, 191.

⁵⁹ Michael Battle, *The Black Church In America*, 193.

⁶⁰ Frazier and Lincoln, *The Negro Church*, 59.

⁶¹ Michael Battle, *The Black Church In America*, 193-94.

In *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Anthony Pinn points out an effect of a growing Black middle class, “In many cases, members of this class considered themselves far better equipped to address their needs than the pastor of the church.”⁶²

Frazier and Lincoln confirm the impact, “In the late 1950s, E. Franklin Frazier’s book *Black Bourgeoise* points to a growing middle class of Black Americans that shifted away from building communities to building larger religious edifices. ‘The Negro preacher in the northern city has striven to build up large churches which are a measure of his status and influence, not to mention his control of economic resources.’”⁶³ As the Black middle class grew, they became less involved in social activism. Pinn cites “as 1960s came to an end ... the vast majority of the nation’s Black Churches lost their commitment to social activism.”⁶⁴

The period from 1972 to 1980 found that the middle-class churches were located in impoverished neighborhoods and the membership lived outside the Black community. Prior to the Civil Rights Movement Blacks lived in the community where they attended church. The church and community were the epicenter for Black life and consciousness.

However, with the economic benefits of the 1970s and 1980s the rising middle class began moving outside of Black communities where they developed a different commitment than their predecessor whose life centered around the church and community.

⁶² Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, 34.

⁶³ Frazier and Lincoln, *The Negro Church*, 57.

⁶⁴ Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church*, 15.

Declining Leadership

From 1970 to the present day, Black church leadership has diminished. Prominent leaders were assassinated, and many Black church leaders faced scandals, impropriety, and moral failures. This led to a strong division within Black leadership. The Black Church remains split on how to move forward in addressing racism and the social issues plaguing the Black community.

In 1961 The National Baptist Convention NBC, USA, felt King was too radical for many people's tastes, especially after denouncing the Vietnam War in 1967. Brogdon cited Cornel West's book, *The Radical King* which shows King's disapproval ratings at that time rose to 72% among whites and 55% among Blacks. Disapproved of his opposition to the Vietnam War and his efforts to eradicate poverty in America."⁶⁵

Numerous Black clergy were against the Civil Rights Movement as well as against Dr. King. "In 1961 the National Baptist Convention NBC, USA the largest Black denomination convention. Dr. King, Benjami Mays, Ralph Abernathy, Wyatt Tee West, and Gardner Taylor started a new Baptist denomination (Progressive National Baptist Convention) because King got kicked out of a very, very conservative Black Baptist denomination (National Baptist Convention)."⁶⁶

Black leaders are caught in scandals of impropriety and inappropriate relationships. "The conduct of ministers shown to have 'feet of clay' has tarnished the reputation of the Black Church and its leadership."⁶⁷ The decline in the Black Church community involvement, the

⁶⁵ Cornel West, *The Radical King, Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press), date ix.

⁶⁶ Michael Battle, *The Black Church In America*, 85.

⁶⁷ Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, 30.

decline of the reputation of the Black leaders, all culminated in the drop in church attendance and confidence in Black Church leadership.

Preaching: Evolving Perspectives and Contemporary Realities

Since Black congregations first gathered in the “Invisible Institution,” preaching in the Black Church has been profoundly theological, shaping and reflected their relationship with God through words and narrative. This preaching often carried eschatological themes, offering hope and reassurance by affirming, as children of God, there is a promised end to suffering and that death represents a release from worldly struggles. Additionally, it has been redemptive and liberating, emphasizing themes of salvation and freedom.

As Chapman notes, “The early African American preacher, Howard Thurman argued, wielded unparalleled influence in shaping the spiritual path of the slave community, despite severe limitations on their movement, functions, and leadership roles. Their preaching resonated with themes of freedom from sin, liberation inspired by the Exodus narrative, and a vision of hope for a better future, both in the present life and beyond.”⁶⁸

In the early 1970’s there was within the Black Church, a subtle growing shift from prophetic preaching to prosperity preaching. Prophetic preaching spoke of individual sins, but also the sins of the government that was insensitive to the plight of poverty and the lack of equal opportunities for Black Americans.

⁶⁸ Youtha C. HardmanCromwell,

“‘Freedom From.’ In Negro Preaching of the Nineteenth Century.” *ATQ: 19th Century American Literature and Culture*. Vol. 14, No. 4. 2000: 277. Gale Academic OneFile).
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A68864396/AONE?u=anon~c8af25bd&sid=googleScholar&xid=4b8c00e6>.

Prophetic preaching emphasized an Exodus motif of Salvation and Liberation. Preaching the Gospel was telling the story of God’s deliverance, raising the dead and God’s intervention into the lives of the oppressed. “The Exodus paradigm (Exodus 14 in particular) has functioned as a vivid and explicit symbol that confirms that God is a God who liberates, who secures justice for the people of God, and who demands a radical obedience that upholds justice for everyone within the community of people of God.”⁶⁹

The Gospel Preaching was another element of Prophetic Preaching. In this mode of preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ was essential in connecting Blacks to relationship with Jesus. And Jesus mission not only to save one from their sin but his missionary message proclaimed in Luke 4:18.

In the 1990s the individual is celebrated. This mindset gave “rise to for people to focus on the needs of the individuals... you are important.”⁷⁰ The Church conformed to society. The 1990s also gave rise to Prosperity Preaching and Mega Churches. “Prosperity preaching the word of faith maintains that the problem of black success and wellness is primarily behavioral, not structural. Black people are poor, they tend to argue, not because of what the government has done or not done, but because African Americans have not lived by the word of faith.”⁷¹

Prophetic Preaching critiques and challenges the society in which they live and gives hope to those who disengage from the status quo faith for divine intervention. Prosperity

⁶⁹ Cain Hope Felder, *Stony The Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 226.

⁷⁰ Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled-and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York, NY: Free Press 2006), 49.

⁷¹ Walter Earl, Fluker, *The Ground Has Shifted: The Future of The Black Church in Post-Radical America* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016), 62.

Preaching challenges the individual to have faith and touch agreement and your prayers will be answered. “These two traditions are at loggerheads over the theological, social, and political mission of Black Churches.”⁷²

The Worship Changes Traditional and Contemporary

In the Black Church, worship is where the presence of the Holy Spirit is experienced. In the Black Church, the worship experience is in some way cathartic. Worship allowed Blacks a form of release from pain, pressure, and problems experienced in life. “Blacks worship celebrates the sovereignty of an Almighty God. Life is hard. In all of our trials, and troubles, God has been with us. God has brought us safe thus far. God is with us now. God gives us victory through Jesus Christ.”⁷³

Authentic Black worship is a celebration. Worship included an expectation for the Spirit of the Lord to move among members that urged people to dance, sing, cry, and shout. African American Christian spirituality emerges through its particularity of dynamic and corporate worship. Thus “Worship in the Black church is primarily defined by music, preaching, testimonies, and prayer.”⁷⁴

Church attendance has declined, and worship services have changed within the Black Church. Spirituals and traditional gospel songs are considered antiquated, too old-fashioned, and not appealing to the younger generation. The attitude of worship is modified from sacred to

⁷² Walter Earl, Fluker, *The Ground Has Shifted*, 63.

⁷³ Joseph B. Bethea, “Worship in the Black Church.” *Duke Divinity School Review* 43, No 1 WINT (1978). Accessed ATLA 11/23/2019.

⁷⁴ Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church In The Post-Civil Rights Era*, 46.

entertainment. Worship services take on a concert-type atmosphere with bands, praise teams, various musical instruments, and praise dance. While the hymns and gospels were based on scriptures, more contemporary music is filled with secular lyrics and genres. Current attitudes in worship focus on the blessing from God, not a commitment to living right before God.

The most significant change in worship today is the role of the preacher. Preaching is not at the centrality of worship, but music or, as some say, entertainment is central.

The Decline in Social Cohesion

The early Black Church placed special emphasis on creating families that the system of slavery dismantled. In the Black Church, the church family is not always limited to blood relationships. Through the Church, extended families were created which spilled over into the Black community.

However, since the post-civil rights era, slowly the view from the outside is that the Church is not interested in families. This issue is further discussed in chapters three and four. Does the Church still provide programs that will involve youth? “Almeda Wright states the Black Church must teach to remind youth and others of their somebodiness.”⁷⁵ In their mission in ward developing and outreach. Wallace states ‘The church needs to address the needs of families, and by strengthening families it strengthens and buttresses the heart of the Black Church.’⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Almeda M. Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 2017), 227.

⁷⁶ Wallace Charles Smith, *The Church in the Life of the Black Family*, 87.

Although there is no specific declaration the Black Church no longer sees the value of children, or the Church is afraid of the younger generation. Yet the absence of ministries directed toward the young gives the illusion that the church is not interested in the younger generation.

Bakari Kitwana in *The Hip Hop Generation* gives keen insight into the existing tension between the older and younger generation when he states. “The older generation fails to understand the new Black youths’ culture in all its complexities, and the younger generation fails to see its inherent contradictions.”⁷⁷

This younger generation fails to see the contradictions of the careers and lives of their current rappers. Their attitudes of life, sex, love and family and anti-traditional family do not create stable family relationships.’

From the perspective of the Black Church, families were considered as such without the distinction of two parents or a single parent. The Black Church embodied a community of inclusiveness. The increase in single-parent households and the breakdown of Black family structures are not novel occurrences for Black Americans. What is novel for the Black community, however, is the Church’s failure to embrace and fortify families.

Conclusion

The decline in the Black Church’s authority and prominence within the Black community was a slow and gradual process. This chapter explored the origins of the Black Church, initially known as the “Invisible Institution,” which emerged out of protest. We examined how the Invisible Institution evolved and merged with the Institutional Church during and after

⁷⁷ Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002), 23.

emancipation. From the late 1890s, the Black Church and Black communities experienced a period of survival and growth that spanned approximately thirty years.

We explored the Black Church's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and the emergence of other radical voices addressing social issues. We also examined the crucial role of Black preachers within the community and the impact of their sermons.

Additionally, we briefly touched on worship practices in the Black Church and the decline in its role in strengthening families and fostering social interactions within the community. In the upcoming chapters, the research will detail the gradual shift in the Black Church's purpose and provide insights into how it is perceived within local communities.

The voices of the individual interview participants will provide insight into their lived experiences within and outside of the Black Church.

Chapter Three:

Collection and Analysis of Data

Introduction

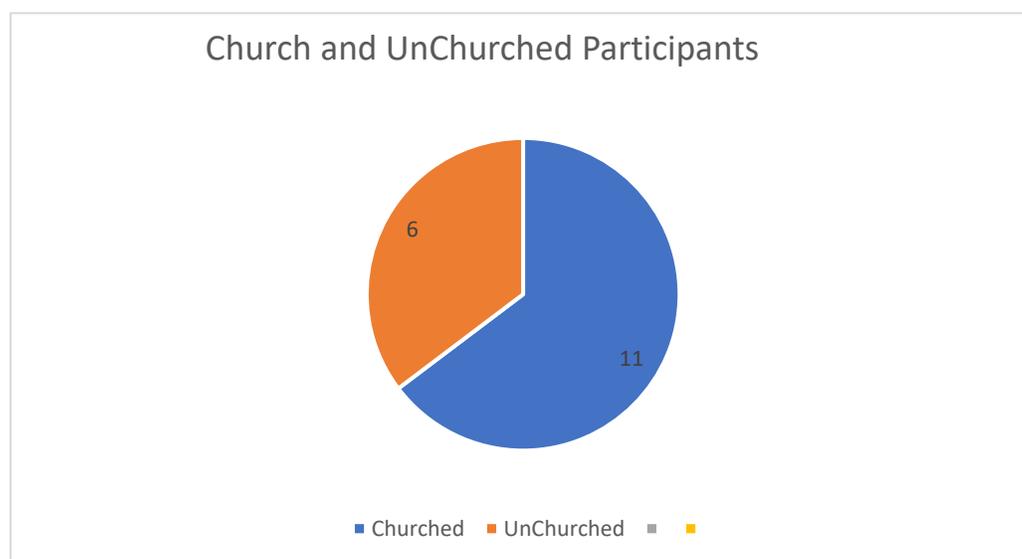
A prevailing hypothesis suggests that the Black Church has declined from its historic status within the Black community. Not only have many young people distanced themselves from the Black Church, often perceiving it as irrelevant, but even older adults have reduced their attendance. To evaluate this hypothesis and clarify perceptions of the Black Church, a series of interviews were conducted.

To facilitate these interviews, the research project employed a qualitative methodology to explore the perceptions surrounding local Black Churches. Data collection targeted individuals across various age groups, and church experiences aiming to provide a comprehensive overview of sentiments toward the Black Church. The interviews focused specifically on residents of a mid-sized city in North Carolina.

Given the thematic focus on the Black Church, all interviewees self-identified as Black, enriching the study with insights deeply rooted in the Black cultural context. Despite the modest sample size, the research offers valuable perspectives on the thoughts and experiences of individuals within a local context, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the broader landscape of the Black Church. Three thematic areas are selected to capture the participants' perspectives: the church's mission, its inward and outreach ministries, and the messages delivered from the pulpit.

The researcher felt it was important to extend the project's scope to include the viewpoints of individuals within the Black community who do not attend church. This deliberate inclusion provides a more holistic perspective on the state of the Church and its standing within the community. By intentionally selecting a sample that encompasses both members of the Black Church and those outside its sphere, the research aims to offer a more comprehensive portrayal of the multifaceted dynamics surrounding the Black Church. An interesting observation from the research is that both churchgoers and non-attendees share expectations regarding the importance of the Black Church's involvement in the Black community.

Figure #1 Churched and Unchurched



Research Participants

Participants were selected through the researcher's personal network and recommendations from pastors and other community members. Key criteria for selection included age, frequency of church attendance, depth of church involvement, and gender. To ensure the anonymity of the interviewees, their identities have been kept confidential.

This research utilized a qualitative methodology, with all interviews conducted in person at the interviewer's church. Each interview was initially scheduled to last a minimum of one hour. In practice, the shortest interview lasted fifty-five minutes, while the longest extended to one hour and fifty-five minutes.

A deliberate effort was made to create a diverse cohort including both regular churchgoers and those who do not attend regularly. Upon analyzing the completed interviews, participants naturally fell into four distinct age groups.

These groupings interestingly align with the generational categories defined by The Pew Research Center, adding valuable context to the study. The Pew Research Center periodically updates the age ranges it uses to define generational groups, which include the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. In the Pew study, participants were categorized as follows:

- **Group One: Gen Z (Born 1997–2012, ages 11–26)**
- **Group Two: Millennials (Born 1981–1996, ages 27–42)**
- **Group Three: Gen X (Born 1965–1980, ages 43–58)**
- **Group Four: Baby Boomers (Born 1946–1964, ages 59–77)**
- **Group Five: The Silent Generation (Born 1928–1945, ages 78–95)**

The researcher intentionally chose not to strictly adhere to The Pew Research Center's generational classifications, opting instead for a simpler, decade-based categorization. This decision was made to ensure a more balanced sample, including both churchgoers and non-churchgoers within each decade range, except for the oldest age group. Participants were primarily categorized by age, resulting in the following distinct groups:

- **Group One:** Three participants aged 22 to 30.
- **Group Two:** Five participants aged 31 to 40.
- **Group Three:** Four participants aged 41 to 59.
- **Group Four:** Five participants aged 60 to 90.

This careful grouping allows for a detailed exploration of diverse perspectives within specific age brackets, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the research findings.

	Group One	Group Two	Group Three	Group Four
Age Range	22-30	31-40	41-59	60-90
Number of Participants	3	5	4	5

Table #4 Interview Groups by Age Range

Participants are identified by their group and assigned numbers, as illustrated in the table below. This concise identification system provides essential demographic details, enabling a clear understanding of each participant within their respective groups. Among those interviewed, twelve were male and five were female.

The participants' ages ranged from twenty-two to ninety years old, with significant differences in opinion among the age groups. In terms of education, the majority of those interviewed held at least a bachelor's degree, with one individual holding a Doctor of Ministry. Slightly less than half had only a high school diploma. During the interviews, it was revealed that two participants had served time in prison, and one is a Black Lives Matter organizer who runs a social activism-focused non-profit.

The demographic data collected is detailed in the table below. Participants are identified by a two-digit code: the first digit represents the participant's age range, while the second serves

as a unique identifier within that group. The second digit has no specific significance other than to indicate the participant's position within their age group.

Participant Identifier	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Education	Church Black Attendance	Children	Employed	Attending White Church
1:1	22	Female	Single	BSW	Not Often	No	Yes	No
1:2	26	Male	Cohabit	BA	Not Now	No	Yes	No
1:3	30	Female	Single	HSD	Not Now	3	Yes	No
2:1	32	Female	Single	BA	Yes	No	Yes	No
2:2	34	Male	Cohabit	HSD	Not Now	1	Yes	No
2:3	35	Male	Separated	HSD	No	4	Yes	No
2:4	35	Male	Married	BA	Yes	No	Yes	No
2:5	38	Male	Single	BA	Yes	No	Yes	No
3:1	45	Male	Single	HSD	Left	3	Yes	Yes
3:2	46	Male	Married	BA	Not Often	2	Yes	Not Often
3:3	48	Female	Married	BSW	Yes	No	Yes	No
3:4	51	Male	Single	HSD	Not now	5	Yes	Yes
4:1	50	Female	Married	HSD	Yes	No	Yes	No
4:2	67	Male	Married	HSD	Not now	2	Retired	Yes
4:3	70	Male	Widower	DMin	Yes	3	Retired	No
4:4	78	Male	Married	BA	Yes	3	Retired	No
4:5	90	Male	Divorce	BA	Yes	3	Retired	No

Table #5 Demographic Table

Several participants who were raised in Black churches shared their reasons for leaving. Younger individuals were drawn to modernized service styles, while the older generation was attracted by the programs offered at other churches.

However, neither group feels a strong connection to their new congregations, and neither are engaged in ministries aimed at fostering spiritual growth and leadership development among members.

Chapter Three will delve deeper into the phenomenon of individuals raised in the Black Church who have since transitioned into White churches. Their reasons for leaving highlight the diminishing influence and authority of the Black Church within the Black community. The chart below illustrates church attendance demographics by age.

