

Remember Who You Are! How Clergy and Christian Leaders Can Positively Affect the
Self-Image of Black, Christian, Gen Z Women

by

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Duke Divinity School
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Date: April 23, 2024

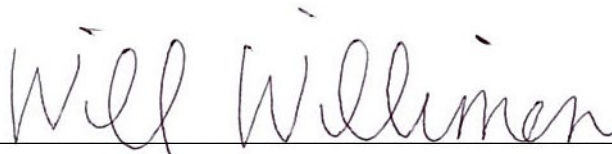
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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry in the Duke Divinity School of Duke University
2024

ABSTRACT

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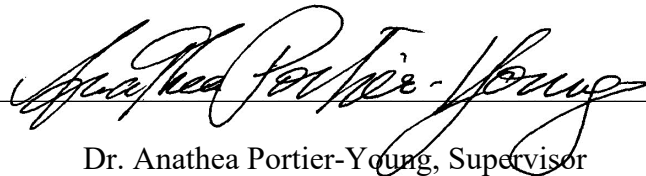
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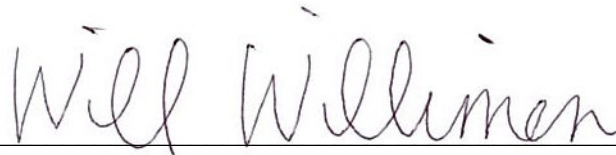
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Abstract

This project explores the ways in which clergy and Christian leaders can positively affect the continued development of the self-image of Black, Christian, Gen Z women. For those who are privileged to hold a space of influence with this demographic, experience among those in collegiate ministry shows that there is an abundance of curiosity and doubt, tenderness and fragility related to their self-image. These circumstances provide the opportunity for building up the self-image of these young adults, God's beloved.

The thesis first defines "self-image" using psychology, sociology, and theology as a foundation. Next, using a methodology that is womanist in nature, this project allows Black, Christian, Gen Z women to speak for themselves. The project explores via in-depth interviews with ten Black, Christian, Gen Z women how their self-image has developed over time, specifically in regard to their encounters with Christian organizations and clergy and Christian leaders.

Finally, this project asks these young women to recommend actions Christian clergy and other Christian leaders can take to positively affect the self-image of women like themselves. What results are recommendations that will benefit not only Black, Christian, Gen Z women, but also will benefit others far beyond this limited demographic. A project that was implicitly womanist yields explicitly womanist results.

Dedication

To EVERY Black woman, Sis, please listen carefully,

To every woman, please hear these words,

YOU are God's beloved,

YOU are enough.

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My “best friends forever” have been with me from various points of time in my life and their love and support did not falter through this latest endeavor. Thank you, Shundra, for the audio books and for being a mock interviewee. Thank you, Linda, for all the engaging ideas and relentless enthusiasm. Thank you, Ava, for being a PhD role model and checking in on my progress. Thank you, Gayle, for being a “study buddy” and the week to week, semester to semester accountability!

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Finally, to the amazing Black, Christian, Gen Z women who shared their stories and their hearts with me: thank you. Your voices are important. Your voices are powerful. Your voices are necessary.

To God be the glory.

1. Introduction

I did not choose my thesis topic, it chose me. Let me explain. I entered the world of campus ministry with great enthusiasm. Not only did I *finally* feel that I was headed in the right direction in terms of a place where my gifts for ministry might ideally be suited, but to have the opportunity to do so on the campus of North Carolina Central University (NCCU) was super exciting. It would be my first experience at a Historically Black College and University. Little did I know that six weeks after arriving on campus it would be shut down due to the COVID 19 pandemic and I would have to “pivot” when I really had no foundation to pivot from!

By the grace of God, eventually Presbyterian Campus Ministry @NCCU was happening in full swing via video conferencing technology. I could not have been more grateful. During one of the Bible study sessions, I was absolutely gripped by the confession of one young woman experiencing symptoms of depression and feelings of doubt about herself because she literally could not “do” the things that she felt she “should” be doing. She was a creative, artsy young woman but was unable to engage in any of the activities that usually gave her and others much happiness. This made her feel even worse. I was thankful that she had a safe place to discuss how she was feeling. I don’t remember how I responded or how any of the other participants responded but I do know we listened with empathy and offered words of support and encouragement. The words of this young woman echoed in my mind for weeks after the Bible study session. Eventually, I concluded that the most significant part of our discussion included the young woman seeing herself as someone who was supposed to be *doing* things all the

time as opposed to prioritizing who she is as a human *being* and what her needs were in that season of time in her life. On that video call we reiterated the fact that “God created human beings, not human doings,” and most importantly, that “God created human beings in God’s own image.” I began to wonder, how does she, especially a Black, Christian, Generation Z woman see herself in God’s image? The beginning of a thesis was born.

Definition of Terms

I designed this project’s target demographic around my encounter with this Black, Christian, Generation Z (Gen Z) woman. I have deliberately chosen to use the term Black as opposed to African American. Why? Primarily because it is the term that “feels right” to me. It feels inclusive in many ways: socially, culturally, economically, ethnically, educationally, and so forth. I also have made the choice to capitalize the term Black unless I am quoting a source that has not. In addition to identifying as Black, the target demographic is Christian. When recruiting interview participants, they were allowed to self-identify as Christian. Therefore, the criteria used to make the religious identification was up to them – with no expectations of what “being Christian” meant attached to their participation.

Members of Gen Z are defined as those human beings born from 1997 to 2012.¹ These birth years for Gen Z appear to be generally accepted within a year or two for most researchers. Gen Z is considered the first generation where technology has allowed them,

¹ Michael Dimock, “Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins,” Pew Research Center, January 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>.

from about age ten, to access content and be accessible to others twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week via technology like television, the internet, and smartphones.² While Millennials, the generation prior to Gen Z, are known for diversity, Gen Z is even more diverse than this previous generation.

Opportunities with Gen Z

The American Psychological Association (APA) conducted a survey specifically evaluating sources of stress in Gen Z young adults. In addition to stress being caused by events in the news (mass shootings, etc.), Gen Z reported feeling stress for myriad reasons: money, work, personal debt, housing stability, and food insecurity.³ Notably, the survey claimed 27% of Gen Z reported fair or poor mental health. The researchers propose that this significant admission about the participants' mental health could be attributed to Gen Z's willingness and openness to confronting mental health issues.⁴ Anecdotal evidence from my experience in campus ministry and college chaplaincy support the APA survey results particularly regarding Black, Christian, Gen Z women. Members of this demographic I speak to in my capacities as campus minister and college chaplain routinely verbalize symptoms of anxiety and depression. In addition, they express self-doubt on a routine basis. Many of the young women I currently encounter in ministry openly talk about being active in therapy and/or seeking professional help and some disclose an actual diagnosis. Upon hearing the stories and witnessing the struggles

² Dimock, "Defining Generations."

³ Sophie Bethune, "Gen Z More Likely to Report Mental Health Concerns," *Monitor on Psychology* 50, no. 1 (January 1, 2019) https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/01/Gen_Z.

⁴ Bethune, "Mental Health Concerns."

of these young women, questions were raised regarding how Christian leaders can have a positive influence on these young women especially using shared faith as a launching pad.

Encouraging news for clergy and Christian leaders comes from researchers Josh Packard, Megan Bissell, Amanda Hernandez, Adrianna Smell, and Sean Zimny at the Springtide Research Institute. In their study of thousands of Gen Z young adults, relational authority is cited as an important tool for all kinds of adult allies to influence the lives of these young people. The study specifically identifies listening, transparency, integrity, care, and expertise as the five dimensions of relational authority which help establish influence with Gen Z.⁵ Furthermore, based on a breakdown by ethnicity including African Americans, between 78 and 92 percent of Gen Z young adults in the study indicate that they extend trust to others based on the five dimensions of relational authority from the study.⁶ Packard et al. assert, “For religious leaders, advocates, ministers, educators, and anyone else caring for the inner and outer lives of young people, the ways trust is extended means young people need to feel cared for before they can be receptive to the influence of others in their lives.”⁷ This study indicates that there is a way for clergy and Christian leaders to make a positive impact on Gen Z. This thesis project aims to uncover specifically how clergy and Christian leaders can positively shape the self-image of Black, Christian, Gen Z women.

⁵ Josh Packard, Megan Bissell, Amanda Hernandez, Adrianna Smell, and Sean Zimny, *The State of Religion & Young People 2020: Relational Authority* (Springtide Research Institute, 2021), 50.

⁶ Packard et al., *Relational Authority*, 93.

⁷ Packard et al., *Relational Authority*, 11.

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines self-image, in part, as “one’s view or concept of oneself. Self-image is a crucial aspect of an individual’s personality that can determine the success of relationships and a sense of general well-being.”⁸ The APA definition goes on to report: a negative self-image can lead to destructive behavior – abuse, neglect, etc. of self or others.⁹ By correlation, a positive self-image can be a conduit of success in various aspects of one’s life – personal, professional, etc.¹⁰

Self-image is generally regarded as something that develops over time, and guides moment-to-moment interactions.¹¹ College-aged Gen Z young adults are still developing in major ways, including psychologically. Therefore, individuals who are privileged to hold a position of influence during this stage of their lives can benefit these young adults in the present moment and for the future.

Self-image is tied to identity, which is more stable over time.¹² Christian theology roots the identity of humankind in the triune God. Christian leaders can be instructive regarding Christian identity and embody this identity (even with all our human imperfections). Thus, Christian leaders with trusted relationships among Gen Z young adults, can influence a positive self-image among them. The thesis research question

⁸APA Dictionary of Psychology, s.v. “self-image,” April 19, 2018, <https://dictionary.apa.org/self-image>.

⁹ APA Dictionary of Psychology, s.v. “self-image.”

¹⁰ APA Dictionary of Psychology, s.v. “self-image.”

¹¹ Teemu Kautonen, Isabella Hatak, Ewald Kibler, and Thomas Wainwright, “Emergence of Entrepreneurial Behaviour: The Role of Age-Based Self-Image,” *Journal of Economic Psychology* 50 (October 1, 2015): 41–51, here 43–44, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2015.07.004>.

¹² Relation to identity: David Matthew Doyle and Lisa Molix, “How Does Stigma Spoil Relationships? Evidence that Perceived Discrimination Harms Romantic Relationship Quality Through Impaired Self-Image,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 44, no. 9 (2014), 600–610, here 601–602; Stability over time: Kautonen et al., “Age-Based Self-Image,” 44.

would be of practical use in a plethora of ecclesial settings and beyond; the recommendations will aid the work and witness of those who walk the journey of faith with this constituency and beyond. The aim of the thesis is to discover guidance for clergy and Christian leaders regarding ways to foster, edify, and support young Black women in a healthy, faithful sense of their self-image.

Methodology

The methodology used in this thesis project was twofold. First, the qualitative research consists of in-depth interviews with ten participants that were recruited from the professional and social networks of the researcher. These interviews yielded valuable insights regarding the development of the participants' self-image and informed candid recommendations for clergy and Christian leaders from the participants' perspective on how these leaders can have a positive effect on the young women. It should be noted that Christian leaders could be anyone from parking lot attendants to greeters, ushers to Sunday school teachers, choir directors to youth group leaders. Christian leaders is a broad category, and thus, the results of this thesis project are widely applicable for those willing to listen.

In addition, as the researcher, I employed a portion of womanist methodology within the design and implementation of the thesis project. Stephanie Y. Mitchem generally defines this methodology as "centering black women's experience; social analysis of the black community's condition; exploring the authentic shape of African

American religious life; deconstruction of all oppressions that stunt human growth.”¹³

Mitchem also states, “At its heart, womanist methodology remains resistance oriented. It serves as a way to resist being excluded from research, to resist dehumanizing definitions of black people, and to resist invisibility.”¹⁴ Womanist theology takes seriously the experiences of Black women, and this thesis project certainly did so overwhelmingly. Womanist theology is also known to put those voices in conversation with theological scholarship as is done in Chapter 4 (*Imago Dei*). This dialogue creates an outlet for all to learn and simultaneously provides an opportunity to add the wisdom of other Black women Chapter 5 (Womanist Theology) alongside these experiences. The result is an environment rich with possibility for not just surviving, but thriving as the beloved children of God we are intended to be.

The Journey Ahead

Chapter 2 establishes the definition of self-image that drives this thesis project. Using information from the fields of psychology, sociology and theology, a working definition is constructed. In addition, the three major aspects of self-image that a person uses to assess themselves as their self-image develops are discussed in terms of their contribution to the development of self-image. These aspects — self-esteem, self-worth, and body image — are so influential that they are sometimes used interchangeably with the term self-image.

¹³ Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 50, <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1761269&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹⁴ Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology*, 52.

Chapter 3 presents the voices of the Black, Christian, Gen Z women who volunteered their time during in-depth interviews via video conference to share about their self-image. The questions began with a general synopsis of where they currently stand in terms of their self-image but then looked back at how their self-image developed over time especially in terms of faith and church related people and events. The interview participants also looked forward regarding what activities and topics might be beneficial in the future.

Chapter 4 is an exploration of *imago Dei* in terms of its historical interpretation for women. This historical portion may explain to young women why some Christian ideas and traditions exist in current day organizations. It also includes more recent feminist and womanist interpretation as a means of edifying and supporting Black, Christian, Gen Z women in their identity, which is tied to self-image. The knowledge presented there is meant as a means of freeing them from the limitations of those previous oppressive interpretations as they continue to grow and develop their sense of self.

Chapter 5 explores womanist theology and its relevance to Black, Christian, Gen Z women. A brief primer on the origins of womanism and womanist theology is presented, including the common starting point for many, the story of Hagar in the Bible. In addition, the ways in which the interview participants unknowingly evoke Womanism in their attitudes and opinions are emphasized as entry points for connecting them to this powerful liberation theology.

In Chapter 6, the voices of the ten Black, Christian, Gen Z participants return in full force giving their recommendations to clergy and Christian leaders. Energized by the experiences they have been reminded of, both positive and negative, and curious about the topics they were asked about, the young women state in no uncertain terms what they believe clergy and Christian leaders should know. What a gift it is to be able to hear directly from this group of God's beloved people.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us. Open our hearts and minds to what you have for each person who encounters this thesis project. Speak O God, your servants are listening. Amen.

2. Self-image: What is it? Definition, Aspects, and Contributing Factors

The idea of “self-image” is difficult to pin down. Research attempting to do so quickly reveals this fact. In literature related to the field of psychology alone, self-image is referred to as self-concept, self-attitude, self-perception, and self-appraisal among other terms. In addition, terms that reflect dimensions or aspects of self-image are many times substituted for self-image itself, including self-esteem (the most common), self-worth, and body image. Therefore, ascertaining the meaning of self-image for the thesis project was more art than science.

Definitions Of Self-Image

In his 1965 work, *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image*, Morris Rosenberg stated, “In recent years the fields of psychiatry, psychology, and sociology have all experienced an upsurge of interest in the nature of the self-image.”¹ This indicates that it has been more than sixty years, during which self-image has been a rising issue of interest regarding the maturation and development process. In addition, Rosenberg states that even though these fields each have a “distinctive tradition,” the topic of self-image is pertinent to the concerns of each.² While as the researcher, I am an ordained pastor in the PC(USA) with a theological lens which is central to my point of view, I initially consulted the fields of psychology/behavioral health and sociology along with various scholarly reviewed articles related to the subject of self-image to assist in determining an

¹ Morris Rosenberg, *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), 3.

² Rosenberg, *Adolescent Self-Image*, 3.

appropriate definition of self-image for the thesis project. A sampling of these definitions are as follows.

The American Psychological Association defines self-image as

“one’s view or concept of oneself. Self-image is a crucial aspect of an individual’s personality that can determine the success of relationships and a sense of general well-being. A negative self-image is often a cause of dysfunctions and of self-abusive, self-defeating, or self-destructive behavior.”³

Another, briefer definition of self-image is offered by John Scott, who regards “self-images” as “transient concepts of self that change across situations.”⁴ This definition is rooted in the definition of self. However, for Scott, the self is not one thing only. His understanding of the self as consisting of two parts derives from the work of George Mead.⁵ Part one is the “I” which points to the inner self and is more creative and subjective.⁶ Part two is the “Me” which does not look inward but instead is connected to the outside world. “Me” involves how an individual sees themselves through the eyes of others.⁷

Updates to Mead’s two-part understanding of the self includes the work of Morris Rosenberg, who understands the content of self-image or self-concept to include ‘social identities’ and ‘dispositions.’⁸ Social identities might be groups to which the person belongs such as being Black or female. Dispositions are ways or inclinations to which the

³ APA Dictionary of Psychology, s.v. “self-image.”

⁴ John Scott, A Dictionary of Sociology, s.v. “self,” 2015, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199683581.001.0001/acref-9780199683581-e-2049>.

⁵ George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).

⁶ Scott, “self,” summarizing approach of Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*.

⁷ Scott, “self,” summarizing approach Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*.

⁸ Scott, “self,” summarizing approach of Morris Rosenberg, *Conceiving the Self* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

person has a likelihood to respond — “Asian male” being one example — because the person sees themselves possessing these dispositions.⁹ Rosenberg shows that the borders of self-image or self-concept extend to areas of shame or pride in various aspects of one’s life which may or may not be within one’s control.¹⁰ In the case of Black, Christian, Gen Z women it will be apparent that their social identities have been crucial to the arc of the development of their self-image over time.

Tara McMullen provides yet another perspective from this field of study with respect to the definition and description of self-image. “Self-image is how an individual thinks they should be (English and English, 1958). An individual’s self-image is comprised of many attitudes, opinions, and ideals. Self-image develops at a young age and is a process which develops throughout the lifespan.”¹¹ McMullen acknowledges the multiple names used to refer to self-image: “self-image is conceptually a difficult term to define due to the large number of varied terms using ‘self’ as a phrase to define some sort of behavior (Burns, 1980).”¹² This reference entry ultimately states that self-image describes how a self-aware person views themselves which in turn further solidifies their self-concept.¹³ McMullen’s self-image description helps to show the intersectionality of the terms encountered when examining self-image.

⁹ Scott, “self,” summarizing approach of Morris Rosenberg, *Conceiving the Self* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

¹⁰ Scott, “self,” summarizing approach of Morris Rosenberg, *Conceiving the Self* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

¹¹ Tara McMullen, “Self-Image,” in *Encyclopedia of Behavioral Medicine*, ed. Marc D. Gellman and J. Rick Turner, (New York, NY: Springer, 2013), 1744-45, Accessed via Springer Link, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-1005-9_1499, drawing on Horace B. English and Ava C. English, *A Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychology and Psychoanalytic Terms* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1958).

¹² McMullen, “Self-image,” drawing on RB Burns, *Psychology for the Health Professions* (MTP Press, International Medical Publishers with Hastings Hilton Publishers, 1980).

¹³ McMullen, “Self-image.”

To gain a better understanding of the term self-image, Joseph A. Bailey considers two definitions of “self-image” and, subsequently, looks at the etymology of the word “image.”¹⁴ The first definition of “self-image” he considers is the “total subjective perception of oneself, including an image of one’s body and impressions of one’s personality, capabilities, and so on (another term of self-concept).”¹⁵ The second definition Bailey considers is, “one’s mental picture, one’s physical appearance, and the integration of one’s experiences, desires, and feelings.”¹⁶

Bailey uses the etymology of the word “image” to help narrow down the most accurate definition of “self-image.” In its original 13th century English denotative meaning the word “*image*” probably comes from the same source as “*imitate*” (“to make a copy of”). It was “defined both as a ‘likeness of something’ and ‘to picture to oneself.’”¹⁷ “The 16th century definition of ‘*picture*’ included a ‘*visualized conception*’ and a figurative ‘*graphical description*.’ All of these parts shaped a definition of ‘*self-image*’ as a rough pictorial representation of measurable things.”¹⁸

Ultimately, Bailey concludes, “self-image pertains to (measurable) concretes about what one does (e.g., achieving work products, like sports records), measurable aspects of how one appears (e.g., one’s body proportions) and material things one has.”¹⁹

¹⁴ Joseph A. Bailey II, "Self-Image, Self-Concept, and Self-Identity Revisited," *Journal of the National Medical Association* 95, no. 5 (May 2003): 383–6, <https://login.proxy.lib.duke.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/self-image-concept-identity-revisited/docview/214064963/se-2>.

¹⁵ Bailey, “Self-Image, Self-Concept” 383.

¹⁶ Bailey, "Self-Image, Self-Concept," 383.

¹⁷ Bailey, "Self-Image, Self-Concept," 383.

¹⁸ Bailey, "Self-Image, Self-Concept," 383.

¹⁹ Bailey, "Self-Image, Self-Concept," 385.

