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CAN I GET AN AMEN?

CENTRAL FLORIDA BLACK PASTORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE  
IMPACT OF THE BLACK CHURCH IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of Sociology  
in the College of Sciences  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando Florida

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Major Professor: David Gay

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study uses phenomenological methods to answer the research question, “what do black pastors perceive as the role of the church in the black community?” I asked 20 Central Florida black pastors 17 questions, most of them open-ended, to determine their perceptions of the current black church. First, these pastors are dismayed at the condition and the position of the current black church. They view the history the black church as strong and stalwart, and the Civil Rights Movement as an example of what the institution is capable of doing and being. Second, they perceive the primary roadblock of the black church to be leadership. They do not see current pastors as having neither the vision nor the desire to make the church the instrument of social justice and change that it once was. They see current pastors trying to make a name for themselves instead of impacting the communities they serve. They also see member apathy as another issue that hinders the impact of the black church. They argue that many black people have climbed the social ladder and no longer desire to reach back and help other blacks in the community that they have exited. This study provides important insight into the current state and the perception of the direction of the black church from the vantage point of these men and women who lead black churches in Central Florida.

To my partner in life Meryl, thank you for your constant support and love. Without you this doctoral dream would never have become a reality.

To my children Matthew, Ciara, and Candace Williamson thank you for waking me up and dragging me to bed on the many long nights I fell asleep writing. I am thankful that I am blessed with the best offspring on the planet.

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To my mother Willie Williamson thank you for working, sweating and praying for me through my educational journey from tiny Ramah J. Academy all the way through the second largest university in the country.

To the enduring memory of my father the late Henry O. “Hammer Hank” Williamson, your work ethic taught me to never give up.

And as a believer to my God -“The voices of a million angels, could never express my gratitude, all that I am and ever hope to be, I owe it all to Thee” – Andre Crouch.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Black church in the city is at a crossroads. Congregations like Emmanuel and the neighboring churches such as Antioch, Mt. Sinai, and Olivet Institutional Baptist are critical to struggling neighborhoods, providing safety, social services, and an anchor for revitalization plans.

- The Cleveland Plain Dealer October 11, 2008

Researchers who study American mainline religions recognize the importance of the historical distinctiveness of the black church in America (Roof and McKinney 1987; Steensland, Robinson, and Wilcox, 2000). In July of 1962, Martin Luther King Jr. lamented in a speech to the National Press Club that the most segregated hour in the United States is 11:00 A.M Sunday morning. This statement can be debated; however, research suggests that blacks and whites worship in different ways (Morris 1984). The difference between white and black churches are obvious and stark; Morris (1984) argues that the black church is a more impactful institution than white religious institutions because of blacks inability to participate fully in the economic, social, and political life of the majority society. Watley (1993) argues that black churches came into prominence because the racism of US society was reflected in the life of the majority of churches.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century blacks received their earliest indoctrination into mainline religions. Slaves were considered property and reasoned to be uncivilized therefore untamed beasts and had to be controlled (Pinn and Pinn, 2002). During slavery, both Methodists and Baptists made efforts to introduce slaves to Christianity. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Methodists were the first to license slaves to preach. These men using illustrations and spirited dialogue, used the Bible especially the New Testament to speak of liberation, freedom and a better day for of the

enslaved. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the black church grew into a more powerful force with thousands of blacks becoming members, and the creation of hundreds of small churches. During the years leading up to the Civil War the black church found its voice and grew even further still. Even though President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, blacks still remained in state of poverty, homelessness, and despair through the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many black denominations were formed during this period including the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AME Zion) denominations. It was during this period that W.E.B. DuBois in his work, *The Souls of Black Folks*, said that the black preacher is “the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil, a man who found his function as the healer of the sick and the interpreter of the unknown (p. 82).

Studies have examined the independent effects of the black church on a wide range of attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Ellison and Sherkat 1991; Gay and Lynxwiler 2010). As a result, research suggests that the black church impacts attitudes and behaviors of its constituents in a significant manner. Researchers argue that many blacks have turned to the black church as a haven from discrimination and marginalization. Traditionally the black church has been viewed as one of the most vital institutions in the African American community (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). The black church is viewed by not only by black people but researchers also as a dominant force. Over the past 25 years sociologists of religion have witnessed an increased interest in the African American religious experience (Trulear 1985).

The black church has long been considered a strong fixture in the black community. Black churches played a pivotal role in planning strategies for protests and other social causes.

Many of the marches that took place during the Civil Rights Movements looked very much like church services and the emotional response that place at those services. They were led with prayer, singing and the invocation of God who they called to lead them. During the Civil Rights Movement Black pastors may have disagreed on religiosity, however when the time came for social causes they found a way through common ground and leadership to make significant social progress.

Research supports the impact of the far reaching dimensions of the black church (Billingsley 1999). Having grown up in the inner city I believe that most black churches are located in neighborhoods with high crime rates, economic depression, and higher health risks and they are seen by many as the only beacons of hope in an otherwise blighted landscape.

Researchers argue that the role of the black pastor is central in the advancement of the black church. Frazier (1974) argues that at the end of the Civil War, the black preacher was cemented as leader within the black church. Franklin posits the black preacher held the office of liberator, educator, political leader, and sometimes that of physician or healer (p. 66). Woodson (1921:305) argued “the Negro ministry is the still the largest factor in the life of this race.” Black pastors remain influential in today’s black church, and are at the heart of this research. There has been a great deal of research on the significance of the black church, as few argue about the church’s influence during post slavery periods and during the Civil Rights Movement. The significance of the black since that Movement has been the subject of much debate. Some researchers and pastors argue that the black church is dead, however much research and many

surveys reveal that black people continue to show high levels of church attendance and the church continues to be a significant part of their lives.

My research enhances our understanding of the significance of the post-Civil Rights black church. Gaining an understanding of black pastors perceptions of the black church contributes to the knowledge of not only what they think, but it also gives insight into problems that currently exist within the black community and their perceptions of what the church is doing or should be doing to combat those issues.

To better understand the significance of the black church I interviewed 20 black pastors from Central Florida and obtain their perspectives on the current state of the black church especially as it related to its impact in the black community. I asked them questions in the categories of the role of the church, politics, education, and community service. The primary question I posed to these church leaders is a yes or no question; is the black church still a refuge for African Americans, and does it still supply social support and leadership to the black community. It is within this framework I seek these perceptions.

## **CHAPTER TWO: THE BLACK CHURCH IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

### **Slavery and Religion**

W.E.B Du Bois (1903), E. Franklin Frazier (1963), and C. Eric Lincoln (1974) all emphasize the importance of the black church in the lives of black people within our society. From the era in which slaves arrived on the shores of America to present day the spiritual bond of black people and their participation and membership in the black church has proven to be significant both sociologically and historically.

One of the factors of note is the degree to which the black church grew quietly into a force that when mobilized became an international symbol for both peaceful protest and equality. This accomplishment is in addition to its primary mission of religion and faith, and the dichotomy of vertical vs. the horizontal; vertical the reaching up to God, the horizontal; reaching out to man. The significance of the development of the early black church is presented as it sets the stage for its great influence later.

Du Bois argues that the devastating effects of slavery created a great void that permeated every phase of black life. He also argues that the influence of African religion remained very powerful throughout this dark, disastrous era, and that though African Americans were downtrodden, they remained spiritually resilient.

Du Bois, Frazier, and Lincoln all agree that the black church played a very specific and important role in the social support of the black community, and albeit a quiet support, it was enough to form a mighty movement. The quote from the research of the Eighth Conference, a

meeting in Atlanta in 1903 that studied “Negro Problems”, sums up the crux of the Du Bois argument:

The Negro Church is the only social institution of the Negroes which started in the African forest and survived slavery. Under the leadership of priest or medicine man, afterward of the Christian pastor, the church preserved itself the remnants of African tribal life and became after Emancipation the center of Negro social life. So that today the Negro population in the United States is virtually divided into church congregations which are the real units of race (Du Bois 1903:16).

The roots of the black church run deep and far back into African past. These researchers argue those roots continued to hold firm at least throughout the contentious Civil Rights era.

To examine the importance of the black church today a close look at the history of black people is in order. When slaves were brought to the Americas, it appeared as if everything was taken from them. From traditional clothing down to their name, they carried nothing from their African past to their new permanent home. According to Frazier, “studying any phase of the character and development of the social and cultural life of the Negro in the United States, one must recognize from the beginning that because of the manner in which the Negroes were captured in Africa and enslaved, they were practically stripped of their social heritage” (Frazier 1963:9).

Once in the new world, slaves were forced to adhere to social norms that were foreign to them and into a different culture in which they had no knowledge. Many of the slave owner’s efforts were to get slaves to forget their original culture and reshape their social reality.

Raboteau (1978) argues that the gods of Africa were carried in the memories of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic and were never forgotten although these attempts were made for

mindshifting. To be sure they went through a sea change; and their rituals, traditional myths, and languages were altered or lost. As the hard work began for these newly enslaved they had no choice other than to comply with demanding physical tasks, rules and regulations, or die. En route to this new life, conservative estimates are that two out of every ten slaves died, and many more were killed or drowned for simple noncompliance reasons (Frazier 1963). “The history of their culture is demeaned and they are subjected to disdain, retribution and hostility if they were to not acquire the ways of their new society with haste. Among the most important of all factors was communication, any attempt on the part of slaves to preserve or use their native language was discouraged or prohibited (Frazier 1963:11).

Even with these hardships, Du Bois argues that worship of some kind was a prominent part of the African culture and of utmost importance in the make-up of African spirituality. As pressed upon as they were, they retained a belief in a spiritual being. Almost all tribes believe in some form of a supreme god (Du Bois 1903). Raboteau (1978) has written extensively regarding African American religious movements, and argues that since slaves were traded all over the United States and the Caribbean much of their “African religious heritage was lost” (1978:47). He also contends that slaves sold on the shores of the United States lost the most. “Especially does this appear so when black religion in the United States is compared with the cults of Brazil and the Caribbean” (1978:47). Raboteau entitled the chapter from which this quotation was taken as “Death of the Gods.” For Raboteau, this means that not only were the names of African deities lost, but also the influence of the African belief system associated with the names of these beings.

All of the actions towards the slaves, physical beatings or intimidation were put in place to loosen social bonds and destroy social cohesion. Slaves who spoke the same language were separated and all made to speak the language of their masters. Those caught speaking their native tongues were dealt with severely. The place where this was most likely to occur was the place where the fragmenting of social cohesion mattered most, the family. Much was destroyed with the enslavement of those brought from Africa against their will but among the most devastating was the destruction of the slave family. “There was of course no legal marriage (among slaves) and the relation of the husband and father to his wife and children was a temporary relationship dependent upon the will of the white masters and the exigencies of the plantation regime” (Frazier 1963: 13).

Du Bois (1903) also argued that the Africans brought to this new land kept, if nothing else, their spiritual nature and their belief in something greater than themselves. He argued that “the only social institution among the Negroes which started in the African forest and survived slavery” was the black church (1903:2). According to Frazier and Lincoln (1963), it is not what remained of the African culture or African religious experience but the Christian religion that provided the new basis of social cohesion. It follows then that in order to understand the religion of the slaves, one must study the influence of Christianity in creating solidarity among a people who lacked social cohesion. This is particularly interesting given that most slaves were forcibly given a Christian baptism (Frazier 1963). These circumstances would lead to an unexpected outcome; the religious structure slaves were forced into became the structure that ultimately became their haven.



From the inception of slavery until the slave trade ended as many as twelve million slaves were brought to America. Albeit under forced conditions, the number of slaves that would eventually assimilate into mainstream American culture would solidify their place in the United States as a historically significant group. The black population at some points in time was growing faster than the rate of some nations. Historian Michael Tadman (2000) reports that from 1770 until 1860, the natural rate of North American slaves was much greater than the population growth of any nation in Europe, and nearly twice as rapidly as that of England. With the rapid growth of the black population came the rapid growth and continuing emergence of the black church.

### **Emergence of the Black Church in America**

Some researchers argue that while no material goods came over on slave ships, an attitude and spiritual mindset were very much a part of the intrinsic nature of slaves. Researcher and theologian Henry Mitchell (2004) posits that early researchers on this notion overlooked key points; one of which was that data had not been collected and interpreted in a way to properly tell the story of spirituality. He argued that if more study had been given to this topic few would doubt the deep spirituality that these slaves carried within themselves.

Although Christianity and the ancient religious philosophies of these slaves appeared to be a good match for American Christianity and many slave owners practiced it through missionary endeavors, slaves were slow to be woven into its fabric. Conversion to Christianity was so loaded with the danger of slaves feeling equal to masters that a great many slave owners preferred not to run the risk. It was not until the early portion of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that campaigns

to take Christianity to slaves were organized. It was then the slave “adapted the Christian religion into their own psychological and social needs (Frazier 1963:19).” The mass conversions of Africans to Christianity took place during the First Great Awakening (1730-1780) accompanied by soul-stirring, call-and-response preaching (Whelchel 2011).

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Christian revivals made their way through the antebellum south. Although they started off slowly, these revivals converted huge crowds of slaves. These meetings operated under the heavy scrutiny of white slave owners. The growth of the black church as a separate religious entity began in the late 1700’s and early 1800’s when slaves were able to hold religious services separate from their white counterparts (Baer and Singer 1992). For example, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church organized in 1796 and the African Methodist Episcopal Church organized in 1816; both grew rapidly (Johnstone 2004). However, the formation of separate religious organizations gained most of its momentum after the Civil War. The races were often incompatible in church primarily due to vastly different worship styles. White church members were not happy with the spontaneous free expression of their black counterparts. Black members often outnumbered white members who were simply overwhelmed in worship size by black members (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). This incompatible mix of worship styles became another factor driving black congregations into their own independent worship services.

The closing years of the eighteenth and the early decades of the nineteenth centuries witnessed an unprecedented spread of Christianity among African Americans, slave and free (Raboteau 1978). Permitting slaves to be converted to Christianity served several purposes for

the slave-owner, among them a way to absolve guilt for those who inwardly felt as if the institution of slavery was wrong (Raboteau, 1978). Mathews (1977) notes the conversion of a slave would please a Christian slave-owner who was concerned with the state of his soul, and might have some misgivings about owning them, and that slave-owners believed it was their responsibility to bring salvation to their slaves.

With the growth of the black population, antebellum black churches arose and prospered especially in the Border States (Raboteau 1978). Black churches began appearing in massive numbers from Maryland to New Orleans, and the steady increase in the growth of the black church often surpassed that of white membership. Du Bois (1903) argued that once blacks got full control over their own church, it became the center of its member's social life and the primary medium of communication and information exchange. He also argued that "a study of economic cooperation among Negroes must begin with the church group" (1903:36). The black church has also been a significant factor as it relates to education. The first real educators to take up the work of enlightening American [Blacks] were clergymen interested in spreading the gospel (Woodson 1915). Most of the schools were established with religious learning as its base but quickly became institutions of secular learning as well. Many historically black colleges or universities (HBCU) have their roots in the black church: Paul Quinn College in Texas, Virginia Union University in Virginia, Morehouse College in Georgia, Shaw University in North Carolina, Xavier University of Louisiana, and my alma mater Oakwood University in Alabama. Most of these schools opened in the 1800's.

The black church perhaps had its most influential effect in the area of politics. When the Reconstruction era began, blacks slowly began to actualize some prominence in the South. Blanche K. Bruce became the first black US Senator from Mississippi, and there were as many as 1500 elected officials during the time frame from 1865 to 1877 (Raboteau, 1978). When Reconstruction came to an end, white supremacy once again took hold of the South, and blacks lost nearly all of their prominence. With this stark reality the black church became the “arena...of political activities for black citizens (Frazier 1963:48).” The black church was at this point the only institution that blacks had sole control over.

With the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the black church began to further solidify. The churches became even more prominent in the community and a resource for neighborhoods. A study of black churches in Georgia 1903 revealed that a great number of churches had become family churches (Du Bois 1903), meaning that the church became one of the few places for blacks to have an organized existence.

Between 1910 and the late 1960’s, millions of blacks moved from the South to the North, Midwest, and Western United States looking for jobs in industry (Frey 2004). This link between blacks and the church at that point means that the church became mobile and carried its message from the South all over the nation, providing what would amount to a nationwide audience as the tensions heat up over the impending Civil Rights Movement.

With the advent of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950’s and 1960’s the most obvious place to set up shop for this new undertaking was the black church, this social structure in which blacks maintained total control. The hub of the organizing power of the Civil Rights Movement,

the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) used black churches as the foundation of its non-violent message. Ministers were mobilized in cities such as Memphis, Birmingham, Nashville, Atlanta, Montgomery, and wherever large numbers of blacks could be found. Following the Montgomery bus boycott in January of 1957, more than 50 prominent ministers who had led similar demonstrations in their cities formed to strategize on how to continue such pressure in other arenas and areas. The SCLC helped student led groups organize such as the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. To be clear, the black church was not the only vehicle for social change, as much as ninety percent of black ministers during the Civil rights movement declined the invitation of the SCLC (Raboteau, 1978).

