

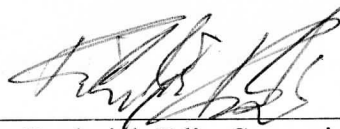
Infused: Millennials and the Future of the Black Church

By

Joy K. Challenger

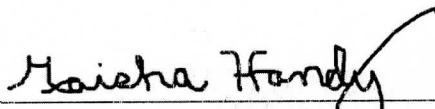
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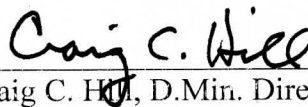
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Frederick Edie, Supervisor



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Craig C. Hill, D.Min. Director

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

2016

ABSTRACT

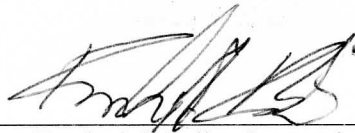
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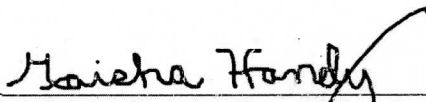
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## **Abstract**

Deep societal trends impact the religious fervency and participation of millennials in the Black Church. Many young adults, though remaining Christian, have fallen away from their faith communities, finding them irrelevant for their daily lives. Even the most religiously committed have shown signs of waning faith, as evidenced by limited participation, and theological and ideological dissonance with the Black Church. Historically strong across all indicators, the Black Church is ideally positioned to stave off the attrition of youth and young adults, having a missional mindset toward this cohort—prioritizing them in their ministry development and programming. African American congregational leaders must develop disciples who have cohesive identities, live integrated lives, and experience an infusion of their personal vocation and the mission of the Church. Thus the future of the Black Church depends on the development of millennials who have an integrated faith life, which is distinguishable by its practices, disciplines and virtues that are nurtured by an understanding of the Church’s mission and their role in it. Key will be establishing mentoring relationships that allow for questioning, exploration and discovery. To enact the changes necessary the church must understand the cultural worlds of young adults and engage them in holistic ministry that is reflective of the mission of God through Christ (*missio dei*)—activity that culminates with reaching the world with God’s redemptive plan for humanity.

## Dedication

To Mommy  
Casandra K. Murphy,  
For introducing me to Christ  
and the Black Church

&

In memory of my grandparents  
Jesse and Catherine Kilpatrick, Sr.  
Virginia Challenger,  
Your love is *always* with me

# Contents

<i>Abstract</i> .....	<i>iv</i>
<i>Dedication</i> .....	<i>v</i>
<i>List of Tables</i> .....	<i>vii</i>
<i>List of Figures</i> .....	<i>viii</i>
<i>List of Abbreviations</i> .....	<i>ix</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	<i>x</i>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>1   STILL WATERS RUN DEEP</b> .....	<b>12</b>
Societal Deep Trends & Faith.....	14
The Black Church in Historical Context .....	31
Theological Terms.....	33
The “MILLENNIALS”.....	36
Cultural World of Millennials .....	40
Life Stage Issues.....	51
<b>2  THE DIASPORA</b> .....	<b>58</b>
The Black Church: Fervency In Context.....	60
A Bad Rap For The Church.....	67
Religious Participation .....	71
Religious Belief and Thought.....	80
African American Waning Fervency.....	85
The Diaspora of Black Millennials & Young Adults .....	95
<b>3  INSIDE OUT</b> .....	<b>102</b>
Identity Formation .....	105
Identity and Spiritual Formation.....	113
Integration.....	117
The Marks of a disciple (The Look).....	135
<b>4  THE GATHERING</b> .....	<b>148</b>
Infusion: Our Role in God’s Great Story.....	152
There Remains a Remnant.....	159
The Gathering Field.....	165
Developing I3 Disciples .....	172
<b>5  LIVING MISSION IN THE FIELD</b> .....	<b>191</b>
Millennial Matters .....	192
A Wake Up Call.....	194
#Movements .....	197
The Church and Black Lives Matters .....	202
A Final Word.....	207
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>211</b>

## List of Tables

Table 2.1 Emerging Adults (Ages 18-23) and Changes Since Adolescence (13-17) on Some Indicators.....	92
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**List of Figures**

*Chapter Two:*

Figure 2.1 Religious Types | Source Data from Smith & Snell, Souls in Transition ..... 73  
Figure 2.2 Religious African Americans ..... 87  
Figure 2.3 Religious Indicators for Black Protestant Millennials (In Comparison)..... 88

*Chapter Three:*

Figure 3.1 Development Template of the Three Ethics ..... 133  
Figure 3.2 Expression of the Cultural-Development Ethics Among Religious Liberals..... 134  
Figure 3.3 Expression of the Cultural-Development Ethics Among Religious Conservatives .. 134

## List of Abbreviations

AME	African Methodist Episcopal
BLM	Black Lives Matter
Black Panthers	The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense
BP	Black Protestants
CME	Christian Methodist Episcopal
COGIC	Church of God in Christ
CRM, CRM1	The Civil Rights Movement , Civil Rights Movement 1.0
CRM2	Civil Rights Movement 2.0
I3	Identity, Integration and Infusion
MTD	Moralistic Therapeutic Deism
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NSYR	National Study of Youth and Religion
PEW	The Pew Forum
SNCC	Student Non-Violent Committee
UNCF	United Negro College Fund

## Acknowledgements

My love of the Black Church was birthed at Pitt’s Chapel UFW Baptist Church; I was three and singing in their choir under the direction of my aunt, the late and unforgettable Mother Cora (Kilpatrick) Bell. I am grateful for Pastor John A. Good, who rests in Glory—and the Bible Gospel Center members—whose passion for the Word of God nourished my own during my young adult years. Admittedly, I still drive like Jehu sometimes.

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I am grateful to G-d, the gifts entrusted in my life, and the journey to this place. My prayer is that *you* Lord get glory from my service and that my worship is indelibly sweet in your nostrils.

## INTRODUCTION

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Matthew 28:18-20

The Church has been commissioned by Christ to make disciples. But more than simply evangelizing, disciple-making is walking with people in order to help them embody Christ’s teachings in their lives and partnering with other believers in fulfilling the Church’s mission on the earth. For some time I have been concerned about the formational effectiveness<sup>1</sup> of the Black Church because, beyond initial conversion, many disciples remain as babes<sup>2</sup> in Christ—showing signs of spiritual immaturity, without evidence of a growing faith.<sup>3</sup> Kendra Dean argues that many Christians have a “lackadaisical faith” that is not young people’s issue.<sup>4</sup> These problems are not isolated to the Black Church, but exist in present-day Christianity as a whole—especially those who are members of today’s young adult cohort, *millennials* (those born after 1980). Our challenge is to mold in our communities “the kind of mature, passionate faith”<sup>5</sup> that we say we want for today’s youth

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<sup>1</sup> This comment is not a critique of present Christian education or children/youth ministries, though there may be room for critique; but more the whole of how we form disciples—worship, education, ministry service, etc.

<sup>2</sup> To understand the ideas of “spiritual babes” see 1 Peter 1:3, 23, 2:2; 1 Co. 3:1. The stages of spiritual growth are also given good treatment in Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).and; Jim Putman and Bobby Harrington, *Disciple Shift: Five Steps That Help Your Church Make Disciples Who Make Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Designating someone or a particular action as spiritually immature is a tenuous endeavor. First, because maturity is somewhat subjective—tied to where one began on their journey with Christ. Second, a listing of dos and don’ts will not encapsulate right living. Yet spiritual maturity is necessary, as I will argue in chapter three; and there are stages to reaching spiritual adulthood. Good resource in understanding spiritual maturity are: *Disciple Shift: Five Steps That Help Your Church Make Disciples Who Make Disciples*; Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*.

<sup>4</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

and young adults—elevating it from the belly of religion that often lacks the passion, commitment, and love of active faith.

While worship attendance is one good indicator of spiritual vitality, it does not guarantee that Christians are actively engaged in a holistic faith that connects their lives both inside and outside of the church. A disciple of Christ is more than one who can simply boast of church *membership*<sup>6</sup>—even though being a member of Christ’s body is vital;<sup>7</sup> disciples should be distinguishable by their practices, disciplines, virtues, and knowledge that ‘mark’ them as Jesus’ followers. Yet most teens fail to integrate their religious faith into their lives, resulting in a dichotomy between life and faith as persons emerge into adulthood.<sup>8</sup> This omission significantly affects my project as my focus is on those millennials<sup>9</sup> who were 18-35 in 2015. Without change, we will continue to see young adults who treat religious life as an accessory to their lived reality. Anne Streaty Wimberly’s concept of *story-linking* will connect millennials’ everyday life stories to the biblical text and the African American heritage—impacting both relationships with God and individual ethics.<sup>10</sup>

In the Black Church, Sunday morning worship is the primary place of formation, but in its current form, worship is sadly insufficient in developing young adult disciples who

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<sup>6</sup> By ‘membership’ I mean engagement/belonging a local church/fellowship. Disciples are admonished to stay connected to one another in Hebrews 10:25. See also Karl Barth’s *Call to Discipleship*. Here I am not speaking of the truth that every born again believer is a ‘member’ of the Body of Christ.

<sup>7</sup> This statement presumes a confessional acceptance of Christ as Savior/Lord (Rom. 10:8-10) and subsequent baptism (Matt: 28:19).

<sup>8</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> I will provide greater explanations how I am using this millennial cohort in chapter one. The first part of my young adult group (18-35) are emerging adults, yet in the Black Protestant tradition most denominations group all young adults together, as do scholars like Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

<sup>10</sup> Anne Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 21-36.

will perpetuate the mission of Christ. Our worship needs to be intergenerational, using pillars of hip hop culture (i.e. improvisation and inspiration), E.P.I.C. (i.e. experiential, participatory, full of imagery)<sup>11</sup> without compromising the faith of our mothers and fathers. Thus, in order to successfully make millennial *disciples*, the Church must engage them in religious education—which includes not only worship and education but also the full of religious practices and activities intentionally designed for spiritual formation and fostering Christian maturity. The goal is to move these young adults from a passive and often compartmentalized faith to one that impacts the whole of life, one that is fortified with an ecclesiological understanding of the Church’s mission and evidenced by active witness outside the Church.<sup>12</sup> Thus, for the Church to embody its mission, Sunday worship—our music, messaging, prayers, sermons, and other aspects of liturgy—must be designed in such a way to allow the faithful to become mature disciples versus spiritual babes. This is secured through identity forming practices that nurture what Lisa Miller argues is our innate “natural spirituality.”<sup>13</sup>

I have loved the Black Church since I was a young girl and it is the place of my own spiritual formation and is the context in which I live out my vocation. However, I am concerned with her legacy and about the growing numbers of young people who, after adolescence, opt out of formal religious life (even though they might confess themselves Christians and claim that religion is important). For example, in 2010 the Pew Forum noted that 81 percent of Black Protestants between the ages of 18-29 claim that religion is very

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<sup>11</sup> Alise D. Barrymore, "Authenticity and Relevance in a Postmodern Context: A Conversation between the Black Church and the Emerging Church" (McCormick Theological Seminary).

<sup>12</sup> As we will see in chapter three, one such evidence of said maturity are virtues like fruits of the spirit and people’s understanding of personal vocation and mission becoming infused with that of the Christ’s and Church that results in outward practices that witness Christ in the world.

<sup>13</sup> Lisa Miller, *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting Health and Lifelong Thriving* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 9.

important, yet only 55 percent attend worship at least weekly.<sup>14</sup> Understanding that young adulthood is usually a time when people are less religiously active, as well as the fact that the religious fervency of Black millennials is comparatively greater than other religious groups, such numbers might be viewed as indicating no undue cause for alarm.<sup>15</sup> Yet practitioners across the country note an increased decline in the number of young adults in their pews. Bauch and Hurst notes they “don’t come to church” because it “doesn’t make sense to many young adults; it doesn’t address things important to them” resulting in many having a “so what?” attitude toward the Black Church.<sup>16</sup>

The number one assailant against American religious fervency is non-affiliation<sup>17</sup> which plagues white Mainline Protestants. Yet the bigger issue threatening the Black Church is generational attrition—adults who never returned to church after departing in late adolescence are raising their children outside the household of faith. Secondly, among African American millennials, regular<sup>18</sup> participation in communities of faith continues to fall and is down from previous generations—many remain committed to Christ (even if only in theory), but have become either disinterested or disillusioned by their churches. In many ways, religious community has become irrelevant. In fact, the erosion of religious life as a central part of Black family dynamics has quietly gone unnoticed by reporting agencies

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<sup>14</sup> Pew Research Center on Religion & Public Life, *Religion among the Millennials* (Washington, D.C., 2010):6-10, accessed, 3/2/15, <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Note: 42 percent of *all* millennials say religion is very important and only 33 percent attend worship weekly.

<sup>16</sup> Ken Bauch and Rich Hurst, *The Quest for Christ: Discipling Today’s Young Adults* as quoted in Benjamine Stephens III and Ralph C. Watkins, *From Jay-Z to Jesus: Reaching & Teaching Young Adults in the Black Church* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2009), x.

<sup>17</sup> Though we operate from a point of strength with only 9% if we are not careful this will one day threaten the strength of our congregations.

<sup>18</sup> By regular I mean those who attend Church at least one time a month.

for at least two generations.<sup>19</sup> A culprit may be what Putnam and Campbell identify as the “symbiotic relationship”<sup>20</sup> between religion and racial identity among African Americans. One hunch is that even those who are less active in religious life will report a higher level of affinity and practice than is actually the case. But it is undeniable that many African American Church leaders are concerned with both the physical and ideological fall-out among young adults in their congregations. Pew also notes that if people are going to leave the faith of their youth they will do so before age twenty-four.<sup>21</sup> Thus prioritizing how we do ministry with millennial young adults will benefit the Black Church in the long term.

In many ways this thesis is a preemptive strike against the loss of young adults from the Black Church, those who are too often ignored. I have chosen to focus my efforts on millennials largely because we have already missed our moment of effective change with Generation X (born 1965–1979)<sup>22</sup> and youth ministry (ages 11-17) is often strong within Black Churches.<sup>23</sup> I also have focused on young adults because many churches are seeking methods to effectively engage them in church life—though there are a few standout examples across the country.<sup>24</sup> As a former youth pastor and educator who is always first concerned with spiritual formation, this project is near to my heart.

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<sup>19</sup> Despite sensational headlines to the contrary, National surveys show relatively stable religious participation among African Americans over a 20-year period. See Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> *American Grace*, 260.

<sup>21</sup> The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S.” (April 2000) as quoted in David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 32.

<sup>22</sup> Generational cohorts have a semi-permeable demarcation of beginning and ending depending on which researcher is consulted. Generation X is estimated to encompass dates ranging from the early 1960s to the early 1980s.

<sup>23</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 30-71.

<sup>24</sup> Community of Hope AME (Temple Hills, MD), and Trinity UCC (Chicago, IL) are just two fine examples though there are others who are fine exemplars of working well with Black millennials in their congregation.

The churches that make up the Black Church are a beautiful assembly of denominations and congregations that have been riding the waves of religious strength of our ancestors and the reverberations on the water have carried us to this place. But, I am fearful that the momentum of the past will not carry us into the future, especially if we lack meaningful ways to communicate a clear identity and missional purpose to the next generations.<sup>25</sup> Our way of engaging people in religious life has not keep up with societal changes. Many younger adults wrestle with how to live out their commitments to Christ within congregations that have not made room for their leadership, modernized their programs and worship services, or provided places for millennials to seriously engage matters of faith. Such omissions, if not attended to, threaten the very future of the Black Church. Something needs to change.

In this thesis, I will argue that for the Black Church to thrive in the future we must attend to retaining our millennials and developing in them an integrated faith life marked by an understanding of the Church's mission and their role in it. This means we must effect mentoring relationships that allow for questioning, exploration and discovery, and inculcate the virtues, practices, and disciplines that distinguish Christian life. An understanding of the cultural worlds and religious lives of millennials is critical to my argument. I will also identify the (dis)integration between individual, spiritual, and group identity of young adults and argue their centrality in developing the type of disciples needed for the church—through achieving identity cohesiveness. Multi-levels of integration

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<sup>25</sup> Of course the church will endure to the return of Christ, so this sentence sounds super dramatic, but... we are at a crisis and the negative trends noted by religious sociologists tell us that we must change if we are to not see some of the same problematic results that are already being experienced in mainline denominations. While the particularities of the BC/AAC have delayed some of these results, the gap between the BC experience and the majority church is lessening.

will also be necessary for rightly aligning beliefs and practices in the expression of who millennials are in society's wider culture. Finally, I construct an understanding of *infusion*, a vocation and missional joining—in a disciple's self-understanding—that is tied to the Church's communal call to be witnesses of God's mission in the earth. These issues are used to deconstruct what I have named as diasporic tendencies among African American millennials from their spiritual ancestral home.

I seek to tailor a process of formation that is consistent with the burdens, hopes, and gifts of millennials as described by scholarly research on the cohort as well and theology and practice of the African American Church. This project bridges the disciplines of practical theology, religious education, sociology of religion, missiology, and cultural studies (which is itself already inter-disciplinary). There are several studies on millennials that sufficiently lodge my concerns for the Black Church within the wider conversation about young/emerging adults and their spirituality. Though these sources explore the opportunity of improving millennials' spiritual condition and relationship with the Church,<sup>26</sup> there remain gaps in the literature with regards to the nuances of the Black Church.<sup>27</sup> Evelyn Parker asserts "research in the area of Cultural Studies and Popular Culture is needed in Religious Education if we are to place the field and Practical Theology in the midst of the academic debate about religious meaning making."<sup>28</sup> This will to attend

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<sup>26</sup> Some of these books include Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*; Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*; Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*; Tim Elmore, *Generation Iy: Our Last Chance to Save Thier Future* (Atlanta: Poet Gardener); Ed Stetzer, Richie Stanley, and Jason Hayes, *Lost and Found: The Young Unchurched and the Churches That Reach Them* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group and LifeWay research, 2009). There are also a number of reports by the Pew Forum and the Barna Group.

<sup>27</sup> Wuthnow also acknowledges these gaps in *After the Baby Boomers*,72. Once recent exception is F. Douglas Jr. Powe, *New Wine New Wineskins: How African American Congregations Can Reach New Generations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press).

<sup>28</sup> Evelyn L. Parker, "Cultural Studies Meets Religious Education," *Religious Education* 101, no. 4 (2006): 463.

to these gaps and makes recommendations that will be useful for those churches seeking a vibrant relationship with these younger adults.

Chapter 1 and 2 provide the cultural framework of African American millennials by looking at trends impacting life and faith. Chapter 1 reviews the deep societal trends that impact millennials' relationship to the Church. I argue that these developments started in prior generational cohorts and have not been acknowledged as contributing to the change of the religious landscape of young adults (18 and up) in the U.S. I provide a brief theological overview of the initial concepts necessary for our discussion—disciple, missions, and church. I review the legitimacy of millennials as a generational cohort, including explaining *emerging adulthood* in comparison to *young adulthood* and how they both impact what wider society refers to as *millennials*. Finally, I look both at the cultural worlds and life stage changes specific to those ages 18-35 necessary for understanding the context of today's millennials.

Chapter 2 overviews the religious lives of African American millennials—the categories (types), their beliefs, and how they relate to the Christian Church. I include a historical explanation of religious fervency in the Black community, noting the changes of the Church's role between the generational groups. I argue that presently many millennials are in diaspora—I use Hip Hop verses that become vehicles of expressing sentiments about Black churches. I argue that a falling away or ideological distancing is manifested by physical distance, theological disagreement, or practical indifference due to frustration with faith communities. I offer a game plan of recovery, based on Acts 1:9, that prioritizes our work with millennials—first with those in the household of faith and then to those in the mission field.

Having discussed the social-cultural worlds of millennials, I shift the conversation in Chapter 3 to theological concerns by discussing identity formation in early (emerging) adulthood and its connection to personal, group, and spiritual identities. A review of Shweder's Ethics of Autonomy, Community, and Divinity—a formational model—reveals how all aspects of our identity impact our choices and moral/ethical behaviors.<sup>29</sup> I define an archetypal “exemplary” disciple(s) who will reflect the type of *identity* and *integration* necessary for strengthening this generation's relationship to the Black Church. My argument pivots here; I identify certain normative traits as reflective of a faithful following of the ministry and mission of Christ. In the last section specific details concretize my claim that the type of disciples needed are discernable. I forecast my understanding of *infusion* and call these exemplars I3 Disciples—ones who have identity cohesiveness, live an integrated life, and are infused (representing God's love through action in the world).

Chapter 4 argues that the Black Church should have a missional mindset toward this millennial generation—actuating the Acts 1:9 principal of starting local, then extending global. I begin with *infusion*, which I designate as the communal aspect of discipleship—reaching and touching the world for Christ. Infusion is based in a missional understanding and focus on partnering with God in the redemptive plan for humanity. This process is both formation and culmination of exemplary disciples' readiness. I argue that all believers should participate in practices that reach the world with the love of God expressed through missionary assistance, justice, and sharing the good news of God's love for humanity. Once a full understanding of our shared mission with Christ takes place, a person has been infused. I argue that there is a African American millennial remnant (the most faithfully

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<sup>29</sup> Lene Arnett Jensen, "Through Two Lenses: A Cultural-Developmental Approach to Moral Psychology," *Developmental Review* 28 (2008).

committed to Christ and Church) who will, with mentoring, become the exemplars discussed in Chapter 3. These unite their personal mission and the Lord's—elevating ecclesiological understanding of what it means to be the Church—and own their part in maintaining the Church's witness.

My concluding platform, Chapter 5, provides a practical application of the claims of this project and ways to engage millennial disciples in a more active missional faith while discovering new ways to honor the traditions of the Historic Black Church and what it means to belong to Christ. I use the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement as a lens through which to observe how the Church can and must deal with life issues which impacting millennials. I suggest that partnering with organizations like BLM—an example of a movement which deals with societal ills plaguing young adults—can help those outside of the church recognize our authentic and active concern for their well-being. I acknowledge potential obstacles while encouraging the type of understanding that comes from partnering with organizations such as BLM. While the Black Church may never again be *the center* of the African American Community, she can secure for herself an enduring legacy among millennials by constructing a vision of faithfulness that reaches outside the doors of the Church.

I hope this thesis provides prescriptive solutions for pastors, teachers, counselors, educators, parents, and para-church groups who minister, mentor, and partner with millennials. It includes a framework for developing and releasing 13 Disciples into the world. Because context is so important, readers will have to apply the recommendations to their particular congregation or ecclesial setting. While the goal of this project is to equip the Black Church in reaching millennials, its impact is far-reaching—the type of identity,

integration, and infusion I have suggested is necessary for *all* disciples. I am prayerful that this project will facilitate a safe journey home for millennials—returning to faith communities that are culturally sensitive to distinctiveness of those ages 18-35 and provide a shared space for millennials to explore what it truly means to be disciples of Christ. We must encourage innovative expressions that fit their context; much is at stake.

## 1 | STILL WATERS RUN DEEP

### *Millennials and the Cultural Trends Impacting Faith*

Millennials are not a cultural anomaly, suddenly bursting into American society; nor did they solely create the conditions of their reality. Instead they are the living continuance of cultural and societal changes of their parents and grandparents. Yet the prevailing rhetoric is that this new generation, those born after 1980, is vastly different. Undoubtedly there are many ways that millennials differ from their predecessors, but there are also more similarities than some “experts” are willing to admit. Newscasters, advertising firms, and pop culture specialists are quick to provide ‘answers’ to industry and institutions seeking to understand and successfully work with millennials, while sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and research groups provide exhaustive quantitative and qualitative data in hope of guiding earlier generations to successfully engage this next one. Several labels were used before the popular *millennials* prevailed: Gen Y, Mosaics, Nexters, Generation.com, or Digital Generation, to name a few.<sup>1</sup> More significant than what to call them, however, is learning who they are and how society’s institutions, like the Church, can engage them despite declining trends in areas of religious fervency. Christian leaders endeavoring to connect must examine their religious traditions established in the era of the Silents and Baby Boomers and be willing to make the changes necessary for the future of the church.

Some have called millennials the next great generation because of their size, which is often compared to that of the Baby Boomers. In 1972, during the age of the Boomers, young adults ages 20-44 totaled 105.3 million (32.7% of total); by 2002 this segment grew to 121.8

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<sup>1</sup> The name millennials, almost universally accepted, is credited to Neil Howe and William Strauss, see Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* (New York: William Morrow, 1991); *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000). For other names also designated see also Elmore, *Generation Iy: Our Last Chance to Save Thier Future*, 18.

million (36.5%)—a jump of 4 percent.<sup>2</sup> By 2015 millennials ages 18-34 alone were projected to be 75.3 million people<sup>3</sup>—24 percent of the total population. Robert Wuthnow surmises that the sheer size of the group notwithstanding, the *proportion* within the entire population may mean that these adults have more influence on the economy and politics than a generation ago.<sup>4</sup> The importance of the size of this cohort becomes especially clear when one considers the pace of social change—growth in higher education, changes in the job market, advances in technology, and rapid globalization have occurred with more speed and greater impact due to the size of the generational shift.

Their size alone makes millennials objects of much attention throughout society, and Black churches are no different, in that they also wish to understand them. At a loss to connect, some church leaders have acquiesced to their absence and dismiss them in their ministry plans—despite the fact that forty percent of U.S. religious adherents are between ages 21 and 45.<sup>5</sup> Wuthnow is correct in his assertion that this generation is as important as their parents and grandparents. I echo his concern that “religious leaders risk the very future of their faith communities if they ignore the changes that are taking place among younger adults.”<sup>6</sup> Perplexed by the intricacies of their generational differences, many pastors and judicatory leaders are disquieted by these very changes, and find themselves at a loss for what to do. Critical to formulating a plan of engagement, leaders must seek to understand millennials’ faith lives, their self-understanding, and their spiritual identities.

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<sup>2</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 7-9.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Fry, "This Year, Millennials Will Overtake Baby Boomers," *Pew Research Center: FactTank-News In Numbers*, 01/16/15, accessed 02/19/2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/01/16/this-year-millennials-will-overtake-baby-boomers/>.

<sup>4</sup> Wuthnow states that the influence of younger adults based on sheer numbers is inconclusive, as their proportion of all adults has remained somewhat flat over the same period of time: young adults as a percentage of ALL adults ages 20-65+ have been at the 51-56% mark every decade since 1970. While their percentage boomed in the 1980 and 1990, as would be expected, it levels back off by 2000. Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 251.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

It is easy to accuse this post adolescent cohort as the cause of their own spiritual problem. However, more serious examination reveals the danger in doing so: it oversimplifies the problem, denies the connection to the past, and leads to perpetuation of faulty beliefs. Despite this fact, there is no shortage of claims about the religious life of today's young adults who have been characterized as quasi-religious at best and irreligious at worst. They are said to be more secular than the generation before, less involved in organizations, unfazed by God, and not interested in the spiritual life. "In the absence of solid information, speculation about the religious needs and interest of the next wave runs rampant."<sup>7</sup> Smith and Denton's findings in the 2003-05 first wave of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) surveys noted that adolescent religious beliefs and practices mirror those of their parents.<sup>8</sup> Further, the NSYR shows a direct influence extending to young adulthood, although modification of beliefs usually begins occurring at this time.<sup>9</sup> (A note of caution: we should be suspicious of "facts" that are the product of the imaginations of "self-styled cultural experts" rather than "grounded in any systematic research."<sup>10</sup> Also, claims based upon small samplings should be treated with care.)

### **SOCIETAL DEEP TRENDS & FAITH**

The premature epitaph on the religious lives of younger adults is unwarranted. Despite the rumors packaged as forecasts of the future, scholarly researchers find it "difficult, based on the data, to conclude that emerging adults in the United States have as a group become less religious or more secular in the last quarter century."<sup>11</sup> Scholars likewise caution against making premature conclusions in the opposite direction. Nonetheless, the data does reveal that religious

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>8</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 261.

<sup>9</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 256.

<sup>10</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 100.

fervency across traditions will fluctuate across a number of indicators. In fact, “Evangelical Protestant and black Protestant emerging adults generally reflect higher levels of religious commitment and practice and more allegiance to, at least, certain theological beliefs than do Catholics and mainline Protestants.”<sup>12</sup> Without a doubt, context matters when considering the religious lives of millennials. It would be misguided to consider millennials in a sociological or anthropological bubble, for they were not created *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). Instead, the context and wider trends under which young Americans are coming of age are key to understanding their perspectives.<sup>13</sup> While there are several developments that may influence the cultural trends of this generation, a few are of particular interest to this project. These trends are no small ripples on the surface of the waters, but deep seismic changes that result in a shifting of culture over an extended period of time—apart from their historical context, these changes could be mistaken as new trends. Without discernment, one may wrongly conclude, as some popular literature would suggest, that this generation is without faith and its members are more spiritual than they are religious. Thus, an inquiry into the societal trends that impact faith will be imperative to our understanding of African American millennials and the C/church.

### **America’s Waning Religious Fervency**

It is argued that today’s problem of religious fervency is the effect of our living in a post-Christian world. This is not a new argument. As far back as 1967, sociologist Peter Berger discussed how modernity was being shaped by the impact of secularization, privatization and pluralization.<sup>14</sup> This shift represented a dismantling of the sacred canopies, where religion was

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See also Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, xv.

<sup>14</sup> I was introduced to these ideas by James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014); who used Berger to explain the historical underpinnings

being challenged as the unifying norm of society.<sup>15</sup> Political scientists Putnam and Campbell argue that American religion since the 1960s has been impacted by one shock and two aftershocks. In the 1960s it was the campaign of *Sex, Drugs and Rock and Roll* coupled with the declaration that *God is Dead* that sent the country into a tailspin. Yet this “perfect storm” of instructional disruptions (political, social, sexual, and religious) had “a mélange of contributing factors.”<sup>16</sup> They provide a comprehensive list of factors that justify their claim of America experiencing a *shaking*—for example the Pill, Vatican II, Vietnam, assassinations, Watergate, drugs/LSD use, the Civil Rights Movements, and the Women’s Liberation Movement.<sup>17</sup> These changes, more severe than the Industrial Revolution, significantly impacted the landscape of American culture, registering analogously 8.0 on the Richter scale.

The shaking in the African American community during this same period was analogous to a building sitting at the epicenter of a quake. Blacks not only had to deal with the bombardment of changes of the wider culture, but internal rifts as the Civil Rights Movement progressed caused additional shaking which would have a profound impact on the Black Church. The fight for segregation, the right to vote, and the death of Jim Crow led to political and social activism expressed in marches, boycotts and other forms of protest. Yet there was disillusionment among younger Christians, similar to today, dissatisfied with how their churches were or were not involved in the fight for equality (and justice). The emergence of the militant self-defense Black Panthers organization and the youthful exuberance and radicalized views of

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of the increase of non religiously affiliated. See Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, 1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967).

<sup>15</sup> *The Sacred Canopy*.

<sup>16</sup> Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 91.

<sup>17</sup> See Putnam, *American Grace*, *ibid.* —they also list as contributors to shaking: bulge in then the youngest cohort (boomers), unprecedented affluence, rapid expansion of higher education, abatement of Cold War anxieties, the assassinations (naming Kennedy, but categorizing Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X as “others”), movements such as the antiwar, and later environmental and gay rights.

the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) caused generation old debates—liberative vs. pious expressions of faith—to again arise within the Black Church.

The first aftershock was in the 1970s and 1980s, which Putnam and Campbell name as the rise of religious conservatism, marked by the 1976 election of the born again president. They argue that concerns of the direction the country had taken during the sixties caused a stabilization of church attendance during the next two decades.<sup>18</sup> They further note that the youthful generation did not follow the religious decline of the boomers before them; instead, church attendance leveled off among younger Americans by the 1980s and “even began to rise again in some places.”<sup>19</sup> Despite this finding, other sources note that surveys of college freshmen reflect a rise in rejection of religious identity since 1980.<sup>20</sup> During this same period there was an increase among African Americans who affirmed their belief in God.<sup>21</sup> Despite being exposed to more liberal theologies at a university level, blacks are noted as having higher rates of attendance among the college education than those with only high school education.<sup>22</sup>

The second aftershock, in the 1990s and 2000s, was youths’ disaffection from religion. This was caused by increasing discomfort with the public presence of conservative Christians.<sup>23</sup> Surveys show that from 1990 through 2010 there was a consistent increase in college freshmen indicating their religious preference as “none”—rising from 12.5 percent to 22.5 percent.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> This matter is somewhat contested, and there are reports on both sides that indicate a diminishing of religious participation and proclamation in the early years of college, while newer longitudinal studies show college in itself, does not diminish religious affiliation (though participation may fall off). See Kara E. Powell and Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan); Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 248-51.