Bailey appears to use a portion of the three previous parts (two from the definitions of image and one from his 16th century etymology of image that comes from the word picture) to arrive at his final definition which he sees as the practical application of the previous definitions. Bailey's definition connects to the instigating event that piqued my interest in this topic because the young woman in the Bible study group was dismayed regarding what she could not "do" or achieve in her time of feeling symptoms of depression. This ability to "do" or achieve was closely tied to her self-image. In addition, Bailey's definition foretells something that will be prevalent in many of the in-depth interviews, the prevalence of issues around body image for Black, Christian, Gen Z women, a measurable aspect of their self-image.

Aspects of Self-Image

Individuals internally assess themselves both positively and negatively. Three aspects of self-image contribute to this assessment: body image, self-esteem, and self-worth. These three aspects of self-image are likely to provide most of the internal gauge which determines an overall positive or negative assessment each person has regarding their self-image.

BODY IMAGE

Body image is defined by the American Psychological Association as "the mental picture one forms of one's body as a whole, including its physical characteristics (body percept) and one's attitudes toward these characteristics (body concept). Also called body

identity.”²⁰ In my experience, body image is likely at the top of the list in terms of what Black women (in the USA) themselves think of and mention regarding aspects of self-image in conversation.

The standard of beauty that for decades, even centuries, has favored a body type that is Eurocentric and thin is still having an impact on female college students. A study from 2010 indicates that both Black and white female college students were displeased with their bodies and chose smaller body types as ideal.²¹ Researchers Eboni Baugh, Ron Mullis, Ann Mullis, Mary Hicks and Gary Peterson “surveyed 118 students at 2 universities, 1 traditionally white and 1 historically black.”²² Their methods included: “Correlations and multi-variate analysis of variance (MANOVA)” and “were used to investigate the relationship between race, ethnic identity, and body dissatisfaction.”²³ One of the researcher’s conclusions was that no matter the ethnic background, women who are immersed in the majority culture are more likely to buy in or adopt the attitudes of that culture.²⁴

The researchers did note one significant cultural difference among Black women. “Researchers suggest that black women reside in a culture that is more permissive of weight and, therefore, do not experience as much pressure to be thin. This environment fosters more positive attitudes about weight, allowing black women to not focus on their

²⁰ APA Dictionary of Psychology, s.v. “body image” April 19, 2018, <https://dictionary.apa.org/body-image>.

²¹ Eboni Baugh, Ron Mullis, Ann Mullis, Mary Hicks and Gary Peterson “Ethnic Identity and Body Image Among Black and White College Females,” *Journal of American College Health* 59, no. 2 (2010): 105–9, here 105, DOI:10.1080/07448481.2010.483713.

²² Baugh et al., “Ethnic Identity and Body Image,” 105.

²³ Baugh et al., “Ethnic Identity and Body Image,” 105.

²⁴ Baugh et al., “Ethnic Identity and Body Image,” 105.

weight or on comparisons between themselves and other black women.”²⁵ These cultural “protections” if you will, according to the research, cause Black women to choose a larger ideal body type, to be less affected by thin images, and assume their partners prefer high levels of body fat as acceptable and attractive.²⁶ However, cultural differences are not a cure-all. Black women, the researchers warn, “are not immune to and often exhibit body dissatisfaction, binge eating, and other symptoms of eating disorders. In fact, the gap between blacks and whites appears to be narrowing. Both groups of women report concern about their bodies and using different methods to modify their appearance.”²⁷ The ten participants in this thesis study will align with this research in certain aspects.

SELF-ESTEEM

While the concept of self-image features prominently in the fields of behavioral health/psychology and sociology, research linking concept of self to the identities that intersect in the target population of the thesis study group (Black, Christian, Gen Z women aged 18 to 22) focus primarily on self-esteem, which I treat as an aspect of self-image.

Self-esteem is defined by the American Psychological Association as the degree to which the qualities and characteristics contained in one’s self-concept are perceived to be positive. It reflects a person’s physical self-image, view of his or her accomplishments and capabilities, and values and perceived success in living up to them, as well as the ways in which others view and respond to that person. The more positive the cumulative perception of these qualities and characteristics, the higher one’s self-esteem. A reasonably high degree of self-esteem is considered

²⁵ Baugh et al., “Ethnic Identity and Body Image,” 105.

²⁶ Baugh et al., “Ethnic Identity and Body Image,” 105.

²⁷ Baugh et al., “Ethnic Identity and Body Image,” 106.

an important ingredient of mental health, whereas low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness are common depressive symptoms.²⁸

Self-esteem is also largely tied to self-worth, the next aspect of self-image to be discussed.

Self-esteem is developed across the lifespan and has influence on significant life outcomes.²⁹ Ulrich Orth and Richard W. Robins define self-esteem in terms of what it is and what it is not. They write, “Self-esteem refers to an individual’s *subjective* evaluation of his or her worth as a person (see, e.g., Donnellan, Trzesniewski, and Robins, 2011; MacDonald and Leary, 2012). Importantly, self-esteem does not necessarily reflect a person’s objective talents and abilities, or even how a person is evaluated by others. Moreover, self-esteem is commonly conceptualized as the ‘feeling that one is “good enough[.]”³⁰ The authors characterize self-esteem generally in terms of being high (or low).³¹ They identify the fluctuation of self-esteem as another characteristic, declaring that self-esteem fluctuates “in response to external contingencies, such as experiences of success and failure[.]”³² The researchers do not claim gender as an influence on self-esteem, stating “both men and women tend to show increases in self-esteem from adolescence to midlife and then declines in old age.”³³ They do see ethnic group as an

²⁸ APA Dictionary of Psychology, s.v. “self-esteem,” accessed March 4, 2020, <https://dictionary.apa.org/self-esteem>.

²⁹ Ulrich Orth and Richard W. Robins, “The Development of Self-Esteem,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 23, no. 5 (2014): 381–87, here 381, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44318803>.

³⁰ Orth and Robins, “Development of Self-Esteem,” 381, citing M.B. Donnellan, K.H. Trzesniewski, and R.W. Robins, “Self-esteem: Enduring Issues and Controversies,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Individual Differences*, ed. T. Chamorro-Premuzic, S. von Stumm, and A. Furnham, Chichester (England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 718-746, and G. MacDonald, and M. R. Leary, “Individual Differences in Self-Esteem,” in *Handbook of Self and Identity*, ed. M.R. Leary and J.P. Tangney (New York, NY: Guilford, 2012), 354-377.

³¹ Orth and Robins, “Development of Self-Esteem,” 381.

³² Orth and Robins, “Development of Self-Esteem,” 383.

³³ Orth and Robins, “Development of Self-Esteem,” 382.

influential factor, noting that “members of ethnic minorities do not show the same patterns of self-esteem change as majority-group members. For example, the trajectory of African Americans (compared with Americans of European descent) increased more sharply during adolescence and young adulthood (Erol and Orth, 2011) but then declined more rapidly during old age.”³⁴ Once again, researchers can determine a difference between African American/Black subjects and non-Black. This difference hints at cultural differences as a root influential factor, though this study does not delve into those factors. The study did however address differences in income, employment status and physical health, and even looked at personality traits. However, there are a plethora of factors, especially issues of equity and justice, that likely contribute to self-esteem.³⁵

SELF-WORTH

Self-worth is the final aspect of self-image that is commonly referred to in written and verbal dialogue. It is defined by the American Psychological Association as “an individual’s evaluation of himself or herself as a valuable, capable human being deserving of respect and consideration. Positive feelings of self-worth tend to be associated with a high degree of self-acceptance and self-esteem.”³⁶ Self-worth is referred to in terms of contingencies of self-worth—what people believe they need to do or possess in order to have value as a person. The model of seven contingencies or domains acceptable for use in a study targeted toward college students are: “others’

³⁴ Orth and Robins, “Development of Self-Esteem,” 383, citing R.Y. Erol and U. Orth, “Self-Esteem Development from Age 14 to 30 Years: A Longitudinal Study,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101 (2011): 607-619, here 607–6.

³⁵ Orth and Robins, “Development of Self-Esteem,” 382–383.

³⁶ APA Dictionary of Psychology, s.v. “self-worth,” accessed March 4, 2020, <https://dictionary.apa.org/self-worth>.

approval, appearance, defeating others in competition, academic competence, family love and support, being a virtuous or moral person, and God's love."³⁷

When it comes to college students, researchers Jennifer Crocker, Riia K. Luhtanen, M. Lynne Cooper, and Alexandra Bouvrette measured how the most important of the seven contingencies of self-worth affected how college students spent their time in their freshman year.³⁸ After all data was collected and analyzed, the contingencies of self-worth on which freshman students based their self-esteem provided a prediction of the organizations they joined their first semester of college. Self-esteem is a common term found in literature and sometimes used interchangeably with self-image. In addition, these self-esteem related contingencies of self-worth predicted how the freshmen spent their time during the first two semesters of college.³⁹ The contingencies of self-worth were literally projected through actions taken in parts of their lives where each had a variety of options, thus proving the importance of these contingencies of self-worth to these college students.

Factors That Contribute To and Affect Self-Image

Myriad factors contribute to and affect a person's self-image. The length and scope of this thesis are not sufficient to tackle the subject in its entirety. However, my research was directed toward resources that included Black/African American women, college students, or Christian/religious components due to their intersection with the

³⁷ Jennifer Crocker, Riia K. Luhtanen, M. Lynne Cooper, and Alexandra Bouvrette, "Contingencies of Self-Worth in College Students: Theory and Measurement," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85, no. 5 (2003): 894–908, here 895.

³⁸ Crocker et al., "Contingencies of Self-Worth," 894.

³⁹ Crocker et al., "Contingencies of Self-Worth," 905.

segments of the identities of the subject group of Black, Christian, Gen Z women aged 18 to 22. It should be noted that the research which follows is related to Black women, Christian women, Gen Z women or any combination of these identities and the majority of the material references self-esteem as opposed to self-image. Self-esteem is one of the major aspects of self-image.

Diane Byrd and Sonja R. Shavers utilized a mixed design of qualitative and quantitative measures to investigate the potential sources of self-esteem of sixteen African American women.⁴⁰ Based on the 1972 work of Rosenberg and Simmons, they adopted the following definition of self-esteem: “an evaluation of self-worth and the extent a person perceives himself or herself to be a worthy individual.”⁴¹ Role models, identity, reflected appraisal, and religious beliefs are a few of the contributing factors considered in more detail.

In one study, African American women that had mothers, mother-substitutes, and other role models as a reference group were more likely to have a positive self-esteem.⁴² When specifically compared, “women who used significant other mothers, aunts, or sisters as a reference group maintained higher self-esteem than women who did not use significant others as a reference group.”⁴³ Mothers, mother-substitutes, and other role models as a source of self-esteem will be particularly relevant for this study, as the statements from the interview participants will show.

⁴⁰ Diane Byrd and Sonja R. Shavers, “African American Women and Self-Esteem: The Various Sources,” *Race, Gender and Class* 20, no. 1/2 (2013): 244–265, here 244, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43496917>.

⁴¹ Byrd and Shavers, “African American Women and Self-Esteem,” 246, drawing on M. Rosenberg and R.G. Simmons, *Black and White Self-Esteem: The Urban School Child* (Washington, D.C: American Sociological Association, 1972).

⁴² Byrd and Shavers, “African American Women and Self-Esteem,” 246.

⁴³ Byrd and Shavers, “African American Women and Self-Esteem,” 246.

Byrd and Shavers further cite research that positively correlates church involvement and private devotion as essential to self-esteem. They further explain, “African American children are frequently taught that inherent worth is given by God to all individuals regardless of status (Ellis, 1993; Krause, 2004).”⁴⁴ Finally, they argue that the self-esteem of African American women can be enhanced by meaningful work outside the home, likely because of the value placed on that work.⁴⁵

Byrd and Shavers further include racial and womanist identity among sources of self-esteem for African American women, stating that the racial identity development and maturity of college students seem to have some correlation to higher self-esteem.⁴⁶

Womanist identity is particularly pertinent as a response to certain stages of development when a woman devalues both her African American and female identities and then becomes aware that race and gender affect life, which can result in lower self-esteem.⁴⁷ This particular observation ties in to the treatment of womanist theology in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

A final source of self-esteem cited by Byrd and Shavers is reflected self-appraisal, which “captures how the self is evaluated by others. Individuals judge themselves by the reaction of others to them and in their interaction with others.”⁴⁸ Some research (Wolfe, Crocker, Coon, and Luhtanen, 1998) has found that “African Americans’ self-esteem is

⁴⁴ Byrd and Shavers, “African American Women and Self-Esteem,” 246, drawing on C.G. Ellis, “Religious Involvement and Self-Perception Among Black Americans,” *Social Forces* 71 (1993): 1027–1055. and N. Krause, “Assessing the Relationships Among Prayer Expectancies, Race, and Self-Esteem in Late Life,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 3 (2004): 395–408.

⁴⁵ Byrd and Shavers, “African American Women and Self-Esteem,” 247.

⁴⁶ Byrd and Shavers, “African American Women and Self-Esteem,” 248.

⁴⁷ Byrd and Shavers, “African American Women and Self-Esteem,” 248.

⁴⁸ Byrd and Shavers, “African American Women and Self-Esteem,” 249.

not contingent on others, including significant others or members of their own race and thus they are not likely to internalize the reflected appraisal of others.”⁴⁹ In addition, this research has shown that due to attributing negative attitudes of others to prejudice, African Americans’ self-esteem does not depend on others; a psychological adaptation to American society where they frequently encounter “discrimination, racism, and stigmatization.”⁵⁰ However, this stance is not categorical. Other research, like that by Nyia A. Ford, shows that Black Americans do indeed hold in regard and “internalize what others in their group think about each other because they may view the thoughts and opinions of other Black Americans about Black individuals to be more realistic,” though the sample size was limited in this particular research study.⁵¹

Byrd and Shavers’ quantitative and qualitative study yielded mixed results regarding correlations of certain factors to the self-esteem of African American women. “One major finding of this research is that the primary source of self-esteem for African American women is religious beliefs. Most participants reported that having a good relationship with God was the main basis of their adult self-esteem.”⁵² The secondary source of self-esteem in adulthood revealed by their research was family, especially mothers. However, mothers were, in fact, the primary source for childhood self-esteem

⁴⁹ Byrd and Shavers, “African American Women and Self-Esteem,” 249, citing C.T. Wolfe, J. Crocker, H. Coon, and R.K. Luhtanen, “Reflected and Deflected Appraisals: Race Differences in Basing Self-Esteem on Others’ Regard” (unpublished manuscript, 1998).

⁵⁰ Byrd and Shavers, “African American Women and Self-Esteem,” 249, drawing on Wolfe et al., “Reflected and Deflected.”

⁵¹ Nyia A. Ford, “The Reflected Appraisal Process in Black Americans,” (Senior Project, Purchase College, State University of New York, 2021), <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12648/11470>.

⁵² Byrd and Shavers, “African American Women and Self-Esteem,” 259.

among their participants. Family was followed by role models, usually older African American women like older sisters, teachers, etc.⁵³

The importance of mothers, mother-substitutes, and other role-models is confirmed by the work of Joyce E. Everett, Laverne D. Marks, and Jean F. Clarke-Mitchell which focused specifically on the role model relationship between mothers and daughters. Adult mother-daughter relationships were studied specifically to determine “the influence Black mothers have on their daughter’s development,”⁵⁴ including their self-esteem/self-worth. The definition of self-esteem is “the affective or emotional aspect of the self that is the positive and negative evaluations or orientation of oneself (Ridolfo, Chepp, and Milkie, 2013). Self-esteem encompasses feelings of personal capacity and feelings of personal worth.”⁵⁵

Prior to presenting their own research and findings, Everett et al. cite the work of Victoria L. DeFrancisco and April Chatham-Carpenter in 2000 who report that intergenerational diffusion of self-esteem occurs through the community and is centered with Black mothers. Lessons from other community members (family, friends, church and others) are also acquired, but Black mothers are most influential on the self-esteem of their daughters.⁵⁶ Everett et al. further summarize the findings of researchers Heather

⁵³ Byrd and Shavers, “African American Women and Self-Esteem,” 259.

⁵⁴ Joyce E. Everett, Laverne D. Marks, and Jean F. Clarke-Mitchell, “A Qualitative Study of the Black Mother-Daughter Relationship: Lessons Learned About Self-Esteem, Coping, and Resilience,” *Journal of Black Studies* 47, no. 4 (2016): 334–350, here 334, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43926948>.

⁵⁵ Everett, Marks, and Clarke-Mitchell, “Black Mother-Daughter Relationship,” 339, summarizing H. Ridolfo, V. Chepp, and M.A. Milkie, “Race and Girls’ Self-Evaluations: How Mothering Matters,” *Sex Roles* 68, (2013): 496–509, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-013-0259-2>.

⁵⁶ Everett, Marks, and Clarke-Mitchell, “Black Mother-Daughter Relationship,” 340, summarizing Victoria L. DeFrancisco and April Chatham-Carpenter, “Self in Community: African American Women’s Views of Self-Esteem,” *The Howard Journal of Communications* 11, no. 2 (2000): 73–92, here 77.

Ridolfo, Valerie Chepp, and Melissa A. Milkie, who suggested the following three aspects (presented here in part) of parenting by Black mothers that supported the development of positive self-esteem in their daughters: (1) quality relationship indicated by parental support and communication, (2) academic support for their daughter's education translating to a sense of self-worth, and (3) encouragement of independence which gives a sense of self-control to the daughter.⁵⁷ Quantitative results of Ridolfo, Chepp, and Milkie's study support the positive relationship between Black mothers and their daughter's self-esteem (as opposed to White mothers and daughters in the study), albeit not categorically – meaning the results did not conform 100%. The study discussion specifically summarizes the reasons for this positive relationship as shown in the study results.

Black daughters report receiving greater encouragement of independence from their mothers than do White daughters, and their mothers report holding higher academic aspirations for their daughters than do White mothers. The quality of Black mothers' relationships with their daughters, and Black mothers' "extra" encouragement of daughters' independence partially account for the race differences found in girls' problem solving ability, and to a smaller extent, self-esteem.⁵⁸

Shakiera Causey, Jonathan Livingston, and Benyetta High examine a correlation survey of African American college students, these researchers sought to "assess the impact of parental involvement, racial socialization, social support, and family structure

⁵⁷ Ridolfo, Chepp, and Milkie, "Race and Girls' Self-Evaluations," 498.

⁵⁸ Ridolfo, Chepp, and Milkie, "Race and Girls' Self-Evaluations," 505.

on self-esteem in African American college students.”⁵⁹ They defined self-esteem as “one’s affective reaction toward and feeling about oneself that is also evaluative.”⁶⁰ They further clarified that for this subject group, “when evaluating outcomes of African American children, an examination of their self-concept and image is of great import.”⁶¹ This study by Causey, Livingston, and High found a positive correlation between parental involvement and social support as excellent predictors of higher self-esteem among the study subjects.⁶²

Scott Schieman, Alex Bierman, Laura Upenieks, and Christopher G. Ellison, meanwhile, have identified belief in a God who provides divine support as a central influence in the relationship between religious involvement and self-esteem.⁶³ Because reflected self-appraisals (what others think of you) are important influences on self-esteem for some, Schieman et al. “situate the belief in divine support as a central psychosocial resource that can be beneficial for self-esteem.”⁶⁴ They also claim that data from a general social survey in 2004 reveals “two central findings: (1) divine support helps to explain a positive association between religious engagement and self-esteem; (2) divine support strengthens that association.”⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Shakiera T. Causey, Jonathan Livingston, and Benyetta High, “Family Structure, Racial Socialization, Perceived Parental Involvement, and Social Support as Predictors of Self-Esteem in African American College Students,” *Journal of Black Studies* 46, no. 7 (2015): 655–677, here 657, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24572913>.

⁶⁰ Causey et al., “Predictors of Self-Esteem,” 657.

⁶¹ Causey et al., “Predictors of Self-Esteem,” 657.

⁶² Parental involvement: Causey et al., “Predictors of Self-Esteem,” 671; Social support: Causey et al., “Predictors of Self-Esteem,” 672.

⁶³ Scott Schieman, Alex Bierman, Laura Upenieks, and Christopher G. Ellison, “Love Thy Self? How Belief in a Supportive God Shapes Self-Esteem,” *Review of Religious Research* 59, no. 3 (2017): 293–318, here 293, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26378526>.

⁶⁴ Schieman et al., “Love Thy Self?” 295.

⁶⁵ Schieman et al., “Love Thy Self?” 293.