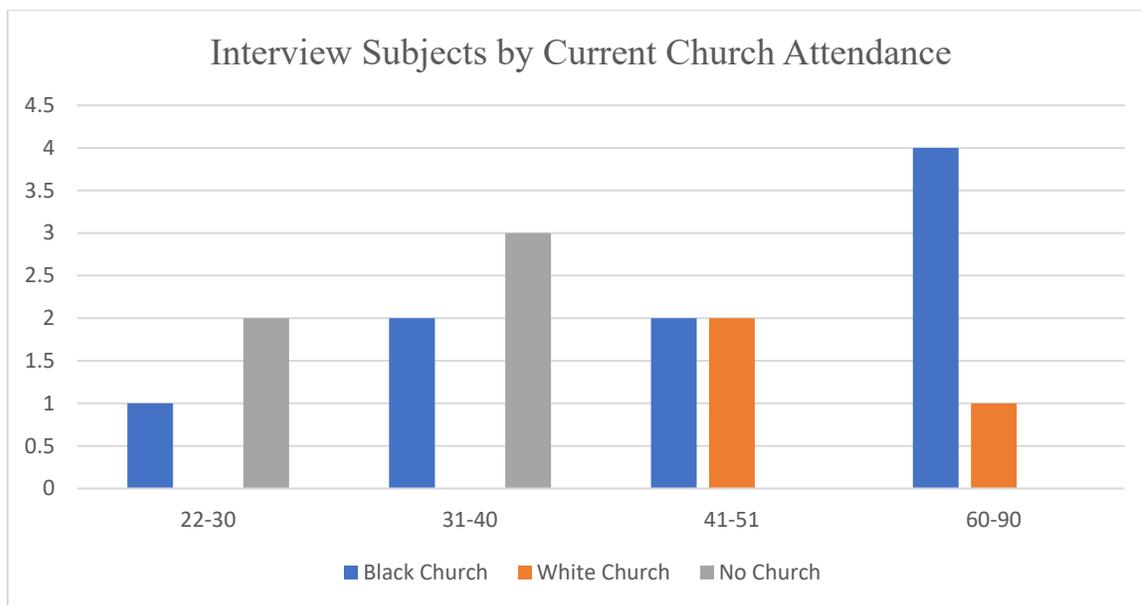


Figure #2 Church Attendance Demographics.

Areas of Interview Focus

Research participants were asked a series of questions to explore their experiences within the Black Church. The study focused on four key areas:

1. Church attendance and involvement.
2. Ministries aimed at strengthening families and outreach initiatives supporting the community.
3. The Church's engagement in social issues within the Black community.
4. Messages conveyed from the pulpit and aspects of worship.

Interview Questions:

Inquiries About Church and Attendance

1. Could you share your age, the duration of your membership, and how frequently you attend, and why?
2. Discuss the demographic makeup of the church membership, including professions, and community involvement?
3. Did you grow up in this church or another church? What was your experience like? If not, what prompted you to start attending? How often did your family attend, and for how many generations has your family been part of this church?
4. While understanding you cannot speak for everyone, do you believe efforts are made to integrate families into the church community? In what ways has the church made you feel part of the church family?
5. Have you observed changes in the church's family atmosphere over the years? What distinguishes the current atmosphere from that of five or ten years ago?
6. How does your church actively welcome and accept visitors? What measures are taken to follow up with visitors, as well as support those who are sick or shut-in?
7. Could you provide insights into the history of this church? How does the congregation celebrate and acknowledge its history, and how is the church's vision for the future communicated?
8. Historically, the church had a community presence. How would you describe the current community standing of the church you attend? Additionally, to what extent has the church been involved in past movements such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter Movement?

Inquiries Regarding Family Strengthening Ministries and Outreach Initiatives

1. What specific programs or activities has the church implemented to strengthen families within both the church and the broader community? In what ways does the church demonstrate its commitment to supporting and caring for families?
2. Can you elaborate on the various community outreach programs offered by your church? How does the local community respond to these outreach initiatives? Examples of such programs include Vacation Bible School, a food pantry, teen outreach ministries, after-school programs, as well as initiatives related to prison and societal readjustment.
3. How effective has the church been in providing meaningful ministries for young people? What specific programs are available for the spiritual and educational development of young adults? Additionally, does the church offer online, and live stream services to cater to its members' diverse needs?
4. How does the community perceive and engage with the church?

Inquiries Regarding the Church's Engagement in Social Issues

1. How is the church actively engaged in addressing social issues, and in what specific ways could it further contribute to these causes? Examples may include initiatives related to voting, combating racism, sexism, addressing education disparities, housing concerns, among others.
2. Could you share the church's mission and vision statements? Additionally, what are the goals envisioned for the church within a postmodern community? Are members actively involved in shaping the vision and mission statements of church?
3. In terms of leadership development, how does the church cultivate leadership from within its community? Are there specific programs and ministries dedicated to nurturing the next generation of leaders, both within the church and in the broader community?
4. What is the Church's perspective on the community and its relationship with the current generation?

Questions on Messages from the Pulpit and Worship

1. Can you recall any specific messages preached from the pulpit, and the themes commonly addressed in the messages? (Themes such as forgiveness, reconciliation,

justification, restoration, and/or reparations.) Do the messages primarily focus on personal piety, prosperity, or a commitment to spreading the message of salvation?

2. How do you personally interpret and embrace the messages of faith, hope, and love conveyed in the church?
3. In what ways does the church integrate both traditional and contemporary worship styles and music into its services?
4. What aspirations do you hold for the future of your church, and what hope resonates within you concerning its trajectory?

The Setting

The interview sessions were held in the sanctuary of Rock Hill Missionary Baptist Church, one of the oldest Black churches in Asheville, North Carolina. Historically, this church was part of an association of thirty-three Black Baptist churches. While Rock Hill Missionary Baptist Church may not have the largest membership among Black churches in the city, it proudly occupies the most expansive building.

For four decades, this church served as the primary venue for associational meetings, training sessions, and various community programs. Located in the city's last Black neighborhood, Rock Hill Missionary Baptist Church remains a significant and longstanding pillar of the community.

A noteworthy aspect is the church's after-school program, which, due to logistical challenges, coincided with the timing of two interviews. As a result, these sessions experienced intermittent interruptions from children entering and exiting the sanctuary during the final ten minutes. The children's voices were recorded but were carefully edited out during the transcription process.

The interviews were conducted using a desktop computer to record both video and audio. Their durations varied considerably, with the shortest lasting forty-two minutes, recorded for Participant 4:1. Participant 2:2's interview extended to one hour and fifty-four minutes. The substantial time difference between these two participants prompted an initial inquiry. It was observed that Participant 4:1 provided brief, prompt responses with minimal contemplation or discussion, and appeared hesitant to share negative observations about the Church.

The reluctance of seniors to voice negative opinions reflects the cultural norms ingrained in their generation. They were often taught not to speak ill of the church, especially in public—a principle encapsulated in the saying, “You don’t wash your dirty laundry in public.” As a result, seniors tend to prioritize protecting the church’s image.

Conversely, adults in their thirties often grew up in an era characterized by increased criticism of traditional churches. This generation tends to be less satisfied with or appreciative of the church, viewing it primarily as a place where their needs should be addressed and resolved. As Participant 1:3 stated in her interview, “The church is not meeting people where they are, and not meeting people’s needs.”⁷⁸

After all the interviews were completed, the recordings were sent to an online transcription company. However, several challenges were encountered during the transcription process, including misspelled words, occasional merging of voices, and difficulties in capturing certain physical and verbal nuances present in the video.

One significant challenge encountered was the poor sound quality in the recordings, which affected clarity. The computer’s built-in microphone proved inadequate for capturing clear

⁷⁸ Participant 1:3, 2022, Interviewed by Researcher, October 14, 2022.

audio. Utilizing a more robust sound system with a high-quality external microphone could have mitigated this issue.

Editing began after all interviews were completed. Challenges with transcription primarily arose from misspelled words and the inability to capture certain physical and verbal nuances from the video. Of the eighteen interviews conducted, only seventeen were included in the research, as one session was unintentionally not recorded due to a technical error. However, the written notes from that interview were sufficient to include insights into the study.

The interview responses varied significantly. Some participants provided direct answers, while others gave brief summaries of their thoughts. The interviews often deviated from the planned structure, with participants addressing multiple questions simultaneously or responding to questions that had not yet been asked. Given the sensitivity of the topic of the Black Church within the Black community, participants were eager to share their perspectives during the interviews.

After editing each transcription, an initial coding pass was conducted using a color-coded system based on a predetermined framework. The primary colors assigned corresponded to the four key themes: yellow for church attendance, green for ministries focused on family strengthening and outreach, orange for the Church's involvement in social issues, and blue for messages from the pulpit and worship. These codes were aligned with the categories that guided the interview questions.

These primary codes were applied consistently throughout the coding process. Participants' responses were color-coded according to the relevant category when addressing specific questions. As coding progressed, additional colors were introduced to highlight emerging themes.

During this process, thematic elements surfaced that aligned with concepts identified in the literature review. These themes will be further explored in subsequent chapters and are briefly defined below.

Exploring Generational Perspectives: Understanding Differences

A prominent theme that emerged is the significant disparity in perspectives among different generations within the Church. Each generation holds a distinct vision of what the Church should represent and embody; however, reality often falls short of these ideals.

For Group One (22-30), there is a perception that the Church lacks active involvement in community initiatives. In truth, the Black Church is deeply engaged within the community. Several Black churches run prison ministries, one historic Black church houses a program for women, and another operates a summer learning academy and after-school programs.

In contrast, participants in Group Four (60-90) expressed the belief that their church effectively meets community needs. However, a closer examination of their conversations revealed that their church may not be fully in tune with the actual needs of the community.

These differing perspectives across generations are highlighted by recurring comments from Group Four (60-90) participants, particularly 4:1, who stated, “The Church was great and moving forward.”⁷⁹

Disenchantment

There is a mutual disenchantment between the elders of the church and young adults. Eric Masson, in his writing, observes this dynamic within the traditional Black Church: “Their

⁷⁹ Participant 4:1, 2022 Interviewed by Researcher, November 12, 2022.

[seniors'] eyesight, fixed on the rearview mirror of an increasingly distant church tradition, is constantly obstructed by 'remember when the church' ... nostalgia. This romanticized view of 'Big Momma's church' fuels their longing in the present while leaving them nearsighted to the future."⁸⁰ This tension is further highlighted by Participant 2:3, who remarked, "We [the Church] are struggling because we are stuck in our ways."⁸¹

In Group One (22-30), disenchantment with the church arises from the perception that it fails to address their current needs, social concerns, and values, leading them to question the necessity of attending. The values held by young adults appear to present the greatest challenge for the traditional church.

Young African Americans expressed mixed perspectives on how their churches and spirituality influence their understanding of the world around them. As one participant noted, "The Black Church has strict views on many social issues that concern our generation, like gender and LGBTQ+ matters. The church is often more condemning than welcoming."⁸²

The interview process revealed that the younger generation is less inclined to participate in church activities. They are unlikely to attend Bible studies and often lose interest in worship services. The younger generation have adopted a "what's in it for me" mentality, viewing the church primarily to meet social needs rather than as a place for spiritual growth. The consensus among the younger generation is the church needs to get back to meeting the needs of the people, but they rarely mention any kind of Biblical teaching for spiritual growth.

⁸⁰ Eric Mason, *Urban Apologetics: Restoring Black Dignity with the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 53.

⁸¹ Participant 2:3, Interviewed by Researcher, September 13, 2022.

⁸² Participant 1:2, 2022, Interviewed by Researcher, October 3, 2022.

Seeking Despite Being Unchurched

In Group One (22-30), the youngest group, a notable finding regarding church attendance emerged: the interviewees had previously experienced positive interactions within the church. Although they are not currently attending, they express a proactive desire to find a new church community. However, they do not explicitly state their reasons for disengaging from regular church activities.

Despite facing significant challenges such as racism, unemployment, strained relationships, single-parent households, the school-to-prison pipeline, functional illiteracy, housing shortages, and abject poverty, one might expect young people to seek refuge in the church.

However, contrary to these expectations, they are choosing to disengage from active church participation. The older generation viewed the church as a refuge and a haven—a place to rest, find strength in their faith, and believe that God would eventually provide liberation for His people.

The term “unchurched” does not fully capture the situation—these individuals hold nuanced opinions about the church. Their views are deeply personal and individualized, often centered on the belief that the church falls short in terms of addressing the social needs of the community. They rarely look to the church for educational or spiritual growth, nor do they seek to experience the presence or influence of God throughout history.

Emerging from the depths of adversity, the Black Church arose as an “Invisible Institution,” offering sanctuary and strength to the oppressed and becoming a powerful advocate for freedom. However, in modern times, it appears that some generations are drifting away from

this historical sanctuary, departing from a once-cherished refuge that provided resilience and unity.

Black Lives Matter and Navigating Urban Renewal or Urban Removal

In previous discussions about the Church's involvement in the civil rights movement and how this movement gave rise to other influential voices in the community, the lack of Church involvement in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) social activist group was noted. In Groups Two (27-42), Three (ages), and Four (ages), a common theme emerges as participants express the belief that the BLM movement has not adequately addressed certain issues within the Black community. They argue that BLM has become entangled with various issues not directly relevant to the community's core concerns. As Participant 2:3 stated, "Black people did not lead the Black Lives Matter movement. And the Black Church was not involved in the Black Lives Matters protest marches."⁸³

Concurrently, the inquiry into community dynamics reveals a common theme highlighting the erosion of the Black community, with a diminishing role of the Black Church in upholding familial bonds. Many of the participants from Group 3 (41-59) and Group 4 (60-90+) raise the subject of how urban renewal impact the Black community.

"Given that such "urban renewal" occurred nationwide, it's easy to see why the affected neighborhoods still suffer, and why there's not a larger African American middle class in America. Those areas had begun as emergent urban orders—small experiments in capitalism that arose from poverty and oppression—and were creating a generation of black businessmen. With time, those businesses likely would have evolved from relative simplicity to growth and

⁸³Participant 2:5, 2023, Interviewed by Researcher, April 1, 2023.

specialization. But this never happened, because these ecosystems were demolished. The culprit was local governments, who zealously created their destructive top-down plans; and the federal government, which gave out the money to execute them.”⁸⁴

The “urban renewal” assault on black neighborhoods undermined liberty, free markets, and human dignity—and was one of America’s great, and unrecognized, twentieth-century tragedies.

Urban renewal is perceived more as urban removal, displacing African Americans from various vibrant Black Communities within the city and exacerbating the fragmentation of their community. “Urban Renewal created fear of our land being taken. We did not have help with any repairs to the church, there was no funding available to help Black Churches.”⁸⁵ Urban Renewal left the Black Communities without having a voice to vocalize the resistance to tearing down and displacing of their buildings, business, and schools. “Stevens Lee High School (All Black High School) was torn down and the Black community could say nothing about it.”⁸⁶

This upheaval has also resulted in a rift within the family church, and the neighborhood disappeared. “From Participant 3:3 vantage point of view ‘neighborhoods, over by the Black High School Stevens Lee those communities just seemed to disappear.’⁸⁷ Subsequent chapters will explore these complex issues in greater detail.

⁸⁴ [Catalyst articles by Scott Beyer](#) | [Full Biography and Publications](#)

⁸⁵ Participant 3-2, 2023, Interviewed by Researcher, February 11, 2023.

⁸⁶ Participant 4:3, Interviewed by Researcher, November 14, 2023.

⁸⁷ Participant 3:3, 2023, Interviewed by Researcher, March 6, 2023.

Intriguing Insights Have Surfaced

The coding process revealed several important questions that had not been initially explored during the sessions. Questions arose regarding the impact of urban renewal on both the church and the community, as well as the significance of the church in individuals' lives. The fundamental premise of this research was based on the assertion that the Black Church has lost its authority within the Black community. Further investigation aimed to understand the underlying reasons for this decline in influence.

Participant 4:2 highlighted the significance of the church for many, stating, "People reach out to the church when they have a funeral. They contact the pastors when there is a funeral. They are not disconnected from the church when it comes to funerals."⁸⁸

E. Franklin Frazier's perspectives offer valuable insight into the church's significance within the community, particularly during times of grief, sorrow, and death. "In many of the Spiritual's death appears as a means of escape from the woes and weariness of this world,"⁸⁹ This perception is expressed in the Spirituals the slaves sang.

Participants from Groups One (22-30), Two (31-40), and Three (41-59), collectively expressed a shift in their perception of the Black Church's authority within the community. Meanwhile, Group Four (60-90), voiced concerns about the decline in church attendance, attributing this trend to changes within the community itself. The underlying reasons for their belief that the Black Church has lost its influence in the Black community are explored in Chapter Four.

⁸⁸ Participant 4:2 2022, Interviewed by Researcher, February 1, 2023.

⁸⁹ Frazier and Lincoln, *The Negro Church*, 21.

Chapter Four:

A Shift Within the Black Church, and Change Outside the Black Church

Introduction

The primary focus of this research is to explore whether the Black church has lost its role as the central voice of the Black community. This inquiry involves examining the changes within the Black church, from its historical mission of creating a family environment, social advocacy and representing the community to its current position where the Black community question the Black Church influence.

The study centers on three key areas: mission, ministry, and message. These core tenets are analyzed to assess their impact on the transformation of the Black church and its role within the community.

This section highlights the core unwritten mission of the Black Church: to build families and strengthen communities. The ways in which the Black Church fulfilled its mission is through cultivating an extended church family, meeting family needs, and establishing a culture of expectation of church attendance, and participation. “Single mothers, orphans, widows, and widowers were all sought out to come as they were.”⁹⁰ “The Black Church is built on the African concept of the extended family.”⁹¹

⁹⁰ Wallace Smith, *The Church in the Life of the Black Family*, 18.

⁹¹ Wallace Smith, *The Church in the Life of the Black Family*, 84.

Creating a Familial Atmosphere:

From its inception, the Black Church did not establish formal policies or statements explicitly aimed at rebuilding families. However, it has consistently worked to cultivate a sense of family and community among its members, dedicating itself to recreating and fortifying familial bonds.