Many other groups appreciated the movement but not the methods. The Black Panther party and Nation of Islam's Malcolm X, who called Dr. Martin Luther King a chump, and the march on Washington a "farce" (Perry 1991). However, most researchers who have studied the black church argue that it would have been impossible for the Civil Rights Movement to have had the same impact without the black church and the untiring work of Dr. King. The names Martin Luther King Jr., David Abernathy, and Jesse Jackson, are perhaps the most notable names in the Civil Rights movement, all three members of the clergy. At the heart of the black church during that period is the black pastor. In the early black church in America and to this day, the black pastor has been the most influential figure in the not just the church, but too much of the black population.

Frazier (1963) calls the black church a refuge in a hostile white world, and this refuge allowed the church to be the center of the organizational activity for the Civil Rights Movement. It helped mobilize people for nonviolent action because church membership provided individuals a “frame for receiving the message and meaning of non-violence” (Brown 2000:172). Brown also posits that the black church put resources in places that had broad based community support, and provided a foundation where blacks could have stability in multiple areas. Patillo-McCoy (1998:72) asserts that the church acts in many functions, as a school, as a bank, a benevolent society, a political organization, a party hall and of course its core mission as a spiritual base. The influence and spirit of the black church is portable. The camaraderie, sense of togetherness, solidarity and spiritual nature are not subjected to the church house. Carter (1976:41) argues that for blacks, Christianity goes far beyond the building and that “it has proved itself to be a source of power, not locked behind stained glass windows.”

Lincoln (1974) argues that as the black church emerged, the role and influence of the black pastor grew. He posits the reason for this growth in the pastoral role is proximity:

Perhaps the particular genius of the black preacher derives from the fact that he has never been far from the people. He rose from among them as someone they knew and trusted – someone God raised up in their midst...he was more than a leader and pastor, he was a projection of the people themselves, coping with adversity, symbolizing their success, denouncing their oppressors in clever metaphor, and scriptural selection, and moving them toward that day of Jubilee. (p 67).

From the African medicine man and priest to the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, the black pastor, for multiple reasons, was the leader of the black church. Sullivan (1969) argues

that “every significant movement of the black community and its survival (p 70)” has its roots in the work of the black preacher.

## **CHAPTER THREE: THE BLACK PASTOR AND THE BLACK CHURCH**

### **The Black Church, Christianity, and the Community**

Black people are people of faith; Gallup and Castelli (1989) argue that blacks by some measures are the most religious people in the world. With the sheer number of black people in America in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, historian Carter G. Woodson called it “The dawn of the New Day” (1921: 24) in the religious landscape when Methodists and Baptists began proselytizing blacks. Frazier contends that “when the Methodists and Baptists began their revivals in the South, large numbers of Negroes were immediately attracted to this type of religious worship” (1963:15). During the 1800s, blacks had a difficult time establishing independent denominational associations and physical congregations in which to worship. Calhoun-Brown (2000:49) argues that the movement to establish independent churches was in essence the first Black Freedom Movement. It is estimated that more than half of the of the black population are church members and though there are approximately 30 different black denominations of the Christian religion alone, seven out of every eight black members are either Baptists or Methodists.

Black churches share a common history of struggles and faith. Even though the various religious collectivities (i.e., Methodist, Baptist, etc.) have ideological distinctions, there is a predominantly ecumenical atmosphere that historians and social scientists refer to as the “black church.” This collectivity is predominantly Christian in general and Methodist or Baptist in particular (Lincoln 1999:37).

Even blacks who are not actively involved in church are affected by it simply due to the deeply woven interconnection. Sherkat and Ellison (1991) argue that because so much of black



church culture is meshed with social activity, blacks who have left the church are less deeply involved in activist organizations and less integrated into the black community overall.

Du Bois (1903) understood that the black church stood at the center of the black community. His work, *The Negro Church*, was the first major sociological study of the church that was based on empirical evidence. Du Bois (1903), and his fellow researchers discovered that the church “does not essentially differ from the body from which it sprang (Smith 1892 p. 46)”. In other words when looking at the church it looked very much like the black population itself.

Du Bois also compared the black church to a community where everyone relied upon each other. He believed that the reach of the black church was great and the role of the minister one of much power. In his book the *Souls of Black Folks* he states:

Such churches are really governments of men, and consequently a little investigation reveals the curious fact that, in the South at least, practically every American Negro is a member. Some to be sure are not regularly enrolled, and a few do not habitually attend services but practically, a proscribed people must have a social center and center for this people is the Negro church (p 151).

Du Bois (1903) suggests two points to bolster his position on the church as a significant social entity. One, the AME Zion church became the greatest black organization of its time. There was no other organization in America with the kind of membership and organization that the AME Zion church had. This gave rise to the learning of organizational skills for the first time for blacks on this level. The second argument is the black church predates the black home. In other words, the black organized church in America was older than the black organized home. As slave families were separated, sometimes by hundreds of miles, the intact family was rare.

But wherever the slave found themselves, they usually found a church and usually a preacher which became the de facto family. Carlson (1992) argues that the black pastor still has influence in the black family. He theologically posits that “men are ordained by God to be the leaders of their family (p 16).” Other researchers argue the black family would not have survived without the church and the black pastor. The church and its pastor have “provided a consistent presence of support and stability for Black families and communities, including relationship and marriage education” (Hill, 1999).

Frazier also argues that the economic advancement of blacks can also be linked to the black church. Quoting Du Bois, Franklin writes “a study of economic cooperation among Negroes must begin with the Church group” (Lincoln and Mamiya, p 244). It was in order to establish their own churches that blacks began to pool their meager economic resources and buy buildings and the land on which they stood. This became the economic focus of the black church, the building of the church itself. “In the cities throughout the United States numerous beneficial societies were organized to provide assistance. (Frazier 1963: 41). Many of these beneficial societies, like the Free African Society, were connected with churches.

Education was also promulgated along the lines of the church. “The first real educators to take up the work of enlightening American Negroes were clergymen interested in the propagation of the gospel among the heathen in the New World” (Frazier 1963:22). Sunday schools encouraged parents to get their children educated but only as it related to religious ideals, but the secular was not far behind. Frazier also argued that “the Negro church has permeated every phase of social life and to the influence of the Negro preacher who authoritarian

personality and anti-intellectualism has cast a shadow over the intellectual outlook of Negroes” (Frazier 1963:47).

Lincoln (1999) argues that the 1960’s were a time of great promise for the “church union” (p. 112). It was during this period that the power of the black Church would be on display for all to see, both domestically and internationally. Lincoln (1999) argues that timidity was the code for black churches and that survival and submission were the wisest course of action; this framework set the foundation for the tone of the Civil Rights Movement. “In consequence, Martin Luther King Jr.’s, Montgomery Improvement Association growing out of the black churches in Montgomery raised anew the question of the definition of the black church’s responsibility as an agent of social change” (Lincoln 1999:108). The mettle of the church’s peaceful movement was clearly to be tested when a bomb was thrown from a speeding car into the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and four young girls were killed. This incident became a focal point in the movement. Other civil right organizations were outraged and prepared to take a stand but Lincoln argues that the black church was “most prepared to lead the social march towards equality and that due to multiple tragic incidents, the black church as a self-conscious, self-assertive, inner-directed institution was born” (Lincoln 1999).

### **The Black Church and the Influence on the Family**

To gain a better understating of the impact of the black church on black citizens it is necessary to gain an understanding of the black family. The black family has always stood as the bedrock of the community even prior to the slave trade. Berry and Blassingame (1982) argue that the current black family was formed from three components; a mesh of African traditions,

Christian beliefs and slavery era adjustments. They argue that in Africa the family had a strong bond with males in charge and a primary focus on children. Though slaves did not have much power, monogamy was requested by slaves as it had been in Africa and in that tradition Whelchel (2011) argues there was no impediment to women as spiritual leaders or women preachers; the families were strong. To American slaveholders the women were primary sources of free labor and breeders for more free labor; they were property, not human beings.

When slavery ended it was the black church that legalized slave marriages, and demanded monogamy for the black males. Staples and Johnson (1993) argue that moral and spiritual education was the reason parents took their children to church. Lincoln and Mamiya posit that the black church has its foundation in the black family, and that it has played a pivotal role in the black community but also in the raising of children and fostering of families. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990:311) assert that the black church and the black family need each other and that “families are the building blocks for black churches and through their teaching, belief systems, and rituals, black churches and families maintain a symbiotic relationship with one another.” Walls and Zarit’s (1991) study of families and church in a small sample of older black individuals revealed that both family and church support were important and predictive of perceptions of well-being, and aspects of the black religious and political experience reflect elements of the ethic of family hood (Gilkes 2001). Families were also a place where much respect was given to older black women in the church, and this was often the only place where such respect was bestowed. In both sacred and secular community settings, there are powerful and respected older women addressed by the title of “mother” (Carter 1976). This title exists in the black church presently.

Black churches are closely involved in the complex network of black family life and in particular, extended family and multi-generational family relationships (Chatters and Taylor 2004). A great deal of research in the social sciences relating to African American history documents that extended families and churches are the most influential and established institutions that are in the confines of the black community. Berry and Blassingame, 1982,: Billingsley, 1992, 1999; Hill 1999; Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990; McAdoo, 1981,; Staples and Johnson, 1993 all argue that church life and family life have been a linked enterprise from the conception of slavery throughout the civil rights movement. Church was the one place where black families could come together and discuss commonalities in religion, education, housing, and other issues of importance. Families and churches still perform a number of vital functions that aid in addressing the problems facing black communities. Stack (1974) argues that race aside, family and church have always been a part of social support such as dealing with chronic poverty, or dealing with the loss of a loved one, or other life changing issues where the church has always played a significant role.

### **Perception of the Black Pastor**

The Black Preacher has of course played a vital role in this drama which we call the African American experience. Sometimes heroes, occasionally sell-outs, always figures of prominence in the community, Black ministers have made their mark on American history and have helped to transform American Christianity into a more inclusive experience (Whelchel 2011:237).

It is no exaggeration that the “invisible institution” of the Negro church took root among the enslaved blacks (Frazier 2003). Hill (1997) accentuates the use of the black church culture to galvanize black Americans around certain issues and ultimately encourage specific behavior

towards tangible ends. She argues that this function had historical significance that remains part of current tradition, and that using storytellers, crated sermons, prayers, narratives, poems, essays and songs they were able to uplift and stir the African Spirit toward action. Hill (1997) posits that nobody one understood this process better than the African spiritual leader who evolved into the black church pastor.

Our preachers were usually plantation folks just like the rest of us. Some man who had little education and had been taught something about the Bible would be our preacher. The colored folks had their code of religion, not nearly so complicated as the white man's religion, but more closely observed...When we had our meetings of this kind, we held them in our own way and were not interfered with by the white folks. (Frazier 1963: 23).

In this vain the preacher of the sacred word became a dominant and fixed member of the slave culture. Du Bois (1903) argued there were some societal norms of the African tradition still intact after slaves arrived in North America. The primary the role of the African priest-medicine man was as leader of his tribe and under the leadership of the priest the church preserved the remnants of the slave's former spirituality. He argued that drawing from African tradition that black society's leader was not a political, economic, or even a freedom facilitating individual but one who could point others to their spirituality.

Much of the success of the Civil Rights Movement is attributed to the work and narrative of the black clergy. Ministers such as Rev. Martin Luther King, Andrew Young, Fred Shuttlesworth, Wyatt T. Walker, Joseph Lowery, and Jessie Jackson were considered to be among the movements most significant leaders. Wilmore (1995) suggests that the black church clergy helped the black church discover how preaching and prayer, music and worship are all

inspired by the bible and theology and are directed toward the fundamental transformation of persons and institutions of society.

Researchers argue that one of the leading architects of the developing black church during the Civil Rights Movements was Martin Luther King Jr. Lincoln (1974), posits that although many blacks of the day wanted fierce retribution and revenge for the social atrocities of the day, King's strategy was one of quiet power. Lincoln argues King's way was one of religious conviction (Lincoln p.114):

His method was a strategy of Christian love. So close is this bond between the people and the church that Lincoln says "there is no disjunction between the Black Church and the Black Community. The Church is the spiritual face of the Black Community, and whether one is a church member or not is beside the point in any assessment of the importance and meaning of the Black Church (Lincoln 1974:115).

Lincoln (1974) argues that the Montgomery Bus Boycott, a local social protest against racial segregation in Montgomery Alabama in 1956 led by Dr. King and Reverend David Abernathy was the most important social movement in American race relations. He also posits that the lesson of Montgomery, was possibly Dr. King's most fundamental contribution to black America. The boycott that lasted from December of 1955 to December of 1956 helped countless millions of blacks all over the country to understand more clearly the basic anatomy of race relations. Lincoln (1974) argues that the Montgomery bus boycott helped to reveal the true power of blacks if they worked together and demystified the notion of white invincibility. From the very beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955, King raised the possibility that the Negro church would become "God's instrument" for the actualization of a higher human and

ethical ideal (Baldwin 2010). He also pointed to the importance of recognizing that this leadership and social organization is coming from the black church, more specifically the black pastor. This new method of peaceful protest led by clergy would be the strategy for moving forward socially.

Lincoln (1974) argues that this Christian model of peaceful protests was embarrassing to the white American Religious Establishment and a perfect example of Christ's example put into practice. He posits that the black church was the perfect place to incubate a movement, and the black pastor preaching peace as the best candidate to lead it.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: A CURRENT DISCUSSION ON THE STATE OF THE BLACK CHURCH**

A 2010 article in the Huffington Post, an online newspaper and blog, featured an article with this title:

### **The Black Church Is Dead**

The article's author Eddie Glaude Jr. argues that the black church "as we've known it or imagined it is dead." Glaude states several reasons for this hypothesis. The first is that "black churches have always been complicated spaces." He argues that black churches and those who pastor them continue to be very conservative; however, this conservative bent is buried and rarely discussed. Second Glaude posits that African American communities are much more diverse. His main point is that the black church no longer stands in the center of the black community. From the article:

The black church, as we've known it or imagined it, is dead. Of course, many African Americans still go to church. According to the PEW Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life, 87 percent of African Americans identify with a religious group and 79 percent say that religion is very important in their lives. But the idea of this venerable institution as central to black life and as a repository for the social and moral conscience of the nation has all but disappeared (The Huffington Post 4/2010).

He argues that black life, more specifically black people, has become more segmented and spread out and that black life can now blossom without there being a centered hub such as the black church. He concludes with this message:

The death of *the* black church as we have known it occasions an opportunity to breathe new life into what it means to be black and Christian. Black churches and preachers must find their prophetic voices in this momentous present. And in doing so, black churches will rise again and insist that we all assert ourselves on the national stage not as sycophants to a glorious past, but as witnesses to the ongoing revelation of God's love in the here and now as we work on behalf of those who suffer most The Huffington Post 4/2010.

This article in the Huffington Post sparked a greater conversation as some pastors took issue with the notion of the death of the black church and its relevance in society today, however, some pastors and many in the academic community fully concurred. In January 2012, a roundtable on the present and future of the black church was convened at Columbia University to help clarify, highlight, and query some of the most pressing challenges and promising developments that occupy the American religious landscape. A number of issues were at the forefront for this panel including pluralism, gender inclusion, and the priestly verses the prophetic role of the black church. The panel members included:

Anthea Butler, Professor and Graduate Chair of Religion, University of Pennsylvania

Eddie Glaude, Professor of Religion and African American Studies and Chair, the Center for African Studies, Princeton University

Fred Harris, Professor of Political Science and Director of African American Studies, Columbia University

Obery M. Hendricks, Professor and Visiting Scholar-Religion and African American Studies  
Columbia University Biblical Interpretation - New York Theological Seminary

Reverend Dr. Eboni K. Marshall, Assistant Minister for Christian Education Abyssinian Baptist Church – Harlem New York

Reverend Dr. Otis Moss III, Senior Pastor Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago Illinois

Josef Sorett, Professor of Religion of Religion and African American Studies – Columbia University.

Out of this panel's discussion two themes come to the forefront. The first issue appears to be the confusion of the focus and mission of the black church. Panelist Marshall argues:

Marshall: It appears to me that the critical question that confronts us tonight is not so much whether the black church is dead, but more importantly how the image of the black church, as it has been fictively conceived, can be actually realized?...In other words—who do you think you are?—is the identity question that the black church must wrestle with.

This second thread is the priestly vs. the prophetic role of the black church. In their pivotal work on the black church and experience, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya (1990) suggest a dialectical model that places the black church between its priestly and prophetic functions. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) suggest, “prophetic functions refer to involvement in political concerns and activities in the wider community . . . priestly churches are bastions of survival and prophetic churches are networks of liberation” (p. 12). Priestly functions are concerned with spirituality and the religious scope of life; its polar opposite reflects the black church as an agent of change. Prophetic black churches are involved in events that lead to economic and political authorization and the preservation of cultural and racial/ethnic identity (Morris 1984; Nelsen, Yokley, and Nelsen 1971). Priestly congregations emphasize the importance of godly living, worship, and events to meet the spiritual/religious needs of members (Cavendish, Welch, and Leege 1998; Drake and Clayton [1945] 1962; Du Bois 1903; Frazier 1964). Both priestly and the prophetic actions exist to some degree in most churches, however fundamentally different forms of religion may occur based on the dominant function. Differences in emphasis have also been noted based on denomination (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Regardless of ideological or denominational position, the historic black church has been found to be an important economic, political, social, and psycho-emotional buffer for African Americans. Glaude (2010), whose article was the catalyst for this forum, argues that black churches are

schizophrenic when it comes to the notion of the priestly vs. the prophetic. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) argue “priestly functions involve only those activities concerned with worship and maintaining the spiritual life of members (p 12).” In its priestly role, the Church provides religious symbols, worship, and events to enable members to strengthen their relationship with the Deity. The priestly function enables congregants to survive in a society that is often unwelcoming and motivates them to look forward to a more promising afterlife. In diametric opposition to the priestly function, the prophetic black church is most concerned with Christianity as a mechanism for liberation of oppressed and disenfranchised people.

