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An analysis of the black church in Atlanta politics

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE BLACK CHURCH IN ATLANTA POLITICS.

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SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY IN
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BY
TAYO E. PENOSEN

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

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ABSTRACT

POLITICAL SCIENCE DEPARTMENT

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE BLACK CHURCH IN ATLANTA POLITICS

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Dissertation dated July 2011

The black church plays a significant role within the black community. However, an examination of the changing role of the black church is necessary as it continues to evolve. This study examines the types and patterns of participation of black churches within the political arena and the community so that: (1) an understanding of past and present contributions of the black church to the political welfare needs of African Americans can be developed and (2) based on the above, the potential of the black church as an institution for social service and social action can be considered in the formulation of the future of political policy and social planning.

The research also proved that it is necessary to further define the traditional black church as a necessary shaper of public policy. In fact, what can be inferred from the research is that the traditional black church must reflect in its leadership persons who are active participants in the life of the community. In this regard, the research is emphatic about the role of the traditional black church that it is to continue to be an advocate for community needs, expectations, and system change. This research reemphasized the role
of the church as a public conduit for relating community needs and engaging societal issues.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The black church has been a foundational institution for blacks throughout their history in America. The church has served many roles including sustaining the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health of the black community. In its fullest expression, the black church nurtured and provided critical contributions as blacks struggled for their rightful place in America. This research is an analytical examination of the black church as a political institution.

Description of the traditional black church

In order to better understand the role of the black church in politics, it is important to recognize that the history of the black church is complex and multilayered, and develops in response to a blending of sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and religious factors that are intensified by the fight over the fate of the nation.

From the frequent appearance of “anti-slavery” in the titles of African American religious groups in free states, it might appear that they had one concern only: the end of chattel slavery. Since this research project examines the broader total development of church bodies, the researcher will examine what was behind the use of that militant term, anti-slavery. This research will also examine the charge that early African American religion was used by masters to make better working slaves. An accurate record would
have to report early African American churches as striving both for people to be saved from sin and to be set free.¹ However, this former end was far more simply achieved than the release sought from earthly shackles. And so an examination in some detail the early black church's wider concerns and its social activist struggles is appropriate.

The variety and magnitude of the efforts put forth by the early black church command attention and respect. The most apparent evidence of the black church's concern for its people in shackles has already been seen in the name anti-slavery. This term readily bespoke association with social action groups by that name, and a great tradition of oratory at public gatherings to rally support for the abolitionist cause. John Hope Franklin in his book, *From Slavery to Freedom* identified five critical forms of social activism:

Related to oration was the persuasion sought by pamphleteering and other publications. The black church supplied great speakers and powerful authors. The second area of activity was the opposite of publication and communication: the secret Underground Railroad. A third and somewhat unusual area to consider as activism was the black church's ways of cooperation with a military involved in liberating action. Extending family mutual assistance and aid to all humanity in personal and public disasters, is undeniably a fourth form of social activism. And the fifth and final form of social activism for consideration here is the extent to which African American religion played a part in slave rebellions.²

The anti-slavery and abolitionist movement, primarily in the North, was led by liberal whites without whose resources and influence coherent struggle by effective agencies would have been almost impossible to sustain. Yet their greatest resources of mass meeting oratory undoubtedly came from African American preachers and laity, who often also served as staff. The list of famous abolitionist African American

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² Ibid.
preacher/orators include Amos G. Beman (Congregational), Hosea Easton (A.M.E.Z.), Henry Highland Garnet (Presbyterian), Leonard Grimes (Baptist), Nathaniel Paul and Thomas Paul (Baptist), J. W.C. Pennington (Congregational/Presbyterian), and Samuel Ringgold Ward and Theodore S. Wright (Presbyterian).

Virtually every African American church pulpit was an abolitionist platform, and every preacher, as well gifted laity, orators for the cause. Even so there were a variety of intensities. In the Second Baptist Church of Columbus, Ohio, a split occurred in 1847 over radical abolitionism. In 1858, the schism was healed, as Second Baptist Church called the activist pastor of the Anti-Slavery Baptist Church, and the congregations merged. The pastor was James Poindexter.3

Among the powerfully gifted laity enlisted in the abolitionist cause, and well known in history were Frances E.W. Harper, Sarah and her brother Charles L. Remond, Lunsford Lane, and William Wells Brown.4 Most noted of all, along with Frederick Douglass, was Sojourner Truth, ex-slave and stinging orator. Douglass, best known as an abolitionist orator and publisher, was licensed as a local preacher in the Bethel A.M.E Zion Church.

Nearly every ex-slave in a pulpit in the North was also an effective witness against the diabolical system of slavery, not to mention the thousands of laity whose formal testimony, along with their labors, was supportive of the cause. James Forten, a wealthy African American Episcopal layman, sail-maker, and supplier of ships, was an


important leader (alongside Richard Allen and Absalom Jones) in many efforts put forth in Philadelphia, especially the 1831 boycott of slave-grown foods.

The ultimate anti-slavery orator, of course, was Frederick Douglass, original preaching product of the Bethel A.M.E. Zion Church in New Bedford, Massachusetts. On arrival there (1833) from his former bondage, he served every role all the way from sexton to class leader to preacher. His first public utterances were in this role, and his rise to unequalled excellence as an orator was meteoric.

Douglass became one of the great preacher-publishers of anti-slavery news organs, publishing *The North Star* in Rochester in 1847. Others included Samuel Cornish and John Russworm, who began publishing *Freedom's Journal* in New York in 1827. Among other papers published were short-lived organs in Pittsburgh and San Francisco. Douglass also authored a slave narrative of his life. This popular genre was an effective abolitionist tool, used by Rev. Josiah Henson and other clergy including J.W. Loguen, and J.W.C. Pennington. William Wells "Box" Brown’s popular tale was one of many exhilarating slave narratives delivered by laity.

**The Underground Railroad**

While African American pastors and church members were being publicly seen, heard, and read in the anti-slavery movement, they were also covertly engaged wherever possible, in assisting escaping slaves. It was a foregone conclusion that any church in the Providence Association north of the Ohio River was a stop or station on the Underground Railroad. The very locations of those churches told what they were about. The members

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6 Ibid., 234.
themselves were free, so they could remain in sight. But instead of moving on further North to better country, they stayed near the border, to assist those not yet free, who fled the clutches of the Fugitive Slave Act. 

Richard Allen’s Bethel A.M.E. Church in Philadelphia, and many other Bethels, had concealed quarters that still exist today. The faithful Christians there were adept at misleading slave-catchers from the South. And Bishop and Mrs. Allen, who were noted for personal generosity to escapees, were imitated by many other members, by the church itself, and throughout much of the black church in the North.

Jermaine W. Loguen, later a bishop of the Bethel A.M.E. Zion Church, was a major figure in the Underground Railroad, operating out of Syracuse. His motivation was readily understandable. His mother had been born free in the North and kidnapped into slavery and carried to Tennessee, where her son Jermaine was born. After he escaped, he became a powerful anti-slavery orator. But his chief activity was off the public record, coordinating the traffic of a complicated and invisible network of African Americans, Quakers, and other supporters of freedom.

The greatest Underground Railroad conductor of the all was Harriet Tubman, a faithful and supportive member of the Bethel A.M.E. Zion church who resided in Auburn New York. She supported her trips through domestic service. On the “road,” she carried and used a pistol when necessary, and she led some 300 souls to freedom in the North. She suffered spells of dizziness from a head injury, but she prayed and persevered. Her greatest ambition in later life was to establish in her personal residence, a home for the

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homeless in Auburn New York, to be owned and operated by Bethel A.M.E. Zion after her death.  

From the perspective of black Christians from Methodist and Baptist churches, the Civil War and Reconstruction were signs of God’s displeasure with the system of slavery as well as God’s call for the evangelizing of the elusive South. Missionary work was difficult because of limited access to transportation and harassment from those who did not want southern society changed by northern sensibilities. Former slave owners, and many white Northerners who moved to the South, were determined to maintain the codes and social relationships in place before the invasion of the North. This meant missionaries who “traveled much beyond the security of Federal soldiers almost anywhere in the South… exposed themselves to danger.” 

As missionary Hiram Revels remarks, physical harm remained a possibility even after the war: “It is an undisguised fact that no man can safely go beyond the lines of the Freedmen’s Bureau, without endangering his life.” Even when missionaries did not encounter open hostility, it was not uncommon for them to lack resources necessary for their fledging churches to have a house of worship. In these cases, preaching the gospel had to be combined with a business sense and construction skills. In other cases appropriate space was available but it was necessary to secure it through creative means.

The church at the end of Reconstruction era brought about the economic, social, and political developments of the 1870s and 1880s. This similarity was seen again as the

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struggles of the 1960s produced a middle class with new advantages and professional status that embraced the church today.

The creation of autonomous black churches was a major achievement of the Reconstruction era, and a central component of blacks' conception of freedom. As the first institution fully controlled by African Americans, the church played a central role in the black community. Before the Civil War, many rural slaves had held secret religious meetings outside the supervision of their owners. Other slaves, along with free blacks, had belonged to biracial congregations controlled by whites, many of which required black members to sit in the back of the church or the galleries during services.

With emancipation, blacks withdrew from these institutions to create their own churches. They pooled their resources to purchase land and erect church buildings. A place of worship, the church also housed schools, social events, and political gatherings, and sponsored benevolent and fraternal societies. Black ministers also came to play a major role in Reconstruction politics that led to the formation of contemporary churches.

The Contemporary black church

First, African Americans are increasingly un-churched. Although African American respondents to national surveys overwhelming report that they believe in God, pray daily, believe the Bible to be the inspired or literal word of God and use religious beliefs as a guide to daily life choices, fewer black Americans are members or regular attendees of church. The declining attendance of black Christians mirrors a larger trend

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in American society, as church attendance rates have leveled or declined for many demographic groups. However, the political implications of declining church attendance by blacks are potentially more meaningful.

One way to think about the organizational significance of the church to black politics is to see it as a kind of subsidy to less affluent citizens. The black church underwrites the cost of political participation for African Americans by providing reliable and regular contact with elected officials, political information, opportunities for mobilization, and advice about identifying political interests. Those who do not attend politicized black churches must bear the cost of deciphering and navigating the political world without this subsidy, which means that they must gather all the information and opportunities on their own without having it provided through the church. This means that for the un-churched, political participation is more expensive. African American communities remain vastly poorer than their white counterparts. Losing the participation subsidy provided by black churches can make the costs of political participation too high to bear and push many potential voters out of politics altogether. In this way, the decline of black church attendance represents a rising cost of political participation for black Americans.

The second important institutional trend among the black faithful is that African Americans are increasingly mega churched. While a lower proportion of African Americans are regular church attendees, those who do go to church increasingly choose nondenominational mega churches over mainline black denominations. The Baptists,

13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
Methodist and Bethel A.M.E. congregations that provided the vanguard of black political mobilization fifty years ago are increasingly ignored as the Church of God In Christ (COGIC) and a cadre of large, nondenominational churches have taken their place as the primary location of African American worshippers. Churches of two thousand or more members are a fast growing segment of black religion in America. These churches can be found in traditional migration cities like Philadelphia and Chicago, and in Californian enclaves like Oakland, but are mostly concentrated in Southern Sunbelt cities like Atlanta and Dallas. Black mega churches tend to be located in or near large African American suburban communities. These churches are attracting increased journalistic and scholarly attention and criticism and observers begin to question "whether black mega churches have effectively maintained the African American church's traditional commitment to an active engagement with broad black-community issues." Alternatively, the rise of the mega church may mean that black Americans can be more efficiently mobilized toward political action because their church homes provide expansive networks and substantial resources.

In *The State of Black America 2000*, R. Drew Smith and Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs released some of the first available data on black mega churches. Based on surveys of more than fifty black churches with memberships over two thousand, the preliminary data suggests that mega churches outperform their smaller counterparts in terms of both political activity and community development. In fact, as was previously thought,

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ninety-six percent of black mega churches indicate that they have helped in voter registration drives. The apolitical image is possibly a problem of perception, created by the fact that the political aspects of black mega churches have not been as conspicuous as other aspects of their ecclesiastical and community activities. However, the data is highly aggregated and generalized asking about the activities of churches but not of individual members. For instance, a church can be classified as politically active even if only one hundred of its ten thousand members are involved in political action. The current data provides no discernable way to determine whether or not thousands of African Americans are being mobilized for action.

Organizationally, the church has often served as a place where African Americans learn important civic skills. Black men and women who are active in the church learn about chairing meetings, passing motions, organizing groups and mediating competing interests, skills which can be used in the political realm. The church is a place where black people become available for mobilization by political entrepreneurs and groups. Candidates, parties, and organizations go to black churches to find voters, campaign workers and community organizers. The church has also served as a place where African Americans develop psychological resources of self-esteem and efficacy. Black Americans reaffirm their intrinsic worth as human beings and use those psychological resources to bolster their capacity to engage with an often hostile American state.

However, new patterns of church attendance and membership raise two central questions at the intersection of black religion and politics in upcoming elections: (1)
whether un-churched black Christians can be motivated to vote and participate given that they do not receive the informational and mobilization resources that accompany regular attendance and, (2) whether the shift from mainline black denominations to larger, mega churches signals a transference in the political influence of the African American church. While these challenges emerge from what we observe about changing organizational elements of the black church, they can only be answered through an investigation of the theological orientation.

The black church in Atlanta Politics

Georgia's African American churches have a long history of political involvement, including a crucial role in the civil rights movement and, more recently, an influence on the decisions made by City of Atlanta elected officials. Throughout the era of racial segregation, ministers and educators, in towns and cities across the South, often served as the leaders of the African American community. In fact, the black church played a significant role in the development of these leaders as many of the colleges and universities serving African Americans were sponsored by churches. In Atlanta, prominent African American pastors, such as Martin Luther King Sr. of Ebenezer Baptist Church and William Holmes Borders of Wheat Street Baptist Church, used their positions as community leaders to meet regularly with elected public officials leading the black church to become as much a symbol of spiritual prosperity as social prosperity.

For example, responding to the 1946 federal banning of the all-white primary in the state which opened the way for blacks to register and vote in primaries, black church leaders spearheaded a voter registration drive in Atlanta to increase the number of
African Americans who could participate in local elections. Atlanta's longtime mayor William B. Hartsfield recognized the growing importance of blacks in local politics and hired eight African American police officers in 1948. This pattern of carefully negotiated steps toward desegregation gave Atlanta a reputation for moderation in race relations. While Mayor Hartsfield proclaimed that Atlanta was "the City Too Busy to Hate," local African American ministers continued to provide leadership in the struggle to end segregation. For example, in 1957, Borders, a prominent black minister in the city led a small group of ministers who boarded a city bus and sat near the front in defiance of Georgia's transit-segregation laws. The ministers were arrested and immediately released on bond, providing a test case for federal courts. The federal district court declared the state law invalid, a decision that integrated the bus system in Atlanta. This kind of gradual change and moderation was in sharp contrast to other cities in the South.