The interview findings reveal a significant shift in perspective: many now believe that the Black Church no longer adequately addresses the needs of the Black community. Historically, there was an unspoken expectation that the church's mission was to serve those in need, a belief deeply ingrained in the legacy of the Black Church. For generations, it played a vital role in supporting and nurturing the Black community.

However, this perception has changed over time. Previous generations recognized the church's mission—though often unwritten—as one centered on outreach and community-building, particularly in uniting families.

Several participants emphasized that the church once served as a central hub where families came together, their needs were met, and a strong sense of kinship was fostered among its members. “As the Reverend Al Sharpton puts it, “The Black Church was more than just a spiritual home. It was the epicenter of Black Life.”⁹²

The impact of the Black Church in fostering a social, familial atmosphere cannot be measured quantitatively; it is instead observed intrinsically within both the church and the broader community.

⁹² Henry Louis Gates, *The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song*, 5,

Membership in the Black Church was crucial for building a sense of community, as it brought families together and created a strong support network for individuals, regardless of their origins. This sense of unity helped stabilize and strengthen communities.

Blacks have always had a need to form families after arriving as slaves in America. Slavery uprooted Africans from a long history of strong families and community life.⁹³

The church became a place where family connections were expressed, not only through bloodlines but also through extended relationships built on the concept of familial bonds.

“The African concept of extended family is fundamentally different from the European concept. It is based on the consanguineal rather than the conjugal unit.”⁹⁴ Everyone connected to the church were part of the everyone’s extended family. The strength of the Black Church was the family atmosphere created by the members who mostly belonged to the same community even though they all did not attend the same church.

This family atmosphere was validated by participants in the research. Participant 4:5 remarked, “The amazing thing was that we were all like family, and the families got along well together.”⁹⁵

Even the youngest participants shared their experiences of growing up in the Black Church, describing it as a gathering place for families, where children attended with both parents

⁹³ James Deotis Roberts, *Root of a Black Future: Family and Church* (Bowie, MD: J. Deotis Roberts Press, 2002), 20.

⁹⁴ Wallace Smith, *The Church in the Life of the Black Family*, 40.

⁹⁵ Participant 4:5, Interviewed by Researcher, November 16, 2022.

or at times, just one. The church fostered a strong sense of belonging among its members and extended this warmth to visitors, making them feel like part of the family.

Participant 1:3 “My mother stayed in church, we attended Bible study, singing in the choir, night service. The church made us feel like a family, they recognized visitors, so I would say they made them feel at home.”⁹⁶

Participants recalled attending church as a family, noting that going to church was never up for debate. It was as natural and routine as getting up for school. Participant 3:1 “I was raised in an era when you were not told that you need to go to church. You knew you were getting up to go to church, you were not given a choice. We were in church during most activities. Some families you saw four or five days out of the week.”⁹⁷ According to the participants, their families attended church in some form or another, and the children never questioned it.

Participant 4:4 stated “One key thing is in my family (most families in my neighborhood) you had to attend church. My parents were religious, and a lot of parents were religious.”⁹⁸

Whether in two-parent or single-parent households, attending church was a given. The key difference across generations was who took them to church; in many cases, it was the grandparents who brought them.

All the participants in Group One (22-30), shared how they, too, were taken to church. Attending church was important. Participant 1:1 describes the grandmother who took them to church. Although they attended several different churches, their grandmother, who always lived

⁹⁶ Participant 1:3, Interviewed by Researcher, October 14, 2022.

⁹⁷ Participant 3:1 Interviewed by Researcher, March 9, 2023.

⁹⁸ Participant 4:4, Interviewed by Researcher, March 19, 2023.

in the same place, was the one who consistently took them to church. Occasionally, their uncle would also come by to take them. Their parents, particularly their mother, were not actively involved in the church. As one participant recalled, “Our grandparents would come to get us to take us to church.”⁹⁹

Establishing a familial atmosphere among members was crucial for the church, both in retaining current members and attracting new ones. The welcoming, family-like environment experienced by visitors played a significant role in shaping their decision to join the church.

The church was the epicenter of the Black community. “The strength of the Black community is the Black Church. The Church was the only communal institution in most urban and rural Black Communities, black church was intimately involved in the complex network of black extended families.”¹⁰⁰

Historically, some churches were made up of families who were biologically related, creating close-knit congregations with deep familial ties. “In rural areas some churches were dominated by one or a few kin groups so the phenomena of family church or kin church.”¹⁰¹

Another way Black Churches fostered both a family atmosphere and a respectful environment was through the use of familial titles. Referring to one another as “brother” and “sister,” along with terms like “Big Momma,” “Uncle,” “Mr.,” and “Mrs.,” became a distinctive practice within Black churches.”¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Participant 1:1, Interviewed by Researcher, March 07, 2023.

¹⁰⁰ C. Eric Lincoln, and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 311.

¹⁰¹ C. Eric Lincoln, and Lawrence H. Mamiya *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 311.

¹⁰² Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years*, 15.

These terms of endearment not only fostered a strong sense of community and connection but also cultivated a culture of respect for elders. This tradition, rooted in the church, extended into the wider Black community, reinforcing intergenerational bonds and shared values.

A Shift Away from Building Families and Addressing the Needs of the Black community.

The precise moment when the Black Church shifted its focus away from building families is difficult to pinpoint. Like many changes, whether positive or negative—this transition was gradual, moving away from the unwritten mission of fostering families and taking a different new direction.

Pinn placed a shift in “the mission of the church in the late 1970 when the Church moves away from social activists.”¹⁰³

“The proportion of Black adults who say church involvement is overall ‘desirable’ is on the decline, from 90% in 1996 to just 74% today,” the Barna Group reported in the latest segment of its State of the Black Church project.¹⁰⁴

“A generation ago, four out of every five inner city black men had some contact with the Church or Sunday school. Today [1995], studies show three out of five have no church contact whatsoever. These children were born during a period when the Black Church was held suspect, and their attitude often reflects this perspective.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, 18.

¹⁰⁴ Barna Group, <https://www.barna.com › research> *Most Black Adults Say Religion & the Black Experience Go Hand in Hand*, February 18, 2021,

¹⁰⁵ Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, 20.

The photos below depict the church's history: the image on the left commemorates the church's seventy-ninth anniversary on the fourth Sunday of October 1977, while the image on the right celebrates the church's one hundredth anniversary on the fourth Sunday of October 1998.



#6 Church Celebrating 79th Anniversary 1977



#7 Church Celebrating 100th Anniversary 1998

Both photos reflect the reality of what the church looked like in the 1970s and towards the end of the 1990s. Notably, there is a marked decline in the number of men attending church from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Wallace Smith writes “the secularization in the last half of the twenty first century exacted a great price. The Church no longer occupies the central position of authority in the life of Blacks that it once did.”¹⁰⁶

“Churches and the communities at large were proud of their capacity to care for the aged, widowed, crippled, homeless, and destitute.”¹⁰⁷

Participant 3:3 recounted an anecdote where their favorite fourth-grade teacher, who happened to attend the same church, used a gentle reminder to reinforce a sense of community

¹⁰⁶ Wallace Smith, *The Church in the Life of the Black Family*, 22.

¹⁰⁷ Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years*, 166.

accountability, “If I noticed any misstep in class, she would say, ‘You know I’ll see you in church.’¹⁰⁸ This simple, yet meaningful interaction underscored the interconnectedness of the community. While the teacher might not encounter the student’s parents during the week, the shared Sunday service ensured that their paths would cross, fostering a sense of communal oversight and support.

Accounts from participants in Groups Two (31–40), Three (41–51), and Four (60–90) revealed that in many communities, it was once customary for any adult who witnessed a child misbehaving to intervene and administer correction. This collective responsibility for discipline reflected a deeply rooted communal ethic, where the Church and the broader community worked in tandem to uphold shared values. Such interactions were instrumental in reinforcing neighborhood cohesion and fostering a strong sense of accountability and care.

Urban Renewal or Urban Removal: Restructuring Community Boundaries

One recurring issue that emerged was the profound impact of Urban Renewal on the Black community. This raises critical questions: What events unfolded in the lives of community members that contributed to the sharp decline in Black church attendance and its influence within the community? How did a once-nurturing family atmosphere unravel into a space marked by isolation, loneliness, and feelings of abandonment?

The impact of Urban Renewal on both the Black Church and the broader Black community highlights the significant transformations that have reshaped these essential institutions. “Urban renewal had a significant impact on the black Community in America. It

¹⁰⁸ Participant 3.3, Interviewed by Researcher, March 6, 2022.

undermined liberty, free markets, and human dignity, and was one of the great tragedies of the twentieth century. Black residents faced lasting injustices and displacement due to urban renewal.”¹⁰⁹

While participants in groups one and two did not mention Urban Renewal, those in groups three and four referred to it as “urban removal.” Participant 2:6 shared, “During Urban Renewal, our church was condemned, sold, and slated for demolition. If it weren’t for my uncle, who lives just down from the church here on Jefferies, and my grandfather, who managed to raise the money to buy it back, we would have lost it.”¹¹⁰

Advocates of Urban Renewal deemed the church unfit for service, sold it, and scheduled it for demolition without informing the congregation. This abrupt and unilateral decision disrupted the cornerstone of the community. Both the church and the surrounding neighborhood, essential pillars that brought life and vitality to Black Americans, were deeply affected by this disregard for the voices and needs of those they served.

Urban Renewal disrupted this foundation, displacing countless families who were either pressured to sell their homes or had their properties seized through eminent domain. Hundreds of families were uprooted, with some being relocated to other neighborhoods while others were moved into public housing.

The impact of Urban Renewal extended far beyond the destruction of neighborhoods and businesses—it deeply affected the church, undermining its role as a pillar of community life. The neighborhood church, once a central pillar of the community, was no longer within walking

¹⁰⁹ Scott Beyer, “How the U.S. Government Destroyed Black Neighborhoods: Post-World War II Urban Renewal Replaced Thriving Black Hubs with Highways and Public Housing,” *Catalyst*, (April 2, 2020).

¹¹⁰ Participant 2:6 Interviewed by Researcher, March 26, 2023.

distance for many residents, breaking a vital link between the church and the people it was meant to serve. “People were uprooted and disconnected from where they were and that led to disharmony. I remember a whole lot of old folks dying shortly after relocation began and they were moved into high-rises and moved into apartments for elderly. A whole lot of people just seemed to be dying off. I think what we lost was community.”¹¹¹

The Urban Renewal project not only displaced individuals from their communities but also disrupted their connection to their churches, resulting in a significant decline in church attendance. For many Black Americans, Urban Renewal was seen as “urban removal”—a program that forcibly uprooted Black families from their homes, businesses, schools, and places of worship, dismantling the very fabric of their communities. Participant 4:3 estimated that “the Black community lost 1,100 people, 55 homes, around 160 Black-owned businesses, including 15 to 20 Black-owned grocery stores, Black-owned homes, and five funeral homes.”¹¹²

These losses had a deeply detrimental impact on the Black community. The community had been a nurturing environment where children were instilled with values, cared for, and regarded as the hope for the future. When the community was disrupted, the social teachings that fostered a strong sense of identity and connected children to the structure of family and community were significantly undermined.

Participant 4:3 observed, “The relocation and displacement of people led to us mixing and mingling with others, riding school buses, and losing our sense of identity and direct involvement in our own activities. We were no longer actively shaping the lives of our children.

¹¹¹ Hannah Frisch, “Article Tuesday History: Before and after East Riverside Urban Renewal Project,” *Mountain Express*, August 8, 2017,

¹¹² Participant 4:3 Interviewed by Researcher, November 14, 2022.

The Black Church and Black community once played a vital role in helping to raise our children.”¹¹³

The restructuring of neighborhoods through Urban Renewal profoundly disrupted the familiar foundations of the Black Church and the communities it served. This upheaval altered long-standing social and spiritual dynamics, raising critical concerns about the Church’s capacity to remain a unifying force and familial anchor within a community it once deeply shaped.

Generational Divide

Insights from participant accounts indicate that the decline in church attendance cannot be attributed solely to Urban Renewal or the restructuring of communities. It is also driven by a generational shift in expectations and a marked decline in active participation within the church.

Generational divergence of expectations, or the generational divide, is a theme reflected in the work of Almeda M. Wright, “The Young African Americans interviewed in this research had mixed understanding of their churches. They had equally mixed perspectives on how their churches and spiritually influence how they make sense of things taking place in the world around them”¹¹⁴

Each generation faces the responsibility of shaping its own values, morals, and ethics while drawing inspiration from the legacy left by those who came before. Within the church, a noticeable gap in perspectives often arises between established members and the younger

¹¹³ Participant 4:3, Interviewed by Researcher, November 14, 2022.

¹¹⁴ Almeda M. Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017). 94.

generation. While all groups in the research acknowledge the existence of a generational divide, there is uncertainty about its root causes and how to effectively bridge the gap.

Participant 3:1 could not say exactly why there is a divide, but he stated, “he should go to church and take his children, but he feels lackadaisical about attending and often feels like he should do something else.”¹¹⁵ A deep sense of apathy has taken hold within the Black Church and community, reflected in the attitude, “Why go to church? Nothing will change.” In the past, families placed great importance on attending church. However, today, many parents no longer feel it is necessary to bring their children, youth, or teens to church.

Many churches actively strive to involve younger members, yet bridging the generational gap remains a persistent challenge. To preserve and pass down the church’s history and legacy to future generations, it is essential for younger individuals to engage with the church and connect with its rich historical narrative.

The most common sentiment expressed by the younger generation is, “I don’t think my church does very much because they’re always begging for youth [participation] but when they have us, they just push us away. They’re constantly saying, ‘You can’t do this.’”¹¹⁶

This perspective offers a compelling critique: if the church wants to pass its legacy on to the next generation, it must ensure that the generation feels welcomed and valued enough to stay. Their comments suggest a deeper, more profound insight into the disconnect between the church’s intentions and its actions.

¹¹⁵ Participant 3:1 Interviewed by Researcher, March 9, 2023.

¹¹⁶ Almeda M. Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 17.

Participant 2:2 comments “less and less people want to be involved in ministry, or the history of the church. That’s why the mega churches are doing good and smaller churches are suffering.”¹¹⁷

This intergenerational exchange is essential for preserving the church’s legacy and traditions. The older generation has a history and legacy they wish the next generation to know, value, and embrace. The vital question asked by the Black Church is how to get younger adults involved with the church and what involvement would look like for older members of the church and the younger generation. The older generation view involvement as attending church, engage in worship services and ministries, knowing the history of the church.

Participant 2:6: “Young people today are very civic oriented. They look for the church to engage in real work in the community. They do not want to come to church and sit down. They do not mind coming to listen to the sermon. But they want to get out into the community.”¹¹⁸

Research indicates that both the older and younger generations often misunderstand each other, harboring preconceived negative ideas. In *The Hip Hop Generation*, Bakari Kitwana stated, “As long as the older generation fails to understand the new Black Youth culture in all of its complexities, and as long as the younger generation fails to see its inherent contradictions, we cannot as a community address the urgent crises now upon us, particularly those facing Black American youth.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Participants 2:2 Interviewed by Researcher, January 12, 2023.

¹¹⁸ Participant 2:6 Interviewed by Researcher, March 26, 2023.

¹¹⁹ Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation*, 23.

An underlying sense of mistrust persists within the Black church, fueled by mutual assumptions: the younger generation often feels judged by the older generation as soon as they step through the doors, while the older generation assumes that younger individuals have little interest in attending church.

Participants in Group One (22-30), highlighted a significant issue, noting that Black churches often lack ministries specifically designed to meet the needs of Black youth and young adults, further widening the disconnect. A recurring concern among young adults is the paradox within the Black church: while it outwardly expresses a desire for their involvement, it often unintentionally fosters an environment that feels unwelcoming, discouraging the very engagement it seeks to cultivate.

Participants in Group One (22-30) acknowledged the importance of church, but Participant 1:2 highlighted a significant concern, stating, "The church has strict views on gender and often conveys a hostile, condemning attitude toward those who attend, which makes it feel far from welcoming."¹²⁰

The primary issue deterring young people from attending church is their perception that the Black Church fails to make them feel genuinely welcomed or included as part of the church family. While this may be a perception for some rather than a reality, it remains a significant concern. Participant 1:2 observed, "I feel like a lot of young people feel judged in the traditional church."¹²¹ This represents a dramatic shift from the Black Church's earlier reputation as a place where even visitors were warmly welcomed and embraced.

¹²⁰ Participant 1:2 Interviewed by Researcher, October 3, 2022.

¹²¹ Participant 1:2 Interviewed by Researcher, October 3, 2022.

In contrast, members of Group Four (60-90) offered a different perspective, suggesting that the church itself has not fundamentally changed. Instead, they argue that the shift arises from families no longer prioritizing or actively participating in church attendance.

Participant 4:3 stated, “There is a whole generation not in church. A gap exists in the social fabric, children not learning yet they go to school, and families not attending church.”¹²²

Participants in Groups One (22-30) and Two (31-40) identified feeling unaccepted as a key reason for not attending church. They also highlighted additional factors that contribute to their reluctance to participate. Participant 1:3 cited “the hypocrisy among church leaders, the church not meeting people where they are in the stages of life.”¹²³ Participant 2:2 “I think less, and less people want to be involved with the church.”¹²⁴ Participant 4:3 family atmosphere has changed into more of a secluded setting. People who have gotten more private, more personal. And it is like staying out of my business.¹²⁵

The foundational concept of family was once deeply intertwined with both the church and the broader community. However, contemporary perspectives highlight a growing divide in how the church’s role is viewed. Many from older generations see the church as largely unchanged, while others acknowledge shifts in its ability to cultivate a family-oriented atmosphere.

¹²² Participant 4:3, Interviewed by Researcher, November 12, 2022.

¹²³ Participant 1:3, Interviewed by Researcher, October 14, 2022.

¹²⁴ Participant 2:2, Interviewed by Researcher, January 12, 2023.

¹²⁵ Participant 4:3, Interviewed by Researcher, November 12, 2022.