### **Conclusion on Panel Discussion**

All panelists agree the black church struggles with purpose and aim, and that the conflicting actions related to the priestly vs. the prophetic will likely always be a difficult issue. They also say that there are major issues that still face the black community that few groups of any kind are addressing. However they support the idea that the black church still has the power to be mobilized into a strong social force once an issue of great importance is ratified and successfully communicated to its members.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: METHODS**

### **The Idea for the Project**

The idea for this project came about when I began studying blacks in the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church. As a black SDA, my study of this denomination has led me to this conclusion, SDA churches are very much like churches in the rest of the religious community, blacks and whites worship separately, this was my experience in my early life. Having grown up in the 1960's and a teenager in the mid 1970's I saw first-hand the power of the black church, and how it could influence individuals and groups. I grew up in a black church but aware of white churches of my city and denomination.

My parents are from the South, my father from a small town halfway between Memphis and Nashville Tennessee called McLemoresville, and my mother from a small town north of Selma, Alabama called Haynesville. All my life they told me stories of social injustices and racist attitudes and behaviors associated with living in the South, and what they also discovered regarding race relations when they moved North. My father was one of 13 children and my mother one of 17 children, so there were scores of stories to tell of life in the Jim Crow South. My fathers' family was members of the local Presbyterian Church. They were one of the few Black families in the town; my grandparents owned a 120 acre farm where my father and his siblings all worked. As far as church attendance or religion goes, I recall they prayed over their food, and that my grandmother was a Christian woman, as were my father's brothers and sisters; however, I have not known them to attend church regularly.

My mother's side of the family was raised in the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church, and was regular in church attendance. With at least 10 of the 17 children in tow in the 1930's – 1950's my maternal grandfather rarely missed a Sunday. For decades as the church treasurer, he demanded church attendance of my mother and her brothers and sisters. This attitude towards church was solidified in the life of my mother who moved from Central Alabama during the late 1950's to Northeast Ohio. She too believed in regular church attendance. Since churches, even in Ohio, were either predominately white or black, she attended a black church. She left the CME Church and joined the SDA Church, and like her father took all of her children, that would be my four brothers and me, to church every Saturday. She believed that there was power in the church and revered every pastor who was sent to our church, the Glenville SDA Church in Cleveland Ohio. Almost all of my close friends were church members and I was even sent to the local elementary church school which was also an all-Black SDA institution, Ramah Jr. Academy. It would be accurate to say my life revolved around my family and the church. Church picnics were regular functions, and a fully staffed and motivated youth group consumed much of my social time. From the youth choir to the youth usher board, the church was the foundation upon which everything else was built.

My mother would often sermonize on the safety that came along with being members of the church and the dangers that lurked if one were step outside of its reassuring confines. It was through the lens of the black church that I learned about education, economics, relationships, and my place in the larger community. Although my local SDA church did not get into local politics, they were involved in working with the community. Members formed committees to feed the homeless, visit those in prison and regularly visit the sick and shut-in.

After high school I was encouraged to attend a Black SDA college, Oakwood College, now Oakwood University (OU). It was there in the 1980's that I began to understand the full significance of the black church and the influence of the black pastor. OU offers a wide range of degrees, from nursing to business; however, at heart it is a religious institution charged with training black SDA Christian teachers, Bible workers, and primarily ministers. Many of my roommates/suitemates were studying to become members of the clergy. I was intrigued with their view of the church and the role they hoped to play in their local churches and communities. OU is the only predominantly black SDA University; therefore, if a black Seventh-day Adventist wanted to become a minister within the denomination that person had a better chance of pastoring a black SDA church if they went to OU; which means that these perspective ministers came from all over the country. The dialogue that I was exposed to within this environment created a great deal of curiosity within me and a desire for service via the church. Although I did not choose the ministry (or hear the call as the ministers call it) many ministers continue to be my closet friends. It was through a lifetime of these interactions with people and the black church that I wanted to learn more about God, but I also wanted a greater role in the community in which I lived. I still speak in many churches as guest for special occasions and serve my local church with my children and wife as well.

Another factor behind the idea for this project is my professional background. As a former broadcast journalist who because of a business undergraduate degree mainly covered consumer stories, I was often assigned to stories that examined poverty, healthcare, and many other issues that often are associated with or affected by a lower socioeconomic status. Many of those stories featured an African American person or family who was facing some kind of a challenge due to

a new law, proposed bill or who may have had something catastrophic take place in their life. In most of those stories the African American interviewee would often invoke God or religion into the interview, hoping or praying for divine intervention, and unlike many reporters I always left this angle in these stories as I thought they were significant.

When covering politics it became evident to me that many of the black politicians, especially in local politics were ministers. From city council to the state legislature often these elected officials were clergy, which I argue speaks to their influence in the community.

Currently I remain actively involved in my church. This background has provided the idea for this project.

### **Methodological Framework**

As this study seeks to discover what black pastors perceive as the role of the church in the black community, I performed a qualitative study for this research. Qualitative methods have a long and distinguished history in social science research. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (1995:3) write that “qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the subject matter.”

The qualitative researcher uses inductive analysis which means that categories, themes, and patterns come from the data. The categories that emerge from field notes, documents, and interviews are not imposed prior to data collection (Denzin 1995:46).

To determine these themes and categories, this study was informed by phenomenological methodology. Phenomenology was created by Edmund Husserl and later developed into a sociological theory by Alfred Schutz (1967). Schutz argued that the life-world, or the world



individuals' sense exists, is shaped by knowledge and perception. Schutz (1970:79) argues, "Man came into a world that existed before his birth; and this world is from the outset not merely a physical but also a social structural one." Phenomenology seeks to understand the meaning and organization of the social world through individuals' subjective experiences in everyday life. This subjective interpretation refers to experiences or opinions rather than an outside perspective or evidence. Phenomenological, human scientific researchers tend to choose the interview due to their interest in the meaning of a phenomenon as it is lived by other subjects (Englander 2012). Phenomenological concerns are frequently researched using qualitative methods (Bogdan and Taylor 1975; Denzin and Lincoln 1974, 1998).

In phenomenological research intensive interviewing to uncover the subject's orientations or his or her "life world" is widely practiced (Costelloe 1996; Grekova, 1996; Porter 1995). I used face-to-face interviewing to elicit responses from these pastors. Qualitative tools are used in phenomenological research either to yield insight into the micro dynamics of particular spheres of human life for its own sake or to exhibit the constitutive activity of human consciousness (Langsdorf 1995). Therefore, phenomenologists work to understand reality from another person's vantage point. Schutz (1970:273) states "the exploration of the general principles according to which man in daily life organizes his experiences, and especially those of the social world, is the first task of the methodology of the social sciences."

The goal for the researcher in phenomenological research is to describe what is being observed without a predetermined framework. Welman and Kruger (1999:89) argue "the phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social phenomena from the perspectives of the people involved." A researcher applying phenomenology is concerned with the lived

experiences of those involved with the issue that is being researched (Greene, 1997; Holloway, 1997; Kvale, 1996; Maypole & Davies, 2001).

A central component of phenomenology is intersubjectivity, a condition in which more than one individual shares a common perception of reality. Though the belief exists that human experiences are unique and personal, phenomenologists argue that no one person has a unique interpretation of the social world. This particular component is appropriate as the research objectives, explained later, seeks to determine commonalties within themes deduced from the perceptions of these pastors. Silverman (2004:47) argues “asking questions that addresses themes that are part of, or implied by two or more perspectives is a form of analytic bridging.” Though I do not know what these themes will be, a phenomenological concept based in intersubjectivity suggests that there will be at least some common concepts in the responses.

I used phenomenological methods to answer the research question, “What do black pastors perceive as the role of the church in the black community?” The goal was to understand their experiences from their own point of view.

### **Sample and Recruitment**

Twenty black pastors were interviewed for this study. This sample size allowed me to gather data in discovering what these uniquely positioned individuals believe. Lincoln (1974) argued that the central figure in the black church is the black preacher, “he has no exact counterpart in the white church, and to attempt to see the white minister or pastor on the same

plane is to risk confusion, for the black preacher includes a dimension particular to the black experience” (Lincoln 1974:65). I chose the number twenty based upon a realistic and feasible estimate of the number of ministers that could be researched within the scope of this study, yet still provided me with valuable data for this research. I began participant recruitment with black pastors that were already known to me; others were recruited through snowball sampling. Snowballing is a method of expanding the sample by asking one informant or participant to recommend others for interviewing (Babbie 1995, Crabtree & Miller, 1992). The inclusion criterion was that the pastor must be black and lead a predominately black church in the Central Florida area. Pastors of varying age, gender, and denomination were recruited. As the research began I determined if other purposive sampling needed to occur to encompass more variety or an underrepresented group for the study. It was my belief from the outset that I might uncover a group or demographic of pastors that would add additional detail to this research. Pastors who are sixty years or older may have a different perspective as they would have lived through the Civil Rights Era, however younger pastors might emphasize technology and emerging trends that speak to the direction of the black church today. For this reason I sought ministers of all ages and looked for variety in age, gender and denominational groups.

The target area from which I recruited these ministers was Central Florida, specifically the Orlando Metropolitan area. The United States Census defines the Orlando Metropolitan area as Orlando-Kissimmee-Sanford area. The United States Office of Management and Budget defines the area as Lake, Orange (including Orlando), Osceola and Seminole counties. The ministers were selected within all of these general areas.

Central Florida is a good locale for this study. This is a major population area with more than 2 million residents. There were many black churches to study as the black population in Central Florida is robust. According to the Diversity Data project, a Harvard University Program which identifies metropolitan areas indicators for diversity opportunity and quality of life, 15.3 percent of the population is Black, (Non-Hispanic) which is higher than the national percentage of 13.1 percent (US Census 2012).

According to CityData.com (Orlando Forum City-Data.com) the median income for whites in the Central Florida Area, (listed as Orlando, Kissimmee and Sanford) is \$52,397. The median income for Blacks is \$37,294. The income gap is more than \$15,000. The income gap between blacks and whites is a topic which has been researched extensively. The dichotomy in these income numbers reveal the continued inequality that has existed historically, and reveals Central Florida as a region that contains a number of commonalities which exist throughout the United States.

Another reason Central Florida is ideal is because of the number of black churches in the area. I conducted a search for “black churches” in the website of a local Central Florida phone directory which yielded more than 360 churches. However one pastor informed me that there were more than six hundred churches in one Central Florida area, Pine Hills, Florida. The denominations that these churches fall under are numerous, most are Baptist or Methodist; however, there are many that are Church of God in Christ, Seventh-day Adventist and many others which are non-denominational.

I recruited each pastor initially by telephone, informing them of the study and the goals of the research. I then made appointments to interview them at a mutually agreed upon location and time.

### **Procedure and Instrument**

The interviews and data were collected through face-to-face, open-ended interviews which were conducted by me. Giorgi (2009) posits there are, in general, two ways of collecting data if someone wants information about another person's lived experience of a phenomenon. First is the traditional face-to-face interview, and secondly, one can ask for a written (or recorded) account of the experience. The face-to-face interview is used to solicit data in a personal way. This approach gave me the ability to investigate the research question but also allowed for a very personal environment. The use of the open-ended face-to-face interview allowed me the ability to change directions and, when needed, explore avenues which might have gone undetected in standard qualitative questionnaires. This format also allowed for illumination, or clarification, on a response which might have needed further dialogue.

I requested an interview time on a weekday as to reduce possible distractions that could take place on a busy Sunday/Saturday morning when ministers could have a packed schedule. The interviews were face-to-face, and I reiterated the goals of the interview and addressed any questions of confidentiality. I also explained the order and format of the questions, gave the minister an idea how much time it will take, and asked if they had any questions before we began the interview.

With the permission of the pastors, I began interviewing and recorded via two micro-recorders. Audiotaping is probably the most popular method of recording qualitative interviews. There are a number of advantages; the interviewer can concentrate on what is said and there is a permanent record that captures the whole conversation verbatim. Inflections such as tone of voice, emphasis, and pauses are also recorded. I used two recorders in case one did not function properly. To ensure confidentiality I issued a pseudonym to identify each pastor. I asked them to select their own pseudonym, if they declined or could not decide on a pseudonym I assigned one to them. To ensure the interview is not lost I downloaded the file immediately to a computer to save an additional file copy. The interviews were professionally transcribed verbatim by transcriptionists Olga Sierra and Yvonne Jenkins.

The interview guide (Appendix A) contained four sections, the role of the church, politics, education and community service. All questions assisted me in learning what black pastors perceived as the role of the church in the black community.

### **Explication of the Data**

Hycner's basic guidelines for analyzing phenomenological data formed the guide for this study. Hycner (1985:279) posits "there is reluctance on the part of phenomenologists to place too much emphasis on specific steps." A concern by another researcher using this methodology echoes Hycner's sentiments:

Unlike other methodologies, phenomenology cannot be reduced to a cookbook set of instructions. It is more of an approach, an attitude, an investigation posture with a certain set of goals" (Keen 1975:41).

Hycner (1985) argues that no method can be enforced upon phenomenological data, as the observation of the data itself dictates next steps. This is an appropriate approach as the information that will be received from the local pastors will dictate the next steps. Hycner (1985) suggests a list of guidelines to analyze phenomenological data.

The first step is to have the audio professionally transcribed. I then began the process of bracketing and phenomenological reduction. The term phenomenological reduction, coined by Husserl, is an experience which allows the researcher to enter the data with no knowledge or preconceptions. This step is important as it allows the researcher to enter the world of the participant with a sense of astonishment. Keen (1975:38) says of this part of the process “we want not to see this event as an example of this or that theory that we have want to see it as a phenomenon of its own right, with its own meaning and structure.” This is listening to what is being “said” and not hearing my own judgments or presuppositions. The goal was to be open to whatever details and themes emerged from my conversations with these pastors. I then listened to the interview for a sense of the whole; this step required listening to the interview over and over again and becoming fully immersed in the data. This is where I began to formulate what was being heard in a thematic fashion. Journaling was advantageous at this step as these themes and very general impressions began to emerge. The goal was to stay true to the pastors’ perceptions as possible.

I then began the process of delineating units of general meaning (Hycner 1999). At this stage I went over every word, phrase, sentence and paragraph in order to determine meanings. Like the previous two steps openness is fully expected here as well. This step is where units of meaning are defined, or a place where a unique thought or expression occurs that is recognized

or recorded. This unit of meaning creation is important for the next step of delineating units of meaning relevant to the research question – this step is the start of the crucial phase of the explication of the data. At this point the individual units of data will be matched back to the research question. The goal is to determine if the unit of data illuminates the research question. Hycner (1985:284) argues this is “the beginning of a very critical phase in the explication of the data.” If the unit of data does illuminate the research question then it is recorded as a significant piece of information, if it did not then it was not recorded. If the detail was on the border then I included it.

I then began the process of eliminating redundancies. Once the previous steps were completed it then became necessary to eliminate units of meaning which were previously noted. This means if I created a unit of meaning there was no need to create another one. The next effort was to cluster the units of relevant meaning. I started the process of examining the data to determine if there were any common themes that emerged from the data. Hycner (1999) argues that there is some judgment here; however, that is part of the researcher’s responsibility. This is why earlier steps were important to ensure that all of the data had been considered and properly grouped. The next stage was to determine if there is a theme that encapsulates the clusters of relevant meaning. Colaizzi (1978:59) argues at this point the phenomenological researcher “is involved in that ineffable thing known as creative insight.” Numerous clusters then emerged in this format, and the job became to determine if a central theme surfaced, and then go back over the transcript and write a summary of relevant data, clusters, themes, and other important discoveries.



The next step was to modify the themes and summary. This was a verification process to confirm that the themes recognized were the best themes for the study. After further examination it was at times necessary to add or modify the themes and or summary. No new significant information came to the forefront, and therefore no themes or summaries needed to be rewritten. Hycner (1985) argues this part of the analysis may be a judgment call; however, it is part of the process.

After all steps were repeated for each transcript, I then examined if there were general and unique themes for all of the interviews. By this time the essence of the clusters, themes and summaries from participants were well known and therefore were central themes that came out of the interviews as a whole. Next I verified that the general themes identified were derived from the same context.

Hycner's final step is to write a composite of all the interviews. He posits this step is "helpful and instructive" (p 294). Writing up a composite summary of all of the interviews which captures the essence is important in understanding the phenomenon being investigated. This summary should describe the "world" that these pastors experience.