Schieman et al. use the language of self-concept to represent self-image. Self-concept is defined as

the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings with reference to [the] self as an object" (Rosenberg 1989:34). The self-concept acts as a motivating force, structuring numerous beliefs and behaviors; moreover, there are many social-psychological influences on the self-concept (Stets and Burke 2002; Gecas 2001).⁶⁶

Schieman et al. explicitly claim self-esteem as one of the central aspects of self-image (as did many other researchers). They state, "we focus on one of the main evaluative dimensions of the self-concept: *self-esteem*."⁶⁷ Schieman et al. further define self-esteem as more "object like" meaning not only is one's self-esteem good or bad, but also quality evaluations are made — how valuable you are, how competent you are, and how superior you are.⁶⁸ Divine support may be a significant influence in this area.

Divine support is interpreted by Schieman et al. as "belief in a divine force that is personally involved in the events and outcomes of their daily life."⁶⁹ It is also an attribute of "those who subscribe to beliefs in a personally involved God."⁷⁰ Using the term "God is my co-pilot,"⁷¹ for example, indicates this type of belief in divine presence, engagement, and support. This belief is significant because research shows that persons "who believe in an active, engaged God tend to have a greater sense of significance to

⁶⁶ Schieman et al., "Love Thy Self?" 295 drawing on Rosenberg *Adolescent Self-Image*, Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, "A Sociological Approach to Self and Identity," in *Handbook of Self and Identity*, ed. Mark R. Leary and June Pride Tangney (New York: Guilford Press, 2002), 128-152, and Victor Gecas, "The Self as a Social Force," in *Extending Self-Esteem Theory and Research*, ed. Timothy J. Owens, Sheldon Stryker, and Norman Goodman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 85-100.

⁶⁷ Schieman et al., "Love Thy Self?" 295.

⁶⁸ Schieman et al., "Love Thy Self?" 295.

⁶⁹ Schieman et al., "Love Thy Self?" 296.

⁷⁰ Schieman et al., "Love Thy Self?" 296.

⁷¹ Schieman et al., "Love Thy Self?" 296.

others.”⁷² Schieman et al. also cite research that says, “belief in a loving God has also been found to be positively associated with self-esteem and self-worth (Benson and Spilka 1973; Francis et al. 2001) and was specifically found to do so amongst American college students (Phillips et al. 2004).”⁷³ The Divine, divinity, and/or divine support will be significant issues in this thesis study among participants who all identified as Christian. The participants overwhelmingly showed interest in both *imago Dei* and womanist theology as a means of bolstering their self-image in the future. The love of God and faith in God are the binding factors that hold hope for the thesis question (i.e., how can clergy and Christian leaders positively affect the self-image of Black, Christian, Gen Z women?) because the question assumes that the love of God and a foundational connection through shared Christian faith in God between Black, Christian, Gen Z women and clergy and Christian leaders are the seed of hope for the entire process and for the answers or suggestions that will result.

In the study summarized above, Schieman et al. make important claims regarding the results of their study, stating categorically, “First and foremost, we demonstrate that a sense of divine support is a robust predictor of self-esteem.”⁷⁴ They further specify that “belief in divine support is the strongest predictor of self-esteem” (as opposed to church attendance, prayer, etc.) and “having a close, supportive relationship with God is

⁷² Schieman et al., “Love Thy Self?” 296.

⁷³ Schieman et al., “Love Thy Self?” 296, citing Peter Benson and Bernard Spilka, “God Image as a Function of Self-Esteem and Locus of Control,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 12, no. 3 (1973): 297–310, here 297 and Leslie J. Francis, Harry M. Gibson, and Mandy Robbins, “God Images and Self-Worth Among Adolescents in Scotland,” *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 4 no. 2 (2001): 103 and Russell E. Phillips III, Kenneth I. Pargament, Quinten K. Lynn, and Craig D. Crossley, “Self-Directing Religious Coping: A Deistic God, Abandoning God, or No God At All?” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no 3 (2004): 409–18.

⁷⁴ Schieman et al., “Love Thy Self?” 309.

associated with elevated feelings of personal significance and self-worth.”⁷⁵ However, the real lives of the Black, Christian, Gen Z women interviewed in this thesis project will show how complicated remembering the love of God and the significance of self can be in the midst of situations, relationships, and constant messaging that speaks to the contrary. The recommendations for clergy and Christian leaders will be poised to help them be guideposts to light the way back to the knowledge of this steadfast love of God that informs and boosts their self-esteem and their self-image.

Conclusion

Research on self-image connected with a message crucial to my call to ministry in general and my current call in collegiate ministry as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (USA). As a third career pastor, I was clearer on what I was *not* called to do in ministry than what I *was* called to do during the six years I pursued my Master of Divinity and Master of Arts in Christian Education degrees in a part time seminary program. After being ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA) I served two associate pastorates, led there by breadcrumbs laid down for me to follow by the Holy Spirit. However, I never felt serving the congregational church was my true calling.

Only in the last five years of serving in collegiate ministry have I sensed a fulfillment of my true ministry calling. However, one thing I did know for sure early on, and it materialized without me even realizing it: I was called to let people, all people, know that they are God’s BELOVED in Jesus Christ. When they are up and when they

⁷⁵ Schieman et al., “Love Thy Self?” 309.

are down. When they get it right and when they get it wrong. No matter what country they live in. No matter who their parents are. Whichever and whatever condition anyone can think of – you are God’s BELOVED. Period.

Joseph A. Bailey helped explain why it was important that the terminology for this thesis project use the term “self-image” as opposed to any of the other terms (self-concept etc.) The short etymology section of Bailey’s “Self-Image, Self-Concept, and Self-Identity Revisited” connected with what I anticipated would be a fundamental premise underlying the thesis question, namely the premise that humans are made in the image of God (*imago Dei*).⁷⁶ We are, in some mysterious way, an imitation or likeness of God.⁷⁷ No wonder we, as humanity, are God’s beloved! In addition, “Love Thy Self? How Belief in a Supportive God Shapes Self-Esteem” by Schieman et al. introduced to this study the idea of a supportive divine power as a contributing factor to self-esteem, which in turn is one of the crucial factors of self-image.⁷⁸

What it means to be made in the image of God remains mysterious yet somewhat straightforward for a very brief section in scripture, namely the first three chapters of the book of Genesis. A discussion of *imago Dei* frequently leads to a discussion regarding the impact of sin, salvation, and the eschaton on the *imago Dei*. However, none of these truths negate the work and will and wonder of God’s creation of humans!

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the

⁷⁶ Bailey, “Self-Image, Self-Concept,” 383–6.

⁷⁷ Bailey, “Self-Image, Self-Concept,” 383.

⁷⁸ Schieman et al., “Love Thy Self?” 293.

earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”²⁷ So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”²⁹ God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.³⁰ And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.³¹ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. (Genesis 1:26-31 NRSVUE)

I discuss the theological significance of *imago Dei* for Black, Christian, Gen Z women in Chapter 4, including an analysis of Gen 1:26-31. I conclude the present chapter by returning to the question of definitions. The early stages of my research, including the ten ethnographic interviews I conducted, were guided by the following working definition of self-image: your overall beliefs and attitudes toward yourself, including your body, personality, capabilities, etc. and importantly, your identity.

A different definition emerged from the research itself: Self-image is the development of a self-awareness over the lifespan of one’s view of oneself as one is now, the prospect of future opportunities and achievements, and the reflection of the views of others about oneself; especially close family members/role models and God. It includes physical appearance (body image), personality, capabilities, achievements, and various facets of identity. Self-image is generally described as positive or negative. It is favorably impacted by supportive parenting (especially mothers) and religious beliefs/teaching (particularly a relational God in whose image one is made and whose love is active and steadfast).

Chapter 2 will present the ethnographic research in condensed form for each of the ten interviews of Black, Christian, Gen Z women aged 18 to 22. Their responses will be viewed through a lens of the definition, aspects, and factors of self-image. Subsequently and most importantly, clergy and Christian leaders will hear from them regarding what they can do (or stop doing) in order to affirm and support these young women in terms of their self-image. The second, more robust definition of self-image that emerged from further research into scholarly literature guides my analysis in this and subsequent chapters.

3. In-depth Interviews

The previous chapter discussed the complexity of defining self-image. Research regarding self-image and important related components was presented. Ultimately, the definition of self-image adopted for use in this thesis project was presented. This chapter will report the results of the ten in-depth interviews covering self-image-related questions with increasing scope and depth. The topics begin with a general view of the participants' self-image and how it has changed over time and then asks them to share how church involvement and Christian identity have affected their self-image. Subsequent questions revolve around their experience of having relationships of trust with clergy and other Christian leaders. Another question asked when they felt good (or bad) about who they are (self-image) in a situation related to being at church or in Christian organizations or interacting with clergy or Christian leaders.

In-depth interviews are an important research tool, initially used as far back as the 1880s but not widely embraced in the social sciences until approximately the 1980s.¹ In-depth interviews are “face-to-face encounters between the researcher and informants directed toward understanding informants’ perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words.”² They are valuable in research for gathering detailed information, adapting to the participant’s responses, and observing body language and tone. However, this research method limits the sample size, random

¹ Pamela Rutledge and Jerri Lynn Hogg, “In-Depth Interviews,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Media Psychology*, 1, Accessed via author draft 7pp. posted to Research Gate, September 9, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119011071.iemp0019>.

² Steven J. Taylor, Robert Bogdan, and Marjorie DeVault, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource* (Hoboken, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2015), 102, ProQuest Ebook Central.

sampling, and the researcher's ability to generalize based on the data collection.³ In the situation where research interests are well-defined, in-depth interviews are well-suited.⁴

Gen Z is an emerging generation and researchers are clamoring to study them at the various ages and stages of their development. However, though the pace has picked up, generally speaking, studies with Black Americans as the primary subjects are not nearly as plentiful as for white Americans. The added layer of Christianity in particular made finding data for this thesis project difficult. These reasons are the beginning of why in-depth interviews were never optional for this research project. However, the decision to include in-depth interviews as a research tool was based primarily on the researcher's experience as a Campus Minister and specifically as a Black woman. Within Gen Z, this demographic (Black women) needed to be given a voice, a platform to speak for themselves if this work was to ultimately have any credibility. A significant portion of the data must be firsthand knowledge because "in-depth interviews allow the path of inquiry to better identify and reflect audience meaning and experience; this is particularly helpful in identifying meaning and processes with specific demographic or marginalized populations."⁵ Based on the verbal and nonverbal responses of the subjects, the basis for this decision was justified. "I think the work you are doing will be very beneficial," said one participant. Another exclaimed, "Awesome topic! That's very, very exciting research. So, really cool."

³ Rutledge and Hogg, "*In-Depth Interviews*," 5.

⁴ Taylor et al., *Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 104.

⁵ Rutledge and Hogg, "*In-Depth Interviews*," 2.

In total, ten Black, Christian, Gen Z young women were interviewed. They were referred by colleagues, social networks, family, and friends. In addition to identifying as named above, the participants were between 18 and 22 years old, undergraduate students or Spring 2023 graduates, and United States residents. Prior to the interview, each participant was given the thesis title and the working definition of self-image that was used in the early stages of the thesis project. A designated but flexible interview guide was prepared for use in each interview session (See Appendix A). All interviews were conducted via Zoom and both audio and video recorded. Names of the interviewees and their identifying information have been redacted to maintain their privacy. A brief introduction to these young women follows.

Introduction of Interviewees

The ten participants were largely located by hometown or place of matriculation in the southeastern U.S., based on the network connections of the researcher. There were a couple of participants with midwestern or east coast connections. In addition, the participants were by and large unknown on a personal basis to the researcher.

Janiya is matriculating at an HBCU, majoring in history.⁶ She describes her self-image as positive. Janiya is a lifelong Christian but has not attended church on a regular

⁶ According to the U.S. Department of Education, “The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, defines an HBCU as: ‘...any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary [of Education] to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation.’ HBCUs offer all students, regardless of race, an opportunity to develop their skills and talents. These institutions train young people who go on to serve domestically and internationally in the professions as entrepreneurs and in the public and private sectors.” U.S. Department of Education, “What is an HBCU?” The White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity,

basis for most of her life. There was one brief period of consistent church attendance in middle school that she recalled with some fondness.

Harmonee is a Food Science major at a Big 10 university who describes her overall self-image as “pretty positive.” Her self-image is supported by taking great care of her body through exercise and good nutrition. Harmonee’s parents are Christian leaders, but she sees them as parents first and foremost. She has had and still has an informal leadership role in the Baptist congregation where she has grown up.

Samone is a lifelong Baptist and has attended the same church for quite some time. She has friends in Christian leadership and is an informal Christian leader herself. In addition, she is involved in a Baptist Campus Ministry at the HBCU she attends where she is majoring in Biomedical Science. She candidly admits, “I don’t look at myself the way that I should.”

Amyah attends a Baptist church and is a lifelong Christian. Her aunt is a Reverend and others close to her are also Christian leaders. Amyah is a poet and has been a praise dancer since she was very young. In addition, she is involved in Campus Ministry at the Predominately White Institution (PWI) she attends. Amyah is a Biochemistry major. She describes her self-image in a transitory manner. She says her self-image is “developing” and “becoming more positive.”

Excellence, and Economic Opportunity Through Historically Black Colleges and Universities, accessed December 3, 2023, <https://sites.ed.gov/whhbcu/one-hundred-and-five-historically-black-colleges-and-universities/>.

Journey is a political science, public policy, and religion and philosophy triple major at a PWI. She is nondenominational in her Christian affiliation. Journey has many family members and friends in Christian leadership and has been in a formal leadership role herself on campus for two years. In addition to her academic and extracurricular endeavors, Journey is a member of the oldest branch of the Armed Forces, the Army. As a warrior does, Journey is battling with her self-image, both the internal and external portions.

Daisha has recently chosen a nondenominational Christian church for herself. While Daisha is not in any Christian leadership role, she started a Christian micro business with her significant other. In terms of self-image, Daisha uses the terms “pretty good” and “developing.” She is a biology major at the PWI she attends.

Tamika attends a nondenominational church. She has a plethora of family in Christian leadership roles; she sees herself as an informal minister of the church to those around her. She is a recent HBCU college graduate with a degree in marketing. Tamika describes her self-image as “pretty good.”

Kameron is a recent graduate from a PWI with a degree in psychology. She is a lifelong Baptist who grew up in a family-oriented church. Kameron is open to new ideas and yet loyal to the essentials when it comes to the Christian faith. When asked about her self-image, she landed on the words “well rounded.”

Londynn is a political science major and athlete at a PWI. She recently began attending a Baptist church near her college but was previously involved in a

nondenominational church with her family. “Relatively good” is how she reports her current self-image.

Jayla is a graduate student and athlete at an HBCU. She is a recent computer science graduate from the same university. She is a Christian who has not been historically involved in church. However, she is involved in campus ministry. Jayla bifurcates her self-image by area, indicating that it is “pretty good” in terms of her body image but “developing” in the areas of identity and purpose.

In the analysis of the collective answers of the participants that follows, insights regarding how this dynamic group of Black, Christian, Gen Z women currently assess their self-image and how it has developed over time will be revealed via salient points from the various interviews. In addition, the variety of ways they report the impact of their faith, church-related organizations, and relationships with clergy and other Christian leaders on their self-image promises to be enlightening.

Analysis of Combined Interview Results

The main section of the in-depth interviews began with a baseline question regarding the participant’s assessment of her overall self-image at the current moment.

The inquiry was posed in this manner:

As you may recall from the information sent to you to prepare for this interview, the main subject of interest is the self-image of women in your demographic. For this thesis project, self-image is defined as your overall view or concept of yourself, it is comprised of your beliefs and attitudes toward yourself, including your body, personality, capabilities, etc. and importantly, your identity. How do you feel about yourself as a whole right now? In other words, how would you describe your self-image overall?

The responses to this question did not conform to the typical positive or negative verbiage used to describe self-image in literature but did do so primarily in meaning or tone. Seven out of ten interviewees described their current overall self-image as leaning toward positive, and one described hers as essentially negative. The participants' initial responses were balanced in terms of including both internal (personality, capability, and identity) and external (body, hair, and skin) components of their self-image. Six of the young women mentioned both components, internal and external, two of them mentioned only internal or only external components in their initial response.

Amyah and Journee were wholly committed to language that was shifting in nature (developing, a process), though several of the young women mentioned working on their self-image when describing its current state. Janiya stated that she was putting “lots of energy and time” toward staying positive. Three interviewees mentioned exercise as a part of their effort to maintain their self-image. Others mentioned non-specific process language indicating that they were working on themselves and would not or could not commit to a definite position of a positive or negative self-image.

This process or movement language is consistent with research indicating that self-image develops over time. The foundation for self-image may be laid in early childhood, but self-image is not stagnant. For example, Tara McMullen reports that “self-image develops at a young age and is a process which develops throughout the lifespan.”⁷

⁷ McMullen, “Self-image.”

These young women articulated a portion of this very process from the experiences of their lives.

Changes Over Time

Due to the development of self-image over time, the young women were asked how their self-image has developed over time up to this point. For example, has their self-image always been “pretty good”? One hundred percent of the interviewees responded that there had been significant changes in their self-image over time, typically going from challenged or “not so great” to better or improved, but not always. Most of them were able to ground their thoughts beginning around their middle school years, others as early as elementary school. Overwhelmingly, what these Black, Christian, Gen Z young women were able to recall in terms of development of their self-image was related to external components of self-image, their body image. Unfortunately, for roughly half of the interviewees, the perception they had of themselves was not good. Of those whose recollection of the early days of school specifically included the internal components of self-image, the mentions were far less plentiful and somewhat mixed in terms of positive or negative.

While the data set for this project is small, there was one overwhelming factor that seemed to be a common factor across many stories shared by the young women that may very well be quite telling and applicable for the larger community. These young women cited the fact that they compared themselves to others (primarily to white peers) in a way that was detrimental to their own self-image. This was mentioned specifically by no less than 50% of the interviewees and somewhat implied by others. “I would compare

myself to other people,” says Harmonie regarding her days in a diverse middle school. When discussing a major shift in her self-image and mental health during her time in a predominantly white high school, Samone reveals, “I think, comparing myself to them might have been where that happened.” In hindsight, Tamika sees it clearly, stating, “I found myself comparing myself a lot to Caucasian girls at the time” when discussing the negative change in her self-image that happened in late middle school moving into high school. Her comments were particularly poignant because she mentions “the beauty standards between our two communities, between us and us are a lot different” (as she points to the back of her hand and the front of her hand, notably NOT using the descriptors us and *them*).

In her predominantly white high school, Tamika would fake a positive self-image and the extreme self-confidence that she had been known for since she was a child. Deep down inside she could not shake the comparisons that the societal (European) beauty standards set forth. Tamika contends that deciding to attend an HBCU was the best decision ever for her. Here she was able to “step into myself” and “embrace myself on another level.” However, Tamika does not claim the HBCU environment as a cure-all. She says she gained weight during the pandemic while in college (calling it the “COVID 25”) and states that she had to “relearn” to love herself. The HBCU environment does not insulate Black women from self-image related scenarios.

On the other hand, Samone still finds herself faking a positive self-image and self-confidence although she also attends an HBCU. She managed to cope with the comparisons until the bottom fell out during her junior year of high school at a PWI. Ever

since then, Samone is unable to shake her damaged sense of self, despite the affirmations and compliments of those around her including her biological family and church family. She no longer compares herself to white girls but is still unhappy with her body, voice, and hair. Samone's insecurities still abound with a vengeance even though she is at an HBCU. Meanwhile, she continues to fake it and distract herself from "thoughts of feeling ugly or not worth it."

The self-image definition given as a guide to the participants included personality, capabilities, identity, etc., much more than body image, yet a great deal of their responses centered around body image. When one participant was asked about this fact her response was quite enlightening "I would say, because those (body image related) were the areas where I struggle with. I think with me always being, you know, very outgoing, I've always had like a very extroverted personality. So, whenever I go into the room, even if I don't know people, I'm always eager to kind of like, meet people, make friends, speak to them. As far as struggle, personality-wise, like, I love my personality, and I think because that's not something I've necessarily looked towards as a struggle. I think that's why it didn't come to the forefront of my mind, 'cause I didn't even think about that." Perhaps for other participants their focus on body image could also indicate confidence in the other areas unless otherwise indicated.

Impact Of Faith, Church-Related Organizations, Clergy, and Christian Leaders on Self-Image

All the young women identified as Christian and their answers as to how their Christian faith and affiliation with church or church organizations have impacted their

self-image were wide-ranging. Three of them either outright said they felt there was no effect of their faith or church organizations on their self-image or their answers were off topic regarding this question but were useful answers for another question that had not been asked yet in the interview.