In contrast, the younger generation presents a different viewpoint, often perceiving the church as stagnant and resistant to change, unwilling to evolve to meet the current needs and challenges of the community.

There are numerous reasons people cite for the existence of a generational divide. Participant 2:4 said “You see a lot of elders in churches and not enough young people. I believe there are tons of reasons why. There is no one reason why this situation exists.”¹²⁶

A plethora of books has been written to explain the decline in Black church attendance, particularly among younger generations, including millennials. “Young Black Christian’s disillusionment with the Black Church’s antiquated liturgical practices, homophobia, or position on male dominance are some of the usual topics of discussion.”¹²⁷

Participant 2:4 highlighted the challenges of identifying a single reason for the decline in Black church attendance, suggesting that the issue is multifaceted. When asked whether there is one definitive cause, Participant 4:3 remarked, “We have a global issue, and it’s equalized. Everybody is falling away from [God] and the Church. It’s not a matter of color; everyone seems to be moving and shifting toward their own set perspectives.”¹²⁸

Participant 4:3 made a compelling observation, noting that the church is no longer a central aspect of life for people, regardless of their age.

¹²⁶ Participant 2:4 Interviewed by Researcher, July 17, 2023.

¹²⁷ Erika D. Gault, *Networking the Black Church: Digital Black Christians and Hip Hop* (New York, NY: New York University Press 2022), 41.

¹²⁸ Participant 4:3 Interviewed by Researcher, November 14, 2022.

Visitors An Extension of Hospitality

In earlier years, the church cultivated a familial ambiance by prioritizing warm and welcoming interactions with visitors. Contemporary experiences of young individuals attending church often reflect a contrasting sentiment, as they frequently perceive a judgmental atmosphere regarding their clothing, marital status, sexual orientation, and economic standing.

Participant 1:2 is quoted saying “I’ve seen a great deal of people my age post on social media things like the church has strict views on, like the LGBTQ situation.”¹²⁹ However, we did not explore if those posts were people stating they went to church and experienced an unwelcome presence.

However, this perception may be influenced more by their expectations and the sources of their information, such as social media, rather than being validated by their actual experiences. For many in this generation, social media plays a significant role in shaping their views and insights. This apprehension also affects young adults, who hesitate to invite guests to church out of concern that their visitors might face harsh treatment or judgment.

Participant 2:2 stated sometimes it is only a perception that young adults have about being judged when they attend church. “They think they will be judge and therefore do not attend church.”¹³⁰ Perception for some people is their reality. However, their perception sometimes may not be accurate.

From the perspective of those in Group Four (60-90) the church is always a welcoming place for visitors. Participant 4:1 When people come to church, “It’s always a welcoming

¹²⁹ Participant 1:2, Interviewed by Researcher, October 3, 2022

¹³⁰ Participant 2:2, Interviewed by Researcher, January 12, 2023.

community, the ushers, and members. If this is your first time in church, we will sing a song. And, afterwards, they will get a token of love and invited to attend service again.”¹³¹

However, the perspectives from Groups One (22-30) and Two (31-40) differ significantly. Participant 1:1 acknowledged the unique characteristics of each church but emphasized that the prevailing perception among young people is a consistent feeling of being judged within the church environment.

Although people’s experiences in church differ, not everyone shares the same perspective. Additionally, the timing and context of an individual’s church experiences may vary.

Participant 2:2 shared that during her first church experience as a teenager, she felt a strong sense of belonging, describing it as feeling like part of a family. “Although at times I could not understand the message or the King James Scriptures, yet I felt like I was around a lot of people who look like my family.”¹³²

However, Participant 2:2 expressed that the current church lacks a family atmosphere. Reflecting on her experience, she stated, “At the church I attend now, I’ve seen people come in, wait, and leave—and we never saw them again. I’ve reached a point where I no longer want to invite anyone because of how I’ve seen others being treated.”¹³³

¹³¹ Participant 4:1 Interviewed by Researcher, November 11, 2022.

¹³² Participant 2:2 Interviewed by Researcher, January 12, 2023

¹³³ Participant 2:2 Interviewed by Researcher, January 12, 2023.

Summary

Dr. James Deotis Roberts writes, “The Black Church was obligated to minister to Black Families.”¹³⁴ Historically, when examining how Black people were forcibly brought to America, torn from their homeland, culture, and familial connections, it becomes clear why Dr. Roberts’s declaration is both commanding and deeply impactful.

Traditionally, the informal mission of the Black Church was to rebuild families and function as an extended family for the community, fostering an inclusive and supportive environment that embraced and adopted all who sought its refuge. “The Black Church and family are the repositories of hope.”¹³⁵

This research highlights a significant shift in the Black Church’s mission, moving away from its traditional focus on building and supporting families. Earlier generations emphasized the importance of attending church and raising their children within its nurturing environment.

However, over time, a notable change has occurred, with the Black community no longer viewing the church as a central refuge or a place of importance for gathering and support and where they feel part of the church family.

Participant 4:1 “families are not coming to church.”¹³⁶ “The church no longer occupies the central position of authority in the life of Blacks that it once did. This fact has a great impact on the family and community.”¹³⁷

¹³⁴ James Deotis Roberts, *Roots of a Black Future: Family and Church*, 20.

¹³⁵ Wallace Charles, Smith, *The Church In the Life of the Black Family*, 25.

¹³⁶ Participant 4:1, Interviewed by Researcher, November 12, 2022.

¹³⁷ Wallace Charles Smith, *The Church In the Life of the Black Family*, 22.

This chapter delved into the generational divide, particularly focusing on the perception of not being accepted or welcomed into the church family due to a judgmental attitude.

The consistent observation from Groups One (22-30) and Group Two (31-40) feels the church is judging them. Therefore, they do not come to church, nor do they invite their friends to church. Some participants in groups one and two expressed the belief that they feel a certain level of pressure from church members. A common response of this generation is typical of Participant 1:2 “I understand only God can judge but many people in church are judging those who come into church.”¹³⁸

Participant 2:2 shared that while she continues to attend church, her experience has been shaped by observing how both members and visitors are treated. She remarked, “I’ve reached the point where I no longer invite anyone because I’ve seen people being mistreated. There’s favoritism in the church.”¹³⁹

This sentiment reflects a broader trend in which many individuals no longer feel welcomed or embraced as part of the church family. As a result, the Black Church is experiencing a significant shift away from its traditional role as a place where families are nurtured, valued, and connected.”

Moreover, a notable change within both the church and the broader community is the current generation’s diminished sense of responsibility to attend church or involve their children in its activities. This decline in engagement has further accelerated the ongoing transformation. In the Black community, there has been a noticeable shift in the perception of the church’s value

¹³⁸ Participant 1:2 Interviewed by Researcher, October 3, 2022.

¹³⁹ Participant 2:2 Interviewed by Researcher, January 12, 2023.

within the community. Historically, the church played a central role in creating, building, and supporting families, but this focus has diminished over time.

Another factor that significantly affected both the Black Church and the Black community is Urban Renewal. This chapter examines the profound negative impact Urban Renewal had on these institutions. The initiatives led to the destruction of homes, the condemnation of buildings—including churches—and the widespread disruption of Black communities, dismantling their stability and cohesion.

These efforts displaced residents from their neighborhoods and severed their connection to the Black Church within the community. With churches no longer easily accessible, many were left without a central place of worship and community support. As previously noted, the effects of Urban Renewal played a significant role in the decline of both the Black Church and the Black community.

Participant 3:3 reflected on their memories of Urban Renewal, stating, "I was young and didn't really understand much about it. I just remember that a lot of old neighborhoods suddenly disappeared."¹⁴⁰

The church's mission to cultivate a familial atmosphere within its congregation and extend that sense of community outward has gradually shifted over time. Younger generations no longer view the church as a place where everyone is warmly welcomed and embraced as part of the church family. This shift was further compounded by the impact of Urban Renewal, which significantly redefined neighborhood boundaries and disrupted community ties.

¹⁴⁰ Participant 3:3 Interviewed by Researcher, March 6, 2023.

Chapter Five examines how these changes have influenced the church, highlighting shifts in both its internal ministries and its outreach efforts as it adapts to these evolving dynamics.

Chapter Five:

Ministries: Inward and Outreach

Introduction

Chapter Four delved into how the Black Church has gradually moved away from its unwritten mission of fostering stronger families. It also examined the detrimental effects of urban renewal projects, which restricted community boundaries, negatively impacting both the Black Church and the Black community. Additionally, the chapter explored perceptions of a growing generational divide within these spaces.

This chapter categorizes ministries into three sections: inward, outward, and social justice. This chapter will explore the historical inward and outreach ministries of the Black Church, emphasizing their role in fostering spiritual growth and supporting both members and the broader community and where those ministries are today.

While social justice is traditionally considered an outreach ministry, this chapter will review social justice through the Black Lives Matter movement.

When the question of inward and outreach ministries was asked, the consensus of the participants was that the church is not engaged in inward or outward ministries. The epitome of these answers comes from the oldest participant in, and affirms the sentiment of Groups Three and Four, Participant 4:4 stated, “We are not doing much.”¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Participant 4:4 Interviewed by Researcher, March 19, 2023.

A central theme emerging from the research is the perception among most participants that today's Black Church, for whatever reason, has limited inward and outreach ministries.

Ministries Inward

Historically, most Black churches, except for Black mega-churches, have lacked the resources to hire professionals for internal or outreach ministries. Instead, they have predominantly relied on volunteers to support and participate in these ministries. Although the discussion on paid professionals in ministry was not extensively explored, the impression the major of participants stated volunteers were responsible for inward and outreach Church ministries.

In African American churches, there is not often a paid professional in ministry except for the pastor and musician. Within the organizational structure of the Black church, two primary paid ministerial roles emerge: one is the pastor, and the other is the musician.

Lincoln cites "in regard to the number of clergies employed by Black Churches, our survey showed that 1,476 (77.9 percent) have only one paid pastor. In other words, paid multiple staffed ministries were very rare among the black denominations but many Black Churches had a number of unpaid assistants, trainees and volunteers."¹⁴²

Despite the absence of trained professionals, in the past Black churches have successfully provided ministries that have made a profound impact both within their congregations and in the broader community. These ministries, whether focused internally or externally, were powered by dedicated volunteers who were deeply motivated by a strong sense of evangelistic calling

¹⁴² Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church In The African American Experience*, 135.

inspired by the church's mission. Participant 3:1 comment, "There were more people energized to become involved in ministry, they were not paid yet more people got involved in ministries within the church and especially in youth outreach."¹⁴³

However, today there is need for the Black Church to have more pronounced ministries for strengthening families, reaching young black men, programs that intentionally construct positive self-image of children, teens, adults. From this research Black churches did not have ministries designed to build and strengthen families. Nor are ministries intentionally designed to provide guidance to youth and young adults.

Most Black churches embraced a covenant that prioritized the religious education of their children, reflecting a deep commitment to nurturing faith and values in the younger generation.

Youth Ministries:

"There's no professional youth minister, stand-alone youth ministry, Sunday school teachers. In Black Churches there is a special emphasis on providing teaching, training, and other ministries to guide, encourage, and inspire youth. The primary forms of youth ministry include a youth choir, youth ushers, monthly to quarterly youth fellowship opportunities Sunday school classes and Sunday worship services led by or dedicated to youth."¹⁴⁴

Interviews with this group revealed a variety of reasons why youth are not attending church, with the most common concern being that churches often appear to lack engaging activities or meaningful opportunities specifically tailored for young people. This ties back to the

¹⁴³ Participant 3:1, Interviewed by Researcher, March 9, 2023.

¹⁴⁴ Almeda M. Wright, *The Spiritual lives of Young African Americans*, 48.

statements shared by many of those who regularly attend church. “We don’t know what to do”¹⁴⁵ and the statement by Participant 4:4 “I don’t think we are doing much of anything.”¹⁴⁶ A consistent issue that emerges is the widespread lack of either volunteers or youth attendance necessary to develop ministries targeted at young people. One clear reason for the absence of these ministries is the low youth attendance itself.

Group Four (60-90) pointed out that many parents are not interested in attending church, which directly impacts the presence of a younger generation in the congregation. Additionally, families feel that the church is failing to meet their needs, further contributing to this decline. Participant 4:3 children follow parents”¹⁴⁷

Based on the evidence gathered, one could conclude that the breakdown stems from both the church and the family, or the next generation. As one member of the Gen X group remarked: “He was in church all day that by the time he reaches his preteen and teens he had other interests not pertaining the church like MTV, Rap, those things got his interested that we eventually stop attending church. While in church he felt he was missing out of other things”¹⁴⁸ The last three generation are not committed to attending church as the two previous generations.

Regarding other ministries focused on the church’s internal growth, none of the participants mentioned any family-oriented ministries beyond the traditional offerings such as Sunday school and Bible study.

¹⁴⁵ Participant 4:1 Interviewed by Researcher, November 12, 2022.

¹⁴⁶ Participant 4:4 Interviewed by Researcher, March 19, 2024.

¹⁴⁷ Participant 4:3 Interviewed by Researcher, November 11, 14, 2022.

¹⁴⁸ Participant 3:3 Interviewed by Researcher, March 6, 2023.

The Black Church appears unprepared to fully engage with the younger generation. Many young people show little interest in traditional roles such as junior deacons or ushers, which are often seen as the primary ways for youth to participate in church life. Instead, they seek ministries that extend beyond the confines of the church's padded pews and resonate with their lived experiences and broader aspirations. The youth in Wright's research indicates that... "Most of the young people resonated with the language of "God calling them" to work for some kind of change or to respond to some of the concerns in the community."¹⁴⁹

The older and younger generations share similar views on ministry, both recognizing the need for societal change and expressing a desire to make a meaningful impact in the world. Both generations also feel a strong sense of God's calling upon their lives, uniting them in their commitment to faith-driven action.

Outreach

Traditionally, the Black Church has not enjoyed the luxury of employing a staff of professionally trained individuals to lead its ministries, except in the relatively recent rise of mega-churches.

Although many congregations are composed of a diverse mix of professionals and blue-collar members, formal training has rarely been a requirement for participating in ministry. In fact, such training has never been a prerequisite for ministry involvement. Often, it is not the professionals but others within the congregation who take on roles like teaching Sunday school

¹⁴⁹ Almeda Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 44.

or serving in various ministries. As Participant 3:2 noted, “her fourth-grade teacher in elementary school was not the same person who taught her Sunday school at church.”¹⁵⁰

The ministries both within and beyond the church included Vacation Bible School, Sunday school, Bible study, and youth ministry. Additionally, the church operated a benevolence program to support individuals in financial crisis. However, financial assistance was sometimes contingent upon the recipient’s membership in the church.

Outreach ministries are virtually nonexistent when it comes to engaging with communities outside the church. Participant 3:1 “When I was growing up the church did more outreach and events in the community. But for several reasons the church is not going out into the community. Primarily for several reasons, we have an older generation...”¹⁵¹

Participant 3:1 echoes a common observation in this research—that church congregations are aging, with many members passing away over time. While reflecting on outreach ministries, Participant 2:3 recalled that the church previously had several such initiatives, but they dwindled as members either passed away or relocated.” Participant 2:3 “People that we looked up to those who were involved in ministry either died off or move.”¹⁵² . Participant 2:3 said, “people died, and nobody took the baton to the next level.”¹⁵³

Participants in Groups Two (ages 31–40), Three (41–51), and Four (60–90) tended to focus on what the church once offered, rather than engaging with its current ministries. Some even

¹⁵⁰ Participant 3:2 Interviewed by Researcher, February 11, 2023.

¹⁵¹ Participant 3:1 Interviewed by Researcher, March 9, 2023

¹⁵² Participant 2:3 Interviewed by Researcher, September 13, 2022.

¹⁵³ Participant 2:3 Interviewed by Researcher, September 13, 2022.

reported leaving the church due to a lack of learning opportunities or programs that addressed their specific needs.

Based on the participants' comments and insights, it appears that somewhere along the way, the previous generation failed to pass down—or was unable to successfully transfer—the importance of active involvement in ministry to the next generation. Alternatively, it may be that the next generation did not fully embrace the teachings, training, or sense of family offered by those who came before them. These reflections echo the sentiment found in Judges 2:10, highlighting the generational disconnect in spiritual continuity. “And also, all that generation were gathered unto their fathers: and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the Lord, not yet the works which he had done for Israel.”¹⁵⁴

Critics of the Black Church may be placing blame on the institution for issues that stem from their own inaction. The current state of the Black Church and community reflects, in part, a failure among individuals to step up and carry forward the responsibilities or vision of those who have either passed on or grown too old to actively participate in ministry work.

Vacation Bible School

Vacation Bible School served as the church's primary summertime evangelistic outreach. To promote this event, churches utilized various methods, including announcements, flyers, and door-to-door visits, to ensure the entire community was informed about the program. However, the churches represented in this research have since shifted away from hosting individual Vacation Bible School programs in their community. Instead, two of the churches have partnered

¹⁵⁴ Judges 2:10 (KJV).

with a predominantly white congregation to conduct a collaborative Vacation Bible School, fostering a more unified approach. This coordination and collaboration emerged primarily due to two factors: a decline in community participation and insufficient involvement and preparation by members of the individual churches. As discussed in Chapter Three, the decline in church attendance by families has had a cascading effect on other ministries.

The reduced participation of church members has significantly diminished the effectiveness of ministries both within and outside the church. In the past, Vacation Bible School was a highly effective tool for attracting people to the church and increasing community awareness of its programs and activities. Participant 2:2 noted “My first exposure to church, was this church, I remember guys inviting the community to vacation summertime Bible School”¹⁵⁵

Unfortunately, participants noted that the church has discontinued its outreach efforts to connect with the less fortunate in the community. Effective outreach ministry is not determined by the size of the church but by the commitment and dedication of its members to engage with and support their community. A few of the churches had a bus ministry to pick up families, or youth that live in government housing. Participant 4:3 “I remember we had three or four buses at the time to go and pick up children from the projects and bring them to church”¹⁵⁶ Apart from the churches of Participants 4:2 and 4:3, no other participants mentioned any knowledge of their church operating a bus ministry to transport children. This highlights a broader trend: the practices that churches engaged in during the past are often no longer being implemented today.