### **The potential contributions of this study to the discipline.**

This study is about race which remains an important issue in the United States, and because race is still important, it deserves continued examination. I argue this research could provide additional details on this important subject in Central Florida; and perhaps nationwide. It may also serve as a data source that could provide some churches with avenues to assist their parishioners and community.

### **Limitations of the Research Method**

This study is limited only to pastors from Central Florida so this will only reflect the experiences of these local ministers, and although I believe these ministers come from all over, their perspectives will likely be local. Another limit is the number of ministers; I interviewed twenty as this was a manageable number that I believe gave me a good perspective.

Another limitation is that the study does not incorporate the perspectives of the laity. The lay worshipper is also a good potential candidate for the study of the black church. The insight that they would offer could contain much interesting data in analyzing this topic. Their interaction is a topic that I plan to study in the future, for without the laity the pastor has no flock to lead. Many lay persons have been through as many struggles and have as much interesting content as the pastors that serve them.

## **CHAPTER SIX: IS THE BLACK CHURCH STILL RELEVANT?**

Lincoln (1974) argues that the black pastor is more than just a leader and a pastor but that he is the representative of the people that he has to cope with through adversity trials and insecurities, and that he symbolized their successes. It is with this description of the black pastor's role and connection to black people within the church that the study of the black pastor is significant.

At the start of this study my goal was to discover black pastor's perception of the current black church, after all of the interviews one question became a key indicator and a direct focus: "Yes or No: Is the black church still a refuge for African Americans, and does it continue to supply social support and leadership to the black community?"

Historians who study the black church argue that it has been perhaps the most significant institution in US history as it relates to the social progress of African Americans. The central question - is this still the case? The question supplied responses which many pastors answered without equivocation. Their responses seemed on some level to strike a personal nerve, one pastor telling me he always wanted to express his view on this, and preaches about where and what the church should be all about from the pulpit. One dominant thread appears, those who believe the black church is no longer significant and doesn't supply social support are fewer in number but are emphatic regarding their stance, and those who believe the church has relevance

and does supply social support are not as emphatic and hedge their statements and beliefs on what they hope will be a positive future.

Fourteen of the twenty pastors answered yes to this question while six answered no. All three of the female pastors say yes but none with much enthusiasm. One of the oldest pastors and one of the younger pastors answered no, both emphatically. The elder of the two said no because of what he believes arises often, and that is an issue with pastoral leadership. Of those who argue the decline of the social significance of the church put the blame squarely on the pastor, but say parishioners play a significant role as well. They believe the thrust and direction of the church is set by the pastor, and when the pastor takes his/her eye off what they believe to be the true mission of the church, meaningful progress is lost. The elder statesman, Pastor Anderson is critical of these church leaders.

I mean a black pastor today, they're politicians. I don't care how big the church is, they all trying to figure out ways on how to get the income to be able to provide what they want, what they believe is the mission and, and, and that's the reason why you see the flight from the inner city of the big, you know, the black churches. They all wanna be in the suburbs. They all looking for property, they all have a mission in the vision that God gave them to go out and build something.

Pastor Claybrooks 48, born and raised in the south echoes the concern of Pastor Anderson regarding focus and what he deems as lack of leadership regarding the place of the black church in society today. He argues that many pastors are not qualified to lead a church and in fact will use their position for "personal gain."

Could we be that...the problem is until we take responsibility and quit putting people in positions, they just don't care (inaudible) and not who got called to be in that position. I think the black mostly put people in places because of what they can say they can do.

And when you put a person in place that's not qualified, you don't get a person who's going to take all your um, take all your um, your best and use it for themselves.

This harsh rebuke of pastoral responsibility is mentioned by several other pastors as it relates to multiple topics of this research. As this is perhaps the sternest rebuke of pastors also adds that without true leadership "what organization can stand?" He argues that misused leadership is the death nail of any organization.

Woodson (1921) argued the (black) ministry is still the largest factor in the life of this race. If this has resonance to this day then the words of Pastor Anderson and Pastor Claybrooks may bear some of the explanation of my earlier hypothesis. Lincoln (1974) argues that the central figure in the black church pastor is the black preacher. Preachers were the best educated people in community and had a great deal of political power. They stood at the center of black life and were the most respected persons in the black community. Many of these pastors believe that is still the case, that black pastors have wide-reaching power and are the determinant of black society's success.

The other elder pastor, Hepner, who serves more of a support role of his church, because he wants "to give the young people a chance" also answered no and suggests a lack of focus by parishioners on the things in life that really matter. Pastor Hepner believes that the focus of the church is no longer a question of what can we do for each other, but what I do for myself. He argues that "the church should be involved, it is not there. And I say that because we have begun just to look on ourselves, what kind of car we drive, uh where we live"

One of the younger pastors, 34, also emphatically responded no, the church does not continue to offer social support to its parishioners and agrees with the 75 year old church elder statesman. He argues that black parishioners have turned fully inward, and have left the inner

city to fend for itself. This he argues means that people and families, especially children, have been left behind. Pastor Ball harkened back to the Civil Rights Era as his proof that the black church has strayed away from its core mission and it's everyman for himself.

I mean if you just look at the witness prior to the, the conclusion of the civil rights movement, the church was involved in providing direction for how we as a people should move in becoming an integral part of America. Now you look at since the Civil Rights Movement it's everybody for themselves. It's like Exodus has gone on steroids and we all Exodus from ourselves and so as long as I can make it out to the suburbs I could care less what happens to Pookie and Ray Ray and them over in you know the, the, the hood.

This reference of the Exodus, this Biblical story with a book after the same name, chronicles the story of the Israelites who are freed from bondage after four centuries, is often used to discuss scale. For Pastor Ball he sees the scale as large. It is his observation that those fleeing the inner city are exiting on a massive scale, and for him the worst part is that those people have no concern for those they have left behind.

These were three most emphatic negative responses to the question. The other three negative responses were more even and contemplative. One 40 year old pastor called the question "a loaded question." He went on to say that the black church was not a refuge for African Americans, but says "it can be." Another senior pastor, Pastor Hepner, also responded no to the question, and argues the church has a one sided focus and that does not help all.

...to the extent that the church should be involved, it is not there, and I say that because we have begun just to look on ourselves, what kind of car we drive, uh where we live and it's not bad, not knocking that ... I'm not saying that we shouldn't live where we should, that's not what I'm saying. But having said that, sometimes, but catering is in one direction, uh not realizing that our main mission really is...to feed the poor, to help the homeless...to minister to broken families.

The statement “catering is in the one direction is the theme of this response. Pastor Hepner does not in any way begrudge those who seek a nicer car, or more expensive home, or pathway out of the inner city. He argues that should not get all of the focus of parishioners and pastors. Having been a pastor for more than 50 years, this seasoned pastor points back to what he sees as the main mission of the church, to feed the poor, help the homeless and take care of families.

A few other pastors stated no to the question but not in any big all-encompassing way. They do not want to criticize the church but believe that more people than not, pastors and parishioners, see the church as having lost influence. Pastor McDonald’s statement below represents this point of view.

It’s not but it has the potential to be. That’s my safe way of saying it, certain practices we have to put back into place. So no it’s not...current standing, no... it’s not and again not a hundred percent of people, I’m saying percentage, percentage based...the major percent is not that... not effective in this time, uh but it has potential to be...and I think that in order for our society to move forward, the African American community to move forward, we have to get back to doing it.

This hedging is seen on both sides of the yes or answer to this question, “no but,..yes but..” Here Pastor McDonald argues no the black church does not continue to offer social support and that the church must get back to doing so, as Pastor Hepner also agreed.

As previously written, 14 pastors responded yes, however, none of them with the strength of those who answered no. Looking at percentages 70% of all pastors answered yes to this question, 30% answered no, however 30% of these pastors say this is not the case. Pastor Dalton, 67, year old says yes, but that is the end of his affirmative response. From there he suggests that if you want to know the significance of the church, follow the money.

Yeah it’s, it’s nowhere near as strong as it can be, as it should be or as it used to be. It’s not. And I still think that, that, that economics impacts that. I think, I think that influence it, corrupts compassion. The more secure we become, the less concerned. We, we, we (inaudible), I cannot hug you from here.

The 40 year old pastor of a large church Pastor McDonald member church is perhaps the most hopeful.

Um yes it is because I see it every week, how people who are hurting in the African American community and when they come to church it's like a relief because they coming to relieve all the stress , all the issues that they have and it's the word of God that helping them with that, through prayer. So I really believe if they can't come to the church, where can they go, where they feel comfortable?

Pastor Thornton, 54, still sees the church as an institution that can best fulfill the needs of the black populous, and is still the fallback should all other institutions fail. In the statement below Pastor Thornton argues that some are too embarrassed to ask for assistance outside of friendly environs.

...in terms of meeting the social needs, the, the church will always be in that position I think, mainly because many of the institutions that are established by government to meet institutionalized needs or programmatic needs, doesn't catch everyone, and some people choose not to engage those kind of institutions and programs because they would like to be helped but they don't wanna be seen as a statistics.

He also argues that black people often don't go after programs set up because of the stigma that goes along with being part of that number. He also talks about stigmas that go along with being part of social programs. He believes that black people have already been stigmatized enough and when they can't make ends meet the church becomes the institution that they lean on. This goes to the issue of social support. This relationship between the black church and those that rely on it are inseparable according to Thornton. This also is a look at personal pride. Thornton argues that many people although in desperate situations do not want others to see their needs in a public way.



Pastor Washington, 60, says that the church still does provide support however in a different way. He says that the “the vehicle is in place, but the drivers are different, he characterizes some of those drivers in the following ways:

Some drivers I believe have been compromised. And because they don't take the time to really research why they are who they are, their mission statement, their purpose, their goal, their vision statement and uh once we do that, once you do that, you'll know who you are, you'll know where you come from and you'll know how necessary you are.

Pastor Washington joins the group who believe that the black church does supply support but not strong support, and that the church we has “kind of failed a lil' bit but I do, I do feel, I do feel that we have not lost it.” This question of necessity was at the forefront of many of these discussions. If the church's social importance has decreased is it due the fact that African Americans are more affluent now than they have ever been?

The three female pastors all answered in the affirmative, they all believe that the black church still does indeed supply some level of social support. All were given the option to respond beyond to the yes or no question; however, only one did so. Pastor Ritner agrees that the church is not as significant as it used to be but she says it still has relevance in today's society. Though minimized in its role she believes that the church will always be in the minds of African Americans, and they will return when the need arises.

They may come to church once every three months but any issue that they have that they cannot solve, resolve or any situation that they cannot be resolved in their own way they're coming to church, and without fail, I cannot see them for three months, but if they got an issue I am going to get a phone call or an email, somebody is going to show up saying you know I just need...you know.

Pastor Ritner goes far beyond the others and breaks down what people in her church still look for as it relates to social support when they come to church. In arguing that the church will always be significant she says the issues are what they have always been and what they will “continue to be, everyday life direction”. Pastor Ritner as many others view parishioners as seeing the church with outstretched arms, willing and waiting to help whomever may need it, but use it only when all else has failed. For her this is acceptable and in some respects expected. As she sees it, members do not perceive the role of the church to be that of fulfilling major social needs, but that the church has an attitude of “we are here when you need us, and when you do come back we will not judge or criticize.” She does say that when people come to her after missing church she tells them church does not have to be a last resort, and that the church may have answers to yet unasked questions. Pastor Ritner says many come to church for simple answers to questions:

When they come to church and get the information so that they can understand how to make the decisions. Because we’re just trying to help people make, make proper decisions, make good decisions. And so the information that we you know teach from the pulpit is basically trying to help you determine what your friendship should be like, you know what relationships should be like. What your money management, your household all of those things help people live but they come in church sometimes to get that information. And when they get in trouble they want to have a two hour conversation.

Her words speak to what many pastors see as somewhat of a common factor. That since the church has in their opinion declined in significance, it still is a place where African Americans go when they are in need of assistance, and the church is never far away for those who will at some point need it. This idea of the church’s significance may not be so much about the church for she argues the church is there and has not changed, but more about the member.

Few of the Pastors who answered yes to this question did so emphatically. When Pastor Ritner suggests that the black church still has the potential to do great things but for whatever reason, be it pastoral leadership, upward economical ability of its parishioners, the church no longer has the reach it once had. 67 year old Pastor Anderson argues that many pastors who should be leading are focused on all of the wrong things. In the statement below he argues that many pastors are on the wrong track:

They all wanna be in the suburbs. They all looking for property. They all have a mission in the vision that God have given them to go out there and build something. And that's the reason why we set up in our bylaws of our church here is that any pastor that come after me, if God gives him a vision and he wants to sell this property and go somewhere else, he has 1,342 hoops to jump through first -- legal hoops, then he has to go through the 462 congregation hoops and then he gotta go through the regular denomination hoop and if he's willing to do all that, God bless him.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: HAS THE CHURCH CHANGED SINCE THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

Be it fair or unfair the black church of today is often judged by the black church during the Civil Rights Movement and before. Woodson (1921) argues “the Negro Ministry is still the largest factor in the life of this race (p.305).” Black pastors were seen as those who led the movement successfully. Their speeches, planning, chastising, and leadership were seen as key to social equality for blacks. Not having a place to voice their opinions and rally the troops, the church itself, meaning the location, became the center of rallying activity. All direction and planning was set in motion via the church and its emissaries. Being at the forefront of the movement the church was considered to be heart and soul of any measurable black progress. Black pastors today in particular know the shadow in which they walk. Pastors with names like King, Jackson, Abernathy and others are well known as those who made a true difference during a period when strong leadership was needed. A tumultuous time when people with presumably no power took a stand for what they believed to be socially right. The obstacles they faced, governments both local and federal, police department and police dogs, firehouses, were enormous. But did these men make a difference in society because society was different and if so has that forged a new mission and therefore change for the current black church?

The question has the church changed since the Civil Right Movement was asked to receive perception on this very point. 18 of the 20 pastors answered yes to this question, which means this question had more agreeability than any of the other questions. Many suggest they respond in the affirmative because of the issues of then and now, and the responses are mostly

negative as to why. Many follow a similar theme when they respond negatively about the church. The blame often shifts to one of three themes, leadership, money, or a lost focus by parishioners. It is fair to say and true that all pastors had a strong feeling about this question, and they were not hesitant to answer it; my goal was to learn not just if the church had changed, but also any contributing response, many of which were given without prodding.

### **Leadership**

When these pastors look back in history they see pastors who were part of the moral fiber of that day with black advancement as the number one priority. But they no longer see that as a thrust. Pastor Anderson, 67, who was around to see the pastors of the Civil Rights Movement says the men and the mission were one, and that the leaders were not just leaders, they were also called upon to teach and guide proper ways to live.

Black church historians argue that the black spiritual leader was far more than just a leader; in fact, he was the embodiment of the people themselves. Lincoln (1974) argues that the black pastor was never far from the people, and that they knew him and trusted him. The black pastor historically has a figure whose job it was to keep his congregation informed, enlightened, and inspired. Lincoln (1974) writes:

He was more than a leader and pastor, he was the projection of the people themselves, coping with adversity, symbolizing their success, denouncing their oppressors in clever metaphor and spiritual selection, and moving them on toward that day of Jubilee which would be their liberation.

These attributes and duties of the black pastor again reveal the importance of their role in the successful movement of the black church. As the role is so crucial, one must acknowledge

that if the black pastor rises to the occasion then so does the black church. However the opposite also applies; if the black pastor does not supply leadership, direction and protection from oppressors, the organizations' movement could stall, lose momentum or at worst case scenario, lose all relevance.

When asking the question has the role of the church changed over time, the frequency with which pastors pointed a finger at themselves or at least fellow clergymen as responsible was apparent. These pastors hold themselves accountable for what the church has accomplished and where it has failed to meet the expectations of the institution's strong past. Cone (1970) argues that there can be no comprehension of black theology or its leadership without understanding that its very existence comes from a community which looks back on its unique past, visualizes the reality of the future, and then makes decisions about possibilities in the present. This cocktail for the church's success had fallen squarely on the shoulders of black pastoral leadership whom the faithful looked to for answers. Pastor Anderson in an outspoken way says yes the church has changed over time primarily due to pastoral leadership.

Yes, yes because all the issues during civil rights period, when you look at what Dr. King and Reverend Abernathy, George Farmer and Wilkerson and uh Ralph Bunche and all of these guys, what they were really explaining was the moral aspect of people not having their equal rights.

Pastor Anderson discusses what many other pastors discuss, that the black church leaders of today are not so much interested in social issues as they are about church growth and personal accomplishments. He says that many pastors are "businessmen disguising themselves as pastors

and policing the resources of Gods people.” He reinforces the sentiment of many that church because of pastoral leadership has changed.

He argued that the focus of changes of the black church over time revealed a focus on choices, and the direction the church chooses to take. He argues that the people came into the flock to be a part of something and that people of all colors want to be a part of something. Pastor Anderson says “that’s why people came to be a part if the Civil Rights Movement, that it wasn’t right to treat people like this, it wasn’t Godly.” This notion of being a part of something important was key to the church of the Civil Rights Movement and is key for the black church of today.

Pastor Bithers, male 57 years old, argues that the leadership of the black church during the Civil Rights Movement appeared to be meek and gentle on the outside, but the men of that day who led the movement were serious about their mission. He reaches back to thoughts of the Civil Rights movement, “it’s kinda like Martin Luther King, you know you can do it peacefully but you have to be educated to the point where you can argue and fuss and come in with a big sledge hammer.”