<sup>21</sup> Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 131.

<sup>22</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 276-77.

<sup>23</sup> Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 120.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 101. (Figure 4.2, p. 101 Source: The American Freshman Annual Surveys at UCLA)

Similarly, those reporting not attending church in the past year rose from 15 to 22.5 percent.<sup>25</sup> Chaves agrees that this rapid acceleration represented “a backlash to the religious right’s rising visibility in the 1980s.”<sup>26</sup> Conversely, during the same period, there was rapid decline in size for most protestant groupings, except evangelicals.<sup>27</sup> Yet, Black Protestants ages 18 to 25 showed an increase, then stabilization, in attendance.<sup>28</sup> In these two decades, religious conservatism as it relates to politics became taboo in comparison to the previous wave when religious commitment in political leaders was seen as advantageous.<sup>29</sup> “Christianity has an image problem,” asserts Kinnaman, explaining that outsiders, particularly younger adults, are not very trusting of religion.<sup>30</sup> The reasons noted for this indictment are that Christians were perceived as hypocritical, anti-homosexual, and judgmental; too concerned with converting people to the faith, and out of touch with reality.<sup>31</sup> During this period, “the rise of the nones . . . was heavily driven by generational factors”: doubling among Baby Boomers and again with Generation X during the period they were coming of age.<sup>32</sup> However, African American religious communities seemed resistant to this trend, showing only small incremental changes of non-affiliation. Yet, decline in organizational participation is not limited to the area of religion alone—the fallout extends into civic, political and other social arenas.

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<sup>25</sup> See also Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), Loc 246. He also noted in 1957 3% of Americans were Nones and by 2008 it was up to 17%.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, Loc. 257.

<sup>27</sup> Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 108-17.

<sup>28</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 95-98.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 11.

<sup>31</sup> David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 11.

<sup>32</sup> Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 122-32. See also discussion of the rise of religiously non-affiliated in White, *The Rise of the Nones*, 2014; Pew Research Center on Religion & Public Life, “Nones” on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation (Washington, D.C., 2012), accessed, 3/4/15, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

## Reduced Integration in Social Structures

It has been said we are a nation of joiners. The need to belong is one of the most basic human needs and is deeply rooted in the fabric of American culture. Tocqueville insisted that we must pay attention to associations whether “religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large [or] very minute.”<sup>33</sup> In the first two-thirds of the twentieth century there was a burst in community involvement.<sup>34</sup> Yet, by the late 1960s, membership growth began to fall behind population growth. In spite of picking up momentum in the 1970s, Americans were essentially becoming less involved.<sup>35</sup> How individuals expend their social capital says a lot about our society. The number of volunteer organizations<sup>36</sup> in American almost tripled between the 1960s and the 1990s, but the size of these organizations, in terms of membership, was down almost 10 percent.<sup>37</sup> During this same period, organizations with chapters that allow for associational memberships declined in proportion to those that were mass-media type entities—those where membership is reduced to writing a check to ‘belong’. By the new millennium, Americans had grown accustomed to these newer types of associations, which Putnam refers to as “tertiary,” wherein the relationship between members is little less than a shared interest—whether in the AARP or the NRA, most members are unaware of the existence of their peers.<sup>38</sup> These new associations show a shift in how individuals relate to and understand membership, which often devolves to “card carrying” membership holding equal weight as traditional memberships. Over time, this same understanding would seep into psyche of church attenders.

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<sup>33</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, ed. J.P. Mayer, Trans. George Lawrence (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), 513-517 as quoted in Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 48.

<sup>34</sup> Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 53-55. Note: there was a dip during the great depression, with a continuation of the rise through 1960 when decline begins to persist (see details in Figure 8).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>36</sup> Voluntary associations can be categorized broadly as either community, religious or career.

<sup>37</sup> Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 49-50.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-53. For now we will not look at how social media impacts social capital, though this newer medium of connectedness changes the face of what it means to be “friends,” a significant trend for churches working with millennials.

In terms of social capital, meaning a sense of connectedness among people, more traditional organizations give us a better sense of active community involvement.<sup>39</sup> One study showed that between 1957 and 1976 there was a “reduced integration of American adults into the social structure.”<sup>40</sup> These two decades brought about a 10 percent decline in informal socializing with family and friends, a 16 percent fall in organizational memberships, and a 20 percent drop in church attendance. In addition there were significant drops also noted in “unions; church groups; fraternal and veterans organizations; civic groups, such as PTAs; youth groups; charities; and a catch-all ‘other’ category.”<sup>41</sup> Noteworthy is that while there was a decline in many groups, other groups—such as those that were work-related—experienced growth.

Putnam does not address this issue within Black communities. However, it would appear that Blacks remained more connected during the same period due to the overflow of the civil rights movement. After the start of integration, the number of community organizations open to African Americans began to rise resulting in memberships in predominately black organizations being challenged, but numbers would remain strong through the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century. Yet by the close of the century many national Black organizations—NAACP, Urban League, UNCF—would decline, while work-related associational membership would increase in step with trends in the rest of America.

“Half of all associational membership[s] in America are church related, half of all philanthropy is religious in character, and half of all volunteering occurs in a religious context.”<sup>42</sup> Thus the church is significantly involved with to how people are integrated into the fabric of our

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<sup>39</sup> Putnam argues that the number of voluntary associations nationwide are not a reliable guide to trends in social capital, especially those that lack the structure of local chapters in which members can participate. See *Bowling Alone*, 53, 58.

<sup>40</sup> J. Veroff, E. Douvan and R. Kulka, *Inner American: A Self-Portrait from 1957 to 1975* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 17 as cited by Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 58.

<sup>41</sup> Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 58-59.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

society. Though Americans claim membership in a number of organizations, they spend little time in community organizations. Putnam states “we’ve stopped doing committee work, stopped serving as officers, and stopped going to meetings.”<sup>43</sup> Americans have been dropping out in “droves” from all sorts of organizations. These trends with respect to social engagement are important when considering attracting millennials to the church. It is not just membership and participation in church that is diminishing, but in the whole American landscape of social engagement.

Further, the same “problems” noted with millennials’ engagement in and commitment to organizations such as the church are prevalent in the wider culture. There was a time when belief in God almost automatically guaranteed participation in a religious community.<sup>44</sup> Yet today, not only has belonging reframed the conversation of social capital; it has shifted how the church relates to those sitting in the pew. Market forces now influence religious life, in as much as churches are in competition to attract members. This is particularly so considering the demographics of a congregation which is no longer tied to a specific residential radius (Catholicism being the noted exception).

The popular conclusion was that younger Americans were becoming less engaged in society as the twentieth century neared its close. Yet Putnam argues that younger generations today are “no less engaged than their predecessors, but engaged in new ways.”<sup>45</sup> Though met with opposition, he points to three countertrends to support his claim: encounter groups that anchor the emotional and social lives of Americans; great social movements of the last third of the twentieth century; and telecommunication growth, the least of which is the Internet.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 63-64.

<sup>44</sup> See a similar claim made by Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 53???

<sup>45</sup> Find his full argument in Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 26

<sup>46</sup> See Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 148-182 for full conversation.

Though insisting commitment may take on a new look, Putnam does concede that “American civic engagement and social connectedness” needs renewal.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Privatization of Faith**

Faith in God is inherently communal. Thought to be individually initiated (Rom 8:9-10), it is in reality jointly experienced with other believers via Christian community. In fact, faith—belief in and worship of God—is first expressed in community via practices that transform the individual and the world. Consider the Israelite roots of Christianity, whose worship of God was experienced almost exclusively in community (i.e. temple worship, sacrifices, holy feasts, etc.). In the New Testament, the imperative of rebirth through Christ (John 3:7) opened the door for an individualized expression—and understanding—of faith. Yet, salvation outside of community, argues Gordon Fee, “is outside of [the] New Testament frame of reference.”<sup>48</sup> Community is needed to experience the process of salvation: one, the community is needed for confession of sins (Ja. 5:16) and two, for water baptism (Acts 2:38) which inaugurates a person’s identification with Christ and his people.<sup>49</sup> Thus any faith that is privately emphasized challenges the view of personal and communal salvation experienced by the earliest Christian converts.

Faith via community creates normative behaviors and relationship used to pattern one’s life. Berger argues as social creatures, we create canopies—unifying norms, beliefs or worldviews—that bring order and meaning to life.<sup>50</sup> Religion is one such canopy. Yet when faith becomes privatized it moves the stakes of the canopy that grounds faith in community. One of the characteristics insinuated as unique to millennial spirituality is that it is highly

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<sup>47</sup> Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 28.

<sup>48</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, M.A.: Hendrickson, 1996), 63.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*.

individualist and subjective. Yet, Wuthnow, writing over twenty-five years ago, described American religions as becoming increasingly privatized—“the public, corporate, communal quality of religions is declining, leaving individuals with their own highly subjective and idiosyncratic expression of faith.”<sup>51</sup> This is more than simply thinking for oneself; instead “privatization [is] the process by which a chasm is created between the public and the private spheres of life and spiritual things are increasingly placed within the private arena.”<sup>52</sup>

According to James White, faith deteriorates to little more than a reflection of the self, concluding that Berger’s predictions have come to fruition: “today the canopy is gone, replaced instead by millions of small tents under which we can choose to dwell.”<sup>53</sup> White’s reading can be interpreted in two ways: the millions “small tents” can either be the individual expressions of faith or the various iterations of worldviews derived from a pluralistic society. Either way, the unifying norms of traditional faith have diminished and been replaced by a more individualistic faith.<sup>54</sup>

“American religion has become culturally individualistic and subjectivistic, driven by religious ‘seekers’ bearing consumerist mentalities about faith.”<sup>55</sup> Sadly, people are looking at religious participation with an attitude of “What is in it for me?” Berger’s postulations are also deeply relevant in how people view faith today. Suffice it to say, younger adults are not the first to embody a privatized view of religion that takes away the need for many of the communal aspects of faith like *koinonia* (communion/fellowship). Instead, White argues people are not losing belief in God, but rather they “are losing their religion,” adding that “Christianity is losing

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<sup>51</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *The Struggle for America's Soul: Evangelicals, Liberals, and Secularism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 116.

<sup>52</sup> Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File: Papers on the Subversion of the Modern Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983), 74 as quoted by White, *The Rise of the Nones*, 48.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>54</sup> Jeffrey Jenson Arnett and Lene Arnett Jenson, "A Congregation of One: Individualized Religious Beliefs among Emerging Adults," *Journal of Adolescent Research* vol. 17, no. 5 (2002).

<sup>55</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 5. For more on this topic see also footnote #3, page 312.

its place as the dominant worldview.” Some are satisfied with a faith that is “privately engaging, but culturally irrelevant.”<sup>56</sup> This paradigm is problematic; without relevancy the Church will be unable to fulfill its task of making disciples. Further, for the Apostle Paul, there is no church, no Christianity to speak of, apart from *koinonia*. Faith and relationship with God are lived out in our own lives, as well as in community. Thus a privatized outlook on faith is in opposition to who the church is and how it must function, particularly so in the historical Black church whose understanding of salvation always had a communal focus on race uplift and preservation.

### **Instrumental Approach to Religion**

In 1966 Philip Rieff predicted that the future of religion would not be characterized by secularization, as contemporaries like Berger suggested, but would increasingly begin to take on the character of therapy.<sup>57</sup> William Hamilton helps to explain the significance of *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* in which Rieff claimed *the psychological man* lived in his day and that he was looking to explain how culture was changing in the time of the death of God.<sup>58</sup> Hamilton explains, the therapeutic as

the man who has to live without faith, without therapies of commitment, without—as Christians may say—an ultimate concern that gives final meaning to his existence. [H]e lives . . . in the time when the children of our era have undergone a deconversion experience that is bound to last.<sup>59</sup>

Rieff argued that the religious man was being replaced by the therapeutic. In this construct, the need for God is alleviated and replaced by various therapies.

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<sup>56</sup> White, *The Rise of the Nones*, 44-47.

<sup>57</sup> Chad Lakies, "Candy Machine God, or, Going to Church without Going to Church: Millennials and the Future of the Christian Faith," *Missio apostolica* 21, no. 1 (2013): 17.

<sup>58</sup> William Hamilton, "Phillip Rieff's the Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud," *Pastoral Psychology* (1966): 51-52. Hamilton explains Rieff's arguments are complex and mostly accessible only to those familiar with Freud's *The Mind of the Moralist*.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

Chad Lakies' essay "Candy Machine God" is helpful in seeing ways that the therapeutic has triumphed today. He draws connections between the church and the Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) of adolescents—a pan-religious ethos which believes "God wants us be happy" as the predominate view of God's relationship toward humanity, with little space for accountability or expectation of us from God—which he understands to be co-opting the tradition of Christianity changing it from its authentic form.<sup>60</sup> This trend contributes to a benign faith found among many millennials—those Christians who are scarcely changed by their religious faith, who make little impression on their world for Christ.

Lakies explains, Rieff's arguments draw upon the "disenchanted worldview of the fact/value distinction and its governing social stratification of a public and private realm," the bureaucrat for the public and the therapist in private.<sup>61</sup> The church becomes therapeutic when it ceases to be loyal to biblical faith and instead takes on the role of counselor helping individuals cope with the demands of public life (rather than transform them), overcoming feelings of guilt and failure. This therapist makes people feel better by helping them "to see that such demands are illusory,"<sup>62</sup> and undeserving of their angst. He claims, in many ways the church has done what Rieff suggested; it became proficient at administering a therapeutic institution under the "justificatory mandate that Jesus himself was the first therapeutic."<sup>63</sup> One can imagine how a therapeutic view can be harmful in constructing a vision of the disciple who must sacrifice, may suffer, and follow in the selfless<sup>64</sup> example of Christ (cf. Matt. 16:24; Phil. 2:5-8; 2 Tim. 3:12).

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<sup>60</sup> Lakies, "Candy Machine God," 16.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>63</sup> Phillip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 215.

<sup>64</sup> The idea of being "selfless" can be a problematic when speaking of oppressed persons who are often denied the right of manifesting a self.

Religion is diminished to an instrumental use when individuals are solely looking for what religion or God can do for them.

### *Black Church a Different “Therapeutic”*

Due to the struggles of oppression of marginalized people, the Black Church is in some ways inherently therapeutic, but not in the manner as described by Rieff. Instead, the therapeutic nature of black congregations constructs biblical theologies of hope and liberation, and help people heal from the atrocities of a racist society. In this alternate view of the therapeutic nature of religion, faith is not judged by what it can do for a person, but instead hardwires to the DNA of Christ’s disciples a self-understanding renewed and redeemed through Christ in stark contrast to negative identities imposed upon blackness by society.<sup>65</sup> In this sense, the Black Church, and by extension the pastor, has become therapeutic in the ways Christ embodied (Luke 4:18-19).

### *Therapeutic Individualism and the Instrumental*

Smith and Denton claim a malignant strand of therapeutic individualism has invaded the America Church. They explain:

the individual self [sees itself] as the source and standard of authentic moral knowledge and authority, and individual self-fulfillment as the preoccupying purpose of life. Subjective, personal experience is the touchstone of all that is authentic, right, and true. By contrast, this ethos views the “external” traditions, obligations, and institution of society as inauthentic and often illegitimate constraints on morality and behavior from which individuals must be emancipated.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> See discussion on societal identity imposed on racial-ethnic groups in chapter three.

<sup>66</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 173. For a fuller conversation see pgs. 172-75.

“The self must be liberated from” authorities and social institutions like religion, beyond that which is deemed useful.<sup>67</sup> Once deteriorated to this degree, the connection to the rich traditions and biblical obligations of being Christ’s Church are lost among the demands of the Id that wants what it wants, when it wants, and at any cost. Virtues like sacrifice, service and spiritual discipline are incongruent with the demands of the self. Kendra Creasy Dean refers to MTD as a “do-good, feel-good spirituality that has little to do with the Triune God of the Christian Tradition.”<sup>68</sup> Instead of a modern expression of an ancient faith, religion has become instrumental, picked up by millions when needed for convenience or consolation. This is a disturbing trend among cultural Christians who are less devoted to the biblical faith instituted by the early Church.

The African American church is also fervently warring against individualized therapeutic faith. Yet in many pockets, she too has become susceptible to this corrosive poison—take for example the perpetuation of the Prosperity Gospel.<sup>69</sup> The exemplary disciple I will argue for in my later chapters will not have a utilitarian view of faith, but look to authentically live as legacies of the ministry and mission of Christ. I will argue that faith expression in Christ does not end with personal piety and individual salvation, but must continue to reach beyond the self and outside of the church as an extension of being one with Christ.

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<sup>67</sup> Therapeutic individualism is not limited to the religious life, but most social institutions are impacted according to Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 172-175. We will explore this again in chapter two’s discussion of individualism.

<sup>68</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 4.

<sup>69</sup> David Van Biema and Jeff Chu, "Does God Want You to Be Rich?: A Growing Number of Protestant Evangelists Raise a Joyful Yes! But the Idea Is Poison to Other, More Mainstream Pastors," *Time Magazine*, 9/10/2006, accessed <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1533448-3,00.html>.

## Effects of Postmodernity on Culture

Since the 1970s, postmodernist thought has had an increasing influence on American culture.<sup>70</sup>

By the beginning of the new millennium, youth ministers and leaders of the Emergent Church Movement began paying close attention to how cultural shifts were changing people's relationships to church and religious life, which, up until this time, were largely based upon constructs of modernity.<sup>71</sup> While there are a number of pillars to describe the differences between 'now' and 'then', those most relevant for this present study are: subjectivity over objectivity; high value of community; and preference for authenticity.

Cultural shifts are critical to understanding the Church. We have sufficiently seen in the previous two trends how subjectivity has impacted faith. Yet the post-modern value of community can be diluted by a privatized or even pious expression of faith. More significantly, millennials need to participate in meaningful ways in the communities to which they contribute. As with the majority culture, young blacks often drift away from the church once they graduate from high school. The removal of the sub-culture of youth church, choirs, or other groups, results in many emerging adults languishing without a place to fit in among other community members. No longer children, but not 'full' adults, millennials often struggle to express their religious devotion within community. The postmodern value of community thus stands in contradiction to their own experience at church, thereby alienating countless who drift away.

Lastly, the prioritization of authenticity will keep many from the church because of the perceptions of a church which is disinterested in people being their own true selves—the church is either unwilling or unable to embrace the questions, misgivings and lifestyles of individuals

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<sup>70</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 13.

<sup>71</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church (the Church and Postmodern Culture)* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).; Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Youth Specialties, 2001).; Ivy Beckwith, *Postmodern Children's Ministry: Ministry to Children in the 21st Century Church* (Grand Rapids: Youth Specialties).

that fall outside of the expected norms. Rank and file Christians, accepting dogma unadulterated, no longer fits many millennials' global interfaith-individualized worldviews. Pluralism, tolerance and embracing others as equals prevail in a postmodern mindset. The thoughts that there is 'no one truth' but many 'truths' persists among this cohort. The contemporary Church's failure to give younger Christians—and adults too—an holistic faith and a construct that helps them reconcile the worlds they are flowing in and out of, causes many younger Americans to compartmentalize faith in the secret quadrants of personal expression.

### **Universalizing Ideal**

Accompanying postmodern thought and increasing globalization, there has been a tendency in the West to subscribe to a “universalizing ideal.” Tolerance, acceptance, and social mixing among Americans have in some ways caused a loss of differentiation of religious thoughts for many. Further, by the close of the 1960s and the earlier years of the 1970s many walls of division between the races were demolished,<sup>72</sup> and by 1980, the tensions between Protestants and Catholics, between Christian and Jews, and between Protestant denominations had diminished.<sup>73</sup> “The effects of the ecumenical movement . . . the more general attitudes of toleration being promoted by higher education . . . intermarriage, and other forms of social mixing” were changing culture.<sup>74</sup> While dividing lines in society were present, they were beginning to mean far less. A new utopian ideal, wherein everyone is accepted as equal, had finally begun to take on by

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<sup>72</sup> In theory or in a legislative sense with the Passing of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968, as well as the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Yet, in reality it would be several more years before the affects of these legislations were realized.

<sup>73</sup> Wuthnow claims that the tensions began to ease after World War II. See Wuthnow, *The Struggle for America's Soul*, 15.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

the time we reached the new millennium. Traditional boundaries were crossed and those previously seen as *other* began to normalize in the public sphere.

Wuthnow's twenty-five-year-old claim seems to ring true today: "people . . . generally *see* little reason to revere the distinctive traditions of their own faith—or at least to let these loyalties interfere with social interaction."<sup>75</sup> We will see later that in many ways, millennials have lost the value of the particularity of the Christian Story. In fact, insisting on the truth of Christ, in its particular salvific role, is one of the many things that pull moderns away from the Church.<sup>76</sup> Smith and Snell call it the "enigma of inclusiveness . . . a moral system valuing diversity that begins by valuing everyone's particular differences somehow ends up devaluing any given particular difference."<sup>77</sup> While predominant in today's younger Americans, the loss of particularity began before any of them were born. In many ways, the lines are now blurred between openness to differing ideologies and maintaining one's own identity and Christian beliefs.<sup>78</sup> The Gospel story of reconciliation and redemption has a universalizing affect, but is a very particular story of Jesus Christ's birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension.

We started this conversation with the deep trends impacting millennials and their relationship to faith because characteristics noted among millennials cannot be considered in isolation from the wider culture. As with any other generation before, today's younger Americans are a product of their environment. Each of the trends discussed will have a direct impact or contributing influence on both the cultural particularities and religious lives of millennials.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> See fuller discussion in Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 169.

<sup>77</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 81.

<sup>78</sup> Dean also deals with the themes of particularity and the danger of niceness to the witness and profession of a particularity that is Christianity in Dean, *Almost Christian*, 25-34.

## THE BLACK CHURCH IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The nascent roots of today's Black churches began in the late eighteenth century, in slave communities, evangelized under white oppression, and were enlivened by African heritage to create places for independent worship of God. Distinguishable from white churches and black congregations in white denominations, African Baptist churches carved out their own lively mix of rhythmic music, shouts, dances, emotive preaching and responsive listening that remain hallmarks today of many black congregations.<sup>79</sup> These centers of faith were always holistic in their existence, were forced to wrestle with theological matters, as well as "political, economical, educational, and various dimensions of culture."<sup>80</sup> Social matters for the black man and woman living in America had always been tied to faith—themes of hope, liberation, and survival were interpreted via the lens of the biblical text and ecstatic experience, providing affirmation and identity clarification for the masses of Black folk.<sup>81</sup> The pastor could not preach simplistic truths that remained as historical narratives of a Jewish legacy of the early church; instead the black preacher, and by extension his church, fought for racial uplift and the moral development of its people.<sup>82</sup>

Since her infancy, the Black Church has been the nucleus of the black community. While others point to its centrality emerging after the civil war when membership quadrupled,<sup>83</sup> there is no dispute that these faith communities are the birthplace of countless social hallmarks within

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<sup>79</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 20-46; Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 1-22,46-70.

<sup>80</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 316.

<sup>81</sup> Larry Murphy claims that the liberation thrust of the black church began in the nineteenth century, along with the themes of hope, survival; see "Piety and Liberation: A Historical Exploration of African American Religion and Social Justice," in *Blow the Trumpet in Zion: Global Vision and Action for the 21st-Century Black Church*, ed. Iva E. Carruthers, Frederick D. III Haynes, and Jeremiah A. Wright (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 37-38.

<sup>82</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, Third ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 193.

<sup>83</sup> Murphy, "Piety and Liberation," 43.

black society. The oratory power of the black socio-political, intellectual elite were birthed from her pews; gospel, jazz, soul, and R&B (rhythm and blues) blossomed from her choir stands; an informed congregation descended into a racist society while protesting for justice and equality, marched proudly from her steps; and today's youth generation emerged expectantly from her womb. Yet, for the first time in history, we are in danger of a foundational shift as the role of the African American Church continues to lose influence. Many who are arguably disconnected from the mother church are still invested in seeing her fulfill the destiny of being an institution of change, activism, and hope—three stalwarts of the Black Church.

Lincoln and Mamiya explain that the themes of survival and liberation have shaped black attitudes toward politics; noting that many historical abolitionists, heads of revolts, elected officials, and civil rights leaders were black clergy.<sup>84</sup> Yet, many were not so inclined to join the fight in the name of the Lord; instead of using the text to liberate minds—and eventually the bodies (humanity)—of its members, some clergy used pious admonishments of struggle as a prelude to heavenly rewards.<sup>85</sup> As early as the 1840s-50s, this type of dichotomy among black religionists caused tensions in establishing the identities of black churches. While some focused on mobilizing a people toward racial uplift, others focused on preparing their flocks for a 'great reward on the other side.' Today, the inability to regard one without the other makes it more difficult to identify a singular position of the Black Church. Instead, we can look past these tensions to reveal the common threads as we examine the significance of millennials.

The Black Church is not only theologically complex, she is also diverse in her make up—now including historically Black denominations, Black congregations within majority denominations, and predominately Black non-denominational churches. Black Protestants is

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<sup>84</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 234.

<sup>85</sup> Murphy, "Piety and Liberation," 40-42.

used by researchers and can extend to the large numbers of African Americans who attend evangelical protestant (non-denominational) mega churches. Eddie Glaude argues, “The Black Church, as we’ve know it or imagined it, is dead . . .the idea[s] of this venerable institution as central to black life as a repository of social and moral conscience of the nation has all but disappeared.”<sup>86</sup> Though I cannot concede death—the Black Church is alive, even if different than her earlier self—I understand the critique. I choose to celebrate the diversity that has become the Black Church and on occasion I use the language of the African American Church as indicative of the expanding beauty of my beloved faith community.

### **THEOLOGICAL TERMS**

This project is not driven solely by qualitative and quantitative data, but it is based on theological themes that undergird the arguments I made. At its core, this thesis is about strengthening Christ’s Church and how it can become more effective in its relationship with the young adults of this generation called millennials. It will suggest that the best way to engage the heart and soul of this generation will be through a meaningful covenant relationship with Christ and His Church (through multi-tiered mentoring and discipleship). Further, it will argue that the metrics of effectiveness will be the individual disciple’s understanding and actuation of their part in the holistic mission of the church, indeed the mission of God—distinguished by the markers revealing an integration of identity and mission in Christ. Thus, this project though substantiated with qualitative data, is very theological, dealing with issues of the nature of Church, the mission

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<sup>86</sup> Eddie Glaude, Jr. names three reasons behind his claim that the Black church is dead: the black church has always been complicated (wrestling between ideals of prophetic and progressive institutions versus being very conservative in actuality), the Black church being more differentiated, and the routinization of black prophetic witness. For full argument see "The Black Church Is Dead," *Huffington Post*, 8/23/2012, accessed 2/3/16, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eddie-glaude-jr-phd/the-black-church-is-dead\\_b\\_473815.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eddie-glaude-jr-phd/the-black-church-is-dead_b_473815.html).

of God, and life of a disciple. As such, it is necessary that we briefly define these terms before moving forward.

The English word for “church” is complicated because of its many meanings: an architectural edifice (building), a body of believers gathered together (for worship and fellowship), a denominational body (i.e. the Catholic church), and used in the plural to designate an individual who is *part* of Christ’s body (you are the Church). In Greek, the word is ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*) as it is used in Matt 16:18, 18:17 to designate “an assembly of citizens of a city”; it also means to “simply gather” or an “assembly of persons” as noted in Acts 19:39, 41; and it is used by the Apostle Paul in reference to the *local churches* he planted throughout Asia Minor.<sup>87</sup> In short, “church” means an assembling of believers of Jesus Christ—universal (Eph. 1:22-23) or local (1 Co. 12:27).<sup>88</sup> The Church is an institution, inherently social; because it is a living-breathing organism. Individual persons become part of the Church through conversion (being born again/salvation—John 3; Rom. 10:8-10). The form of the church, who she is, leads its functions—her mission.

The study of mission has evolved over the last 50 years, shifting its focus from a soteriological focus, to cultural expansion into Eastern countries, to an “ecclesiocentrically” emphasis on the church as the initiator and goal of mission.<sup>89</sup> Today, however, the study of mission resonates with my own understanding of the Church’s participation in God’s

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<sup>87</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Unabridged, One-Volume ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985; Reprint, 1994), 1025-41. *Ekklesia* is also used throughout the Septuagint. The Hebrew word often translated as *ekklesia* is *Qahal* and *Edab*, both meaning “the act of assembling.”

<sup>88</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “Ekklesia,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985; reprint, Nov. 1992), 397. For a detailed history of the word see pages 400-02.

<sup>89</sup> This historic readings belongs to David Jacobus Bosch, as detailed in *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 389-93 as cited by Benjamin T. Conner, *Practicing Witness : A Missional Vision of Christian Practices* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 31.

redemptive plan in the world—and with humanity.<sup>90</sup> In practice, mission also speaks to the purpose of the Church, and what she is created to be and do. Thus, understanding our mission as Christ’s Church is ecclesiological. In this sense mission encompasses at least six categories necessary for a full understanding of our collective role in the earth.

First, Evangelism is the preaching of the gospel (Mark 16:15-16; Acts 1:8), witnessing about Christ in ways that allow Christ to be experienced through the activity of the C/church.<sup>91</sup> Second, edification is building the Body of Christ through spiritual nurture (Eph. 4:12; 1 Co. 12:27), discipleship (Matt. 28:20; 2 Tim. 2:15), prayer, love and assistance in faith life. The third mission is the worship of God, our corporate and individual reverence of God as creator, sustainer, and redeemer (Matt. 18:20; Ps. 150:6; Jn. 4:23-24). Fourth, *missions*, domestic and foreign assistance to marginalized persons or those without resources (Matt. 25:34-40). The fifth is *social justice/action*, the prophetic critique of unjust situations and systems, as well as our activity toward correcting the same (Luke 4:28). The sixth pillar is one less universally accepted, but equally important, which is the *ecological*, fulfilling humanity’s original call to guard and keep the garden (earth) given for humanity to live in and to care (Gen 2:15; Ps 24:1).<sup>92</sup>

A disciple is a follower of Christ, committed to study and follow the teachings of Christ. The Greek word μαθητής (*mathetes*) is used over 250 times in the Gospels and Acts—it is always attached to a person. In the Greco-Roman world, μαθητής meant to direct one’s mind

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 11, 31.

<sup>91</sup> A note on my usage: When “Church” is written with a capital “C” I am speaking of the Church universal (catholic); when using “church” with a small “c” I am referring to either the individual Christian, denominations, or local houses of worship (assemblies). When I use “C/church” I mean am speaking of all that identify as the “Church” individually, collectively and institutionally.

<sup>92</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1051-58. See also James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990); Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2002); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993); Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

toward something, as in a pupil, one engaged in learning *with* a teacher.<sup>93</sup> Thus this word connotes not only learning, like the Greek word διδάσκω (*didasko*, to learn) but a relationship, making it personal, covenantal. In Matt. 28:19-20 the apostles were left with instructions to “go” and “make disciples” baptizing them and teaching them. A disciple thus is first a believer, receiving water baptism, having been made one with the community of faith. The expectation is that this disciple will learn, grow, and be transformed (Rom. 12:2).

### The “MILLENNIALS”

Millennials are the generational cohort born after 1980 and at present have “no chronological end point.”<sup>94</sup> In 2015, millennials were between the ages of 15-35. A wide range encompasses adolescents, traditional college aged students, new career starters, and “younger” adults, and conveys the anxiety-ridden period of teen years, the uncertainty of new independence from parents, and the apprehension and excitement of starting families. Thinking about *millennials* is anything but a simple task. However, three intellectual inquiries from the schools of social science, psychology, and sociology impact our understanding of *millennials* and their context.