Each church represented in the research values and upheld their Church Covenant, which explicitly emphasizes the importance of intentionally providing religious education for their

¹⁵⁵ Participant 2:2 Interviewed by Researcher, January 12, 2023.

¹⁵⁶ Participant 4:3 Interviewed by Researcher, November 14, 2022.

children. In the past, these churches actively focused on teaching and training the younger generation, particularly during Sunday evening services. However, these evening services, training and teaching ministries were eventually discontinued due to declining attendance, and volunteer participation.

Social Justice

The Black Church originated as a powerful protest movement. Enslaved individuals, rejecting the forms of worship imposed by their enslavers, secretly gathered to practice their faith in spaces free from the watchful eyes of slave masters and overseers. These clandestine gatherings carried great risk; if discovered, participants faced severe consequences, including beatings, being sold away from their families, or even death.

Since its inception, the Black Church has consistently demonstrated remarkable leadership and a steadfast commitment to addressing the pressing challenges of each era. “W. E. B. DuBois once remarked that the Black Church was ‘overworked’ because it was the place in the Black community that had to provide political organization, economic development, educational opportunity, socialization process, a civil rights agenda, artistic expression, leadership training, and literary activities, among other things.”¹⁵⁷

“The 1970’s marked a general decline in the reputation of Black Churches because the end of the civil rights movement and the rise of more radical and nationalistic orientation brought into question the merit of church involvement.”¹⁵⁸ Earlier concerns about social justice gradually gave way to a renewed focus on personal piety. However, the social issues of today are

¹⁵⁷ L. H. Welchel, Jr. *The History and Heritage of African American Churches*, 224.

¹⁵⁸ Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, 18.

far more complex and diverse than those faced between 1970 and 2000. Given the multitude of challenges confronting the community, it is unrealistic for the Black Church to address every issue comprehensively. Nonetheless, all participants unanimously agreed that the church should play an active role in advocating for social justice.

However, there was no consensus or clear agreement on which specific social issues the Black Church should prioritize. The conundrum the Black Church encounters is the plethora of social issues that many from the Black community believe the Black Church should address. It is not possible for the Black Church to attempt to be an advocate for every issue or to be the epicenter of social action. In his book Pinn has chapters of the social issues the Black Church needs to confront: *The Black Church on Economic Issues*, *The Black Church on Health and Sexuality*, *Sexism and Church Ministry*. Another prominent Black Pastor and Statesman in his book called "*The Divided Mind of the Black Church*"¹⁵⁹, has a laundry list of social issues the Black Church needs to engage, also theological issues. While expectations from those outside the church often center on its role in advocating for social justice, there is particular emphasis on addressing the needs of marginalized groups and engaging with issues within the criminal justice system.

Groups One and Two offered distinct perspectives on social issues. Group One expressed the belief that the church is failing to meet the needs of its members and the broader community. In contrast, Group Two emphasized a consensus that the church is not perceived as a welcoming space, particularly for individuals based on their gender or associations with the LGBTQ+

¹⁵⁹ Raphael Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*

community. Group One's comments reflected a longing for an older model of addressing social issues, highlighting a disconnect between traditional approaches and contemporary challenges.

Participant 1:1 The social issues of today are complex, with distinct categories...the (Black) Church needs to choose what issues to confront...I think that choosing is necessary"¹⁶⁰ Those is Groups Three and Four also stated the church is not involve in the social issues, but their perspective were traditional issues the church once advocated for such as the inequalities and racism in housing, education, economics.

Black Lives Matter: Radical Voices

The Civil Rights Movement gave rise to more radical voices within the Black community. However, nationally and locally, frustration grew among these more outspoken activists. "The new generation of activists was impatient and much more inclined toward militant confrontation than their elders."¹⁶¹

Despite apparent changes, genuine progress was elusive, leading to the sentiment that 'the more things changed, the more they stayed the same'. "The mandates of the law, every civil rights law is still substantially more dishonored." Radical voices from the Civil Rights Movement look for more confrontational measures to protest racism. "The Black Church Leadership of the civil rights movement declined to participate in the Black Power Movement; this denial did not stop the rise of black consciousness growing in the Black'."¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Participant 1:1 Interviewed by Researcher, March 7, 2023

¹⁶¹ L. H. Welchel Jr., *The History and Heritage of African American Churches*, 217.

¹⁶² Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church In The Post-Civil Rights Era*, 15.

The Black Power movement gave rise to a Black Consciousness and Black Pride among African Americans. “The Black Power movement would help to establish Black Studies programs at universities across the nation, and the scholars in these programs began a dynamic discourse on the history, life, and culture of African Americans, and they have helped to produce a comprehensive literature countering the many racist characterizations of Africa and African people.¹⁶³ The Black Power Movement involves an embrace of self-determination, a critical read of history, and a new vision of economic and political power. In short it was white power confronted by a determined force.

The participants found it challenging to fully grasp the implications of the Black Church and Community’s disengagement from the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the seeming disconnect between the Black Power Movement and its impact on the Black. Despite this uncertainty, a prevailing sentiment emerged in the assessment of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement.

Both the Black Church and community appeared distant from Black Lives Matter, indicating a noticeable gap in alignment. Critically, Black Lives Matter failed to adequately address key issues within the black community. Moreover, the movement’s protests were marred by instances of violence.

Participant 2:6 comments that “the Black Lives Matter movement was very complicated. Like most Black people and Black Churches, we all understood Black Lives Matter is not just applicable to the police but that black lives need to matter to other Black people. We wanted police reform and accountability, not to defund the police.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ L. H. Welchel, Jr, *The History and Heritage of African American Churches*, 219.

¹⁶⁴ Participant 2:6 Interviewed by Researcher, March 26, 2023.

There was never a voice from the Black Church or Black community to defend' the police. "Why would we want to defund the police, when the police is fully funded, they are not coming into our community when called upon."¹⁶⁵

Participants observed that the Black Lives Matter Movement lacked leadership from the Black Church community, faith-based organizations, and authentic representatives of the community's voice. When asked about the Black Church's involvement in the movement, many expressed concerns about this absence. Participant 2:4 "I would say for the most part, no (Black) Churches participated in Black Lives Matter."¹⁶⁶

Other participants believe the Black Lives Matter movement was hijacked by those beside Blacks. Participant 2:3 "The Black Lives Matter movement was not led by Black people, it was not led by people of faith, that really spoke for our Black community."¹⁶⁷

The unanswered question is why the Black Church and Black community was not involved in Black Lives Matter. Participant 3:3 said, "I would imagine all Black Church should be present and it threw him off not to see the Black Church. "This is our time to show that our lives matter."¹⁶⁸ The Black Church's apparent lack of responsiveness highlights a shift away from active engagement in social activism. Within the church, some perceive the Black Lives Matter and Black Power movements as being rooted in contentious ideologies and divisive rhetoric, which they feel diverge from the church's emphasis on tolerance, unity, and collective

¹⁶⁵ Participant 2:6 Interviewed by Researcher, March 26, 2023.

¹⁶⁶ Participant 2:4, Interview by Researcher, July 17, 2023,

¹⁶⁷ Participant 2:3, Interview by Researcher, September 13, 2022.

¹⁶⁸ Participant 3:3, Interview by Researcher, March 6, 2023.

harmony. Participant 2:3 “look at the violence and riots, looting, cause by those in the protest, then hearing all the conspiracy about people being bused, and Blacks from the Church and Community were not present.”

When discussing the Black Lives Matter Movement, participants noted that the movement did not actively seek involvement from the church. Many perceived the movement as framing the issue primarily in terms of race, focusing on a black-and-white narrative, rather than addressing its moral dimensions. In contrast, the Civil Rights Movement was rooted in a moral and biblical framework, using these principles to guide its protest against racism. The Black Lives Matter movement appeared to intentionally exclude the church from participating in its efforts.

“Black Lives Matter has been intentional about keeping the Black Church on the far periphery of their advocacy for black flourishing. They secularized the movement. No organization that has rejected the societal vision of has ever received the official support of Black Churches.”¹⁶⁹

Rev. Yolanda Pierce, an activist, who serves as dean of Howard University School of Divinity, described how much tension exists between Black Churches and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. In noting that the primary actors in the Black Lives Matter were not religious leaders, Pierce raised the question of whether religious leaders were still necessary for the movement. “I think the larger conversation has to do with whether or not we need religious

¹⁶⁹ Anthony B. Bradley, *Why Black Lives Matter: African American Thriving For The Twenty-First Century* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), xv.

bodies to be leaders and whether or not we're still stuck on a model of religious leadership in which we expect a singular figure, like a pastor, to be on the front line.”¹⁷⁰

Summary

The question that arises is not whether the Black Church has lost its authority, but rather whether some individuals attempting to speak for the community lack genuine connection or identification with the Black Church.

Alternatively, it may be that those outside the church are attempting to position themselves as another voice of authority within the Black community, independent of the Black Church. “The strength of the Black community is our Church.”¹⁷¹

Those raised in the Black Church must take up the baton passed down by a generation that felt a deep sense of duty to attend church to become involved in ministries to reach the community to hear a word from the Lord. “The Black Family as an inclusive community was also an adaptationist community. The Black Church and family became a repositories of hope and support, and nurture regardless of a person’s status in the community.”¹⁷²

Chapter Six will explore the message, the role of the pastor and the worship from the Black Church. The preaching of early Negro preachers was considered the greatest single factor in determining the health, welfare, and spiritual destiny of slaves; this era needs a transformative preaching that changes negative narratives.

¹⁷⁰ Erica Lizza, “Race, Religion, and Black Lives Matter,” *Berkley Center, for Religion, Peace & World Affairs*, April 2018. <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/features/race-religion-and-black-lives-matter>.

¹⁷¹ Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, 36.

¹⁷² Wallace Charles Smith, *The Church in the Life of the Black Family*, 26-27.

Chapter Six:

Introduction

In Chapters Four and Five, we examined how the Black Church has played a pivotal role in strengthening families and how its ministries have evolved beyond inward-focused practices and traditional outreach.

Chapter Six shifts the focus to a concise analysis of the Black Church's message, organized into sections on pastoral leadership, preaching and teaching, and worship. Celebrated for its dynamic preaching and spirited worship, the Black Church continues to be defined—and profoundly shaped—by the power of its message.

The Role of the Pastor

Historically, Black pastors in most Black churches wielded significant influence within their congregations and garnered profound respect in the wider community. “Pastors did not limit their ministries to the walls of their churches or solely to their congregants. Instead, they embraced the entire community as their parish, extending their leadership and care to all who sought their guidance.”¹⁷³ Both the congregation and the broader community valued the pastor's words, guidance, and involvement, recognizing the pastor as a key representative of the Black Church and Community.

People tend to seek leadership and guidance not from the chair of the deacon board or the trustee board, but from the pastor. The pastor has traditionally served as both the voice and the representative of the community, embodying its values and aspirations.

¹⁷³ L. H. Welchel, Jr., *The History and Heritage of African American Churches*, 148.

The pastor's responsibilities extended far beyond delivering sermons, encompassing a broad and diverse range of duties. Congregants relied on the pastor to faithfully communicate the Word of God and provide spiritual guidance.

In addition, the pastor is expected to fulfill a multifaceted role, serving as a civic leader, educator, preacher, worship leader, counselor, and administrator. Responsibilities include conducting visitations and counseling sessions, overseeing fundraising efforts, managing church operations, and providing guidance to various church groups. This wide-ranging role positions the pastor as a pivotal figure at the heart of both the spiritual and community life of the congregation.

“The scope of the Black preacher’s responsibilities ranges from blessing newborn children, to planning and presiding over funeral services, all while simultaneously being available to congregants at any given time. Due to this high visibility and influence in, and on, the community, the Black preacher is often called upon to provide leadership outside the church.”¹⁷⁴

The community holds profound respect for the pastor, viewing them as a compassionate leader who understands their struggles and speaks with the authority of God on their behalf. Even today, when people ask, “Where is the church?” they are often referring to the presence and leadership of the pastor. This enduring reverence is rooted in the community’s sense of empowerment, knowing they have a spiritual advocate connected to God who faithfully articulates their needs and concerns.

¹⁷⁴ David L. Everett, *The Future Horizon for a Prophetic Tradition: A Missiological, Hermeneutical, and Leadership Approach to Education and Black Church Civic Engagement* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 28.

There is an unbreakable bond that unites the Black preacher, the Black church, and the Black community, forming a powerful and enduring connection rooted in shared faith, history, and purpose. “It was the Black Church and the Black Preacher, who were the frontline defenders of the humanity of the people when there were no Black politicians, lawyers, businessmen, labor, leaders, journalists, or university professors to call upon. The Black preacher has the longest tenure of professional leadership in the Black community.”¹⁷⁵ The Pastor represents the voice of the Black Church which is analogous to the voice of the community.

The Pastor is held in high esteem as a figure who embodies spiritual authority and purpose, revered for their divine calling from God. Participant 3:3 “I think education is secondary importance, I believe the first thing for me is God calling you to become a preacher.”¹⁷⁶

In the eyes of the Black community, the preacher was expected to have received a distinct and sacred calling from God. Ministry was not merely a path chosen through personal ambition or formal education; it was a divine vocation. During the era of slavery, when education was scarce and literacy among the enslaved was rare, the importance of learning Bible stories and memorizing scripture became paramount.

Despite these significant limitations, the spiritual knowledge and authority of the preacher served as a cornerstone of the community’s faith and resilience. “One qualification

¹⁷⁵ L. H. Welchel, Jr. *The History and Heritage of African American Churches: A Way Out of No Way*, (Paragon House, St. Paul, 2011), 231.

¹⁷⁶ Group 3:3 Interviewed by Researcher, March 3, 2023.

which the Negro preacher among the slaves needed to possess was some knowledge of the Bible. Preaching meant dramatizing the stories of the Bible and the way God to man.”¹⁷⁷

Following emancipation, some pastors stood out as being more educated than others within their communities. During the post-emancipation era, Black communities prioritized education by founding higher education institutions, with a primary goal of developing an educated and well-prepared ministry to lead and inspire their congregations. “But the desire on the part of the masses for an educated minister is far from universal.”¹⁷⁸ Nevertheless, the Black community deeply values the sacredness of the pastoral calling, regardless of the pastor’s level of formal education.

The respect seniors hold for pastors is so profound that those in Group Four were consistently reluctant to criticize or speak negatively about either the pastor or the church. However, they did share the view that the pastor maintained a prominent and highly regarded presence within the community, earning respect from both congregants and local residents alike.

Participant 4:4 “The preacher would come to your home. My mom entertained our pastor on Sundays, not every Sunday.”¹⁷⁹

Participants in Group Four, while not explicitly stating that discussing the pastor was off-limits, exhibited a demeanor suggesting that these institutions are foundational to the Black community and should not be criticized publicly. They discussed the pastor’s visible presence, and the respect accorded to them by both Black and White communities.

¹⁷⁷ Frazier and Lincoln, *The Negro Church*, 24.

¹⁷⁸ Frazier and Lincoln, *The Negro Church*, 47.

¹⁷⁹ Participant 4:4, Interviewed by Researcher, March 19, 2023.

Participant 4:5 “I can recall if people had a health problem, family problem, problems with those downtown, of something that was particularly serious they would talk to the pastor about their situation. The Pastor was trusted, and the Church was where you received help.”¹⁸⁰

Pinn states, “In the 1970s, respect for Black pastors began to decline in the reputation of the Black Church because the end of the civil rights movement and the rise of more radical and nationalistic orientations brought into question the merit of church involvement.”¹⁸¹

The influence of the Black preacher and church has been waning amid a growing culture of homogeneity. This decline is further exacerbated by instances where prominent ministers have compromised their integrity or become embroiled in scandals. Such conduct has revealed their “feet of clay,” tarnishing the reputation of the Black Church and its leadership, particularly in the eyes of the younger generation. Consequently, many young African Americans are moving away from traditional religious institutions, seeking individualized expressions of faith instead.

From the 1990s onward, younger generations have become increasingly vocal and unforgiving toward ministers entangled in scandals or grappling with personal failings.

By the 2000s, this cohort resisted personal judgment yet often harshly criticized clergy for moral lapses. Participants noted that many individuals ceased attending church after witnessing ministers engage in unethical behavior, leading to a decline in church attendance and a tarnished reputation for the Black Church and its leadership.

¹⁸⁰ Participant 4:5, Interviewed by Researcher, November 16, 2022.

¹⁸¹ Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church*, 18.

Participant 1:3 shared that, despite being raised in the church, I ceased attending upon witnessing the hypocrisy of those in ministry. I saw people in the pulpit out in the street where I am, and the saying practice what you preach.”¹⁸²

In the Black Church, clergy are often held uniquely accountable for their moral and financial conduct, with their actions reflecting directly on the entire institution. This heightened level of responsibility means that any ethical lapses by church leaders can significantly impact the church’s reputation and standing within the community.

For instance, high-profile scandals involving prominent Black pastors have not only compromised individual congregations but have also cast a negative perception on Black church leadership as a whole. Pinn describes, “Rev. Henry Lyons, who is serving a jail sentence because of actions. His financial misdeeds.”¹⁸³

Such incidents underscore the critical importance of ethical behavior among clergy in maintaining the trust and respect of their communities. When spiritual leaders engage in misconduct, it not only harms victims but also erodes the congregation’s faith in their leadership, leading to a broader crisis of confidence within the religious institution. Rebuilding this trust requires transparent accountability measures and a steadfast commitment to ethical conduct.

In his research, Bakari Kitwana stated that “the younger generation must hold themselves accountable for their actions or lack thereof, just as they hold the older generation

¹⁸² Participant 1:3 Interviewed by Researcher, October 14, 2023.

¹⁸³ Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church*, 30.

accountable.”¹⁸⁴ The Black Church must demonstrate integrity and accountability, but most importantly, love and forgiveness.

In an era marked by secularization and the proliferation of easily accessible information, younger generations have begun to question the role and relevance of the Black pastor and the church. With many social needs now addressed through government programs, the traditional functions of the church have evolved.

Nonetheless, the Black Church remains a vital institution where individuals engage in meaningful discussions and advocate for the advancement of the Black community. It continues to serve as a central locus of education and engagement, encompassing spiritual, social, and political dimensions.