The slow pace of gradual desegregation gave way to peaceful sit-in demonstrations by students from the Atlanta University Center who were determined to force change in the city. A younger generation of church leaders, particularly Martin Luther King, Jr. and Andrew Young taught the students principles of nonviolence. They also served as mediators in a voluntary desegregation agreement arranged among the students, downtown merchants, and such civic leaders as Ivan Allen, Jr. The city's African American churches continued to be instrumental in the struggle for civil rights: they provided space for meetings; their pastors served as community leaders; and their members participated in local politics. The influence of blacks on city government was

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strong enough that in 1963 Atlanta Mayor Ivan Allen Jr. went to Washington, D.C. to testify in support of the Civil Rights Act, which became law the following year.19

Throughout the 1960s Atlanta's population changed rapidly. Blacks were attracted to the city, in part because of the moderate climate of race relations, and because whites were moving to the suburbs outside the city limits. The 1970 census reported that for the first time in the city's history, the majority of Atlanta's population was African American. Responding to this increased political strength, Atlanta's black ministers rallied their members to support the mayoral candidacy of Maynard Jackson, who was elected in 1973 as the city's first African American mayor.20 The role of the black clergy in local elections was to mobilize church members to participate in the political process and to communicate information about candidates and issues.

Some black ministers played a more active role in local politics. Joseph Lowery, pastor of Central and Cascade United Methodist churches, served for more than twenty years as the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference - civil rights organization created by Martin Luther King Jr. From 1975 until 1998, Reverend Lowery was a member of the board of directors of the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA), serving three years as chair of the board. Another minister, Andrew Young of the United Church of Christ, was elected mayor of Atlanta in 1981 after serving as a U.S. congressman and U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

Concerned Black Clergy

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
In 1983, with the political power firmly in the hands of African American elected officials, the attention of black ministers in Atlanta turned to economic issues. The pastors of six churches that provided services to the homeless met to discuss common problems and ways in which they could work together. From this modest beginning came an organization known as Concerned Black Clergy (CBC), which grew rapidly in size and scope. From its initial interest in providing soup kitchens for the homeless, CBC turned its attention to political issues. In 1986, CBC took an active role in deciding the future of MARTA's rail lines. The ministers persuaded both Mayor Young and the Fulton County Commission chair to support the extension of a rapid-transit rail line to a low-income neighborhood in northwest Atlanta known as Proctor Creek. They also threatened a boycott of the bus and rail system if the transit authority did not fulfill an earlier promise to build the rail line.21

By 1994, the CBC had grown to include more than 125 religious organizations representing more than 100,000 members. Since its modest start, the organization has continued the tradition of active participation by African American churches in Atlanta's politics. Candidates for elected office routinely seek its support because the influence of the city's black ministers and their congregations remains strong in policy decisions.22

Black church voters have been such powerful and reliable allies to Democratic candidates that Republican "Big Tent" strategies have targeted black Christian voters, hoping to chip away at the loyalty of African American believers through moral wedge

21 Ibid.

issues like gay marriage and abortion. In both his initial election and reelection campaigns, President George W. Bush actively courted black religious voters through high profile connections with black ministers like T.D. Jakes and Fredrick Price. As we enter the 2008 presidential campaign season, the black church is likely to retain its centrality as a site of political mobilization. What shape this influence on contemporary electoral politics takes depends on changing organizational, theological and cultural elements of the African American church.

Much of the study of African American religiosity and political behavior has largely centered on one defining question: does Christianity encourage or discourage political activism among African Americans? Scholars of religion, Lincoln and Mamiya refer to the black church as the "womb" of the community because it gave life to important social, economic and cultural institutions of African American life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While few question the historic centrality of the church as an organization, there are scholars who suggest that the church is a force of quietism in black communities, discouraging political action through other-worldly focus on divine restitution in the afterlife. "Opiate theorists argue that religion works as a means of social control offering African Americans a way to cope with personal and

23 Ibid.


societal difficulties and undermining their willingness to actively challenge racial inequalities."\(^27\)

Other researchers have vigorously defended the connection between the church and political action, stressing both the organizational resources that accrue to black church goers, such as the networks, skills, mobilization, and contact opportunities nurtured in the church, and mapping the psychological resources that contribute to the political actions of black church congregants, such as self-esteem and internal efficacy.\(^28\)

\(^29\) These scholars claim that the black church acts as an inspiration for political action by galvanizing black people to work toward political righteousness.

Sociologist Aldon Morris articulates this position, stating that

"the black church functioned as the institutional center of the modern civil rights movement. Churches provided the movement with an organized mass base; leadership of clergymen; an institutionalized financial base; and meeting places where the masses planned tactics and strategies and collectively committed themselves to the struggle."\(^30\)

Political scientist Fred Harris points to the church's capacity to cultivate psychological resources writing,

"Religion's psychological dimensions could potentially empower individuals with a sense of competence and resilience, inspiring them to believe in their own


ability, with the assistance of an acknowledged sacred force, to influence or affect governmental affairs, thus, in some instances, to act politically.\(^3\)

Regardless of the scholarly debates, potential office holders have found the church an effective machine of mobilizing black voters and have found that many black churches are actively committed to providing worshippers with the organizational and psychological resources necessary for political action. However, there are two important organizational trends within the black church that may potentially impact the church's effectiveness in upcoming elections.

**What Black Voters Believe about God**

The black church not only represents an organizational space that gives rise to unique racial and cultural formations but also serves as an interpreter of the black experience in America which gives rise to unique theological formulations. The black church offers African Americans indigenous religious ideas and organic theologies that distinguish black religiosity.

Some have argued that the black church does not have a distinct theology or did not have one until the mid-1960s. Cone, James H. and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds. 1993. *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume One: 1966-1979.* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books. In the introduction Cone and Wilmore argue that "when blacks separated themselves from White denominations and organized their own churches in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries they did not perceive their actions as being motivated by theological differences. They accepted without alteration the church doctrines and politics of the White denominations from which they separated." (pp. 89)

In some ways this assertion is an overstatement, one that does not credit the distinct worship styles and religious emphases that distinguished slave religion

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\(^3\) Frederick C. Harris, *Something Within: Religion in African-American Political Activism.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999), 82.
from the Christianity of white Americans, but it does reflect the lack of a fully articulated academic theological perspective to guide black Christian worship. I am making a claim to a more organic form of theology built around commonly held understandings of religious texts that circulate in black churches.

These mass-based theologies of the black church are rooted in specific understandings of biblical texts that grow out of black experiences of bondage and oppression. Black Christianity is distinct theologically because of its specific theodicy. Theodicy is the issue of reconciling God's justice in the presence of human suffering. Many elements of Western theology have grappled with how an all-loving and all-powerful God can coexist with evil. While not unique to black religion, theodicy takes on a specific and racialized form in the black religious experience. For African Americans, evil takes the very specific and identifiable form of white supremacy first through enslavement, then through Jim Crow and lynch mob rule, and continuing in seemingly intractable racial inequality. The evil of racism must be reconciled with the idea of a loving and powerful God. The difficulty of resolving this uniquely racialized theodicy led William Jones to question, Is God a White Racist? 32

Having to confront, if not resolve, this fundamental dilemma of God's love for black people in the midst of black oppression is a central, if implicit, theological tenet linking black religion and black political action. As we consider the political implications of an increasingly un-churched and mega churched black population, we must consider how African American believers grapple with theodicy and how the resolutions to which they come influence their political engagement.

One important way that black people have grappled with theodicy is through distinct interpretations of the bible that recasts God as primarily egalitarian. Biblical studies professor Vincent Wimbush argues that African Americans have a distinct approach to reading and interpreting biblical texts. "African Americans used the Bible to make self-assertive claims against a racist America that claimed to be a biblical nation. African Americans were clamoring for realization of the principles of inclusion, equality, and kinship that they understood the Bible to mandate. Beginning in the nineteenth century and extending into the twentieth, African American consistently and systematically attempted to make use of the Bible to force 'biblical' America to honor biblical principles." Guided by this hermeneutical key, African American religiosity chooses to emphasize particular elements of the Bible, "the adventures of the Hebrews in bondage and escaping from bondage, and those about the wondrous works, compassion, and resurrection of Jesus ... and the prophecies, especially the prophetic denunciations of social injustice and the visions of social justice." 

To reconcile an egalitarian God with their deeply unequal circumstances in America, the black religious tradition developed a jeremiad that serves as "the constant warning issued by blacks to whites concerning the judgment that was to come from the sin of slavery." Named for the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, a jeremiad is a form of literature or rhetoric associated with the divine destruction of a wicked people and the


34 Ibid.

deliverance of the children of God. The jeremiad warns that those who have sinned against God or God's chosen people will soon pay the consequences of their sinful actions, and that the chosen people will be led to a land of safety and peace far from the pains of their oppressors. The black jeremiad has been an important form of black political understanding that has helped structure the expectations of black America related to politics. The black jeremiad understands African Americans to be living in a land of oppression similar to the Old Testament experience of ancient Egyptian bondage. As Yahweh delivered His children then, He will deliver black America now.

Other elements of the black religious tradition have sought to make Christianity relevant for African Americans engaged in political and cultural struggle against white racism by asserting that God has a unique relationship with African Americans and re-imagining a black Christ who sides with African Americans as they struggle against social, political, and economic marginalization. This liberation theology reasons that Christ takes on the position of the poorest and most despised in any historical moment, thus in the American context, Christ must be understood as black. This theological formulation allows African Americans to see themselves through a lens that asserts their inherent uniqueness as individuals and emphasizes spiritual qualities, such as wisdom and morality, over material possessions as a standard for self-evaluation.

The traditions of black jeremiad and liberation theology promote a particular understanding of the relationship between blacks and the American state. From the late

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nineteenth century to the contemporary era black America solidified its relationship to the state as communal rather than individual. In this regard, black politics drew heavily from black religiosity. Political scientist Eric Michael Dyson said that African American public life shared its roots with the communalism of African American religious thought. One of the critical differences between black and white Protestantism is the African American belief in self-realization of individuality within community. In opposition to the American liberal tradition, African Americans have adopted the worldview that individual freedom can be realized only within the context of collective freedom, that individual salvation can occur only within the framework of collective salvation."

Today, there is evidence of a shift in this communal orientation toward both religion and politics in contemporary black religious patterns. The mega church phenomenon is not driven primarily by the jeremiad or liberation elements of black religious tradition. Instead, many large congregations with fast-growing populations of black adherents preach the prosperity gospel. Prosperity gospel is a constellation of beliefs that are variously grouped under the titles Health-Wealth, Word-Faith, or Name it-Claim it. In its crudest form, prosperity gospel teaches that followers who tithe regularly and maintain positive, faithful attitudes and language will reap financial gains in the form of higher incomes and nicer homes and cars. In more subtle forms, prosperity gospel connects God's mission for his people to financial freedom and security for individual Christians. Visualization and positive confession are advanced as part of a

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spiritual law that encourages God to bless individuals. Wealth is seen as evidence of God's blessing and Christians who follow certain formulas in their personal and spiritual lives will reap substantial material rewards.40

Prosperity gospel offers a radically different interpretation of God's relationship to His people.41 The prosperity gospel asserts God's desire to help his people be financially free and secure. It teaches that Christ helps individuals who follow certain formulas in their personal and spiritual lives. Christ is an investment strategy and a personal life coach whose power can be accessed by believers to improve their finances, protect their families, strengthen their faith, and achieve personal authenticity.42 While the prosperity gospel serves an increasing number of black parishioners, it plays no significant relevance to this research project. There is currently no academic research that suggest that the political behaviors of members of these churches are any different from those who attend more traditional churches.

Data from a survey of black Americans suggest that liberation theology promotes political action while prosperity gospel reduces it. Survey respondents who believe that Christ is black are more likely to vote, contact public officials, attend protest demonstrations, and sign political petitions. Those who see God through the lens of the prosperity gospel are less likely to engage in all of these political activities.43 Through

40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Melissa Harris-Lacewell, "Liberation to Mutual Fund: The Political Consequences of Differing Conceptions of Christ in the African American Church." Chapter in edited volume, From Fews to Polling J.
the narrative of jeremiad and liberation theology there is a mandate for a collective approach to politics and to critique systems of inequality. Christians are urged by Jesus' example to serve the poor and to destroy the structures that create and reproduce poverty. The prosperity gospel advances a pervasively individualistic conception of Christ. To the extent that the prosperity gospel promotes an individualized dispositional understanding of the world, it discourages collective political action. Beliefs in the more instrumental and individual ideas of Christ, like those espoused by the prosperity gospel, make black Americans less likely to engage politically.

This has implications for the future of black politics. Prosperity gospel is a fast-growing theology among black Americans. Preachers like Creflo Dollar and T. D. Jakes have congregations, viewers, and readers numbering in the tens of thousands. There is some evidence that their individual and instrumental message dampens political activism among African Americans. When the black church offers a theology rooted in a social gospel tradition which emphasizes, as moral values, the alleviation of poverty, the advancement of racial and gender equality, and the promotion of peace, it leads to a progressive political agenda among African Americans. When black churches advance a pervasively individualistic conception of the gospel that breaks the link between moral reasoning and structural inequality, it leads to a more conservative political agenda focused primarily on private morality.

Taken together these organizational and theological patterns of black religious life may suggest a shifting contribution of the black church to black political life. The

growing un-churched population means that fewer black Americans are learning civic skills in churches and fewer are available for political mobilization through the organization of the church. Therefore, Democratic Party office seekers will have to find new ways to reach out to and mobilize this powerfully important segment of the partisan base. Further, if the influence of the mega church prosperity gospel is supplanting the more racially progressive social gospel, then there may be opportunities for Republican office seekers to mobilize black church-goers. To the extent that prosperity gospel encourages a strict focus on individual action, accountability and sexual morality; it can increase the salience of sexual ethics issues that have been key to building GOP victories in 2000 and 2004.

However, before concluding that current black religious trends all point to an increasing conservative influence of the black church on black politics, it is important to recognize that the influence of the church in black political life extends beyond both its organizational and theological centrality in black communities. The church also directs and influences important elements of black cultural life. Lincoln and Mamiya argue that the black church is deeply embedded in black culture. "The core values of black culture like freedom, justice, equality, an African heritage, and racial parity at all levels of human intercourse, are raised to ultimate levels and legitimated in the black scared cosmos." 44

Black church in Black Culture

The black church operates as a kind of cultural training ground for African Americans, extending its influence far beyond Sunday morning worship and penetrating black political discourse, ideas and practice at many levels. Sociologist Mary Pattillo discusses the "power of church rituals as cultural tools for facilitating local organizing and activism among African Americans."\(^{45}\) The church is a place where actors learn cultural norms and styles that are then employed in secular settings. African Americans use prayer, call-and-response-interaction, and Christian imagery when coordinating non-religious activities. From this perspective, the black church helps us to understand not only the "what" of participation, but the "how" of social action. "Black church culture constitutes a common language that motivates social action."\(^{46}\) The centrality of the black church to black culture requires that we consider the capacity of church culture to mediate the relationship between African American voters and partisan office seekers. The church is organizational, theological and cultural. Therefore a candidate must come to church, must present political ideas in a way that connects to black religious thought, and also must be able to speak in the language and style of the black church.