Social scientists like Robert Putnam in the late 1990s, having become interested in how American society was changing and concerned with dwindling institutional memberships, framed the conversation in terms of social capital.<sup>95</sup> The goal is to encapsulate the societal shifts in terms of how people relate to that which is outside of themselves: the public sphere, institutions of all kinds, and informal relationships. Psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett in 2000

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<sup>93</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "Mathetes," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985; reprint, Nov. 1992), 552-62.

<sup>94</sup> Many scholars end this generational cohort in 2000 while others have opted to allow the ending phase to be open ended until more time has passed to identify the true ending of the group.

<sup>95</sup> Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 18-20. Note however, the concept of social capital is not new.

proposed Emerging Adulthood (ages 18-29) as a life-stage different from adolescence and adulthood as a result of exploring what it meant to move from adolescent to adulthood. Prior to Arnett, the school of sociology had defined the transition *into adulthood* as being solidified by “leaving home, finishing education, entering full-time work, marriage, and parenthood.”<sup>96</sup> Yet, Arnett’s research revealed a shift among this post-adolescent group: the sociological markers that connoted adulthood, were replaced by more “intangible and psychological” reasons such as “accepting responsibility for one’s actions, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent.”<sup>97</sup>

The first quarter of the twentieth century saw the category of “adolescence” marking out a gap between childhood and adulthood;<sup>98</sup> the concept of emerging adulthood further lengthened this gap.<sup>99</sup> Arnett notes “revolutionary changes” necessitating a new life stage: the Technology Revolution, the Sexual Revolution, the Women’s Movement, and the Youth Movement.”<sup>100</sup> Younger Americans could not be studied as an older iteration of adolescents. At least on this last point, sociologists would agree. The sociological lens extends young adulthood as far as age forty. Wuthnow widens the age range to 21–45 (encompassing *half* of adulthood for most Americans). He explains: “people in their twenties and thirties are already adults, not making a transition to adulthood.” He refuses to define adulthood “as a status that either has or has not

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<sup>96</sup> Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teen through the Twenties*, Second ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), xiii. His findings were originally published in 2005 and he notes first identifying this new life stage among Generation X (p.2).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>98</sup> Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (Perennial, 1999; Reprint, 2000).

<sup>99</sup> Arnett cites the slower arrival to adulthood in part is due to the significant rise in the median ages of marriage and becoming parents between 1960 and 2000. Still, these shifts alone were insufficient cause for creating the fourth life stage category. Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 3.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

been achieved.”<sup>101</sup> By age forty-five, he surmises, “most Americans have accomplished” these milestones of adulthood, “if they are ever going accomplish them.”<sup>102</sup>

Arnett argues that this stage of life is “neither adolescent nor young adults but something in-between.”<sup>103</sup> The psychological influences of family status and revolutionary events notwithstanding, the social sciences have not been so fast to jump on the emerging adulthood bandwagon. Despite this fact, both academic disciplines have displayed an acute interest in this cohort, producing important work helpful in developing a strategy that results in the increase of relevancy of the church in the lives of younger Americans. Both Arnett and Wuthnow point to three trends impacting those in this age grouping: delay in marriage (long term partnerships), delay in beginning parenthood, and delay in becoming established in a career.<sup>104</sup> Wuthnow refers to it “taking longer” to reach these milestones and Arnett looks at younger people “moving toward” these commitments.

Wuthnow and Arnett both reject the use of generational terminology such as “millennials” for those in early adulthood. First, Wuthnow sees no evidence of this cohort being “decisively shaped by a particular historical event” and, secondly, he argues that generational language lends itself to popular comparisons with previous generations that are just not true for those in their 20s and 30s.<sup>105</sup> His perspective seems accurate because the absence of these milestones does not negate one’s designation as adult. Arnett argues, “characteristics of today’s young people are not merely generational. The changes that have created emerging adulthood. . . will be around for many generations to come.”<sup>106</sup> Because of these disclaimers, I will use “millennials” fully

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<sup>101</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 6.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> See full conversation in his preface to the second addition page viii

<sup>104</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 6 and Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 7.

<sup>105</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 6.

<sup>106</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 2.

acknowledging baggage it brings. Nevertheless, this term is recognized by most religious practitioners, especially considering the number of sources that prefer generational terminology.

The African American arguments of practitioners and pastors writing about this generation should also be taken into consideration with regard to who counts as an adult. Stephens and Watkins, in speaking of young adults, ages 18–39, explain African American young adults are living in a post-civil rights, post-soul generation.<sup>107</sup> F. Douglas Powe describes Millennials (born 1981–2000) as the Hip Hop Generation that shifted the landscape of African American Christianity.<sup>108</sup> I will explore the significance of these reclassifications later, but for now they are reminders that all studies of this cohort must be contextually grounded to ensure that the nuances of culture, age, and identity are accounted for in our quest to walk further with this generation.

The majority of African American denominations categorize young adults as 18–35.<sup>109</sup> As this is a study ultimately on the Black church, this perspective on the cohort is helpful. This definition of young adults encompasses both ranges of ages for emerging adulthood and young adults. Therefore, for this study it is not necessary to prefer one designation to the other, especially as this study focuses on young adults ages 18-35. When citing scholars I will maintain their own language when referencing this cohort (i.e. Emerging Adults, Young Adults, or Millennials). When I use the term millennials I mean specifically young adults 18-35 (including those understood among psychologists to be emerging adults).

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<sup>107</sup> Stephens III and Watkins, *From Jay-Z to Jesus*, 2.

<sup>108</sup> Powe, *New Wine New Wineskins*, 19-21.

<sup>109</sup> National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. (18-35), National Baptist Convention International (18-30), Christian Methodist Episcopal (18-30), African Methodist Episcopal (18-40), Church of God in Christ (18-35).

## CULTURAL WORLD OF MILLENNIALS

Most leaders of African American churches, at a loss of how to reverse the chronic absence of millennials in their pews, are looking for ways to engage millennials in their congregations.

Their concern has two parts: one, survival of local churches,<sup>110</sup> and two, the soul of this generation. It is paramount in attempting to find viable solutions to this problem, that one understands the developmental distinctions of both emerging adults and young adults.

Additionally, any significant evangelism or discipleship effort with *millennials* will require a stratified approach that recognizes the different cultural and/or life issues associated with the sub-groups of this cohort: I am Adult (18-21), I'm Grown Now (22-25), I am Grown for Real (26-35).<sup>111</sup> While exhibiting many similar characteristics, the application of the solutions will vary. For example, Tim Elmore distinguishes younger millennials as Generation iY (born 1990–2002) because they literally grew up online and because of the influences of the internet (“i”)—an emphasis on the individual (i.e. iPhone, iTunes, iMovie, etc.).<sup>112</sup> Yet unlike others, he stops short of calling this cohort narcissistic.

The Pew Research Center describes Millennials as “relatively unattached to organized politics and religion, linked by social media, burdened by debt, distrustful of people, in no rush to marry—and optimistic about the future.”<sup>113</sup> They are also said to be “confident, self-expressive, liberal, upbeat and open to change.”<sup>114</sup> These digital natives live fully networked

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<sup>110</sup> The concern among judicatory leaders of denominations is more on a macro level, concerning trends among millennials across regions and cumulatively nationwide.

<sup>111</sup> More formal designations would be: Post Adolescent/Early Adulthood (18-21), Becoming and Being Adult (22-25), Adult (26-35).

<sup>112</sup> Elmore, *Generation Iy: Our Last Chance to Save Thier Future*, 13-23, 113-20. Elmore claims that iYs are distinguished because they are the “most eclectic and diverse in our national history as well as the most protected and observed.”

<sup>113</sup> Pew Research Center, *Millennials in Adulthood* (Washington, D.C., 2014):4, accessed, 3/2/15, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood/>.

<sup>114</sup> Pew Research Center, *Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next* (Washington, D.C., 2010):1, accessed, 3/2/15, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/02/24/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change/>.

lives and are often insecure in their relationships and harbor anxiety about intimacy, says psychologist Sherry Turkle.<sup>115</sup> Sadly, “we expect more from technology and less from each other.”<sup>116</sup> In spite of this generation’s vast differences, it is true that the worldview of today’s younger adults can also mimic that of the wider culture, especially considering that some trends noted in this generation first appeared in Busters (his term for GenX) and the Baby Boomers.<sup>117</sup> Nonetheless, with this cohort coming of age in this new millennium, change appears to have reached “maximum velocity and critical mass.”<sup>118</sup> For this reason, close attention to distinct “cultural themes”<sup>119</sup> of emerging adults, as well as the ways they differ from adults or adolescents, will have weighty consequences on the African American church’s success with this cohort. “There is no single explanation for the changes that have taken place; rather, circumstances and attendant pressures of social life have changed, and the cultural norms about how to meet these pressures have evolved.”<sup>120</sup>

It is rightly argued that if you want “to understand the religious and spiritual worlds of emerging adults” one must first “understand the broader context of the cultural worlds in which they live and from which they construct their lives.”<sup>121</sup> It requires more than simply collecting data on this cohort, “but more fully understanding the cultural and institutional contexts that

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<sup>115</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), xii.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> Kinnaman argues even some among the Silent Generation Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 38.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> Smith and Snell provide an exhaustive listing of over 34 “cultural themes” which they say most American emerging adults assume, encounter and express. To explain the complexity of the cohort, they also include in their listing some less common cultural outlooks and experiences of smaller groups within the whole. While they acknowledge this list is “broad brushed,” it is very helpful. See Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 34-74.

<sup>120</sup> Wuthnow names seven “key trends” in the changing life worlds of young adults: delayed marriage, children (fewer and later), uncertainty of work and money, higher education (for some), loosening relationships, globalization, and Culture (an information explosion). Where relevant his trends are discussed below (20-50). See Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 20-21.

<sup>121</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 281.

emerging adults are in part generating and that in turn powerfully form their lives.”<sup>122</sup> Additionally, there are general considerations necessary in understanding the world(s) of emerging adults, from revolutionary communication technologies, mass education, moral pluralism, and the sexual revolution(s) to name a few.<sup>123</sup> Among African American millennials, their particular racial ethnic context and concerns must be weighed. This is a convoluted endeavor; millennials are “discontinuously different” than any generation that has come before due the rapidity of societal changes.<sup>124</sup> Also obscuring a clear view of this cohort is the group’s significant diversity.<sup>125</sup> Despite the *typical* range of characteristics of early adulthood, like managing transitions and becoming self sufficient, there is high variability among philosophical, moral and ethical beliefs that may affect understanding millennials. In spite of the trends discerned, it is important to pay attention to the specific context. My focus on black congregations is in response to this imperative. A contextual approach will prove the most beneficial in retaining, attracting and impacting millennial spirituality.

Generational disconnection is normal, but the data shows that we should be careful to avoid over-emphasizing the divide between the millennial generation and their predecessors. Yet the popular literature does often lean toward looking for disconnects as opposed to what is similar. To stay clear, it is helpful to group the trends evidenced in the cultural worlds of millennials. Kinnaman is helpful on this point; he explains, this “next generation is living in a new technological, social and spiritual reality” which he sums up in three words: “access,

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Smith and Snell also list: mass consumer capitalism, youth-targeted advertising, economic transformations, new career imperatives and strategies, the proliferation of media programming, moral pluralism, and. See Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, *ibid*.

<sup>124</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 38.

<sup>125</sup> Diversity of all sorts, racial, ethnic, religious and the sub-groups within this cohort (teen millennials and young adult millennials). Pew Research Center, *Millennials*, 1.

alienation, and authority.”<sup>126</sup> His categories will provide a starting point for viewing the shifts impacting millennial spirituality; then I will move on to other areas critical for this thesis. In the next chapter we will look specifically at the religious practices, thoughts and ideologies of *millennials*.

### **Technological & Cultural Access**

In all ways, the advances in technology have shifted individuals’ reach and outlook due to seemingly unlimited access to multiplicity of information, media, and entertainment. From behind a screen these young Americans can engage in conversations on the existence of God at far greater ease than with their Pastor or youth group leader. The global village gets smaller each year as the portability and the speed of access increases, allowing exploration of new and varying worldviews. People are empowered “to think as participants, not just consumers, of media.”<sup>127</sup> The *medium is the message*,<sup>128</sup> insisted philosopher McLuhan, not mere entertainment, nor just information. The medium *itself* conveys information, meaning, and intent apart from the message intended to be communicated. “Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication.”<sup>129</sup> Thus how we connect with millennials (or any modern person) will impact what they hear or experience even more than what we hope to convey. Media touches every aspect of our lives, changing what it touches and demanding our engagement.<sup>130</sup> Technological access requires a place for millennials to engage their faith in the context of these encounters—especially the cross cultural ones which

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<sup>126</sup> *You Lost Me*, 39.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>128</sup> Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*, ed. Jerome Agel (Berkeley: Gingko Press, 1967; reprint, 1996).

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 & 24.

raises questions about faith. Later, I will show how mentoring and coaching (via discipleship) provides such connection. Technological access opens our world(s), irrevocably changing life with each encounter.

This generation's relationship to the world through screens led to "screenagers" as one proposed moniker, and creates a cavernous distance between millennials and many of their predecessors.<sup>131</sup> A worldview that is reoriented around media devices and pop culture is a dubious side-effect to opportunities provided by technological advances. One significant effect of the ease of acquiring information is that the existence of an authoritative voice becomes questionable. Do we believe the *New York Times*, *TheRoot*, a site run by neo-Nazis, a statement issued by the National Baptist Church, or a friend's twitter message? Religious community and values taught at home are no longer necessarily the loudest voices in the lives of young(er) Americans. Now media sources weigh in during a time when younger adults (particularly those ages 18-24) are most impressionable, still forming their ideas and structure of giving meaning to life. "Now all the word's a sage,"<sup>132</sup> leaving many millennials in search of an authoritative voice—which often becomes their own.

African Americans are among the top three users of social media according to a Pew Forum report. The high concentration of blacks in urban areas has some affect on this trend, as use of social media tends to be higher in cities versus rural areas. Likewise, the disproportionate number of lower income individuals (under \$30,000) that are under 35, also results in higher social media use—possibly due to more "down time" associated with this life stage. Further, African Americans ages 18-29 report that 25 percent use twitter and 23 percent use Instagram, compared to 16 and 13 percent (respectively) among all ethnicities surveyed. It comes as no

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<sup>131</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 41.

<sup>132</sup> McLuhan and Fiore, *The Medium Is the Message*, 14.

surprise that social media is dominant among millennials; extremely so among blacks ages 18-29—with 83 percent reporting. Much like spiritual and early rap music, Black Twitter has become a vehicle of communication for protest, organization, and mobilization.<sup>133</sup>

The “nearly symbiotic relationship”<sup>134</sup> between young adults and digital media has been noted by parents, teachers and youth workers. Many millennials relate to their technological devices, especially their smart phones, as an extension of themselves. These mini-computers have become a constant companion: those who are tethered to their phones sleep, eat and share the most personal moments with it nearby. Technology for so many becomes a substitute for legitimate interpersonal communication. One emerging adult shared such sentiments: “I don’t use my phone for calls any more. I don’t have the time to just go on and on. I like texting, Twitter, looking at someone’s Facebook wall. I learn what I need to know.”<sup>135</sup> Such detachment is becoming normative as we interact in “machine-mediated relationships on networked devices.”<sup>136</sup> Turkle rightly argues that in some cases relationships are being reduced to mere connections when people are more geared on efficiency than relationship.<sup>137</sup>

If read in isolation these reports would intimate that friendships and relationships are not important to this cohort. That is not the case. As noted above both from a postmodern or natural perspective. However, one side effect of a life orientated toward constant access, connectivity and rapid response is a tendency toward narcissism. “In psychoanalytic tradition, one speaks of narcissism not to indicate people who love themselves, but a personality so fragile that it needs

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<sup>133</sup> Feminista Jones, "Is Twitter the Underground Railroad of Activism," *Salon*, 07/17/2013, accessed 02/04/2016, [http://www.salon.com/2013/07/17/how\\_twitter\\_fuels\\_black\\_activism/](http://www.salon.com/2013/07/17/how_twitter_fuels_black_activism/).

<sup>134</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 41.

<sup>135</sup> Turkle, *Alone Together*, 11, 15.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

constant support.”<sup>138</sup> If left unchecked, constant access and feedback can shift emerging adults’ collective psychological makeup, causing them to relate to the world in narcissistic ways.

### **Institutional Alienation**

Kinnaman notes alienation felt from the systems that undergird society impact the cultural worlds of younger adults. This sense of disillusionment does not, as with the other trends, originate with millennials, but rather takes a new form, deepening the rifts of the youth culture of the 1960s. While he argues the trend originated with Boomers, among millennials the cynicism reaches beyond public institutions, now including family and adults. Further, he claims, new definitions of families,<sup>139</sup> affirmed by culture, usher in new ideas about what constitutes a healthy family—which in turn connects to how millennials find meaning in the need for a good heavenly father. Lastly, Kinnaman suggests any alienation from family leads to delaying marriage (which we will explore below).<sup>140</sup> I am not convinced that alienation has causation in the delay in marriage; instead I think late age of nuptials is indicative of now culturally acceptable models that are outside the scope of ‘traditional’ family configurations. Marriage, no longer seen as the logical next step, falls in priority both because of the life stage issues (see below) and, I believe, because of new worldviews.

More to the point, I believe, is the growing distrust of institutions as sparked by cultural changes initiated by Boomers causes alienation from institutions like the Church—though less widely reflected among Black Christians.<sup>141</sup> The proliferation of institutional failures of the past, from Enron to Valdez, caused many to be cynical about all manner of public entities. The distrust

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 177. See also footnote 7-boundaries negotiations.

<sup>139</sup> Kinnaman gives examples of the absence of fathers, blended families and same-sex partnerships as exemplars of the multiplicity of family types. Ibid. 46.

<sup>140</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 44-47.

<sup>141</sup> I will note in later chapters that this trend does impact Black millennials, but the ways will vary.

that has been passed down to millennials, and the increased access to the public nature of today's failures, feed the suspicion of pastors, priests, principals, and others. African American millennials need role models whom they can look up to during this period of identity solidification (chapter three). Much like the students of the 1960s, today's Black college students and new career starters are raising up, demanding more of their churches. Facing disillusionment on their college campuses, indignation with racialized murders at the hands of law enforcement, fear of repeating their parents' financial demise due to predatory lenders, and failing school systems run by current government agency all instigate millennials to distance themselves from organized structures. These multi-tiered societal problems creates a snowball effect in our culture—raising suspicion among Black millennials.

Kinnaman describes younger Americans as feeling “lost” when it comes to “systems of education, economics, government, and culture.”<sup>142</sup> From new college graduates that cannot find a job to the hyper-connected who live in the news cycle of social media, we are seeing the emergence of a generation of skeptics who remain remarkably hopeful for the future.<sup>143</sup> Alienation is a good umbrella for describing the difference in how millennials relate to the wider culture. While this very well may be due to alienation, some of the institutional distance is due to the delay in hitting the traditional adult milestones which would normally be associated with these behaviors. Thus Disillusionment may be a contributing factor, but I do not see it as a dominant trend as cautioned by Kinnaman.

Finally, it should be noted that “joining” looks different among young(er) adults. Wuthnow argues there is a changing nature of social relationships, while some types of civic involvement have diminished among young adults (i.e., voting and community projects), newer

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<sup>142</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 47.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

forms representing more loose connections are now more prevalent.<sup>144</sup> “Loose connections,” characterized by one or more of the following—brevity of relationship, infrequency of interaction, interaction limited to specific roles or tasks, ease of ending relationship and lack of connection with third parties<sup>145</sup>—nevertheless do count as legitimate social interaction, and in many ways have become normative in this culture. One particular example cited was volunteerism, which Wuthnow noted remained steady over the last few decades, and even increased. Both the changing social world and the diversity of today’s America require a more fluid understanding of involvement on all levels. Organizations must be more porous, as Wuthnow claims, in order to allow people to easily flow in and out. This is counterintuitive to the traditional model of ministry that looks to convert and keep. But if entrance is more permeable, other ministry techniques may make retention obtainable.

I agree with Wuthnow that the changing nature of relationships among young(er) adults should be of concern to the church, particularly in how we create opportunities for this generation to experience community in our houses of worship. If we do not serve as a place of belonging, there are more than a few non-threatening, low-expectation, flexible organizations that will welcome these refugees into their ranks, even if only for a casual day of volunteering. Having spent over twenty-five years working with African American young people, I am convinced that they too desire strong relationships, but the cultural shifts of their times may disarm them of the skills necessary to nurture the very connections they desire.

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<sup>144</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 37-41.

<sup>145</sup> *Loose Connections: Joining Together in America's Fragmented Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 240.

## Questioned Authority

All authority is granted. For someone or something to be “authoritative” in an individual’s life, they must first be granted this privileged place (position or voice). However for millennials, the two postmodern trends of the privatization of faith and the universalizing ideal—which acknowledges all things as having “truth”—may cause questioning of authority. Skepticism, as noted above, raises questions of whom to believe and why.<sup>146</sup> Putnam argues that even our trust of others has diminished.<sup>147</sup> It is possible that our societal trend toward the therapeutic may be contributing to a shift in traditional sources of authority from “priests, pastor, parents, and lawmakers” to “a new authoritative class of professional and popular psychologist, psychiatrists, social workers, and other therapeutic counselors, authors, talk show hosts, and advice givers.”<sup>148</sup> Some researchers have argued that we are living in a post-Christian nation, but in fact “nearly eight out of ten adults identify as Christian.” Among emerging adults however, the figure is more like seven out of ten.<sup>149</sup> While we may be becoming less religious, with as many as 24 percent of Americans claiming no religious affiliation, there is also great differentiation among those who are religious. Further, access to the global village has provided a number of non-traditional religious options in the United States, though they do not predominate.

The rhetoric of inclusivity causes this generation to be inclined toward accepting all religion as having *truth* or being viable. No longer is Christianity the cultural cornerstone across such public and private institutions as community groups, churches, and public schools.<sup>150</sup>

Millennials’ quest for inter-faith common ground and their apprehension toward judging things

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<sup>146</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 50.

<sup>147</sup> Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

<sup>148</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 173.

<sup>149</sup> See Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 106: Table 4.2.

<sup>150</sup> Kinnaman provides a longer list, also including religious programming, popular entertainment, and stable family structures in Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 51.

as right or wrong cause them to question authority beyond themselves. The universalizing of truth undermines the longstanding privilege given to Christian scriptures and tradition above all others in America. The doctrine of *sola scriptura* (scripture alone), which holds that the Bible is the supreme authority in all matters of doctrine and practice, is unlikely to be embraced by younger Christians.<sup>151</sup> Today's young people, though possessing varying levels of faith, tend to be less concerned with obedience to scripture or following strict doctrinal beliefs. In speaking about the results during the first wave of NSYR, Smith and Denton note:

authority resides in the individual human self. Religious knowledge and authority thus become increasingly privatized, subjectivized, customized, and therapeutically psychologized around the controlling authority of individual selves, and not religious communities, traditions, and institutions.<sup>152</sup>

Researchers show that the Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, identified among adolescents, persists even into young adulthood.<sup>153</sup> Worse yet, the breadth of religious viewpoints expressed expand following the teenage years. "Religion does not have any authority per se, any more than shopping malls have authority over their customers."<sup>154</sup> Instead, religion is seen as helping to determine what is right in one's own eyes. Faith may be one of many factors contributing to moral and ethical decisions of younger Christians, but for many it has never held any significant role, and it possibly never will.

### **The New and Old Meaning of Friends**

As thoroughly postmodern individuals, millennials fully reflect a high value of friendships in their daily lives. Though social capital appears to be underfunded in other areas of their lives,

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<sup>151</sup> James Akin, "The Practical Problems of Sola Scriptura," *Eternal Word Television*, accessed 8/13/2015, <http://www.ewtn.com/library/ANSWERS/PRACTICL.htm>.

<sup>152</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 177.

<sup>153</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 155.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

they are fiercely committed to their friends. One popular myth about this newest generation is that social media removes authentic connection between persons. Instead these media sources actually create greater access to both those who are significant in their worlds, while also reinforcing the value of casual relationships because of increased access.

Elmore astutely points out that over 50 percent of adolescents' and young adults' time is spent with their peers in comparison to 15 percent with parents.<sup>155</sup> Thus it is easy to understand that relationships are valued in millennial culture—if for no other reason than the sheer disproportion of time spent with non-relatives. Relationships, community, and social belonging are key. Ironically, despite closeness, MTD and universalizing ideas keep most friendships among millennials from including meaningful conversations about religion, faith, or beliefs. Yes the NSYR found they refrain from talking about faith with friends or romantic partners. Unfortunately, religion is not important enough to be divisive among friends—it is irrelevant to many emerging adults.<sup>156</sup>

### **LIFE STAGE ISSUES**

Smith and Snell characterize the religious implications of emerging adults under a tripartite classification—disruptions, distractions and differentiation—which they argue describe the character of this life stage.<sup>157</sup> They explain that a settled life is predictably associated with religious faith. In contrast, the discontinuities caused by social, institutional, and geographical transitions, which they term disruptions, usually “correlate negatively with religious

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<sup>155</sup> Elmore, *Generation Iy: Our Last Chance to Save Thier Future*, 45.

<sup>156</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 153.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-78.

practices.”<sup>158</sup> In particular, those more psychologically inclined to risk-taking may also be less inclined toward religion (regardless of disruptions because of their inclinations).<sup>159</sup> Arnett describes instability as a major feature of emerging adulthood that resonates with the idea of disruptions; he speaks of the explorative nature of this life stage that includes many revisions to an individual’s life plan. Each iteration of the plan, though disruptive, helps refine a vision of the future.<sup>160</sup> The fluctuations millennials experience will impact their engagement of communal faith practice, and likely their own individual practices.

Secondly, the distractions of *becoming*<sup>161</sup> an adult can also keep many from religious devotion,<sup>162</sup> thus important milestones in the development process—a pursuit of higher education, career establishment, and gaining financial self-sufficiency—all stand as interferences in religious activity. Wuthnow speaks of the uncertainty about work and money as a hallmark of young adulthood as individuals strive for autonomy from their parents. But he stops short of viewing these uncertainties as significantly impactful on faith practices.<sup>163</sup> In the past, economic factors impacted religion among youth; however, recent research indicates that lifestyle and culture are more likely to have an influence than economic factors alone. For example, Smith suggests that having fun during evenings and weekends may keep many away from serious religious practice.<sup>164</sup> It could be the feeling of being in-between, as described by Arnett, that causes many to be distracted and drift away from religious devotion.

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 75. They do however note marriage as the exception, which normally positively impacts one’s religious activity and practice.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 11-12.

<sup>161</sup> Italicized to acknowledge complexity of discussing this as a life stage of becoming adult (EA) versus being a younger adult and having to work on establishing oneself.

<sup>162</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 76-77.

<sup>163</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 28-36.

<sup>164</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 77.

Completing Smith and Snell's triad is identity differentiation—focusing on achieving one's own identity.<sup>165</sup> This includes but is not limited to living away from parents and establishing one's independence.<sup>166</sup> It is unlikely that Arnett would agree with Smith and Snell; he instead names this critical process as a hindrance, especially since it occupies a large portion of emerging adulthood. However, Arnett likely would add to tasks of differentiation accepting responsibility for oneself and making independent decisions.<sup>167</sup> More than hindrances, these tasks may draw the attention of emerging adults, functioning in my mind as both distraction and differentiation—serving as both a challenge and an opportunity that aligns with our current inquiry about the spiritual lives of millennials. The Church in many ways can be a crucial place for identity formation amidst the complexities that come with being and becoming a young adult. Yet in order to be influential in these young adults' formation the Church must also be a place of social belonging beyond adolescence.

The postponement of forming families and entering into marriage is also significant in religious praxis. Younger Americans *typically* begin to return to church when they get married or have children,<sup>168</sup> and many say they want to raise their children within the same religious tradition that they were raised. However, it is clear that “[t]hose who do not marry” or do not “remain married . . . are less likely to attend religious services regularly than those who are married,” even more so than “their counterparts did a generation ago.”<sup>169</sup> Singleness is a greater reason for lack of attendance than divorce. However, the “potential relationships between having children and attending religious services are complicated” by various factors: having children out

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 78-79. See also Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 9-10.

<sup>167</sup> *Emerging Adulthood*, 35.

<sup>168</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 79.

<sup>169</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 56.

of wedlock, divorce, career settlement and the age(s) of children.<sup>170</sup> The correlation between the age of matrimony and religious attendance is positive and clear, but the delay in uniting lives and the responsibility of parenting causes a larger gap in years than traditionally experienced.<sup>171</sup>

Wuthnow notes that between World War II and the 1970s Americans were having fewer children, averaging 1.7 per family. Further, the median age of women at first and second births increased.<sup>172</sup> Additionally, families have become smaller—those with four or more children declined from 36 percent to 11 percent.<sup>173</sup> Finally, more women are opting out of child rearing all together, increasing from 10 to 19 percent between 1976-2000.<sup>174</sup> One of the classic reasons for religious recidivism has been the formation of family and desiring to bring children up in the faith of their youth. Thus, these downward trends are impactful on young adult religious lives, as larger amounts are not returning to church. This is significant in our quest to change millennial spirituality and relationships with the Black church . The church must become relevant to younger adults beyond the indoctrination of children.

The delay in forming families, explains Wuthnow, also extends to the median age of first marriage, which has risen over the last 60 years, increasing 4.1 years for men and 5.0 years for women. A reciprocal result is that marriage rates among people in their 20s have declined in the past 30 years.<sup>175</sup> This study found similar, but less significant, drops among younger adults in their thirties. Both the decreasing number of younger adults who are married, and the

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 126-45.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 24-26. By the end of World War II, the average size of a family was 3.7 children. The median age of women having their first and second children has increased from 21.6 in 1959 to 24.5 in 1999 for the first and from 24.0 in 1959 to 27.5 by 1999 for the second child.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid. Fifty-eight percent of the population of childbearing years had three or more children in 1970 compared to twenty-nine percent in 2000, a drop of 29 points.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 22-23. Median age of marriage rose from 22.8 for men and 20.3 for women in the 1950s, and again to 26.9 and 25.3 for men and women respectively in 2002. Married twenty-year-olds are down 47% among men, and 39% among women in the last 30 years and are still trending down.

approximate five year rise in the median age of marriage critically impact the rate of return to church and religious praxis.<sup>176</sup> Between the periods of 1972/76 and 1998/2002 the decline in church attendance was greatest among unmarried persons ages 21 to 45; the decline among those who were married was significantly less.<sup>177</sup>

Exacerbating the declining numbers is the “dropout” period, after adolescence, when parents no longer require attendance at religious services. The Pew Forum research shows that if people are going to leave their childhood faith they will do so before age 24.<sup>178</sup> Presently there is a “43 percent drop-off between the teen and early adult years in terms of church engagement.”<sup>179</sup> This represents “eight million twentysomethings who were active church goers” in their teens who will not be involved in church in any concrete way by their thirtieth birthday.<sup>180</sup> According to a Barna Group survey taken during 1997–2002, approximately 30 percent of those between ages 18 and 29 indicated monthly religious participation; the lowest percentage of churchgoing of all age groups surveyed.<sup>181</sup>

Postponement and dropout combine as a one-two punch to millennial participation. This is of serious concern to the Church, for a number of reasons. First, this present generation is less churched (lowest religious participation ever) than all previous generations. So before dropout even occurs, the church is already absent in many younger lives. If you are never IN, you can

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<sup>176</sup> See similar claim made by Wuthnow in *After The Baby Boomers*, 22.

<sup>177</sup> See Figure 3.2 in Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 55.

<sup>178</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 32.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>180</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 22. See also Smith & Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 112 (Table 4.5) which details the drop in religious service attendance comparing those who went between the ages of 13 and 17 and 5 years later (ages 18-23) dropping by approximately 25% for those who went at least 2-3 times a month of more. In the same comparison, those who “never” attend and those who only go “a few times a year” also increased. While this is only a part of the period discussed by Kinnaman, it supports his claims.