The role of the pastor has been vital since the earliest days, when the first pastors preached to enslaved people in the secluded southern backwaters, safely away from the watchful eyes of masters and overseers. These early pastors shared powerful stories of redemption and liberation while providing what we now recognize as pastoral care.

Pastors are called to officiate weddings, bless children, and conduct funerals for loved ones—key community events where both the church and the broader community come together. These occasions involve celebrating unions with congratulatory remarks, offering blessings for children, and providing words of comfort to the grieving.

However, the Black preacher is expected to go beyond remaining behind the doors of their office; their role requires active engagement and visible leadership within the community.

¹⁸⁴ Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation*, 23.

Although many in the Black community embrace the sentiments of Participant 2:4 “The (Black) Pastor and the (Black) Church has let us down.”¹⁸⁵

The Black pastor serves as a symbol of leadership, particularly during times of crisis. People continue to look to the pastor for advice, guidance, and support. In many instances, the community expects the pastor to step up, take charge, and provide decisive leadership when needed.

Preaching: The Message from the Pulpit

“Preaching is central in the Black Church. A saying within the Black Church and Black community is that brothers and sisters as member of the cloth can be forgiven of anything but not preaching.”¹⁸⁶

Preaching is central to authentic Black worship. The proclamation of the word of God, to the people of God. “In the Black Church preaching is the telling of the story. Black folk expect the preacher to tell the story. They expect an answer to Jeremiah’s question ‘Is there any word from the Lord?’”¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Participant 2:4, Interviewed by Researcher, July 17, 2023.

¹⁸⁶ Willam B. McClain, *Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 62.

¹⁸⁷ Willam B. McClain, *Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion*, 62.

Black preaching is deeply rooted in the Bible, often drawing on the Exodus motif of redemption and the liberation of God's people, a theme frequently repeated throughout the American South before emancipation.

The Exodus experience provided hope and confidence that God would act to liberate them as well. Moralistic preaching was rejected, as it was seen as incompatible with their experience of the stark contrast between the teachings of Christianity and the practices of the Christian slaveholders.

The legacy of the Black Preaching is rooted in the Black experiences, developing deep faith in a supreme God who sympathized with the plight and problems of his people, specifically, the existential crisis of slavery and racism.

The Black Preacher reaffirms we are all created in the image of God and through salvation redemption we are born into the family of God. ¹⁸⁸ They gave voice to the conviction that God was at work in history, even the history Black Americans—As God had been at work in the history of the Hebrews.”

Three key questions emerged from the research on preaching, specifically regarding the query, “What are you hearing from the pulpit?” The younger generation expressed several concerns:

¹⁸⁸ Youtha C. Hardman-Cromwell, ‘Freedom From’ In Negro Preaching of the Nineteenth Century,” *ATQ: 19th Century American Literature and Culture*. Vol. 14, No. 4. 2000: 277. Gale Academic OneFile). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A68864396/AONE?u=anon~c8af25bd&sid=googleScholar&xid=4b8c00e6>.

1. As young adults, they often struggled to grasp the message because the context was unclear and difficult for them to understand. Participant 1:1 “When I was in church it was hard for me to understand and grasp what is being said in real life experiences.”¹⁸⁹
2. Many felt that they were not being spiritually nourished or learning anything during church services. Participant 3:1, “I am not sure why I am not going to church; I am lazy to get up and go to church on Sunday, or I would rather do something else, or is it really, truly I have been fed (Learning).”¹⁹⁰
3. They rarely hear themes of redemption or prophetic messages. Instead, the sermons often focus on self-reliance and current events. However, these topics seldom resonate with their personal experiences or understanding. Participant 2:2 “I feel it’s a money business, about growing your own thing, a lot of emphasis on what you have, how much money”¹⁹¹

The concerns of older participants often differed from those of the younger generation. They expressed unease about people being led astray by prosperity preaching. Having grown up in the church, many of them were well-versed in the context of such messages. They preferred sermons focused on redemption, forgiveness, and how God works through challenges to bring about good. These participants sought messages that nurtured their faith and made them feel spiritually fulfilled.

¹⁸⁹ Participant 1:1 Interviewed by Researcher, March 7, 2023.

¹⁹⁰ Participant 3:1 Interviewed by Researcher, March 9, 2023.

¹⁹¹ Participant 2:2 Interviewed by Researcher, January 12, 2023.

Preaching with Context

The comments from the younger generation highlight the need for more relatable and contextually grounded preaching to engage the younger congregants.

There are several generations that did not have parents, grandparents telling them “You got to read the Bible, you got to have the Bible in your life.”¹⁹² Black preachers often used imagery and story, Jesus spoke in parable that painted picture for those to understand. “And spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow.”¹⁹³

These stories in the parable spoken by Jesus resonated with the crowd, both young and old, as they could easily understand and relate to their significance. Black preachers used rich with relatable imagery, not only conveyed a clear message but also inspired hope for a better future. It emphasized how God can work through individuals to bring about meaningful change.”

However, in speaking to a younger generation the stories need to give younger listeners more context. Almeda wring cites from interviews that young people who “felt called by God or their church for change or make a difference in their communities.”¹⁹⁴ However, many of the messages they hear offers hope without providing answers. “[Sermon] he offered hope of a better future, but did not give them an example of what working for that hope, beyond waiting for the blessings of God, will look like.”¹⁹⁵

A subject not explored by the research but discussed in the reading was the exception for the preacher/prophet to speak to the establish maladies of the power structure. “The true prophet

¹⁹² Almeda M. Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 38.

¹⁹³ Matthew 13:3 (KJV).

¹⁹⁴ Almeda M. Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 44.

¹⁹⁵ Almeda M. Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 54.

“speak truth to power, true prophet put their butts on the line. I suspect that many who call themselves prophets would more accurately be described as entertainment in exchange for offering.”¹⁹⁶ Young people expect preaching to address and confront the social issues and injustice that inundate our society. ‘The Black Church must aggressively involve itself again in social and political action.’¹⁹⁷

Preaching and Teaching

Preaching is central in the Black Church. As previously cited, theologian Howard Thurman asserted that “the Negro preacher was the greatest single factor in determining the spiritual destiny of the Black [enslaved] community. “The Black preacher served to nurture hope in the midst of hopelessness. Hope has enabled people to survive in the past and will enable them to survive in the future.”¹⁹⁸

Although the Black preacher may not fulfill all expectations from today’s perspective, their role remains vital to the Black community. “The Black preacher was greatly restricted as to ““movement”” function and opportunity of leadership.”¹⁹⁹

Historically, Black preaching has embodied a dual hope: the liberation of the individual from sin and the emancipation of the community from oppression. “Black preaching is didactic as well as inspiring. It seeks to inform as well as inspire. It seeks to discern the actions of God in

¹⁹⁶ Danielle J. Buhuro, *Spiritual Care in an Age of #BlackLivesMatter: Examining the Spiritual and Prophetic Needs of African Americans in a Violent America* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 154.

¹⁹⁷ Reginald F. Davis, *The Black Church*, 27.

¹⁹⁸ Hardman-Cromwell, ‘Freedom from Negro Preaching,’ 294.

¹⁹⁹ Hardman-Cromwell, ‘Freedom from Negro Preaching,’ 295.

history as it relates to the existential dilemma of those gathered. It seeks to speak to the human condition to lend healing to hurting souls.”²⁰⁰

When analyzing the issue raised by participants who stated they were not learning or being spiritually nourished, the claim initially appears quite concerning. However, it prompts an important question: what were their expectations? Black preaching is inherently biblical, with messages designed to connect scripture to contemporary life situations.

While the participants did not specify the insights or lessons they were seeking, their feedback invites deeper exploration into the nature of their unmet expectations. Most Black churches offer various opportunities for learning and spiritual growth, such as Sunday school, evening services, and Bible study. However, the reasons why these participants chose not to engage in these teaching or learning opportunities were not examined, leaving an important gap in understanding their perspectives.

Due to declining participation, many Black churches have discontinued Sunday evening training and worship services. However, it is noteworthy that most individuals who reported not learning or being spiritually nourished were not attending Sunday school or Bible study. These two vital avenues for teaching and spiritual growth remain widely available in most Black churches and are open to both members and non-members.

In her book, *Generation Me*, Twenge references a shift over several generations where people have increasingly focused on how things affect their own lives. We are now living in

²⁰⁰ William B, McClain, *Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 66.

what she terms the “Me Generation,” “²⁰¹ characterized by a mindset of self-interest, where individuals are more concerned with what they can get rather than what they can give.

Reflecting on the previous generation’s dedication to ensuring their families attended church, it becomes evident that they willingly volunteered their time to lead and participate in various ministries. Driven by a strong sense of divine calling, they took on roles such as teaching Sunday school, initiating ministries for young mothers, coordinating holiday plays for children, and organizing anniversaries for both pastors and churches. Their commitment exemplified a profound dedication to their faith and community.

This previous generation also took on responsibilities within the church community, such as collaborating with young boys and girls, establishing youth choirs, and supporting junior deacons and ushers. Moreover, the younger generation honored senior women by reverently referring to them as the mothers of the Church.

One of the participants made a startling and eye-opening response to the decline in church attendance and church participation. Participant 2:3 said ““and people died’ “some of our elders, people we looked up to, either died off or just moved on. And nobody took the baton to the next level.”²⁰²

The statement, “*and people died,*” serves as a powerful reminder of how the legacy of faith established by the previous generation has not been carried forward by the next. It underscores the fading continuation of their commitment and spiritual foundation, highlighting a profound generational gap in sustaining their vision and values.

²⁰¹ Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2006), 49.

²⁰² Participant 2:3, Interviewed by Researcher, October 13, 2022.

In the book of Judges, we learn that Joshua, the son of Nun, passed away, along with the generation that witnessed the Lord perform great miracles. Joshua and his people had made a solemn oath to serve the Lord and lead their families in faith. However, Judges 2:10 reveals that when this faithful generation died out, the new generation failed to embrace the same values and commitment to God as their predecessors. This shift marked a significant spiritual decline, highlighting the challenge of passing on faith across generations.

Judges 2:10 “And also, all that generation were gathered unto their fathers: and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel.”²⁰³

The Black Church and the Black community once worked hand in hand to provide teaching, training, and education, fostering the growth and strength of their members while addressing the broader needs of the community. However, the next generation did not grow up with the same level of commitment as the previous generation, leading to a noticeable shift in priorities and engagement.

Those who leave the Black Church are often quick to criticize what the Black pastor and church are not doing for the community, yet they fail to recognize how their own lack of involvement contributes to the challenges faced by both the church and the community.

The Black preacher is taught, trained, and encouraged to deliver impactful sermons on Sunday mornings, recognizing that people attend to hear a meaningful and transformative word

²⁰³ Judges 2:10 (KJV).

from the Lord. “Black folk expect the preacher to tell the story. They expect an answer to Jeremiah’s question: ‘Is there any word from the Lord?’”²⁰⁴

Battle in *The Black Church in America* says, “The Black Church has always recognized itself as having a message with a certain character and substance. Some have characterized this message as redemption, others have named it as deliverance, and yet others see the essential message of the Black Church as a love ethic.”²⁰⁵

Black preacher is told to tell the story of Jesus’ life, death, crucifixion, and resurrection. “But we preach Christ crucified”²⁰⁶ Regardless of what the preacher’s topic is they will close out the message with preaching about the cross. “We are reminded over and over again that in spite of what happens on Capital Hill there is a higher hill--Calvary,”²⁰⁷

Black preaching, without exception, is deeply rooted in the Bible. Even the stories told by preachers are intended to highlight specific passages of Scripture. Black preaching is inherently hopeful and eschatological, often using poetic language to deliver prophetic messages that speak out against racism and other systems that denigrate human dignity. It aims to lead people into salvation and freedom from sin while also addressing liberation from physical and political oppression.

Black preaching is a form of theology that grapples with understanding God’s movements in relation to the experiences of Black individuals. As such, “Black preaching is also

²⁰⁴ William B. McClain, *Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion*, 62.

²⁰⁵ Michael Battle, *The Black Church in America*, 69.

²⁰⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:23 (KJV).

²⁰⁷ William B. McClain, *Come Sunday The Liturgy Of Zion*, 62.

a form of teaching, communicating with both the mind and emotions to provide a holistic spiritual experience.”²⁰⁸

Black preaching tends to engage the congregation with social issues, addressing them from a biblical perspective. In contrast, White preaching can be more pastoral and personal, as White communities do not have the same adversarial relationship with the establishment that is experienced by the Black community. Participant 3:3 states “In church you would hear Black preachers tells a story [of faith and hope], while White preachers would be teaching.”²⁰⁹

Some also claimed that Black preachers focus solely on making people feel good when leaving the service. Black preaching intentionally aims to uplift and transform individuals, ensuring they leave the service with a renewed spirit and a distinct perspective. Black preachers should indeed be purveyors of hope, especially in hopeless conditions.

“Howard Thurman stated that when the oppressed heard from the Black Preacher that they were God’s children, they reached a much-needed transcendence amid frightening terrorism. [When] their total environment conspired to din into their minds and spirits the corroding notion that as human beings they were of no significance, thus his one message spring full grown from the mind of God repeated in many ways a wide range of variations: “You’re not slaves, You’re not niggers, You’re God’s Children,” Many a weary, spiritually and physically exhausted slaves found new strength and power gushing up into all the reaches of their personalities.”²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ William B. McClain, *Come Sunday The Liturgy Of Zion*, 65.

²⁰⁹ Participant 3:3, Interviewed by Researcher, March 6, 2024.

²¹⁰ Reginald F. Davis, *The Black Church*, 15.

The Black preacher, guided by the Holy Spirit, proclaims words from the sacred scriptures that address the realities of life while emphasizing God’s presence, which has the power to change lives and situations. The Black preacher offers hope to those in hopeless situations.

Preaching: Prosperity and Prophetic Preaching

There are two main types of preaching in the Black Church: the traditional prophetic preaching and contemporary prosperity preaching. The central issue raised by participants is not necessarily with the preaching itself but rather with the role that Black preachers have chosen, particularly their lack of engagement with the social issues confronting the community.

Prosperity Preaching.

Prosperity preaching teaches to trust in one’s own ability to change circumstances by applying their principles, which somehow activates God’s power and favor.”²¹¹ Several preachers believe the church should not engage in social issues beyond encouraging people to vote, a sentiment echoed by many participants regarding their pastors. Participant 2:5 “My pastor does not preach social issues.”²¹² Contemporary prosperity holds the individual person responsible of their poverty because they have not exercised the proper faith to access the blessing of God.”²¹³

²¹¹ Anthony B. Bradley, *Why Black Lives Matter: African American Thriving for The Twenty-First Century*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 171.

²¹² Participant 2:5 Interviewed by Researcher, April 1, 2023.

²¹³ Walter Earl Fluker, *The Ground Has Shifted: The Future of The Black Church in Post-Radical America*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2015), 61.

Several authors have noted a shift in the church's concerns away from addressing broader social issues. There are several modern famous pastors who do not belong to traditional Black denominations that advocate contemporary prosperity preaching. "Contemporary prosperity church leaders in these traditions, [are] represented by pastoral leaders such as T.D. Jakes, (Neo-Pentecostal), and Creflo Dollar (Word of Faith)"²¹⁴

"Prosperity preaching maintain that the problem of black success and wellness are primarily behavioral, not structural, Black are poor, they tend to argue, not because of what government has done or not done, but because African Americans have not lived by the word of faith and practiced prescribed scriptural forms of holiness."²¹⁵

Prophetic Preaching

Black preaching is often considered prophetic preaching. Prophetic preaching holds the nation accountable for its injustices, including the abuse of the poor, widows, and orphans. "The Black preacher draws from Old Testament narratives to proclaim and announce judgment on the nation and to prophetically challenge the institutions responsible for these societal injustices."²¹⁶

Although some Black preachers have shifted away from engaging in social issues or participating as social activists, the expectation for prophetic preaching has not changed. Prophetic preaching demands visible personal and social transformation, calling for true justice and change.

²¹⁴ Walter Earl Fluker, *The Ground Has Shifted*, 62.

²¹⁵ Walter Earl Fluker, *The Ground Has Shifted*, 62.

²¹⁶ William B. McClain, *Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 63.

“Black preachers often address racial equality, whereas in White churches, such topics have traditionally been viewed as hostile to their prevailing ethos. While White preaching is primarily pastoral, prophetic preaching in the Black Church remains a call to action and accountability.”²¹⁷

“Black prophetic preaching centered in Biblical hermeneutic that views God as a powerful sovereign acting mightily on behalf of dispossessed and marginalized people. A belief in this God, an awareness of the sociocultural context of the black experience, and the creation of a sermon that speaks in a relevant and practical manner to the common domains of experience in black life, when taken together, ultimately result in a powerful sermon that resonates in a potent and meaningful way with those listening in the congregation.”²¹⁸

Worship

Worship itself was not a primary concern for the participants. Some felt the services were too long, while others believed they were designed to provoke emotional outbursts and physical frenzy. A few younger attendees struggled to understand the context of the passages. Participant 1:2 “My Friends and I fine service is too long.”²¹⁹ There is no significant movement towards having two distinct types of services, one traditional and one contemporary, in most churches.

²¹⁷ Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the of the Black Churches*, (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1985), 76.

²¹⁸ Thabiti Anyabwile, *Reviving the Black Church: A Call to Reclaim A Sacred Institution*, (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2015), 34.

²¹⁹ Participant 1:2, Interviewed by Researcher, October 3, 2022.

Black individuals are not leaving their churches at a higher rate than White individuals are leaving theirs. As Participant 4:3 noted, “there is a general decline in church attendance across all racial groups.”²²⁰ Within the Black community, this decline is attributed to the perception that Black churches are not actively engaging in social issues or in the daily lives of the community. Many believe that the Black Church is not doing enough outreach or in reach to improve community life.

²²⁰ Participant 4:3 Interviewed by Researcher, November 14, 2022.

Chapter Seven:

Conclusion

The research confirms that the Black Church has lost its prominence as the authoritative voice in the Black community. While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment or place when this decline occurred, the Black community still regards the Black Church as a significant voice that should speak out and engage with the issues they face. Despite its diminished influence, there remains a reserved place for the Black Church to reconnect with the community.