Former President, Bill Clinton serves as a clear example that one need not be black to be held to the standards of being present, presenting ideas in a manner that connects, and displaying the ability to speak in the language and style of the black church. In 1998, Nobel Prize winning, African American author Toni Morrison


\(^{46}\) Ibid.
suggested in a New Yorker article about Bill Clinton that, "white skin notwithstanding, this is our first black President." Morrison's description of Clinton as black was prompted by his experience of personal humiliation at the hands of his political foes. When Morrison labeled Clinton black, she was not making a claim about his genetic heritage, but instead drawing parallels between his public debacle and the historic treatment of black public figures. She was also commenting on his experience with and use of cultural markers that often stand for the denigrated elements of black life in America. She stated, "Clinton displays almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald's-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas."

Journalist DeWayne Wickham compiled a fascinating array of interviews with African American leaders and lay persons chronicling the unique relationship between Bill Clinton and black America. The interviews throughout Wickham's text enunciate common themes of shared cultural understanding and genuine personal connection that Clinton exuded to both black leaders and masses. The interviews in Wickham's text point to the deeply rooted cultural practices that Clinton shared with black America. Among the most important was Clinton's command of and ease with African American religious rhetorical styles. In clarifying his support for affirmative action, Clinton spoke of the experiences with discrimination and segregation that he witnessed while growing up in the American south. Clinton made the widely heralded step of offering an apology for the Tuskegee Study on black men in Alabama. He turned the cheer of segregationist on its


48 Ibid. 17.
head by using the language of the black national anthem in his celebration of the
desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas saying, "Let us resolve to
stand on the shoulders of the Little Rock Nine and press on with confidence in the hard
and noble work ahead. Let us lift every voice and sing till earth and heaven ring, one
America today, one America tomorrow, one America forever." 49

Most visible in the case of President Bill Clinton, but resonating throughout black
electoral politics, is the role of religious culture in mediating the relationship between
African Americans and political leaders. African American politics is imbued with
religious cultural practices, even when the issues being discussed are not overtly defined
as religious in nature. The cadences of racialized religion resonate in black politics even
among the un-churched or newly mega churched. Political leaders' intent in securing the
black vote is more effective when they can readily adapt to and make use of these
religious cultural practices.

Reflecting on the 2008 Elections

The centrality of the black church organizationally, theologically and culturally to
African American politics illuminated the fascinating choices facing black voters in the
2008 Democratic presidential primaries. There was an apparent question of which of the
three leading candidates, Senator Hillary Clinton, Senator Barack Obama, or former
Senator John Edwards would benefit most from the continued relevance of the black
church?

49 Ibid. 19.
If we consider only the organizational element of the African American church, Senator Clinton appeared to have the advantage in mobilizing black voters. Building on the existing and enduring networks established by Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton enjoyed a substantial grassroots network of Southern, Midwest urban, and Northeast urban black churches. Clinton's organizational capacity in key primary states has been touted by some journalists as among the most powerful political machines in American politics. One key ingredient of that political base has been the vocal, visible and willing support of black religious leaders throughout the country. Senator Clinton and her supporters had access to black church pulpits and the influence that goes along with them. There is no question that she commanded the longest standing and most influential set of supporters among black clergy. Thinking of the black church solely as an organizational asset for the Democratic Party, Senator Clinton appeared to be the frontrunner. However, with an increasingly un-churched but religious youth population among black voters, candidates had to employ theological and cultural aspects of black religiosity in addition to traditional organizational uses of the black church.

Senator Barack Obama made the most compelling claim on the black church's theological understanding of the connection between the sacred and the political. Memorializing the anniversary of Bloody Sunday in March 2007, Obama articulated a vision for his leadership drawn specifically from a racialized, Biblical tradition. Senator Obama argued,

"I'm here because somebody marched. I'm here because you all sacrificed for me. I stand on the shoulders of giants. I thank the Moses generation; but we've got to remember, now, that Joshua still had a job to do. As great as Moses was, despite all that he did, leading a people out of bondage, he didn't cross over the river to see the Promised Land. God told him your job is done.... We're going to leave it to
the Joshua generation to make sure it happens. There are still battles that need to be fought; some rivers that need to be crossed. Like Moses, the task was passed on to those who might not have been as deserving, might not have been as courageous, find themselves in front of the risks that their parents and grandparents and great grandparents had taken. That doesn't mean that they don't still have a burden to shoulder, that they don't have some responsibilities. The previous generation, the Moses generation, pointed the way. They took us 90% of the way there. We still got that 10% in order to cross over to the other side.\textsuperscript{50}

The Exodus narrative in which Moses leads the people of Israel out of bondage by

the authority of God is the single most important anchor of black religious thought.\textsuperscript{51}

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s final "Mountaintop Sermon" drew on these same themes of leading the people to, but not himself entering, the Promised Land.\textsuperscript{52} Therefore, when Senator Obama framed his own political project with this particular biblical interpretation, he made effective use of traditional black religious tropes. In addition to his capacity to employ traditional, racialized social gospel theology in his political self-understanding, Senator Obama also appealed to the more individualist private morality of contemporary mega churches. For example, Senator Obama explained persistent racial inequality in academic achievement as resulting from a youth culture that emphasizes cool over smart.\textsuperscript{53} This "individual responsibility" narrative which criticizes youth

\textsuperscript{50} Barack Obama, \textit{The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream}, (First Vantage Books, 2008), 231.


\textsuperscript{52} Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his last public sermon on April 3, 1968, at Mason Temple (Church of God in Christ Headquarters) in Memphis, Tennessee. At the close of the speech he invoked the biblical experience of Moses saying, "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!" 44.

cultural practices rather than structural inequality resonated with the dispositional analysis offered in the prosperity gospel.\textsuperscript{54}

While Senator Obama effectively deployed both the more traditional and the newer forms of black religious ideas in connection with politics, it was not completely clear whether these multiple understanding can be easily reconciled among black voters. There had never been a single black church or a monolithic black politics. African American religious traditions have always blended concern with social justice and demand for personal righteousness. Black political attitudes have often combined political progressivism with personal conservatism, but in the current political context of highly partisan politics, African Americans often find it difficult to combine these multiple traditions.

While Senator Clinton was leading in the organizational capacity of the black church and Senator Obama was superior in deploying black religious ideas, it is not clear who led in connecting with African American voters through black religious culture according to Ta-Nehisi Coates in her March 2008 Time Magazine article. Although Barack Obama, who regularly attended a black church, it is not clear that this identity and these experiences translated into a sense of shared cultural experience with black voters. Ms. Coates further stated that substantial press attention was been given to the question of whether Barack Obama was "black enough" for black voters because of his mixed-race parentage and childhood socialization that differs from typical black experiences, and his apparent unease with offering strong opinions on issues of race. Senator Clinton may

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
reap the benefit of her marriage to President Clinton who was widely heralded as being highly adept at black religious cultural practices. However, Senator Clinton is sometimes judged against the standard of President Clinton and regularly falls short.\textsuperscript{55} Further, some black voters are uncomfortable with President Clinton's campaign presence on behalf of his wife in black communities because it is seen as a cynical attempt to entice black voters based on the earlier connection between black voters and the Clinton administration. Senator John Edwards never distinguished himself as an important contender for black voters according to the same Times article. Like President Clinton, Senator Edwards is a southerner from a disadvantaged background. His personal narrative of overcoming obstacles, struggle, and a particular Southern commitment to faith in the midst of personal crisis may translate particularly well in the vernacular of black religious culture.

The black church is likely to remain the single most important political organization among African Americans. It is the oldest indigenous black institution and it is historically and presently significant in developing African American political culture and encouraging African American political participation. But churches are not political organizations. Their sacred and spiritual functions, not their political ones, are the primary purpose of their existence. However, worshipping in black congregations, believing racialized religious ideas and imbuing black religious culture continues to have relevance in the political world as well as the sacred.

\textsuperscript{55} Dick Morris, and McGann, Eileen. "The Democrats: Hillary Blunders; Obama Surges Again" Saturday, March 17, 2007), 76.
Statement of the Problem

The black church plays a significant role within the black community. However, an examination of the changing role of the black church is necessary as it continues to evolve. This study examines the types and patterns of participation of black churches within the political arena and the community so that: (1) an understanding of past and present contributions of the black church to the political welfare needs of African Americans can be developed and; (2) based on the above, the potential of the black church as an institution for social service and social action can be considered in the formulation of the future of political policy, social planning.

Research Question

While it’s clear the contributions of the black church have been important, this research project will focus on the central question, what are the leadership contributions of the Atlanta black church in the political arena?

Hypothesis

The black church has developed the leadership skills of its leaders. Their skills have been honed and refined through a continuous process of actively responding to the needs of the community. This commitment to services requires that the church and its leaders stay engaged in local issues ranging from childcare to business development.

Assumptions

As an example of the Atlanta black church, Ebenezer Baptist Church has played a significant role in shaping the political landscape of Atlanta. As such there are numerous articles and books written that document the activities of Atlanta-area churches. It is an
assumption of the researcher that the written record will also reflect the leadership role taken in these numerous efforts.

The final assumption is that leadership skills are transferable. The researcher assumes that by uncovering the leadership skills and political contributions in Ebenezer Baptist Church and other Atlanta-area black churches will enable others to replicate these skills in their community.

**Significance of the Study**

This research paper closely examines the feelings and assumptions within the black community of the role the traditional black church plays in setting public policy. In addition, this research examines the difference, if any that mega church has contributed to the roles of churches in the political environment.

In order to identify the role of the black church, it is necessary to look at the research without defining parameters for normal and moral spiritualizing of the issue. In this sense, there is a realistic connection between present situation (human need) and leadership. This is significant in that the research deals with so called “secular” issues and therefore reflect a realistic expectation of spirituality without overly spiritualizing the issue. The research showed that the black community expected the traditional black church to address real, life-affecting issues such as community empowerment and development, redlining, political influence, and other social issues.

The current research also showed that because members of the black community share what could be considered the “black communal experience in American society,” a logical implication seems to follow that common perceptions often grow out of common experiences and historical connections. Furthermore, this research supported the role of
black preachers and the church as the main source of political assistance and financial enlightenment of the community.

The research proved that it is necessary to further define the traditional black church as a necessary shaper of public policy. In fact, what can be inferred from the research is that the traditional black church must reflect in its leadership persons who are active participants in the life of the community. In this regard, the research is emphatic about the role of the traditional black church that it is to continue to be an advocate for community needs, expectations, and system change. This research reemphasized the role of the church as a public conduit for relating community needs and engaging societal issues.

Methodology

For this study, two types of methodology will be used; historical and empirical analyses, and qualitative research. This allows the researcher to pull from various different sources and authorities to develop a conclusion.

Historical analysis was garnered by researching local church histories. For this reason, the researcher used qualitative analysis. As mentioned earlier, the study will utilize the following indicators for assessing the effectiveness of black political leaders and their organizations in black politics in reordering the social and economic conditions of blacks in Atlanta through the use of black churches: (1) distribution of government services to the black community; (2) health care; (3) election of blacks to public office

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56 R. Murray Thomas, *Blending Qualitative and Quantitative Research Methods in Theses and Dissertations* (Corwin Press, 2003), 256.

through the backing of the church; (4) employment and economic development projects for the black community; and (5) housing.

Overall, the primary focus of this study is to look at some of the key factors that affect the black community without the aid of the black churches.

The different types of methodology used by this researcher will determine the following:

1. Define by historical analysis the genesis of the traditional black church or the contemporary black church (shown in Chapter 1).

2. Examine and define the role of contemporary black church within the community.

3. Define mega church in order to label those churches and parishioners who fall under that category (Chapter 4 elaborates on the definition).

4. Develop conclusions and recommendations for follow-up study (Chapter 5).

Case study is an ideal methodology for an in-depth investigation into the role black churches play in Atlanta politics. Case studies have been used in a variety of investigations, particularly in sociological studies. Yin, Stake, and others who have wide experience in this methodology have developed robust procedures that, when used, allow the researcher to utilize methods as well developed and tested as any in the scientific field. On the other hand, data collection and analysis methods are known to hide some details whether or not the study is experimental or quasi-experimental.⁵⁸ Case studies are designed to bring out the details from the viewpoint of the participants by using multiple

sources of data. A review of the literature has identified at least four applications for a case study model:

1. To explain complex causal links in real-life interventions
2. To describe the real-life context in which the intervention has occurred
3. To describe the intervention itself
4. To explore those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear set of outcomes.  

Yin has identified some specific types of case studies: Exploratory, Explanatory, and Descriptive. Research by Stake included three others: Intrinsic - when the researcher has an interest in the case; Instrumental - when the case is used to understand more than what is obvious to the observer; and Collective - when a group of cases is studied. Exploratory cases are sometimes considered as a prelude to social research. Explanatory case studies may be used for doing causal investigations. Descriptive cases require a descriptive theory to be developed before starting the project. In all of the above types of case studies, there can be single-case or multiple-case applications.

This research project will use the Explanatory-Exploratory type of case study. It will enable the researcher to review printed reports and interview the participants in an effort to answer the research question posed on the role of the black church in Atlanta politics. The unit of analysis is a critical factor in the case study. It is typically a system of action rather than an individual or group of individuals. Case studies tend to be selective, focusing on one or two issues that are fundamental to understanding the system.

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60 Ibid.,

being examined. In this research study, the unit of analysis will be four representative black churches, Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church, World Changers Ministries, New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, and Bethel A.M.E.

Case studies are multi-perspectival analyses which mean that the researcher considers not only the voice and perspective of the actors, but also of the relevant groups of actors and the interaction between them. This one aspect defines the key characteristic that case studies possess: they give a voice to the powerless and voiceless.

Case study allows a triangulated research strategy. Snow and Anderson assert that triangulation can occur with data, investigators, theories, and even methodologies.62 Protocols that are used to ensure accuracy and alternative explanations are called triangulation.63 The need for triangulation arises from the ethical need to confirm the validity of the processes. In case studies, this could be done by using multiple sources of data. The problem in case studies is to establish meaning rather than location.

This research project will use two of the four types of triangulation identified by Denzin.64 Both data source triangulation, occurring when the researcher looks for the data to remain the same in different contexts, and Methodological triangulation, in which one approach is followed by another to increase confidence in the interpretation will be used in this project.

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The issue of generalization has appeared in the literature with regularity. It is a frequent criticism of case study research that the results are not widely applicable in real life. Yin in particular refuted that criticism by presenting a well constructed explanation of the difference between analytic generalization and statistical generalization: "In analytic generalization, previously developed theory is used as a template against which to compare the empirical results of the case study."65 The inappropriate manner of generalizing assumes that some sample of cases has been drawn from a larger universe of cases. Thus the incorrect terminology such as "small sample" arises, as though a single-case study were a single respondent. However in this research project, the dearth of literature in this area provides no clues to the number of cases that exist.

Stake argued for another approach centered on a more intuitive, empirically-grounded generalization.66 He termed it "naturalistic" generalization. His argument was based on the harmonious relationship between the reader's experiences and the case study itself. He expected the data generated by case studies would often resonate experientially with a broad cross section of readers, thereby facilitating a greater understanding of the phenomenon. The researcher enters this project with the knowledge and understanding that only a small group of churches may initially value its importance. However, by using the Explanatory and Exploratory type of case study, the entire research community will understand the need and the areas for future research.