<sup>181</sup> A good graphical depiction of the “dropout problem” is in Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 22. See Also Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 115-18. Note: The tendency to return to religious activity is not isolated to the Christian tradition. Yet the chart provided by Kinnaman and Hawkins was specific to Christian church attendance from The Barna Group surveys and quantitative studies upon which their book is based. However, the data of the NSYR is inclusive of all religious traditions.

never drop OUT. Second, most churches are geared toward *ministering to children/youth and families*, leaving a gap of community for single young(er) adults. Many younger Americans are not returning to religious life after they leave. While in the past young adults would return after the predictable hiatus, according to Wuthnow “the postponement of marriage and children continues to suppress church attendance at least until adults are in their early forties.”<sup>182</sup> Finally, and perhaps most importantly, during “the experimental and experiential decade from high school to late twenties . . . when a young person’s spiritual trajectory is confirmed and clarified,” the church is not present.<sup>183</sup> While youth ministry provides exposure to and calibration with religious traditions and theologies (maybe) of the church, as we saw above, it is in young adulthood that identity is solidified.

### **Conclusion**

As I have noted above, there are a number of societal trends that will impact how this cohort relates to matters of faith. In a moment, we will look at the religious world(s) of millennials and how they impact both young adult’s individual spirituality and community participation. The nucleus of this thesis deals with how African American Church leaders can partner in the spiritual development of this new generation. The goal is to stave off the same type of decline in religiosity, both in practices and beliefs, found among mainline protestant and other religious traditions. The goal is to build upon our strengths, while recognizing our vulnerabilities in hopes of creating a space where young adult Christians have an integrated faith life, vested in the mission of the Church. It must be contagious enough to attract those who have never been connected to Christ’s church or those who have migrated away, preferring no affiliation to

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<sup>182</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 62.

<sup>183</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 31. The absence is not necessarily the church’s choice, but the fact remains, it is absent.

Christ's Bride. Because the African American church is in good, even phenomenal health compared to its peers, it invites a false sense of security that, left unchecked, has a detrimental impact upon our futures. To succeed, the church must become good at innovation that respects the traditions of the Black Church, but find ways to engage the heart of a generation that has drifted. African Americans leaders must find ways that their ministries can be relevant to the life of millennials, have authentic relationships with this cohort, learn to become a place of revelations where they learn and grow as disciples, and finally be a place where they can experience revolutionary encounters with their local churches. We will see shortly how understanding these young adults is critical to becoming such a place for those 18-35.

## 2| THE DIASPORA

### *The Religious Lives of Millennials and the Black Church*

I have noted that many emerging adults do not see the church as a place of real social belonging, which is problematic for those called to reach *the culture*<sup>1</sup> with the Gospel and to consistently make disciples. Generational disconnection complicates successful engagement with this cohort across many Christian traditions. Within the Black Church community leaders are hopeful of connecting with this generation despite their increased absence on Sunday mornings. In the previous chapter, I examined the cultural trends shaping millennial spirituality in the United States, the developmental changes among the distinct subculture of young adulthood, and the cultural worlds of this cohort, in order to understand the direct influences of millennials and their relationships with the church. I have no expectation of the church being *the* place of social belonging among younger adults, but I insist that it must be *a* place of community if we are to live into our mission as the Church.

Now I will turn specifically to the religious and spiritual lives of millennials, considering their religious outlooks, participation, beliefs, and thoughts; African American religious fervency; and the current diasporic trend of the majority of Black Protestant millennials. Discerning the causes of this diaspora will help reveal the challenges of releasing a new generation of empowered, connectional, missional believers as ambassadors into the culture. The next chapter discusses the critical step of integration that must take place if millennials are to fulfill their rightful positions as legacy holders of the historic Black Church.

Millennials are Christianity's most elusive members to study. With countless experts looking to reveal the keys to reaching this cohort, it is easy to get sucked into accepting

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<sup>1</sup> By "the culture" I mean the prevailing culture of society as a whole; similar to the biblical juxtaposition between "the world" as a place outside of "the church" (cf. John 2:15-18, Rom 12:2).

oversimplifications and unfounded conclusions about this *generation*.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, serious inquirers must challenge claims about millennial spirituality that are insufficiently supported by evidence. For example, some claim that most young adults today are spiritual but not religious, or that globalization has contributed to many millennials converting to eastern religions.<sup>3</sup> As noted, the use of ‘millennials’ as a generational distinction to be rife with problems leading to nebulous conclusions about them and the church—yet it is imperative for the future of the Black Church that they be studied as a cohort.

Diversity is one of the distinguishing factors of today’s younger adult; this is readily apparent in how they relate or do not relate to religious institutions, their faith practices, beliefs, and worldviews. For this reason, I rely greatly on the quantitative and qualitative research of millennials’ religious lives as revealed through national surveys conducted by sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, and religionists. Knowing that context makes a difference in the data, when possible I focus on African American millennials. Additionally, I will make use of monographs and articles written by church leaders who are interested in connecting with the Hip Hop Generation<sup>4</sup> coupled with my personal, long-term experience working with black youth in church environments. Young African Americans, although a smaller proportion of the Church

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Wuthnow also warns against popular literature, media and press oversimplification not based on statistics, surveys or data. He notes that many of these sources use small samples to make sweeping claims from those observations. See *After the Baby Boomers*, 3-5.

<sup>3</sup> Wuthnow dispels these myths, See *ibid.*, 134. Also see, Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 2009 166-8.

<sup>4</sup> This is the predominant name used among African American scholars and clergyperson when speaking about today’s youth and young adults. First seen as Rap music only, Hip Hop now represents a culture and a people of its own. This term has been used since the late 1990’s see Stephens III and Watkins, *From Jay-Z to Jesus*; Efreem Smith and Phil Jackson, *The Hip-Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press); Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press).

than a generation ago, still make up forty percent<sup>5</sup> of the Black Church; thus, they are a critical presence.

### **THE BLACK CHURCH: FERVENCY IN CONTEXT**

The African American Church and to a large extent its pastor was *the voice* of the Black community for generations. Historically religious participation has never been a monolithic enterprise in the Black community. Instead church was a place for worship, religious indoctrination, therapeutic healing for atrocities against the race, community and civic activation, socio-political and educational engagement, racial uplift via identity clarification, receiving social services, and where leaders were developed— thus, for black people, church was integrated, overlapping all areas of their life.<sup>6</sup> This type of multifaceted existence solidified the Black Church as a strong religious (social) institution since her birth. Further, securing her institutional strength were the theological frameworks used to connect the people to the holy word. In some ways religious practice, via the church, was a matter of survival. The church was necessary for the community—drawing families to her for any number of reasons. Yet, things began to change after integration, with early signs during the Civil Rights Era. These changes are helpful in understanding the Church, millennials, and religious fervency among African Americans; they will also be helpful in contextualizing the diaspora that has now gotten to a critical mass among today's youth generation.

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<sup>5</sup> Wuthnow notes from 1998-2002 African Americans ages 21-39 make up 40% of Black Protestant congregations (15% are between ages 21-29; and 25% between age 30-39). See full discussion in *After the Baby Boomers*, 73.

<sup>6</sup> This portrait may be somewhat idealized when considering more conservative traditions in the Black Church, which may not reflect all aspects noted. Yet, even the most conservative churches possessed these characteristics, just to lesser degrees in the areas of political activism and protest.

## **Generational Impact on African American Faith**

F. Douglas Powe lodges African Americans within Howe and Strauss' generational groupings; his reconfigurations, more than mere recapitulations, provide a meaningful construct to explore religious life and identities among African Americans. He renames the Silent Generation (born: 1921 to 1940), previously categorized as adaptive for their ability to fit in, as the Civil Rights Generation—change agents who transformed the identity of the Black community and sought to change the fabric of American culture.<sup>7</sup> This cohort, explains Powe, connected politics and religion and believed the church must be instrumental in creating the beloved community, making the kingdom of God a reality in America, where race distinctions would not matter.<sup>8</sup> Christian leadership used theological constructs to fuel their political activism. The turmoil of the day required even the most conservative (socially inactive) congregations to move toward more politicized matters as a means of survival for its people.

The church could no longer simply be a place of personal transformation; it also needed to be a place of political activism toward social transformation. Some congregations would resist this imperative, creating a diverse response by the Black church to the Civil Rights Movement spanning from 1954 to 1968. During this period there was a decentralization of the church as *the* voice of the African American community would begin with the emergence of Malcolm X and The Nation of Islam, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) who by the late 1960s would take a more radicalized approach demanding racial equality, and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (The Panthers) who rejected Dr. Martin Luther King's non-violent approach the fight.

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<sup>7</sup> Powe, *New Wine New Wineskins*, 7-8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

These developments put a wedge between the Black church and some of the youth generation of that day. Note that both the SNCC and the Panthers were started by young people in their late teens and early twenties—very similar to today’s young political activists demanding to be heard by their elders. This Civil Rights Generation was comprised of marchers, protesters, social reformers, and political activists who operated from an integrated understanding of their private, public, and religious selves. This cohort becomes the modern referent as *the legacy* when future generations discuss the strength of the black community.

Boomers became the Black Consciousness Generation (born: 1941 to 1960) that emphasized the beauty of blackness (rich with both sociological and theological implications), birthed black liberation theology, explored the role and presence of blacks in the bible (including the insistence on Jesus’ blackness), and greatly influenced the emergence of black educational publishing, including curriculums for and by black people.<sup>9</sup> Though it would meet resistance in many congregations, others were looking for a biblical response to the Black Power Movement.<sup>10</sup> Powe argues that this generation built upon the work of Civil Rights generation in three important ways: they deepened the understanding of black citizenry to promote black empowerment; they highlighted the “systemic nature of social ills,” as well as the ongoing need for economic and political equality; and they understood all too well the importance of the connection between the church, politics, and economic development.<sup>11</sup> Undeniably, the legacy of the Black Church will continue through this cohort, but theological disillusionment with the Church will begin to rise.

The Thirteenth Generation (born 1961 to 1980) were renamed Integrationists because they were the first to live and mingle freely among their Anglo peers. Powe argues integration

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 12-14.

<sup>10</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*.

<sup>11</sup> Powe, *New Wine New Wineskins*, 12-14.

created a dichotomy, previously non-existent in black communities, between those who got out and those who remained in predominantly depressed black neighborhoods; and that this cohort remains nostalgically attached to the previous two generations, though their success at integration caused disconnect between them and the Civil Rights and Black Consciousness Generation.<sup>12</sup> The Integrationists would introduce the “idea of someone having spirituality” without connection “to one particular religion.”<sup>13</sup> The Church was no longer necessary, socially or religiously, for some in this generation. The shift that occurs in this generation and its relationship to the church is well noted. The *Black Church* becomes the African American Church<sup>14</sup> and is displaced as the epicenter of the black community—now there would be multi-centers, though none would be as influential as the church. In fact, it becomes clear that there is no such thing as “one” black community or “one” black experience. There would be a number of changes that impacted African American’s relationships to the Black Church in particular, and faith in general: loosening connections and disillusionment with institutions. Further, there was a loss (for several in this cohort) of a theology of community once these Internationalists *arrived*—no longer concerned with the needs of their improvised brother and sisters they formerly shared a pew with. A unfortunate side-effect is that this sociological climb begins to diminish, for many, communal understanding of faith.

This generation was striving for an America where race distinctions would not hold persons back, yet it would seem that, among some facets of the black community, people traded racial marginalization for economic superiority. Unity of the body of Christ takes a back seat to economic and educational uplift. This is not to say that classism was new, but among African

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>14</sup> Mostly as an elevation of ethnicity beyond color, African American replaced Black in many persons vernacular. From an academic standpoint the name “Black Church” still continues.

Americans, the Black Church had reduced the effect in our communities. At church, all were equal—this truth was theological, and it was socially necessary. Yet the divide between suburb and city created an inequality (class divide) that the church heretofore mitigated among the masses of black people.<sup>15</sup> The Atlanta Blackstar argues that Integration moved black culture backwards by stagnating wealth, collapsing the family structure, contributing to the unemployment of black men, and causing the African American community to become more dependent.<sup>16</sup>

Powe joins others in designating millennials the Hip Hop Generation (born 1981 to 2000), who he labeled capitalists because of their focus on the monetary parts of the American Dream.<sup>17</sup> I find his observations of this cohort to be less insightful than the others. Nonetheless, he helpfully notes that this generation's attraction to "megacongregations" mimics the celebrity culture to which they gravitate—the draw being more about status and connection to the cultic senior pastor as well as their affinity for technology.<sup>18</sup> His most astute observation of this generation's relationship to the church notes the way millennials relate to senior pastors—not needing a personal connection, yet wanting to feel close via social media (Periscope, Twitter, etc.).

In speaking of the Hip Hop Generation, Otis Moss III proclaims the Black Church is now in the Post Soul Generation—the first generation that does not have all its roots in the Church.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For a brief discussion of how the class divide (and reflections on DuBois' 'Talented Tenth') is impacting Black American today see Henry Louis Jr. Gates, "Black American and the Class Divide," *New York Times: Education*, 2/7/2016, accessed 2/2/2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/07/education/edlife/black-america-and-the-class-divide.html?hpw&rref=education&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=well-region&region=bottom-well&WT.nav=bottom-well&r=0>.

<sup>16</sup> ABS Staff, "5 Ways Integration Underdeveloped Black America," Atlanta Blackstar, Accessed 02/27/16, <http://atlantablackstar.com/2013/12/9/5-ways-integration-underdeveloped-black-america>.

<sup>17</sup> Powe, *New Wine New Wineskins*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

<sup>19</sup> Otis Moss III, "Real Big: The Hip Hop Pastor as Postmodern Prophet," in *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2007), 111-12.

Therefore, for some, religion is not necessary for socialization or even meaning making. Over time, dropouts from previous generations will raise their children totally separated from religious indoctrination. For those young adults who remain connected to the church, they often wrestle with staying connected and living lives on their terms in the world. Yet for others, even if they walk away, they re-appropriate messages of faith for their context. Unfortunately, the rhythms, the beats, the anger has kept the Black church from hearing Hip Hop—even its Christian counterparts. As inheritors of rap music, this new Hip Hop generation will be heard, yet the medium will block much of their message from the ears of the church.

### *Lyrical Interlude*

Their grandfathers sang hymns; this generation raps and spits lyrics.<sup>20</sup> Their great-great-great grandfathers beat the drums to communicate; but this generation creates electronic beats which captivate. Music, rhythm, and beats have always been powerful tools of communication in the African American community. Today, it is the same. Music is often the voice of dissent, of those refused a seat at the table or those pushed to the margin. Music is the heart of worship and sings the yearnings of our souls. An old African American phrase says “every good bye ain’t gone.” Could it be that those who have left our hallowed halls are yet longing for a place to connect with God? Hear the beat of the lyricist:

Order, huh. Yo, we at war. We at war with terrorism, racism, but  
most of all we at war with ourselves. God show me the way  
because the Devil's tryin' to break me down (Jesus Walks with me,  
with me, with me, with me, with me.<sup>21</sup>

### **Training Up – Perpetuation of BC Traditions**

The Black Church has always sought to instill love for Christ in its children and young adults.

Proverbs 22:6 tells us to “Train up a child in the way he should go, [so that] when they are old

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<sup>20</sup> This could also include poetry-slams, though it does not fit my analogy.

<sup>21</sup> Kanye West and Che Smith, "Jesus Walks," in *The College Dropout* (Sony Music Studios, 5/25/04).

they shall not depart from it”); this was the mantra of mothers and ministers who ensured Sunday morning worship was the launching pad of a lifelong commitment to Christ and Church. Kanye’s prayer and wrestling while living life away from God and the Church reflects the truth of this promise, even when afar off the Hip Hop Generation calls, as Kanye’s beat continues:

I don't think there is nothing I can do now to right my wrongs  
(Jesus Walks with me). I want to talk to God, but I'm afraid  
because we ain't spoke in so long (I want Jesus).<sup>22</sup>

But our ancestors knew that young people also needed places of education and connection to support their formation. Worship alone would not provide the necessary training to inscribe the ways of faith on their souls—thus Sunday School was implemented to undergird the religious education creating a portal for young minds to explore faith in a smaller setting. Further, many children were socialized to their churches via youth choirs, usher boards, young people Christian leagues, Vacation Bible School, and more. Across denominations (CME, Holiness, Baptist, AME, COGIC, Non-Denominational, etc.), African Americans were early exemplars in church activities for children and youth—though over time Evangelicals have caught up. Yet, as with the wider culture, at 18 everything begins to fall apart for adolescent Christians. The African American church, stymied by models of ministry created around the Silents (who generally stayed in church marrying early by their mid 20s) and Boomers (who predictably returned to congregations after marriage), have ignored unmarried members ages 19-29, only making exception when persons returned to church after marriage or children. For those who drifted away, it was almost accepted that “they will return,” just “like we returned”—holding on to the truth of Proverbs. But the gradual—albeit consistent—reduction in those who come back to church has now left many churches without a game plan.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Until recent decades, family participation in church life was automatically under the umbrella of “as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord”; as long as young persons were part of their parents’ household, attendance was required.<sup>23</sup> Yet, in the twentieth century, a number of changes impacted the Black Church’s relationship to youth: less frequent use of Christianity as de facto socialization; Hip Hop music and the emergence of Hip Hop as a culture; the inward focus of many black congregations after the Civil Rights Movement; and an erosion of some family structures due the lack to economic opportunity for industrial workers, just to name a few. Hip Hop in particular did what the Church began to fail to do: understand the struggle and cries of its youth generation. This is not a new problem. In 1986, clergyman Walter McCray insisted that the Black Church must understand the issues and life challenges of young adults ages 17-24 and address their needs; he argued doing so was necessary in order to strengthen the church’s future.<sup>24</sup> Our challenge is the same today. We need to hear the voice and cries of millennials—the church that listens to the real life matters they face will be invited into relationship with them, while benefiting from these young people being with them. This is an incarnational model where the church must practice presence with millennials, representing God by being with them.

### **A BAD RAP FOR THE CHURCH**

*I lack words for these actors called pastors  
All these folks is hypocrites,  
And that’s why I ain’t at church  
Truthfully I’m just doin me,  
And I don’t wanna face no scrutiny  
Lacrae, Church Clothes (2012)<sup>25</sup>*

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<sup>23</sup> While this is true for Christian families, who were (are) in the majority, we must not forget that some Black Americans tough religiously conservatives, were part of the Nation of Islam or other religious traditions.

<sup>24</sup> For more on his arguments see Walter Arthur McCray, *Black Young Adults: How to Reach Them, What to Teach Them* (Chicago: Black Light Fellowship, 1992). Find similar concerns about this cohort in Stephens III and Watkins, *From Jay-Z to Jesus*.

<sup>25</sup> Lacrae, "Church Clothes," in *Mixtape* (Reach/DatPiff.com, 5/10/2012).

Despite being raised in her pews, more than a few African American youth are disillusioned with the Black Church. This discontent has been quietly rumbling for over thirty years, and is now approaching a roar.<sup>26</sup> The result is undeniable; this silent protest is evidenced in our pews and is blaringly clear to all who would hear the sound of their absence. The lyricist Lacrae's pen provides an example of a generation's misgivings about the church, which for young black folk are layered, fluctuating across tradition—revealing a deterioration in the relationship between faith communities and the “would-be” faithful followers. Frustrations notwithstanding, a large majority of young African Americans express classic indicators of religious fervency, except for waning regular worship attendance.

This disquieting trend among millennials is not exclusively focused on the Black Church—Lacrae's complaint in “Church Clothes” is first against the community holistically, and only secondarily against the church. Continuing, his words reveal the obvious connection, in his mind, between Civil Rights leaders and the Black Church. His words embody the tension of honoring venerable historical figures while also speaking truth:

RIP to Medgar Evers,  
RIP to Doctor King  
I ain't tryna hate on my own kind  
But Al and Jesse don't speak for me  
I'm probably gon' catch  
Some flack man,  
But Imma swallow this pill  
Like pac man

This artist knows the Black Church is not simply a place of worship—inwardly focused on strengthening members in their pious pursuits—but is also a center of community uplift. Why else, before ranting about issues with the Church, does he start by paying homage to historical figures? Lacrae's sentiments are representative of the Hip Hop Generation's angst with the

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<sup>26</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 309-45.

church. Millennials desire to make a difference in the world and insist upon a faith that can be in dialogue with them regarding important life matters while actively fighting beside them against injustice. In order for this to occur, the church must be in active bi-lateral<sup>27</sup> relationships with millennials in order to facilitate mutual respect that allows each group to hear the other. By co-mentoring I am speaking of... millennials mentoring their elders as well as elders mentoring millennials. Key is an open relationship that can work and wrestle with the obstacles of each context to make a better world and church. In this environment, older Black Protestants will not accuse the youth of apostasy and the younger cohort will not indict them of dereliction of duty by ignoring the needs of the people because they will be talking with each other and not at one another.

There are a few religious, cultural themes that predominate among emerging adults: indifference toward faith, belief that all religions share principles that are good (one no better than other), and that religion is peripheral to major life decisions.<sup>28</sup> The Barna Group, though writing from an evangelical standpoint, reveals alarming thoughts of younger Christians who are falling away from organized faith, They report that young persons' impressions of Christians as being hypocritical, anti-homosexual, and judgmental are particularly germane for the Black Church.<sup>29</sup> Their inquiry into dropouts is also helpful—they note that millennials (whom they call Mosaics) claim their disconnections from church are due to the church's overprotectiveness,

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<sup>27</sup> For more on young adults mentoring adults, see Earl Creps, *Reverse Mentoring: How Young Leaders Can Transform the Church and Why We Should Let Them* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008).

<sup>28</sup> For a complete listing see Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 144-54.

<sup>29</sup> For full discussion see Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*. My listing omits sheltered and too political as they are in my estimation less significant among African American millennials.

shallow teaching that does not provide a comprehensive way of life and faith, sexual repressiveness, etc.<sup>30</sup>

These are tough critiques for the church to hear, especially from those nurtured in her children and youth programs. There is “an overall lack of heart connection between young adults and the church [that] has reached the level of spiritual global pandemic in the first generation of twenty-first century adults.”<sup>31</sup> The shifts in culture as a whole noted earlier make the conservative traditional Christian worldview challenging for many millennials. For those who remain in our sanctuaries, there is an invisible demarcation, which separates the church’s space from the secular segments of their lives. The quadrant for their religious selves is often relegated to the sixty to ninety minutes of church time, weekly, semi-weekly, or less.

How younger adults think and feel about religion is as important as what they do with their faith (praxis). It is also important to hear the validity in their angst, noting that disconnections are not always unfounded. No matter the level of allegiance, whether actively engaged in local church life or sporadically present or all together checked-out, Parks explains how individuals “do or do not make sense of the *whole* of life.” This in turn “profoundly affects our personal and collective life,” Parks insists, so that “too many emerging adults are not being encouraged to ask the big questions that awaken critical thought in the first place.”<sup>32</sup> Instead, the church mistakenly ignores young Christians as if they must wait their turn to begin an authentic relationship with the Church. No longer in the voiceless ghettos of youth group, these young adults want more, speaking volumes in their silence, and absence. The church, derelict of its

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<sup>30</sup> David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011). I have redacted their list removing anti-science and exclusivity claims do not predominate as tenets of faith stressed in most Black Church pulpits.

<sup>31</sup> Richard R. Dunn and Jana L. Sundene, *Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adults: Life-Giving Rhythms for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 20.

<sup>32</sup> Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*, 2nd. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), xi.

duties, leaves this post adolescent group vulnerable with our being the type of interlocutor necessary for survival during the years of emerging adulthood.<sup>33</sup> This is not to negate the challenge and work necessary to reach every generation—understanding the faith lives of millennials and knowing how to engage them in the life of our churches is complicated—yet we must charge forward. To master the complexities of challenge will require a contextualized approach. National surveys on spiritual and religious lives provide context by revealing trends among millennials and further context in understanding African American millennials and the Black Church.

## RELIGIOUS PARTICIPATION

*The reason I'm fishin' 4 a new religion  
Is my church makes me fall asleep  
They're praising a God, that watches you weep  
And doesn't want you to do a damn thing about it  
When they want change  
The preacher says, "Shout it"  
Does shout bring about change? I doubt it  
All shout does is make you lose your voice  
**Arrested Development (1992)**<sup>34</sup>*

How we feel about the Church directly impacts our religious participation. It determines whether we show up, and if we do, how we participate. In the above lyrics, the artist expresses disillusionment with a Baptist Church that caused him to go “fishin” for a new church/faith tradition (“religion”). I have shown that many millennials are marginally engaged in the faith communities to which they claim allegiance, while others have opted out altogether.<sup>35</sup> Figure 2.1 depicts six religious types of emerging adults identified by Smith and Snell: Committed

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<sup>33</sup> For more on this topic see Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids*.

<sup>34</sup> ArrestedDevelopment, "Fishin' 4 Religion," in *Unplugged* (Chrysalis, 3/23/1993).

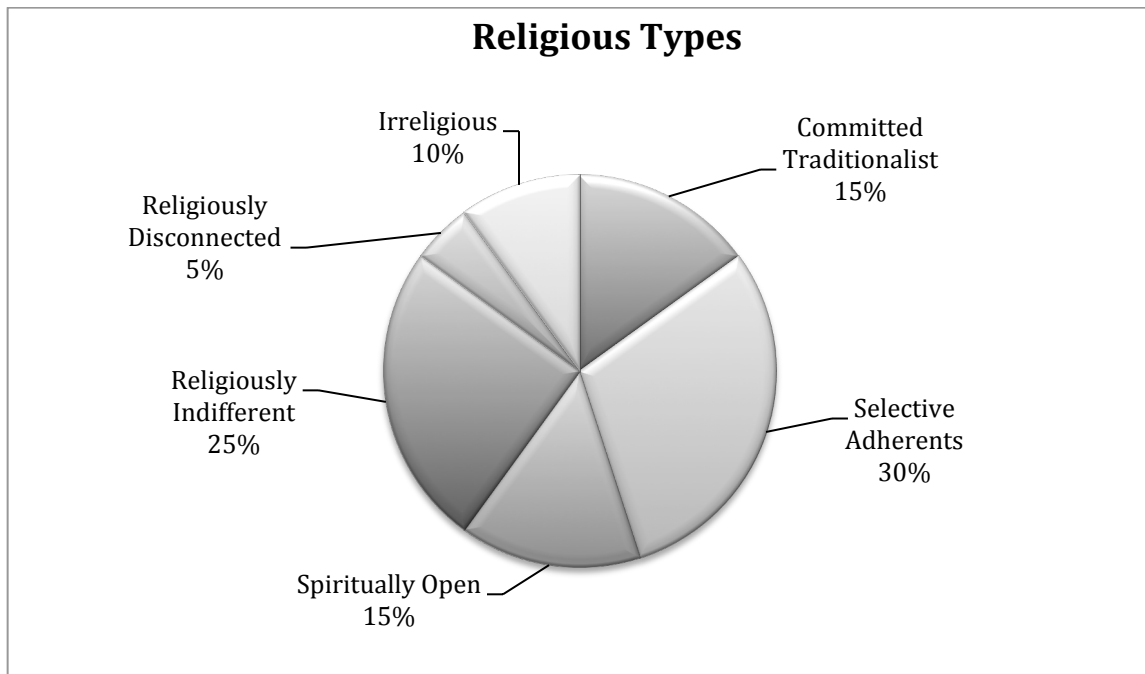
<sup>35</sup> Some young adults leave because of dissenting views, while others never pick up religion-having never been exposed to it in their homes.

Traditionalists (15%), Selective Adherents (30%), Spiritually Open (15%), Religiously Indifferent (25%), Religiously Disconnected (5%), and Irreligious (10%).<sup>36</sup> The characteristics associated with each of these categories were observed across all religious types but suggest a reliable representation as 63% of the respondents were Christian.<sup>37</sup> Chapter four discusses the need for the church to have a missional mindset toward active members—the traditionalists and the selective adherents. Yet for now it is worth noting that fifty-five percent of this cohort is uncommitted to a faith tradition (the religiously indifferent or spiritually open) or totally disengaged (religiously disconnected and irreligious). Consider it this way: a total of fifty-five percent of emerging adults are without faith in God or apathetic to organized religion. The minority group, forty-five percent, of emerging adults are engaged in religious community (committed traditionalist and selective adherents)—unfortunately two-thirds of this sub-set are *selective* in how they follow their faith tradition.

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<sup>36</sup> Smith and Snell define the types as: (1) “Committed Traditionalists embrace a strong religious faith” that is generally “well articulated and actively practiced”. They tend to be “grounded in established” faith traditions rather than “customized personal spiritualities” or new age wisdoms. (2) “Selective Adherents will believe and perform certain aspects of their religious traditions but neglect or ignore others. They are less serious and consistent about their faith... but are more grounded and convinced” than those outside of the C/church. (3) “Spiritually Open emerging adults are not personally very committed to a religious faith but are nonetheless receptive to and at least mildly interested in some spiritual or religious matters.” They are skeptical about some religious forms, but open to others. (4) Religiously Indifferent are “neither care to practice religious nor oppose it.” They are simply “not invested” and “it really doesn’t count for that much.” Religion “is simply not a particular interest, priority, or commitment in their lives.” (5) Religiously Disconnected “have little to no exposure or connection to religious people, ideas, or organizations. They are neither interested in nor opposed to religion.” (6) “Irreligious...hold skeptical attitudes about and make critical arguments against religion generally, rejecting the idea of personal faith. They may concede that religion is...good for some people, but their general attitude is incredulous, derogatory, and antagonistic.” For full descriptions of each of these categories see Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 166-68.

<sup>37</sup> Also noteworthy in the NSYR data is that African Americans made up 14% of those surveyed (33 of 230). See table B.5 - *ibid.*, 319.



**Figure 2.1 Religious Types** | Source Data from Smith & Snell, *Souls in Transition*

In comparison, seventy percent of all millennials (the selective adherents, spiritually open, and religiously indifferent) are in need of evangelism and/or mentoring into an authentic faith that captures their imagination. It is important that the church bolster the faith lives of The Remnant (who I will define as those millennials still faithfully engaged in the African American church community life, i.e. traditionalists), as well targeting the selective adherents for renewal and transformation. In order for the Black church to ensure its future, it must relate to these marginalized millennials in its pews by ensuring that church is a place of belonging and providing a guide to journey with them as they wrestle with their beliefs and disbeliefs. Only after rejuvenating the faith lives of the present minority will the church be equipped to go after the majority who remain open, indifferent, and disconnected.

Wuthnow prefers simpler categorizations—involved (spiritual and religious) and uninvolved—noting that fifty-five percent of young adults in his survey ages 21-45 were religiously involved. More unexpected is the interest in spirituality expressed by the uninvolved (who tend to be in their thirties, married, are parents, female, and better educated); thirty percent

of these admit religion is very or extremely important; twenty-nine percent say they have spent a fair amount of time in the last year working on their spiritual life; twenty-five percent acknowledge their interest is increasing; twenty-five percent say they meditate once a week or more.<sup>38</sup> Interest in spirituality among the marginally faithful is indeed a hopeful sign, but it should not lull the church into believing that reversing the current trend is an easy task. Despite expressing interest in spiritual matters, over half remain religiously uninvolved. This statistic alone is indicative of the arduous work ahead.

NSYR data revealed that the religious lives of most emerging adults mirrored that of their teenage years. Of those interviewed five years after the original survey, only one person had a significant change in their religious or spiritual life.<sup>39</sup> Despite rumors of mass exodus, the attrition is more gradual than one would think. The religious affiliation of emerging adults compared to their adolescent years revealed a seven percent drop among Protestants and a six percent drop in Catholics; predictably in the same period, there was a reciprocal thirteen percent increase in non-affiliation (non-Mosaic faiths either remained flat or fell by less than one percent).<sup>40</sup> The study also revealed that those raised in a particular tradition are not switching faiths (as has sometimes been suggested). Thus, the connection between adolescent spirituality and that of younger adults cannot be understated. As I argued, the wider societal trends greatly impact waning faith among all generations. Yet millennials are of particular interest for me because of the cultural distinctives that create a philosophical and often physical distance between them and the generations that introduced them to faith.

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<sup>38</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 134. See also Arnett and Jenson, "A Congregation of One," 451.