Our initial assessment aimed to examine the shifts in the Black Church that have led to its loss of authority and the decline in church attendance. The research revealed that not only are Baby Boomers disgruntled with the Black Church, but a large segment of young adults is equally disappointed and disillusioned.

The study focused on three key areas that have traditionally had a significant impact on both the church and the community: the shifts in the Black Church's Mission, Ministry, and Message have contributed to the decline in church attendance.

This triad of involvement once created, strengthened, and validated families through its mission. Through its ministries, the church supported the community by advocating issues that impeded Black people's access to education, employment, and economic opportunities. It was through prophetic preaching and the symbolic role of the pastor that the Black Church provided a message of faith, hope, and love to counteract the impact of systemic racism that debilitates all people.

When these areas decline, they contribute to the overall weakening of the church's mission, ministry, and message, leading to significant changes within the community. The

research and literature consistently highlight three key shifts in the Black Church's mission, ministry, and message.

The call is for the church to strengthen families, return to its roots of resistance, and deliver a prophetic message that speaks not only to the immediate community but also to the broader society.

Mission: Rebuilding and Strengthening Families

The consensus among participants aligns with prevailing literature: the mission of the Black Church is to return to, recreate, and redefine the social construct of family. The Black Church is called to emulate the resilience and unity demonstrated by Black people during slavery, fostering a familial atmosphere that strengthens community bonds.

The concept of family within the Black community did not originate from the traditional European model of the nuclear family. Under the harsh conditions of slavery, Black people were unable to conform to the European construct of family. Instead, they created a more inclusive and adoptive sense of family, embodied by the Black Church. To fulfill its mission, the Black Church must once again strive to be all things to all people, fostering unity and support for the entire community.

Rebuilding Family

The Black Church was built on the concept of family and the influence of extended families. From this social construct, the church became a place where the needs of Black families were addressed and strengthened. By fortifying families, the church itself was strengthened and supported. The heart of the Black Church was, is, and always will be family.

Once again, Black Families are struggling with spiritual and social issues that have negatively impacted the Black Church and Community. The Black Church must return to being a place where everyone is considered part of the larger church family and, more broadly, the universal family of God.

This does not require any specific programs to accomplish; rather, it calls for a fundamental shift in mindset. For reasons that remain unclear, the Black Church appears to have distanced itself from its traditional roles of fostering strong families, creating a welcoming environment for newcomers, and recognizing the vital role of youth as future leaders. Some suggest that the Black Church has adopted elements of the White Conservative Christian perspective, which may have influenced this shift.

While programs exist that emphasize the idea of being part of God's inclusive family, a frequent criticism of the Black Church is its perceived lack of love and warmth. Restoring the image of a truly loving and welcoming community requires a collective commitment—an effort that everyone must embrace and actively demonstrate in their actions and interactions.

Youth Involvement:

Feedback from the younger generation often highlights feelings of judgment and a sense of exclusion, with many believing they have no meaningful place or role within the church. To address this, the Black Church must take deliberate steps to redefine the value and role of its youth within the faith community. It should strive to become a space where children and young people are genuinely valued, empowered, and prepared to carry forward the legacy of previous generations.

The Black Church must emphasize the intrinsic value of every individual as an integral part of the church family while nurturing a deeper sense of belonging to the family of God. Implementing an enrichment program that underscores the truth that we are all created in the image of God and adopted into His family could greatly enhance this effort, fostering unity and a stronger sense of community among believers.

The narrative rooted in the 1787 Three-Fifths Compromise, which sought to dehumanize people of color by reducing their humanity to just three-fifths of a person, has left a lasting legacy. Even today, many Black individuals feel they are treated as second-class citizens, despite their invaluable contributions to the foundation and development of America.

To counter this negative narrative, the Black Church must reaffirm the foundational teaching that all humanity is created in the image of God. Emphasizing this truth fosters dignity, respect, and mutual responsibility across all generations.

This principle was a central focus of the Black Church and its community during the late 1960s and 1970s, even if not always explicitly acknowledged. By reclaiming and promoting this belief, the Black Church can continue to instill these values and strengthen the bonds within its community. “Biblical interpretation within the Black Church has to be addressed in a new way.”²²¹

²²¹ Danielle J. Buhuro, *Spiritual Care in an Age of #BlackLivesMatter*, 80

Strengthening Families

The Black Church has historically served as a place where everyone was treated as family and reminded that they were created in the image of God, regardless of their social status. Much has been written about the psychological impact of racism on the development of the Black community. One prominent concept, Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome, was popularized by Joy DeGruy to describe these lasting effects. To address these challenges, the Black Church must embrace all members, fostering an environment of unity, healing, and belonging for everyone in the community.

The Black Church has historically been a cornerstone of dignity and empowerment, instilling in its members the belief that they possess unique gifts from God. It was a place where individuals and families could turn for support, whether seeking economic assistance or guidance on family matters.

Through its central role, the church not only nurtured faith but also served as a vital hub for addressing broader social issues. To reclaim this legacy, the Black Church must once again position itself as a central force in the community, actively addressing and combating systemic racism while fostering unity and resilience.

The younger generation must feel deeply valued by the Church, understanding that their presence is not only appreciated but vital to the future. The Black Church must reinforce the belief that just as God moved powerfully in the lives of previous generations, He will do the same for them as they navigate the challenges of the future.

In the late 1940s and 1950s, the Black Church served as the epicenter of Black life, playing a pivotal role in shaping the younger generation. It was a place where many received essential training, teaching, and inspiration, equipping them to lead and make meaningful

contributions. Reestablishing this role is essential to ensure the younger generation remains empowered and connected to their faith and heritage.

The younger generation of the late 1940s and 1950s, many of whom became renowned orators, musicians, gospel singers, secular entertainers, political and social activists, athletes, and leaders in education and medicine, found their roots in the Black Church. These children were cherished by the Black Church family, where they were taught, trained, and nurtured as gifts from the Lord. This foundation empowered them to excel and create transformative change in every field they pursued, leaving an enduring legacy of achievement and inspiration.

In the 21st century, a multitude of social programs were introduced to support communities, but in recent years, government support has entered a phase of retrenchment. Despite never having abundant or unlimited resources, the Black Church and its community have always demonstrated a profound sense of collective mindfulness, offering assistance to meet financial needs and guidance for addressing family challenges.

To remain effective and relevant, the Black Church must cultivate a persona rooted in love, embodying inclusivity and extending its reach to all people. It cannot afford to view families through the narrow lens of conservative perspectives but must instead embrace a broader, more compassionate approach that acknowledges the diversity and complexity of modern life.

Regardless of how a family is structured—whether with one parent or two—they are an integral part of the extended family of God. The Black Church must actively teach and affirm that all believers are grafted into the family of God, created in His image, and embraced as His sons, daughters, and people. This message fosters unity, belonging, and a deeper understanding of the shared identity within the body of Christ.

The mission of the Black Church to rebuild and strengthen families is driven less by formal programs and more by a mindset of acceptance and mutual recognition. The foundation of family and extended family is deeply rooted in the belief that “we need one another” to survive and thrive. This “we are family” concept was particularly strong during a time when church members often lived in close proximity to the church, fostering a deeper sense of community and interconnectedness.

Reclaiming this spirit of unity and collective support is vital for the Church’s mission today. However, all Black Communities have been removed or destroyed from the impact of Urban Renewal. With Urban Renewal the impact changes the dynamics of Black Church Attendance and community.

Regarding church attendance, participant 4:2 observed, “People are leaving the church in all denominations.”²²² This statement reflects a broader reality that extends beyond the Black Church. However, it is important to note that the role of the church differs significantly between communities.

The Black Church has historically been a vital institution for the Black community, a place not just of worship but of survival, support, and empowerment in the face of systemic challenges. This distinction underscores the deeper social and cultural significance of the Black Church within its community. “The Black Church was part of a much larger Black community that interacted socially, politically, and spiritually throughout the week”²²³ One of the ministries the church can engage in is, as Wallace suggests, return or “develop an adoptionist

²²² Participant 4:2, Interviewed by Researcher, February 1, 2023.

²²³ Marvin A. McMickle, *Preaching to the Black Middles Class: Words of Challenge, Words Of Hope* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press), 5.

community”²²⁴ and refuse to have a society of groups defined our community, family, and children. Developed a Family Enrichment Ministry. Wallace’s strategy can be adopted: this ministry intent to “1. To heighten self-image, and that all persons are created in the ‘image of God.’ 2. To develop skills for building family relationships, i.e. strengthening and understanding blended families, single and two parent families, strengthening spousal relationships. 3. Ministries that provide educational and recreational opportunity for children, youth, young adults.”²²⁵

Ministries: Expanding Outreach and Strengthening Inward Reach

The ministries of the Black Church were originally designed to combat the effects of systemic racism, equipping the community with tools to cultivate a healthy self-perspective, provide educational opportunities, and pass on a legacy of faith in a sovereign God.

However, the church has shifted from focusing on spiritual development and teaching members the Word of God to emphasizing how to live out one’s faith before God. This shift has led to a domino effect: declining church attendance resulted in the elimination of programs, and the loss of these programs diminished both the church’s and the community’s voice and influence.

The Church cannot do it all. However, the Church can provide for other social ministries to operate from the church as it ministers to the community. The Black Church, since the removal of the Black community, must adjust the definition of Community to stretch wider than

²²⁴ Wallace Charles Smith, *The Church in the Life of the Black Family*, 107.

²²⁵ Wallace Charles Smith, *The Church in the Life of the Black Family*, 115.

a particular area, to redefine the geographical boundaries and racial and gender way of identification.

Inward Reach Ministries

Many Black Churches have discontinued traditional biblical education programs such as Vacation Bible School, Sunday School, evening teaching sessions, and worship services, largely due to declining attendance. Another contributing factor is the shortage of volunteers within the congregation who feel called to teach or are willing to make the sacrifices necessary to sustain these ministries.

Compounding this issue is the financial reality faced by most Black Churches. The average congregation lacks the resources to hire professional staff to manage and operate various pastoral ministries. As a result, these vital programs, which once served as the backbone of spiritual growth and community engagement, have diminished or disappeared altogether.

The Black Church faces two critical challenges. First, many churches lack both paid professional staff and a sufficient number of volunteers to effectively operate their ministries. Second, there is a noticeable decline in interest among members in participating in programs aimed at fostering spiritual growth and education.

Additionally, the traditional Black Church is contending with the realities of an aging congregation. Seniors, who have long been the backbone of the church, often face difficulties attending services regularly due to health or mobility issues.

At the same time, many adults show a diminished level of commitment, and younger generations often struggle to connect with biblical teachings. They also perceive the church as

being inadequately engaged with pressing community issues, further widening the generational divide. These factors collectively underscore the urgent need for the Black Church to adapt and reimagine its role in fostering connection, relevance, and community impact.

This situation poses a significant challenge for the Black Church. While there is a strong desire to offer inward-focused ministries, strengthen families, and support the youth, the church often struggles with a lack of both professional staff and committed, skilled members willing to minister effectively to the needs of the current generation.

Furthermore, the traditional Black Church is often located in underserved or disadvantaged communities, while many of its members now reside in different, more distant neighborhoods. This geographic disconnect has been exacerbated by the displacement of Black communities, contributing to the decline of neighborhood churches and weakening the close-knit ties that once defined these congregations.

Urban Renewal

Urban Renewal—often referred to by Black residents as *Urban Removal*—resulted in the widespread uprooting and relocation of Black families, the closure of Black-owned businesses, and the shutdown of Black schools, with students being reassigned to consolidated institutions. These changes disrupted the fabric of Black communities and the support networks that sustained them.

To remain relevant and impactful, the Black Church must redefine its concept of community, moving beyond geographic boundaries to embrace the broader, dispersed Black

community. Evangelism should be at the heart of all church activities, serving as a unifying force that bridges these divides.

While larger churches have the resources to make substantial contributions, smaller churches can collaborate and pool their efforts to create a meaningful and lasting impact on the wider community. This collective approach can help restore the sense of unity and purpose that has historically been central to the Black Church's mission.

Expand Selective Outreach Ministries

The challenges facing inward ministries also extend to outreach efforts, largely due to the shortage of paid staff and volunteers who feel a divine calling or demonstrate a strong commitment to ministry. Historically, the Black Church has thrived by relying on dedicated volunteers, those who either felt a spiritual calling to serve or were deeply committed to the mission of the church—rather than on paid professionals. This reliance on passionate, committed individuals has been the cornerstone of the church's ability to sustain both its inward-focused ministries and its outreach initiatives.

A younger participant suggested that the Black Church should be strategic and selective in the social issues it chooses to address. Historically, the focus of civil rights efforts was on combating systemic denial of basic rights—such as access to education, employment, and economic opportunities—discriminated against solely on the basis of race.

Today, civil rights advocacy has evolved to encompass a wider range of issues, addressing discrimination based not only on race but also on other factors such as gender, sexuality, religion, and socioeconomic status.

In Wright's research, "75% of students identified concerns such as homicide, violence, drugs, and crime as pressing issues, while 40% highlighted divisions among groups—whether racial, ethnic, or religious—as significant challenges." The younger generation appears to connect deeply with the idea of being "called by God" to contribute to meaningful work or drive positive change in addressing these issues."²²⁶

The Black Church must harness the passion and insights of the younger generation, who are deeply invested in driving meaningful change both within and beyond the Black community. To remain effective, the church must broaden its understanding of community, recognizing it as more than a geographic concept and instead focusing on the shared challenges and opportunities that shape its members' lives. Identifying and addressing the critical issues affecting the well-being of the community is essential. Outreach ministries, therefore, are not only vital to the survival and relevance of the Black Church but also crucial to the continued strength and vitality of the Black community as a whole.

Another essential ministry for the Black community is one that offers guidance and explores alternatives to a life of crime for Black men. Over the past few decades, the number of Black men awaiting sentencing in the prison system has risen sharply, while their enrollment in higher education has declined significantly. Addressing this disparity is critical to empowering Black men and fostering pathways to opportunity and success.

Evidence shows that a significant number of Black men are unchurched, and many of those in the judicial system lack positive male role models in their lives. The Black Church must

²²⁶ Almeda M. Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*, 44.

prioritize ministering to families living in poverty and reaching out to unchurched men in the community to offer guidance, support, and a sense of belonging.

The growing divide between the Black middle class and the Black underclass, as they no longer share the same neighborhoods, underscores the need for innovative strategies to foster cooperation and unity. Many who are concerned about the future of the church in America see the challenges facing the Black underclass as deeply theological issues that demand attention.

To address these challenges effectively, we should draw upon the wisdom and practices of earlier eras, examining the sources and norms that shaped the church's historical role in supporting and uplifting the community.

While it must continue to embody love and support for all individuals, it cannot single-handedly tackle the vast array of social challenges facing Black Americans. Addressing these complex issues will require the church to partner with other organizations and groups, fostering collaboration to develop more effective and sustainable solutions.

One of the most pressing needs facing families today is access to meaningful educational and recreational opportunities. The Black Church is uniquely positioned to respond—but it must rise to the moment. It is no longer enough to limit engagement to Wednesday night Bible study and Sunday morning worship.

Families are seeking consistent, accessible support throughout the week—support that nurtures the whole person and the entire household. They need spaces that offer educational enrichment, health and wellness resources, spiritual guidance, mental health support, and safe, engaging recreation. The Church must expand its presence and programming to meet these needs—because when the Church opens its doors wider, it opens the path to healing, empowerment, and transformation for the entire community.

Small churches have a powerful opportunity to make a lasting impact by partnering with larger congregations to offer vital educational resources to their communities. Through collaboration, they can help establish after-school programs, weekend youth fellowships, and other enriching activities that support learning, leadership, and spiritual growth. By joining forces, churches of all sizes can create a stronger, more unified presence that uplifts youth and empowers families.

Message: Prophetic Vision, Prosperity, and Worship for the Church and Community

The Message

The research highlights diverse opinions regarding the message the Black Church should prioritize. Some argue for a return to its historical role of resistance against oppression, while others advocate for reshaping the narrative to transform how Black individuals see themselves as integral members of God's family.

Additionally, there is a growing call to reconsider the role of the pastor as a singularly charismatic leader. For the Black Church to thrive in the modern era, the traditional model of charismatic leadership may need to give way to a collective leadership approach—one that empowers and incorporates the voices and talents of the broader church community.

Some advocate for prophetic preaching that emphasizes God's sovereignty, focusing on liberation from sin and the freedom of the oppressed and captives. In the Black Church, this message is centered on redemption—a transformative change of heart that manifests in how individuals live their lives and interact with others.

Despite the challenges posed by scandals involving some Black Church leaders, it is essential to restore the role of the pastor to one of respect and integrity, where they are viewed as

responsible and trustworthy spokespersons for the community. The Black Church has long been a symbol of steadfastness and uncompromising integrity, and preserving this legacy is vital for its continued influence and relevance.

The consensus is that the most powerful message from the pulpit is how pastors live their lives beyond it. The current generation is seeking leaders from the Black Church who embody integrity in both word and action. Black pastors are expected to serve as symbols of this integrity, providing guidance and support to individuals in crisis and helping them discover meaning and purpose in their lives. “Politicians and other community leaders, recognize the potential of Black Churches to shape opinions of those living in urban areas.”²²⁷

The message to the Church and community should emphasize the importance of a willingness to transform our collective mindset. As Davis highlights in *Is the Church*, this shift is essential for fostering growth and addressing the challenges of our time. “Relevant states the plight of Black Americans is to be transformed, the Black Church and Community must change this way they think.”²²⁸

The early Black Church was deeply influenced by the Exodus narrative, finding inspiration in the Hebrew people’s relationship with God and their deliverance from slavery. This story of liberation and divine faithfulness became a powerful foundation for the church’s identity and mission.

For the average Black Church member, whether the preaching is prophetic or centered on prosperity, the most crucial element is a message that offers hope in the midst of life’s

²²⁷ Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, 31.