Others gave a range of specific interpretations of the question. Samone stated, “I am more in tune with my insecurities” and explained that through her involvement with her church she learned that she was not the only one experiencing such self-doubt. She added, her religious teaching informed her that “vulnerability is not weakness.” Though Samone is still struggling greatly with her self-image, her Christian faith and church involvement appear to be a supportive, affirming place for her. The same can be said for Amyah in a way. She has been uplifted in her self-image “through praise dancing [because] it feels holy,” she says.⁸ Amyah says the praise dancing she has continuously done since she was a young girl makes her feel “connected inside and outside.” Journee is also uplifted in her self-image through her faith community. After a brief discourse about worship, Bible study, etc., she shared that community service is very important in her church; she specifically points to this fact “[I am] empowered [because] all believers fall short and that’s okay, they provide space for that.” I would interpret Journee’s statement, based on the context of our conversation, to mean that exposure to various people and

⁸ A praise dance ministry is common in some Christian churches. According to Johanna Loiseau, “Praise dancing is often performed to a fast, upbeat tempo and is characterized by waving one’s arms overhead, clapping courageously and swaying one’s body. Praise and worship dance have strong similarities to modern dance; however, other styles have entered the mix including, but not limited to, ballet, jazz, hip-hop and variations of gymnastics and many musical traditions.” Johanna Loiseau, “Dance and Worship as a Way to Glorify God,” *Performing Arts & Digital Arts Blog*, Grand Canyon University, July 22, 2022, <https://www.gcu.edu/blog/performing-arts-digital-arts/dance-and-worship-way-glorify-god>. A YouTube search will yield many videos of examples of praise dancing in various contexts.

situations opened up conversations which allowed the Christian leaders to affirm her sense of self, even when she doesn't get it right, just like those they may have met in the community who have made mistakes.

Finally, Harmonee and Tamika both answered in ways that identified their faith, Christian identity, or church as foundational to their sense of self. Harmonee said of her Baptist church, "it is a part of my personality" and "if I'm describing me, like, I'll describe it with Christian." Tamika agreed that a good summary of how she felt was that her faith and church upbringing was a foundation that she took for granted. She says it supports all the other things in her life, including and importantly, her self-image."

One somewhat surprising aspect of the responses to this question was what was not included. In the previous chapter, research regarding self-image indicated that self-esteem was one of the major contributing factors. Scott Schieman et al. report that American college students' "belief in a loving God has also been found to be positively associated with self-esteem and self-worth."⁹ Therefore, the lack of a specific mention that the knowledge of the love of God was a source of positivity and affirmation that shapes their self-image was unexpected. However, it is notable that this was the second question of the main question set. More probing questions requiring increasing vulnerability and transparency would follow. Perhaps the participants were still gaining a rapport with the researcher.

⁹ Schieman et al., "Love Thy Self?" 296.

Positive Memories

After inquiring generally about how their faith affects (or does not affect) their self-image, the line of questioning in the interview turned toward memories of positive and negative impacts on the participants' self-image when they were engaged in activities at church, in a Christian environment, or interacting with Christian leaders. When given a few moments for thought, these responses seemed easier for the interviewees to respond to (versus the previous general question) and held commonalities among groups of the participants. Their answers began to point toward recommendations in response to the ultimate thesis question: how can clergy and Christian leaders positively affect the self-image of Black, Christian, Gen Z women? (I present those recommendations in Chapter 6.)

Church programs, starting with Vacation Bible School and extending to Youth Church and Campus Ministry, were all named by the young women as places where they have felt positive about who they are in a Christian space. In each case, Jayla, Harmonee, and Janiya discussed feeling free from judgment, being able to talk freely, and discovering their Christian identity in tandem with their peers. Their comments seemed to describe a cherished environment. Harmonee says, "I could basically just be myself" and Jayla commented, "we could just hang out and just say what we want." These times of true authenticity appear to have helped develop their identity, which in turn feeds their sense of self-image in a healthy manner.

Another group of the young women felt affirmed in their self-image at church when involved in Bible study or hearing a sermon where the Word of God seemed to

speak to them in a very specific, personal manner. Daisha remembered studying the book of Ecclesiastes and gaining clarity about being made just the way God intended for her to be. This, she says, was a significant positive impact on her self-image. Daisha also said the study reminded her of things that are not important and that she should not focus on.

Kameron on the other hand recalls being in a bad place, feeling down on herself and hearing a sermonic message that seemed targeted directly at her in a way that lifted her up. The message was so personal that she wondered, “How did you know I was going through this?” Ultimately, Kameron walked away from that worship service being reaffirmed in herself as God created her to be, her capabilities, her identity, and ultimately in her self-image.

Amyah and Tamika both felt affirmed in their self-image when participating in worship leadership through the arts. Amyah read her original poetry during worship, a courageous thing to do at a young age! She remembers with fondness and a smile the applause, the encouraging words, and the expressions of beauty regarding her poetry from the congregation in general and leaders in the church. Tamika was the youngest member of the praise dance ministry, and the team was ministering at a different church and in front of an unfamiliar community. She was moved by how the youth in audience worshiped with enthusiasm by “like lifting their hands up to, like, say, thank you God!” The impact of the moment on her was that “[it] felt really good to know that I’m walking the path that I try my hardest to walk, the path that’s best for me.” Tamika felt affirmed in her identity as a Christian young woman ministering in the name of the Lord.

Samone and Journee expressed being affirmed in their self-image by experiencing the presence of the Lord in a very intimate, personal way. Samone's experience was relatively recent to our interview. She recalled, "I caught the Holy Spirit, and I was speaking in unknown tongues, and I just felt like God hugging me during that moment."¹⁰ And I was just like, I don't want to be anywhere else but right here. And after that the whole church just got together. And we were just hugging and crying and talking together." Samone goes on to explain how this was a positive impact on her self-image, though temporary: "Actually for the following two weeks after that I didn't have anything bad to think or say about myself. I feel like when I am in an area where people are loving me, and I feel there is love, there is no room for me to have self-hate." After this intimate, personal, up-close encounter with the living God, Samone was secure in her self-image for days upon days in the aftermath.

Journee experienced hearing a direct word of affirmation from the Lord during one of the most difficult times of her life. During her military AIT training, she had the

¹⁰ The Urban Dictionary is an online crowd sourced resource that explains the meaning of slang terms. It is one of the few resources readily encountered with a succinct explanation of Samone's phrase "caught the Holy Spirit," which it defines as follows: "Catching/ having caught the holy ghost/ spirit is a euphemism usually said by African American Baptists for then one gets so wrapped up in church service they begin to dance and sing as if you were possessed by the holy ghost." Phoenix Fire Truth, "caught the holy ghost," *Urban Dictionary*, January 29, 2021, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=caught%20the%20holy%20ghost>. A more extensive article citing personal experiences with "catching the Holy Spirit" was published by the *Indianapolis Recorder*. This article documents how the experience may begin as a secondhand observation and then become a firsthand experience. One individual recalls observing, for example, how "Elderly women who 'got the Holy Ghost' during worship would thrash so violently in the pews that their wigs flew off. People shouted, wept and fainted." That same individual then goes on to report experiencing it himself: "Suddenly, something seemed to slip inside of me. A tingling raced up my spine. I stood up to clap, scream – I didn't know what I was about to do." The article goes on to describe the skepticism of some Christians about these experiences that they wish to describe as purely emotional. Brandon A. Perry, "'Holy Ghost' leaves different impressions," *Indianapolis Recorder*, December 22, 2011, <https://indianapolisrecorder.com/146a05d4-2cac-11e1-8fb8-001871e3ce6c/>.

benefit of a breakout group led by a Black female chaplain.¹¹ Within this group she felt empowered in her identity as a member of a marginalized community within her battalion. At that time she was the only Black female soldier. The breakout group equipped Journee with tools to sustain her in the difficult moments. It was at this time that God spoke directly to her, further affirming her, saying, “You really need to trust in me, really need to lean in, and know that I’m with you.” Affirmation in her identity as a beloved child of God was received by Journee in this moment, a boost to her self-image.

While the researcher was surprised by the responses in the earlier question that the participants did not directly express the love of God as a source of impact on their self-image, their positive memories do reflect this sentiment. Specifically, Daisha, Kameron, Samone, and Journee do so in a manner that may not use those exact words but are not a stretch to apply as such.

Negative Memories

In nature and in life there is no sunshine without rain. Therefore, the young women also reported memories of negative instances that impacted their self-image at church or religious related organizations or with Christian leaders. The overwhelming majority of negative memories recounted by the Black, Christian, Gen Z young women interviewed had to do with being or feeling judged in some shape, form, or fashion.

¹¹ When Journee describes hearing from the Lord during a difficult time, it was during difficult military training. Military OneSource describes this training. “Advanced individual training [AIT] is where you will learn the skills needed to perform a specific Army job, such as artillery or engineering. At your AIT school, you’ll receive hands-on training and field instruction to make you an expert in that career field.” Military OneSource, “Life After Basic Army Combat Training,” January 7, 2022, <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/military-basics/new-to-the-military/life-after-basic-combat-training/>.

Highlights from their stories reflect resilience. The fact that with God's help they have overcome these experiences or are still working to overcome them is a wonder from a human point of view and a testament to the work of the Lord from a lens of faith.

Janiya and Kameron experienced being judged by leaders in the church and Christians in general, respectively. Janiya's comments about being judged in church were initially non-specific, especially regarding self-image, but heartfelt. She indicated that she and her family had been subject to judgmental comments at church. Janiya states, "I do know there were times where we weren't consistent with church because of things that were said to my mother, or things that were said about me and my brother when we were younger, and it really just discouraged us from continuing to go to church." As she continued, she began to recall negative comments about her skin and coily hair from "Christian" family and friends (not sure if they were leaders per se) that seemed to haunt her. The comments "just kind of really like put a falter in like my confidence as I was growing up," she says. This may seem small, but even at this age Janiya states that she gave those comments agency in her life. "I just kind of like kept hearing it in the back of my head, and it really it just put a damper in my spirit, and I allowed it to do that for a very long time." Janiya's experience is a "textbook" example of how self-image is developed early and shaped in part by close family members but also develops over time.

While Kameron did not state that she was judged by Christian leaders, it is worth noting that she experienced significant judgment by Christians in general because she was best friends with an openly homosexual male in college. These Christians questioned or judged her Christianity because of this friendship. This could have been a source of

impact on her self-image and identity as a Christian, but it was not. Kameron was strong in her faith and in her acceptance of her friend.

Samone and Jayla have actually experienced self-inflicted judgment. Samone is struggling, to an exponential degree, with a negative view of herself. Her self-image is very low despite all the affirmation she receives from loved ones, including the clergy and Christian leaders she is close to. Samone also readily admits to inflicting judgment upon herself on a regular basis. She remembered attending the Campus Ministry meeting for the first time and feeling unwelcome and not belonging. Samone says that the people were welcoming and did nothing to make her feel like she did not belong. However, she was having her own thoughts comparing herself to others. Samone recalls thinking, “You guys know the Bible better than me and you guys can probably think of the right verse now and tell me if it’s the New Testament [or] Old Testament. You can probably tell me who wrote this book if I opened it right now. And I was, just it was a lot of overthinking because I was new, but I didn’t know who I was surrounded with.” Here, Samone is actively thinking judgmentally about her capabilities in comparison to others (people she doesn’t know yet) and this is negatively impacting her self-image in that moment. The good news is that she did not give up on the Campus Ministry and remains an active member of this organization that is beloved to her as she continues to attend college.

Jayla admits that she struggles with social anxiety and her example of self-judgment is also related to a Campus Ministry event. She describes it this way: “It was a lot of people, a lot of different people I hadn’t met before and hadn’t seen. It’s kind of like a group that wasn’t as small as the initial meetings that we had because they were

trying to bring more awareness to the organization. I don't like meeting new people.”

Jayla goes on to say that she stresses out before and after big events because she can't get her words out properly when speaking in front of these groups but knows she needs to work on it. Jayla agrees that this is a negative when it comes to her self-image regarding her capabilities. She thinks to herself, “I should be able to do this!”

Amyah and Journee mentioned chance encounters with Christian teaching that turned out to be, in their opinion, both false teaching and negative encounters with different forms of the Christian faith. Amyah describes attending a Hebrew Israelite summer camp with her cousin a couple of times when she was approximately 12 and 13 years old.¹² The second time she attended she was stunned by the teaching of the pastor's wife who said, “her blood was tainted because she had European in her.” Amyah says “I went home confused and like, is there something wrong with me?” Because I have ancestors who are not just Black, but they're Native, American, and white. So, it just made me feel like, is there something wrong with me? She was further confused and felt degraded in her self-image by additional comments made by the Christian leader of her group. Amyah says, “she talked about how like her children aren't allowed to date outside of their race. And it just kind of made me feel like, maybe I'm not good

¹² Sam Kestenbaum, “Who Are The Hebrew Israelites?” reporting via Forward, a national Jewish, independent, nonprofit news source accessible at forward.com. This source was referenced to define “Hebrew Israelite” mentioned by Amyah: “Hebrew Israelites are people of color, mostly African Americans, who view the biblical Israelites as their historic ancestors. For Hebrew Israelites, the transatlantic slave trade was foretold in scripture, and they understand those Africans who were enslaved in the Americas as Israelites, severed from their heritage. Now they are returning. Israelites of all stripes today point to specific scriptures as prophetic proof of their ancestry, particularly Deuteronomy 28. For Israelites, the chapter describes a foretelling of slavery and servitude in the Americas: ‘The Lord will send you back in ships to Egypt on a journey I said you should never make again.’ The chapter also describes those Israelites being made to serve false gods and lose knowledge of their true identities.” Sam Kestenbaum, “Who Are The Hebrew Israelites?” Forward, December 11, 2019, <https://forward.com/news/347996/who-are-the-hebrew-israelites/>.

enough because of who my ancestors were.” At this time, Amyah was questioning her very identity and worth based on this teaching. However, upon returning from camp that summer Amyah talked the situation over with her mother based on the strength of their mother-daughter relationship. Amyah’s mother performed exactly the crucial role that research says that mothers play in the development of their daughter’s self-image in a direct and intentional way; she calmed Amyah’s fears and did “damage control” to her self-image in terms of her identity.

Journey mentioned having a keen sense of discernment as a spiritual gift and felt that she generally is guided away from negative situations by the Lord.¹³ However, she was able to think back to a few times she encountered Christian teachings on social media that have caught her off guard and made her question herself as a Christian. This is an important part of her identity. These encounters make Journey wonder, “Okay, am I being a good Christian? Am I following what it means to be a Christian, like, am I doing the right things, like, in my following?” Journey says that she always goes back to reading the Bible for herself or consulting trusted Christian leaders to help when she has encountered these issues from time to time.

Londynn’s experience on the other hand was a very negative experience with the Campus Ministry organization she really likes and participates in regularly. However, she

¹³ Dan R. Dick “Spiritual Gifts Handouts” provides a definition of discernment that is likely similar to the one intended by Journey; the ability to separate truth from erroneous teachings and to rely on spiritual intuition to know what God is calling us to do. Discernment allows us to focus on what is truly important and to ignore that which deflects us from faithful obedience to God. Discernment aids us in knowing whom to listen to and whom to avoid. Dan R. Dick, “Spiritual Gifts Handouts,” *Equipped for Every Good Work: Building a Gifts-Based Church*, November 16, 2010, https://equippedforeverygoodwork.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/spiritual_gifts_handouts.pdf

recalls this particular experience with renewed displeasure: a guest speaker was brought into their meeting to talk about sex and sexuality. She says, “the way he presented the topic kind of alienated every student in the room.” Londynn admits that she agreed with much of what the speaker had to say overall but describes the negative feel of the meeting. “It was definitely the opposite of welcoming, opposite of invitation. It was definitely kind of I felt like I was being scolded almost, and I felt like other people in the room felt like they were being scolded.” When it comes to her self-image, Londynn felt attacked as a woman. “It was some of the things that he was saying. I felt like they weren’t very pro woman. He was like, women can’t let men use their bodies as playgrounds. And I was like, but there’s also males in here [too]. So why are we only talking about women’s role and the sexual immorality? And some of the girls felt some type of way about that, as far as, like, why are we the only ones getting this talk right now?” In the end, Londynn agrees that sex and sexuality was an important topic that needs to be discussed, especially among college students. However, her Campus Ministry group was an epic fail at its attempt to cover it on this occasion and a lot of negative feelings and talk about it were generated afterward. It appears then not only was the opportunity missed to build up the self-image of Londynn and other young women and men, but also the opportunity for constructive critical conversation in a safe place was not achieved either.

Daisha experienced a lot of negative talk and teachings in the church she went to with her family when she was younger. She describes the overall atmosphere as one of damnation. “They made it seem like, if you don’t do this, you’re going to hell, if you

don't do that you're going to hell." Daisha says the harshness they presented never seemed to present any hope for her. At a young age she found herself thinking "It's too strict. I can't follow all the rules." The intensity of it all left Daisha moving toward the conclusion, "It's too late now. I'm going to hell" and "I don't know if Christianity is for me." This early experience "ruined Christianity for me" she says, "and it took me a long time to get back into it [Christianity]." These teachings seemed to give Daisha no assurance in her identity, capabilities, and the love of God in terms of her developing self-image based on her recollection.

Of the participants who articulated very specific negative memories (judgmental attitudes being at the top of the list), several of them also indicated in the next question that they held close relationships with clergy or Christian leaders in the church. Some of them were even within the organizations in which the negative event occurred.

Relationships of Trust with Christian Leaders

The interview now begins to move toward the crux of the matter: the relationships of trust with clergy and Christian leaders. Do they exist? If so, why? If not, why not? These answers will be related to the thesis question of how clergy and Christian leaders can affect the self-image of Black, Christian, Gen Z women. Generally speaking, trusting someone means belief that they are reliable. Trust also tends to involve a belief in the strength of their character and abilities. When interviewees were asked whether they had in the past or currently have relationships of trust with Christian leaders and what factors contributed to their answers, some of the responses pointed back to the positive and

negative memories previously discussed. However, others opened new realizations for consideration related to the definition of trust.

Four young women answered that they had no relationships of trust with Christian leaders, but the answers were for very different reasons. Janiya states “We were all for God and everything. We never really went to church that often.” Likely this is because of her negative memories of “judgy” attitudes at church. Kameron states that church was a place she always felt supported and loved but it was a family church. Everyone in the congregation there was literally her family members or like family. Therefore, this question seemed almost “foreign” to her. Daisha expressed a two-part answer. In the past, her answer was a categorical NO! The church she grew up in was full of gossip, negative energy, and judgment. However, her new church is one where everyone cares and is loving. Daisha did not mention specific relationships of trust currently established at her new church, but she seemed hopeful for making those connections. Harmonee also says she does not have relationships of trust with Christian leaders at church. Her reason is because “I would feel like I’d be judged off the stuff I did, and the stuff I said so I didn’t really trust them with everything at church.” Interestingly, all of these participants associate the possibility of trusted relationships with the traditional church and not with other places and spaces where they encounter clergy and Christian leaders.

There is a group of affirmative answers from the participants based on presence, accessibility, and responsiveness as a basis for trust. Amyah says that her relationship with her pastor has improved over time because he remembers who she is (he used to

forget). Her pastor also encourages her, and she feels that both the pastor and the team of deacons are accessible and available to her.

Journey seemed to agree that the persons in leadership that she trusts are present for her and available to her in ways that go above and beyond any job duties. She claims the spiritual gift of discernment as an important tool for her to know who to trust. There is a particular Christian leader that she trusts enough to also function as her therapist. This person has done so over many years. Journey spoke of this woman in a way that was reminiscent of the role model category of influence on self-image mentioned in the research by Byrd and Shavers discussed in Chapter 2.

Finally, Samone uses the barometer of responsive communication. She says that those who claim to be “there for her” will respond quickly when she reaches out to them. “I know I can trust someone based on how fast they can get to me.” Samone does realize that people may not be available at that very moment, but expects to hear something. “Even if they can’t get to me fast, they let me know that they’ll let me know: Yeah, hey, I’m busy. I will get back to you when I am free.” For Samone, “it’s communication letting me know that you are here for me and standing by it.” She wants to know by words and actions that Christian leaders are reliable.