<sup>39</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 166-68.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

## Church? No Thank You

The “nones”—the religiously non-affiliated—are the fastest growing religious segment in America. Kinnaman, in hopes of helping churches re-connect with those who have previously identified as Christian and reverse this trend, looks to understand those dropouts (ages 18-29) that he categorizes as nomads, prodigals and exiles. *Nomads* walk away from church engagement but still call themselves Christian; their disconnection may be intentional, but it is often a slow fade of increased detachment. *Nomads* fit within my description of diasporic tendencies—those dispersed physically, theologically, or practically. *Prodigals* lose faith and say they are no longer Christian, largely because of pain or frustration over a particular issue that led to their leaving. Their exit may be “head-driven,” in that Christianity becomes intellectually untenable (they usually strongly identify with their new faith), or “heart-driven,” fueled by emotion and angst, who denounce Christianity specifically. Evangelism with prodigals is the hardest. *Exiles* are those who are still invested in their Christian faith but feel stuck (or lost) between culture and the church; despite a loosening connection<sup>41</sup> to church, most desire to live in honor of God, hoping to impact the world beyond the church. *Exiles* struggle with their religious tradition and living a faith that is relevant for their lives and vocation.<sup>42</sup> Many of the exiles would benefit from the framework laid out in chapters three and four of this thesis.

Belief in God is no longer equated with participation in religious praxis via a faith community.<sup>43</sup> In fact, many who are categorized as religiously non-affiliated<sup>44</sup> still believe in

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<sup>41</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 2.

<sup>42</sup> This paragraph summarizes the descriptions provided in Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 59-90.

<sup>43</sup> A similar claim is made by Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 54.; and Pew Research Center on Religion & Public Life, “Nones” on the Rise.

<sup>44</sup> For over 50 years surveys have used this term to represent those who responded to questions about religion “they have no religion, no particular religion, no religious preference, or the like.” This name is not without critique because it implies only persons affiliated with a formal group are religious--instead, The Pew Forum found that “most of the ‘nones’ say they believe in God, and . . . describe themselves as religious, spiritual or both.” In 2012 one fifth of the U.S. public, and one third of adults under 30 were religiously unaffiliated, the highest percentage in

God. According to James White, nones tend to be young, white males who believe in God, are not very religious, are democrats, and favor legalized abortions and same gender marriages.<sup>45</sup>

About 20 percent of unaffiliated Americans go to church at least monthly or yearly (which is only 12 points below the national average for those religiously affiliated).<sup>46</sup> This trend of non-affiliation is not presently having a significant impact on the African American Church. Yet she must be on alert; otherwise, this trend could have a future impact with grave consequences.

There was a two-point climb in non-affiliation between 2007 and 2012 (among Blacks) to fifteen percent.<sup>47</sup> Though the continual rise in nones is concerning, there are more fundamental corrections that, if not addressed, will prevent reversing the current diaspora among African American Millennials. Fixating on nones in and of themselves will not help. Instead, as we will see in chapter three, a new way of looking at the spiritual formation and nurture of disciples must begin with multi-tiered integration in their life, words and personal identity.

### *Active versus Passive Participation*

In today's culture, few distinguish between church members, Christians, or Disciples of Christ—instead we tend to situate all three under one umbrella, Christian. Yet for the purpose of this thesis, it is important to remember that a disciple is more than a church 'member' or participant; a disciple is a person on a journey of *followership* (John 8:31)—following after God—as students and imitators of Jesus (1 Co. 11:1). The deliberate choice of language “disciple” helps millennials aspire beyond church or organizational membership and it encourages active participation in the life of their local church. If we adapt the more common “Christian” (in

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years recorded; a trend that is showing steady increase with a five point jump in the five years prior to this survey. (Quotes from Pew Research Center on Religion & Public Life, *"Nones" on the Rise.*)

<sup>45</sup> White, *The Rise of the Nones*, 22ff.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Pew Research Center on Religion & Public Life, *"Nones" on the Rise*, 21.

isolation), we undercut the call for raising faithful followers who experience an ongoing process of transformation—impacting how they understand their own vocation and their vital part in the Lord’s church. For sure, this distinction is not bound in the name disciple—theoretically, any name could be used to describe the type of growing, spiritual formation and maturity that I will expound on in chapter three. What is paramount is nurturing and developing a generation who will redefine what it means to be a Christian in today’s culture while responding to the critical call to make and be disciples. The journey of becoming Christ-like is not without peril. Far too many millennials who consider themselves Christian have a faith that is insignificant in their lives—their faith is benign. This type of fledgling faith is hardly indicative of the movement started by Jesus or the radical faith of Paul, first Apostle of the Christian Church. Faith must be active in a young person’s life if they are to have the passion required to carry our churches into the future. Marginal faith in the masses of this generation will eventually contribute to the gradual demise of vibrant communities like the African American Church. What is missing in this cohort are committed disciples who recognize they called sharers of the gospel and ambassadors in the world. Instead, far too many Americans are Christians by extension of their cultural heritage, but have no ongoing spiritual transformation taking place in their life beyond their initial acceptance of Jesus as Savior.

My understanding of who the Church (the body of Christ) is called to be is based in the active and contributory efforts of every member furthering the mission given by Christ (Lk. 4:18; Matt 28:19-20; 2 Co. 5:18). In this construct, each disciple uses their gifts (Rom. 12:4-8; Eph. 4:7-8,11-16) in cooperation with the mission of Christ (2 Co. 5:18-20; John 3:7). It is one thing to visit the Lord’s house or even become active in a church’s ministries and programs—but another to have a life-changing encounter with God which embraces one’s role as an ambassador

of Christ (2 Co. 5:20). This type of understanding stems from a spiritual awakening that recognizes church membership is not driven by affiliation, but instead is covenant based. Only this kind of radical *followership* can ensure that the Black Church will regain her strength and move to the next level. This type of membership, to borrow from the Church of God in Christ, requires that a person be “born in,” transitioning people from members to citizens of the Lord’s Kingdom.<sup>48</sup> Disciples were never intended to be observers but citizens. When the body of Christ is gathered it is for the spread of the Gospel, worship of God, strengthening of the saints, and fellowship. These elements serve as a launching pad to “GO” out into the world and transform it with the love and power of God. When the mission of the Church becomes commingled with a person’s own mission and purpose, infusion has taken place, I will discuss in more detail in chapter four.

How relevant a church is in a person’s life generally correlates with religious participation. I do not suggest a one-to-one ratio, especially knowing that many millennials stay connected to their church even as these institutions began to fade in significance (cp. Kinnaman’s Selective Adherents). Wuthnow explains, “church teachings seem to matter to a narrower sphere of activities than they used to.”<sup>49</sup> However, those who are involved in a small group or bible study find these groups to be “an important source of support” in emotional crisis or difficult decisions.<sup>50</sup> For emerging adults, it is key that they find their place of belonging IN the church, a place of *koinonia*, which requires a deeper commitment than attendance. Yet, participation alone is enough for the church to earn a voice in the lives of millennials; nor to be granted a seat at the table of their reasoning and decision-making. Me Unfortunately, until young

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<sup>48</sup> The COGIC song about “membership” goes “We are the Church of God in Christ (2x)... You can’t join in, you got to be born in, we are the church of God in Christ.” The emphasis is on being born again and by experiencing the new birth one becomes a member of the church.

<sup>49</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 148.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

adults make commitments to live as Christ's disciples, the church will remain one of many voices holding no real authority in their lives. But the church must also make a compelling case for life in the body of Christ. It is well noted among church growth specialists that people with six to seven personal relationships within local churches will help ensure retention rates among new members. Similarly, when adolescents no longer have natural overlaps of socialization—between friends, school, church, and social activities—their church activities diminish.<sup>51</sup> In chapter four we delve into the role of mentoring and discipleship in developing exemplary disciples and discuss the inward identity and integration that prepares millennials to be church leaders. Relationships' role in maintaining community cannot be overstated.

Wuthnow argues, in today's society, the type of caretaker institutions that provide support and socialization for developmental tasks of childhood and adolescence all come to a halt around twenty-one or twenty-two. He elaborates,

Since more of those tasks are happening later, this is a huge problem. It means that younger adults are having to invent their own ways of making decision and seeking support for those decisions. Whereas dating and mate selection used to happen within the social milieu of the high school, congregation, or campus, it now occurs increasingly in bars, at parties, and through the Internet. Other major decisions, such as when to have children and how to raise them, or where to live and what kind of career to pursue, are also being made on an improvisational basis, largely without firm institutional grounding. It is little wonder that social critics write about the problems associated with *individualism*. In the absence of any institutional sources of support and stability, young adults are forced to be individualist. They have no other resource but themselves.<sup>52</sup>

This is problematic from both a sociological and theological perspective. At a time when support is necessary and many developmental tasks are yet being made, the church is absent as influencer

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<sup>51</sup> Smith and Denton note that adolescent participation is highest when multiple activities overlap. See *Soul Searching*, 162.

<sup>52</sup> *After the Baby Boomers*, 12.

and conversation partner from nearly half of American emerging adults.<sup>53</sup> It creates a double-edged sword—first, leaving millennials to be self-made, self-directed without dialogue with Christ and Church (a sinful posture), and second, leaving the religious adherents feeling abandoned by their Church. In part, these feelings are fostered after young adults graduate from youth ministries at age 18, but have no place of connection to call their own among the wider life of the church. Most languish<sup>54</sup> in their faith and ultimately disappear in predictable ways. Finally, when significant developmental tasks are at hand, the masses are forced to make it up on own or seek guidance elsewhere because the support of the church is absent.

## RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND THOUGHT

*I believe in one God. That's the thing that makes the most sense to me.  
There's wisdom in all kinds of religious traditions—I'll take  
from Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, whatever.  
The parts that make the most sense feel like they're coming  
from the same voice, the same God.*

*Jay-Z, Decoded (2010)<sup>55</sup>*

Beyond categories and types of millennial spiritual orientation, it is important to understand their religious worldviews and how they give meaning to life.<sup>56</sup> Arnett and Jenson, in surveying younger Americans 21-28,<sup>57</sup> noted that their beliefs roughly fall in four evenly distributed categories: agnostic/atheist, deist, liberal Christian, and conservative Christian— “noting considerable diversity within each category.”<sup>58</sup> Their research data revealed participants’ beliefs were highly individualized—no surprise there. However, in contrast to NSYR findings, they

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<sup>53</sup> Not only the church, but all caretaker institutions are virtually silent in the lives of young adults See also below in ‘religious participation’ statistics that also support Wuthnow’s claim of “more than half” being disconnected from organized religious practice.

<sup>54</sup> See Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 22...who speaks of “spiritual energy” fading away.

<sup>55</sup> Jay-Z, *Decoded* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2010), 277.

<sup>56</sup> Parks describes faith as the activity of meaning making in *Big Questions Worthy Dreams*, x.

<sup>57</sup> Arnett and Jenson, "A Congregation of One," 454. Note: 140 persons aged 21 to 28 in their survey sample.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 451.

noted “little relationship between childhood religious socialization and current religious . . . beliefs.”<sup>59</sup> They found African American churches are likely to show a similar trend, though the trend is lessened among African American community, which is highly religious in its orientation and whose young adults consistently show stronger fervency than the entire U.S. population (see Figure 2.3 below). While the descriptions of the agnostic/atheist and conservative Christians are predictable, the deists trend in new ways, confirming belief in God or spirituality, but not holding to traditional Christian dogma. Those classified as liberal Christians identify as Christian and at times with a particular denomination, but they have skepticism about certain dogma.<sup>60</sup> These categories are helpful, they focus acutely on the character/nature of millennials’ beliefs more so than what they believe (classic indicators on God, heaven, hell). In this way, both Wuthnow and Arnett/Jensen are essential for this section.<sup>61</sup>

### **Moralistic Theistic Deism**

“Most emerging adults have religious beliefs. . . [and] believe in God,” but in large part, these religious ideas are abstractions, checked off and filed away.<sup>62</sup> Researchers note that millennials share the belief that there is little substantive difference in faith traditions beyond outward practices, worship days, or rituals—resulting in the loss of particularities of religious tradition. Religious differences become perfunctory and peripheral considerations. The culprit of this

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 457.

<sup>61</sup> Among sources consulted for this thesis Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers* was most helpful in investigating the actual religious beliefs. Smith and Snell, *Soul In Transition*, while focusing more on the classic religious indicators, do point to *Smith and Denton*, *Soul Searching*, explanations of Moralistic Theistic Deism as persisting into the period of emerging adulthood; also helpful as noted above were the religious types that encompassed beliefs and practices, the classic indicators. Finally, Arnett and Jensen’ findings noted in “A Congregation of One” concur with much of conclusions in Wuthnow about actual belief constructs, though their sample set of 140 twenty to twenty-eight year olds is considerable smaller than the sources conferred by Wuthnow. Wuthnow does not only use data from his own NYARS Study, but also the GSS and no less than 10 other surveys, making his findings significant.

<sup>62</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 154.

concerning trend may be Moralistic Theistic Deism which is said to be a persistent worldview found among most religious American adolescent and emerging adults. This ‘faith’ affirms the existence of God, a creator and protector who only needs to be involved in our lives when problems arise, a God who wants people to “feel good” and to “be good,” which will lead them to heaven.<sup>63</sup> This faith cannot stand on its own because it persistently assimilates onto its host—a traditional religious belief—that often goes unnoticed and is therefore not addressed by religious leaders.<sup>64</sup>

### **Bricolage & Improvisation**

Wuthnow explains, “the religion and spirituality of young adults is a cultural bricolage, constructed improvisationally from the increasingly diverse materials at hand.”<sup>65</sup> No longer are the church and family the primary deciding influencers of religious thought and action, instead each individual “claims authority—in fact, the duty—to make up his or her mind about what to believe. Slippage creeps in between the teaching of religious organization and the practices of individuals.”<sup>66</sup> However, Christian Smith notes parental influence remains the greatest influencer of religious commitment among those in their twenties.<sup>67</sup> Many factors, belief systems, and cultures have a lasting impact on millennial faith. “Bricolage implies the joining together of seemingly inconsistent, disparate components.”<sup>68</sup> The considerations germane to emerging adulthood have an influence on individual religious behavior: uncertainty, diversity, fluidity, searching, and tinkering. This bricolage and improvisational factor is significant in how young

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<sup>63</sup> For full conversation see Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162-63.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>65</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, xvii.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>67</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*.

<sup>68</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 15.

adults will relate to the church and determine their involvement. Modern ways of learning have usurped 'traditional' theologies, opening millennials to a variety of "truths," as noted about postmodernity in the last chapter.

Wuthnow also describes young adults as "tinkerers" whose faith is made up of a "pastiche of metaphors."<sup>69</sup> Because these younger Christians are willing to mix different things in developing their beliefs, they are not necessarily looking for absolutes and certainties in the ways that their grandparents' generation did. In fact, many of the habits of today's younger Americans were inherited from the trends established by their parents in the 1990s.<sup>70</sup>

Theological and religious tinkering means that individuals are able to take the parts that work for them and lay the rest down, even borrowing from other religious faiths. In forming their individualized beliefs, emerging adults "often combined Christian beliefs with Eastern ideas such as reincarnation or with ideas taken from popular culture."<sup>71</sup> Some will invoke ideas from movies adding to the religious cocktail that makes up their beliefs. While African American youth and young adults by and large have held traditional Christian religious beliefs, these have gradually eroded since the 1990s.<sup>72</sup> The challenge is that this generation is not interested in systematic theology or any other sort of education—in other words, they are not very willing to ingest a "whole system." This generation has been spoiled by customization and has carried this privilege of choice, portability, and adaptability into their religious decision-making.

### **Self-Authority**

It is no surprise, because of the individualism discussed earlier, that millennials choose themselves as the ultimate authority in religious beliefs. The cultural influence of music among

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> See *ibid.*, 61-62.

<sup>71</sup> Arnett and Jenson, "A Congregation of One," 460.

<sup>72</sup> Any number of trends on religious belief can reflect this trend. NSYR surveys and their use of the GSS data more than adequately reflect this claim. See Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching.*, Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition.*

African American young adults is significant. While this has always been the case, it is poignantly true today. It is well established that cultural influences greatly impact how millennials live their life of faith. The words of rappers and artists become part of their worldviews and thoughts about religion and faith. How these artists think has become central in the cultural normative psyche of the Hip Hop generation. Consider the words of Jay-Z above, “I take from Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, whatever” or those of Common and Celo Green:

Some say that God is black and the devil’s white, well, the devil is wrong and God is what’s right...As a Child, given religions with no answer to why, just told believe in Jesus cause for me he did die... My mind dealt with the books of Zen, Tao the lessons Qur’an and the Bible, to me they all vital (Lyrics to: G.O.D)

According to Smith and Denton, the teens in their surveys—the young adults of today—reflected a way of thinking where each individual is uniquely distinct from all others and deserves a faith that fits his or her singular self; that individuals must freely choose their own religion; that the individual is the authority over religion and not vice versa; religion need not be practiced in and by a community; no person may exercise authority over another.<sup>73</sup> This type of “radical relativism”<sup>74</sup> is the result of the deep trend of privatized faith we considered in chapter one. This does not mean that church and the bible is not a valued source among millennials for spirituality. Instead, those seeking to reach this generation must realize they are now one of many valued resources that millennials draw on for guidance, thought, and belief. Thus churches will not be able to drop dogma on top emerging adults, pedagogically speaking.

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<sup>73</sup> See Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 147. Similar claims are also found in Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 155.,

<sup>74</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 144.

Everything that is experienced in one's twenties and thirties, according to Wuthnow, requires "consideration, choice, and change."<sup>75</sup> As we will see in the next chapter, during this phase of life even identities are being solidified as these newer adults wrestle with both the existential questions of life and faith. Further we will argue that the key for successful ministry engagement at this critical time of life will require persons willing to journey with this cohort—reasoning together (Isa. 1:18), not only to see Christ formed in them, but also being ready to be changed by their encounter with the new generation. Millennials may wrestle with ideas of authority to scripture, the lordship of Christ, submission to God, and other classic beliefs, but this should not deter Christian leaders from walking with them as they explore, grow, and change.

### **AFRICAN AMERICAN WANING FERVENCY**

It does not require a major research groups to recognize the religious strength among Black Americans. The African American church has proven to be resilient, withstanding many attacks through the generations since slavery. Yet, researchers caution against letting the numbers alone tell the story of this cohort. Smith and Snell state that in order to "adequately understand the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults requires. . . fully understanding the cultural and institutional contexts" they "are in part generating and that in turn powerfully form their lives."<sup>76</sup> As stated, understanding context is critical to those seeking to influence African Americans millennials. The data below indicates a strong religious fervency among younger adults in the Black Protestant tradition. Yet, the majority of clergy and pastors in these Black churches report that this generation is by and large missing from their pews.<sup>77</sup> The rampant fall reveals a larger

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<sup>75</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 215.

<sup>76</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 281.

<sup>77</sup> Although to a lesser extent this trend began with Generation X.

problem that astute practitioners are eager to address. Despite this truth, “African-Americans stand out as the most religiously committed racial or ethnic group in the nation.”<sup>78</sup> Among emerging adults, black and evangelical Protestants “generally reflect higher levels of religious commitment and practice and more allegiance to certain theological beliefs than Catholics and mainline Protestants.”<sup>79</sup> Yet this does not necessarily mean all is well. The numbers hide a critical piece of the story; the incontrovertible truth of experience at the congregational level is why Smith and Snell’s admonishments make sense. Something is going on *inside* religious adherents, and without change from the *inside*, no program will right the ship.

The qualitative research entities quoted in this project,<sup>80</sup> conduct multi-year surveys on religious faith, practice and social trends, and they categorize the Protestant tradition into three parts: evangelical/conservative, mainline, and black (historically black denominations and churches). The latter also includes individual black Protestants regardless of type of protestant church. Figure 2.2 depicts results from a Pew Forum report, which noted that 78 percent of religious African Americans are Protestant (59% attend historically black congregations, 15% evangelical, and 4% mainline), 5 percent are catholic, 12 percent unaffiliated, 5 percent other, and 1 percent do not know or did not report.<sup>81</sup>

The same Pew Report reveals that 40 percent of all African Americans identify as Baptists (with one of the national Black Baptist denominations). Black congregations are 92 percent African American in comparison to majority congregations where African Americans make up only 6 percent in evangelical churches (i.e. southern Baptist and Assemblies of God),

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<sup>78</sup> Pew Research Center, *A Religious Portrait of African-Americans* (Washington, D.C., 2009):3, accessed, 7/12/15, <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/01/30/a-religious-portrait-of-african-americans/>.

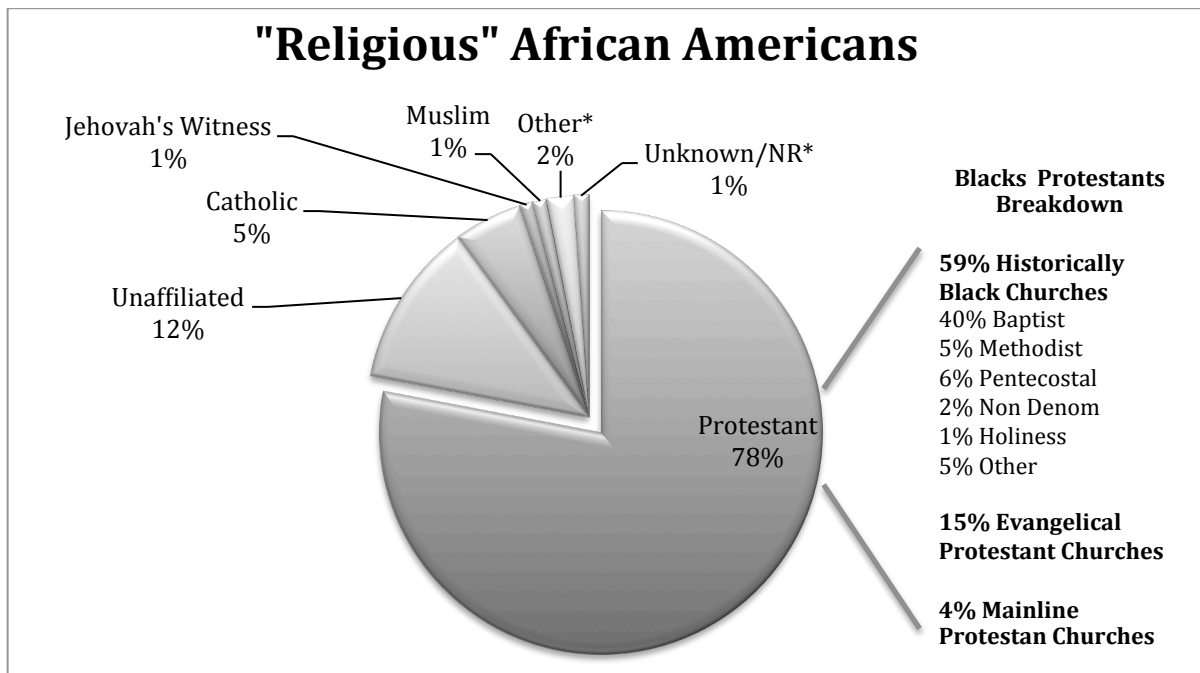
<sup>79</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 100.

<sup>80</sup> The National Survey of Youth Religion (NSYR), The Pew Forum (PEW), The General Social Survey (GSS), the National Young Adults and Religion Study (NYARS), and The Barna Group (BG).

<sup>81</sup> Pew notes in comparison that 53% of white, 27% of Asians, and 23% of Latinos are protestant, making African Americans the most Protestant racial ethnic group in the U.S. See Pew Research Center, *Religious Portrait of African-Americans*.

and 2 percent in mainline denominations (i.e. disciples of Christ, Presbyterian, Lutheran, etc.).<sup>82</sup>

It is no surprise that Sunday morning worship remains one of the most racially segregated places in America. Therefore, debates of religious segregation aside<sup>83</sup>, it is incumbent upon those endeavoring to understand, the so-called, millennial problem within the African American Church should take into account the contextual differences and experiences within these faith traditions (black protestant versus others).



**Figure 2.2 Religious African Americans**  
 Source: Pew Forum "A Religious Portrait of African-Americans," 2007 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey \* = No Response

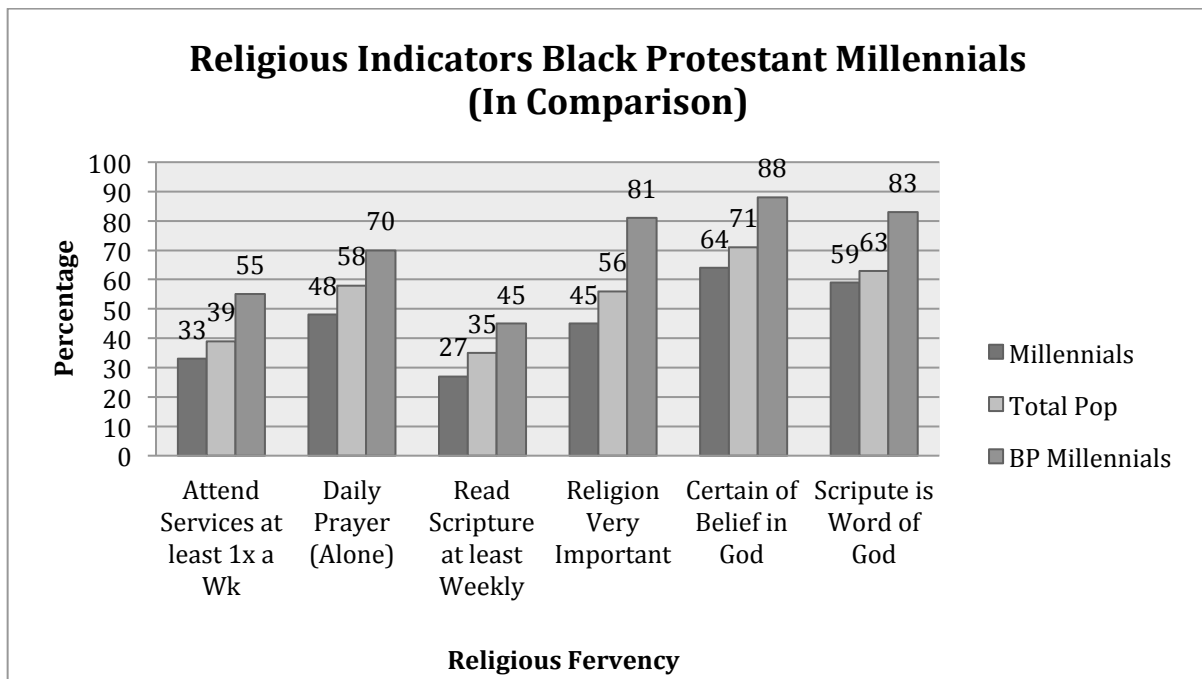
### Religious Indicators among Millennials

As expected, the religious practices of millennials are notably less than those of previous generations, primarily due to life cycle changes. Figure 2.3 depicts a 2010 Pew Forum Report on Millennials ages 18 to 29 and indicates 33 percent of young adults attend religious services at

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Helen T. Gray, "Many Black Churches Emphasize Tradition over Integration," *The Wichita Eagle*: 2011, accessed 2/27/16, <http://www.kansas.com/living/religion/articles1058146.html>.

least once a week compared to 39 percent for the total adult population; the practice of daily prayer was 48 percent among the younger cohort compared to 58 percent of the all adults; and, 27 percent of millennials surveyed read scripture at least weekly compared to 35 percent among all adults in the U.S. The same report noted stronger indicators among millennials within historically Black Protestant churches in comparison to the total adult population surveyed: 55 percent in weekly attendance, 70 percent daily prayer, and 45 percent weekly scripture reading.<sup>84</sup> In each category, these young African Americans were stronger than the whole: 22 points ahead for attendance, 12 points for prayer, and 10 points for scripture reading. These indicators are just a few that reveal the strength of Black Protestant millennials in comparison to their peers and the general adult population.



**Figure 2.3 Religious Indicators for Black Protestant Millennials (In Comparison)**  
 Source: from Pew Research Center “Religion Among the Millennials,” 2007 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey

<sup>84</sup> Pew Research Center on Religion & Public Life, *Religion among the Millennials*, 8. This report also compares other religious categories as well as the U.S. Population by various adult groupings (i.e. 50-64, 65+, etc.).

It is well documented that religious indicators like daily prayer, weekly service attendance, and affirmation of religious importance generally increase with age.<sup>85</sup> The Pew Forum noted that although millennials are less religiously active than older Americans, they are fairly traditional in other ways. This report seems to contradict Wuthnow's claims of bricolage and improvisational; yet it is plausible for both to be true. PEW reports parallelism in practices and along many theological lines. Figure 2.3 reveals that Black Protestant millennials are more religious than the total adult population—including the older more *Erosion In Context*

In chapter one I argued that deep theological trends impact how millennials relate to the Church. Further I stated that the present erosion, or diaspora trends (chapter two) were not created *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). In fact, there is any number of reasons for the lower rate of return, to the Black C/church, exhibited in each generation of young adults. Thus in discussing the problems discerned in this millennials cohort, I want to both remember these disclaimers but also resist placing the blame of present weakening of fervency on those born after 1980. I have sufficiently documented my concerns with today's younger adults, but it is important to look inward to our part as Church leaders in our present conundrum of attracting and reaching millennials. It is my hope in doing so, we will not have to end our relationship with our youth upon their entrance to late adolescent or upon completion of high school.

Previous young adult cohorts began to wane in their commitment to the Black Church due to a number of factors. Here are a few. First, many felt ignored, after adolescence due to lack of programming geared at college, young professional, or career starters. Second, they felt pushed aside with no place to lead or flourish—evidenced by older generations' reluctance to share power. Third, the Black Church began to become irrelevant to black folk in 'the world'—sometimes too focused on conservative theologies than community transformation. Fourth, as

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<sup>85</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 89. See Figure 3.1 representing data from the GSS.

eloquent as it has been, rhetorical preaching ceased to deal with concrete issues of life and faith for those in our pews. Fifth, an unwillingness to discuss with young adults conservative theologies that challenge their way of life—insisting on rules of holiness that may be more tradition than biblical mandates. This list is by no means comprehensive, but gives some idea of the crucible from which today’s physical, theological, and practical diaspora emerges. My insistence on mentoring relationships that allow for questioning, exploration, and discovery remain important for reversing the dangerous trends of non-affiliation and low religious participation now evidenced among Black millennials.

It is well documented that religious indicators like daily prayer, weekly service attendance, and affirmation of religious importance generally increase with age.<sup>86</sup> The Pew Forum noted that although millennials are less religiously active than older Americans, they are fairly traditional in other ways. They report seems to contradict Wuthnow’s claims of bricolage and improvisational; yet it is plausible for both to be true. Pew reports parallelism in practices along many theological lines. Figure 2.3 reveals that Black Protestant millennials are more religious than the total adult population—including the older more devout cohorts. Pew indicates that 45 percent of younger adults 18-29 report religion as “very” important compared to 56 percent in total population, and 81 percent among Black millennials; certainty of belief in God is high at 64 percent, near 71 percent for the whole, and 88 percent for Black Millennials; and 59 percent attested to believing that *scripture*<sup>87</sup> is the word of God, 63 percent affirm the same in the total population, while 83 percent for Black Millennials.<sup>88</sup> Beliefs in life after death, heaven, hell, miracles, and angels/demons more closely aligned with a one-point differential, except in the

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid. See Figure 3.1 representing data from the GSS.

<sup>87</sup> Note for questions on scripture they used “holy book” inserting the appropriate book by tradition i.e. “the Bible” for Christians and unaffiliated, “the Torah” for Jews and the Koran for Muslims, for other faiths they used the language “the Holly Scriptures.”

<sup>88</sup> Pew Research Center on Religion & Public Life, *Religion among the Millennials*.

case of belief in hell, where younger adults are three points ahead of the total population.<sup>89</sup> Black Protestants are ahead both in comparison to the total population and among the young adults; they show stronger religious fervency than the entire population by as much as 10 to 29 points.<sup>90</sup> This is great news for the African American church as it looks to engage this millennial generation more effectively.