²²⁸ Reginald E. Davis, *The Black Church: Relevant or Irrelevant in the 21st Century*, (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2010), 51.

challenges. The biblical narrative must be interpreted in a way that underscores God's active presence and faithfulness throughout the history of Black people, providing inspiration and resilience for their journey.

According to the current folklore, a young boy was once told about the many conquests of hunters over the lion. This story intrigued the little boy: he was puzzled and inquired: "If the lion is supposed to be the king of the jungle, why is it that the hunter always wins?" The father responded: The hunter will always win until the lion writes his own story! The same can be said about African Americans, who have been victimized by a narrative from Scriptures that deny their humanity and place in God's realized history.²²⁹ The biblical narrative must resonate with the daily realities of Black people's lives while

remaining inclusive of all people. The message should address their immediate needs, incorporating not only a realized eschatology that reflects Jesus' enduring legacy but also a visualized eschatology, where God ultimately sets all things right. Early enslaved people held a steadfast belief that God would intervene to bring justice and restoration. One of the most powerful spirituals that sustained them, instilling an unyielding hope, was: "I got shoes, you got shoes, all God's children got shoes."

The Black Church has always recognized itself as having a message with certain characteristics and substances. Some have characterized this message as redemption, others have named it deliverance and yet others see the essential message of the Black Church as a love ethic. Instead of perpetuating forms of the Church that mimic civil religion. The Black Church unashamedly shows the world its worship of God that demonstrates love of neighbor.²³⁰

²²⁹ Cain Hope Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 98.

²³⁰ Michael Battle, *The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality*, 69.

Prophetic or Prosperity Preaching or Message.

Only theologians and preachers often debate whether the message should be prophetic or one of prosperity. The average Black congregant simply seeks to hear a word from the Lord. Most Black people desire preaching that inspires and encourages them to navigate today's adversities.

Prophetic Message

The prophetic message speaks truth to power and does so with conviction. Prophetic preaching challenges systemic injustices to bring about change and compels those in power to treat humanity with dignity.

This form of preaching remains essential. It issues warnings from the watchmen on the wall, alerting of impending disaster if current paths are not altered. Prophetic preaching encourages hearers to rely on the Lord's movement and seek His guidance and direction.

Prosperity Message

Prosperity preaching places the responsibility for an individual's situation and condition entirely on their own shoulders. While it seeks to empower people by encouraging them to change their circumstances through faith, it also subtly shifts blame onto them for their challenges or struggles. Prosperity theology teaches that one can activate God's power and favor by applying specific principles, effectively making divine intervention contingent upon human action.

In contrast, biblical Christianity emphasizes that God's power and favor are always at work, fulfilling His purposes even in the most difficult and trying circumstances. This perspective offers hope and assurance rooted in God's sovereignty, rather than placing the

burden of outcomes solely on human effort.”²³¹ This type of preaching reflects the concept of “double consciousness,” or having “two minds,” more than any other form of preaching in the Black Church. It represents the Black American attempt to reconcile the implications of faith with the realities of living in a world filled with tension.

Anecdote:

The style of preaching is just as important as the content itself. Some participants observed that they could often predict how a sermon would conclude, as pastors frequently ended in a similar manner—seemingly aimed at stirring emotional reactions during the preaching experience rather than inspiring lasting devotion and reflection afterward. In the Black Church, a pastor’s ability to preach powerfully and tell a compelling story often holds greater value than their formal education, highlighting the importance of connecting with the congregation in an impactful and relatable way.

Worship

Black worship services are characterized by vibrant praise and music, heartfelt prayer, personal testimonies, and powerful, climactic preaching. Worship in the Black Church serves as a celebration of life and a sacred time to reflect on God’s faithfulness in guiding and sustaining the congregation through another week’s journey.

²³¹ Anthony B. Bradley, *Why Black Lives Matter: African American Thriving for The Twenty-First Century*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 171.

It is a space where the presence of God is profoundly felt, offering a transformative experience akin to a weekly Pentecostal encounter, as the arrival of the Holy Spirit renews, uplifts, and inspires the community.

The pinnacle of the worship service is the preaching, which often reaches its crescendo at the Cross, where forgiveness is received, and God's boundless love is revealed.

The Black Church must not forsake prophetic preaching, as it serves as a powerful catalyst for repentance and the reception of the Holy Spirit, ultimately bringing about transformation and new life. However, an emerging trend in many Black Churches is a shift toward mirroring White Churches by placing greater emphasis on teaching rather than the traditional dynamic of preaching. This shift raises questions about maintaining the unique spiritual and cultural essence that has historically defined the Black Church experience.

Worship in the Black Church is deeply interactive, with the congregation actively engaging in the preaching experience. What the White Church may interpret as emotionalism, the Black Church understands as the manifestation of the Spirit of the Lord descending upon individuals. This worship experience is transformative, instilling hope and affirming that the future is not dictated by external forces or oppressive systems.

Within this sacred space, systemic injustices are confronted and resisted, empowering worshippers to persevere and seek change. The Black Church delivers a message to the community that exposes sin but ultimately leads to salvation. It proclaims a powerful narrative of freedom—freedom from slavery, freedom from discrimination, and freedom from all forms of bondage—offering a vision of liberation rooted in faith and the redemptive power of God.

The church's message should inspire young people to engage with social issues that strip individuals of their dignity, deny their humanity, and hinder them from realizing the full potential that God has instilled in them.

Just as the Black Church relied on the younger generation during the Civil Rights Movement, it needs their energy, passion, and insight today. However, today's youth are drawn to a church that not only preaches faith but also takes tangible action, actively advocating for the disadvantaged and addressing the systemic challenges facing their communities. The church must rise to meet this call, becoming a beacon of justice and compassion that resonates with the values of the next generation.

By leveraging diverse technological platforms, the Black Church can amplify its prophetic message, reaching a broader audience than ever before. To position itself at the forefront of meaningful change, the Church must deliver a message that challenges individuals to take responsibility for using their God-given gifts to make a transformative impact on the world. This approach not only inspires action but also reinforces the Church's role as a catalyst for spiritual, social, and cultural progress.

Worship services have the potential to be more inclusive and unifying when they thoughtfully blend both traditional and contemporary styles. Rather than separating congregants by age or preference through multiple distinct services, churches can create a shared worship experience that honors the rich heritage of the past while embracing the energy and expression of the present.

Offering only separate services for different generations may unintentionally deepen the divide between older and younger members. A blended approach, however, fosters connection, mutual respect, and a sense of unity—strengthening the church as one body worshipping together.

In many Black Churches today, the tradition of sharing testimonies has faded—but it is a powerful practice that deserves revival. Romans 10:17 reminds us, “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” Testimonies are living proof of God’s presence and power, offering real-life encouragement and strengthening the faith of all who listen. By reintroducing this sacred practice, the Church can rekindle a spirit of hope, connection, and spiritual growth among its members.

Equally important is how we welcome those who walk through our doors for the first time. It’s not enough to simply recognize visitors from the pulpit—we must embrace them with intentionality and warmth. Creating a dedicated ministry to personally greet guests, introduce them to members, and, when possible, connect them with the pastor, transforms a moment of recognition into a meaningful experience of belonging. When people feel seen, valued, and connected, they are far more likely to return—and to grow within the community of faith.

Final Conclusion

Historically, the Black Church has been a cornerstone institution, empowering Black Americans to endure and overcome racism, crises, grief, and trauma. It served as the central authority and the primary voice of advocacy for the Black community. However, in recent years, the Black Church has seen a decline in its role and influence within the community.

The primary research question explored in this study is: **How has the Black Church lost its authoritative voice within the Black community?** The research confirms that the Black Church has lost its prominence as the authoritative voice in the Black community. While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment or place when this decline occurred, the Black community still regards the Black Church as a significant voice that should speak out and engage with the

issues they face. Despite its diminished influence, there remains a reserved place for the Black Church to reconnect with the community.

Our initial assessment aimed to examine the shifts in the Black Church that have led to its loss of authority and the decline in church attendance. The research revealed that not only are baby boomers disgruntled with the Black Church, but a large segment of young adults is equally disappointed and disillusioned.

The study focused on three key areas that have traditionally had a significant impact on both the church and the community: the shifts in the Black Church's Mission, Ministry, and Message have contributed to the decline in church attendance.

This powerful triad of involvement—mission, ministry, and advocacy—once served as the backbone of the Black Church's role in uplifting and empowering families. It didn't just offer spiritual guidance; it actively strengthened and validated the Black family through bold, community-centered action. Through its ministries, the Church stood as a champion for justice, confronting the barriers that denied Black communities' fair access to education, employment, and economic opportunity.

At the heart of this movement was prophetic preaching and the symbolic leadership of the pastor—voices that delivered messages of faith, hope, and love in the face of adversity. In an environment poisoned by systemic racism, the Black Church became a sacred space of resistance and renewal, offering not only spiritual refuge but also the inspiration and courage to pursue justice, equity, and healing for all.

When the mission, ministry, and message of the Black Church begin to decline, the impact reverberates far beyond the sanctuary walls—it contributes to the weakening of the Church's influence and the erosion of its role as a cornerstone of the community. Research and

literature consistently point to three critical shifts that have reshaped the Black Church: a transformation in its mission, a dilution of its ministry, and a softening of its prophetic message.

Now more than ever, the Church must reclaim its foundational role. It must recommit to strengthening families, revive its historic stance of resistance against injustice, and boldly proclaim a prophetic message that speaks not only to the needs of the immediate community but also to the moral conscience of the broader society. The times demand a Church that is courageous, compassionate, and unapologetically committed to justice, healing, and hope.

“The Black Church must lead the way in bringing about our society’s transformation. Black Families are the key to this process.”²³² People in the Black community—and the broader society—still look to the Black Church as a moral compass and a trusted voice of authority. They expect it to speak boldly and unapologetically on behalf of the Black community, especially on matters of racial injustice, social inequity, and systemic oppression.

In a world where silence can be complicity, the Black Church is still called to be a prophetic voice—challenging injustice, advocating for the marginalized, and leading the charge for transformative change.

A powerful quote from Participant 4:3” I don’t believe the Black Church has lost its authority in the Black community as long as we have funerals. Because people want to bring the funeral to the church, it is relevant. It has not lost its relevance.”²³³

Although the Black Church may be battered by internal challenges and bruised by external criticism, the Black community continues to look to it for leadership. Despite its

²³² Wallace Charles Smith, *The Church in the Life of the Black Family*, 103.

²³³ Participant 4:3, Interviewed by the Researcher, November 14, 2022.

imperfections, the Church remains a vital institution—expected to rise as the prophetic voice that speaks truth to power, to embody the priestly vision that inspires hope in an eschatological future, and to serve as the pastoral presence that nurtures, sustains, and rebuilds the spiritual and familial foundations of the community. In times of uncertainty and injustice, the Black Church is still entrusted with the sacred responsibility of advocacy, healing, and empowerment.

Recommendations for Revitalization of the Black Church

To restore the Black Church's historical role as a moral compass, community pillar, and prophetic voice, it must intentionally return to its foundational commitments in three key areas: family, ministry, and message.

1. Rebuilding the Church as Family

The Black Church must recommit to its unwritten mission of serving as a surrogate family for its members. This begins by creating intentional spaces of belonging, intergenerational mentorship, and relational connection. Programs that foster fellowship, support single-parent households, and promote holistic wellness can help to reestablish the sense of communal kinship that once defined the church. Spiritual formation and community-building activities should emphasize love, dignity, and mutual accountability, restoring the familial atmosphere many now find missing.

2. Revitalizing Leadership and Ministry

A renewed focus on leadership development is essential. The Black Church must invest in identifying, equipping, and empowering emerging leaders from within its own pews. This includes theological education, lay leadership training, and opportunities for youth to engage in meaningful ministry. Moreover, the church must re-engage in community outreach by addressing

issues such as education, housing, health disparities, and economic inequality. Ministry must move beyond the sanctuary to meet people where they are—demonstrating the relevance of faith in everyday life.

3. Reclaiming Prophetic Voice

The Black Church must recover its prophetic tradition—speaking boldly to the injustices that persist in society. This requires moving beyond prosperity-focused theology and reclaiming a message rooted in justice, liberation, and hope. Pastors and faith leaders must not shy away from addressing systemic racism, police brutality, voter suppression, and other forms of structural violence. Preaching must once again be a tool of empowerment, challenging both individual hearts and societal systems in pursuit of God’s justice.

These three areas—family, ministry, and prophetic witness—represent not only the historic pillars of the Black Church but also the key to its renewal. If revitalized with intentionality and courage, the Black Church can reclaim its place as a central force for spiritual strength, social change, and communal restoration.

Appendix A:

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

Greetings, Spencer

On behalf of the Winebrenner Institutional Review Board, I would like to congratulate you upon the board's determination to accept your submitted research proposal. After reviewing your submitted materials, we have these recommendations for your research:

- Write the Informed Consent document in paragraphs with important headings in bold print.
- Include a confidentiality statement in the Informed Consent document such as, "In order to maintain the confidentiality of research participants, the researcher will de-identify participants by excluding personal names, church affiliations, pastors' names, other identified persons' names, participant stories that will identify them, and any other information that the participant and/or researcher deem necessary to remove in order to uphold the confidentiality of the participants."
- Work with your research advisor to create a research title that indicates the research is an *examination* of the church's power and influence in the black community as opposed to THE answer of *how* the church lost its power and influence.
- Remember, this research is only utilizing participants from Asheville, NC; thus, the experiences of the participants will *not necessarily represent* the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of the entire "Black Church." Consider how this will be noted in the research title, findings, and summary.
- Follow-up with the IRB is **required** (according to the *Ethical Research Plan Determination Flow Chart*). Upon completion of the data collection, a "summary report must be submitted to the IRB, including the number of subjects involved, the duration of subject involvement, and a summary of project results." Please submit this summary report *prior* to releasing your research findings to entities outside of your immediate research team.

Once again, congratulations upon the acceptance of your research proposal. We look forward to receiving your summary report and hearing about your findings. The information you receive and synthesize has great potential to launch greater discussions surrounding the influence and direction of the Black Church.

God's wisdom, knowledge, and grace upon your research. May His Truth prevail.

Sincerely,

Dr. Mary Steiner Iames, Winebrenner Institutional Research Board Chair

Appendix B:
Institutional Review Board Report

Dear Dr. Iiames,

I have completed a research study examining the declining prominence of the Black Church within the Black community. This qualitative study involved interviews with seventeen participants, whose ages ranged from 22 to 93 years. Of the seventeen individuals, twelve had prior church experience, while five were categorized as non-attenders. Although each interview was scheduled to last approximately one hour, many extended beyond the allotted time. This was largely due to the intentional creation of a relaxed and welcoming environment, which encouraged participants to speak freely. Moreover, the interview questions were open-ended rather than structured for simple yes or no responses, thereby prompting participants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives.

The findings indicate that the Black Church has experienced a decline in influence, particularly due to shifts away from fostering a strong family-centered atmosphere, the diminished presence of both outreach and inward-facing ministries, and a perceived lack of clarity in its message. Despite these challenges, the research also reveals that the Black community continues to view the Church as a vital institution—one that is expected to speak out on social justice issues, offer messages of hope, and serve as a sanctuary for all people.

Respectfully submitted,
Spencer Ellis Hardaway

Appendix C:

Informed Consent Form



IRB Use Only

- Exemption Granted
(Project # _____)
- Expedited Review (ERP required)
- Full Review (ERP required)

Institutional Review Board Research Proposal

All research at Winebrenner starts with this typable Word form. Be thorough. This form must be submitted by e-mail to the Chair of the IRB using findlay.edu or winebrenner.edu e-mail ONLY. Please allow 10 days for the IRB to review this proposal. Please note: if an Ethical Research Proposal (ERP) is required, approval of the ERP may take an additional 30 days.

SUBMISSION DATE:

COURSE/DEGREE PROGRAM: Doctor of Ministry

PROPOSED RESEARCH TITLE:

PROPOSED START DATE: January 30, 2022, **PROPOSED END DATE:** March 27, 2022

FUNDING AGENCY (IF ANY): N/A

PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER (PR): Spencer Hardaway

CONTACT INFORMATION (PHONE, E-MAIL, ADDRESS): (828) 277-0787, hardaways@findlay.edu, 82 Pebble Creek Drive, Asheville, NC 28803

SECONDARY RESEARCHER (SR) (IF ANY): N/A

CONTACT INFORMATION (PHONE, E-MAIL, ADDRESS): N/A

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

The purpose for the research is collect data, and to draw to a conclusion as to the reasons if and why the Black Church does not represent the voice of authority within the Black community. This project seeks to analyze the relationship between the church, community, and individuals. Also, the project will research the influences of the Black Church on community from the post-civil rights era to today's Black Lives Matters movement.

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH PROCEDURES:

The researcher will study three of the oldest local churches in Asheville, NC, review their history and influences in the community. The areas of interest in this study are worship service, family

ministries, outreach social activism ministries. The researcher will interview twenty people, five from each of the three local churches. The pastor from each church will select the participants. The researcher will select five interviewees from the community who are not currently attending church. The participants from each church will answer the same identical questions. The interviewees from the community will answer separate set of questions ask their views of the church and the reasons they are not attending church. The data from the interviewees is collected, tabulated, coded, and analyzed. The benefits of this research will allow African American Churches to understand the changes which have occurred within the black church and community. This data will allow churches to strategize ideas, vision, and mission to move forward into the future with clarity and deliberative missions that will impact the Black community.

Will there be face-to-face interaction between researchers and subjects? Yes No

Will there be data that must be kept confidential? Yes No

Will any subject need physical, psychological, social, economic, privacy, or any other type of protection? Yes No

POTENTIAL RISKS:

The risk is minimum. The pastor may request a copy of questions to influence his selection of participants. The interviewees could be coerced or feel social pressure into making only positive observations. Interviewees could change their view of the church from positive to negative

POTENTIAL BENEFITS:

This research can provide pastors insights into how to refocus their vision to provide ministry in the future. The interview could strengthen the participants' view of the church. Interviewees could be motivated to become involved in the ministry provided through the church.

Principal Researcher's Signature

Date

Secondary Researcher's Signature

Date

Course Instructor's/Program Director's Signature

Date

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