Yet another group of young women cited relationships of trust including proactive actions on the part of Christian leaders as an important element. Samone, who mentioned a timely response to her communications, included trusted Christian leaders’ taking the initiative to reach out to her (“Hey, I was thinking about you”) or sending her a Bible verse. Tamika also discussed trusted persons being in tune with her and reaching out to

her with unsolicited prayer calls and other forms of support. She specifically recalled her former praise dance ministry leader, describing her as a second mom and a phenomenal woman: “if she felt like she just needed to pray over you or something, if her spirit told her that I wasn’t doing something she would call me and be like, are you good?” Tamika says, “for them... to just pray for me even when I sometimes don’t know to pray for myself, I would say that definitely has had an impact on me.” Finally, Londynn approaches this same idea of being proactive as a way of eliciting trust from a different perspective. She describes having an “E group leader,” essentially a small group leader who she trusted and built a great relationship with over time. Londynn was initially very quiet and shy in the group setting but the leader engaged Londynn by asking questions based on what she knew about her. She essentially invited her into deeper engagement with the group and with her by building on the foundation of what they had already established and by displaying relationship and community building skills. Londynn reports that, eventually, she was one of the most talkative and engaged people in the small group and had a great relationship with the small group leader.

Various aspects of authenticity were important to the relationships of trust that were reported or part of the reason they were lacking among several of the interviewees. Jayla spoke of having relationships of trust with the leaders in her campus ministry group. These leaders are largely her peers who share similar experiences. Jayla says, “we go through a lot of hardships” and “they’re just kind of trying to bring us up and make it the best opportunity possible.” Journee spoke at length about the female Christian leader in her church who is also her therapist. She stated that this person displayed authenticity

in that “she is just one of those people that embodies ‘I’m walking by faith not by sight’ and embodies the word and text, and just being a good person.” Journee goes on to say about this modeling (along with discernment and presence), “that’s why I’ve created that relationship, or we’ve created that good trust amongst each other.”

Harmonee’s recollection of feeling judged by Christian leaders in her church was mentioned earlier. When questioned about why, their authenticity and openness seemed to be at issue. Harmonee explains in detail.

How they present themselves, like, based on what they teach and what they talk about. It makes it seem like they’re perfect, and that it’s hard to find something to relate [to] with them, because you don’t feel as perfect as they do, if that makes sense. I’d say, though people that I trust [at] the church the most are the ones that tell their mistakes and show how they learn from it versus just pretending to put on a front of like, I’m perfect, and I’m super godly.

Harmonee discloses, “basically I feel like, as I grew older and got through high school, I had, like, a church self, and then a self for outside of church. So [I] trust them with the church stuff and stuff related to religion. But nothing outside of that.” Strength of character is at issue with Christian leaders for Harmonee.

Finally, Tamika voiced an aspect of authentic behavior in Christian leaders that was singularly mentioned but likely would be echoed. The dance ministry leader she mentioned previously not only reached out to her proactively but was also willing to “embrace uncommon conversations” with the group of young ladies in the dance ministry. Tamika says the church was running away from important conversations the girls need to have about intimate relationships and dating, but the dance ministry leader was willing to have them from a Christian perspective. This leader appeared to gain trust

based on the strength of her character leading this group of young Christians at a pivotal time in their lives. The final perspective Tamika mentions is that of confidentiality. Holding confidence is important to gaining trust. Tamika says it's important to know "You're not gonna go back and tell my mother, because if I had a question for her I would ask her." Point taken.

Accessible. Consistent. Genuine. Proactive. Confidential. These seem to be the important touchpoints for building relationships of trust as articulated by these participants representing Black, Christian, Gen Z women. Based on the points themselves, one can see that these relationships take time and effort. However, judgmental attitudes within the congregation and among the leaders can and will squelch the ability for the relationships to form and flourish.

Conclusion

Based on my experience as a campus minister, I expected to find stories of both extreme faith and extreme struggle especially in terms of "being a good Christian" on the inside and "doing good Christian works" on the outside. I also expected to hear about the impact of social media on the self-image (both internal and external components) of these Black, Christian, Gen Z women. Finally, I expected and hoped for a sense of connection with the participants given their comfort with the use of technology and the intimate nature of the interview.

After many of the interviews, what I found was that I had the sense I had encountered a touch of #BlackGirlMagic in many instances. "Black Girl Magic" is a phrase that has been around in Black culture and society generally since approximately

2013. On social media it is expressed as the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic. What is #BlackGirlMagic? As a member of the Black culture, I feel like I know it intuitively; however, in her Foreword to the book *Black Girl Magic Beyond the Hashtag: Twenty-First-Century Acts of Self-Definition*, Janell Hobson defines the term in a way that can be understood by all. “#BlackGirlMagic is the articulation of the resolve and persistence of Black women and girls to triumph in the face of intersectional oppressions.”¹⁴ Overcoming the plethora of obstacles in the path of Black women “oftentimes seem so insurmountable that any achievement on the part of Black women and girls cannot help but seem ‘magical.’”¹⁵

My sense of #BlackGirlMagic was overwhelmingly a sense of joy for the ways these young women had already overcome so many barriers to having or developing a healthy sense of their self-image. This sense of #BlackGirlMagic was based on knowing that even now they were still persistently working through the current situations they face as they continue to mature and grow. And, finally, I have a good hope for their future and the discovery of the ways clergy and Christian leaders have been and have the potential to be godly companions along the way as a result of this thesis project.

In addition to these questions directly related to self-image, the participants were asked about their interest in learning about two theological topics, *imago Dei* and womanist theology, that might contribute to the building of the self-image of women in

¹⁴ Janell Hobson, “Foreword,” in Julia S. Jordan-Zachery, and Duchess Harris, eds., “*Black Girl Magic Beyond the Hashtag: Twenty-First-Century Acts of Self-Definition*,” Boston: University of Arizona Press, 2019, ix-xiv, here ix-x, ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹⁵ Hobson, “Foreword,” xi.

their demographic. The next two chapters discuss their comments about each and how these subjects might be of use based on the insights gained from the in-depth interviews.

4. Black, Christian, Gen Z Women and the *Imago Dei*

Chapter 2 defined self-image and established its major contributing factors as a starting point for equipping clergy and Christian leaders to enhance self-image in Black, Christian, Gen Z women. In Chapter 3, the subject group spoke for themselves regarding the current state of their self-image, describing its development over time and how experiences related to the Church and/or relationships with clergy and Christian leaders have positively or negatively affected their self-image. This chapter introduces *imago Dei* as a theological topic of relevance to the experience of and pertinent as a resource for Black, Christian, Gen Z women that could build up the self-image of young women in this demographic.

Adding *imago Dei* theology to the conversation of this thesis project as a whole constitutes a significant portion of my contribution as a woman in collegiate ministry leadership and as a fellow Black woman to the research question of this thesis, namely what clergy and Christian leadership can bring to the relationship with Black, Christian, Gen Z women to edify them and build up their self-image. My contribution includes entering a specific dialogue with them to help create a healthy, more fully informed sense of the *imago Dei* within them.

Participant Interest

Establishing the participants' interest and their thoughts regarding the potential curiosity of others in their demographic is important. Assuming the participants were interested in the topic and/or from what perspective their interest is rooted could lead to wasted time in preparation of content and less than enthusiastic engagement if a baseline

of interest were not established. Therefore, verifying the fact that learning more about *imago Dei* appealed to the target audience was crucial for forming recommendations that were credible and useful. In order to confirm their interest in this topic, one of the final questions asked in the interview was designed to gauge their interest in this topic. In expressing their interest, participants also offered their own understandings of the image of God and its significance for Black, Christian, Gen Z women.

To introduce the question, participants were provided this brief statement of explanation: “Many Christians accept that human beings are made in the image of God. However, the particulars of what being made in the image of God means and how it applies to humans is highly debated.” They were then asked this question: “Would someone in your demographic be interested in learning more about the image of God in a fuller sense to shape your self-image as a Black, Christian, Gen Z woman?”

In response to this question, participants unanimously expressed strong interest in learning more about *imago Dei*. The reasons they stated were varied based on their experiences. Broad categories encompass their reasons for interest in the subject of *imago Dei*. These reasons include how the *imago Dei* relates to the many ways humans appear in their physicality across the globe, what *imago Dei* means when it comes to standards of beauty between and among women, and how *imago Dei* relates to accepting yourself (self-image) and accepting others. Finally, some participants simply felt the need for more in-depth education on this topic.

Among those interviewed, Janiya, Harmonie, Journee, and Londynn expressed interest in how the *imago Dei* relates to the physical body. Janiya believes that this topic

would help ground women in her demographic in knowing that “God made us in his image of what he thought was perfect for us.” She explains that social media displays to them from the time they are young a standard of beauty that they don’t fit and “we think that there’s something wrong with us.” She also admits that attending an HBCU did not alleviate these issues “because you’re just surrounded by so many Black women” and “they’re all gorgeous.” It seems that Janiya understands that we are not a “copy” of God but she knows humans are uniquely made in wonder and awe based on God’s creativity. Even theologians have debated whether our bodies are included in the *imago Dei*. It appears that she uses this foundation of understanding to withstand the cultural pressures of the HBCU environment and beauty standards that seem to pressure her and others to conform.

Harmonee says that being made in the image of God is vague to her because of the various ethnicities (for example: Black, white, Asian). She says she would “definitely want to learn more about what [*imago Dei*] actually means and how it appears physically.” Harmonee is being very literal. She wonders in some sense, “If people literally look like God, why do people look so different? What does that say about God? If that’s not what image means, what could it refer to?” If nothing else, Harmonee appears to know that she desires a more robust understanding of the *imago Dei*.

For Journee, however, the significance of the *imago Dei* both includes and transcends ethnic belonging. Journee believes the topic would be of interest and hopes that Black, Christian, Gen Z women can personalize the information they discover. She hopes they can find “a way to navigate how that looks for them” and not compare

themselves to others. Journee believes this knowledge can connect to the quest for self-actualization she believes many in her generation are on, wondering “who am I in the world, to my community etc.?”

Londynn says she grew up in a nondenominational church “with the image of God being like a white man with straight hair.” As a kid it was hard for her to grasp the concept that she was a child of God based on that physical depiction. Eventually she learned from her grandmother that Jesus is described as having “woolly hair” and “bronze-like skin” which helped, but these characteristics are a part of the reason she thinks this is an important topic to be discussed. Londynn’s comments reveal the close relationship between how we imagine God and how we understand ourselves to be in God’s image. Truthfully, any finite image will have the tendency to leave someone feeling left out. In the case of Black women, Londynn’s desire to see herself or at the very least to see God clearly, anticipates the importance of the womanist theological framework introduced in Chapter 5.

Daisha, Samone, Amyah, Kameron, and Tamika wondered how the *imago Dei* correlates to accepting yourself (self-image) and accepting others. Daisha connects a deeper knowledge regarding ourselves and the image of God with “how you approach things like self-image.” She is more specific in terms of *imago Dei* in that it may help us in “being more like him.” For example, Daisha says, “changing how you say things, changing how you [re]act to different situations and stuff like that.” These five young women are curious about internalizing the *imago Dei*. Though they also confessed to

body image issues along with their peers, they seem to take the totality of the definition of self-image seriously and have applied it to this topic.

Kameron believes knowledge regarding humanity's being made in the image of God is important because she believes "*everybody* was made in God's image." She further explains that people can't be discounted, even if we don't find their identity in Scripture. No one can be discounted because they are still in fact, created by God, made in the image of God, and should not be categorized as "the devil." Her personal experience with a good friend, who also belongs to the LGBTQ+ community, being "demonized" seems to drive her interest.¹ She hopes for the masses to learn a deeper understanding of *imago Dei* and be more accepting of others.

Tamika feels her demographic would be interested in the topic of *imago Dei* and "definitely feels it's needed." Likely she expresses this sentiment in part because "when it comes to your self-image, your self-worth and the image of God, I would say that we hear it, but we don't actually process what that means." She essentially states that the knowledge needs to come from the source (the Bible) and be "broken down" for their understanding. Finally, Amyah simply says, "yes [interest is there]... based on how you're accepted by Christ." She does not give much detail, but her story includes a motif of journey when it comes to her self-image. Amyah has a strong Christian foundation and seems to know she is "accepted by Christ" and maybe learning more about the *imago Dei*

¹ LGBTQ+ is an abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and more.

will help her and others as they are “developing, in process, and becoming” – all words she used during her interview.

Samone and Jayla expressed that *imago Dei* had greatest meaning in relation to educating their church communities and Christian faith in general. Samone enthusiastically states that this topic has been discussed at her home church and women in her demographic “would really be interested to talk about it.” Jayla and those she is connected with on her faith journey would be interested in more education on this topic. Jayla says her friend group passes around books on different topics all the time, including Christian topics, and this is something that would be of interest.

There may be another reason that 100% of participants are interested in hearing more about *imago Dei*. The societal and religious environment they have been living in has been fraught with contradictions regarding the *imago Dei* and women in general and the *imago Dei* and Black women even more so. Whether these young women can name the issues or not, they have lived the repercussions, prejudices and oppressions of the issues arising from historical interpretations of the *imago Dei*, particularly those having to do with women and the interpretation of the *imago Dei* as it applies to them.

What follows is a portion of background information that might help these young women to name the issues. This information may also assist them in understanding “how we got here.” “Here” in this context refers to a situation where women have made great strides being included in Christian leadership in some denominations or individual churches but not in others. For example, in some ecclesial spaces and places it may be clearer than in others whether women are welcome in any and all leadership positions. In

society women are still named as “the first” of their gender to hold senior leadership positions in organizations of all kinds. In fact, women may find themselves as the only female leader of *any* kind within that organization. For many Black women, leadership opportunities remain elusive or may be achieved at great personal cost. The struggle to dismantle a patriarchal society in the United States remains. A knowledge and understanding of the background information below will shed light on the struggles participants expressed in their interviews with respect to their battles with body image, poor mental health, and negative self-image among other issues, because the issues are rooted in history.

Women and *Imago Dei*

Ever since theologians in the early church began to talk about God and creation of humanity, Christian theological speculation about the *imago Dei* has been rooted in interpretations of Genesis 1:26-27:

Then God said, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.
(NRSVUE)

What does it mean to be made in the image and likeness of God? Theologians have debated whether the *imago Dei* includes the flesh or the body in the most controversial ways, especially in terms of men/male versus women/female. Does (or how does) the *imago Dei* include the mind is another aspect that theologians have wrestled with across the centuries. Does (or how does) the *imago Dei* include the soul/spirit is yet another

aspect that is debated over time. An interpretive trajectory, moreover, that is at first centered on God (Theocentric) in some writings and thought patterns emerges. These interpretations initially focused primarily on the first person of the Trinity. Yet this perspective is followed by interpretations that are centered specifically on Christ (Christocentric), who comes to be understood as the second person of the Trinity. What then follows is a Trinitarian interpretation that unfolds over time with writings from early Church Fathers such as Augustine, Medieval Theology, Reformation thinkers like Martin Luther, to Modern Era philosophers like Kant and Twentieth-Century Theologians to include numerous Black women.

Musings on this presenting question (What does it mean to be made in the image and likeness of God?) swirled and answers varied widely among respected voices in each of these eras. This question is closely related to the field of theological anthropology, which is described by scholar Marc Cortez as the study of “the true reality of what it means to be human as we understand the human person in relationship to God, and more specifically as we view the human person through the person and work of Jesus Christ.”² Cortez goes on to say that multiple anthropological disciplines are consulted and provide important information, however the starting point for theological anthropology is always theological.³

Theologians across the centuries have overwhelmingly, though not unanimously, regarded men as more fully reflecting the *imago Dei* in comparison to women. These

² Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: a Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2010), 6, ProQuest Ebook Central.

³ Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 7.

theologians have been immersed in a patriarchal environment and mindset that has been prevalent for centuries upon centuries. At the very core of patriarchy is the position of dominance of men over women. This model of dominance then spills over to the theological understanding of how men and women bear the *imago Dei* and how that image should shape their relationship to one another. The western civilization that these young women have grown up in is no different. Patriarchy from a societal perspective means the father is the final authority, wives and children are dependent upon him, and inheritance is passed through the male line. This patriarchal environment becomes part and parcel of the Christian tradition. What “this model of dominance” looks like in some churches is for women to teach women and children only, for them to be fully integrated into ministries like music (for example) only. That is, leadership positions that do not hold power over men are available to women and it never necessarily “feels” like women are being oppressed or dominated by men.

It should be noted that there are indeed some female-dominated subcultures. However, Carroll Saussy states they tend to be “immersed in a larger patriarchal society in which the majority of elected and appointed leaders are men and in which men are more highly valued than women.”⁴ The consequence of this broader context is still an overall patriarchal environment.

Among the results from the influence of patriarchy are Christian teachings and traditions that both oppress and denigrate women in the name of the Lord using the

⁴ Carroll Saussy, *God Images and Self Esteem: Empowering Women in a Patriarchal Society* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 54.

interpretations of the Bible as a weapon. Rosemary Radford Ruether traces some theological interpretations that have contributed to this oppression and devaluation of women.⁵ From Paul in the New Testament (albeit with inconsistencies) to Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, Ruether points out a “western Christian tradition of female subjugation in the original order of creation” that was only exacerbated by “the view of woman’s primacy in sin.”⁶

It should be noted that while Genesis 1:26-27 itself is egalitarian (all people are equal and deserve equal rights) in its content, it has been interpreted differently, especially in light of the choice of theologians to subordinate this passage to or give more emphasis to Genesis 2:4b-3:24. This passage contains a second account of the creation of the first humans. It also details the narrative that theologians and Christians have titled and interpreted as “the Fall.” Mary McClintock Fulkerson explains the rationale behind interpretations that ground women’s subordination in this second creation story:

Eve’s so-called secondary creation after Adam has served to warrant women’s subordination, just as her encounter with the serpent and the expulsion from the garden have grounded arguments for her less rational nature and her suffering in reproduction. The Bible is then read to portray women as a dimmer creature than man, divinely ordained to be his submissive helpmeet.⁷

⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Sexism and Misogyny in the Christian Tradition: Liberating Alternatives,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 34, (2014): 83-94, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24801355>.

⁶ Ruether, “Sexism and Misogyny,” 86.

⁷ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “The Imago Dei and a Reformed Logic for a Feminist/Womanist Critique,” in *T & T Clark Reader in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Marc Cortez and Michael P. Jensen (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2018), 100–106, here 101.

In addition to what Fulkerson has named here, man's naming of woman in the second creation story has also been used to justify female subordination to man.⁸

Phyllis Trible includes this interpretation in a list of misogynous readings that have acquired the status of a general rule: "Man names woman (2:23) and thus has power over her."⁹

In Feminist Theology, it has been noted that the previously discussed patriarchal system almost exclusively makes the maleness of Jesus the archetype for reflecting God's image, thus "limiting women's ability to reflect God and implying that men reflect God's image more appropriately."¹⁰ Some early Church Fathers agreed that women have a rational mind but, because of the attachment to a female body, their salvation is the denial of their nature or "her salvation must be seen as the negation of her nature."¹¹ In this view, women share spiritually in the *imago Dei* in spite of their bodies and (the woman's *imago Dei*) will be redeemed, fully recovered, in the afterlife. In the present, however, women are regarded as "lesser than."¹² This interpretation of scripture, of Jesus, sets up women for oppression and devaluation from birth to death.

Additionally, "Historically the construction of woman within Christianity has been a composite of those attributes that men have rejected or deemed lesser in humanity," says feminist theologian Michelle A. Gonzalez.¹³ She goes on to note the

⁸ Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image: An Introduction to Feminist Theological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 11.

⁹ Phyllis Trible, *God and The Rhetoric of Sexuality*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 73.

¹⁰ Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 150.

¹¹ Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 27.

¹² Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 27–28.

¹³ Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 85.

work of Daphne Hampson that describes how less desirable traits such as the body, sensuality and emotion are affiliated with women, yet men are connected with what is seen as desirable such as rationality and spirituality.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, God becomes closely associated with the attributes connected to men while women are deemed as reflecting the *imago Dei* in an inadequate and imperfect manner – especially when it comes to their bodies.¹⁵ Due to the societal and theological gatekeeping based on these biases, women, as a group, have been denied access to full rights as citizens, to property, economic and educational resources, as well as to political, cultural and religious leadership.

Feminist and Womanist Theological Anthropology and the *Imago Dei*

Feminist theologians have long sought to refute the above-named ideologies that have operated in history and current day understandings of Christian theological anthropology. “Feminist theologians argued that the theological anthropology operating within the greater part of the Christian tradition, one that Christians today have inherited, is patriarchal in nature, based on an androcentric world view that fuels sexist attitudes toward women.”¹⁶ Feminist theology began in the 1960s with primarily European American women as foremothers. However, the boundaries quickly spread as it was pointed out that the voices of other marginalized women, including Latinas (Mujerista Theology) and Black women (Womanist Theology), were not represented.

¹⁴ Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 86, citing Daphne Hampson, *After Christianity* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996).

¹⁵ Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 86.

¹⁶ Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, xix.