He argues that church membership has dropped off significantly from 50 or 60 years ago and it is because of “the character of the black church and what it focused to be doing for communities, we’ve lost that.” Within the context of the question the pastor speaks to what leadership had been and what has been lost since, a sense of focus on the issues that matter which he points back to leadership.

## **Money**

A few pastors point to money and finances or the influence of money and finances as a reason for the change seen in the black church. They argue that pastors preach about money more than they preach about God, His love and what you can do for your fellow man. This kind of preaching, some argue, has led parishioners to believe that God is about giving them things, material things, which He believes they deserve for following Him. As this thinking process sets in, Pastor Jackson says members get off track.

I, I think that we've become more capitalistic as opposed to being a church that reaches the individuals. It appears that the church has this infinite desire to be this mega (inaudible) in this big box business that we've lost the essence of what we were called to do. And so uh we've skipped over Matthew 25, when I was naked you clothed me, when I was in prison you came to see me, and so our, our emphasis has slowly, seeming become uh more preacher oriented than Jesus oriented.

He believes the black church has become more materialistic in its approach to purpose, and argues that many ministers preach that if you join the church that "you'll get this house or you'll get this car." Prosperity gospel he believes has gripped the church and lacking a social movement becomes the only attractive thing that pastors can offer non-members to entice them to become members and, therefore, bring them purpose. Pastor Jackson stated, "the church is no longer "rooted in righteousness, but in money."

He is not alone. Many of these pastors; Anderson, Washington, Matthews, Ball, Hepner, Danson, Jackson and others, place money near or at the center of their discussions when talking about the setbacks of the black church. They argue that money has basically caused the church to lose its focus and is at the heart of how and why it has changed since the Civil Rights



Movement. With all of the impact and strength the church had at the time Pastor Matthews suggests that money has eroded the mountainous stature the church had in the past.

So the black church instead of been a... it should be as strong as any government entity but because we lost our place and we're taking handouts because individuals have (inaudible) in positions because of self-greed or whatever the church hasn't grown. So therefore people don't turn to black church actually it limits the community.

Pastor Dalton gets to the heart of why he believes the church has changed over time and that it has do with the financial status of the people who once attended. He argues that the black parishioners of that day were not upwardly mobile, but those of today have more opportunity and therefore less reason to look to an entity for leadership.

As we moved into this whole social change of `civil rights and all those things like that, the church then became the beacon so in the midst of all of the activities you always look back to the church, it was center. It, it, it was home. It, it, it was, it was, it was the home page. So whatever you strayed into, it went, went back to the home page and helped you to recalibrate and come forward again. The, the rise in economics in the black community has brought about a difficult comfort that comes in any society the more prosperous it is, the less spiritual it becomes. It may remain religious but it's not as spiritual.

### **Lost Focus by Parishioners**

Pastor Ball argues that the roles have now reversed. He believes that during the Civil Rights Movement it was the black church and its church leaders that pushed the agenda forward. Be it social matters, employment or whatever, the church dictated its message and communicated that message to state, local and federal leaders. Pastor Ball believes that the black church is now having issues and agendas forced up them.

...since the civil rights movement and the church is no longer the center of black life tangibly, it's the center in terms of people still coming, everybody will always say that it's the center but it's not the only place we can go. So now what happens is rather than us dictating, you know sending forth leadership to represent us, it's the political leadership comes to us to represent their views to the community so it's been a reversed relationship or reversed role.

Other pastors suggest that since the Church no longer bears the significance it once did, people are less likely to hang around and be a part or look to it for assistance. Without the focus the church once had pastors argue that parishioners are turned inward. That since the parishioners have no issue or policy that might help the masses, Pastor Freeman, 41, says they must look to do things for themselves.

Now everybody's kinda like self-centered. We don't have that, you know that (inaudible) no more where everybody come together and, and just do what we need to do to help this community, help other communities out. Everybody like in they own lil' island, which the church before that, people fellowshiped, they helped one another out, pastors even fellowshiped, even; it's totally, even with the pastors now.

This pastor argues that "everybody wants to be a millionaire now" which actually combines two of the common themes in this response 1) that money not community purpose is at the forefront of the black church member, and that it is essentially every man/women for themselves. This theme of individual success became a common factor in these interviews. The pastors I interviewed seemed disappointed and in some instances perturbed by the change of focus by church members. Many come just shy of accusing members of being selfish. One quotes the Bible New Testament writer Matthew who in the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter is critical of those who do not look outward to help others in need. The verse says that God will in the end dismiss those who did not look after those in need. Matthew writes:

*For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,<sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.*

Pastor Jackson says that that black churches in particular since the Civil Rights Movement have gotten away from this biblical mandate:

I think that we've become more capitalistic as opposed to being a church that reaches the individuals. It appears that the church has this infinite desire to be this mega church in this big box business that we've lost the essence of what we were called to do.

The mega church concept was mentioned by a number of pastors. The term mega church generally refers to any Protestant church with a sustained average weekly attendance of 2,000 persons or more in its worship services. Most discussions of mega churches focus on very large Protestant Christian congregations in the United States - of which there are roughly 1,600 presently, reports the Hartford Institute. I did not interview pastors of mega churches; however, these pastors did not speak of the pastors of this type of church positively. Basically stating that these churches preach a "prosperity gospel," that if you join you will be blessed materialistically. At the heart of this discussion was the basic disconnect for these pastors; during the civil rights movement it was about serving others for a greater cause, but now it's all about serving yourself.

One pastor argues that the church and its parishioners should be able to stand on their own two feet; however, because of what he sees as a lack of inward focus the church is unsteady. Because of that lack of focus Pastor Matthews believes that there are people who are hurting with various types of issues whom the church cannot serve.

So the black church instead of been a... it should be as strong as any government entity but because we lost our place and we're taking handouts because individuals have been placed in positions because of self-greed or whatever the church hasn't grown.

He argues the people no longer turn to the church and the lack of strength and solidarity are the primary reasons the black church has not grown. Here again we see this focus on money and the effect these pastors say it has on individuals. The cohesion that the church brought to bear during the late 50's and 60's he argues should be as strong as any government. On its surface this comment seems innocuous, but a deeper examination points to self-sufficiency and a sense of power from a core organization which has the best interests of the people in mind. However, he says that the black church, because of a lack of focus and having lost its place, it now takes handouts. This may be one of the sternest rebukes of any pastor. It is an attitude of "the church was a place for those sad people of the past". He does not appear to have sympathy for the black church because he believes the wound was self-inflicted, and if pastors and parishioners were not so self-absorbed, the church could be as great a force as any that can be found.

The change in the role of the black church by one female pastor was enlightening. She did not speak of money, or leadership, or loss of focus. Her focus was on the family. In fact in all of the discussions on all topics this 48 year old pastor saw family and community as essential. She does not believe the mission of the church as changed, she believes that will "always remain." But Pastor Ritner argues they are not like the members of old.

Well as time has change and the needs of family have change and churches have evolved to try to meet the needs. Yeah because a lot of times parents want to come to church and they want to be able to hear a message but they don't want to have to deal with the child who may be irritable or can't um, sit through a service.

Pastor Ritner suggests that family and community are the lifeblood of the church, and because the church does not look outward as it used to, people are not as concerned about the well-being and health of others. She argues that Jesus was a man of the community and family and community were of primary concern to him. She too argues that as times have changed with the church the sense of community cohesiveness has suffered.

Neighbors really were neighbors and they depended on one another a lot more. Um, I think the way that is placed on the church now to meet a lot of those needs (inaudible) met within the community because when someone didn't have a meal in the neighborhood nobody went to the church to see if there was a food bank, we kind just walk around the neighborhood.

This emphasis by Pastor Ritner echoes the comment of Pastor Matthews who argued that systems and government programs have taken the place of the church in terms of helping those in the community. She says that when mothers or children were hungry others within the community would cook extra food and either took it to the hungry family or invited the family over, much of this process engineered by the church. I find this particular interview interesting in terms of the vivid picture she paints of family and community. She also discusses jobs and how if "back then" you had a job and knew of other openings you were quick to spread the word. She said people often knew that "somebody had a resource or connection" to assist with employment or other issue. This is yet another clear example of one of these pastors, Pastor Ritner, and her attitude regarding an every man for himself type approach of the current black parishioner.

Down the street, two doors over you know across the back fence, somebody knew the answer to (your dilemma) somebody had some resource, some connection. But now I'm seeing that those

relationships have changed...people are coming church; they're trying to find answers to their problems, and so our role is to still to answer those questions, solve the problems.

Her key point is that the church at its best is an organization that looks to serve the community's need first. Or at least that is what it should be; however, changes in relationships have changed the focus of the church. She also admits something that most of the other pastors suggest or report boldly, that there are still many problems and issues in the black community that must be addressed. She specifically speaks about jobs but also about needed resources. She believes that now "people are a lot more on guard or a lot more jaded."

This adds to this concept of every man for himself. One of if the not the main thrust of the Civil Rights movement was creating a better environment and society for all. Many of these pastors suggest that the black church does indeed stand tall in the black community, and that it can really have an impact. Pastor Tasker says that if any pastor says the black church has changed since the Civil Rights Movement, they couldn't be more wrong.

I think that it, in many respects, it has. Um I would say that when you listen to the people and the talk of many preachers, many church folks, it hasn't, we still believe it and when incidents happen that effect the community the church still come, gathers and tries to come and be more of a support and make an impact and let the community know we care but in terms of habit over time, we, we, we've kinda distanced ourselves. We need to be more, uh more involved.

The idea of the black church becoming more inclusive and more involved is pervasive in these interviews. This gap between people and the church is ubiquitously recognized. The comments of Pastor Tasker relate to issues that arise and people need someone or something to turn to. However when that happens the church cannot often help because "we" meaning the black church has distanced themselves from the people and are too far removed to be of any real

assistance. He uses two key words, support and impact. He posits that even though many people think the black church will show up when there are these times of crisis or great need, they are mistaken; and because of the distancing over time their notions are incorrect.

The pastors discuss why inclusion makes for a better society. Pastor Claybrooks believes that the church has gotten better at reaching out to others, both inside and outside of the black church.

The social outreach changed and so therefore the role changed and whereas before we were, in my opinion, we were just closed in to ourselves, now there's more of an outreach that the role has changed when we reach in to other denominations and to other races as well.

This is rare optimism as it relates to the question. Pastor Claybrooks believes that the black church is as open and as helpful as it has been and reaches out not just to the black parishioners it serves but also to those it does not, including other races. I found no other pastors who made a comment similar to this one. This pastor performs a number of services at his church, feeding of the homeless and giving money and meals to the local rescue mission, and assist with educational programs for the children in his church. He feels that his church reaches out as well as any church of his church's size.

Much of the dialogue was dominated by what was wrong with the church. The discussion centered primarily on money leadership, or a lost focus by parishioners. However the several pastors made a very distinct point: the church of the Civil Rights Movement is no longer as influential because it no longer has to be. Several pastors discussed the election of the nation's first black president; many of these pastors thought they would never see that in their lifetime. They point to the success of the Black Church and its leadership throughout the Civil Rights

Movement as the reason why the church no longer has the influence it once held. Pastor Ball 34 suggests that black people had no other place to go.

Yeah I think it's changed primarily because uh before the accomplishments of the civil rights movement the church was the organization center. It was the only place that we could organize; it was the only place that we could come together freely um and so um it was almost like the church raised up its leadership and sent it forward. Um now, since the civil rights movement and the church is no longer the center of black life tangibly.

He argues that "the church was where you went when you had a problem." But now there are so many other resources, so many other opportunities that the need that existed then does not exist now. Grants and programs "are everywhere" he argues. To argue that the church is no longer the center of black life he suggests that black people can in essence find help for their problems in a number of other venues therefore the church whether it likes the news or not is simply not as vital as it once was. Pastor Murdock suggests that the church is not as vital as it once but has evolved in a good way but to what end?

Ah, I think it has evolved in a lot of, of positive, positive ways. I think it has... we have (inaudible) we've now been able to reach more people than ever before. The question is what we are reaching them with. How would be the challenge, how is set. Ah, we have ah, grown in so many retro... retrospect's as far as volume. Ah I, I, I understand the concept of the business side of church but if, if it does not match it with Gods business then is really just business. And at the end of the day we must remember that we're always a church, that's our first establishment of what we are.

### **Summary**

Relevancy is difficult to formulate and measure. Relevancy is largely about perception and perception by definition is a way of processing and understanding something. The cross section of these pastors – where they are from, their age and gender and different denominations



is vast. The things they see, the needs presented to them, and the issues they deal with week in and week out are from different people but are very much the same. They seem largely to have a mostly subtle but often outspoken distrust of ministers who come into the leadership role of the church and use it for personal gain. Most of these pastors believe it is the number one way a church can lose its focus, via a pastor with a non-worthy ideals. Not one pastor who speaks on any level about the lack of relevancy in the church places the responsibility on society at large. Whatever losses to membership the church may have had regarding relevancy and impact, these pastors place that loss squarely on their colleagues and parishioners. They do agree that the needs may have changed but none argue that the needs have gone away.

Many of the pastors argue that the needs of the parishioners who attend or live in the neighborhoods of black churches has not changed. They agree that many have discovered and moved successfully out of those communities; however, those who remain have real and significant issues. 14 of these pastors said yes the church is still a relevant institution and supplies relief and release to the community it serves, but none say it with major conviction. The three female pastors are the most optimistic in terms of the impact the church can have on families.

The tenor of these pastors on this question appears to be tepid. There does not seem to be agreement by age. Both younger and older pastors have differentiating views regarding the current impact of the church and the reason the church has its current perceived standing.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: THE BLACK CHURCH AND EDUCATION

The role of education in African American life has always been significant. According to Anderson (1988) initially, ex-slaves attempted to create an educational system that would support and extend their emancipation, but their children were pushed into a system of industrial education that presupposed black political and economic subordination. Blacks have seen education as a bridge to success and the possibility of social mobility. Lincoln (1974) argues “the effort of the black church to provide a means for education their members was monumental (p 22)”.

Just after the Civil War ended freed blacks realized that freedom was not a panacea. They had no political power, and certainly no economic leverage therefore seeing education as the only way to change their plight. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century many black schools were established, some by well-meaning whites but mostly by blacks. At conference of the A.M.E. church in 1834 this was the resolution that was passed regarding education.

Resolved: That as subject of education is one of that highly interests all people, and especially the colored people of this country, it shall be the duty of every minister who has the charge of circuits or stations to use every exertion to establish schools wherever convenient, and to insist upon parents sending their children to school; and to preach occasionally a sermon on the subject of education; and it shall be the duty all such ministers to make returns yearly of the number of schools, the amount of scholars, the branches taught, and the places in which they are located; and that every minister neglecting to do so be subject to the censure of the Conference.

These church leaders took education seriously. In this resolution it is quite clear that education was not just a focus for most ministers but for many a requirement. The bar for what is to be the standard regarding education was placed high at the start of the period of free black slaves. The statement “it shall be the duty” places responsibility of educating blacks during this era squarely on the shoulders of the black pastor. This group of church leaders do not in this statement request help from the government, or business leaders, or even well-wishing whites. This statement places the responsibility of the education of blacks in the lap of the black pastor. The understanding that this was to be no easy undertaking on the part of these church leaders as the signal is sent quickly within the statement that pastors are to use “every exertion” to accomplish this goal. It is particularly interesting that the statement says “insist in the parents sending their children to school. Remember at the time there were no laws at the time requiring parents to send their children to school. In fact during this era, there was quite a great deal of justification to keep children home. These ministers and their congregations were freed blacks who understood the importance of learning and being educated if they wanted to be enterprising and able to survive what would come their way.

Lincoln (1974) posits that by 1900 the Baptists were supporting 80 schools and 18 academies and colleges. The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century appears to have been a focus on education. In addition to what the Baptists were doing, the AME Zion was supporting as a denomination eight colleges and or institutions providing education above the elementary level. Lincoln argues that practically every denomination from Methodists to Baptists and others during this period saw education as key and made a commitment to making sure the young people in the church had the opportunity for higher learning. Few would argue that the black church took education

very seriously and made it a part of its mission. But does that thrust still continue in every day society? What do pastors think about the education, and do they give it the same priority that their predecessors as a gateway to success and a game changer for those who chose to embrace it?

The question that was posed to these pastors, “what should the role of the church be as it relates to education?” The responses varied however they centered primarily around three basic themes; 1) we believe in holistic education, 2) the role we have is to provide tutoring/afterschool programs 3) we have no focus on education, but we are working on it.

### **Holistic Education**

Many of the pastors took issue with focus on education being about the individual. They believed that the focus should be on helping one another, many in fact argued that is what church was all about, helping others on their personal or spiritual journey. This is a word that many of the pastors spoke about, almost as if they had it from a script. A dive into the definition of the word holistic suggests something being centered around a system, or parts coming together to create a functioning mechanism. The word is often used in health connotations suggesting a regimen that is good for the whole body. If taken within the context of education and after listening to these ministers speak it is clear that they see a system as it relates to the notion of the involvement of the black church. They clearly see greed and materialism as end game success in education and suggest that the church should want none of it. In fact, none of the pastors spoke of the benefits of education supporting personal gain. The most senior Pastor Anderson in particular saw any education as a means to get more personal items as “secular knowledge.” In

his statement below Pastor Anderson speaks of what he believes to be wrong with traditional education.