Application of Recommended Procedures


Yin presented three conditions for the design of case studies: a) the type of research question posed, b) the extent of control an investigator has over actual behavioral events, and c) the degree of focus on contemporary events. This type of research question justifies an exploratory study. This Research project will look at the following variables:

- Location
- Size
- Class of congregation
- Years of Service
- Community Organizations
- Political/Leadership Organizations

Documents to be used in this research project will be evaluation reports and journal and newspaper articles. The validity of the documents will be carefully reviewed so as to avoid incorrect data being included in the data base. One of the most important uses of documents is to corroborate evidence gathered from other sources.

**Churches in the Research**

Ebenezer is one of the oldest churches in Atlanta. It was founded in 1886 during the Reconstruction Era in the South. The Rev. John A. Parker, born into slavery, was the founder and first pastor. The original church site was located on Airline Street in Atlanta. The church’s current location on 407 Auburn Avenue was established in 1914

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and it remains there today. It has been at the forefront of civil rights actions. It is also the church where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached for several years.\textsuperscript{69}

The other traditional black church examined in this research is Wheat Baptist Church. It is located in the heart of the Sweet Auburn district near the Martin Luther King, Jr. Historic site and preservation center. This mighty fortress is one of the nation’s oldest African American churches. The church pioneered socio-economic development in Atlanta’s inner city community and has many charitable organizations that are used for its outreach for the community.\textsuperscript{70}

World Changers Church International is located in College Park Georgia. Its founder and pastor for nearly twenty years is Dr. Creflo Dollar. His teachings are based on prosperity preaching. The congregation is in excess of 10,000 members and rakes in millions of dollars in yearly revenue.

New Birth Ministries was founded by Bishop Eddie Long in 1982. He focuses on prosperity preaching and has over 25,000 members. The church is located in Lithonia Georgia. Bishop Long has several outreach programs for the community where the church is located.

**Limitations**

This study is limited to a review of four churches: Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church, World Changers Ministries, New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, and Bethel A.M.E. This study was limited to non-denominational churches because the majority of

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.

the black church population is Protestant. This study is further limited to the participation of the church as a unit in community activities and political impact in the community. The research will not concentrate on ministerial participation in community activities except as it relates to the church’s involvement. The method of inquiry of this study is based on a case study of the traditional black church in the Atlanta area Ebenezer Baptist Church, Wheat Baptist Church and Mega churches New Birth and World Changers. These churches were involved in a test group consisting of four churches located in the inner city of Atlanta.

First, this case model allows for in-depth analysis and investigation of defined constraints and opportunities presented to this particular group for their review of future political involvement. Second, this study allows the researcher to analyze data collected within a defined time frame that is useful for understanding the stages of development of the traditional black church and its interaction with Atlanta’s urban political economy.

Scope of the Study

As mentioned earlier, this study seeks to develop a conceptual analysis of the impact of the traditional black church as a catalyst for addressing the issue of change and advocacy in communities, particularly Atlanta. Critical to this process has been the need to assess both the process in its effect on the lives of those impacted by the twentieth century and the subsequent impact of institutions charged with, or at least, bearing responsibility for responding to political and social issues. This includes programs such as affirmative action and welfare, political procedures such as redistricting of minority areas and other challenges to progress and assistance in minority communities.
In recent years, faith-based communities have been gaining much attention with respect to their roles as agents of advocacy, change, and exchange within the American social, economic, and political structure. Though not a new phenomenon certainly within the black community, "faith-based communities" are gaining increasing attention in addressing issues that were otherwise left up to governmental agencies, grassroots political organizations, social advocacy groups and educational institutions. Issues that pertain to social uplifting and well-being are being critically assessed with respect to the status of recipients of government aid and assistance. Restructuring of assistance programs has placed a heavier emphasis on self-help, self-reliance, self-determination, and self-support with community-based institutions being asked to provide technical assistance, training, and even support (financially, emotionally, and spiritually) for those transitioning from need-based services.

The scope of this research will discuss a cluster of the traditional black churches located in four separate urban areas in metro Atlanta. Additionally, these churches will be explored in relation to their engagement in the political economy of urban development. Defined as a cluster, these churches can be described as actively participatory community churches that have come together as a conglomerate to initiate creative action and to seek resources to engage in economic development in urban blighted areas. Thus,

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74 Nancy Tatom Ammerman, Congregation & Community. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 16.
exploration of this area is critical for its utility as a primer for future analysis and investigation.\textsuperscript{75}

The African American church in Atlanta is a dynamic force for change. As the principal social institution historically owned and controlled by blacks, it continues to function as the main guarantor of cultural values in African American public discourse and life. In explicit ways, the social and political life of blacks in Atlanta exhibits an affinity for the organizational and cultural influences of black religion.\textsuperscript{76}

For the city’s black inhabitants, religious beliefs play an important role in their life. The black church is an important catalyst for change. The black churches on Auburn Avenue have proven that the church as an institution can bring about economic revitalization of black communities. It goes without saying that black churches cannot possibly meet the economic needs of the African American community on their own. The community, federal, state, and local governments have to participate in the process.

In African American communities across the South, religion and politics are only partially differentiated at best. Institutional boundaries are permeable and notions of separations of church and state are unintelligible and even reprehensible in the face of social injustices. As one local historian insightfully observed, “Black Atlantans” support for the black church against affirmative action programs is just as strong as the Jewish community’s support for the state of Israel.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{75} William L. Banks, \textit{The Black church in the U.S: Its Origin, Growth, Contributions and Outlook.} (Shelbyville: Bible and Literature Missionary Foundation 1972), 218.


\textsuperscript{77} Carlos Campos, “Tough Talk Spurs Fear of City Rift Overheated,” (Atlanta Journal Constitution 1999), 11.
The types of black churches researched in this paper are still attaining the same goal as far as serving the black community, but in different ways. The traditional black church is serving its parishioners as it did in the past; the contemporary black churches, the mega church, is preaching the prosperity gospel which differs a little from its counterparts, and reflects the type of church administration surveyed.
CHAPTER II

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research paper examines the role of the traditional black church in its use of the outreach program, and the modern phenomenon of the contemporary black church in regard to politics and prosperity preaching. The origins of the traditional black church as an institution in the United States can be explained by what Singer calls "ethnogenesis." He says ethnic groups evolve through a five-step process. First, some portions of the population have hierarchy status. The difference in this hierarchy status can be physical or social. Second, members of this group will be assigned specific roles. Third, as the people recognize that they have different roles, they will learn to interact with each other, and distinctive social structures will emerge as the interaction leads to social awareness. Fourth, they will recognize that they are isolated from the dominant culture and in-group loyalties form. Fifth, and finally, the development of the ethnic group is enhanced from these differences that are recognized by the group. These differences are then used as an organizational tool to promote their social and political causes.

Singer's theory of ethnogenesis serves the writer's purpose because it helps to explain how segregation resulted in the birth of the black church. The pattern of racial segregation among churches has its prototype in the social community where these

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1 J. Singer, A First Course In Factor Analysis (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates 1982), 123.
churches are located. The origin, nature, growth, and development of the distinct traditional black church must be viewed as a distinct black caste. The black church grew out of protest against white supremacy and the superior position held by whites in American society.²

The other theory the researcher examines is the Compensatory theory; this is drawn from the works of St. Claire Drake and Horace,³ as well as Gunnar Myrdal.⁴ They assume the black church is a creation of distorted realities created from black culture. This theory deduces that the black church in the black community found community empowerment, control, acceptance and dignity that were not available to them in the larger society.

The communal prophetic model is one proposed by Nelson's own model.⁵ This model interprets the role of the black church in a more positive light. The model gives credence to the significance of the black church as an institution of accomplishment that has established itself internally as an ethnically rich community-based organization. Furthermore, the black church accents the acclaim of the minister as a prophetic voice addressing issues within a society dominated by corrupt white Christians. This model is useful in laying an analytical framework both for embracing the steadfastness of the

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black Christian experience in the face of insurmountable odds and confronting the ineptitudes of morally detached white Christians.

**Types of Black Churches**

Johnson provides a typology useful in classifying the types of churches found in Black communities. Church Type A is the unemotional, practical, action-type congregation. Its membership is made primarily of people with upper and middle socio-economic status (persons who would have attained high educational, occupational, and economic status). This church is classified by lower socio-economic status (SES) African Americans as “high brow.” It generally stands for the elimination of traditional forms of worship characterized by emotionalism and otherworldliness. Members of this church prefer a quiet, intellectual type of worship.

For the members of Church A, religious activity is viewed as a form of organized activity in an atmosphere of social approval. Though members of the church attend worship regularly and participate in church clubs and activities, this is not the center of their social lives. As church A seeks to alter traditional religious expression, it simultaneously promotes education because it believes that enlightenment facilitates advancement. To further this goal, Church A sponsors lectures, group discussions, converts, clinics, nurseries, and colleges.

Church A holds strongly that the church should seek practical ends, meaning, the church should seek the present rather than the past and concentrate on that which is near rather than that which is remote. As a result, Church A engages in local community work. It promotes centers of recreation and provides opportunities for leadership and

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participation in community programs. It is aware of employment and business opportunities and may even have a church employment agency.

Church B represents a middle point in terms of the breakdown of traditional patterns of worship, the change in status, and the modification of functions. Church B is comprised of a mixed socio-economic status (SES) church with persons of lower SES and possibly upper SES status in the membership. Church B will be semi-emotional and semi-otherworldly in a traditional way. There is no unity of belief or unity concerning the display of motions and otherworldliness as found in Church A. Some persons in Church B are opposed to extreme emotional demonstrations such as shouting and yelling ‘Amen’ and ‘Hallelujah’; others favor such expression. Generally, this church is undergoing a change which represents a decaying of rural or semi-rural institutions.

In Church B, the coming together of the new and old can be seen. Recent migrants from rural areas bring with them the traditional patterns, while the urban members seek the introduction of more modern activities, as described for church A. Church B feels that transcendental, other-worldly ends should not be pursued exclusively and will, accordingly, redirect interest in the church with one regard for worldly ends. It offers emotionally charged services, yet it calls attention to intellectual needs. Generally, in Church B, there is initial resistance to newer patterns, and then a gradual acceptance.

Church C represents the church where there has been very little breakdown in the patterns of worship, very little change in status of the church as an institution, and little change, if any, in the function of the church. This church might very well be a transplantation of a southern rural church.7

7 Ibid.
The persons in Church C are firm traditionalists and regard emotional display and otherworldliness as desirable. The membership of Church C is generally made up of lower SES African Americans. Usually the persons in this church have an insecure place in the “outer community” and are generally overlooked by groups occupying a more favorable educational and economic status, and by churches serving other groups.8 The church retains the importance as a community center for members of Church C since they do not participate meaningfully in other institutions and activities which compete with the church in the middle and upper-middle SES circles. Generally, Church C seeks to satisfy the emotional and spiritual needs of its members. Parishioners hear spiritually strengthening sermons, communicate with the divine through prayer and song, and give personal testimonies of the help and power of God.

In general, the traditional black church offers many programs designed to satisfy many needs. Classes in Christian education are sponsored, and growth in the knowledge and the reality of God is promoted. The church gives dinners to provide the opportunity for fellowship. The church aids the sick and the morally and financially distressed. It sponsors missionary work in the form of evangelism and education. All of this programming is in accord with the belief that the church should be a medium for Christian fellowship and inspiration in helping its members meet the difficulties of life.9

In Church C, very little provision is made for children and young adults. Some might have youth choirs for young adults to participate in or they may be expected to derive spiritual benefits from the adult-centered worship service. Finally, it can be said of

Church C that, as its members advance in education, employment, and economic status, it will become a church similar to Church B. If changes occur in the condition and the status of the members, Church C will continue as a lower SES church and, as such, provide a core meaningful activity and stability amid the complexities and disorganization of urban life.¹⁰

Church types A, B, and C reflect changes in the status of African Americans. Thus, according to Johnston, as African Americans advance in status, the kinds of doctrine, ritual and church organizations that appeal to them change. The framework in David Gil’s *Unraveling Social Policy*¹¹ is used to draw conclusions about findings in this study and provide the basis of systematic analysis of the political impact and policy implications of the political activities of black churches. There are three objectives Gil’s model provides. The first objective is to gain understanding of the issues that contribute to the nature, scope, and distribution of political activities among black churches, and the theories concerning the underlying dynamics.¹²

A second objective is to uncover the chain of substantive affects resulting, or expected to result, from the implementation of the black churches’ influence in the communities. These include the intended and unintended, and, short and long-range effects of church policies on the communities that they serve.

The final objective of this analysis is to suggest new alternative policies aimed at the same objectives concerning church involvement in politics within the black


community. This involves providing information pertaining to the issues that affect the black community and by hosting candidate and issue forum and voter registration drives. Another alternative is to use the pulpit via sermons and announcements.

In summary, the conceptual framework that guides this study consists of three components. First, the black church as an institution in American society and its activities in social and political involvement in the community which will be viewed as a result of the minority status of African Americans. Secondly, the types of churches and their involvement in financial support through development of the communities in which they are located. Lastly, the analysis of the kinds of leadership skills church leaders possess. The research uses the first conceptual framework which consists of looking at the black church as an institution and its impact on the black community.

**Traditional Black Church and the Political Economy**

The black church has historically played a central role within black communities. Often black churches are the only non-governmental institution for social change within the black neighborhood, and many blacks look to their churches to address social problems in their communities. The saturation of minorities in cities has changed the landscape of the inner city. Since the 1960s, this high concentration of blacks in urban centers has not only changed the economic complexion of the city but has also had a varying effect on the political culture of cities. Subsequently, there have been varying degrees of directives related to policy institutive which affect the social well-being of blacks and other minorities.

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Most assumptions about the election of black officials have been greatly exaggerated regarding their considerations for pursuing what is perceived as an agenda common to the needs of the black community. Issues such as welfare, public assistance, affordable housing, poverty, crime and others that are viewed as sensitive to the social agenda of the black community evoke varied societal responses. Richard Brown in 1973 suggested that the mere presence of black office holders does not necessarily return concrete benefits for minorities.

There are two reasons for this trend: first, in most cases, black public officials do not have sufficient control over policy, and do not have access to those who control the policies, secondly, even when mayors are in the position to change the system, the enormous size of the bureaucracies operates against a restrictive restructuring process. In that regard, both the presence of political coalitions and time constraints are hindrances to black public officials shaping public policy.