In a way, *imago Dei* is at the heart both of feminist theology and the broadening of boundaries to include these marginalized voices. Theologian Mary McClintock Fulkerson asks if there is a way to apply the *imago Dei* to all human beings without qualification. “*Imago Dei* has the double function of referring both to human beings and to God. It thereby directs us to ask not only about the way in which God is imaged and what that communicates, but how such imaging contributes to the valuing and devaluing of human beings as well.”¹⁷ This in turn should relate, translate, and dictate whom those in the Christian tradition see as fully human and treat as such.

An egalitarian view of men and women is relatively universal among the body of writings of feminist theologians.¹⁸ They interpret Genesis 1:27 as an equal representation of male and female creation in the image of God. In light of equal representation, Rosemary Radford Ruether believes that Christian anthropology cannot therefore both embrace an egalitarian point of view and continue to associate women with attributes that are devalued (particularly in relation to men).¹⁹ In a similar vein, Elizabeth Johnson argues that women are the *imago Dei* in totality just as they are.²⁰ Feminist theology has liberated the female body from a position of marginalization, in theory at least. This position has been embraced more and more by Christian individuals and organizations and started to permeate some traditions. However, the lived experiences of the young

¹⁷ Fulkerson, “*Imago Dei* and a Reformed Logic,” 100.

¹⁸ Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 116.

¹⁹ Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 130.

²⁰ Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 130.

women in this thesis project serve as limited data points that demonstrate there is much work to do for this to be a reality for all women.

Womanist theologians understand that for Black women, the inequities, the atrocities, the oppression, and the hyper sexualization of Black women's bodies through the history of slavery, Jim Crow, police brutality and other societal wrongs in the U.S. have gone far beyond the experience of white feminist theologians. Therefore, the theologians within this strand of liberation theology use more expansive thought and language when talking about *imago Dei* and women's bodies. Theologian Delores Williams describes the womanist view of an attack on Black women's bodies as a simultaneous attack on their spirit and self-esteem and claims that this way of devaluing Black women is sin.²¹ Williams goes on to list four distinctive features of the womanist notion of sin. One of these features is:

Black womanhood and humanity are synonymous and in the image of God; Black women's sexual being is also in the image of God; therefore to devalue the womanhood and sexuality of Black women is sin; to devalue the womanhood and sexuality of Black lesbian women is also sin.²²

It follows for womanist thought, according to Williams, that there is no such thing as women being accepted by God in spite of their bodies. "The doctrine of the *imago Dei* becomes a justice-infused denouncement of violence against black women."²³

²¹ Delores S. Williams, "A Womanist Perspective on Sin," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie Townes, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 145, <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1901172&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

²² Williams, "Womanist Perspective on Sin," 146.

²³ Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 126.

The theological anthropology of feminist theologians does not ignore Genesis 2:4b-3:24. It is in fact supplementary material. This text, however, is crucial for patriarchal interpretations of Genesis 1:26-27, but feminist theology looks at it with a different eye, one without a negative bias toward women. A key text within this passage is Genesis 2:18: “Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper [*ezer*] as his partner’” (NRSVUE). About this passage Suzanne Burden, Carla Sunberg, and Jamie Wright state,

There are only two options in translating the [Hebrew] word *ezer* [helper] into English. Either the woman is a ‘strong helper’ as God is a strong helper, or she is a ‘strong power.’ The full force of the original meaning of this verse might come out something like this: to end the loneliness of the single human, I will make another strong power, corresponding to it, facing it, equal to it. And the humans will be both male and female.²⁴

Different simply means different, not that one or the other is deficient, nor that biological differences don’t mean anything. Gonzalez observes that biology must be taken seriously but not reduced to models that are hierarchical (where groups of people are ranked in order of importance according to some value measurement) and complementarian (where groups (e.g. men and women) have equal value and status but fulfill different roles).²⁵ Instead, each person reflects the image of God equally according to their unique context. “The image of God calls us to be in relationship and community with one another as we mirror the relational life of the trinitarian God.”²⁶

²⁴ Suzanne Burden, Carla Sunberg, and Jamie Wright, *Reclaiming Eve: The Identity and Calling of Women in the Kingdom of God* (Kansas City: The Foundry Publishing, 2009) 30, ProQuest Ebook Central.

²⁵ Gonzalez, *Created in God’s Image*, 160.

²⁶ Gonzalez, *Created in God’s Image*, 160.

Feminist theology includes a Christological perspective on the *imago Dei* as do the traditional views that developed from the early church. Gonzalez writes,

Feminist theologians situate the *imago Christi* in Jesus' liberating message and his concrete outreach to and inclusion of the marginalized. Grounded in this liberating Christology is an image of Christ that we are challenged to reflect in our spirituality and actions.²⁷

As Gonzalez reflects on the thoughts of Catherine Mowry LaCugna, she suggests something similar.²⁸ The ministry and message of Jesus, the suffering of Jesus and the way Jesus is a companion of the marginalized negate any justification of hierarchy or subordination of any group of humanity to another group.²⁹ In addition, this thread of thinking interprets idolizing Jesus' masculinity as wrong and "in direct conflict with Jesus liberating message of inclusive love."³⁰ We are not at liberty to make Jesus' gender a standard, an issue, or a benchmark given that Jesus did not. "To render Jesus' masculinity an idol undermines Jesus' universal salvation of all humans, regardless of biological sex."³¹ Essentially it is not the maleness of Jesus that constitutes or elaborates the image of God but the message and ministry of Christ. This all humans can do equally and fully as God equips them to do. As we grow in the image of Christ through message and ministry, we grow in the image of God.³²

Trinitarian theology further contributes a relational component of the *imago Dei* to feminist theological anthropology. Gonzalez explains, "In addition to an egalitarian

²⁷ Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 150.

²⁸ Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 154–155, drawing on Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

²⁹ Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 154–155.

³⁰ Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 155.

³¹ Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 151.

³² Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 160.

vision of humanity, an emphasis on the centrality of relationships is fundamental for understanding of feminist theological anthropologies. The relational nature of humanity is grounded in God's trinitarian nature as relational and our reflection of this nature through the *imago Dei*.³³ God is relational and as bearers of the image of God, we are relational. "Through our relationship with God, our fellow human beings, and the rest of creation we reflect the image of God within us. The human being is not self-contained but rather is constituted by relationships."³⁴ This is important for this thesis project because many of the participant interviews resonated with this connection to relationality and the image of ourselves. This should not come as a surprise, seeing as the definition of self-image recorded in Chapter 2 includes "the reflection of the views of others about oneself."

Feminist Theology interweaves *imago Dei* and *imago Christi*, grounding each in trinitarian theology. This centrality of relationships is also an important component of and essential to self-image. Part of the research cited in Chapter 2 regarding self-image has shown that as self-image develops and evolves over time, it is done so in community, in relation to God, others, and self. This has been revealed in the voices of the women who participated in the in-depth interviews and provides hope for the positive influence clergy and Christian leaders can have in their relationships with young women and other Black women as their self-image continues to evolve. Relationality will be reflected in the final recommendations to clergy and Christian leaders.

³³ Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 118.

³⁴ Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 159.

Finally, as was stated previously, *imago Dei* not only asks how humanity images God but it also begs the question, how do we as humans imagine God? Based on patriarchal and androcentric world views, the way we refer to God, and in turn see God, has primarily been shaped by male perspectives and by theologies and social structures that maintain men's social dominance in relation to women. These same factors have caused the subordination of females in understandings of the image of God. Many women of all ages and backgrounds have only experienced God referred to using male titles (Father, King) and pronouns (he, his, him). Carroll Saussy states,

When women image Deity in exclusively male terms, they relate to God (that is, male deity) as 'like the other but not like me.' The symbols used of this Jewish and Christian male deity or God are most often symbols of power and authority: Father, Lord, Ruler, and King. When women image Deity in female terms, however, they relate to Goddess [the author's word used to expand her understanding of the Deity] as 'like me.'³⁵

Saussy defines "*God/dess* [a]s an inclusive term including both masculine and feminine images of Deity."³⁶ Saussy will go on to recommend this inclusive term to fulfill a need for women "to proclaim the truth that they, too, image the Holy One."³⁷ The dangers of projecting the male gender onto God are consequential according to Saussy: "As long as gender assumptions are projected onto the God of faith, the patriarchal hierarchy will continue. God is male and male is God."³⁸ Hebrew scriptures contain several references to God in female images – as Spirit hovering in Genesis 1, as Mother in Isaiah 66, as Midwife in Psalm 22, and as Mother hen in Luke 13. Yet choices

³⁵ Saussy, *God Images and Self Esteem*, 17.

³⁶ Saussy, *God Images and Self Esteem*, 17.

³⁷ Saussy, *God Images and Self Esteem*, 68.

³⁸ Saussy, *God Images and Self Esteem*, 55.

regarding which scriptural images of God (namely, male ones) to lift up as normative have been perpetuated by those with the patriarchal and androcentric points of view. Feminist theological anthropology helps us appreciate the biblical evidence that supports the inclusive image of the divine. While it can be argued that humanity knows intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and otherwise with certainty that the Triune God is not male or female, Saussy says it well: “No single metaphor or image of Deity, nor any combination of images of Deity, is large enough. And yet embodied people seek images or metaphors to express the incomprehensible, mysterious, both transcending and immanent Deity.”³⁹

Conclusion

What does it mean to be made in the image and likeness of God? Early Church Fathers and prominent theologians in Christian history have interpreted Genesis 1:26-27 as secondary to patriarchal interpretations of Genesis 2:4b-3:24, resulting in traditions that devalue and deny women’s ability to reflect the image and likeness of God. This thinking and the accompanying practices have gone on for centuries. Although progress has been made, many Gen Z women may be unaware of the roots of traditions that still have a grip on many minds, hearts, and organizations. They may harbor a deep sense of wonder as to why women, especially Black women, are still excluded or limited in their roles and responsibilities in society and in many Christian organizations. Exposing them

³⁹ Saussy, *God Images and Self Esteem*, 67.

to the basics of the historical landscape will provide enlightenment and insight, or a reminder for those who might have some familiarity.

Feminist Theology treats Genesis 1:26-27 as a primary text regarding the *imago Dei* in women and the egalitarian relationship of women and men. Furthermore, feminist theologians delve deeply into the text of Genesis 2:4b-3:24, uplifting the powerful description of *ezer* that God gives to the woman as companion to man. Womanist theology, meanwhile, recognizes that for Black women, the devaluation of their personhood and their bodies goes far beyond what feminist theologians address. The effects of continued societal injustices are yet to be overcome. Claiming the *imago Dei* for themselves is a task to be done with and for each other.

This topic, *imago Dei*, is one that many clergy may be informed about, but perhaps other Christian leaders are not. However, the implications of a robust knowledge and conviction of how the *imago Dei* applies to all human beings is influential to the ways of “being” and “doing” in Christian leadership. As the vessel through which this particular aspect of project has come to fruition, I pray a move of the Holy Spirit on the hearts of those who encounter this chapter to respect and honor the *imago Dei* in all human beings.

Specifically, when the question regarding the participants’ interest in learning more about *imago Dei* was formulated and included in the interview guide, I expected, based on my experience of engaging in campus ministry during the pandemic, to hear their interest based on inner struggles, perhaps even related to mental health, rather than on body image struggles and issues. The ongoing body image conflicts the young women

expressed came as a surprise. However, my objective for pursuing this theological subject did not change, even though the foci may have. The objective was for the young women to understand from a theological perspective what influences have impacted their journey to this point in their lives and to empower them with new information to pursue and embrace as they move forward. Ultimately my hope is that they will wholeheartedly claim for themselves Psalm 139:14 (NRSVUE): “I praise you, for *I am fearfully and wonderfully made*. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.” (emphasis mine)

For each of the participants, their inquiries and reasons for interest would likely be at least partially answered. Janiya and Journee would hopefully see that God did indeed make each of us in the image perfect for us that includes our gender and so much more (body, mind, and soul). Harmonee might learn to live with the vagueness of the physical image question based on the various ethnicities that are all made in the image of God because God ultimately transcends the physical. Daisha and Amyah would know that we are accepted by Christ based on the ways we participate in the message and ministry of Christ and that the maleness of Christ has absolutely nothing to do with it. Kameron and Jayla were interested in general education, but Tamika wanted it “broken down.” Tamika would appreciate the historical background information and updated feminist and womanist perspectives that could be shared with others.

The next chapter will introduce womanist theology. Here, the participants and their peers might find a place of wonder and discovery. Most of all, I hope womanist theology will provide a place where they will learn that they have a voice that adds to a

conversation in progress, one where they can be spiritually nurtured and find both strength and guidance for their everyday lives.

5. Black, Christian, Gen Z Women and Womanist Theology

After initially discussing definition, pertinent aspects, and contributing factors of self-image, the thesis project turned to in-depth interviews with ten Black, Christian, Gen Z women to hear their voices regarding their own self-image, how it currently stands, how it was formed over time, and specifically how faith encounters have impacted their self-image. The previous chapter introduced an expanded vision of *imago Dei* as a practical theological resource to edify these young women and their peers in the ongoing development of their self-image.

This chapter further expands on a second topic, womanist theology, that was introduced in Chapter 4. My identity, experience, and positionality as a fellow Black woman convinced me of the potential of womanist theology to enhance the self-image of Black, Christian, Gen Z women. This form of liberation theology is rich with spiritual sustenance clergy and other Christian leaders can use to edify these young women.

Participant Interest

Participant interest in womanist theology was assessed by one of the final questions in the interview. Participants were provided the following brief statement of explanation: “Womanist theology takes seriously the experience of Black women. It reflects on the place of Black women in the world, it examines both religion and society in full acknowledgment of racism, sexism, and classism – all of which impact the lives

and experience of many Black women.”¹ They were then asked this question: “Would someone in your demographic be interested in learning more about ‘womanist theology’ as a means of positively affecting your self-image as a Black, Christian, Gen Z woman?”

This strand of liberation theology was not as robustly familiar to the participants as was the topic *imago Dei*. Several of the participants asked for the description and question to be repeated. They listened intently as the information was repeated.

The participants’ informed responses were overwhelmingly in the affirmative. There are broad categories that encompass the participants’ reasons for interest. Some of them have a general curiosity or intrigue about the topic. Others’ interest is based on building identity or self-esteem (essential to self-image). One participant thought womanist theology would provide a sort of informed acknowledgment of Black women’s realities and guidance navigating the world in light of them, especially within the Black community. Another participant spoke of her interest in terms of utilizing the power and liberation of womanist theology for the advancement of Black women.

Harmonee, Amyah, and Samone were generally curious and intrigued. Harmonee was generic in her interest. Amyah hopes womanist theology will satisfy some of her curiosity regarding “why certain people might have a view ... about a person like me, and why do they choose to react in certain manners towards me.” Samone was unsure, stating, “I’m honestly not sure if I know anyone that would be interested in that topic.”

¹ Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 6-7, muse.jhu.edu/book/79072.

Janiya and Journee were interested in womanist theology for building identity and self-esteem for themselves and their peers. Janiya agrees wholeheartedly based on her transparent description of herself and other young Black women, particularly at HBCUs, who are “not very sound with who you are as a person or how you look like.” She also reasons that this subject would be helpful along with *imago Dei* because “I know there are people at large HBCU’s who really are trying to get their relationships right with God, and who are also really trying to build their self-esteem, and I think that this, like, it (womanist theology), would be a perfect outlet for them for that (building their self-esteem).” Janiya’s interview dialogue prior to this question suggests that she and others may look good on the outside but are truly struggling on the inside. Hearing the stories of other Black women via womanist theology would likely instill pride and their self-esteem and self-image as she intuits in her statement of interest.

Journee has experienced quite a bit of life in her 21 years and it gives her a broader view than many college juniors may have. Regarding interest in womanist theology Journee says:

Yes, definitely. I mean, those are, historically, things that Black women and majority Black people have faced and you see it on a daily basis. And I mean it happens consistently that you’re challenged, or you’re presented with things because of your race, your identity. I think being able to take ownership of who you are and knowing how to be content and strong in that identity, allows you to see the grace and allows you to see the light again that you carry.

Given her triple majors of political science, public policy, and religion and philosophy, it is not surprising to hear Journee be passionate when hearing religion *and* society being addressed in tandem in the context her own experience

and/or those she identifies with that likely include racism, sexism, and classism.

She also connects to both the past and the present with an eye on the future.

Tamika and Kameron are interested in the power of acknowledging these realities (i.e., the plethora of issues that Black women are confronted with) from a Christian point of view and seeking guidance about navigating society in light of them, especially including within the Black community. Tamika agrees from a spiritual and a practical point of view:

I definitely think so. When you're on the cusp of, like, the spiritual world, it's like there's an intersection there. In certain situations, if somebody upsets me at the job, I will kindly, you know, reply, or my mom would always say, 'kill them with kindness.' I might want to 'knuck if you buck,' you know, with this person.² I'm not gonna do that because I know that that is not what I need to do. I have a calmness there because it goes back to, you know, Christianity and my religious beliefs. However, there are ways that we have to as Black women ...[because] there is that image, she's this way, and she's that way; we have to learn how to navigate that. So I think that's a conversation that needs to be had with young women, especially, like, in my generation because they need to know.

Here, Tamika speaks of the realities of her worlds colliding. She wants to be professional, spiritual, and true to herself as a Black woman, and yet she is aware of the stereotypes that will likely prevail if she reacts in anger. Tamika also wants to be true to her faith and what it requires of her. As she describes this scenario, her tone implies "it's a lot!" She believes that womanist theology will help her (and others) honestly and faithfully speak to the multifaceted issues that Black, Christian, Gen Z women will face in the workplace and in life.

² "Knuck If You Buck" is terminology from a popular song by the same title. It essentially means to back up threats with action (typically violence). "Knuck If You Buck," track 2 on Crime Mob, *Crime Mob*, Reprise Records, 2004.

Kameron is all in, boldly declaring,

Yes, I think I think that is very important. Honestly, I can't speak for all churches, but, like, my church is, like, predominantly female. It's basically just the women running the community. Yeah. So, I think that that would be beneficial to the self-image of Christian Black women, especially like Gen Z Black women. Cause I feel like we're in a time where we're acknowledging, like, okay, yeah, we go through racism and sexism. But, like, we go through that in our community as well, it's not just white people doing it.

Kameron has laid hold to the fact that womanist theology has had to take the bold stand of calling out our own community, Black men and women, who for decades have been a part of the oppression of Black women. Within womanist theology Kameron will find bold voices that express her same concerns, to which she may add her own voice. Delores S. Williams is one of those theologians. Williams articulates the power and support of “The Black Church” for Black women. This church has no walls or administrative structure per se. She separates it from the conflicted history in this area of “African-American Denominational Churches.”³ Kameron’s experience of “The Black Church” is her childhood church, the church she considers her home church. It has been an empowering and supportive community that resonates deeply with Williams’ account and suggests that womanist theology could be a vitally affirming resource for Kameron and for others with similar experiences.

Finally, Londynn and Jayla are inquisitive regarding how the power of womanist theology can be used for the good of Black women. Londynn’s interest is clear and

³ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 181–207, https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C2293022.

specific. She claims, “I would say most definitely, especially in certain matters in religion regarding sex and different concepts like that (navigating romantic relationships).”

Earlier in the interview, Londynn shared a negative experience that took place while listening to a sermon on sexuality in her campus ministry group. Based on that experience, she states,

Things are phrased in religions throughout the world that make or could make or do make certain women feel alienated, based off, like, gender. So, I feel like learning more about it, and being able, as a woman, to explore those concepts for yourself may be liberating, and it may make people feel less awkward because I know in that sermon, I felt so awkward.

Londynn does finally also speak for her peers stating, “I feel like the Womanist movement [is] definitely something people of my age would have interest in.” Londynn felt unfairly singled out as a gender group in the experience that she shared. She instinctively knows that this is wrong in more ways than one. Womanist theology can provide her the words to use and the history that impacts how and why it may have happened. The work of her foremothers can empower Londynn and her peers to add their voices and experiences to the work and wisdom of womanist theology.

Jayla has had a more limited background in church engagement growing up but has a solid claim on her Christian faith, especially through her campus ministry group. Her interest in womanist theology encompasses a very specific area of interest. She states,

I feel like women as a whole is growing... Women are coming into power a lot, so I think for sure to keep going. That’s making sure, like, women have opportunity that men have. Definitely, I think people would be interested.”

She goes on to talk about unequal pay in athletics in particular and among women workers in general, saying finally,

“So I definitely think people would be interested [in] learning about that and [to] try to push for better rights, better money, value our money, paycheck salaries all those things. So, for sure, definitely, I would be interested, for sure, because I would want to be a part of that.

Other than the thesis project topic, sports was the other running theme throughout the interview time with Jayla, therefore her answer was not surprising. However, worth noting is that although she is keenly aware of and interested in pay equality for women in athletics, she has an eye toward looking out for the good of all women. This, as it turns out, is a womanist attitude.