You know the, the secular knowledge is toward materialistic things, your goal is towards how much I can make, it's just the nature of public education on any of these schools, the nature of it is that if, if I'm this eventually, you know, this helps me economically, you know the income, like you becoming a doctor or you , you get the PhD, boom you, that's a \$30,000 raise, you know, you find whatever way you wanna go because you have that uh requisition that most people will be look, looking for, that standard, you know the doctor and so you know but that doesn't speak towards what do you believing or what do you stand for.

Pastor Anderson like many of the other pastors sees society's view of the purpose of education as skewed as he argues the "nature of public education." Immediately he expresses his views on the nature of public education, and what he deems as its purpose, which is teach people how to make more money, how to become a profit center and how it's all about the individual and that individuals selfish purposes. Many times during the interview he asks, what do you stand for, regarding education.

Pastor Anderson goes on to discuss what he feels is the proper way to use education, by bringing up Bill and Melinda Gates and how they use their fortune to help children and education. The discussion of money in his dialogue is delivered with negative connotations. He suggests that the money, degrees, and titles really do not mean anything and does not prove to anyone what a person might believe. At his church Pastor Anderson provides afterschool programs for the children of his community, and has a program called young gifted and black which is committed to the study of the Bible and enhancing their cultural knowledge. He cites

people like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, two people he believed to be highly educated however did not reportedly make a lot of money but certainly made an impact on society. He believes knowing the history of the black race is a part of education and is as important as making money. He pointed to the discovery of the shoe machine and the system for plasma by black people as significant accomplishments and worthy of education. He thought that any other interpretation of education was incorrect and “useless.” He argues that he has a number of educated people in his church and he reminds them constantly of their role, which is to help others.

Pastor Dalton also sees education almost exactly the same way. He argues that education should not be about money but taking yourself and others to higher levels of awareness. He believes that education “is more than I can add numbers.” He believed that the role of the church was to make others better both inside and out.

Education has to be how to take information, apply information to create a greater opportunity, not only for myself but for the people that are around me. Education is about getting a loan and then bringing a loan. So as I go, somebody else has to go with me. so, so in, in, in, in, in teaching leadership for instance, there is the notion in my mind about success in leadership. So whatever it is I do, so your, the job you occupy, you’re trained to do that job, you’re experienced to do that job, before you leave that job you need to have impacted somebody ---

Pastor Dalton believes the black church still has the ability to create larger influence through the power of education. His statement “education is about getting a loan and then bringing a loan,” speaks to his vision of the church’s true influence on religion; if you get something, bring it back in some form so others may have the same as you. He appears to compare success to a journey and “as I go, somebody else has to go with me.” Other pastors

interviewed have this same notion that education is not about one's self but how one helps others along the way.

Pastor Dalton also argues that education has to be expanded beyond academia, and the church should be at the forefront of that type of education. He argues that pastors must become "scientists." He said "an artist knows what to do, but a scientist knows why he does it." The scientist then takes the details or what he knows and gives it out to others. He signals several times that the church must be the catalyst for that type of thinking. He argues that any other forms of education are worldly, and the church has the responsibility to encourage educational attainment. Both of these pastors who are plus 65 years old seem to suggest that the church is the watchdog to make sure that its parishioners keep the proper perspective as it relates to education. This pastor argues that direction of what the church should instill in an individual should be so powerful that a person who has received an education and been an active church member should pass along all they know to make others better. Pastor Jackson argues that education is something that "does not [just] flow in, but it also has to flow out.

Pastor Jackson, the youngest of these pastors mirrors the sentiments of his senior counterparts; he has a number of different programs for his church that are education related. He places a heavy emphasis on his own responsibilities to make sure the children of his church are well rounded and well educated. He runs an afterschool tutoring program in which he brings in outside services to help mentor the students in his own church. But for Pastor Jackson he sees education as far more than book learning.

Because education, uh some people don't just learn through common core, which is what we're pushing now, uh we believe that education to be holistic so that involves taking our

kids on missions trips outside of the U S, helping sponsor them to be able to do that because their learning, people who learn and have more exposure are more versed in education.

His view of education is broader than almost all of the other pastors. While all may believe in holistic education he is the only pastor who sees foreign trips as an avenue for educational growth. Pastor Jackson is not American born and believes that children especially those born in America and have not had the benefit to leave their inner city neighborhood, much less the country, need a broadening of their perspective, that is what he deems as important. He sees a “global perspective” as part of a child’s holistic experience.

Pastor Jackson also has a major focus on education for high school students that graduate. He has a scholarship fund for those students; he says “it’s not a full ride but an incentive to get them to the next place.” Pastor Jackson says that education is “big,” and that “in order to change the context of our social economic status, education is going to be that vehicle to help us.” He argued that the role of education was to empower, and that by using free talent that was within his church, parents can depend on his church to help children make good decisions. He says that the church should be at the center of educating children.

Pastor McDonald, 40 has a similar perspective on education. He does not believe that education can be left to educational institutions. He argues that church must be an integral part of the education of school age children.

I don’t think we can just do all education and not bible. And so uh I think they have to merge together, I think it’s a perfect if together because I, I believe that God’s, God desire for his people to be wise, Solomon was one of the wisest men in the world. And so I think that it’s God’s call for us to be wise and with wisdom and I think that also some of our advancements, if education does not, if you have a church that’s uneducated in this



day and time you also have a church that's very limited in their abilities to achieve much because it takes resources.

Like Pastor Jackson, Pastor McDonald sees wisdom as parallel to education, and argues that if the church is not educated than you have a church that cannot keep up with the ever changing society. The reference to King Solomon here is interesting. In the Bible in the Kings 1 1- 15 King Solomons has a dream. In it he sacrifices 1,000 burnt offerings because of his love for God. God is so pleased with Solomon that God tells him to ask for anything he wants and He will grant it. Solomon likens himself to a little child and tells God he wants to be able to guide and govern his people rightly, and asks for understanding. God is so pleased that Solomon has asked for wisdom, not riches or fame or glory. God grants Solomon wisdom, riches, honor and a long life. Pastor McDonald believed that the church through education has to seek wisdom as well as traditional education and then all of the other things sought will come. Pastor McDonald also believes that the growth of church membership is also directly linked to education. He believes that as parishioners become more educated they are more likely to be equipped for what he deems a greater cause. There is also the discussion of exposure, or the need for the church to give its students a broader view of not just religion and education, but also a sense of the greater world at large. Pastors Jackson as well as other pastors paints a portrait of education as a person who has a sense of themselves and the larger picture of themselves, one which does not just pursue money and things but also has a need to help others.

Another pastor also sees the role of the church as it relates to education as holistic. Pastor Murdock argues that education must be about accountability and that must be the mandate the

church signals to its members. In his comment below he details what he sees at the role of the church as it relates to education:

It's awesome to be able to be educated and the church it, it plays a role in it, but I think at the same time we also have to always remember this our major role is the spiritual education on getting people from knowing to knowledge, what you know you got to be accountable.

Pastor Murdock points again to the use of education as a tool for the rounding of the individual student. But he argues the major educational role of the church as a spiritual one. Pastor Murdock's focus on knowledge is consistent with the other pastors, in that education is not meant just to be for the individual; it is not a one way street. The knowing, or attainment of information, must be transferred to knowledge which he argues carries the ultimate responsibility of service. He believes that the church is responsible for making sure that the educated person is looking for someone to "bless" with what they have learned. He also calls it "spiritual education." With this he as many other pastors do, argues there is a direct link between education and spirituality. He also calls it a "major role." These words suggest the power of the dynamic of the place of the church in the educational lives of its constituents. This pastor's church like almost all other pastors' churches within this study are in the inner city, where many people struggle to survive especially financially each day. The chorus from them all is that those who achieve financial success must reach back and help others. Notice the first line from his narrative, "it's awesome to be educated, but the church, it plays a role." He then restates the core of his argument that those educated and attending church must be accountable to constituents who may need some level of assistance.

### **The role we have is to provide tutoring/afterschool programs**

Many of these pastors see their role in education to be one that provides the youngest of its members with the capabilities to be able to grasp a firm foundation early. For whatever reason they focus on this age and feel it is their responsibility to make sure these school age children receive the focus of their educational funds and resources.

Pastor Danson focuses on something he can control which is tutoring for standardized test taking.

Each year our education department was involved with um, with, still involved with tutoring, tutoring and preparation for SAT and ACT. Um we've done some literacy and we've also, we also had a, you know a, every year would do uh preparation for the FCAT. You know tutoring for the FCAT, which um was pretty successful.

This pastor focuses his attention on the school age children of his church. His church is not in the inner city but actually in a fairly well established predominately white neighborhood. People who go to this church commute from outside areas for his high intensity worship service which attracts a younger crowd. This makes it difficult for those who may need to get to this program. They must rely on rides from family members or friends which can complicate the consistency of those who attend. But he feels he has to make an offering to those who are members of his church. He has many young adults in his congregation and approximately 80 school aged children. The building which he occupies has multiple classrooms and meeting room which he uses for these afterschool sessions. He like many of these pastors see the church

as a tool that cannot perform all functions but one that touches every aspect of a person's life beginning with its youngest members. Pastor Danson 56, also has literacy programs for the older members of his church as well. This is not what is seen in many of the other programs, education for adults. While most pastors put most if not all of their educational resources into educating children, Pastor Danson signals a different focus. Many of his church members are older and did not have the opportunity to receive a formal education. These older members made sure that their children were educated and prepared to meet society; however, through circumstances and the environment in which they lived they were not able to receive a proper education, some had a struggle with fundamental reading. He sees the role of his church to educate the parishioners of all ages. He argues that an educated church is a forward church, and that education, both spiritual and academic, is the only way members can move forward.

The youngest pastor who has young children believes that many of his parishioners see education as a burden and therefore many of the children are left to fend for themselves when it comes to education. Pastor Jackson sees the church in this arena as a way to stand in the gap for parents who choose not to, or cannot help their children due to their own academic shortcomings and inability to provide the proper guidance needed. In his statement below he speaks regarding one of the programs that reveal his focus on education:

They didn't understand what's going on, homework not done, coming home late. But we tell our parents, bring your kids on the mid-week and we will do their homework for them and with them, not for them but with them. So while you're enjoying service your kids are being tutored.

This is interesting in that Pastor Jackson allows for tutoring of children while other church wide services are going on, and it speaks to his commitment to education. His church

provides numerous tutors to the children of the church who meet in his huge facility. His focus is solely on assistance with children and helping with homework, he told me that he has professionally trained teachers who handle these tutoring sessions.

The theme of the church as a support system and defacto tutoring arm was a certainly a theme in many of these interviews with these pastors. One pastor telling me that the church should “push its people to education”. In the statement below, Pastor Wilborn argues that the church must be in every aspect of the education of his members especially early on.

We really strive to a cradle, cradle to career type of mindset uh a full educational system uh with a major emphasis on early learning. And, and the reason why we’re doing that, which is a shift from what we’ve done before, we still do the things prior but we have a major emphasis on early learning is because we’re finding out that the children of the inner city are um, they’re behind before they ever get to K.

K for kindergarten. His major emphasis on education for the youngest in his congregation needs to be a particular focus as he believes whites know the importance of early learning while blacks have lagged severely behind. This emphasis is new for the pastor as he looks at kids in the inner city. Pastor Wilborn has an expansive ministry which touches dozens of children. He argued that there is a 30 million word gap that white children hear that black children do not hear. Pastor Jackson argues that white children are taught to be far more logical early and that the frontal lobe of the child is developed during the time these words are introduced which he argues is why the vocabulary and reasoning skills of white children are more advanced. In his quote below Pastor Jackson reveals that he wants the kids that fall under the umbrella of his learning institution to be on the track educationally before anyone expects anything of them:

For the last couple of years we've been really emphasizing early learning to, to decrease that gap so that our kids can perform at K and the process or the system within work, the frustration in the system is you have all of these elementary uh teachers about to lose their mind cause they don't know how to handle these kids who are so far behind.

He points out something that the other pastors do not, that traditional educational institutions may not be able to educate black children, in fact may not be able to manage them. Intrinsic in his argument is that someone or something must fill the gap and get the early learners on track, he says does not want to call them "handicapped" but they just will not be able to compete with their white counterparts if there is not early intervention. Pastor Jackson did not tell me exactly what his educational programs consisted of, however more than once he argued that simply giving young people an impression of caring might be the best form of education and motivation. He said that if you can make young people feel important and that they have worth and will be held accountable then they will surprise you as to what they can do. His insights highlight the impact a third party such as the church can have on a child. He argues that without the church in the lives of young people many would fall by the wayside.

### **We have no focus on Education**

Statistics from the Census Bureau confirm the economic advantage of African Americans who hold a four-year college degree. Data from the year 2004 reveals that blacks with a college diploma now have a median income that is 90 percent of the median income of similarly educated non-Hispanic whites. Blacks with a master's degree have incomes nearly equal to those of whites with a master's degree. Blacks with a doctorate actually have higher incomes than

similarly educated non-Hispanic whites.

Although education was critical to most pastors as an important component to their overall program, the question regarding the role of the church as it relates to education seemed to catch a few of these pastors off guard, and they did not appear ready for the question.

The pastors who did not have specific programs of any kind as it relates to education did still believe that the church had a significant part to play. Pastor Thompson argues that the black church has and still does motivate its members to get an education.

I think that you should push your members (laughter) regardless of their age, to continue to further their education as, providing that they want to. And again that education, um training, um or a matter, whatever degree you're trying to pursue will, will be predicated upon the individual. Um and one of the things I know we do here at (our church), is we strongly push education.

He does not have any traditional educational programs at his church, but he brings in nutritionists, law enforcement, bankers, and others to speak to his congregants. He also points out that this push is beyond age, but goes from cradle to the grave. He believes that cosmetology and any other types of the trades are a great goal and a person can make just as much money in a trade as they can with traditional education. This is the only pastor who speaks to this particular path as one that could be beneficial, but he argues that this type of education can be successful for an individual and the church can be the catalyst.

Another pastor with no traditional educational program is a female pastor who suggests that the role of the church should be that of chief motivator:

The role of the church should press upon everyone to get as much education as you can. It should teach that the sky is the limit and that they should reach, they should reach high. In my church that's a must.

She says that she would be hypocritical to not press her congregation to move forward educationally as she must have at least a Bachelor's degree to be a pastor in her church. She is pursuing her Master's degree and says that she at some point would pursue a Ph.D. She says her church is very small and does not have the funds to have a large program. However, she feels that her church is growing and one day will be able to fund an educational program which she sees as critical.

## **Summary**

The early black church pioneers saw education as a way of escape for black people. They believed that knowledge was power and that children were to be the recipients of this important thrust. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century dozens of schools and colleges were established for this very purpose. Many of these Central Florida pastors had at least one program to help the educational efforts of their members and community, but some had little to none. The conversation with many of these pastors was about education that is beyond the regular learning that someone would receive at school. The word holistic came up many times as they described what they felt to be the thrust of education, helping others not just one's self. Many shunned materialistic gain and argued that must not be the focus of the church. They used terms like self-awareness and responsible learning to explain why they believe education is just one of many tools to pass along for successful everyday living.



## **CHAPTER NINE: THE ROLE OF THE BLACK CHURCH AND COMMUNITY SERVICE**

The black church is almost always in the inner city community where there are often many African Americans. With the sheer number of black churches in the black community many can and do walk to their church on Sunday morning and for other functions within the church during the week. The black church is a community partner and for many the center of the black community. Some blacks do not attend the church in their own neighborhoods, but have a great respect for those churches in the inner city community. In this research it is important to understand not only what is the perceived reality of the current state of the black church, but also the black pastor's perception of what the role of the black church should be in the black community. For many parishioners the black church is the only beacon of hope they see every day, but is the black church living up to the needs of the people who live nearby. With this notion, I asked all 20 pastors, what should be the role of the black church as it relates to community service. The pastors responded with a multiplicity of suggestions, but three themes emerged as what they see the role of the church to be; to find the specific needs of their respective churches and fulfill them, to help people find belonging, and finally it's not the job of the church to handle all the needs of the community.

To answer the question "what should be the role of the black church as it relates to community service," it is helpful to examine the responses to the first question asked, "what role do you think your church serves in the community?" This question gives an indication of the perception of the present, and reveals with some exception, the answers to the former question.

In other words, these pastors saw the role the church should play in the community more or less as the role their church currently served in the community.

### **Find the specific needs of the church and fill them**

It is interesting that the pastors mostly saw their churches as unique, and fulfilling a specific purpose in the community. They all viewed the community in which their churches are located as important and the people within both their church and community as valuable. But without question they see those in the community differently and their needs and values as well. Whether the church was large or small in terms of membership, most pastors believe their view of the community to be enlightened.