African Americans are identified as largely Protestants, with over two-thirds affiliating as Baptist. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Black Protestant emerging adults are strong in affiliation with their own religious tradition; from 1972 to 2006 their affiliation “increased by more than 10 percent, especially after 1995.”<sup>91</sup> Not only do the black Protestants have the highest rate of rise in fervent affiliation in comparison to their peer groups, their starting point is highest of all, beginning at nearly 40 percent. The only group coming close were Evangelicals who start slightly below the Black Protestants and reflect a rise, but not as significantly.<sup>92</sup> These reports support claims of strong African American religiosity and spirituality among emerging adults. This kind of data provides a certain level of comfort when examined in isolation; however, in light of the full landscape. There is reason for pause; closer examination among African Americans show that they too are beginning to wane in areas of religious practice and attendance in comparison to previous generations—although this attrition is small by comparison and is isolated to those now identifying as nones.<sup>93</sup> With respects to religious practices, my peers and I see a stark difference than two generations ago—fewer youth and young adults remain connected

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. Note: Black Protestants percentage beliefs in life after death (79% all/84% young adults), heaven (91%/84%), hell (82%/88%), miracles (88%/93%), and angel/demons (87%/97%).

<sup>91</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 96.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. For example mainline EAs begin around 25% and never reaches 30%. The Catholic EAs over the same period showed decline.

<sup>93</sup> From 2007 to 2012 the jump in unaffiliation was only 2% among Blacks according to Pew Research Center on Religion & Public Life, *"Nones" on the Rise*, 21.

to their faith communities than in previous periods.<sup>94</sup> So while they are more fervent, the diminishing trend is still relevant. What is needed is more than identification as Christian, merely out of tradition, but instead a heart and mind bathed in an identity tied to Christ (more on this the next chapter).

**Table 2.1**  
Emerging Adults (Ages 18-23) and Changes Since Adolescence (ages 13-17) on Some Indicators<sup>95</sup>

	% age 18-23	% change since age 13-17
<b>Belief In God</b>		
Yes	77.6	-6.6
No	6.0	+3.3
Don't Know/Unsure	16.1	+3.2
<b>Importance of Faith in daily life</b>		
Extremely	19.9	(-0.2)
Very	23.9	(-8.3)
Somewhat	29.4	(-1.0)
Sub Total:	73.2	-9.5
Not Very Important	14.0	(+3.3)
Not Important At All	12.8	(+6.1)
Don't Know/Refused	0.1	(+0.1)
<b>Religious Service Attendance</b>		
More than once a week	6.8	(-11.0)
Once a week	13.5	(-11.4)
Sub Total:	20.3	-22.4
2-3 times a month	10.6	(-2.3)
Once a month	7.8	(+1.2)
Many times a year	6.5	(-1.1)
A few times a year	19.2	(+6.1)
Never	35.4	(+18.4)

Table 2.1 provides data from the NSYR that tells a story of decreasing fervency among millennials, comparing second wave reports of the religious beliefs and practices of emerging adults (18-23) to their religious behaviors when they were adolescents (13-17). Smith and Snell reported that among emerging adults, those answering “yes” that they believe in God was down 6.6 percent and those whose responses were “no” went up 3.3 percent, the remaining “I don’t

<sup>94</sup> In order to show specific trending data that would quantify the reality being reported from my colleagues across the country would take a review of multi years of the Pew Form U.S. Religious Landscape Survey as well as the General Social Survey.

<sup>95</sup> Adapted from Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 112 (Tabel 4.5).

know” responses climbed 3.2 percent. This cohort also performed poorly in their responses to questions about the importance of faith in their daily lives. Seventy-three percent responded that faith was either “extremely” (19.9%), “very” (23.95), or “somewhat important” (29.4%), yet in all categories these strong indicators are down 0.2, 8.3, and 1.0 percent respectively—totaling a nearly 10-point decline.

As expected, those who indicated religion as unimportant went up correspondingly. Disturbing were responses to questions about worship attendance. There was a double-digit decline for those who attended worship more than one time a week (-11%) and those who attended weekly (-11.4%). Many of these young adults had not only reduced their frequency of attendance, but had opted out all together with 18.4 percent responding that they “never” go to church services on Sundays.<sup>96</sup> Lots of literature on millennials written by mainlines and for good reason—their declining numbers. As stated, additional projects that track and document African American religiosity among millennials are needed.<sup>97</sup> The NSYR reports a strong trend among Black Protestants: 72% affirmed faith’s importance in their lives as “very” or “extremely important,” shrinking only one percent since adolescence,<sup>98</sup> compared to an 8.5% drop among the entire millennial cohort. Among all millennials surveyed, 26.8% attested that faith is “not very” or “not at all important” is compared to only 6% among Black Protestants.<sup>99</sup>

Though the NSYR data reflects a sampling of the wider culture, in general, and African Americans, in particular,<sup>100</sup> the figures seem to be indicative of what is happening in the cohort as a whole. For example, those black Protestants surveyed, those who attended religious services

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 112-13.

<sup>97</sup> See similar claim in Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 72.

<sup>98</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 114 (Table 4.6).

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 114-15.

<sup>100</sup> Of the approximately 3,300 respondents in both waves (first 2002-2003, and second 2007-2008), Black Protestants were 17% and 15% respectively or approximately 515 young African Americans. See *ibid.*, 309-19 for more research methodology data.

more than once a week as emerging adults in comparison to adolescence, decreased by 17 percent between the two periods. In comparison, conservative and mainline emerging adults attending church more than one time a week was down 31 percent for each. Similarly, Black Protestant millennials that never attend worship increased by 11 percent (between the two periods) in comparison to conservatives, which were up 21 percent, and mainlines, up by 28 percent.<sup>101</sup> This is a prime example of the African American millennials exhibiting a negative trend, albeit less severely than their peers. Few church leaders would defend numbers that can only be characterized as ‘good’ when compared to other religious traditions experiencing decline. The Black church cannot rely on the strength of being ‘better’ than peer traditions but instead must work to reverse negative trends within her congregations. Otherwise, erosion will continue threatening the longevity of the African American religious tradition.

Black millennials did not always favorably trend ahead of their peers in the NSYR surveys. In some categories they preformed more poorly. For example, for the practice of daily prayer, Black Protestants are at the back of the class. The devotional discipline of daily prayer (alone) was down 8 percent for all millennials; yet, it was down only 7 percent among mainlines, and down 9 percent among blacks. The only group with worse numbers was conservatives, who were down 10%. Black Protestant millennials are slightly ahead of the whole (-2%) when it comes to reading scripture alone with: down 4 percent.<sup>102</sup> If this trend continues, in less than 20 years approximately one percent of the “faithful” will seek daily direction from the word of God. Juxtaposed to this poor showing is the fact that those who report never praying have remained relatively stable among Black Protestants (1%); yet, mainline young adults have increased 12 percent and conservatives by 5 percent.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 115-18 (Table 4.7).

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 115-18.

As noted above, African Americans are not yet identifying themselves as Nones at the alarming rate of their white counterparts.<sup>103</sup> Nonetheless, non-affiliation is evidenced most significantly among Gen-Xers and millennials with “one-in-five African-Americans under the age 30 (19%)” being unaffiliated, “compared to 7% who are age 65 and older.”<sup>104</sup> Millennials who remain (those who attend services) are coming to worship church with less frequency, formulating a strategy to prevent future erosion of a strong African American religious tradition.

This is good news for the African American Church which has not yet felt the full punch of modernity’s impact: social change, reduced religious fervency, and relevancy challenges. Ongoing religious fervency among African Americans places its congregations on the threshold of opportunity to capture the hearts of a generation of worshipers who are beginning to wane as a group in their faithfulness to God and faith communities. Though beliefs are more traditional and typical indicators are strong, it does not mean that the above cited falling away from public religious life is not problematic. In chapter three, we will note that the discontinuity between belief and practice. Finally, rumors of a high level of apostasy among Black millennials are not actually evident in the data. Instead millennials report believing in God, prayer, heaven and hell in traditional ways even with reduced concerns among this cohort for orthodoxy in other theological beliefs.<sup>105</sup>

## **THE DIASPORA OF BLACK MILLENNIALS & YOUNG ADULTS**

Black millennials, like their counterparts, are drifting away from churches for a number of reasons. Though dropping out diminishes with each decade of life, the urgency of stabilizing the

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<sup>103</sup> See discussion of the racial makeup of those identify as “Nones” in White, *The Rise of the Nones*, 21. He notes only 9% of nones as African American, while 71% are white. See also details Pew Research Center on Religion & Public Life, *“Nones” on the Rise*.

<sup>104</sup> Pew Research Center, *Religious Portrait of African-Americans*.

<sup>105</sup> This is also true of the majority of other millennials.

religious path among young adults remains critical. Unfortunately with the completion of high school comes a reciprocal graduation from youth groups causing some to wander, as the church no longer provides a place of socialization.<sup>106</sup> I use the language of diaspora to contextualize the religious dropout among African American millennials. Standing on the promises of Proverbs 22, I remain hopeful of their return, but keenly aware of the changes necessary to see them return home. *Diaspora* originates from the Greek meaning dispersion or scattering—which I have categorized among millennials as physical, theological and practical. I also like the construct of diaspora because it speaks of dispersion by migration or flight from one’s land of origin. The African American Christian Church is the religious homeland for most Blacks in America, yet many of our youth are wandering—displaced and scattered.

Nurturing followers (disciples) in the context of rampant dropouts requires deepening relationships, mutual understanding, flexibility, and wisdom.<sup>107</sup> Meaningful relationships will help prevent people, young and older, from disconnecting from local churches. Communities become extensions of life and offer frequent opportunities to gather, worship, and nourish lifelong connections. Yet, relationships alone will not deter the diaspora currently taking place among African American millennials.<sup>108</sup> Stephens and Watkins add that many young adults are offended by the condemnation of their music<sup>109</sup>—an extension of their cultural identity. Consequently, many young adults feel locked out of the church at a time when they are most able to express, if not create, what it means to live as an African American church today. This generation contains the interlocutors the Black Church needs in order to embrace its future,

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<sup>106</sup> In actuality many teenagers check out before age eighteen.

<sup>107</sup> Kinnaman makes similar observations (relationships, vocation, wisdom) in *You Lost Me*, 28-29.

<sup>108</sup> The Barna Group noted that 31% of young adult drop outs surveyed report having a close personal adult friend in their church. See The Barna Group, *5 Reasons Millennials Stay Connected to Church* (Ventura, CA, 9/17/2013):28-29, accessed, 2/1/2015, [https://www.barna.org/barna-update/millennials/635-5-reasons-millennials-stay-connected-to-church#.VrY\\_kvHDrI8](https://www.barna.org/barna-update/millennials/635-5-reasons-millennials-stay-connected-to-church#.VrY_kvHDrI8).

<sup>109</sup> Stephens III and Watkins, *From Jay-Z to Jesus*, 2.

mentoring them to appreciate community faith traditions, while also encouraging them to share new expressions that link the past, present and future.<sup>110</sup> They are the critical link to our future and we must find a way to bring them home.

Despite the murmuring, among some millennials, about the Black Church, most still want to raise their children in the faith of their youth. Yet life stage changes, philosophical roadblocks, and theological differences decrease the likelihood of these black worshippers ever returning to the household of faith—instead opting out. One of the primary definitions of diaspora is “putting contact on hold—with [an] expectation of coming back.”<sup>111</sup> I again prefer the metaphor of “diaspora” in contrast to the language of “dropout” for the hope it conveys. Again, I caution that hope does not necessarily mean we can presume return *will* take place—the current trends in the data and the reality of empty seats in the pews remind me of the lessons of GenX that without action will continue to repeat in this new generation.

I mentioned in chapter one that there were three types of diaspora experienced among African American millennials: physical, theological, and practical. The first category is the most obvious: the physical absence of those between the ages of 18-35 from our congregations. These former youth leaders and children participants are conspicuously absent. This fallout is persistent across all traditions, including the Black Church. Instead of young adulthood being a time of leadership preparation and activation, a generation of leaders is increasingly leaving, finding few reasons to return. It does not help that over the last two generations, since integration, the physical dispersion of Blacks has taken place outside of urban centers into suburbia. Thus, part of the diaspora among African Americans is due to urban sprawl. Over the last 20-30 years many

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<sup>110</sup> L. Gregory Jones, "Traditioned Innovation," *Faith and Leadership*: 1/19/09, accessed 2/4/2015, [https://www.faithandleadership.com/content/traditioned-innovation?utm\\_source=conceptpage&utm\\_medium=principle&utm\\_campaign=traditionedinnovation](https://www.faithandleadership.com/content/traditioned-innovation?utm_source=conceptpage&utm_medium=principle&utm_campaign=traditionedinnovation).

<sup>111</sup> [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)

Black suburban churches have been planted in order to accommodate the faithful living in the “burbs,” but this effort has not reduced the tendency among black millennials to check out from religious practice.

Secondly, there are theological causes to young adults leaving the church. As noted, everything is up for grabs in this period of life and millennials need a place to contextualize what is going on in the world around them—for many the church has fallen down, only able to give them rote answers to complex problems. Still holding reverence for God, many do not totally disconnect, but their theological drifting often leads to physical separation—the church just increasingly ceases to be relevant. The preaching and educational/ formational programs will be instrumental in reversing this trend. Anne Wimberly argues for story-linking: connecting our everyday lives’ stories to those of scripture (especially the gospel), and the stories of African American Christian heritage.<sup>112</sup> Leading millennials in this kind of linking will provide theological validity amidst rampant claims that stories from the bible do not connect to the lives of today’s youth—thus making the bible irrelevant. This type of story-linking would connect with today’s younger generation’s insistence on protest, to that of the African American tradition of protest for racial uplift and equality discussed earlier.<sup>113</sup>

Finally there is a practical diaspora taking place among Black millennials. This type of distance is not just about them not showing up for worship, but also about them no longer viewing church as part of their everyday life. This distance is not just philosophical, but central beyond theology and attendance. This practical diaspora is best used to describe those who may

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<sup>112</sup> Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*, 25. See also Yolanda Y. Smith who argues for the intersection of African, black Americans, and Christian Cultures in "Forming Wisdom through Cultural Rootedness," in *In Search of Wisdom*, ed. Anne E. Streaty Wimberly and Evelyn L. Parker (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 43-50.

<sup>113</sup> For example in the years of 2015 Black Lives Matter, Campus Protests, and number of other off shoots. See further discussion in chapter four.

still be present—attending worship and maybe even some programs at the church—but distant, diasporic. These are the selective adherents who wrestle between church and culture, between being a disciple and being engaged in the world that matters most to them (more on this in the next chapter).

Young adults who leave the church are not necessarily abandoning their belief in God; it's us who they leave. To ensure the future of the African American church, her congregations must face head-on the relational disconnections with these younger members. While relationships will be critical in capturing the imagination of this generation, attendance alone may not be an accurate measure of effectiveness with millennials. The church must become relevant in the lives of millennials by being in relationship with them and valuing the things that are important in their lives; the church must also serve as a source of reliable revelation and understanding, and have empathy for their identity (private and communal); and partner with them in revolutionary ways, from adaptive changes<sup>114</sup> of church traditions to reevaluating church. This requires a deep, multi-layered mentoring that begins with one-on-one encounters between the millennial and representatives of church leadership and adult members. In absence of covenantally-connected mentoring relationships<sup>115</sup> —those which give young people space to explore, question, and discover, the future is bleak in respect to this cohort. Additionally, the church I love must face the challenge of not only converting the marginalized to more faithful disciples of Christ, but also to find a way to attract those outside of the church in order that they too may interact with Christ and His beloved community.

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<sup>114</sup> Adaptive Work “consist of the learning required to address conflicts in the values people hold, or to diminish the gap between the values people stand for and the reality they face.” For more on the adaptive challenges of leadership see Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press), 22.

<sup>115</sup> Here I speak of both traditional (elders mentoring younger persons) and Bi-Lateral mentoring (dialogical mentoring where each generation teaches the other, I will talk more about this in chapter four.)

The church has an image problem in need of repair, but the work will not begin outside the church—we must first start at home. Following the Acts 1:8b principle, “you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” Here the early apostles are given an outreach game plan to spread the gospel in their day. They were to launch from Jerusalem, the province of Judea that was geographically close, Samaria was a territory with values ripe for Christian evangelism. Once finding success in their areas, they were to move far out.

Similarly, we must start INSIDE our Jerusalem, the Black Church, with the committed traditionalists as The Remnant<sup>116</sup> who are key to future. We must take those who are committed (sold out for Jesus) to the church and walk along side of them until they have better integration and a cohesive identity that includes their spiritual selves. Secondly, the Judea of this work is to engage the heart of those who are marginal participants (my language for the selective adherents), those young adults who are sporadic in their attendance and selective in their practices and beliefs—though needing some coaching—and are still influenced by the church. Thirdly, in this model, Samaria is represented by those who have dropped out—the physically dispersed. Finally, the “end of the earth” would be those who are without belief in God—those who never were part of a religious faith community. We will see in chapter four just how African American congregations can respond to this action plan.

To reach this generation with the transformative message of Christ, the Church must infuse culture by offering a compelling message to rival the cacophony of voices heard by millennials. Our priority must not be limited to messaging; we must also grapple with the Church’s relevancy<sup>117</sup> to culture. Many emerging and young adults love God, but we have failed

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<sup>116</sup> We will define in more detail who The Remnant are and their role in the future of the Black Church.

<sup>117</sup> Or in many cases... irrelevancy

to give them a living faith to carry into the world. They come to our pews carrying the burdens of the world, seeking help to make meaning out of their life experiences. A dialogical religious experience is necessary, one where persons are in conversation with Christ and culture as they endeavor to live as faithful disciples—this is a living faith. The key to success with this generation is embracing those Christian millennials who remain engaged in church (the remnant) and revitalize the marginal who are present but less devout, for in both we find those who will grow the church by being exemplars of a relevant faith that attracts *believers of all ages*.<sup>118</sup>

Throughout this chapter we have heard the lyrics of Hip Hop artists of Generation X. To a large extent, they were not heard at the time they were first penned—ignored or dismissed as their medium made their message intelligible. The cultural barrier resulted in large portions of the church ignoring them—dismissing them as apostate, fallen away, those needing to be reclaimed or redeemed. Yet, if listened to closely, these lyricists were speaking their life and their faith; their truth and frustrations with church; and even their quest for a closer walk. For many of GenXers, we have missed our moment. Our inability to bridge the gap and be in relationship has left many of these deists to only be loosely or marginally connected to their faith communities. In today’s millennials we are given a second chance to see and hear them; and to help those young adults still in our pews to claim their inheritance as descendants of a world-changing band of disciples that dared to follow Christ.

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<sup>118</sup> I use this term here intentionally to raise eyebrows. As we will see there are many who are “believers” in God, but do not practice any discernable religious faith.

### 3| INSIDE OUT

#### *Identity, Integration, and the Exemplary Disciple*

The Church has an image problem. This tarnished reputation exists not only among those traditions with significant decline in religious indicators, but also among evangelical and Black Protestants who, despite stronger figures, still bear the marks of decline. Behind these diminishing figures are stories of young adults who have grown disillusioned or checked out from church life. No matter the segment of this millennial generation questioned, either those emerging from adolescence, the college/early career finders, or the older portion that bridges the gaps between Gen X and Y, the fact of the church's diminishing relevancy persists.

The challenge of engaging the faith lives of millennials is a tremendous opportunity for the Black Church whose strength positions its congregations to correct their course before suffering damages that will take a generation to repair. Any current religious fervency should not lull the Black Church into a false sense of security. Instead, in learning from those traditions trending ahead in the march towards irrelevancy, it should stand in position to operate from a place of strength and address the challenges (deep trends) that threaten the future of the church. Communities seeking to respond to millennials and provide leadership of change must first engage in deep introspection and then critical engagement with millennials—no change will occur without a deep understanding and appreciation of the culture. Then these churches are ready to find ways to honor their purpose, while also innovating to ensure the mission reaches a new generation—what L. Gregory Jones calls traditioned innovation.<sup>1</sup>

Without a doubt the particularity of millennial religious *contexts* presents a challenge to those who want to journey with them as they mature in faith and step forth as leaders in the

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<sup>1</sup> Jones, "Traditioned Innovation."

Church. If the Church truly lives into its responsibility to be a culture maker, it can seize the opportunity to make a significant difference in this generation as a whole. We will need to find ways to engage the wider millennial culture with a Spirit-inspired peculiarity (1 Peter 2:9) that attracts persons to the Lord's church (John 17:16,). The dissonance between stated beliefs and religious practices among these millennials is not unlike that noted in the wider culture. However, the persistence of the gaps between 'who they are' and what they 'say they believe' is exacerbated by hyper-individuality, MTD, ecclesiological disconnections, and other spiritual maladies. To engage the soul of this generation requires a faith that encompasses: one, EPIC<sup>2</sup> worship,<sup>2</sup> two, religious education/spiritual formation, three, service to others (missions and social justice/action), and four, participation and volunteerism in a local faith community. It is crucial to move beyond the ceremonial and educational practices of the formative years to an integrated faith that asks something great of the faithful.

Disciples are made not born (Matt 28:18-20). The great commission confirms this and Tertullian insisted upon it. Growth is organic in that after we intentionally make disciples, they replicate themselves by also making more disciples. It is a self-perpetuating system that ensures the Kingdom of God grows (Act 2:47). Multi-tiered mentoring relationships will be important for the necessary change. First, we must mentor persons through community practices like worship and prayer. Additionally, younger Christians must have the opportunity to participate in both small enclaves (i.e. young adult small groups, ministry groups, or young adult ministries) within the church *and* church-wide activities. They must see themselves as necessary to the church's existence and have that sentiment enforced by senior leadership who is willing to engage in reverse mentoring relationships with this cohort, allowing these young adults to mentor them on matters of culture and faith. Third, mentoring will come from a transformative relationship with

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<sup>2</sup> EPIC<sup>2</sup> is Experiential, Participating, Image Rich, Connective, and Creative. We will see more on this shortly.

the Bible. Millennials need places to encounter the text and allow it to encounter them. They must have deep roots, like a “tree planted by the rivers of waters” (Ps. 1:3; Jer. 17:8). Lastly, this generation must be commissioned as ambassadors to their peers who are still scattered or have a strained relationship with the C/church. Important is their participation in one-on-one mentoring for their own growth, as well as mentoring those under them—a perpetual multi-generational mentoring where members reach back to the generation beneath them for the greater good of the whole. In essence, (mentoring) relationships preserve the community that we dearly love.<sup>3</sup>

I have already noted the problematic faith condition of many millennials in the previous two chapters, so here I want to address the unique challenges presented by the diasporic tendencies of this cohort. I am convinced and encouraged to know that there yet remains a remnant of fervently committed, covenantally connected, and passionate millennial Christians in the Black Church who will be instrumental in reengaging the culture toward an active relationship with Christ and the Church. Starting first with those who regularly attend and eventually reaching those of the diaspora—both groups are critical to the longevity of the Church. Yet, without making the needed changes among those who are ‘active’ in our churches—constructive interventions reaching the heart of the person—effectiveness will be impossible. We are combating an increasingly individualized religious fabric in the American Black Church.

In this chapter, I will construct an image of an exemplary disciple within the African American religious tradition. My goal is also to provide a road map to a compelling sub-culture that is attractive enough to draw in those who have fallen away from organized religious expression of faith in God. I have argued that many of the practicing millennial Christians in the black church have become lukewarm and have a benign faith. In this chapter we will examine

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<sup>3</sup> See also Wimberly’s discussion of mentoring Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, “Give Me Mentors: Pedagogies of Spiritual Accompaniment,” in *How Your Ministry Can Change Theological Education If We Let It*, ed. Kenda Creasy Dean and Christy Lang Hearlson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

three root causes of the diaspora of millennial believers today. First, I will argue that millennials are experiencing an identity crisis: they do not know who they are in Christ and lack the spiritual maturity to fulfill their role in the body of Christ. Secondly, I suggest that the division between what younger adults consider as their *life* and their *faith life* is antithetical to a call to discipleship.<sup>4</sup> The discontinuity between the two, leads to a dangerous spiritual disease that threatens the future of the Black Church. Thus, I call for an integrated identity that combines social, personal, and spiritual identities into a cohesive whole; one that will also result in a person's worlds having more dynamic overlap. Finally, this integration will result in a better alignment of beliefs with practices.

To conclude the chapter, I will explore the marks of an exemplary disciple—his or her practices, disciplines and virtues—using the “KNOW-BE-DO” leadership model to learn how it can help millennials embody what it means *to be* the Church. In this section I will lay the groundwork for chapter four, arguing that an infusion of one's personal mission by the Mission of the Church must occur in the life of the exemplary disciple. The life of the church depends on every person understanding and embracing his or her part in God's story with humanity and acting on it.

## **IDENTITY FORMATION**

A large majority of millennial Christians are experiencing an identity crisis with respect to their own beliefs and practices. During the youthful critical time of identity solidification, while wrestling to determine who they are as a person, most fail to prioritize their religious selves as worthy of time and consideration beyond the occasional or semi-regular visit to their local church. The significance to the present inquiry of the identity of the exemplary disciple is quite

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<sup>4</sup> See similar claim in Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*.

central to unlocking the ideal identity of the exemplary disciple. In the early nineteenth century Søren Kierkegaard believed that each individual was responsible for giving meaning to life and living it authentically according to an ascribed meaning. Differing from the traditional viewpoint that looked to societal groups, including but not limited to religions groups, as being part of the enterprise of defining the self, the existentialists that would follow Kierkegaard also joined in belief that the knowing/defining of self is an independent enterprise. The questions of ‘Who am I’ and ‘What am I here for?’ or ‘What am I here to do?’ looked to explain the meaning of life. In the post-adolescent stage of early adulthood and into the twenties, these questions of identity are still being explored as persons discern their vocations.

In order to understand how a person’s sense of identity is formed, I turn to the work of Erick Erickson and the school of psychology he created. Erickson claimed that Ego Status is realized in adolescence when persons are allowed to experience that they are and can act in ways that are consistent with this self-understanding. James E. Marcia, building upon Erickson, developed a “four-quadrant identity model defined by the axes of ‘commitment’ and ‘exploration.’”<sup>5</sup> This model endeavors to explain the stages individuals may go through in solidifying their sense of self: identity achievement, identity foreclosure, identity diffusion, and moratorium. Later, I will explore all four with respect to that portion of our identity that is born out of our spiritual connection with God, but here it is worth noting that people will move along the quadrants with varying levels of commitment to beliefs, lifestyles, and moral constructs. I do not believe all millennials will go through all four of Marcia’s stages, though most will be in at least two of the quadrants as they solidify their own identity, particularly the religious portion.

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<sup>5</sup> David P. Setran and Chris A. Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood: A Practical Theology for College and Young Adult Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 62ff.

These journeyers will need travel companions to accompany them as they wrestle, raise questions, and explore what it means to be “me.”

Alasdair MacIntyre argues that our social obligations often remain unfulfilled as we no longer judge others by how well they execute a particular role. The social identities of the past, in many cases, are “no longer available; the self is now thought of as criterionless . . . the terms of which it once judged and acted are no longer thought to be credible.”<sup>6</sup> Further he notes, a person’s membership in many social groups impacts not only self-identity, but how one is identified by others. Free of required roles, people must now discover who is “the real me.” The interwoven existence of several roles once resulted in persons *inheriting* a particular space.<sup>7</sup> However, with these mandatory societal obligations<sup>8</sup> gone, many are at a loss for answering the question ‘Who am I,’ beyond my prescribed societal identity role? The inability to answer these questions creates for some a crisis of consciousness. The subjectivity to name for oneself what it means to be “me” increases as time proceeds. This self-expression, while powerfully freeing, is also constricting to those who do not have a framework upon which to build identity.

David Setran and Chris Kiesling note the individualization of identity formation in American culture. They reference the work of James Côté and Charles Levine who speak of the “reorientation of the life course” that is caused “by distinguishing societal identity from personal identity.”<sup>9</sup> Social identity, as the name connotes, is the part of our self-concept that is derived from membership in a social group as defined by any number of criteria: culture, class, race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, religion, or even political affiliations. Continuing, they explain personal identity is no longer constrained by boundaries set by cultural norms or social groupings.

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<sup>6</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 33.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Primarily family based obligations like husband, wife, mother, father, etc.

<sup>9</sup> Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 57-58.

People are no longer succumbing to the pressures of “fitting into and sharing the values, beliefs, attitudes, role enactments, and expectation associated” with any given “social mold.”<sup>10</sup> Instead, Americans are constructing a mosaic rather than a more monolithic vision of the self. Society’s emphasis on uber-individualism in the area of identity formation has debilitating effects on identity formation among millennials in America’s faith communities.

Further complicating our understanding of identity formation among African American millennials are matters of race and youth sub-culture within the Black community. Unfortunately, some scholars concerned with America’s social systems do not give much credence to the role of race<sup>11</sup> in *both* personal and social identity development, despite extensive studies on racial identity.<sup>12</sup> In many landmark studies, ethnic identity was reduced to being only a “component of social identity.”<sup>13</sup> Further, if the dominant group in a society holds characteristics associated with a particular ethnic group in low esteem, in many cases, without inference of a corrective identity action, low self esteem or even self hatred may impose upon to some person’s self identity.<sup>14</sup> African American racial-ethnic culture is not monolithic; there is no uniform ‘black experience’ or black identity. Instead, black identities are shaped by many of the same variables of the wider culture—the particularized issues of race, social class, mixed heritage, and more (political

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Jean S. Phinney, "Ethnic Identity Exploration in Emerging Adulthood," in *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21st Century*, ed. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett and Jennifer Lynn Tanner (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2006), 124. -- “Race has no biological reality” but it “is real in the way it is socially constructed and the impact it has through racism”

<sup>12</sup> R. L'Heureux Lewis and Kanika Bell, "Negotiating Racial Identity in Social Interactions," in *Mixed Messages: Multiracial Identities in the "Color-Blind" Era*, ed. David L. Brunsma (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005), 249.

<sup>13</sup> Jean S. Phinney, "Ethnic Identity in Adolescents and Adults: Review of Research," *Psychological Bulletin* 108, no. No. 3 (1990): 500.

<sup>14</sup> These matters are complex and involve a long history of the study of identity that go beyond this present work. However, what is important for this conversation is recognizing the many *issues potentially* impacting the identities of African American millennials. We will see later how the Black Church has been influential in the identity formation of its members spiritually and socially.

affiliation, etc.).<sup>15</sup> Jean S. Phinney uses the term “*ethnic* identity to encompass three aspects of group identity processes: ethnic heritage, racial phenotype, and cultural background”—though all three aspects can be distinguished conceptually and have varying implications for individuals.<sup>16</sup> Despite the array of qualifiers influencing identify, it remains important to understand how the formation of identity will affect the spiritual life of emerging adults and how one’s spiritual life *must* affect identity formation.

R. L’Heureux Lewis and Kanika Bell argue that social identity theory may have it wrong when they posit a dichotomy between personal and social identity for people of color in the United States. “The racialized social system in the United States dictates that the social identities of marginalized group members are likely reflected in their personal identities.”<sup>17</sup> They build upon “David Harris and Jeremiah Joseph Sim’s conceptualization of identity as an entity that is internally defined, externally ascribed, and behaviorally expressed,” and “argue that racial identity is both a personal and social identity for people of color in contemporary American society.”<sup>18</sup> They define “personal identity as the organization and hierarchical alignment of an individual’s social identities.”<sup>19</sup> Who I understand myself to be is thus greatly influenced by the identities ascribed to me, whether I understand them as true, or even act upon them. Consider W.E.B. Du Bois’: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals

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<sup>15</sup> For more on black and ethnic identity issues see William E. Jr. Cross, *Shades of Black: Diversity in African-American Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991); Phinney, "Ethnic Identity in Adolescents and Adults."; "Emerging Adults in America."

<sup>16</sup> "Emerging Adults in America," 118.

<sup>17</sup> Lewis and Bell, "Negotiating Racial Identity," 249.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”<sup>20</sup> Matters of race thus tend to shake the foundation of identity theories because of their complexities within society’s institutionally biased structures toward some racial groups.