The Roots of Womanist Theology

Womanist theology begins with ‘womanist,’ a term and concept coined and created by Alice Walker, poet, novelist and short story writer, in her collection of essays titled, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Prose*.

womanist

1. FROM WOMANISH. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. Serious.
2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white,

beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.”

Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.⁴

Womanist theology evolves from Walker’s ‘womanist’ definition. Initially, African American scholars in religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, specifically women, embraced and incorporated womanism with the objective, as expressed by Katie G. Cannon, “to use Walker's definition as a critical, methodological framework for challenging inherited traditions for their collusion with androcentric [male-centered/male-is-normative] patriarchy as well as for being a catalyst in overcoming oppressive situations through revolutionary acts of rebellion.”⁵ Now in a much more expansive way, Black women who voluntarily embrace womanism and womanist theology not only find a place for the myriad experiences and perspectives for their experiences and those of their foremothers, but a place where the acknowledgement and flourishing of all people is sought. A place of truth-telling. A place of soul-baring with a purpose. A place of godly solace and liberation and salvation.

Womanism was incorporated into the Christian religious realm as womanist theology, a type of liberation theology. Liberation theology is a message of salvation that

⁴ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Prose* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, Inc., 2011), 12, ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁵ Katie G. Cannon, *The Womanist Theology Primer: Remembering What We Never Knew: the Epistemology of Womanist Theology*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Women’s Ministries Program Area, National Ministries Division, Presbyterian Church U.S.A., 2001), 1.

can be rooted in John 10:10, where Jesus says, “I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly” (NRSVUE).⁶ Anchoring his understanding of Liberation Theology in this text, Miguel De La Torre argues that structures that bring death are therefore anti-Christ, and the gospel message of Christ is meant to liberate human oppression of all kinds.⁷ “Liberation theology becomes the process of integrating faith with the sociopolitical everyday in which the oppressed find themselves.”⁸

Womanist theology emerged as Black women increasingly realized how their presence, participation, and person was excluded from other liberation movements. Diana L. Hayes explains how womanist theology addresses that history of exclusion:

It seeks to affirm their roles as women who have been full and active participants in the history of black Americans and the United States itself. Both feminist and black (male) liberation theologians have erred historically in claiming to speak inclusively, while basing their theologies primarily on the respective experiences of only white women or black men. Womanists assert that full liberation can be achieved only when all forms of oppression are equally addressed.⁹

Black women supported the suffrage movement that did not benefit their right to vote. They supported the Civil Rights movement that did not benefit them in equal measure as it did for Black men. Therefore, womanism and womanist theology now center the voices and experiences of Black women while seeking to benefit all.

⁶ Miguel A. De La Torre, *Liberation Theology for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2013), 25, ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁷ De La Torre, *Liberation Theology*, 26.

⁸ De La Torre, *Liberation Theology*, 26.

⁹ Diana L. Hayes, “African American” in the section “Third World Women’s Theologies” in *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, ed. Virginia Fabella and R.S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 221–222, as cited in Cannon, *Womanist Theology Primer*, 2.

Though their experience has in large part already taught these ten Black, Christian, Gen Z women the truth of how things remain for Black women in present times, introducing or furthering their knowledge of womanist theology provides increasing opportunity for them to add their voices, learn from others, and deepen their faith. Experience in collegiate ministry in addition to the in-depth interviews leads me to conclude that womanist theology offers a flexible and dialogic model that will resonate with and benefit Black, Christian, Gen Z women. In fact, I believe the participation of Gen Z will benefit all Black women. Alice Walker's definition of 'womanist' especially resonates for this age group. For example, one participant mentioned the quest for self-actualization as common for her generation. This might be considered by some as "outrageous" behavior, depending on the methods employed by Gen Z women to pursue it. In addition, this generation has a wider view and definition of womanhood, so the second part of the definition might resonate with them because it is expansive and does not perpetuate a stereotype. "Loves herself" is key in the third part of Walker's definition. All of the participants are on a quest of some sort to love themselves, and a faithful, healthy self-image is part of that quest. It is an honor and privilege for clergy and Christian leaders to journey in any way in that sacred space with them.

By way of example, how the Church and its associated organizations like seminaries, of all places, found themselves in need of womanist theology may be instructive. Katie G. Cannon offers a candid account of her experience that emphasizes the Black church. She describes her point of view as a Black female seminarian and

pioneer in the field of womanist theology. I offer here a summary of key portions of her account.

Cannon notes that after the Civil War, protecting white supremacy caused the dependency and despair for African Americans. Opportunities and equality swung like a pendulum in society and in the Church for many of them. Paternalistic white Christians subjected formerly enslaved persons to segregated seating, times to pray, and Holy Communion.¹⁰ The ongoing effects of slavery and Reconstruction “called Black churches forth as the oldest, largest, and most powerful institutions controlled by African Americans.”¹¹ However, with these independent Black denominations came an androcentric “prototype of rhetoric and hierarchical structural organization under the jurisdiction of white ecclesiastical bodies.”¹² Black women were either excluded altogether from decision making or involved only peripherally.¹³

Though the involvement of women may have been “peripheral” in regard to decision making, this does not by any means indicate that their activities were relegated to things that were unimportant. Cannon further notes that Black women used

church auxiliary groups to address education, child care, and nutrition. Lay women, who shared communal identity and beliefs about God, established industrial homes - a network of residential centers offering training of head, hands, and heart for black females migrating from rural areas to urban cities. They also demonstrated their readiness for Christian ministry by creating service guilds, wherein the participants presented numerous interdenominational programs with neighboring churches. Persevering under blatant discrimination, these extraordinarily gifted

¹⁰ Cannon, *Womanist Theology Primer*, 5.

¹¹ Cannon, *Womanist Theology Primer*, 5.

¹² Cannon, *Womanist Theology Primer*, 6.

¹³ Cannon, *Womanist Theology Primer*, 7.

church women promoted various types of creative fundraising activities for the financial support of the church and sponsored cultural and recreational activities that were quite popular beyond their geographical regions.¹⁴

What Cannon describes in the activities of auxiliary groups, these young women may recognize or see remnants of in the activities or programs of Black churches they attend or visit: the Rainbow Tea Fundraiser, rhetorical contests, etc.¹⁵ These ideas that were born out of exclusion may seem old fashioned to Black, Christian, Gen Z women. However, in their proper context and acknowledging their impact, these events may in fact inspire them to do the same (create your own avenues of participation) – while persevering in the fight for liberation.

It is from this view that Cannon and others “enter theological education acknowledging the fact that we had been blessed and inspired by the Black Church community throughout our existence ... Our overarching sociocultural reality was a world of blackness crammed inside of dominating whiteness.”¹⁶ The magnitude of what the Black church has created and achieved and what Black women have contributed within that largely androcentric structure is not lost on “most members of historically Black seminary communities — administrators, faculty, staff and students,” writes Cannon.¹⁷

¹⁴ Cannon, *Womanist Theology Primer*, 7.

¹⁵ Generally speaking, a Rainbow Tea Fundraiser consists of a group or individual hosting a table that is assigned a certain color of the rainbow. Ideally the food provided for their guests is primarily comprised of that color as are the decorations. In addition, the hosts and guests are dressed in the assigned color. The ticket price and other activities at the tea raise funds for the church, perhaps for a particular project.

¹⁶ Cannon, *Womanist Theology Primer*, 4.

¹⁷ Cannon, *Womanist Theology Primer*, 4.

As a seminarian in the 1970s Cannon and others “undertook the most basic kind of liberationist work, interfacing contextual realities of our indivisible blackness and femaleness with our experience of God’s earthly mystery and heavenly revelation. In fairly straightforward terms we understood that theology had been articulated by influential men and communicated from the pulpit to the pew from their own points of view.”¹⁸ They were met with “opposition, bigotry and suspicion” in “a space organized by and for men” that created “ugly days and mean times.”¹⁹

Alongside the detailed definition of womanist theology, this account of how even in this church-adjacent space (i.e., seminary) the voice and experience of women met with such resistance can be enlightening, not only to Black, Christian, Gen Z women, but to all Black Women. This knowledge can possibly provide a bridge of understanding to how other places in society developed the same resistance to the power and presence of Black women. In addition, Cannon would go on to be a history-maker and Womanist pioneer in the fields of Christian ethics, education, and theology, just to name a few; she garnered many awards and accolades, and most importantly, positively influencing innumerable persons along the way. Cannon paved the way for this researcher as the first Black woman ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the United Presbyterian Church that would become the Presbyterian Church (USA).

¹⁸ Cannon, *Womanist Theology Primer*, 8.

¹⁹ Cannon, *Womanist Theology Primer*, 8.

Black Women, Womanist Theology, and the Biblical Text

For many Womanist theologians, Hagar's story is a starting point for connecting the stories of Black women to the biblical witness and to present-day circumstances. Like the history of Black women in the United States, Hagar's story is intertwined with the story of Abram and Sarai found in Genesis 16–21, by force, by no choice of her own.²⁰ Hagar's body is used as a commodity and a convenience for those who have power over her. In Stephanie Y. Mitchem's *Introducing Womanist Theology*, two important texts in womanist theology are cited for their use of Hagar as a starting point.²¹

First, in *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible*, Renita J. Weems begins to delve into nine different biblical stories featuring women with Hagar's story. Mitchem writes, "Through her interpretation of the story, Weems related black women's oppression and exploitation with that of the slave Hagar. Weems deepens the analysis by presenting American capitalism's effects on black women as another form of rape and enslavement."²² Weems refuses to simplify this story to try to make it a black and white issue only or a third world versus a first world problem.²³ She interprets this story through the kaleidoscope of ethnic prejudice

²⁰ Hagar is Sarai's Egyptian slave/servant given to Abram to bear a child in Sarai's place. After Hagar gives birth to Ishmael, this sets off a storm of controversy and adversity. After Sarah (formerly Sarai) births the son God promised, Isaac, she instructs Abraham (formerly Abram) to send Hagar and her son away. God promises Abraham that a great nation will be made through Ishmael and Abraham complies. Hagar and Ishmael are sent away into the desert with a little bread and water. When Hagar cries out in desperation, God hears the *boy's* cries and saves them. Genesis 16:1-21:21

²¹ Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology*, 46, 53.

²² Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology*, 46–47.

²³ Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego, CA: LuraMedia, 1988), 1, <http://find.library.duke.edu/catalog/DUKE000795586>.

exacerbated by economic and sexual exploitation as well as female social rivalry.²⁴

Weems goes on to break it down to its smallest parts, not to belittle the women or us, but to show us how we can see ourselves in the text and where the opportunities for faithfulness to God and one another lie.

In addition, Delores Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, emphasizes Hagar's conversation with God in the wilderness.

According to Mitchem,

Williams connects this story to that of black women who also experience wilderness times. The themes of the meaning of motherhood, poverty and homelessness, the expendability of black women and children, and the ongoing use of black women's bodies for assorted forms of surrogacy correlate the story of Hagar with African American women's experiences.²⁵

Williams includes a powerful exegetical analysis of Hagar's story including the details of promises made to Hagar by the Divine and the naming of the Divine by Hagar.²⁶ She includes specifics that all women, but especially Black women can connect to. For example, Williams begins by clearly stating that Hagar is seen as the solution "to a problem confronting a wealthy Hebrew slave-holding family."²⁷ There is, at the very least, anecdotal evidence to support a feeling among many Black women that they are called in to fix situations both personal and organizational when others have no other options. In addition, through her exegetical analysis from a non-patriarchal lens, Williams sheds light on this story that gives insight into the possibilities of the backstory of the

²⁴ Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, 2.

²⁵ Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology*, 53.

²⁶ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 15–27.

²⁷ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 15.

relationship between Hagar and Sarai that allows Black women to envision themselves in the text.²⁸ Through these techniques, Williams' womanist rendering of Hagar's story may help Black women make sense of what they are experiencing in the here and now.

Black, Christian, Gen Z Women and Womanist Theology

Black, Christian, Gen Z women have expressed their interest in womanist theology, their interviews have resonated with the definition, yet ultimately, they will have to claim womanist theology for themselves. As a Black woman in the process of claiming her own womanism, womanist theology, and voice within it, I raise up my voice via this thesis and in turn lift their voices within it. In the process, womanist theology is refracted, and Womanism is implicit in their words. For example, Tamika has struggled like others with her body image, but ultimately in the essence of her interview she demonstrates the tenacity to struggle to love herself and her roundness. Likewise, Kameron held onto her faith and struggled against those who came against her and her homosexual best friend, never wavering on either front. Journee may be embracing Womanism just by pursuing life in all the ways she desires – a rising senior with a triple major and a commitment to ROTC who is also contemplating law school or seminary: audacious and courageous indeed.

Clergy and Christian leaders who commit to supporting and building up the self-image of Black, Christian, Gen Z women through womanist theology help them make an explicit choice. Specifically, when Black women add our voices and honor them by

²⁸ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 17.

including these young women, we show them that they are important. Their voices produce unique knowledge and theology that result in wisdom that we would not have without them.

Conclusion

When the question regarding the participants' interest in learning more about womanist theology was formulated and included in the interview guide, I did not expect them to know much about it and that proved to be true. I found their points of connection and interpretation curious after they listened intently the second time around to the brief description that most asked for before answering. However, based on their responses in the in-depth interviews, my objective for pursuing this theological subject did not change and was only magnified. Their stories only served to prove that the Church and society have come a long way in some respects, but the Lord knows, we still have a long way to go for Black women to be heard, respected, and included.

The objectives of adding womanist theology to the knowledge base and “toolbox” for Black, Christian, Gen Z women were (1) for them to have a platform to be heard and incorporated into the important work already being done on behalf of Black women in this work of liberation and (2) to give them the opportunity to know that it exists and to have the privilege and opportunity to join in and take it further as they see fit for more impact among their ranks.

As with *imago Dei*, for each of the participants, their inquiries and reasons for interest would likely be at least partially answered by an overall view and discussion about womanist theology. For those who choose to go deeper, a weekly study of the

stories in *Just a Sister Away* by Renita Weems would likely be captivating (deepening the ones they are familiar with and introducing others) and also address many of their points of interest. They could then be directed to other resources for further engagement.

The next chapter will summarize the recommendations for clergy and Christian leaders regarding how they can positively shape the self-image of Black, Christian, Gen Z women. The voices of the ten participants will be heard as major contributors. In addition, the incorporation of *imago Dei* and womanist theology will be addressed.

For Further Reading and Research

Books

The following books were written during the earlier years of the development of womanist theology and provide a view into some of the influential voices at that time.

Cannon, Katie G. *Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*. New York: Continuum, 1995.

A collection of essays written by Cannon that address topics from racism and economist to race and gender as they influence the Black liberation ethic, Womanist preaching in the Black church and more.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Grounded in history, this work gives an account of Black feminist thought that makes use of a variety of resources to shine a light upon and making accessible the ideas of great minds such as Angela Davis, bell hooks, Alice Walker, and Audre Lorde.

Douglas, Kelly Brown. *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999.

An examination of sexuality as the taboo subject in the Black church with its myths and stereotypes and an exploration of the importance of engaging in conversation on sexuality in the Black church.

Riggs, Marcia. *Awake, Arise, and Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994.

A view of the reason for the lack of cooperation among Blacks through the lens of differing social groups and continually nurtured by competition along with a proposal for approaching this crisis.

Townes, Emilie M., ed. *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994.

A collection of essays by theologians that address the question “Where is the Black church (and its women, men, and children) as we face evil and suffering in the United States and in our world?” from different angles.

Williams, Delores S. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.

Beginning with Hagar’s story as a grounding point, liberation theologies that ignore women of color are critiqued.

For more recent womanist theology scholarship and discussion, Black, Christian, Gen Z women and others may find the following online offerings preferable and accessible:

Classes

Union Presbyterian Seminary (website), The Katie Geneva Cannon Center for Womanist Leadership, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://www.upsem.edu/leadership-institute/womanist-leadership-institute-online-courses/>

Vanderbilt University (website), accessed January 22, 2024, <https://researchguides.library.vanderbilt.edu/c.php?g=1051255&p=7631631>

Payne Theological Seminary (website), accessed January 22, 2024, <https://payneseminary.edu/courses/introduction-to-womanist-theology/>

Podcast

Beyond the Womanist Classroom (website), Mitzi J. Smith PhD., accessed January 22, 2024, <https://mitzijsmith.net/beyond-the-womanist-classroom-podcast/>

6. Recommendations for Clergy and Christian Leaders

This thesis project began with the question, “How can clergy and Christian leaders positively affect the self-image of Black, Christian, Gen Z women?” As a matter of research, the definition, aspects, and contributing factors of self-image have been explored, and ten young women have provided an inside look at the development of their self-image over time and how a few aspects of the Christian faith have impacted their self-image. Subsequently, *imago Dei* and womanist theology were explored as theological topics that might be of interest to this demographic as a means of supporting them as their self-image continues to develop.

In the interview process with the young women, after ascertaining the current state of their self-image and soliciting memories about how faith and faith-related circumstances have impacted their self-image, the participants were asked the thesis question point blank. It was important that the women speak directly to the heart of the thesis project. The question was posed, “What do you think clergy and Christian leaders can do (or continue to do) to build up your self-image? In other words, how can they have a positive effect on your self-image?” To honor each woman’s commitment to participating in this project, their suggestions are presented individually and have not been combined with others.

The participants’ recommendations are somewhat in line with several of the five dimensions of relational authority (listening, transparency, integrity, care, and expertise) that establish influence on young adults (from Springtide Research Institute, mentioned in Chapter 1). However, as was also previously mentioned, the words accessible, consistent,

genuine, proactive, and confidential also describe what they are looking for in these relationships with clergy and Christian leaders. Most of their answers are largely based on what they have previously shared and their recommendations are designed to help beyond their own demographic. How encouraging that even though they were excited to have their voices heard, their perspectives were not selfish and many of them included suggestions hoping to help others as well. In addition, I as researcher have provided some interpretation based on the atmosphere, the vibe of the interview that could not be captured in mere words and conversation that has not been quoted within the confines of this document.

Janiya has two suggestions for Christian leaders that are likely related. First, she says, “Be more open minded toward people in their situations.” This immediately begs the question: what type of situations does she mean? Unfortunately, this follow up question was a missed opportunity by the researcher. However, her second suggestion gives a hint. Janiya’s second suggestion is as follows: “Be welcoming just like the way Jesus was described in the Bible, like, ‘Come as you are’, and I just feel like, if people had that approach, then it would just be better for everyone and everyone’s self-image.” Janiya previously mentioned comments being made to her mother and her family that turned them away from the church. She did not comment specifically regarding who made the comments, but implied that they made a negative impact on Janiya’s sense of self and that of her family as well. The broad definition of Christian leader is important in this case because these issues could have stemmed from interactions with greeters, ushers, Sunday school teachers, clergy, or any other perceived leader in the church.

Harmonee suggests that Christian leaders be vulnerable with not only her demographic, but with all people in the pews. She asks that they do so regarding “where they messed up in life, and how God helped them” as a means of building up the self-image of people. Her rationale is as follows: “You’ll feel better about yourself, because you know that everybody is going through what you’re going through, and that they’ll get through it. So, in my case, I feel like church officials should share more about their lives and more about the things that aren’t godly and aren’t perfect, and how they overcame that.” The bottom line is that it appears that Harmonee wants Christian leaders to be real and relatable. In doing so, she says, “people in the pews can actually relate to those that are higher up and in turn internalize what they’re saying more because they know that it actually applies to them versus just a general message.” It’s interesting that Harmonee uses the term “those that are higher up” when referring to “church officials.” She believes that those who have an elevated position have indeed made mistakes and overcome them, something the Bible clearly displays. Yet Harmonee holds a degree of respect for them now and will hold them in greater esteem if they share about their mistakes and recovery from those mistakes.

Samone aims her comments at smaller churches. She states, “Do better at making a youth one (organization) where people around you are going through the same thing. They’re in school. They’re struggling with temptation. They don’t know who to hang out with. They don’t know whether they want to continue [to attend] college or not.” Samone believes this will build up a person’s self-image in general. “I feel like when you are around people who are similar to you it’s better that you’re not alone, and you’re

processing.” Based on our time together this comment from Samone seems to be aimed at all the facets of self-image. As young people are figuring out who they are identity-wise and what they are capable of achieving, a community of others who have the same questions can be a source of comfort. In addition, the age range Samone speaks of (middle and high school) is when many of the participants really struggled with body image; perhaps this group of trusted peers would also be a haven where they can be themselves: confident in personality and in their physical appearance.

Amyah asks that clergy and Christian leaders continue “to encourage us” and “uplift us and let us know there is nothing wrong with us.” She also asks for engagement from them by “talking to us, inviting us to other church events and introducing us to other people in the church.” In essence, Amyah wants to be known and actively loved by Christian leaders. Her suggestions demand relationships that take time to build and maintain.