Most of the pastors in these churches are transitional, meaning that the church board, or a higher body – conference council – regional Bishop or other person or body could move them, promote them, demote them or fire them. Many pastors spoke to me about the connection they had with the church and how much they loved their assignment. In many cases the pastor could ask for a transfer, resign or retire from their respective church. Many of the pastors argue that if the church pastor is to be successful she or he has to come in and find success with their church and community. In the case of the latter, a connection must be made initially to determine the needs of the community. None of the pastors I interviewed informed me of any formal studies they execute within the community to determine need but most did believe that they had identified some of the needs of the community and were working to fill those needs. Among them Pastor Bithers a 57 year-old male, suggests the need could be anything.

...we also serve the community where there are a lot of people that I would say that don't really have a church home and, and there are certain needs that come up in the community sometime where there's a funeral or they need a facility where they can have a special program, uh we open our doors for that, often and all the time uh and we don't put a charge on when someone has lost their family member and they need a place whether they're uh saved or unsaved, it doesn't matter to us, we just realize that there's a need. And, and then we also reach out in the community far as trying to help people that need help.

Pastor Bithers views his church as a place for those who have no church home. This is tricky he admits because regular members have a certain perception of what church should be, and seeing well established church members from week to week becomes the norm. However if he has to meet the needs of the community he has to open the doors of the church to everyone. As much as members speak about bringing in new members, he knows that bringing in a lot of new members might be somewhat uncomfortable. He believes he is up the challenge of growing his church while serving his community.

Black churches in Central Florida especially large well established churches become institutions where major functions are held, such as community rallies, graduations, law enforcement award services, city-wide campaigns among others are held. Pastor Bithers recognizes this need and offers his church operationally for funerals and all. He does not charge those who have a service at his church.

Pastor Withers also believes that the role his church plays in community service is fitting in and doing all that a church can do to uplift the community. His goal is not just to be a community servant but also to make internal changes within the individuals in his community.

In the statement below Pastor Withers says the church needs to aim for personal internal transformation, and then everything else will follow:

And so everything that we do we do in mind on how does it impact [just our]community in relationship on how we're able to draw people to God. I believe just based on my own personal experience that there's no change in the community unless there's first change in the hearts of the residents. When the heart changes, everything changes.

Pastor Anderson argues that the goal is to get the community members, many whom live in public housing to make a new commitment to excellence. His goal is to reach every single one of those within his community four times a year. It takes Anderson four Saturdays four times per year to walk up and down the street his church is on and tell them of the all programs and offerings of the church during that time period. Pastor Anderson has classes on housing, finances and parenting. One of Anderson's main community service thrusts is health; he is a healthy, vibrant man who reaches out to help his community with wellness. Health is one of those quarterly campaigns in which Pastor Anderson knocks on doors to tell people what is going on in his church, below he comments on one such program:

If we're doing a diabetes uh program which we'll partnership with Grace Medical, we knock on every door and let them know and, and we have a partnership with Grace Medical that those who participate will get a free medical home. They get all the diabetes medicine uh for free, medication, whatever is needed but we always start 30 days out.

Pastor Anderson is concerned only about the housing units on his street and like politics this pastor believes all ministries are local, and all pastors should work their area and not have an

expansive outreach. The medical aspect of his ministry is important, and where he believes true community involvement hits home in the housing units near his church. Health is a question that I did not ask; however, it was also never mentioned with the exception of this one time. None of the other pastors saw it as a ministry or focus for their church. In that most research shows blacks having shorter life spans than whites, it was surprising that more of these pastors did not signal health ministry as part of community service. This pastor was explicit to tell me that the health ministry's initiatives he has are fully free.

Another pastor sees his role as all-encompassing as well. He says he cannot point to specific role that his church serves in the community. This because Pastor Freeman sees so many issues within the black community that best thing he could do is to give members a positive outlook.

And we have really done some great things which there are a lot more we can do. But I think we're striving. Um the role we play mostly is giving people hope, that's the main role, giving people, let them know that crime is not the way, drugs ain't the way, you can get a good job, you can survive, you know you ain't gotta go out and do illegal things to survive and that's what we preach, that's what we teach.

Pastor Freeman says his church is in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Central Florida where he says he sees drugs, prostitution, and unemployment at high levels. Freeman willingly admits he does not have time to focus on education as a priority as he is just trying to "keep people alive" in the neighborhood where his church is located. The blight of property he sees daily is directly in the face of the church and he preaches from his pulpit a scenario of a heavenly kingdom where troubles are no more and a life exists that is free of pain of heartache. However

what he sees and knows is what he believes his congregation sees as well, is a sense of despair and hopelessness. He believes the role of his church is to give the people a look at a better way to live their lives and to get away from the drugs and violence that are so common to the people in his church's community. He calls the role of his church a "beacon light to this community," and as his church has been in that community for 90 years, he believes it stands as a symbol for a better future, and argues that "...there is hope for a better life, but you can make it in this life."

This struggle is key in this research. These pastors have a number of roles they must fulfill and some convincing to do. They know that generations of families in many of their churches have made little to no progress in their lives regarding income, housing, and education. They see those cycles and hear the struggles of generations. Many of these people are looking to the church for some kind of intervention, and quite frankly a break. To give these people something, this pastor can put his proverbial finger on nothing else but hope. If he loses that, Pastor Freeman says he has "little to nothing else to offer."

It is interesting what the three female pastors see as the role of their church as it relates to community service. These pastors also see their role in community service as all-encompassing. They all see it as meeting place where people come to meet and greet their God in a personal way and as a place to meet all needs. However, Pastor Ritner saw church far more in the vein of a location for families.

Everything from meeting spiritual needs to directing people to financial resources and legal resources. Um, I find that people come to the church and they assume that everything they need is at the church and they expect you to be able to either answer their questions or connect them with the resources that can actually help meet their needs, whatever the need is. Whether are marriage situations, situations with their children,

sometimes going to their children school. Everything from going to court, going to hospital um, directing um, even in areas of health care we're expected to know a lot and even if we don't know a lot we're expected to have access to these resources.

Pastor Ritner's comments point to the view that many in the black church have regarding families, someone at the church will help me. She says she has counseled many families in difficult situations and has to play counselor, financier, trust officer, and more. As a female pastor she believes that some of the topics that women want to discuss that may be taboo to male pastors are often discussed very openly with her. She argues that her church is a very "open resource" to all of its parishioners. She sees the role of her church as it relates to marriage as a "stabilizing" effect. She tells me she sees the plethora of families that are headed by a single female, and it is troubling to her. Whenever she has the chance to help a marriage in difficulty she makes it "her mission" to try to help keep it together.

Another female pastor, Pastor Northcutt, surveys the neighborhood around her and sees just by her physical observation that her church has to find a way to help families in her community. She posits in the statement below that her church must seek to help as many as it possible can.

My church serves in the community by meeting the needs of all people...my church is actually in, in a community, there's a subdivision all around it and um we have uh different uh economic levels in that subdivision. Um and my church, one of the things that we do every fourth Saturday, uh my church uh we feed and we also give away clothing every fourth Saturday. And that's because to meet the needs uh in the community. There are some people who are uh, you could tell just by their, the way their houses look on the outside, you know that they're not doing too well.

Although she views her church as an institution that must meet all needs of the people within her community, she views families as the key to building a better and safer society. She says she understands the pressures of the family and that is why she focuses on teens and adolescents within her church and says she spends a lot of time with them to change any focus that might not be “heading in the right direction.” She takes the youth to places where they can play video games and if only temporarily, take their mind off of the blight of their neighborhood.

She also sees seniors as the forgotten members of the community. Few if any of the other pastors discuss this group. She has meetings twice a week just for seniors so that they can fellowship or eat together or have special programs for them. She does not see a lot of homeless where her church resides; therefore, she can focus more internally on what she considers to be the needs of her congregation. She says “she doesn’t want to leave anybody out”; however, she sees the youth and seniors as two groups with little power and little voice in both the church and society as the groups that need the help of the church the most.

Only one male pastor, Pastor Washington discusses family and the many needs that it may have. In the statement below Pastor Washington reveals what he sees as the direct needs of his church family and reaches out to them when they signal that they have a need.

There’s often times we buy food and other items as well, clothing and we also have therapist in our church where if a family is going through various traumatic life events or certain types of crisis, we can recommend that family to a therapist because we feel we have an overarching belief that the church has to be the lynch pin of the community and from that many things can change.

Pastor Washington recognizes his skill and says he wants to “stay in his lane.” He says that he can counsel those about to be married, or do some marriage counseling; however, if there



are those whose issues are beyond his scope of counseling he will make the referral. Another interesting comment is that his church will buy food directly for a family who needs it, or clothing. Many churches have a food bank or clothing drive or have a clothing distribution center like Goodwill, but this Pastor says that they church will “buy food and other items as well” for members who are having a hard time.

### **Help people find belonging**

Many of the pastors in this study say that people need a place where they can find common problems, solutions and discussions, and there is no better place than the black church. They see the role of the church as a place of belonging and acceptance. They see the needs as vast and complicated; however, Pastors Brooks, 45 argues that people with commonalities and who truly understand one another can find strength and oneness in the church.

... number one our role is to go into uh our community from a Christian prospective, Christian’s prospective being uh what we are teaching, the doctrine of the church, which would be the death, birth and resurrection of Jesus Christ which is the gospel and uh that’s the main thrust uh when you talk about the doctrine of the church and as far as going in the communities, being able to meet uh the physical, uh the social and some of the even, the economic issues as well as the spiritual issues with people that we come in contact with. Um having an opportunity first uh to let them know how much we care about what they may be dealing with.

Pastor Brooks argues that “people don’t care about how much you know until they know how much you care.” In other words a pastor can talk a good game, and a church can speak of spiritual things; however, if the congregant does not find belonging, all the talk is meaningless. He argues that if those in the church are truly followers of Jesus they will act like it. He argues that “we can see change” only when a community comes together with common thoughts, ideas,

and truths which are discussed and plans are put into action. He believes this is the mandate of the church to be a place for the fatherless, the unemployed, those dealing with abuse, and those with other real and “tangible” problems. He believes that the demographics “work out,” meaning that these people simple due to proximity will find themselves together in communities; that lower income people will find themselves living in the same neighborhoods with other lower income people. He argues that their families will socialize together, and that they will find themselves needing common conversation to deal with the issues of the day. He posits that they will need a place to do that and that the church must meet that need and addresses those needs “efficiently and effectively”. He argues that is true “discipleship,” when someone else sees that you can lead them in the right direction. He believes the church could not be in a better position to help those people and give them a sense that they are not alone.

Another pastor, Pastor Wilborn, finds his church to also be destination place, and says that when people come to his “house of worship,” it’s a place where no issue is taboo and people can discuss whatever they choose as the topic of the day. Below Pastor Wilborn argues that the church must adjust the way people live every day.

in brief in brevity our church is what I call a transforming agent. We believe that it is by our lead that a lot of change has taken place within our community. Whether that being, whether we talk about economics, whether we talk about housing, social justice, all of those things, our, our church is really one of those entities that’s really taken the lead to make about, bring about change.

### **What should the role of the church be as it relates to Community Service**

The main role these pastors considered important in their community/church were the same roles they thought should be important in their community. The three items what they see the role of the church to be; to find the specific needs of their respective churches and fulfill them, to help people find belonging, and finally it's not the job of the church to handle all the needs of the community.

The pastors interviewed with exception of one or two saw the church simply as an entity that had to intelligently find the need of the community and fill it. The responses were very general but paint the overwhelming number of needs in the black community and how the church, as difficult as it may sound, can solve them all to the best of its ability. If so Pastor Bithers argues it must begin with the fundamentals.

Let's just say you have ten dollars. Let's just say this person here has a hundred dollars. There's a need in the community, this old lady staying in a house and it needs some repair of something. Or your yard just needs to be cleaned. Okay what impact that would make if you would go...and help her? What the churches should do is get back to the basics in doing what they can do.

He argues that cleaning an elderly woman's yard is just as important as preaching a great sermon on Sunday Morning, and "if the church does not do it..." He trails off and says later that if the church does not help these people, no one will. Pastor Bithers also speaks very harshly regarding the inability of black churches working collaboratively to mend tears within society. As there are so many needs in the community if they would all just work together, the impact they would have would be enormous.

Pastor Claybrooks says research is the key, and a church has to dig deep and figure out the local need. If the church does not know the needs of the community then the impact of the

church will be stunted. Claybrooks, 48, argues that the neighborhood may have numerous issues but the church must figure out which issues must take priority.

I believe that they should, number one, familiarize themselves with what needs are in that community where they are because you know based on logistics that the needs change. And with us being in the Winter Garden area and where we're presently located there is a need for things that we discussed earlier, uh single mothers, to encourage them, making sure that our kids are getting the best education that they can and assisting with homelessness and uh poverty cause there, there's a uh blue collar area there. So I believe that each church should be just as involved in their community as they possibly can only first by familiarizing themselves with what the needs are.

Fulfilling the general needs of the black community is the theme of the idea that most of these pastors found resonate within the structure of their churches. They know the needs can change from day to day or year to year, but they also know the needs will continue to come. Pastor Claybrooks reported that many in his congregation are struggling single mothers who come to the church with a number of issues and he must be able to help through whatever community resources or otherwise that might exist; however, the church cannot help them if they do not know the specific issues. Many of the struggling families must remain very mobile due to the fact that poverty and unstable employment can lead to swift evictions and possible homelessness. Due to pride or self-consciousness, those within the church and sometimes outside of the church privately seek aid from the church. He argues "they have no other option."

Pastor Thornton also gives no real specifics on what the role of the church should be, only that the church cannot escape its responsibility to assist in whatever way it can. He is one

of the pastors who suggested that the church does not carry the significance it once did; however, her argues it can still be force in the community and has no right to try to escape its mission.

..and so the role of the church, no matter how small or great, has to be in, in concert with that the scriptures teach us, that we, we are in fact our brother's keeper. When a brother falls, when a brother's in trouble, it is our responsibility to respond, to respond in such a way that we bring aid, we bring help. We, we bring restoration and we, we cannot in any way, shape or form dance of out that. we, we cannot in any way, shape or form uh say that's not our, that's not our responsibility, it's not our concern, it is our concern.

Pastor Jackson also believes the needs of the black community are so enormous that it is his responsibility to seek out the needs himself and fulfill them to the best of his ability. He believes it is his responsibility to attack the needs of the community offensively.

one of the things that we did was pretty cool, probably do it again, it's called love a neigh, love, love your neighborhood so we would go around, knock on peoples door and say "Hey we're from The Kingdom Church, we're gonna cut your grass for free", "What", "Well we just wanna beautify your, this neighborhood and make it appealing for our constituents that live here". I think if the church is a tax free entity, it has a great responsibility on making a difference in its community.

He argues it is the duty of the church to go out and find the need, even if it means just starting out offering to cut lawns. The "love they neighbor" campaign is named after a story in the Bible when a lawyer skeptical of Jesus and his teachings, asked Jesus "Of all of the commandments which is the greatest?" Knowing this was a trick; Jesus does not point him back to the Ten Commandments, but suggests that the greatest commandment involves loving all of your neighbors, just as much as you love yourself. Pastor Jackson argues this should be the overshadowing mission of the black church; however, it suggests what most of these pastors argue to be true, the specific needs of the community are numerous.

It is interesting that he mentions something that none of the other pastors communicate at all, the tax-free status of all churches. According to IRS, churches and religious organizations, like many other charitable organizations, qualify for exemption from federal income tax under IRC section 501(c) (3) and are generally eligible to receive tax-deductible contributions. To qualify for tax-exempt status, such an organization must meet several requirements which most churches qualify for. Also pastors pay no income tax. There have been many movements by organizations on the political left to end the tax exempt status of the religious institutions but that political effort continues to fail on a national level.

Pastor Jackson sees the church as a servant to serve all the needs of the community not just out of a spiritual or religious responsibility, but as a social responsibility as well as he inherits what many others cannot receive, a tax exempt status. As he discusses this status he says he believes that because of the tax exempt status that the government should demand more from pastors and churches. He is also a licensed realtor and argues “that you cannot receive income and in the urban church I’m a licensed realtor so I do know this, we consume the largest amount of real estate in the urban churches, in the urban areas, is churches.” He says that if you look in the Pine Hills section of Central Florida there are 638 churches. Pine Hills is a census designated place and an unincorporated subdivision in Orange County, Florida west of Orlando. As of the 2010 U.S. Census Pine Hills had a population of over 60,000 people. Pastor Jackson is very tough on his fellow colleagues and churches and argues that with over 600 churches in the Pine Hills community which is often in the news because of crime related stories, the black churches in the community should be able to do more.

Other pastors responded to the question of what should be the role of the church as it relates to community service in terms of belonging. Several argued that many of their

constituents either members or community persons are victims of cyclical poverty and economic depression. Some fear that “they may always be.” They argue that the people themselves know this and search for what is attainable, a sense of belonging. One female pastor, Pastor Northcutt says that starts with building a strong family.

...in terms of, of keeping families together, helping them cope with the daily struggles of life. I think that we, that the church should be, because the, one thing about the church, see the church to, in my mind the church does not exist if you don't have family. And so to me that should be the main focus, is keeping families together and working with families and like I say, I know that's kind of broad but often times whenever families go through stuff, anything, you need counseling.