Although these trends do not reflect insensitivity to the black agenda, other indications of less sensitivity to social agendas may reflect an economic necessity. Thus, many would suggest that both are a necessity to attract economic development and social integration. For example, the priority to pursue economic development and investment

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15 Ibid., 23.

strategies before adequately addressing revitalization and community development in slum areas could be perceived as more pragmatic than insensitive by elected officials.\(^\text{17}\)

Grassroots leaders often perceive the opposite as true. Furthermore, when black candidates attempt to attract white votes,\(^\text{18}\) social and racial issues are subdued or diverted in order to attract white voters. In effect, this helps to attract voters with the capital and potential to strengthen urban economies. On the other hand, though some black politicians place less emphasis on attracting the constituency of white business persons during campaigning, they realize the importance of white business men for governance of policies and initiatives to develop ailing urban economies.\(^\text{19}\)

Thus, the urban political economy is defined within the context of developing the tax base infrastructure of cities. In that regard, regime politics can often define the parameters from which an organization sets its agenda in terms that exclude non-economic contributors to the process.\(^\text{20}\) Often this is the case with the black church. While elected officials use the black church as a platform for disclosure of their own agendas, upon election to office, the black community is treated as a liability.\(^\text{21}\) What is even more alarming is the fact that black church leaders rarely press the issue of political

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compensation for its assistance in the election of politicians beyond vocal reprimands.\(^{22}\)

This is both institutional and communal as the black community is quick to overlook the ineffectiveness and insensitivity of politicians who overlook community needs. Many have taken the process as a normal part of the American system and believe that their votes do not count or count for much.\(^ {23}\)

The political economy of urban redevelopment seems to have addressed some of the overt systematic problems of acquisition and distribution of resources, wealth and services. In that sense, persons like Congressman Clayton Powell Jr. of Halem, Mayor Marion Barry of Chicago and even Mayor Maynard Jackson of Atlanta gave some semblance of looking beyond mere one-sided business interest as the primary solution to urban ills. Urban redevelopment entails both motivation and investments into community programs and services with contracts, resources and wealth distribution to create positive community psyche.\(^ {24}\)

**Local Church Solutions**

With respect to local activities, there are several approaches to economic development and the elimination of poverty that surface consistently: (1) business ventures and job development; (2) housing; and (3) education. Looking at the needs of their particular communities, some churches, for example, have opened restaurants, food

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 12


stores, high-tech industry, garment production, and gas stations in the neighborhoods where they have their churches.\textsuperscript{25}

Some churches also provide start up funds for small businesses based on church resources such as credit unions as well as through loans arranged by their business development staff. In addition, many churches cooperate with the Department of Housing and Urban Development to accomplish their economic goals.\textsuperscript{26} Once those interested in entrepreneurial opportunities are identified and financial resources provided churches, such as Bethel AME of Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, offer technological assistance and start up assistance to qualified candidates. The church also has a business resource center that contains library information on grant opportunities as well as materials that help with the writing of business plans.\textsuperscript{27}

The traditional black church also helps members of the congregation monitor and manage their money. Many churches are creating credit unions to assist members with loans and credit cards to enhance business-based community development. In addition to these services mentioned some churches are working with consulting firms to provide financial planning and other needed finance related services for blacks who have achieved some level of security.\textsuperscript{28}

\textbf{Partnerships between Church and Society}

Black churches in Atlanta have formed constructive partnerships with their neighborhood and government agencies. One of those agencies formed is the Vine City

\textsuperscript{25} Anthony B. Pinn, \textit{The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era} (Orbis, Maryknoll: New York 2002), 79.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 80

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 84

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 88
Housing Ministry, Inc. The Vine City Community, over one hundred years old, has been described as a historically and commercially important component of the neighborhood.29

Vine City was once home to a thriving black middle class community. By the 1960s the community had deteriorated and public housing took over the entire area. In 1986 eleven congregations, pastors, and community leaders met with local government agencies and with the aid of $250 million in Federal Empowerment Zone Grant awarded in 1994, new business ventures took place in Vine City transforming it into a vibrant city.30 The success of this joint venture was dependent upon the churches and community empowerment.

Traditional Black Church and HIV/AIDS

First recognized in the 1980s, HIV/AIDS has had devastating consequences. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, as of 1989, less than a decade after the first report of AIDS, almost 30 percent of all AIDS patients had contracted the disease through shared needles. The same report indicates that by the end of the year the primary means of introducing the HIV/AIDS virus into the larger, heterosexual population was through sexual contact with drug users.31

Although blacks do not constitute in actual numbers the bulk of those suffering with HIV/AIDS, the rate of infection is frightening. “Blacks make up 37 percent of all those who contracted AIDS through needles and 48 percent of those who contracted


30 Ibid., 16

AIDS through partners who used dirty needles. These patterns of transmission largely explain why blacks are 27 percent of all people with AIDS, and black women are 52 percent of all women with AIDS. Black men are almost three times as likely as white men to contract AIDS, and black women are twelve times as likely as white women.

With respect to the two areas of concern here, illicit drugs and HIV/AIDS the collective traditional black church activism is often associated with the work of spokespersons such as Rev. Jesse Jackson and organizations such as the National Conference on the Black Family/Community and Crack Cocaine. Using these two as examples, the traditional black church has typically but not exclusively responded in two ways: (1) slogans, and (2) distribution of information and suggested policy reform. One of the best examples of slogans is Rev. Jackson's "Down with Dope! Up with Hope!" Such slogans were intended to motivate black Americans to take control of their communities and personal dealings. The moral charge given to adults and young people was to take charge of their lifestyles. In the words of Rev. Jackson: "Our total community must reject the dope pushers and see them as terrorists. We must change our minds, our morals and our conduct."

Many denominations and their local churches adopted this approach, using catchy slogans in the pulpit and youth programs as a way of inspiring

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33 Ibid., 115


36 Ibid., 135
children to avoid drugs. This motivational technique at times has been combined with a more direct attack on the relationship between drug flow into communities and the U.S. government. Again drawing from Rev. Jackson,

"until the American people responded to our campaign message of “Stopping Drugs From Flowing In and Jobs From Flowing Out,” Nancy Reagan was just saying “No!,” Vice-President and Republican Nominee George Bush was just saying nothing, and President Ronald Reagan was just doing nothing except cutting the Coast Guard’s drug interdiction budget by $100 million while international drug trafficking was increasing."37

In addition to the work of individuals like Jackson, the Congress of National Black Churches has been involved in health-care issues, particularly drug abuse. Its primary involvement has centered on assistance and training programs through its national anti-drug and violence campaigns.38 The traditional black church commitment to dealing with illicit drugs is evident in word and deed. The HIV/AIDS epidemic has not been unilaterally addressed. Silence on this issue is often considered appropriate because many black Christians entertain conspiracy theories related to HIV/AIDS that promote suspicion concerning the disease and the medical industry’s research and treatment efforts.39

According to some accounts, this disease is a result of government engineered plot to remove undesirable populations, notably homosexuals, drug users, and racial minorities. The appeal of conspiracy theories is not without merit, earlier in the century

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38 Ibid., 156

black men infected with syphilis remained untreated in order for researchers to study the effects of the disease on the human body and mind.\textsuperscript{40}

Other questions on AIDS education and the traditional black church is the church did not want to give the impression that they condone premarital sex. One gets a hint of this in the following statement offered by the AME Church it argued that the church must “take an uncompromising stand for abstinence from premarital sexual activity, balancing preaching and high risk behavior such as sexual promiscuity.”\textsuperscript{41} In extremely rare cases, with churches such as First AME Church, part of the prevention work involves distributing condoms in-conjunction with abstinence preaching.

Critic of the black church

Malcolm X and Ice Cube, the rapper, both view the black church as a tool of oppression to keep blacks in place. Their viewpoint conforms with Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa who was quoted as saying,

“the White man came to my country he told us to kneel down close our eyes and pray, when we opened our eyes the white man had the land and the blacks had Christianity.”\textsuperscript{42}

In the following chapters Malcolm X and Ice Cube are explored in depth with other contributors.

Summary

Adam Clayton Powell Jr. once said “there is no separation between politics and the Black church.”\textsuperscript{43} The dissertation agrees with Powell’s assertion. The black church is

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, 10


the backbone of the black community and nearly every black politician, and white politicians involve the black church in their campaign for power.

The black church has always been viable in developing political techniques, strategies and styles of political protest mobilization and persuasion to meet crisis and conflict. Furthermore the black church is the most prominent economic unit in the black community. It owns properties and financial stakes in the communities that it serves.

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CHAPTER III

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the seminal work *The Black Church in African American Experience*¹ Lincoln and Mamiya define “greater black churches” as those churches that are a part of one of seven historically black Christian conventions or denominations. Those convention or denominations are as follows: Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC), National Baptist Convention U.S.A. Incorporated (NBC), National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated (NBCA), African Methodist Episcopal (AME), African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ), Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME), and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC).

In addition to the historically black Christian conventions or denominations, the “greater black church” includes those churches whose congregations and ministerial leadership are black.² Scholars of the black church have studied its role in public life and continually wrestled with whether the black church has indeed provided “bread at midnight” or has in fact been detrimental to the African American struggle for social, political, and economic justice. They address questions such as the following: do black churches take away from black liberation or do they further black liberation; do they serve as protest organizations or do they facilitate accommodation to the status quo; and are they primarily “otherworldly” focusing exclusively on issues of the world?


What becomes clear by reviewing the literature is that neither black churches in
general or black mega churches in particular are monolithic. Martin Luther King Jr.
himself is the quintessential symbol of the “activist” black minister that uses religion as
motivation for political action. However, there are many black churches that are
apolitical. Black churches are primarily otherworldly, prophetic, accommodationist or
protest-oriented in character. The black church should recognize that it is a shifting socio-
political context that helps to determine the role an individual plays in public life.

In order to examine the role of black churches in community development activity
it is important to first examine the role of traditional black church and black Christianity
in public life. The role of the black church has been a contentious one especially in the
eyes of black radicals like Malcolm X. He argued that Christianity plays a negative role
in the black public life and, in fact, is the primary tool of oppression used against blacks
in America. To him, Christianity is alien to the African American and conditions them to
acquiesce in their own oppression:

Christianity is the white man’s religion. The Holy Bible in the white man’s hands
and his interpretations of it have been the greatest single ideological weapon for
enslaving millions of non white human beings... The greatest miracle Christianity
has achieved in American is that the black man in white Christian hands has not
grown violent. It is a miracle that 22 million black people have not risen up
against their oppressors- in which they would have been justified by all moral
criteria, and even by the democratic tradition.³

On the other hand, the theologian James Cone argues that Christianity is not only
compatible with black liberation struggles but also that Christianity is black power. Cone
asserts:

Jesus is not safely confined in the first century. He is our contemporary,
proclaiming release to the captives and rebelling against all who silently accept
the structures of injustice. If he is not in the ghetto, if he is not where (human

beings) are living at the brink of existence, but is, rather in the easy life of the suburbs, then the gospel is a lie. The opposite, however, is the case. Christianity is not alien to black power, it is black power.  

These diametrically opposed views of the black church beg the following questions: What is the true nature of black church in public life? Has it been a vehicle for black liberation or has it been a tool for the oppression of African Americans? Has it facilitated accommodation to the status quo or has it facilitated rebellion against oppression? Finally, how do the answers to these questions help us to build an analytical framework for the examination of traditional black church in the community development?

Though it is widely recognized by scholars that the traditional black church is a very important institution for the black community, many observers appear to have negative conclusions concerning the role of the traditional black church in African American public life. An important aspect of this debate can be loosely characterized around the dichotomous idea of the traditional black church as either a liberator or, in Marxist terminology, an opiate, which is used to sedate or pacify people and discourage them from activism by making them pleased with their miserable status quo.  

A debate over whether the traditional black church is liberator or an opiate of the people and a tool of oppression is very useful to help construct a theoretical framework for this dissertation. Serving as a liberator, the contemporary black church would be more apt to participate in community development activities especially those that emphasize

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structural change. However, as an opiate, the contemporary black church would not be as apt to become involved in prophetic activity and would emphasize more of an exclusively “priestly” role.\(^6\)

The studies performed attempt to discover whether the traditional black church serves as an opiate or a liberator, many focus on the attitudes of members of congregations on a religious scale. This may be useful to help determine whether members of churches have a liberation attitude or pacifist attitude that maintains the status quo. It does not reflect whether black churches themselves are practicing activities that help to liberate communities or not.

Religion operating as an opiate, manifested through the black churches, has been a consistent critique throughout the history of the traditional black church in the U.S. Does religion, specifically Christianity, simply promote the idea that African Americans should concern themselves with their situation here on the earth and wait for the “sweet by and by” where they will “get a crown” and “walk all over heaven” with it, as Gary Marx argues?\(^7\) Does the hierarchical and patriarchal organizational structure of the traditional black church inhibit it from practicing progressive politics, coming up with the best strategies, and implementing the most effective procedures to serve a role as a liberator? Also at issue is the controversial way in which the enslaved Africans were introduced to Christianity. Can those who were enslaved legitimately practice a religion that was often used by white slave masters to perpetuate white supremacy and to justify slavery? In his work, *The Negro Church*, E. Franklin Frazier gives one of the most

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scathing critiques of the “Negro church” describing it as more of an opiate than a liberator. Frazier argues that the “Negro church” has served to undermine intellectual thought and basically is the primary cause for the “so called backwardness of the American Negro.” The organizational style of the “Negro Church” was mimicked in the establishment of all other black organizations such as fraternities, educational institutions, and mutual aid societies.

Frazier saw the organizational structure of the black church as authoritarian, antidemocratic and led by various “petty tyrants”. Therefore it was precisely because the traditional black church had been intimately involved in black life and had become the most important institution in the black community that it is so dangerous. Frazier went on to argue that only through integration, which would allow blacks to be influenced by other organizational structures, could their organizations improve. Frazier’s point leads to the following questions: Is it still the case that the dominant forces of the traditional black church hierarchy disable it from serving a liberating role? Does the decision making process in these churches influence the types of community development activities in which they engage? Does that process affect the success of these activities?

Gunnar Myrdal in An American Dilemma described the Negro Church as having a great deal of potential power but actually serving as an opiate. He concluded that in

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most traditional black church a vast majority of the sermons preached were about otherworldly issues and not practical issues of the day. He described the majority of black preachers as ignorant, having no formal theological training, and whose calling to the ministry was generally illegitimate and a farce. Not only did the traditional black church serve as an opiate of the black people but ministers were not as well educated as the members of their congregations.\(^\text{12}\)

Most recently, Adolph Reed, in *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon*,\(^\text{13}\) takes the position that instead of facilitating political mobilization, the traditional black church actually discourages blacks from participating in politics. Reed argues that, in fact, the historical references to the traditional black church as a political mobilizer and a source of political leadership is an inaccurate reading of history. The church actually served as an *alternative* to political participation and engagement. Reed argues that the traditional black church is by nature anti-confrontational and anti-political and has served as a mechanism for social control more than it has served in a political, mobilizing role.\(^\text{14}\)

Singers have been some of the harshest critics of the role of the church. For example, there is evidence of the opiate critique in the song, ‘When I get to Heaven’ by popular African American Rap artiste Ice Cube. In the song, Ice Cube criticizes the traditional black church and, more fundamentally, black Christianity for its coziness with idea of white supremacy and the exploitation of enslaved Africans by white Christians in America. In one of his lines he says, “white man please take another look because we


\(^\text{13}\) Adolph Reed, *The Boston Review*, (Boston 1995), 78.

couldn't be reading from the same book," illustrating that for him there is an inherent inconsistency with being able to practice the same religion as those who oppressed you. He continues, "The (white man) made you slave and then he gave you a Bible... Four hundred years of getting our ass kicked by so called Christians and Catholics." He also describes Christianity (and the traditional black church) as a religion that teaches people to be unconcerned with the present but sit and wait for change to come. The opinions of Reed and Ice Cube are still relevant and alive for many today.