Journey says to Christian leaders that “the main thing is empowering people within the church walls.” She goes on to describe ways she has experienced this and suggests it can be done by “having conversation over food or fellowship.” Go outside of the church walls, too. Journey suggests “Going [out] and doing stuff like [with] life groups.” Journey has participated with “groups of Black women particularly together from older ages together with younger ages, having that support and that mentorship in a Christian way and having that accountability.” She has experienced empowerment by being involved with various types of organizations outside of the church and wants to see empowerment happening in a Christian manner. That is, help Black, Christian, Gen Z

women know what they are capable of by the power of their identity in Christ. Finally, Journee wants Christian leaders to know that “emphasizing the relationship aspect of it all is crucial!”

To Christian leaders, Daisha says that “people need somebody there to talk to that are comfortable, and, you know, outgoing and soft hearted to talk to in the church.” She clarifies further, “what we need is, like, a positive vibe to help especially younger people to, you know, be comfortable to talk about, what’s going on in their life.” Daisha was committed to asking for “a great environment,” “a healthy vibe and loving people,” and those who “are going to be more than happy to accept you and help you and use a lot of hospitality within the church.” I asked Daisha if she was willing to be admonished or corrected by teaching or counsel in the church, even though she previously experienced a tremendous amount of “church hurt.”¹ Her answer was an unequivocal “yes,” only asking that it be done kindly as she has indicated. This answer came in spite of the researcher’s amazement that Daisha was still willing to give organized religion a chance in light of her experiences. The researcher’s interpretation is that Daisha is seeking assurance of the love of God through loving actions from Christian leaders. This builds and affirms her self-image, and she believes it will do so for others as well.

Tamika asks for engagement with “young black girls [and] young black boys, in our community. Specifically, just talking to them, like asking, how was your day? How

¹ “Church hurt” is a term used in some Christian circles that refers to ways in general that people have been harmed by other church people (laity or leaders). The result is pain, sadness, emotional scarring, or even abuse inflicted, on purpose or perhaps unintentionally. Many times, “church hurt” drives people away from a particular church, the Church, or even away from Christianity and God.

are you doing? Generally, how are you feeling right now?” Receiving a heartfelt answer will require a relationship, a relationship built on the pillars the participants shared earlier. She is also a proponent of Christian leaders’ being proactive with young people around them “instead of waiting for the kids to come to church, or the teenagers to come to the chapel [directed at campus ministers and college chaplains]. Meet them where they’re at; if you’re on a campus, go to the dorm and to say, I’m going to just have a dorm check in and let’s just talk.” Tamika says that students may need “to vent, to rant” knowing that what they say is confidential. She goes on to give two more examples of how the church did or did not “meet people where they are.” Tamika’s rationale as to how this builds up self-image is explained as follows: “in very simple terms, just really meeting people where they’re at [is] a way that to, like, not ... be hurt by the church. Also had the leaders in the church had more discernment on who to allow to be an elder, or a deacon or deaconess (other Christian leaders), because those are [the] individuals that are direct representations of God.” She goes on to say that they may interpret being hurt by Christian leaders as being hurt by God if they are not far enough along in their Christian journey to know the difference. Extending Tamika’s example to apply it to self-image, she too is wanting people to feel loved and accepted “where they are” by Christian leaders as a means of feeling God’s love, which in turn builds their self-image. She suggests that clergy and Christian leaders do a better job of discerning who is given authority to impact vulnerable people coming into the church who can easily be hurt by those leaders.

Kameron speaks her truth to Christian leaders. “I believe in affirmations. I can’t speak for everybody, but sometimes I can. You know how Black women are treated in society. Being Black and being a woman is not for the weak.” She gives a specific example of affirmation that is important in her estimation. “Affirming that being a woman that loves God doesn’t look one way, doesn’t sound one way. There’s different ways to do it. You don’t have to put yourself in a box just because you’re Baptist or Pentecostal, or whatever you may be. That’s the main thing for me. I’m just affirming that identity.” Kameron would go on to specifically address women with church-related identity issues due to being in the LGBTQ+ community or having mental health issues. “Affirming that identity” seems to be of utmost importance to her, and indeed identity is an important part of self-image. Kameron truly wants leaders to know this important fact. “Honestly, just honing in on letting the women know that they’re worthy.” Kameron seems to inherently understand that worth drives self-esteem and self-esteem is essential to self-image.

Londynn wants Christian leaders to engage her demographic as well. She says she suggests “getting to know different people” especially “the quieter people” because you will have to be a familiar face in order for them to feel comfortable sharing or engaging. She also encourages leaders to “invite them to speak, because sometimes you don’t feel like people want you to speak and knowing that someone wants to hear you is important sometimes.” This, she says, goes hand in hand with being welcoming and getting to know people in your midst. Regarding how engagement and invitation build up one’s self-image, Londynn says, is summed up this way: “I feel that a community atmosphere really

lends itself to having a positive self-image. When you feel like you are valued and feel like people care about you. I feel like you just think highly, more highly of yourself rather than if you felt like you came into church, and no one acknowledged you or feel like no one really cares if you're there or not.”

Jayla believes Christian leaders should be personable especially by “showcasing and demonstrating good values and morals and stuff like that.” She also is an advocate of clergy and Christian leaders who are real and relatable as mentioned previously. Jayla says if they share their struggle with certain issues and how they dealt with those issues it will be helpful to her. Knowing that she is not alone in the types of struggles she is having seems to hold the positive influence on self-image for Jayla.

What began as a quest for informed guidance from Black, Christian, Gen Z women to clergy and Christian leaders regarding how we can contribute to positively affecting and building up their self-image has resulted in a dialogue about the development of their self-image over their life span to date that is a gift beyond imagining. From the pervasiveness and dangers of “the comparison game” that begins early in life to the nonstop judgment from the outside and the inside that does so much damage to the self-image to the desire for true, honest relationship with Christian leaders to accompany them and guide them, these ten participants have spoken words of wisdom for those who have ears to listen. Whoever you are (clergy, Christian leader, congregant, or other) or wherever you are (church, nonprofit, academia or other), by the power of the Spirit of God, your encounter with the content of their lived experiences will likely speak in the areas where you need to hear and guide you to “be and do” that which God would

have you to when it comes to the building of the kingdom of God through God's beloved people – Black, Christian, Gen Z women and beyond. While they may not have claimed a Womanist identity for themselves as of yet, they certainly have displayed one of the tenets of Womanism clearly – caring for the flourishing of all people.

In addition to the suggestions garnered from the ten participants, the information presented regarding theological topics of *imago Dei* and womanist theology, along with your own further research and reading on these topics, will provide opportunities for sharing in helpful ways with Black, Christian, Gen Z women and others. Women, Black women, and Black, Christian, Gen Z women need to know without a shadow of a doubt that they are God's beloved. The development of self-image over the life span means that the opportunity to have a favorable effect on a woman's self-image is always available.

For example, the history of the interpretation of *imago Dei* that devalued women, while not pleasant to discuss, is important for all women and men to know. Why? Because it helps explain both the blatant and more subtle actions of Christian organizations that can leave Black women and all women feeling left out, curious, questioning, or downright doubting their faith and themselves. There are times when the faithful are a part of an organization for a long period of time and have a lurking sense that something is not quite right, but they can't "put their finger on it." For example, women are teaching only women and children and are an integral part of *certain ministries only*. Even in spaces where no one ever explicitly says that they cannot teach men or preach from the pulpit, yet those leadership opportunities are not readily open to them. However, if as leaders and educators we are open and honest about how Christian

history has evolved when it comes to women, *imago Dei* and inclusion/exclusion in the Christian organizations, we can help our siblings in Christ be more aware, ask better questions, and ultimately decipher what may be happening around them. This is no easy task. A culture of openness and honesty, education and dialogue will go a long way over time to make it a part of the culture of ministry. The history of interpretation that has been briefly discussed and the feminist and womanist interpretation that refutes it also provides a starting point for Black, Christian, Gen Z women (or anyone else) who may want to pursue knowledge on their own.

Womanism and womanist theology may be a bigger ask for the masses to embrace and integrate into the fabric of ministry. However, because womanist theology is a strand of Liberation Theology that is ultimately dedicated to the “survival and wholeness of entire people,” the time and attention of all is warranted, at a minimum, for developing a knowledge of the basics. Having the ability to specifically connect Black women to resources that will center their voices and experiences will be invaluable. There are people, books, online resources, and more that can speak to the ways in which Black women may need to feel seen, heard, supported, and fulfilled that no other theological God-talk will provide. This thesis project has laid information and resources before you as a means of beginning the process. Ultimately, utilizing these resources is a recommendation for any reader of this thesis project.

Through preaching and teaching, pastoral care and community service, the substance of *imago Dei* and womanist theology, as theological and practical perspectives, can be intentionally espoused and embodied as a way of positively affecting the self-

image of Black women, all women, and all people. As stated in the definition of self-image in Chapter 2, knowing God's love is a source for a positive self-image. These topics contribute to a woman's knowledge of the love of God in a more robust fashion in the face of all the experiences of life. Clergy and other Christian leaders have the privilege of participating with God in the lives of God's people in ways that others do not. May we be found faithful.

Executive Summary of Recommendations

For those who may need to take in the recommendations in a succinct format or who have turned to this section to view the “bottom line” before deciding if you want to read the details, this executive summary is for you. Herein lies a basic presentation which summarizes the recommendations for clergy and Christian leaders regarding how to positively affect the self-image of Black, Christian, Gen Z women.

1. Be genuinely welcoming to Black, Christian, Gen Z women and all people. This includes engaging them in conversation to truly get to know them and including them in events.
2. Be open-minded toward people in their unique situations and ensure your outer manifestation as an overall organization aligns with this open-mindedness.
3. Be vulnerable with the people in the pews by sharing your testimony and striving to showcase and demonstrate good values and morals.
4. Be real and relatable.
5. Encourage Black, Christian, Gen Z women and uplift them.
 - a. Use of affirmations is further recommended. For example: “Being a woman that loves God doesn’t look one way, doesn’t sound one way. There are different ways to do it.”
6. Engage Black, Christian, Gen Z women by talking to them – maybe a simple genuine inquiry about how they are doing, inviting them to other church events that may interest them and introducing them to other people in the church they may connect with.

- a. They want to be known and actively loved. This can be done by “having conversation over food or fellowship or going [out] and doing stuff [with] life groups.” More specifically, “groups of Black women particularly together from older ages together with younger ages, having support and that mentorship in a Christian way and having that accountability.”
 - b. The relationship aspect of it all is crucial. Be sure to get “to know different people,” especially “the quieter people,” because you will have to be a familiar face in order for them to feel comfortable sharing or engaging. Invite them to speak up.
7. Black, Christian, Gen Z women need to be comfortable and generally will feel comfortable talking to people who are outgoing and soft-hearted, ones who create a great environment with a healthy, loving vibe.
8. Be proactive with young people in your sphere of influence “instead of waiting for the kids to come to church, or the teenagers to come to the chapel [directed at those in collegiate ministry]. Meet them where they are!”
9. Do better at forming youth organizations where young people can be around those who are going through similar issues.
10. Exercise discernment regarding whom to allow to be an elder, or a deacon or deaconess, or other Christian leaders because these are the individuals that are direct representations of God to many people.
11. Educate yourself on the basic tenets and developments of both *imago Dei*, feminist theology, and womanist theology on an ongoing basis.

12. Work to cultivate a culture of openness and honesty, education and dialogue in your ministry setting where the knowledge gained in #10 above can be shared as appropriate within the relationships that are cultivated.
13. Intentionally offer to connect Black women to resources where they can form additional relationships and find spaces that will center their voices and experiences.
14. Weave *imago Dei* (including feminist theology) and womanist theology throughout all of ministry both as theological concepts and practical tools to be espoused and embodied.

7. Conclusion

“Remember Who You Are! How Clergy and Christian Leaders Can Positively Affect the Self-Image of Black, Christian, Gen Z Women” assumes that clergy and Christian leaders can, in fact, have a positive effect on the self-image of Black, Christian, Gen Z Women. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I found myself amid collegiate women experiencing various states of distress related to their sense of self. I wondered if what I was doing was indeed helping them and what more my ministry colleagues and I could do to minister to them as we journeyed along with them in their life. As the most critical part of the thesis project, I decided to ask ten young women myriad questions about their self-image. They voluntarily answered, openly and honestly, sharing in great depth.

Ascertaining a definition of self-image was a key first step. What emerged was not THE definition, but the one I developed through and for this thesis project: Self-image is the development of a self-awareness over the lifespan of one’s view of oneself as one is now, the prospect of future opportunities and achievements, and the reflection of the views of others about oneself; especially close family members/role models and God. It includes physical appearance (body image), personality, capabilities, achievements, and various facets of identity. Self-image is generally described as positive or negative. It is favorably impacted by supportive parenting (especially mothers) and religious beliefs/teaching (particularly a relational God in whose image one is made and whose love is active and steadfast).

Many of the participants shared struggles with mental health issues related to the distress caused by the conflicted journey of forming a healthy self-image, and, to my surprise, much of it was rooted in body image struggles. The interviews were full of narratives that recounted how they compared themselves to Caucasians (beginning around middle school) and always fell short of European beauty standards. Still others found themselves at HBCU's and were intimidated by the bevy of beauties they found there.

Faith communities played a role in both positive and negative ways for most of the participants. Their memories dated back to childhood and continued to present day, underscoring the fact that self-image is always evolving. For some participants, there have been individual clergy and Christian leaders who have made significant positive contributions to the edification of these young women and their self-image through the building of authentic relationships that develop with time and intentionality. They were enthusiastic about the opportunity to have their voices heard and give their advice to clergy and other Christian leaders on ways to engage their demographic and positively affect the self-image of Black, Christian, Gen Z women and others. The common theme among their suggestions (numbered 1 through 10 in the executive summary) is that they are relational.

To these interview conversations (and ultimately the recommendations to clergy and other Christian leaders) as a woman in collegiate ministry leadership and as a fellow Black woman I integrated two important perspectives on behalf of these young women: first, the knowledge of a more fully informed sense of the full *imago Dei* within them,

and second, womanist theology that takes their minds, bodies, and spirits seriously. These are theological and practical tools that can be employed within organizations and relationships to edify and build up a healthy self-image for Black, Christian, Gen Z women.

I believe that a robust view of *imago Dei* affirms all women as fully made in the image of God. This, in conjunction with the liberative view of womanist theology that takes seriously the breadth of their experiences and voices, will help Black, Christian, Gen Z women “remember who they are.” These perspectives can help them come to know who they are on their own terms, not in comparison to others. These theologies can help name what their souls seem to be longing for, to name the fact that they are uniquely themselves, “fearfully and wonderfully made” by God our Creator who breathed the very breath of life into each beloved one.

Finally, this thesis project was never intended to be an exercise in thought only, but of practical use. Honoring and yielding to the movement of God in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, if the recommendations are not what the reader needs, perhaps a story or sentiment shared by one of the participants, or the variety of research presented sparks further divine guidance to the readers’ unique call to “live, move and have their being” in the privileged space of accompanying God’s people on the journey of life and faith. To God be the glory. Amen.

Appendix A

THESIS INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Hello [Interviewee], how are you today?

- A. Positive response – great, would you be ok with me offering a centering moment before we begin?
 - a. Affirmative – move to centering moment.
 - b. Negative – move to main introductory interview questions.
- B. Negative response – oh, I am sorry to hear that, is this still a good time for our conversation?
 - a. Affirmative – alright, would you be ok with me offering a centering moment before we begin?
 - i. affirmative – let me know if you need to take a break for any reason. Move to centering moment.
 - ii. Negative – move to introductory questions.
 - b. Negative - would you like to reschedule our interview?
 - i. Yes – reschedule.
 - ii. No – thank you for your interest and I wish you well.
- C. Centering:
 - a. Please relax, close your eyes if you like. (pause)
 - b. Let’s take 3 deep breaths, in and out.
 - c. May you have clarity in thought during our time together.
 - d. May you find the words that authentically represent your story as you share with me today.
 - e. Pause
 - f. May it be so.

Introduce myself

- Associate chaplain at Presbyterian College in SC
- Previously campus minister at NCCU
- From Chicago originally been in Carolinas almost 15 years
- Have 3 young adult children, youngest is 25
- Been ordained in the PCUSA church almost 6 years
- Is there anything else you would like to know about me?

Even though we are recording, you may also see me taking notes to help me keep track!

Introductory Questions

We will begin with a few “get-to-know” you questions.

1. How old are you?
2. What year of college did you just complete?
3. What is/was your major?

4. Do you claim affiliation with a particular denomination, church, or Christian based organization?
 - a. If so, which one?
 - i. How long have you been affiliated?
 - b. If not, how long have you identified as Christian?
5. Do you have any family members or close friends who are clergy or Christian leaders?
 - a. If so, please describe their relationship to you and what position they hold, if you know it.
6. Are you involved in Christian leadership, in any formal or informal way?
 - a. If so, please describe your involvement.

Main Question Set

As you may recall from the information sent to you to prepare for this interview, the main subject of interest is the self-image of women in your demographic.

For this thesis project, self-image is defined as your overall view or concept of yourself, it is comprised of your beliefs and attitudes toward yourself, including your body, personality, capabilities, etc. and importantly, your identity.

1. How do you feel about yourself as a whole right now? In other words, how would you describe your self-image overall?
 - a. Has this changed over time?
 - i. If so, please describe how it has changed.
 - ii. If not, why do you believe it has not changed?
2. You indicated that you have been involved in “church/Christian organization” or have identified as a Christian for (insert time here), I’d like to know how this involvement (or Christian identity) has affected your self-image, if at all?
 - a. Follow up questions will tease out specifics, details and areas of clarification (e.g., Say more about....)
3. Describe your experience of having relationships of trust with clergy and other Christian leaders if you have or have had them.
 - a. What factors helped create this relationship of trust?
 - b. What was missing that prevented a relationship of trust?
4. Describe a time when you felt good about who you are in a situation related to being at church/Christian organization or interacting with clergy or Christian leaders?
 - a. What was it about the situation or the person that affected your self-image positively?

5. Have there been times where being at church/Christian organization or interacting with clergy or Christian leaders has had a negative effect on your self-image?
 - a. Why?
 - b. Why not?

6. What do you think clergy and Christian leaders can do (or continue to do) to build up your self-image? In other words, how can they have a positive effect on your self-image?
 - a. Why?
 - b. Why not?

(Interviewee), thank you for sharing this time with me. I appreciate your thoughtful engagement.

Would you like to add anything to this portion of our discussion, or is there something else you wish I had asked?

Wrap-up Questions

Finally, I would like to ask you a couple of brief questions about topics related to self-image that might interest someone in your demographic (Black, Christian, Gen Z Women) for a Christian formation component of the thesis project that is being considered.

1. Many Christians accept that human beings are made in the image of God. However, the particulars of what being made in the image of God means and how it applies to humans is highly debated. *Would someone in your demographic be interested in learning more about “the image of God” in a fuller sense to shape your self-image as a Black, Christian, Gen Z woman?*
2. Womanist theology takes seriously the experience of Black women. It reflects on the place of Black women in the world, it examines both religion and society in full acknowledgment of racism, sexism, and classism – all of which impact the lives and experience of many Black women.¹ *Would someone in your demographic be interested in learning more about “womanist theology” as a means of positively affecting your self-image as a Black, Christian, Gen Z woman?*

¹ Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 6-7, muse.jhu.edu/book/79072.

3. Are there other topics someone in your demographic would like to learn about that would be helpful in affirming and supporting you in your self-image?

Thank you again [Interviewee] for your time. I could not do this important work without willing participants such as yourself! I wish you well.

You will receive your electronic Amazon gift card via email within the next 3 to 5 days.

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Biography

Rev. Larceeda “British” Stephens Hyrams hails from Chicago, IL and has lived in the Carolinas since 2008. British is a graduate of Purdue University holding a Bachelor of Science degree in Industrial Engineering. She earned a Master of Divinity (M. Div.) and a Master of Arts in Christian Education (M.A.C.E.) from Union Presbyterian Seminary.

Fueled by her sense of call and quest for learning, British’s immersion in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was a product of her seminary environment and led to her ordination as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in 2017. British served two associate pastorates in Charlotte, NC, served as Presbyterian Campus Minister at North Carolina Central University, and is now the Jack and Jane Presseau Associate Chaplain at Presbyterian College in Clinton, SC.

British currently serves the broader PC(USA) denomination as a member of the Board of Trustees of the Presbyterian Foundation. Her current community involvement includes active membership with the Union County (NC) Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. as well as volunteering with various non-profits.