She goes on to argue that a church family is very much like a personal family and that once a person feels that they are a part of something bigger than themselves they have a better chance of “surviving” in larger society. Another pastor, Pastor Dalton, seeks a Biblical reference to make her point on belonging. She says that if Christians are to truly follow the life of Christ, it is their responsibility to act like him.

...if you go to the insane man,...they come for this man, he is completely naked, he's broken his chains, they cannot keep him chained. He's out of his mind. Okay, the very first thing that Christ does is help him to belong, he gives him back his mind. And then he gives him a coat and then he leaves him there and when he comes back the man has turned into an evangelist and that whole community is now ready to sit down and learn. If you take, if you take the, the woman caught in adultery, you can talk to her about church, you can talk to her about her social status, academic status, she says I feel you.

Pastor Dalton also points to the important element of making someone feel comfortable in the situation or circumstance that they find themselves in. He argues that one this happens the man becomes encouraged because he is no longer an outsider, and becomes someone great and a

follower of Christ, or someone now bent on doing what is right. He gives other Biblical perspectives which show the work of Christ as being one that is inclusive, and not what many churches actually do which is to exclude anyone who is not like them.

## **Summary**

Community service is a very broad term, by definition how does the church serve the community? What needs are there, and what is the perception of these pastors as to how the church can best serve those needs? The needs of those who go to or live in the vicinity of the black church are vast. Pastors who serve these congregants see these needs every day and many say the needs are too many to mention.

Pastors seemed mostly overwhelmed by the needs of their parishioners for they do not what need might surface on a given day. As many of those who attend their church are in below to low income jobs the biggest need appears to be just the means to live each day. Some need food, others clothing, and some advice on how to handle an unruly or wayward child. Many of these people have no other place to turn with the exception of the church. This is why pastors perceive their role as to be a receptacle for all problems. Many have to console when a loved one dies, or just help someone pay their rent. They see the church as an organization that just can't step away and while other agencies and entities say no the church is the only organization that must find a way to say yes.

Pastors see the black church as a place of worship and praise, a place of education and training and a house of counseling and consoling. The proximity to the people in the community make it an easy commute for most who live in the area and therefore the easiest place to go for



all needs. Many of the pastors speak of the role of the church as one that is supposed to uplift and bring encouragement to the members, one of the pastors saying encouragement is the “primary role of the church.” These pastors see crime or its derivatives in a very up close and personal way and say that their church as a beacon or something else that lights up the way to a better life.

The three women saw the role of the church as it relates to community service in the way it has and can assist families. There were some differences as to the specific focus; however, they believed that for the church to have a maximum impact it must have stronger families. One of the female pastors says she is all about the teens and how they are matriculating through life. She believes that is where the focus should be, with the hope of saving the next generation. Pastor Ritner sees argues that her role includes a counseling component for women. She has a lot of single mothers in her church and trumpets the importance of having a female pastoral ear to listen to issues important to women.

## **CHAPTER TEN: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The black church is an organization of churches with primarily black parishioners. The history of the black church is rich and its roots can be traced back as far as Africa where there was already a sense of a deity firmly ensconced within local culture. When slavery became legal practice in America, blacks rallied around a sense of a God whom they believed would bring relief to the inhumanity they were forced to endure. At the apex and the end of slavery blacks were able to worship individually and as a group forming their own churches and also schools of both secular and religious learning. During the Civil Rights Movement the black church was a monumental force in the passing legislation that would slowly bring about laws to end segregation and segregation type policies.

Most researchers agree that the black church was accidental in its start, powerful but complex in its development, and do not question that it was the most influential institution in black American life. Studies surrounding the black church reveal that it has a profound effect on the attitudes and behaviors of black people. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) view it as one of the most vital institutions in the African American community, and that black pastors are still the most influential individuals within the black church. They are revered by congregants and in many cases by the general public. Sullivan (1969) argues that every significant movement of the black church had a nexus to the black pastor. Many of the pastors interviewed spoke of the need the parishioner and community person had for the church. The church has a long history of being the place where black people came when they needed advice, assistance, and spiritual

encouragement. Even black people who were not necessarily spiritual people came to the church and the pastor for leadership and purpose. The black church, particularly the black pastor provided leadership and inspiration to blacks who sorely needed it, and their views permeated every facet of black life during the movement.

The black pastor had no equal in society. Even though they were regular men, they carried the respect and honor of black people. Du Bois (1903) argued the black pastor was the ultimate leader in the black community. They had to contend with what was painful and unfair all around them while maintaining a sense of positivity and encouragement in both the church and the community. Few black pastors did this better than Martin Luther King that many regard as the leader of the Civil Rights Movement. Lincoln (1974) posits that the Martin Luther King/David Abernathy bus boycott of 1959 was the most significant social movement in American race relations. This was a movement organized and led by black pastors.

Pastors during the Civil Rights Movement used their influence within the church to leverage the confidence of a frightened group of people to make the boycott and a social movement a success. King actually said there was the possibility that the “Negro church would become Gods instrument for the actualization of a higher human and ethical idea (Baldwin 2010 p 188)”. These men used this religious institution to further the social cause. This is the kind of influence the black pastor had regarding the black church. It is against this backdrop of influence, power and social need that I argue the black pastor was the ideal person to interview regarding the impact and influence of the black church today. Using qualitative methods I interviewed 20 black pastors to gain their perspective on the state of the black church. The 20

questions I asked them contained some demographic questions and several others under the topics, role of the church, politics, education and community service. All of the pastors led a black church in the Central Florida area.

### **Key Findings**

One of the most important questions asked of these pastors was a yes or no question, “Is the black church still a refuge for African Americans, and does it continue to supply social support and leadership to the black community?” 14 of the 20 pastors answered yes to this question while six answered no. All three of the female pastors answered yes. They argue that the church is still very much interested in the very important role the church plays in the community. The 14 pastors that answered yes were not very enthusiastic. They have many reasons for this lack of enthusiasm. Many spoke of leadership as the main reason for their apprehension. They look to the pastoral leaders of the past, King, Abernathy, Shuttlesworth, and say that this type of leadership is currently hard to find. They argue that many pastors should perhaps not be pastors because many are looking out for themselves, perhaps not financially all of the time, but some want to make a name for themselves or to promote a personal agenda and do not really have the advancement of the people as their first consideration. Many argue that the pastors have become politicians and have a “look at me” attitude that hinders the forward movement of the church. Other pastors that are fewer in number have tepid enthusiasm for the church’s ability to move forward due to what they see as a lack of parishioner involvement and interest. These pastors argue that black parishioners have done better financially and have no

real need for the church and in many cases distance themselves from the very neighborhoods, often poverty laden, that they know intimately. These pastors say that these congregants have turned fully inward and left those in the inner city to figure it out for themselves. They argue that church goers of old would truly look after each other and help with job searches, education, and more. Again, these 14 pastors say yes the church is still relevant, and that it can be helpful especially in situations which call for the church to activate its members, but these two issues, a lack of leadership and congregant apathy are retarding its forward movement. However six pastors emphatically say no, and primarily for the same reasons the 14 are not enthusiastic. They see a lack of leadership and member apathy as the main reason the black church is no longer a relevant social institution.

The Civil Rights Movement was an important time for blacks in America. 18 of the 20 pastors say that the black church has changed since the Civil Rights Movement. Almost all saying the change has not been positive, which some say is not necessarily a bad thing. For those pastors who say the church has changed since the Civil rights Movement and has had a negative effect, they believe that has a lot to do with what was discussed previously, pastoral leadership. The black pastor of the past they saw as a strong leader who had very little tolerance for those not fully into the work of improving the lives of others. These pastors hold themselves and fellow clergy responsible. One argued that pastors during the Civil Rights Movement were able to “explain the moral aspect of people not having their equal rights.” They argue that the change has based upon nothing more than choices, that black pastors and many black parishioners have made a conscious decision to do their own thing and focus on themselves. Money appears to be the main reason why these pastors say the church has changed since the

Civil Rights Movement. They argue that both members and pastors and many in the community have a focus on personal success and that notion is at odds with the theme of the Civil Rights Movement. They argue, in a positive way that many church members have made a better life for themselves and no longer need the assistance the church once had to offer. However some say that the focus inward fostered an “everyman for themselves” mentality and those who needed assistance to rely upon. Some blamed the rise of the megachurch or at least the megachurch mentality as a reason for the lack of effectiveness of the black church. A megachurch is a church is a church without denominational affiliation with a membership of over 2,000. Many say the focus of these churches is financial independence, a popular topic but one that does not serve the needs of all. One of the female pastors argues the focus of the church has not changed and never needs to. As long as the church has a focus on families she believes that the other needs will take care of themselves. All pastors argue that the needs of the people in the neighborhoods where most churches are located are very real and magnify the need for the black church.

When asked about the black church and its role in education, these pastors believed it was badly needed but the focus could not just be on personal gain. Many of the pastors argued that this is one area in which the church should counsel its young people on strongly. They say that those who are moving through the educational ranks need to make sure they focus not just on education that helps the student move forward socially but on education that is holistic, or that focuses on enriching the lives of all around them. Few suggested for the notion of getting education for education sake, but said that the role of the church as it relates to education should be to encourage students to gain knowledge that both uplifts the individual and the community that they should serve. Many of the pastors saw the need to get their church to be individually

involved in the educational process. Many have afterschool programs that they use to assist school aged members of children or community children in their academics. Some even have tutoring services while the church service is going on. Some have no specific focus on education but did believe that their church should play the role of chief motivator regarding education.

One of the questions I asked these pastors is what should be the role of the church as it relates to community service? The responses regarding this question were varied; however, one theme seemed to appear frequently, this is something that each pastor must figure out. Some say the role should be to just encourage their members and communities and let them know that there is a better life out there, almost a hands off approach. Others see their role as fully hands on. Many go into the community and see the role of the church as it relates to community service as one that communicates directly to the community by having programs about health, finances, education and scholarships. However the majority of these pastors argued that they had to get out into the community, determine what the needs are and work hard to fill those needs. The needs of one church could be vastly different that another therefore it behooves a pastors to get out into the community and spend time to make that determination. But if all else failed many suggested if they could just help members and those in the community find a sense of belonging that is a good start. Many see the poverty and cyclical issues of crime and unemployment all around and say that people can tend to feel hopeless and helpless. Therefore, if they can just help them feel accepted and loved that may be the best they can do.

Ultimately these pastors view the black church as an entity that can have a major impact in the black community; however, they believe it starts with their own professional, pastoral leadership. In other words that impact starts and stops with the pastors themselves.

### **Future Research Directions/Contributions of this Literature**

There were many themes discussed in this literature which were compelling and surprising. There were many others that were not addressed fully, the discussion on politics, and the perception of the church and their work in communities outside of the United States in places such as Haiti. The responses to these questions were interesting and enlightening and deserve additional consideration and analysis.

Also currently there is major discussion regarding law enforcement and excessive uses of force in the black community. With cases in the recent past such as Travon Martin, who was shot and killed by a neighborhood watchman, and Michael Brown and Freddie Gray, who were killed by white law enforcement officials; the research regarding these pastors' perceptions would be enlightening on this topic.

W.E.B. Du Bois, Franklin Frazier, C. Eric Lincoln, Lawrence Mamiya and others who studied the black church, all emphasize how important it has been to the black community, to race relations, the political spectrum, and to families. However this research reveals a perception of the decline of this significance. Although researcher Eddie Glaude wrote the black church is



dead, this analysis suggests that the black church is not dead, but perhaps aged and struggling to find significance during changing times. This current literature contributes the notion that black people do not have the need for the black church they once had and are moving forward without it. These pastors see it as a two way street, the pastors must do a better job at leading and the people must join them in making the black communities a better place.

It is my view that these pastors spoke honestly about an institution that they care very deeply about, because within that institution are the people they serve. These men and women have watched the black church evolve, some through the Civil Rights Movement, and do not like what they see. They are not happy with their colleagues and want them to do better. They are not always happy with their members and want them to be more engaged. It is interesting that only one or two of these pastors saw improvements that they needed make; they mainly discussed the shortcomings of other pastors. Lincoln (1974) in particular emphasizes the importance of the role of the pastor; this research reveals that he could not have been more correct. These pastors' observations echo his sentiments which could be described with this phrase, "as the black pastor goes, so goes the black church."

I believe that these perceptions are driven by events that have happened over time, and that their perceptions mean that black church is still a viable institution that still does have clout, but just not as much it once did. They would argue that difference is very noticeable, at least to them. As leaders of the black church, they like any other leaders of any other organizations want to see the black church as important and doing the task it has been created to do. These professional religious leaders don't like what they see but clearly believe that the church can do

better and does do better when a real need arises for the church to demonstrate its influence.

However as far as on a day to day basis, they want to see more Martin Luther King like effort from pastors, and believe that is what black people who have come so far fully deserve.

## **APPENDIX A – IRB APPROVAL**



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

## Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: UCF Institutional Review Board #1  
FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: Jeffrey A. Williamson

Date: November 05, 2014

Dear Researcher:

On 11/05/2014, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination  
Project Title: CENTRAL FLORIDA BLACK PASTORS' PERCEPTIONS OF  
THE IMPACT OF THE BLACK CHURCH IN THE BLACK  
COMMUNITY  
Investigator: Jeffrey A. Williamson  
IRB Number: SBE-14-10709  
Funding Agency:  
Grant Title:  
Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the [Investigator Manual](#).

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kanille Chay".

IRB Coordinator

## **APPENDIX B – EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH**



## **EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH**

Title of Project: Central Florida Black Pastors' Perceptions of the Impact of the Black Church in the Black Community.

Principal Investigator: Jeffrey Williamson

Other Investigators: There are no other investigators

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. David Gay

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Whether you take part is up to you.

- The purpose of this research is to determine what black pastors perceive as the role of the church in the black community
- I will ask 20 Central Florida pastors their perceptions of the Black church in five general areas – The role of the church, politics, education, community service, and the characteristics of their church. I will meet each participant at a mutually agreed upon location and record the interview on a mini-recorder and have them professionally transcribed. I will then look for themes within the comments of these ministers.
- Each interview should take approximately 1 hour; I plan to interview all 20 pastors within a 60 day time frame.
- Pastors will be asked to verbally acknowledge the fact that they are aware that they are part of a research project and that their interview transcript will be kept confidential.

You must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study.

**Study contact for questions about the study or to report a problem:** If you have questions, concerns, or complaints contact Jeff Williamson, Doctoral Sociology Student, College of Sciences, Sociology Department 407 823-3744. Dr. David Gay, Dissertation Committee Chairman, Department Vice Chair 407 823-2244 or by email, [David.gay@ucf.edu](mailto:David.gay@ucf.edu)

**IRB contact about your rights in the study or to report a complaint:** Research at the University of Central Florida involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (UCF IRB). This research has been reviewed and approved by the IRB. For information about the rights of people who take part in research, please contact: Institutional Review Board, University of Central Florida, Office of Research & Commercialization, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826-3246 or by telephone at (407) 823-2901.

## **APPENDIX C - INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### Role of the Church

- 1) What role do you think your church serves in the community?
- 2) Do you think this is typical of black churches or do you think yours is different from most?
- 3) Do you think the role of the Black Church has changed over time?
- 4) What about since the Civil Rights Era?

### Politics

- 5) Is your church politically active in the community?
- 6) Is your church active in getting people to the polls during election season?

### Education

- 7) What educational programs do you have for children?
- 8) What educational programs do you have for adults?
- 9) What should be the role of the church as it relates to education?

### Community Service

- 10) What role does your church play locally as it relates to local issues such as homelessness?
- 11) What role does your church play locally as it relates to non-local issues such as the crisis in Haiti?
- 12) What role should the church serve in community service?
- 13) Yes or no question: Is the Black Church still a refuge for African Americans, and does it continue to supply social support and leadership to the black community?

### Characteristics of the Church



- 14) What is the approximate size of your congregation?
- 15) Are you the only Pastor of this church? If not what is your role?
- 16) What proportion of your church is black?
- 17) What is your age?

## **APPENDIX D – ANNOUNCEMENT OF DEFENSE**

Announcing the Final Examination of Jeffrey A. Williamson for the degree of Doctor of Sociology

Date: Wednesday October 28, 2015 at 11:00 a.m.

Time: 11:00 a.m.

Room: 406I

Dissertation title: Can I Get an Amen? Central Florida Black Pastors' Perceptions of the Impact of the Black Church in the Black Community.

This study examines the impact of the black church in the black community, through the eyes of black pastors who lead churches in Central Florida. This study examines their perception on three basic topics, the role of the church, education, and community service. This study goes beyond a historical view of the black church, it also examines themes that are current and what these pastors forecast regarding the future of the black church. The data show that these pastors are unhappy with the state of the black church and blame leadership and member apathy as primary reasons for their lack of confidence in what many consider to be a great institution. These pastors believe that there is hope for the black church, but it will take leadership with a different mindset to move the black church forward.

Outline of Studies:

Major: Sociology

Area: Social Inequalities

Educational Career:

B.S., 1985, Oakwood College

M.A., 1996, New York University

Committee in Charge:

Dr. David Gay

Dr. Shannon Carter

Dr. Jay Corzine

Dr. Ty Matejowsky

Approved for distribution by David Gay, Committee Chair, on October 9, 2015.

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