On the other hand, most of the recent literature (especially in the aftermath of the civil rights movement) tends to show the traditional black church in a more positive light. From this perspective, the traditional black church is seen as an instrument for black liberation. After the civil rights movement, politically active black ministers began to participate in both electoral politics and protest politics. The traditional black church is seen as a mobilizer of political activism by providing cognitive and organizational resources. Gatherings of worship among African Americans are associated with pleas to government and social protest, and the religious gatherings themselves were often sites of strategic planning for resistance.

Many black organizations (e.g. schools and banks) were established through the traditional black church. Labor leader A. Phillip Randolph did most of his recruiting for members of the brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters Union within traditional black

\[\text{15 Ibid., 14.}\]
\[\text{16 Hans Baer and Merrill Singer, } African American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), xii.}\]
\[\text{17 Ibid.}\]
church, and meetings were held there as well.\textsuperscript{18} Black liberation theologians like James Cone have done the most work from this perspective and focus on the liberation theme in black religion. For example, Cone historically traces the evolution of the traditional black church from the "invisible institution" of the American slavery period to the present-day African American church and concludes that, "liberation is the central core of the gospel as found in the scriptures and in the history of black Americans."\textsuperscript{19} From this perspective, the traditional black church is seen as the most independent of black institutions because it generally depends on the support of its members rather than the state or white benefactors, unlike institutions such as black colleges.\textsuperscript{20}

Gary Marx’s findings on the "de-militizing" impact of traditional black church were challenged by social scientists influenced by these more flattering views of the traditional black church.\textsuperscript{21} According to Cohen, Hunt and Hunt challenged these findings by retesting the Marx data.\textsuperscript{22} They found that when taking into account the difference in sect-like religiosity and church-like religiosity, religion could actually increase the chances that one would be militant. While sect-like religiosity decreased militancy, church-like religiosity increased militancy; those who had church like religiosity were actually more likely to hold militant viewpoints than those who were agnostic. In this

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 23.

\textsuperscript{19} Rufus P. Browning, Dale Rogers Marshall, and David H. Tabb, eds., \textit{Racial Politics in American Cities}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., 78.


\textsuperscript{21} Eva T. Thorne and Eugene F. Rivers, "Beyond the Civil Rights Industry: Why black America Needs a New Politics: How the Black Church Might Deliver One," \textit{Boston Review} 1, no. 8 (September 2001), 45.

\textsuperscript{22} Cathy Cohen, "The Church?" (a response to Rivers and Thorne) (Boston Review September 2001), Volume 1 Issue 8, 89.
way black religion served as both an “opiate and inspiration of civil rights militancy” depending on the type or style of the black religion and its shifting socio-political context. In fact, traditional black church was found to be extremely important to the success of the civil rights movement serving as a central organizational base for the movement and the mass meetings that supported direct action efforts such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was a church-based organization that connected congregations and thus people to the movement. These church leaders actually wanted to act more radically than the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which had been the premier civil rights organization up to that point. The SCLC respected the legal approach but thought a direct action approach might be more effective. This more radical approach (direct action) was led by church leaders, which defied the notion of the church as only serving in an accommodation capacity. They also provided leadership for the movement and leadership training that helped make the movement successful. Traditional black church provided organizational resources, leadership, financial resources and even sanctioned the non-violent aspect of the civil rights movement, and were in large part responsible for its success. Some scholars argue that the “Negro church” that Frazier spoke of was in fact


transformed to the more liberatory “black church” due to the modern civil rights movement. These authors look at the “black church” as having been born out of the “Negro church” as a fundamentally different institution from that which Frazier described.26 This is because many ministers were heavily influenced by an increased “black consciousness” that came about due to the civil rights movement. They had actually begun to think of the role of the church differently. From this perspective, many traditional black churches experienced a re-birth that politicized them more activist.27

Lincoln and Mamiya argue that the interpretation of the traditional black church as either liberator or opiate is much too simplistic and studies based from this assumption cannot possibly account for the intricacies of the traditional black church. On the other hand, they think of the traditional black church in terms of six dialectical tensions that evolve but never synthesize in the Hegelian sense. Instead, these dialectical tensions can all exist to various extents in any given church. The six tensions are: (1) priestly and prophetic; (2) otherworldly; (3) universalistic and particularistic; (4) communal and privatistic; (5) charismatic and bureaucratic; and (6) resistance and accommodation. Lincoln and Mamiya argue that this perspective of the traditional black church allows for the interpretation of the dynamic nature of the traditional black church. It facilitates an examination of the traditional black church as it responds to social conditions.28


28 Ibid.
Similarly, Baer and Singer argue that black religion is contradictory by nature.\textsuperscript{29} While on the one hand it has been used to justify slavery, it has also been the inspiration for many black revolutionaries as African Americans reworked Christianity and used it to serve a number of needs.\textsuperscript{30} They also argue that the relationship between opiate and liberator is complicated. For example, although generally one would consider community outreach activities as being a part of a liberation tradition, Baer and Singer argue that they can sometimes serve an accommodation role. In pursuing these activities, African American religion exhibited an accommodative dimension by attempting to create an acquiescent space for blacks in a racist society, whether it was in the rural areas of the South or the cities of the North.\textsuperscript{31}

The role of traditional black church in the civil rights movement is one of the best illustrations of the complicated role of traditional black church in public life. While it has been found that traditional black church was integral to the movement - supplying much of the financing, organizational resources, and value formation - many black churches did not participate in the civil rights movement. In fact, even many of those ministers that did participate did not do so willingly and only after being virtually coerced. For example, at the first mass mobilization meeting for the Montgomery Bus Boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, Reverend Ed Montgomery had to embarrass the other leading ministers of Montgomery into physically supporting the movement at the first mass meeting saying “you guys have... lived off these poor washwomen all your lives and ain’t never done

\textsuperscript{29} This biographical sketch can be read in its entirety on the Crenshaw Christian Center, Los Angeles, CA. (www.faithdome.org accessed November 12, 2006), 1.


\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
nothing for ‘em”. If these other preachers refused to march, he then threatened that he would inform their congregations that they were too afraid to participate. It was only after people were already mobilized and ready to participate in the protest that the majority of the ministers signed on to the program to support their churches.

Models of the Primary Roles of Traditional Black Church

While there is a general consensus on the role of the church in the black community there is a debate over the direction and character of its influence. In the past, three models of the traditional black church and its role in alleviating conditions for black American were advanced by sociologists and social scientists. The assimilation-isolation model views the traditional black church as an obstruction to the complete assimilation and integration of blacks into American society. By socially segregating its members, the traditional black church was said to impede its members’ level of participation in the activities of voluntary and civic associations. Characterizations of the religious behaviors of blacks as primarily emotional and otherworldly, which consequently impede direct social action and participation in the electoral politics, are consistent with this model. For example a leading proponent of the assimilation-isolation model felt that as blacks achieved higher socio-economic status and assimilated into American society, the traditional role of the traditional black church as a spiritual and social refuge would cease to exist.

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32 Ibid.


The compensatory model asserts that the church is a significant presence in black communities by virtue of its position as the primary voluntary association of blacks. It is through the church as a functioning and viable community organization that blacks had the opportunity to learn organizational skills and participate in a variety of roles typically denied in wider society, e.g. Ebenezer Baptist Church. This model differs from the assimilation-isolation model in that it conveys a basically positive attitude toward the traditional black church. However to a large extent, the black community and black institutions such as the church are viewed as reactions to discrimination and segregation, and as such, are portrayed as mal-adaptations.

Similar to the compensatory model, the ethnic community model emphasizes the role of the church as enhancing individual self-worth and building a functional community that is based on sense of group identity and collective interest. Consistent with this model is the observation that churches serve as institutional bases during struggles against racial injustice.35

Overview of the Black Church

Since the traditional black church has the only continuously organized constituency available to black advocacy, it became a natural training ground for African American leadership. Traditional black church spokespersons for the interests of African Americans can be traced from Nat Turner and Gabriel Prosser, to Bishop Henry McNeil Turner, Adam Clayton Powell, Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, Jesse Jackson, Leon Sullivan, and Malcolm X.

When the traditional black church was the only avenue of expression and adjustment for African Americans, it served many functions which other groups, functioning under different societal circumstances, have never been required to serve. Aside from its purely religious function, the traditional black church was called upon to serve in a number of ways. For example, the early black church basically functioned as a social center where friends looked forward to meeting friends - contact with whom was denied by the necessity of long working hours during the week. Since there were no black-owned clubhouses, amusement parks or recreation halls, and because the wider
society did not permit blacks to use its social, recreational, and amusement facilities, the church inevitably became the social center of the community.¹

The traditional black church has been one of the primary places for the release of suppressed emotion and thus is a source of protecting the community’s mental health. Blacks in oppression found themselves with a confused mixture of many emotions, including those of hate, fear, love, anger, and joy.² These emotions often do not find avenues of expression in the daily round of activities and have to be suppressed. The church furnished the place where suppressed emotions could be released. The emotionalistic tendency found in the African heritage and Christianity gave approval to this function.³

The traditional black church has served as the place where news and information concerning social activities, births, deaths, weddings, and community concerns could be obtained. Since non-black newspapers do not report African American news extensively, and since the African American population does not have funds to maintain its own newspaper in every locality, the church became the clearinghouse for news. The prolonged announcement period in most churches has always been very important for this very reason. It is not uncommon for the period of notices and announcements to consume fifteen to twenty minutes of the worship time.⁴

² Ibid.
³ Ibid, 12.
Aside from activity in political parties, African Americans have engaged in a kind of politicking in the context of the church. As a result, the church has served as a political arena. Local churches as well as state, district, and national conventions among the Baptists are places where Blacks can achieve leadership and recognition which is largely political in connotation. In district, state and national conferences and conventions of black denominations, ambitions of a political nature are furthered. This is not to say that the same dynamics do not occur among non-black denominations, but the greater importance of this type of activity among blacks can be explained in large part by the fact that blacks have been largely out of leadership and participation in the larger political body.\(^5\)

In relation to civil politics, the traditional black church has functioned as a voting unit. Astute politicians have been well aware of the power of the traditional black church and the influence of the black ministers in pursuit of the black vote. Now that blacks are becoming elected officials again the black vote is mobilized through activities which are frequently independent of the church. However, no politician would pass up the opportunity to solicit help from the black ministers so that certain congregations may be counted on to vote a certain way.

Furthermore, blacks have usually been denied the opportunity to enter and develop powers of leadership in business concerns. Thus, to some degree the church has become the scene of business and economic activity. Some of the most crucial arguments which have split churches center on appropriation and misappropriation of funds.

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Trustees of traditional black churches usually highly value their positions as regulators of church business.

Underlying the functions reviewed, and a function in itself, is the role the traditional black church has played in helping the black community adjust to their environment in the United States. The traditional black church, more effectively than any other institution, aided African Americans in adjusting to slavery and to the caste system which succeeded slavery. Possibly the most significant technique of survival for blacks was the creation of a special “religious technique” which is represented by the institution of the separate traditional black church.

Political/Leadership Organizations

At the turn of the twentieth century, the contemporary black church movement had gained phenomenal popularity among African American churchgoers. The contemporary black church can be loosely defined as those churches with more than 10,000 regular attendees. These churches usually have numerous ministries and programs to meet their members’ needs. They often meet in monumental edifices that aesthetically and spatially dominate their local neighborhoods.⁶ A number of contemporary black churches have taken on the ambience of a spiritual shopping mall, becoming one-stop shops for all social and spiritual needs. These churches are administered like large corporations, with the latest hi-tech facilities, electronic pulpits, and appendages such as full-time schools, bookstores, and real estate concerns.

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The contemporary black church movement is evolving in two distinct trends. First, there are a number of traditional, mainline churches experiencing spiritual awakening and phenomenal growth. These mainline churches have administrations which remain loyal to their denominations while adopting a more charismatic style of worship by incorporating speaking in tongues, ecstatic experience, and the laying on of hands. The second trend is toward non-denominational, usually founded and led by a charismatic figure. These nondenominational churches also offer a Pentecostal style of worshipping, often with many of the rituals and traditions of the Independent Black Church Movement, with some even eschewing the cause of social justice for an entrepreneurial prosperity gospel. Indeed, several of these churches purposefully bear little resemblance to African American Christian churches of the past. Despite having overwhelmingly black congregations, they identify with the historical cause and struggle of blacks as little as possible. This break with tradition is in part a reaction to the unfortunate legacy of elitism, corruption, and rejection by some of the established mainline churches.

As discussed in this research, 28 percent in the traditional black church view the church as an agent of advocacy, social justice and change agent for the community. In fact, the belief is held that without the church's involvement in the community, activism among the community would be almost non-participatory. Traditional black church members overwhelming believe that the church should promote social change. However, members within the mega churches do hold feel that the main concern or focus of the church should be for social change.

\footnote{Ibid, 81.}
Serving as a house of worship and freedom shrine, Ebenezer is revered by visitors as ground zero for the civil rights movement. The church stands as a living monument to the progress of a people and a nation. Some have questioned, however, if the Ebenezer of today has any social currency other than its celebrated past. Much of Ebenezer’s reputation for activism predates the modern civil rights movement, to a time when black leadership typically came from the ranks of the elite, educators, entrepreneurs, and more often than not, the clergy. The Reverend Alfred Daniel (A.D.) Williams and his son-in-law Reverend Martin Luther King Sr. were in the forefront of the African American struggle for equality at a time when black politics were quite understandably defensive, whites were the only candidates, and black voters (who, despite segregation, still numbered several thousand in Atlanta) relied heavily on the pulpit to learn which candidate was considered the least detrimental to blacks. Called to the pulpit of Ebenezer in 1894, Williams served as the first president of the Atlanta branch of the NAACP, organizing the voter registration drive among blacks that helped defeat a bond referendum providing for the construction of white schools only. Two years later, a second bond issue was passed, but amended this time to include five new schools (and the first black high school) for the African American community. Williams preached a

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9 Ibid.

10 Ibid, 25.

petit bourgeois message of black achievement, pushing where possible for the economic and political opportunities that were to give rise to Atlanta’s early black middle class.

In 1945, the black church was smaller and more cohesive, with less competition from external forces. Perhaps the most powerful religious leaders in that year were David V. Jemison, the president of the National Baptist Convention, and William A. Fountain, the senior bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Among other highly visible leaders of the Church in that year were Adam Clayton Powell Jr., pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church and the newly elected congressman from Harlem, and major spiritual leaders like college presidents Benjamin E. Mays and Mordecai Johnson, and theologian Howard Thurman. There were, of course, strong local pastors like Martin Luther King Sr. of Atlanta’s Ebenezer Baptist Church. One of the major features of the church scene in these days was the national presence and power of charismatic leaders like Father Divine and Daddy Grace.