In contrast, Setran and Kiesling argue that now in the place of social identity is personal identity, which is the free-flowing distant cousin that is not constrained by assigned roles, but chooses for itself its place of belonging. The freedom of self-selection thereby increases the importance of the “subjective sense of personal identity.”<sup>21</sup> It is not surprising that subjectivity becomes a key component in modern American culture considering the over-arching rhetoric of today. Cote and Levine make connections between identity formation and postmodernity—it “may be better described as the reconstitution of the self’s relation to society and the reordering of Western culture around a specific kind of individualization.”<sup>22</sup> According to Stanley Grenz, postmodernity deconstructs for the individual the stability and unity that was part of the social self and leaves in its place a “splintering of the self into multiple subjectivities.”<sup>23</sup> While the removal of prescribed pathways into adulthood of education, career, and family frees younger Americans to find their way to their true selves, the opportunity to paint one’s own world leaves challenges for many who struggle in construction of the self. However the church can provide a framework upon which to build a faithful existence that honors Christ, while still allowing space for individual expression of and understanding of vocation. Postmodernity’s insistence on universal equality for all ideas, along with the recognition of the subjectivity of all truth claims, complicates issues of identity.

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<sup>20</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Quote: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double\\_consciousness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_consciousness)

<sup>21</sup> Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 58.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, "Christian Spirituality and the Quest for Identity: Toward a Spiritual-Theological Understanding of Life in Christ," *Baptist History and Heritage* 37, no. 2 (2002): 93.

Group identity can also upset the framework used to understand identity formation. There are at least two other types of frameworks: acculturation models that suggest “we all adapt in some way or another to our environments in the development of our identities;” and “identity-as-choice theories,” which suggest, “humans use personal and social, achieved and ascribed, information to construct their own group identity.”<sup>24</sup> Identity-as-choice models are helpful because they at least ascribe a space for ethnicity, race, and other variables, but “contemporary theory has not acknowledged the role of racial-group identity in the conceptualization of the self: “By eliminating the importance of group identity from the analysis of the self-concept, all information regarding values, attitudes, worldview, ideology, religious preference, racial preference, salience of ethnicity, or the influence of nationalism is ignored.”<sup>25</sup> This is problematic, and significantly important to our inquiry of African American millennials because of the many racialized issues faced by countless young black men and women. (We will explore the significance of this for the church a bit more in the next chapter.)

It is customary for young adults to explore their identities<sup>26</sup> and experiment, and, as Arnett has noted, such explorations tend to focus on three areas of our emerging self-identity: love, work and ideology/worldview.<sup>27</sup> The latter is of particular interest here as it encompasses religious faith and issues of belief. However, if Arnett’s ideas are combined with what Turkle describes as our “connections with uncertain claims to commitment,”<sup>28</sup> then self-questioning will also occur in relationship to institutions and communities. Existential faith questions such as “What does it mean to be Christian”, “What are the expectations or responsibilities of being in

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<sup>24</sup> Lewis and Bell, "Negotiating Racial Identity," 253.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 253-4. See also Cross, *Shades of Black*.

<sup>26</sup> Both their personal and individual identities are likely to be included as they explore.

<sup>27</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 9, 211. I would offer a broader definition of love to include family and friendship, as both are key to the understanding of the self.

<sup>28</sup> Turkle, *Alone Together*, 153.

covenant with God?” and “What commitment(s) must I make?” force us to look beyond ourselves. Nevertheless, for a generation that looks at faith life for its *benies* (benefits) and not for what they themselves can contribute to God’s plan for humanity, these questions may never be raised, or if raised, may prove difficult to negotiate. Yet the exemplary disciple understands their role in fulfilling the Church’s mission. As tenuous as the process of discovery and exploration may be, it is necessary among those I am holding forth as exemplars.

Churches, who understand where their younger worshippers are in this process, have a greater chance of engaging it and helping them settle upon the kind of cohesive identity I am proposing. Through the process of *spiritual* identity formation and solidification, matters of faith can move from the realm of the peripheral into the foreground of emerging adults’ spiritual imagination. An Eriksonian sense of continuity and coherence in one’s self-picture and social relations can emerge. Yet, individuality remains one of the primary challenges to a spiritual identity and formation that looks anything like the faith of our mothers and fathers in the Black Church. It has been noted that the individual nature of identity development can either lead to anxiety or apathy.<sup>29</sup> My fear is that the latter persists among over half of African American millennials who wrestle with the banality of religious expression. With the many uncertainties (delayed marriage, etc.) discussed in chapter one, it is no wonder that Arnett first proposed the idea of emerging adulthood in lieu of the popular young adulthood. This stage of life is very much about *becoming*, more than it is about *being*.

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<sup>29</sup> For more conversation on identity see Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 60ff. See also James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, *Identity, Formation, Agency and Culture: A Social Psychological Synthesis* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002).

## IDENTITY AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

*Spiritual* (identity) formation is a life-long process. Clinical psychologist Lisa Miller argues that we are all genetically hardwired for a sense relationship with God,<sup>30</sup> but that expressions of spirituality take many forms—not only religious faith. Consequently, how this “natural spirituality” develops and emerges in the life cycle is generally connected to our upbringing, so that those who are raised with overt spiritual engagement and instruction are far more likely to navigate through adolescence and into adulthood with a sense of their own individual spirituality.<sup>31</sup> Just as milestones can measure our growth into adulthood, so can our spiritual progression with particular indicators connoting arriving at *spiritual* adulthood.<sup>32</sup> Here Marcia’s quadrants are useful in understanding *spiritual identity development* of exemplary disciples—using them as a framework to conceptualize the journey to maturity. There are three phases on the road to spiritual maturity: encounter, conversion, and becoming a disciple.

The spiritual part of identity formation begins with an encounter—either with an individual (disciple) that draws us to a faith community or the gospel story of Christ—which then leads to conversion. For some, the allure is developed over time, after several encounters with people or community. Among millennials, being accepted before making confessional allegiance to Christ is important.<sup>33</sup> Ideally, the spiritual part of a person’s identity will be nurtured at home and reinforced by many encounters of community at church. Unfortunately, this paradigm is no longer commonplace; particularly among the large percentage of millennials who are children of parents who are dropouts themselves or those without religious faith. Many

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<sup>30</sup> Or the creator, nature, universe or whichever term one uses for a higher power

<sup>31</sup> Miller, *The Spiritual Child*.

<sup>32</sup> See similar arguments in James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995); Putman and Harrington, *Disciple Shift: Five Steps That Help Your Church Make Disciples Who Make Disciples*. Hawkins categorizes this growth in four segments: Exploring, Growing, Close, and Christ-Centered in Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 105-24.

<sup>33</sup> The Emergent Church Movement postulates, “belonging before believing” makes a difference for those who may be skeptical about faith communities. Even without skepticism, the importance of acceptance is key for this cohort.

millennials begin their journey in Marcia's *moratorium* stage, exploring faith choices without conviction, and testing and experimenting to see which fits them.<sup>34</sup> Here the church can be influential by presenting itself as an irresistible community where the gifts and graces of God are apparent. Ritual is vitally important to community as it represents who and what is believed and valued most. Sometimes people will journey with the community, practicing its practices before finding the gospel story believable. These encounters, during moratorium, are essential to the eventual acceptance of Christ and future generations of faithful followers becoming part of the Church.

When conversion—the second step—does occur, the Christian receives the gift of salvation (Eph. 2:8) and is confirmed and sealed in the water of baptism (Acts 2:38, 22:16). Though salvation is instantaneous; there is biblical paradigm of a lifelong journey of transformation and renewal.<sup>35</sup> As they journey, prayerfully under the tutelage of a more mature disciple, they will begin to explore Christian views and beliefs, participate in community practices, and learn of disciplines necessary to secure their own maturity. To develop the dynamic disciples I am envisioning here, it is important that *identity foreclosure* does not set in—that is having strong beliefs with little desire to explore said ideals. It is equally detrimental to spiritual development for new converts to fall into *identity diffusion*—having very limited aspiration to explore, alter or establish firm convictions. Persons in this quadrant may accept ideas based on the word of persons in authority—a borrowed conviction. While it is expected a person will initially accept the teachings of those more established in the faith (parents, pastor,

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<sup>34</sup> See connections of faith and that quadrants in Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 62.; See also original study James E. Marcia, "Development and Validation of Ego Identity Status," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 3, no. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Various described as sanctification, "life of flourishing" "joy" "abundant life." See Yale Center for Faith and Culture "Joy Project." Emphasis is also on the communal, covenantal nature of the journey as the "Body of Christ." In Pentecostal traditions, sanctification is the process of purification in the life of the believe 'worked out' overtime as a component of spiritual growth and maturity.

coaches, and the like), it is paramount that each individual solidifies his or her own convictions. In order for an enduring, contagious faith to occur, a maturing toward *identity achievement*—wrestling and testing various beliefs, then making them a personal commitment—must take place.

The final and longest phase, becoming a disciple, continues throughout the life of a faithful follower. In this stage the believer begins to take on the practices, disciplines, virtues, and mission of the body of Christ, and sanctification culminates in eschatological hope.<sup>36</sup> The existential questions of faith mentioned below begin to have greater significance as the disciple determines his or her place in the plan of God. This ‘place’ is not static throughout the lifetime of faith, but grows, develops, and often changes as one intermingles with the sub-culture of the church, the wider cultures of society, and one’s own family unit. Transformation is the heart of this phase and is not reserved only for those in the post adolescent group. The persons in this phase of faith development will see their life of faith intricately connected to the well-being of the whole community of faith; their perspective is not I/Thou but a lens of We/Thou.<sup>37</sup> The mature disciple considers the world beyond the concerns of one’s spiritual condition and wants to help others grow in faith.

Nevertheless, spiritual formation is frequently not an easy process. First, there is the misconception that emerging adulthood is a graduation of sorts, and when we have learned all that is needed during adolescence about the life of faith, we can go on to live our ‘life.’<sup>38</sup>

Secondly, closely related to the first, is can be hard to convince emerging adults that there is a

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<sup>36</sup> Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 76. Another image is “living toward the Kingdom of God.” In essence I am emphasizing realized eschatology—the need to participate in God’s saving work in the present day

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> See similar arguments in Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*; Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*; Dean, *Almost Christian*.

*continued* need for spiritual development and spiritual growth—that in fact is a lifelong journey and not a ‘one-time arrival.’<sup>39</sup> Finally, the lessons learned on the journey need to be thoroughly integrated into our being—so, just like Paul, we must internalize the mission of Christ and accept it as the core our identity (Col. 3:3).<sup>40</sup> Thus any delay in reaching adult status adversely affects an emerging adult’s integration of the self.

There is a high value placed upon both personal and communal identity in the Black Church.<sup>41</sup> As far back as slavery, the doctrinal position of infinite worth and equality of all humans was paramount in the Black Church—instrumental in preventing total dehumanization of slaves.<sup>42</sup> Powe’s generational constructs are helpful in distinguishing how group identity was strengthened through the preaching, teaching, and ministry programs of the Black Church. Each cohort had a dynamic role in recapitulating the identity of the individual.<sup>43</sup> The Civil Rights Generation understood the identity-shaping power of social, educational, political, and religious ideals; and was instrumental in redefining black identity as equal, no longer bound by second-class citizenship.<sup>44</sup> Instead “blackness. . . embodied true American citizenship”—not only religiously, but politically, too.<sup>45</sup> By giving racial identity theological significance, this generation reframed how its congregants saw themselves as now being made in the *imago dei* (image of God).<sup>46</sup> The Black Consciousness Generation took the elevation of “black” group

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<sup>39</sup> Here the influences of MTD are evident that treats emergence into adulthood like graduation from religious catechism.

<sup>40</sup> This sentiment connotes the epitome of identity achievement albeit Christologically focused.

<sup>41</sup> Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, *Nurturing Faith and Hope: Black Worship as a Model for Christian Education* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004), xxiv.

<sup>42</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 315-16.

<sup>43</sup> Powe, *New Wine New Wineskins*, 7-24.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

identity one step further by theologically insisting on the “beauty of blackness”<sup>47</sup>—no doubt spurred on by non-Christian pro-black organizations.

## INTEGRATION

Of chief concern in developing exemplary disciples among African American millennials is *integration* in their lives. Those who will lead the Church into her future must become the living example of bridging the gaps within the identity of the self, as well as between belief and religious praxis. First, I insist on the need for identity cohesiveness that reflects personal, social and religious factors in the self-understanding of the ideal millennial Christian—remembering the complexities of ethnic/cultural distinctives. Secondly, I am proposing a fusion of the “worlds” of millennials, which for some are disjointed and for others totally separated. As I have shown, many younger adults view their day-to-day lives as different and distinct from their “faith lives.” This next lacuna is not about belief, but rather the actualization and practice of a disciple’s religious/spiritual selves in harmony with the rest of life. This is not to suggest a total overlapping in the lives of emerging adults, but a Venn diagram type of intersection. Thirdly, the integration I am calling for requires a unification of the beliefs and practices among millennials—following the example of Jesus, whose identity and practice were integrated. The Lord’s belief was manifest in his actions. Likewise, as disciples, our stated beliefs and religious practices are supposed to be aligned. I will insist upon the need for an infusion of individual purpose and mission, with the mission of the Church in the next chapter. However, before moving to ecclesiological understanding, we must explore integration as it relates to the archetypal millennial disciple.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 12.

## Challenges to Integration

The integration I am calling for is met immediately with a number of challenges. The first of these is the distorted idea of God's inactivity in humanity. The idea of a holy God who wants to be active in the day-to-day lives of humans stretches the 'hands-off' caricature of God that predominates in the underlying MTD religious psyche of the American (Christian) young adult. Despite the diminished expectation among millennials, a vision of God actively engaged in our lives is theologically accurate—God's activity is critically important in the self-identity of the type of disciple I am arguing is necessary for the future of the African American Church.

The second challenge is a myopic worldview of life, faith and community among those disciples who do conceive the world from an "I-Thou" lens versus a "we-Thou" ideology that recognizes their life and actions affect their community and vice-versa.<sup>48</sup> The popular view of what it means to be a Christian devalues the relationship the Lord desires to have with every disciple and their role in the overall plan/economy<sup>49</sup> of God. The theological heresies that cheapen<sup>50</sup> any portion of our relationship with God threaten this accurate conception of being in relationship with a covenant keeping God. Exemplary disciples recognize not only the great benefits of a covenant relationship with God, they have counted up *the costs*.<sup>51</sup> Further, they are acutely aware of the august responsibility of being part of God's plan with humanity. For this reason, faith in these disciples' lives is not an occasional commitment, but a personal relationship that is central to who these disciples are and how they envision themselves in the world—both factors into one's understanding of one's identity.

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<sup>48</sup> The language of "I-Thou", "We-Thou" adapted from Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 76.

<sup>49</sup> Economy of God refers to God's way of being and engaging with humanity. This designation is necessary to connote a difference between how the world works and God's desired relationship with and for our world.

<sup>50</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. Chr. Kaiser Verlag Munchn, Fifth ed. (New York: Touchstone, 1995). There is no denying identification with Jesus is a call to die to him. Yet, this death is better than other sacrificial systems—consumerism or military, because it is the only sacrifice that leads to life.

<sup>51</sup> Here I am borrowing from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's distinction between "cheap" and "costly" grace.

Third, many millennials have a healthy resistance to religious particularity and exclusivity, neither of which originate in this cohort, although it is heightened among millennials. As the witness of Christian particularity wanes, so does the identity of what it means to be the church and who is part of Christ's beloved community.<sup>52</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean lambastes the church, keenly depicting our problem:

After two and a half centuries of shacking up with “the American dream,” churches have perfected a dicey codependence between consumer-driven therapeutic individualism and religious pragmatism. These theological proxies gnaw, termite-like, at our identity as the Body of Christ, eroding our ability to recognize that Jesus' life of self-giving love directly challenges the American gospel of self-fulfillment and self-actualization.<sup>53</sup>

If the church is struggling in its identity, so will the believers that are part of the various communities of faith.

Further, there is an erosion of the fabric of the orthodoxy<sup>54</sup> that formerly defined what it meant to be Christian. This attrition can be witnessed in emerging adults' failure to adopt the confessions of the Church, if they even have knowledge of them; their lack of commitment to worship, liturgy, and sacraments; and in their less than stellar theological comprehension.<sup>55</sup>

Across the board, widespread self-selection of doctrines, practices, Christian ethics, morals, or biblical-truth blurs the demarcation line of what it means to be a follower of Christ. This type of cherry picking results in “the individual as the authority over religion and not vice versa!”<sup>56</sup>

These trends are malignant cancers, killing the cells at the center of our faith communities.

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<sup>52</sup> One question that millennials will be able to help the church answer is if there is a way to maintain our particularity of Christianity while also being engaged with culture and other faiths through inclusivity. This of course is not without some challenges.

<sup>53</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 5.

<sup>54</sup> Those interested in exploring more on the renewing or returning to Orthodoxy can start with Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous or +Hodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan). Although matters of theological content matters to me, our present study does not allow for a full consideration of how they impact identity of millennial disciples.

<sup>55</sup> Find similar claims in Dean, *Almost Christian*; Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 13.

<sup>56</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 147.

Without change, Christianity could be reduced to a social club—albeit a loving community—with unclear beliefs or convictions. The power of *Koinonia* (fellowship) notwithstanding, the Church was called to transform the world, not just hang out with one another. Smith and Denton explain that adolescents embark upon their early adult years with a “rather inclusive, pluralistic, and individualistic view about religious truth, identity, boundaries and the need for religious congregation.”<sup>57</sup> Apart from those persons who are part of the most conservative communities, younger Americans tend to shy away from any explicit doctrines or teachings that are viewed as divisive or that stand in judgment of others. Such teachings are seen as old-fashioned and tend to alienate so many young adults in our pews.

Grenz helps understand the fourth challenge to integration: identity instability—closely related to the identity formation noted earlier. He points to our fast-changing world which “exacerbates the fluidity of the self,” explaining, “the self is not only impermanent but also highly unstable.”<sup>58</sup> Postmodernity causes the replacement of the stability and unity that had characterized the self during the modern era, with “psychic fragmentation.”<sup>59</sup> He argues, the “chaos” of identity and at root of individual’s “search for . . . personal integration.”<sup>60</sup> Grenz’s arguments resonate with my call for integration, but go further by connecting the deep inward need, among those in search of identity, with the specific nuances of our postmodern culture. The church can and must be instrumental in the internal integration of Christian young adults.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>58</sup> Grenz, “Christian Spirituality and the Quest for Identity,” 93. For discussion of *psychic fragmentation* see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 90. James E. Cote also discusses the fluidity of identity among early adults in “Emerging Adulthood as an Institutionalized Moratorium: Risks and Benefits to Identity Formation,” in *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21st Century*, ed. Jeffrey Jenson Arnett and Jennifer Lynn Tanner (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2006), 108-09.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Grenz, “Christian Spirituality and the Quest for Identity,” 91.

### *Erosion In Context*

I asserted in chapter that deep theological trends impact millennials' relationship to the Church. Further I stated that the present erosion, or diasporic trends (chapter two), were not created *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). In fact, there are numerous reasons for the lower rate of return to the Black Church exhibited in each generation of young adults. Therefore in our discussion of problems discerned in this millennial cohort, I want to remember these disclaimers and also resist placing the blame of present weakening of fervency on those born after 1980. While I have sufficiently documented my concerns with today's younger adults, it is important for Church leaders to also look inward for our part in the present conundrum of attracting and reaching millennials. It is my hope that with earnest reflection we will not have to end our relationship with our youth upon their entrance to late adolescent or high school graduation.

The commitment of previous young adult cohorts in the Black Church waned as a result of a number of factors. After adolescence, many felt ignored due to lack of age-appropriate programming. They also felt pushed aside when there were not space to lead or flourish—evidenced by older generations' reluctance to share power. The Black Church became seemingly irrelevant to black folk in 'the world'—sometimes too focused on conservative theologies than community transformation. As eloquent as it has been, rhetorical preaching ceased to deal with concrete issues of life and faith for those who sought refuge in our pews. Finally, an unwillingness to discuss conservative theologies, especially those that challenge their way of life—insisting instead on rules of holiness that may be more tradition than biblical mandates severed already fragile ties. This list is by no means comprehensive, but gives some idea of the crucible from which today's physical, theological, and practical diaspora emerges. My insistence on mentoring relationships that allow for questioning, exploration, and discovery

remain critical for reversing the dangerous trends of non-affiliation and low religious participation currently evidenced among Black millennials.

### **The Church's Role in Integration**

The church most participate actively in this generation's formation process—stressing the importance of community in the understanding of the self. Participation in the body of Christ, and the interrelationship of individual members in each other's story is critical to the type of integration I am referring to (1 Co. 12). Individual self-definition must not be myopic, concerned only with itself; instead, a community-centered worldview must be part of the self-understanding of members of Christ's Church. The challenge is to connect disciples to something transcendent—connecting their identity to a “distant past and a limitless future” and making the individual's spirit “significant for the universe and the universe significant for him.”<sup>61</sup> The postmodern insistence on one person's story connected to the whole wonderfully honors the individuality of today's millennial self, while also recognizing connections to *a story* that is far greater than us.

We can co-opt postmodernity's prioritization of an individual's story, the “narrative self,” to the “relationally-based postmodern identity.”<sup>62</sup> How people organize the diverse parts of their lives into a cohesive story of meaning is indicative of a culture with the self at the center of overlapping relationships— “as the referent in the story recounted by those around him” to the wider story of family or community.<sup>63</sup> An idea that is wonderfully explored in Brian McLaren's trilogy on a New Kind of Christian—instead of viewing this postmodern trend as negative, the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 94. For discussion of *psychic fragmentation* see Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 90.

<sup>63</sup> Grenz, “Christian Spirituality and the Quest for Identity,” 94.

Church can redeem the theological value of story to connect persons to the purpose of the church.<sup>64</sup> This connection is critical to the future of the Black Church. The benign existence of a flat faith that only impacts the individual, but does not change the community (and by extension, the world) will remain ineffective in motivating millennials in search of meaning beyond the self.

In the Black Church, Mary Hinton argues, religious education is “fundamentally about identity—how a people know themselves, organize for living, and work to endure through time.”<sup>65</sup> Religious Education thus moves beyond Christian Education, which can be about learning information, histories, and expectations, etc., instead of reaching the ultimate goal—the heart of the worshipper. Thus, it is incumbent faith communities (leadership and laity together) to ensure the type of integration I argue should take place. This newest generation is influenced toward a life that ethically, morally, and practically reflects an awe-worthy faith distinct from the marginalized masses. As integration becomes more normative in this cohort, the potential for attracting those disillusioned by the church increases. As I argued earlier, for exemplary disciples, one’s spiritual identity remains central and not peripheral to one’s self-understanding.

A cohesive identity will impact everyday decision and choices. Yet, it is widely noted that millennials view their lives divergently, having their ‘life’ and a separate ‘faith life’.<sup>66</sup> This dichotomy is not ideal in the life of the exemplary we are discussing. My critique does not eliminate the possibility of inconsistencies due to living life in our sinful nature—but broad disconnections between life, as lived, and faith, as practiced. Problematic for many millennials, is belief being consigned to activity explored during religious indoctrination, but never breaking

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<sup>64</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass).

<sup>65</sup> Hinton, Mary Hinton, *The Commercial Church: Black Churches and the New Religious Marketplace in America* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2011), 6, 121.

<sup>66</sup> NSYR, Dean, Wuthnow, et al.; Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 114.

into their daily lived-experience. As a result, religious belief is not talked about outside the walls of their faith communities or homes.

By and large, millennials' 'worlds' hang in different solar spheres, orbiting around their own self-conception of life—causing large gaps between family, church, school, and social aspects of their lives. Despite the importance of these different worlds (communities) to younger adults' conceptions of the self, they never seemingly converge into an unified-self informed and influenced by both matters of life and faith. Many emerging adults remain part of our faith communities but “compartmentalize their lives, continuing religious participation in their “Christian life” even while living contrary to their beliefs in other venues.” Further, the moral choices of others in this cohort “will move them to redefine Christianity in order to bring it in line with their chosen behaviors.”<sup>67</sup> Unfortunately, an even larger percentage of those raised in faith have put Christianity on a shelf with the intent of reclaiming it later. As noted, diasporic tendencies are detrimental to the present and future health of the Black Church. While some churches can lull themselves into a false sense of security because of the presence of a remnant of young adults, those who are paying attention cannot deny the gross absence of Christian millennials from our pews on Sunday morning.

The challenge for religious communities is to capture the imagination and allegiance of the next generation!<sup>68</sup> The C/church is in competition for millennials' attention, time, talent, and commitment with any number of causes, organizations, activities, and interests. Sharon Daloz Parks is rightly concerned with what emerging adults are breathing in; what are those things (images, narratives, and ideologies) that are in the market and contributing to “the formation of

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<sup>67</sup> Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 18.

<sup>68</sup> See similar claim in Parks, *Big Questions Worthy Dreams*, 225.

the emerging adult's soul?" Further, "what passions are they encouraged to imbibe?"<sup>69</sup>

Researchers note during the emerging adult years "widespread" religious decline in areas of belief, behavior, and subjective inner life; a pronounced drift from orthodoxy; and, even when beliefs stay intact, there remains religious decline in the subjective importance of religion to day-to-day life.<sup>70</sup> Dean and Parks, along with others who have encouraged the church to have an effective response to postmodern challenges, have insisted that the church ask something great of this generation.<sup>71</sup> We must help them find integration and to wrestle with those things that matter most to life *and* faith.

Music, movies, and multi-media sources are culture-forming devices that influence the formation of persons young and old, though that influence is possibly more pronounced in this millennial generation. One cannot deny, as Evelyn Parker accurately asserts, that many aspects of popular culture have "faith-shaping"<sup>72</sup> capacity. They have pedagogical influence on culture and how persons give meaning to important questions of life. A community that is faithful to the mandate of discipleship must find ways to help the people reconcile competing allegiances. Without bravely facing this challenge, the goal of developing Christian millennials with unified selves will not be met. The local church must find ways to link what is done within our faith communities and, in the practice of Christian faith, with how people construe the meaning of their lives and how they live their lives *in* the world.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>70</sup> Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 12-13.

<sup>71</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1998); Dean, *Almost Christian*; Parks, *Big Questions Worthy Dreams*.

<sup>72</sup> Parker, "Cultural Studies Meets Religious Education," 463.

## Integration: Belief and Practice

Amy Plantinga Pauw's arguments deeply resonate with my ideas of the "exemplary... discipleship" in which "the coherence of belief and practices is so imperative".<sup>73</sup> Likewise, the contributors in *Practicing Theology* correctly insist that "beliefs and practices can and should be understood in relation to one another...rejecting the separation of thought and action, seeing in a practice a form of cooperative meaningful human endeavor in which the two are inextricably entwined."<sup>74</sup> Pauw explains:

My understanding of the interdependence between belief and practices is informed by a critically realist epistemology, in which religious beliefs are beliefs about God, human beings, and the rest of creation. Beliefs presuppose the human possibility of some critical purchase on truth; for example, Jonah's belief in God's indiscriminate mercy involves a truth claim about divine reality. At the same time, this epistemology affirms that all human beliefs are culturally and materially situated and inseparable from practice. Beliefs about God are not pure truths grasped by a Cartesian ego and then "applied" to the messy, ambiguous realm of practice. Religious beliefs are interwoven with a larger set of other beliefs and embedded in particular ways of life. They are couched in the language, conceptuality, and history of a particular people and reflect personal and communal experience and desires. Religious beliefs shape and are shaped by religious practices.<sup>75</sup>

Beliefs are not only about God and creation, but also convictions held by Christians on any number of biblical, theological, ethical, or sacramental matters. These beliefs could either be individually derived or collectively embraced by a tradition or faith community. Beliefs can be as rigid as prescribed set of dogma or more porous as in an *understanding* of truth, divinity, or of God's expectations. Because, one's religious beliefs are comingled and are in competition with

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<sup>73</sup> Amy Plantinga Pauw, "Attending to the Gaps between Beliefs and Practices," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 34.

<sup>74</sup> Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 21.

<sup>75</sup> Pauw, "Attending to the Gaps between Beliefs and Practices," 35-36.

other ideologies and their correlative practices, many people experience discontinuity between religious belief and religious practice.

Though not popular to speak about in modern society, we must recognize there to is a systematic power of sin at work in the world. Further, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD), and other pseudo theologies are constantly at war with people’s attempt to live faithfully into the call to be Christ’s disciple. With our seemingly unlimited access to variant ideologies, knowing what to believe is a challenge to many faithful disciples—young and old. Jaime Smith speaks of “cultural liturgies”—found in sports, music, television, etc. which can form our loves to the wrong ends, instead of God, without our necessarily noticing it. Sin in Smith’s lens is not a laundry list of things not to do, but instead any power that is opposed to God (though ultimately defeated by Christ) that distorts our love.<sup>76</sup>

Unfortunately, religious belief has become watered down in comparison to previous generations. A less critical assessment would be to describe present day belief as more simplified. Yet the characteristics of MTD as noted in chapter two are not to be deemphasized in those of early adulthood. Arnett notes that most emerging adults equate religious belief as a variation of the Golden Rule.<sup>77</sup> Powell and Clark, in sampling a group of college juniors, reported that thirty-five percent did not even mention Jesus in describing what it meant to be Christian. Instead faith’s primary descriptor was noted as “loving others.”<sup>78</sup> Again, the rejection of religion’s particularity stands as a residual challenge of cultivating a relevant Christian worldview for this generation.<sup>79</sup> Repudiation of pagan ideals and practices is missing from much of protestant faith today. Instead we see variations of syncretism, compromise, universalization of religious

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<sup>76</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom : Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Volume 1 of Cultural Liturgies (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009).

<sup>77</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 85.

<sup>78</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids*, 29.

<sup>79</sup> See Dean who calls for “radical particularity” in Dean, *Almost Christian*, 33.

expressions, and other forms of pluralism. Many of the faithful are scripturally illiterate, theologically confused, and moral relativists.

Dykstra and Bass define practices as the “things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world.”<sup>80</sup> They suggest a redaction to their original definition; adding to its end, “in Jesus Christ.” Further, they identify Alasdair MacIntyre’s explications of the concept of *virtue* as influencing this definition, noting the explanation of “social practices” as “complex social activities that pursue certain goods internal to the practices themselves.”<sup>81</sup> Thus, practices are not just activities, but are actions that are inherently good. I will adopt their description of practices, with my own modifications.

I define practices as those things Christians do together over time in response to and as an expression of God’s active presence and participation in the world through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. While the scope of practices can be quite encompassing, I find great value in considering them in our religious context as things that are good, just, even holy in some cases, when enjoined by faithful believers together in an expression of relationship with a covenant keeping God. Discipleship, thanks to Craig Dykstra, can and should be discussed in light of practices through which the church creates space where people “through the Holy Spirit” can “palpably feel, and respond to God.”<sup>82</sup>

I echo the idea that practices are in cooperation with God’s action toward humanity. In my mind, it is dialogical. Religious belief informs practices, and practices inform our religious belief. In Pauw’s words, they “shape” one another.<sup>83</sup> Practically speaking, most people encounter

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<sup>80</sup> Dykstra and Bass, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," 18-20.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Conner, *Practicing Witness*, 3.

<sup>83</sup> Pauw, "Attending to the Gaps between Beliefs and Practices," 37.

the church and Christian community in *practice* (i.e. worship, service, fellowship, etc.) long before they have solidified beliefs that inform said practice. Kathryn Turner explains, “beliefs come in only after the fact to ratify the interest one already has or the actions and attitudes one already deems proper” in accordance with the times or other social allegiances. Yet in a more concrete world where beliefs are lived, she also points to the dialogical influencing of actions, attitudes and interests which are as much “infiltrated and informed by beliefs one holds as beliefs are to be influenced by actions, attitudes and interests.”<sup>84</sup> The dissonance between belief and practice that is so prominent today in Christianity can be combated *if* a cadre of missional millennials emerges from within the African American Church. Belief and practice, too, must be integrated.

It is prudent to refrain from indicting this younger cohort by presuming that their disconnections arise from their own religious missteps. Instead, the intentional connection of belief-informed practice and practice-informed belief must be born in community. Pauw and I share the conviction that “*how* communal beliefs shape communal practice is deeply ecclesiological.” How do Christian community members understand the C/church’s mission and their responsibility in that mission’s execution? She explains that the functionality of this connection, the *how*, “cannot be answered apart from critical discernment about the institutional forms of religious life and their structure of authority and accountability.” Further, by deferring to Miroslav Volf’s idea of “polycentric” understanding of Christian community, she again raises the interdependent nature of beliefs and practices. Lastly, she argues that the assessment of a church’s health is discerned by observing the beliefs and practices of the laity.<sup>85</sup> The church is only as strong as those persons representing the median of the whole; the normative expression

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<sup>84</sup> Kathryn Turner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1992), 9.