This, of course, was in the heyday of Jim Crow, and it was widely said then that 11 o’clock Sunday morning was the most segregated hour in America. Since that time, largely because of the work of black church leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and other members of the Black clergy, the black church and the White Church have changed significantly. The Baptist Church, which was the leading Black denomination in 1945 in terms of membership, is still the largest denomination in Black America. But the relatively small Pentecostal denominations of yester-year have grown phenomenally, and current survey figures indicate that the Church of God in Christ is now the second largest Black denomination in the nation. Most denominations, White and Black, have lost
ground in overall membership, but the Black Pentecostal groups, according to current figures, are the fastest-growing Christian religious groups in Black and White America.

At the same time, again largely due to the black church-led Freedom Movement, there has been a dramatic increase in the power and influence of Blacks in what one Black churchman calls the "outposts" of the historically Black Church, predominantly Black groups and denominations in historically White churches. In 1945, there were no Black bishops or major officials in the White Church. Today, there are major officials in almost all White religious organizations. In some cases, and in some cities, Black men and women are the major officials of these churches.

By almost all accounts, the black church has made major contributions to Black and White America since 1945. Racial equality has always been a precept upheld and espoused in the black church and has since chimed through the halls of White congregations as well. It is generally agreed that the Freedom Movement, led by Baptist minister Martin Luther King Jr., increased the amount of political and spiritual freedoms in Black America.

Charismatic men whose average age is forty-nine years generally lead contemporary black church. They are a highly educated group of ministers, many of whom have doctoral degrees with the majority having some graduate education. These
men (and a few women) have led the vast majority of these churches since they became NBCs and many of them are founders of the churches.\textsuperscript{12}

According to Thumma, the development of contemporary black church depends on nontraditional charismatic, spiritual entrepreneurial ministerial leadership.\textsuperscript{13} The charismatic leadership that Thumma points out as nontraditional is quite traditional in the black church. In fact, Gilkes argues that it is this longing for traditional charismatic leadership, as opposed to a longing for traditional charismatic leadership, as opposed to a longing for change that in part attracts young black professionals to contemporary black church.

The nature of charismatic leadership, however, dictates that it focuses on the leader himself, and very few contemporary black churches have experienced a leadership transition while in office. In fact, forty-five percent of the contemporary black church ministers (virtually all of the nondenominational contemporary black churches) are also the founders of the church.

\textbf{Years of service}

In 1935, Ebenezer's third pastor, Martin Luther King Sr., led a march on city hall to demand greater voting rights for blacks.\textsuperscript{14} In the 1940s, with the financial backing of Ebenezer and the active assistance of King, Atlanta's black teachers waged a protracted but successful legal battle to receive equal pay with their white counterparts. Auburn

\textsuperscript{12} Scott, Thumma, \textit{Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches} (Jossey-Bass :CA 2007), 147.

\textsuperscript{13} Scott Thumma "The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: The Megachurch in Modern American Society" (Emory University 1996), 22.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
Avenue’s power brokers, the black churches and businesses, in tandem with the city’s black colleges, worked closely together in the fight against political disfranchisement, providing each other with fiscal support and counsel. Still, the pace of social change was slow, and excruciatingly so for the black poor. By 1960, Ebenezer and “Daddy King” as King Sr. was widely known had come to symbolize the old guard, an outmoded politics of gradualism, and a generation of leaders who despite their firm commitment to social change, seldom negotiated from a position of strength. That same year, Martin Luther King Jr. resigned after five years as pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, to join his father as co pastor at Ebenezer. Largely as a result of the far-flung social witness of Martin Luther King Jr. and his espousal of non-violent resistance, Ebenezer took on a new ecumenical and worldwide fame.

The extraordinary history of Ebenezer Baptist Church makes it altogether impossible to ignore it, therefore, as an institution of continuing social and political relevance. Cloaked in the aura of the civil rights era, the church has become a progressive beacon of hope for human rights causes everywhere. From protests against the war in the Persian Gulf in the early 1990s to current support for the city of Atlanta’s affirmative action program, Ebenezer’s sponsorship of political forums and rallies influences the court of public opinion. In the last few years alone, former Presidents

15 Hardy T. Frye, Black Parties and Political Power: A Case Study (Hall and Company 1980), 130.
16 Ibid.
Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter, former Vice President Al Gore, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and former Atlanta Mayors Maynard Jackson and Andrew Young have addressed various public policy matters from Ebenezer's pulpit.\(^{19}\) As earlier indicated, the church took an active part in former Mayor Bill Campbell's efforts to defend affirmative action. It has also supported the eleven former and current employees of suburban Atlanta defense contractor Lockheed Martin Corporation, now plaintiffs in a lawsuit charging the company with racial discrimination against black employees in promotions, performance evaluations, and compensation.\(^{20}\) However, despite Ebenezer's efforts, the daunting perception in the local community remains that Ebenezer does little to promote substantive change.

The most dramatic proof of Ebenezer's lack of concern would appear to lie within a five-block radius of the church, where several aging high-rise and low-rise complexes are located. These cater mostly to the elderly black poor, as does a nursing home across Auburn Avenue from the King Center. According to the Fulton County Services Office of Aging Division, approximately ten thousand seniors live in and around the Auburn Avenue community.\(^{21}\) This is by far the greatest concentration of seniors in the county, some 32 percent of who fall below the poverty line.\(^{22}\) Predictably, the attendant dilemmas of gentrification have begun to set in as old houses undergo renovation and

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\(^{19}\) Ibid.

\(^{20}\) Ibid, 44.


\(^{22}\) Ernest Holsendorph, *An Economic Awakening,"* (Emerge, September 1999), 18.
new ones are built just east of the original King homestead two blocks from the church. With some of the new houses now priced in the hundreds of thousand, Ebenezer’s detractors question the church’s commitment to the elderly and to organizing low-income working families for social and economic empowerment.

For Ebenezer, the decision to build its new facility directly across the street from the original sanctuary is the most salient expression of their commitment to the people of Auburn Avenue and to the larger Atlanta community. Dr. Joseph L. Roberts Jr., Ebenezer’s senior pastor for more than a quarter century, stresses that the church had a sacred obligation to remain on Auburn Avenue. When white-owned banks reneged on funding the new $8 million church several years ago, five black-owned banks collaborated to fund it.23 According to the local print media, Ebenezer would have been more bankable had it elected to move to the more affluent suburbs.24 Instead, the continuing physical presence of the church in the heart of the city, with the backing of the black banking community, allows it to remain a significant factor in the revitalization of the King Historic District and Sweet Auburn community.

The founding dates of contemporary black churches vary. Twenty-one percent of contemporary black churches were founded before the turn of the twentieth century. Another twenty-four percent were founded before 1955. Therefore only fifty-five percent of the contemporary black churches were founded in 195525.

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24 Ibid.
Although Abyssinian and Shiloh report to have reached NBC attendance numbers before the 1980s they are exceptions rather than the rule. Almost ninety percent of non-denominational Black Church became contemporary black church (reached 2000 weekly attendance) after 1980, although they may have founded (actually established as churches) earlier.26

Size

The social science and journalistic definitions of “contemporary church” generally rely on membership numbers.27 This research relies on the average weekly attendance of black contemporary churches, using 2,000 weekly attendants for Sunday services as the minimum. The criteria used were modeled after Scott Thumma’s work.28 The reason that average weekly attendance (AWA) was used as opposed to the number of members in the church is because attendance numbers provide a standardized measure for the size of the contemporary church.

Different churches count membership in various ways. For example, some churches count only due paying members while other churches count non-due paying members as well. The average weekly attendance gives the researcher a concrete number of “active” church memberships.29

25 Scott Thumma The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: The Megachurch in Modern American Society (Emory University 1996), 20.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
In addition to the average weekly attendance, the researcher was concerned with the reasonable ability of the churches to participate in community development activities. Therefore large congregations temporarily held in convention centers or public stadiums are not included in this analysis. Nor are churches that share their meeting space with any other organization including other churches. Contemporary churches have a location base from which to do community development and exhibit influence and they are actually stable (at least physically) parts of communities. Thus, African American contemporary churches are predominately black churches with at least 2,000 people attending the weekly Sunday services. They are in operation seven days a week and have multiple ministries. Whether renting buying or owned, contemporary churches have control over the church edifice seven days a week.

Using Scott Thumma’s criteria, the researcher verified sixty-six contemporary churches that range in attendance size from 2,000 to 20,000. The average weekly attendance is 10,000 and the most common average weekly attendance is 2,000. Over fifty percent average fewer that 4,000 people per week and only six percent average 10,000 people per week.

The occurrence of extremely large black churches is not a new phenomenon. In fact, there were very large black churches before the turn of the twentieth century. In Plenty Good Room, Cheryl Gilkes lists several churches that were contemporary churches

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31 Ibid.
in the early 19th century. Likewise, in an examination of black churches in New York City, Clarence Taylor discusses several churches that had over one thousand members as early as the 1920’s. Although not much is known about the average weekly attendance of these churches, it stands to reason that it was probably a sizable number, especially churches that were identified as having extremely large memberships like Antioch Baptist Church in Brooklyn, which reported 10,000 thousand members in the early 1
Contemporary black church can be differentiated by when they were founded and when they expanded into contemporary black church. Many contemporary black churches have been large prominent churches for decades but reached two thousand weekly attendances only recently. Others were small churches that experienced phenomenal growth during the 1980s and the 1990s. Still others were founded in recent years, reaching the two thousand mark either immediately or within a couple of years of their founding.  

Location

Data reveals that older contemporary churches tend to be located in inner cities and belong to a mainline denomination. Two of the older contemporary churches, Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York and Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington, DC, fit this description. Interestingly, these two churches were not only founded before the twentieth century but both serve contemporary church members well before the 1980s, when most other contemporary churches reached average weekly


33 Ibid.

attendance of 2,000. Abyssinian Baptist Church which was founded in 1808 had 1600 members as early as 1855 and reached its peak during the 1930s when Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. was the minister there. At one time Abyssinian Baptist Church had over 10,000 members.\(^{35}\)

In addition to the growing numbers of churches that have contemporary church congregations, the contemporary black church phenomenon refers to the quickness with which they reached this contemporary black church status. Several contemporary black church exemplify this rapid growth pattern. For example, New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia grew from 300 members in 1987 to 22,000 members in 2001. Similarly, Windsor Village United Methodist Church went from 25 members in 1982 to 10,200 members in 2001. In fifteen years, St. Paul Community Baptist Church grew from 84 to 500 members. This rapid and phenomenal growth is often accented by moving to a large facility either attached to the old one or in a different location to accommodate the growing numbers. Even with the movement to larger facilities, most contemporary black church have multiple Sunday services to accommodate continually growing members and schedules of parishioners. Furthermore, the churches in this study show no signs that growth is declining. In fact, sixty percent report that they have experienced significant growth in the last five years.\(^{36}\)

This growth has caused a few contemporary black churches to expand to multiple locations. Greater St. Stephens’s Full Gospel Baptist Church in New Orleans (which seats

\(^{35}\) Ibid.

4000 people) calls itself “the church in three locations.” Between the three locations they have seven services on Sundays. Light of the World Christian Center Church in Houston, and the other on the Northside. The Pastor and founder of the church, Dr. I.V. Hilliard, rides in a helicopter called ‘Angel of Faith’ on Sunday mornings in order to convene both services. One church is in New Orleans and the other two are in Houston located North and South of the city.

In such a large church anonymity may be a factor that either discourages people from or draws people to attending. For example, many may feel lost in such a large church and have too hard a time connecting with other members to become deeply involved in church life and may attend a contemporary black church specifically for this reason. Although almost none of the contemporary black church ministers questioned viewed anonymity as a serious problem in their churches, contemporary black church have various programs that indicate that they are aware of and attempt to address some of the problems (like anonymity) that such a large congregation may present. Many contemporary black church have created cell groups or small sub-groups of the membership to help people integrate the church into the church.

Class

The contemporary black church phenomenon is not only a black church phenomenon; in fact there is also a white contemporary church phenomenon. These white

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38 Ibid.
churches, generally newly founded (after 1955), are nondenominational, suburban, located in the sunbelt states, and theologically conservative. The large contemporary church is a newer phenomenon among white churches than among traditional black church and contemporary black church and are much more diverse. For example, while the vast majority of white traditional churches were founded after 1955 this is not the case of contemporary black church many of which were founded earlier. Also, while most white mega churches are theologically conservative this is not the case with contemporary black churches, which are more theologically diverse. Contemporary black churches are developing faster now as opposed to the earlier period because of the demographics in the African American community.³⁹

Despite the fact the that the majority of Ebenezer's members are middle or upper class and no longer reside in the neighborhood, Dr. Roberts vigorously maintains that the actions of the church prove "it is not where you live, but where you spend your time and resources that is very important."⁴⁰ Ebenezer has an institutional commitment to systemic and structural change that begins and ends with public advocacy for the "least of these" (Matthew25:45): "We're continuing [King's] legacy by saying that you can transform the city by expending funds in it so that the people who live here will have the parable of hope."⁴¹

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⁴¹ Ibid.
A little known case in point is Ebenezer’s letter-writing campaigns for the poor in which members of the church have appealed to the federal government to make hunger legislation more helpful to those in need. Members have also participated in a campaign advocating worldwide debt cancellation, especially as it relates to the near-indentured status of poor nations relative to wealthier nations. At the community level, the Intergenerational Resource Center, Inc. started as an adult day care for Ebenezer families now operates as an independent nonprofit organization serving the larger community. The center’s offerings, including care and rehabilitation services for the elderly and disabled young adults and a respite program for caregivers, has made it the second largest adult day-care provider in Fulton County.

Community Organizations

Appearing alongside the dominant political parties in the electoral process are alternative political organizations seeking to influence partisan politics and to pressure government. These alternative political organizations may assume the form of either parties or interest groups. As increasingly influential alternative organizations, they span the spectrum of class, religion, ethnicity, issue, and race. For blacks the impetus for the formation of alternative organizations, particularly church-based political organizations, appears to be the same as for other groups, unresponsive political parties. Similar to their precursors in the post-Emancipation period, today’s black churches provide organizational, financial, and spiritual resources for collective political mobilization.

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According to social scientist Charles Green and Basil Wilson, rising church-based political activism with black communities, along with the contemporary black church’s demonstrated...willingness to experiment with new approaches to organization...could fundamentally alter the relationship of the black community to establish power structures [e.g., the Democratic Party].

While attention has been focused on blacks’ participation in the formation of third parties, scant attention has been focused on black leadership that has emerged from these organizations. This neglect in the scholarship in political parties and urban politics is remarkable when one considers the extent to which black churches and their clerics will and do, engage in nonparty political activity.

Still even Dr. Roberts acknowledges that Ebenezer’s ministries of social transformation are far outpaced by its more therapeutic ministries for social outreach. In addition to the above-named advocacy projects, the congregation has plans to build a $6 million community resource center adjacent the church, delivering an array of legal, medical, psychological, and special services. As well, the church has partnered with the Public Assistance Coalition, lobbying to increase aid to dependent children to the level of the cost of living index. Nevertheless, it is in terms of social outreach that Ebenezer’s presence is most pronounced. Prominent among these ministries are a crisis food closet,

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eviction prevention, transportation assistance, homeless care, employment counseling and referral, HIV/AIDS ministry, job training programs and support services for teenage mothers. Every Saturday morning the elderly of Auburn Avenue and other residents benefit from the Kingdom Food Cooperative, a marketplace sponsored by the church, providing fresh produce at cost to a community not served by a major grocery store. On every first Sunday, the church conducts voter registration drives. To quote Dr. Roberts, “Even while challenging systems, the needs of persons must be ameliorated.” This focus on human development is consistent with Ebenezer’s therapeutic mission, not to duplicate available social services but to provide services where none previously existed.  

Many scholars have documented the role of the church in promoting community development Billingsley and Caldwell. The churches founded outreach programs that were a major part of the church’s agenda. Pastors found that their missions to be combining practical assistance with spiritual guidance.  

Black churches understand the duality mission of the church involvement in the commitment to social change and its ability to have an individual impact on the lives of its members. Factors which contribute to the level of church involvement in the community development activities are the size of the congregation which is an important


determinant on the level of service delivery and the range of financial, parental and human resources the church has to meet its goal. Ministers with advance educational training were more likely to lead their church to fulfilling community development functions.

At the same time that there is an increased development of contemporary black churches, there is increased focus on community-based solutions to economic and social problems. As community-based institutions, contemporary black churches are encouraged through legislation, government, grants, grants from the private sector, and philanthropic institutions to participate in community development activities. Many contemporary black churches such as World Changers, led by Dr. Creflo Dollar, are participating in community development by building new homes, providing job training, and providing social services. By the nature of their membership size, and subsequent concentration of resources (e.g. money, volunteers, and space), contemporary churches seemingly exhibit the potential to participate in community development activity even more so than an average-sized church.

Community development activity focuses on growth, change and improvement through both direct social service provision and economic development. The data suggest that contemporary black churches engage in all forms of community development.

49 Ibid.

50 A. Billingsley and C.H. Caldwell. The Church, the Family and the School in the African American Community (Journal of Negro Education. 1991) 60(3): 312, 34.

activity. Though encouraging, their level of participation is modest. They primarily engage in direct social service provision, especially health initiatives and food distribution. They also engage in housing, organizing and advocacy, and commercial development to a lesser extent. These political activities (organizing and advocacy) are part of the contemporary black churches invisible hands in steering the direction of their communities.

The religion of the 20th century black church in practice was radical in organizing and financing schools, initiating the civil rights movement and playing a role in business development. The church was critical in the lives of African Americans because it fostered social change initiated by African Americans.52

During Jim Crow, the church became the entity which financed schools, banks, insurance companies and other crucial, organizations needed by African Americans. The black church played a pivotal role in creating and financing educational institutions as defining the self-help doctrine which led to the fight against slavery, and later Jim Crow laws.

In contemporary black churches, community development activity is practiced through either community development corporations (CDCs) or through independent community development activity (that which is not a part of a separate 501(C) 3, nonprofit organization and is usually funded through tithes and offerings or other donations, not government grants). It is also practiced at several different levels of intensity. These include activities that are solely sponsored by the church, those that are

52 A. Billingsley and C.H. Caldwell. The Church, the Family and the School in the African American Community (Journal of Negro Education. 1991), 42.
sponsored by other sources (e.g. government or other organizations) but are housed in the church, and those which are done in collaboration with other organizations.\^{53}

The National Congress of Community Development estimates that there are approximately three thousand community development corporations across the country. Very active in the development of affordable housing, community development corporations have generated increasing interest and enthusiasm as a strategy for church community development involvement across the country. Some contemporary black churches have also pursued this strategy; in fact, sixty percent presently have community development corporations.\^{54}

Contemporary Black Church-based community development corporations which are affiliated with the church but have separate 501(C) 3 status, have a varied project emphasis. In many instances, contemporary black churches have been involved in developing housing including single-family housing, facilities with two to three units, large apartment complexes, and also transitional or emergency housing such as homeless shelters, drug abuse centers, and women’s shelters. Contemporary black church-based community development corporations have also engaged in social service provision, health clinics, political organizing, business support, job training and commercial development.\^{55}


\^{54} Ibid.

Traditional black churches have participated in a range of activities aimed at improving the economic viability of black communities. These include commercial enterprises such as worker-owned firms, community financial institutions, and church business endeavors, public-private collaborations through community development corporations, and work force mobilizations through job training and referral.\textsuperscript{56}

A higher proportion of contemporary black churches said that they are involved in these activities than traditional black church in general. For example, data from Lincoln and Mamiya on traditional black churches involvement in business activities, such as the operation of bookstores, child care centers, and housing development projects, showed that only 6.9 percent of traditional black churches participated in these types of church-operated business during the 1980s.\textsuperscript{57} On the other hand, an astounding, ninety-five percent of contemporary black churches currently participate in some form of this activity.

Community financial institutions, including community development banks, credit unions, and revolving loan funds, are also important vehicles for economic development used by contemporary black churches. In fact, twenty-eight percent of contemporary black churches report that they have credit unions organized for the benefit of the members and not to turn a profit.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{57} Lincoln and Mamiya, \textit{The Black Church in the African Experience} (Duke University Press 1990), 256.
Religion in black churches has always included the politics of liberation as part of the worship experience. Historically the black churches developed in response to the racism in society and represented an opportunity for African Americans to worship, congregate and organize. Often this organization during slavery became a place to assemble insurrections, disseminate anti-slavery information, educate the slaves and hide fugitive slaves. Hence liberation was part of the original doctrine of the church and in many ways defined black religion. Thus, the development of the black church and its constant role in initiating change in the lives of African Americans represents the radical nature of religion and how this type of radicalism translates into self-help and social change.

Self-help, defined as a value system which demands that the victims of oppression change their circumstances, was a part of the church's agenda.\(^{58}\)

In practice the black church was formed because the extreme system of racial oppression and segregation did not permit interracial worship. Consequently, slave owners made allowance for their slaves to attend, congregate and hold separate worship services to carry out Christian practices.\(^{59}\) For the slaves the church was the only vehicle where they could exercise a measure of autonomy. In a system, which dehumanized the slaves in every arena, the church was a place to gain self-esteem, encouragement and skills. The church was a place for survival and it was here that the practice of self-help began. The origins of the black self-help tradition were found in the attempts of slaves to


help each other survive the traumas and terrors of the plantation system in any way they could. 60

W.E.B. Dubois was one of the first scholars to research the black church. At the turn of the century he carried out empirical studies of black communities in different regions and in both urban and rural settings. Dubois found differences in churches in urban and rural settings, large and small congregates, denominations and preaching styles. 61 Dubois also found a strong interaction between the family and the church and found the church to be the center of social life in the community as a social institution.

E. Franklin Frazier studied the black church and found four major economic functions; 1) the church owns real estate and makes economic investments in the community whether this includes the church building or other facilities 2) established mutual aid societies which evolved into insurance companies 3) created and organized black fraternal organizations 4) the church helped organize and build schools, pay teachers and distribute scholarships funds. 62 Historically, the black church is the fundamental institution for self-help and acts as a resource for addressing concerns of the Black community: Beginning with slavery, the church held the forefront of the anti-


slavery movement by providing a forum for discussing grievances, organizing insurrection, and aiding runaway slaves\(^6^3\).

During reconstruction and the twentieth century the church made loans to small businesses, founded and supported institutions of higher education, purchased property, and financed banks, insurance companies, and other organizations central for meeting the needs of African Americans.\(^6^4\) The churches joined in the fight for education by first using the church as a school house then by forming the first historically black colleges and universities. A number of denominations participated in forming schools; the colored Methodist Episcopal Church developed five schools; the African Episcopal Zion Church supported four schools and by 1909, the African American Baptist formed a total of 107 schools. Between 1847 and 1904 the church gave more than one million dollars to educational efforts.\(^6^5\) Also primary and grammar schools were supported by Blacks. Education was clearly a method of self-help for African American in a society which did not offer them political or civil rights.

Most contemporary black churches participate in some form of direct social service provision. They have some form of benevolence program that provides emergency funds for people needing assistance with rent or utility payments. Many


contemporary black churches have “clothing ministries” that sponsor clothing drives and clothing distribution at various times of the year.\textsuperscript{66}

Lincoln and Mamiya characterized the church as having both communal and privatistic orientation.\textsuperscript{67} The privatistic orientation of the church focuses on meeting the spiritual needs of the congregation while the communal aspect of the church describes the historic traditional of being involved in the social political and economic lives of its members.\textsuperscript{68}

Thus the community aspect of the church is part of a cultural tradition which has traditionally helped to form businesses, civic organization and schools and serves as an organizing agent for a value system which promotes self-help, community involvement and family values. Thus the church was responsible for the ethic that emphasized economic and moral development, and racial solidarity.\textsuperscript{69}

Community advocacy and organizing emphasizes the goals of community control, community decision-making and agenda setting, and community empowerment. This component of community development goes beyond the “improvement” and includes the process. Community advocacy and organizing activities seek to foster community

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 255.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 278.

\textsuperscript{68} A. Billingsley and C.H. Caldwell. \textit{The Church, the Family and the School in the African American Community} (Journal of Negro Education. 1999), 12.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 223.
solidarity. They include activities that are specially designed to encourage citizen participation and consciousness-raising\textsuperscript{70}.

These activities may be in the form of voter registration drives, citizen education, political campaigning rallying, and cultural activities and protest activities. Community advocacy and organizing is a very important aspect of community development. In fact, the history of community development corporations, an important vehicle for community activity, reveals that the quest for community empowerment and control was at the forefront of the early CDC movement.\textsuperscript{71}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
    \item[70] Scott, Thumma, \textit{Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches} (Jossey-Bass :CA 2007), 141.
\end{itemize}
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CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Churches today have changed some and now appear to be divided into two groups, traditional and contemporary churches. The first group is the traditional church, which remains loyal to denominations, and continues to have a charismatic style of worship. On the other hand, the contemporary church is less traditional, and has moved toward the trend of non-denominational congregations. Both groups of churches have large numbers of members and continue to serve the needs of its parishioners. Many of today’s churches have embraced an entrepreneur spirit and have their own bookstore, daycare center, and school.

Political/Leadership Organizations

The black church has always played a significant role in the lives of blacks in America, just as it continues today. The history of the black church has always been and continues to be as a service organization for the multitude of needs of the black community. Initially, the black church served as a meeting place and an opportunity to develop leadership skills. Most importantly, the church represented safety. It was a safe haven where the tired and oppressed could come and relinquish their burdens. If only for a few hours, it was a place where parishioners were free; free to express their emotions, fears and troubles, free fellowship with neighbors, free to be a community, and free to plan for a better tomorrow.
Throughout the years, the black church gave rise to strong leaders, who represented the needs of the community in political circles and kept the community informed with Sunday sermons. Many of the leaders have similar characteristics. They were often well-educated, well-spoken, and charismatic. Martin Luther King Sr., Benjamin E. Mays, and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. are just a few of those leaders to express these qualities. These leaders not only provided spiritual teachings and knowledge, but also encouraged the community in many activities such as voting, housing, and other civic concerns.

Church leaders used their churches to hold discussions on issues that plagued the community. These forums gave a voice to the community, while providing politicians, black and white, an easy means to share what they offered. The churches were known to organized voter registrations, which ensured members who were eligible had an opportunity to vote. The church continues to serve as a political and leadership organization for the black community.

Years of Service

Ebenezer church has been a national and community monument for many years in Atlanta. Through the years the church has been an institution that helped change and improve social and political issues. It has been a symbol through the civil rights movements and a place for the community to protest and hold political rallies. Ebenezer serves as an example of how the traditional black church has served the community. Located in the heart of community the church has faced the tough decision of staying in an area that has history value and sentiment versus moving to the suburbs with more affluent blacks. There doesn’t appear to be a consistent pattern, as some older, more
established churches have moved, while others like Ebenezer elected to stay. What does appear to be consistent is the service to the community. Regardless if the church elected to stay or move, they continue to serve as meeting places and generally the center of political activity. They host debates and give politicians access to the community. The black church has begun to address other needs of the community. Many churches offer services ranging from daycare to nursing care. Despite the apparent commitment to service. There are still those who question whether the black church does enough for the community and the welfare of the poor and elderly. Those, whom question this, use the general area around the church as their basis of evidence for the traditional church. The contemporary church faces this same argument as many believe the church has abandoned the community with its move. However, the researcher was unable to find any evidence to support this claim. The black church regardless of being traditional or contemporary continues to serve its constituency.

Size

The phenomenon of mega churches is nothing new in black churches. These were churches before the twentieth century that grew to mega church size. Father Divine of Harlem, New York created a doctrine that was served as a magnet which attracted a large following, not only in American but several countries, included France, Switzerland and Canada. It is widely documented that his church had tens of thousands members. Just as in the past, mega churches are often led by a very charismatic leader in a large urban city. Mega churches offer a variety of services, including banking, daycare, and bookstores. Interestingly, mega churches are not limited to contemporary churches;
There are many traditional churches that have the number of parishioners and/or weekly attendance to justify mega church designation.

Location

The traditional black church can still primarily be found in older, historically black neighborhoods. Many of them faced the dilemma of relocating to more affluent faster growing parts of town or remaining in their same location. Many elect to stay as a commitment to the community.

Contemporary churches that have moved to the suburbs occasionally maintain the original church as well. This allows the church to serve its original members, while growing and accommodating its new members. This move to the suburbs by contemporary churches appears to be more to do with the migration of blacks to the outer suburban areas of the city, than anything else. The contemporary church, which is more likely than traditional churches to be found in suburban areas, has experienced an increase in its membership as blacks have moved to the outer areas of the community.

Class

This research failed to find a distinguishable difference in the class status of parishioners of the traditional or the contemporary church. The natural inclination is to believe that contemporary churches, which tend to be found in more affluent, often suburban communities has more affluent membership. However, traditional churches can count amongst their members some of the more affluent and politically influential members of the community.
Community Organizations

The traditional black church in practice was radical in organizing and financing schools, initiating the civil rights movement and playing a role in business development. The church was critical in the lives of African Americans because it fostered social change. The black church played a pivotal role in creating and financing educational institutions as defining the self-help doctrine which led to the fight against slavery, and later Jim Crow laws.

Black churches understand the duality mission of the church involvement in the commitment to social change and its ability to have an individual impact on the lives of its members. Factors which contribute to the level of church involvement in the community development activities are the size of the congregation which is an important determinant on the level of service delivery and the range of financial, parental and human resources the church has to meet its goal. By the nature of their membership size, and subsequent concentration of resources (e.g. money, volunteers, and space), contemporary churches seemingly exhibit the potential in community development activity even more so than an average-sized church. The data suggest that contemporary black churches engage in all forms of community development activity.

Though encouraging, their level of participating is modest. They primarily engage in direct social service provision, especially health initiatives and food distribution. They also engage in housing, organizing and advocacy, and commercial development to a lesser extent. These political activities (organizing and advocacy) are part of the contemporary black churches invisible hands in steering the direction of their communities.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