<sup>85</sup> Pauw, "Attending to the Gaps between Beliefs and Practices," 34-35. Italics for emphasis are mines.

of faith and belief in said community. The lives of clergy will not be most telling because they are outliers to the system. Instead, the best way to access the present and future health of a religious community is in observing our young people who are the self-incriminating mirror to the truth of how we live into being Christ's disciples and ambassadors. Young adults prove that our disconnections have become communal in nature. An uncritical eye attempts to use millennials as the scapegoat to a much deeper fraying of religious fervency among African American Christians. The decent is not a "youth" problem, but lies at our feet—their parents and grandparents (in faith).

### *The Gap: Belief and Practices*

"Scholars across the board agree that Christian *practices and institutional participation* are far more likely to decline even when beliefs remain intact.<sup>86</sup> Though admirable, the solution is not as only in unifying beliefs to practices. The *solutions* must be deeper. Thus far in this chapter I have argued that an individual's identity is key in developing those who resemble the exemplary disciples I am espousing. Furthermore, I have insisted on multi-level integration as essential.<sup>87</sup> Kinnaman argues the Church has failed "to impart Christianity as a comprehensive way of understanding reality and living fully in today's culture."<sup>88</sup> It is natural to seek coherence in life—finding ways to make meaning of our lives.<sup>89</sup> To realize an integration of belief and practice requires a reorienting of the worldview of the faithful—one that places relationship with God through Christ at the center. Unfortunately, the church has ceased to be interlocutors on the

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<sup>86</sup> Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 13.

<sup>87</sup> I have argued for integration in a) identity, b) belief and practices, and c) life and faith life. We will see in a moment that I also call for integration in ecclesiological understanding, which I have called *infusion*.

<sup>88</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 114.

<sup>89</sup> Parks, *Big Questions Worthy Dreams*, 27.

most critical matters of faith and thus has become impotent in its efforts to reach today's young adults.

Further hindering our success are practices in the church that do not reflect the concerns of life that challenge and call the youthful. For example, many churches are silently complicit in the Black Lives Matter movement and the newly rising youth movements around matters of racial equality on college campuses.<sup>90</sup> These are just two examples of disconnection. This generation is looking for practices that are informed by belief in tangible ways. They are not interested in a faith that is only liturgically relevant, without being literally relevant in very practical ways. The exemplary disciple is one whose expressions of faith are integrally connected to who they are and how they interact with culture. Jesus becomes our ultimate exemplar in matters of integration. In Him, identity and practice are united.<sup>91</sup> For Jesus, *who he was* (identity) resulted in *what he did* (*practice*). The middle step of belief is encompassed in a rightly constituted understanding of self.

### **Integration and Moral Reasoning**

Relevant to this discussion is how Christian beliefs influence millennials' approach to morality. The existential questions again are connected. Does a person's self-understanding during early adulthood have a significant influence upon their morality? What are the factors that affect how

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<sup>90</sup> See Abby Ellin, "Meet the New Student Activists," *New York Times: Education Life*, 2/1/16, accessed 2/2/16, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/07/education/edlife/the-new-student-activists.html?action=click&contentCollection=Education%20Life&module=RelatedCoverage&region=Marginalia&pgtype=article>; Leonardo Blair, "Could 'Black Lives Matter' Be Prophetic Message to the Church?," *The Christian Post*, 1/14/2016, accessed 1/14/2016, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/black-lives-matter-movement-day-brenda-salter-mcneil-148985>.

/// Ellin, "Meet the New Student Activists."

<sup>91</sup> The idea of this continuum was spurred on and later adopted from an in depth and ongoing conversation with Fred Edie of Duke Divinity School in the fall of 2015. In his words: "Jesus did both identity and practice integrated." Similarly he argued "God's beings equals God's doing. Who God is – IS – What God does." I rather hope I said, "In Jesus practice and identity are integrated."

decisions are made? Who or what influences millennials—friends, pop culture, family, etc.? More pertinent, does one’s identity as “Christ’s” have predominance in the decision matrix? If not, to what extent does being a Christian influence one’s outlook, decisions, and actions? The exemplary millennial disciple always holds central in their decision matrix the following: who they are in Christ, their role in his mission, and their vocation. Their beliefs about themselves directly influence their actions. Here Wimberly’s Christian ethical decision-making model is helpful in linking individuals’ every day stories, those of the Christian faith tradition, and the faith stories of African Americans to the decisions made for life.<sup>92</sup>

Lene Arnett Jensen’s explanation of Shweder’s three ethics approach to moral reasoning is helpful in understanding moral reasoning among millennials. The Ethics of Autonomy addresses “the interest and wellbeing and rights of individuals (self and others) and equality between individuals.” This approach considers the needs, desires, and preferences of persons. The emphasis is on taking responsibility for self, which also includes “self-esteem, self-expression, and independence.” An individual’s preferred outcome predominates in decision-making. The Ethics of Community are oriented around virtues related to role-based duties to others. Here one is concerned with the “protection and positive functioning of a social group” such as family, school, or nation. The individual is mindful of their role within this system and is concerned with fulfilling obligations to the group over their own autonomy—including “community-orientated virtues like self-moderation.” Here, one may also be concerned with faith community among others in deciding how to act/respond to a moral choice. The Ethics of Divinity “focuses on people as spiritual or religious entities.” Sacred texts, like the bible, figure prominently in the understanding of what it means to be in right relationship with God; the

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<sup>92</sup> Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*, 33.

individual strives to be connected to the divine and “part of that which is pure.” In this ethic, “divinity-oriented virtues such as awe, faithfulness, and humility” are at play.<sup>93</sup>

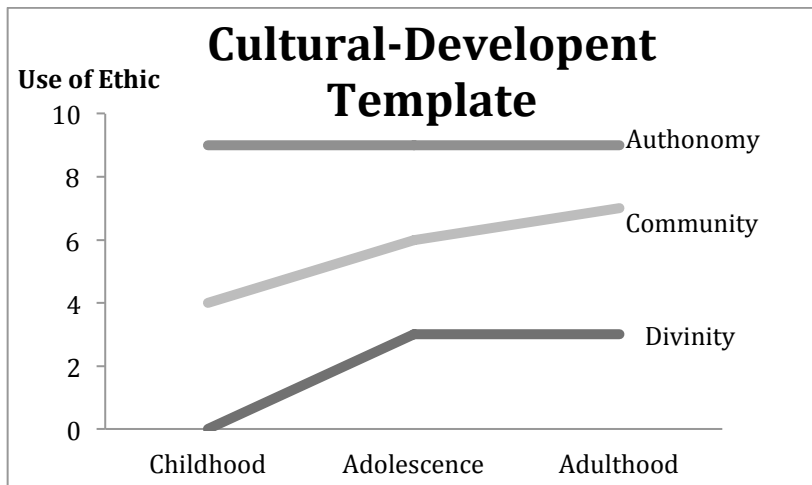


Figure 3.1 Development Template of the Three Ethics

How these frameworks interact in the life of a millennial disciple will depend on their cultural context. In Figure 3.1 we see how Shweder envisions the developmental pattern of these three ethics over a person’s life span—though his chart does not account for the frequency of use of each ethic. Despite being highly contextualized, his findings do explain how these ethics function throughout the life cycle. For example, among the more religiously liberal (see Figure 3.2), the Ethic of Autonomy will be very high and fairly consistent throughout the life cycle; Ethic of Divinity, as you may imagine, ranks low, yet makes a slight jump in adolescence and then remains constant; lastly the Ethic of Community starts slow and increases throughout the life cycle, coming close to autonomy by the time one reaches adulthood.<sup>94</sup>

In contrast, those who are religiously conservative (see Figure 3.3) are much more variable throughout the life cycle in how they use these ethics in moral reasoning. The Ethic of Authority starts in the middle and falls sharply through adolescence into adulthood. The Ethic of Community, on the other hand, will begin low and climb progressively at pre-adolescence, then

<sup>93</sup> Jensen, "Through Two Lenses," 296.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 302.

in adolescence take an upward climb to level off in adulthood. Meanwhile, the Ethic of Divinity starts very low in childhood, makes a steep climb in adolescence, and has the highest factor in adulthood.<sup>95</sup> The connectivity between these ethics and personalized identity is less predictable in our modern context. Yet those who are being mentored in a community of faith may utilize these ethics in more predictable ways.

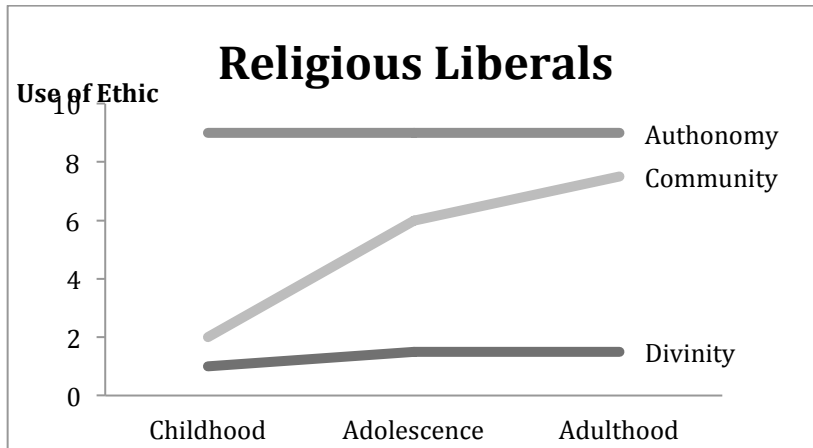


Figure 3.2 Expression of the Cultural-Development Ethics Among Religious Liberals

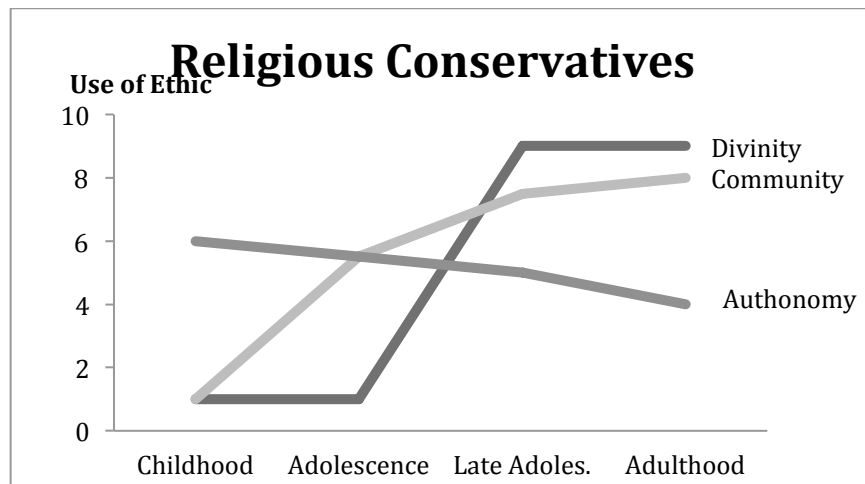


Figure 3.3 Expression of the Cultural-Development Ethics Among Religious Conservatives<sup>96</sup>

Within the Black Church, as noted above, community identity has always been critical in the understanding of what it meant to be faithful. The exemplary disciple would be one who a) uses all three ethics in harmony to make moral decisions that revere God’s role in their life, b)

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>96</sup> Figure 3.1, 3.2, 3.2 replicated from *ibid.*, 298-303.

has respect for community and their own role in establishing and maintaining its health, c) all while still meeting the needs of the self. This is not to say that the self is the last in prioritization, but instead recognizes that the prioritization of the self is inherently natural and making space for divinity and community is a learned behavior through the processes of maturity and spiritual formation. The call to be a disciple requires an emphasis on the Ethics of Divinity and Community in balance with the needs of the self. Creating this new context does not rest solely on the shoulders of younger adults; it is also incumbent upon the leaders of the church to be active in framing this moral-ethical enterprise for its members.

This framework will create a sub-culture of millennials who will become culture makers. This enterprise is dialogical: clergy (and/or mentors) serving as catalysts (partners) in helping laity in becoming ambassadors in the world that is seemingly obsessed with the individual rights of *the self* and the right of communities to define for themselves that which is right. With millennials, it will be critical to develop both the Ethics of Community and the Ethics of Divinity to tap into their shared concern for improving their communities and world. Utilization of both ethics gives a theological context to concern for community and fellow humans.

### **THE MARKS OF A DISCIPLE (THE LOOK)**

The picture of the ideal millennial disciple entails looking at the *characteristics* common to those who will serve as exemplars of a living faith—engaging and interactive with life. The hope is to reframe *the look* of the faithful and to create a desirable image of Christianity for a new generation. A word of caution: what will follow is not a call for religious clones; instead the sets of practices, disciplines, virtues, and knowledge goals discussed will provide the desired result of

our ministry programs of religious education<sup>97</sup> and formation within the Black Church. There is no “5-step” program in developing the disciples necessary for our beloved churches. Instead the exemplars described below are archetypes through which each organic nature of individuality, along with the creative work of the Spirit, will create anew what it means to live authentically as Black Christians in today’s society. These disciples are to be made in community; they should be distinguishable from mere ‘church’ *members*;<sup>98</sup> and they are able to mentor other disciples via spiritual duplication.

Religious *practices*, as defined earlier, will be prominent in the formation of these ideal disciples. Likewise, a cadre of spiritual disciplines, done primarily alone, will also be vital in recognizing the type of disciples that will perpetuate the traditions of the Black Church. I will also delineate a number of scripture-based virtues that should inform the life of a believer. Finally, there are baseline knowledge sets that a true disciple must acquire—those that should not be thought of as simple catechetical statements mechanically repeated, but deeper ways of engaging the world that include awareness and application of scripture (story, verses?, ethics, and morality) to an individual’s lived experience.

Wimberly and Parker’s conception of “wisdom formation” is helpful: they define it as the “ongoing journey of imagining, gaining insights, and deciding how to live as faithful and responsible Christians.”<sup>99</sup> By framing the conversation around wisdom, this conception gives texture to the call to be Christ’s disciples, linking to a deep biblical narrative of wisdom as being God-Breathed<sup>100</sup> knowledge for humanity. Further, the language of ‘formation’ reveals the

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<sup>97</sup> See earlier definition of “religious education.”

<sup>98</sup> Disciples are born again believers part of the body of Christ. Church members could be any person who joined the institution of a local or national Church.

<sup>99</sup> Anne E. Streaty Wimberly and Evelyn L. Parker, *In Search of Wisdom: Faith Formation in the Black Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 12-13.

<sup>100</sup> Wimberly and Parker use the language of wisdom formation having “its source in God.” *Ibid.*, 13.

progressive nature of our transformational relationship in Christ—we are saved; but we are yet being saved, in a process of sanctification, whereby we grow in grace as we walk with Christ.<sup>101</sup> Wimberly and Parker note that wisdom formation calls for a sense of duty that comes from engaging in personal and corporate spiritual disciplines.<sup>102</sup> In other words, it is not only about our own pious activity, however important this may be, but also about how our communal practices impact spiritual growth. “Wisdom formation also includes our coming to know the qualities of God exhibited in Jesus Christ, our seeking after those qualities, and our making those qualities and the spiritual values undergirding them part of our everyday *sojourn* in community.”<sup>103</sup> As such, the characteristics we discuss below should be *growing* in increasing measure over the life of a disciple.

In discerning these exemplars in our faith communities we should look for a “single-mindedness,” those who have developed “an undivided heart that is completely loyal” to God (Jer. 32:39; Ezek. 11:19).<sup>104</sup> The exemplars I am envisioning embody this mindset and live in such a way as to keep oneself undivided—warring against idolatrous wanderings of the heart—cultivating the skill of ‘being in the world, but not of it’ (Cp. Jn. 17:6; 1 Jn. 2:15-17). This type of existence sets the exemplar apart as culture influencers having learned to authentically co-exist in the church and in the world. Secondly, these disciples know that they are citizens of heaven (Phil 2:20)—an important analogy because it is “relationally cast, suggesting rights, protection, participation,” and responsibility.<sup>105</sup> These young adults will recognize they are part of a whole, having both gifts to be contributed in maintaining community. All their *worlds*—*communities*— both benefit from and socially inform their own self-identity.

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<sup>101</sup> The last move is we “shall be saved from the wrath of God” at the end of days Rom. 5:9.

<sup>102</sup> Wimberly and Parker, *In Search of Wisdom*, 13.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 15. (emphasis mine)

<sup>104</sup> Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 32.

<sup>105</sup> Parks, *Big Questions Worthy Dreams*, 230.

Thirdly, these disciples see and understand God as active in creation (general) and in the disciple's life (specific). This knowing leads them to ask of themselves, "What does the Lord require of me?" and answer according to Micah 6:8, "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." This is not the only instance of this particular answer to this particular question; rather, a number of guiding scriptures will answer in the same way (Matt 31; Gal 5; etc.). Lastly, having experienced integration—or at least being on the journey of integration—they know their character and competence will not be enough to fulfill their role as disciple. Instead the triangular leadership model of BE-KNOW-DO<sup>106</sup> assures them that they must be actively working in the life and ministries of the faith community with which they partner.

Knowing, Being, Doing. . . this triad must be active in our exemplars' lives in such a way that their action (what they *DO*) is informed both by their character (who they [BE] are) and their knowing (what they *KNOW*). Our exemplars will experience a type of integration: head, heart, and hand. All three impact what others observe: their doing. It is indeed more than just a *look*. It is also more than what one does—more than their routines, actions, behaviors or skills. The *doing* is as much about *being* as it is about *knowing*. These three work cohesively to reveal *the look* of the faithful.

Each exemplar will ebb and flow through success and failure on their journey to becoming God's best. In fact, the process of journeying and ongoing transformation and sanctification is in part what makes these disciples the most appropriate exemplars. Pauw explains that the "less exemplary believers point us away from notions of heroism and mastery in religious practice; they draw our gaze instead toward the gracious God who works in and

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<sup>106</sup> Frances Hesselbein and General Eric K. Shinseki, *Be-Know-Do: Leadership the Army Way (Adapted from the Official Army Leadership Manual)* (Jossey-Bass, 2004).

through them.”<sup>107</sup> I suggest that the gaps among the exemplars will be smaller than those who have not experienced integration. As we will see in the next chapter, those whose self-understanding is tied to—infused with—the salvific mission of Christ (and Church) will likewise have fewer gaps between beliefs and practices. Participation in social justice/action activity with their church and in their communities will give purpose to their life that is greater than the self. This does not however negate what Pauw calls the “tensive relationship between beliefs and practices” which reveals that, although beliefs influence practices, they “are not reducible to certain actions, attitudes, and interests.”<sup>108</sup> Despite the difficulty of a one-to-one conversion between certain beliefs and desired practices, I remain confident there is a framework for *the look* of an exemplary disciple. These exemplars will not only be participants, but also leaders in the church today and for our promising future.

### **Religious Practices (DO)**

I have said practices are those things Christians do together over time in response to and as an expression of God’s active presence and participation in the world through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Practices are inherently influenced by the Ethics of Community. The exemplary disciple is first committed to a *life* of worship.<sup>109</sup> Their commitment begins through the participation (*practice*) in church worship services, which in turn spark a passion for prayer, liturgy, and music in their private life. Through these experiences, disciples learn how to pray, to praise, and to worship God, as well as important aspects of liturgy from communion to confession to baptism. Corporate prayer teaches them the importance of repentance, grace,

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<sup>107</sup> Pauw, "Attending to the Gaps between Beliefs and Practices," 34.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>109</sup> This does not mean merely religious worship services, but a lifestyle or mindset of how they see themselves as Christ’s.

forgiveness, lament, and more.<sup>110</sup> Not merely casual patrons, these disciples are faithful, regular *participants* in worship at their local church. Further, they view the connection to their local assembly as an expression of their membership in God’s family. They are strengthened, encouraged, and mentored in faith through the power of worshipping with their faith family.

Secondly, a prominent practice among the exemplars is service to others, including work in missions and outreach programs designed to help “the least of these” (Matt 25:40).<sup>111</sup> Their commitment is more than simple dedication to community service; it is part of their personal mission as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Following in the pattern of Jesus their dedication to service is proximate to their own identity and part of their faithfulness to God (cf. Mark 10:45, 9:35; Phil 2:5-7; Col 3:23-24). Important for the future of the church is that this practice is given a theological construct that grounds these activities in scripture.

Third, participation in social justice/action—the prophetic critique of unjust situations/systems and our activity toward correcting the same—should be an active expression among the faithful. Cain Hope Felder categorizes justice in the New Testament as reciprocal, eschatological, and compensatory. Compensatory justice is the moral process of correcting injury, dispossession, exploitation, and the violations of rights of individuals.<sup>112</sup> It is eschatological because justice brings the soteriological aspects that extend Jesus’ multi-tier plan of salvation in Luke 4 to those who are marginalized and oppressed. Community organizing and other programs geared at systemic, lasting change will resonate with millennials want to make a difference in the world.

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<sup>110</sup> An example is Wimberly list of prayer language that teaches about God. See Wimberly, *Nurturing Faith and Hope*, 13-17.

<sup>111</sup> I define *missions* as activities that focus on the betterment of individuals, families or communities, including but not limited to providing food, clothing, shelter, job placement, educational assistance, etc. Missions could also include the establishment of institutions that embody Christ in the world (i.e. schools, hospitals/nursing homes, social services agencies, etc.). See discussion also in Chapter one, theological terms.

<sup>112</sup> Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class and Family* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), Chap. 4.

The fourth practice that will be seen in the life of these exemplars is participation in the shared work of ministry either in their local church or through para-church ministries. The use of their gifts in the service of the mission of Christ will lead these millennials to generously volunteer at their local church by participating in ministry groups, activities, or programs. They are not willing to be mere consumers of faith, but active contributors in building the household of faith. While there are other practices<sup>113</sup> that may be seen in the life of the exemplar, these four are those that are most vital to the sustenance of the Black Church.

### **Spiritual Disciplines (DO)**

Disciplines can be used in a number of ways, but for the purposes of this conversation, they are Godward activities done by disciples for strength, growth, and as part of their worship and submission to God through Christ. These actions are connected to the Ethics of Divinity discussed earlier. Richard Foster reminds us that disciplines are “God’s means of grace” that “allow us to place ourselves before God so that He can transform us.”<sup>114</sup> There are three primary disciplines of the exemplar: private prayer, bible reading/meditation, and abstaining practices like fasting. The frequency, character, and expression of each person’s devotional life will be unique, these three components are central to the maintenance of a rich life of faith and the survival of the spiritual self. Prayer and bible study<sup>115</sup> will go hand and hand. Attention to the inward self will be important in combating the challenges that life will bring for the faithful. Commitment to Christ does not shield millennials from difficulty, but development of personal worship at home and with prayer partners will assist people in not falling away from the faith in

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<sup>113</sup> Fellowship, hospitality, bible study, witnessing, etc.

<sup>114</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1988), 7.

<sup>115</sup> Note--bible study is also a practice.

times of trials. Other disciplines that may be present are journaling, personal reflection and introspection; all of which can boost the prayer life.

The tendency to always be tethered to technology, the loss of downtime makes the contemplative life difficult to many millennials. This is especially the case in modern society and a generation that practices hyper-social connectivity. The lively worship services of most African American religious traditions make transferring the value of quiet, solitude, and the benefits of contemplation difficult. Further, helping millennials create spaces to explore the unknown within themselves—only found through meditation and prayer—is unfamiliar territory for many black leaders. Developing the inward self should be as much a priority as the outward expressions of one’s identity. This type of introspection, though unfamiliar to many, is an important part of integrating the cultural worlds of millennials.

### **Characteristics (BE)**

The exemplary disciple does not only *do* certain things that indicate they are followers of Christ, but *who they are* will also be reflective of their covenant relationship with God. How a disciple is, their ‘being’ will be central to discerning those who will bring glory to the Lord’s name through how they live their lives. Having experienced integration and infusion, the exemplars envision who they are, or how people experience them, as being connected to Christ. They understand their competence (what they know) will mean nothing if they don’t have a character (who they are “be”ing) that reflects Christ. As such, we can expect certain virtues to be found in their life. I suggest six primary virtues as evidenced in the life of the exemplary disciple: humility, kindness, peacemaking, mercy, faithfulness, and self-control.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> This list may seem short and lacking detail. As stated above, this endeavor on concretizing *the look* with specific details is an arduous task. For example, love and godliness can reasonably be argued as belonging in this listing. Yet

You will note that all six require another person to be exercised—each is extended to maintain community (Ethic of Community)—religious, family, social or other. They also reflect the Ethics of Divinity in as much as walking in these virtues keeps disciples in good standing with God. Two of these virtues embody the missional infusion I have alluded to earlier in this chapter. First, peacemaking<sup>117</sup> encompasses any number of activities by God’s agents who touch the world with God’s love—missionally focused acts reaching humanity—the heart of infusion. Second, the virtue of mercy<sup>118</sup>, though at times locally expressed, is a Divine gift extended toward humanity and required of the faithful (Mic. 6:8). Mercy is more an institutional grace expressed through love in tangible ways. Key here is noting that when individual disciples (*the Church*) participate in extending mercy or making peace, God’s mission and that of the individual have fused, resulting in the world being change by the LORD’s power. Inward focus alone will leave disciples falling short of fulfilling their mission of *being* the Church. Our shared purpose as Christ’s Church is fulfilled when each disciple works together to live into Jesus’ command that we be the “Salt of the Earth” and the “Light of the World” so that people will see our good works and glorify our God in heaven (Matt 5:13-16).

As one may expect, the virtues enumerated above were drawn from scriptures that speak of the faithful. A longer listing would include seeing in these exemplars the fruit of the spirit (i.e. love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control [Gal 5:22-23]) and the virtues noted in the beatitudes (i.e. modesty, meekness, appetite for the

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these characteristics are nebulous and highly subjective, thus not helpful in envisioning the exemplary disciple. Further, these two also come with a certain amount of religious baggage. Many violent actions have taken place in the name of God or love; thus when used as a descriptor, both leave a bit to be desired. Thus I have opted for the kindness as an expression of love in action. I omitted godliness in hopes that the actions of the faithful will warrant them receiving the designation of being God-like, Christ-like (Eph. 5:1-2).

<sup>117</sup> The church is to be active agents of peace domestic, foreign, urban, rural, against terrorism and wars.

<sup>118</sup> For a brief description of “mercy” see Phillip H. Towner, "Mercy," in *Bible Study Tools.Com (Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology)* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996). <http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/mercy/>, Accessed 3/12/16.

religious life, mercy, purity, peacemaking, and endurance for the cause of Christ [Matt 5:3-11]). The righteous one's life should also answer the prophet Micah's question of the Lord's requirements: they must act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). Additionally, though hard to measure, we should expect too to find a passion for Christ among the faithful. Finally, these persons live their life submitted to the will of God. I could go on, but suffice to say there are more than a few requirements we could list in describing the ideal disciple. Thus I have opted for simpler listing of those most essential to sustaining, attracting, and building the African American church.

### **Knowledge Sets (KNOW)**

In addition to being and doing, the exemplary disciples I am envisioning will know a) certain stories of the faithful and their ethical/moral implications; b) basic theological teachings on the doctrine of God, Christ and the Holy Spirit; and c) the Gospel story, which they will also be comfortable sharing with others in everyday language. Their knowledge of scripture should provide for them an understanding of God's redemptive plan for humanity; a vision of justice, reconciliation, mercy and grace; and an eschatological hope. Finally, there are a number of biblical texts that should be learned in order to equip the millennial believer for an effective prayer life and knowledge of what it means to be Christ's disciple.

The emphasis on knowledge must not be simply rote memorization, for, as Dunn and Sundene note, memorization without personal investment is useless.<sup>119</sup> Faith alone in God is not enough to build Christ's church. To faith must be added virtue, and to that knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and love (2 Peter 1:5-8). *The look* of the exemplary disciple is noted via integration between head, heart, and hands—between knowing,

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<sup>119</sup> Dunn and Sundene, *Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adults*, 8-9.

being, doing. This triangulation, manifesting in the lives of those who will lead the church into its future, is paramount for a healthy African American church. In the next chapter I will explain how to achieve the *telos* of exemplary disciples by first beginning with the remnant of active millennials in the church.

## CONCLUSION

To be a growing and effective disciple of Christ, no matter what your life stage, requires transformation. Coming into a saving knowledge of Christ as Savior is not a final destination—thus the depiction of the Christian life and relationship with God as a *journey* is accurate. Being a disciple is lifelong adventure with the life-giving creative source that is God. *Knowing about God* or following a particular set of moral codes does not complete the process of spiritual maturity; instead it is a “process of deep transformation, knowledge of God’s Word, living by the power of the Holy Spirit, . . . engaging in rich community,”<sup>120</sup> which, together with service to others, brings us into spiritual adulthood. In the next chapter we will unlock how *infusion* provides the final key for overcoming the current religious diasporic tendencies among the majority of African American millennials. This infusion, as I have called it, occurs when a disciple joins their own self-understanding of vocation with the mission of the C/church, realizing they have an integral part to play in its fulfillment. This is what it means to be the Christian—to *be the Church!*

Identity cohesiveness, Integration, and Infusion are necessary for the development of the type of worshippers that will rescue the Black Church from an endangered future. “Formation of a group identity relative to one’s ethnic, racial, or cultural heritage is a salient, important, and

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<sup>120</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 31.

extended process.”<sup>121</sup> Although incredibly important, identity achievement and cohesiveness—because they based in the Ethic of Autonomy—are not the standard for developing exemplary disciples. The final step must be to a disciple’s outward expression of faith what identity is to his or her understanding of self. Identity formation—whether the complicated period of ego identity crisis, identity resolution, or the ethnic identity solidification—will likely “be reexamined as a result of changing contexts” after the original resolution.<sup>122</sup> Recognition of the variable nature of this process resonates with the motif of journeying in faith. Emphasis must remain on the journey, not the destination, if the Church wants to continue to assist in the personal, social, and spiritual identity cohesiveness of younger adults. Thus, the existence of critical mentoring relationships in faith communities can provide tremendous help during these sometimes turbulent years of establishing oneself in young adulthood.

I have been advocating for multi-tiered integration because it has far-reaching implications beyond millennials. These disciples must not be alone in living integrated lives, but can become the new standard bearers for the future. Yet without an intentional process of disciple-making (whether called mentoring or some other less formal term), the Black Church will continue to find fewer younger adults, in each generation, actively engaging their faith in the world. Further, this august body will fall short in releasing into the world disciples who will be witnesses, advocates of justice, and missionaries reaching the world with the love of God.

The manifestation of the archetypal millennial exemplar I have discussed will result in a new generation of faithful disciples whose life choices and community practices reflect their covenant-relationship with God. Further these new disciples will strive to bring their self-understanding and vocation in close proximity to God’s active plan for humanity, and Christ’s

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<sup>121</sup> Phinney, "Emerging Adults in America," 129.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 121.

mission in the world. I will call these type of millennial disciples “I3” for short—identity cohesiveness, integration (between life and faith & belief and practice), and infusion (a missional understanding and actuation of witnessing Christ in the world). These I3 millennials have a desire to process and personalize the content they receive at church, are “hungry for the unanswerable, and want to connect with something they cannot explain.”<sup>123</sup> The church can be such a place of revelation and revolution for those languishing at present in a protracted state of nihilistic religious ineffectiveness.

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<sup>123</sup> Stetzer, Stanley, and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 92.

## 4| THE GATHERING

*Missional Focused Mentoring to Mobilize and Recover Millennials*

*"I am because we are and, since we are, therefore I am."* --John S. Mbiti<sup>1</sup>

The Christian journey is not a solitary walk, but a march with others toward God's Kingdom being actualized in the earth (Matt. 6:10). It is a collaborative work—joining the efforts of the faithful to Christ's mission of redemption and reconciliation<sup>2</sup> so that the entire body of the faithful under the head of Christ might be expressed in the African Ubuntu proverb: "I am who we are." This proverb expresses our humanity as connected eternally one to another and is a helpful metaphor in conceptualizing the interconnectivity of the Body of Christ (cp. 1 Co. 12) who are witnesses of God's love in the earth.

An sense of community was essential for self-understanding in African slave churches that birthed today's African American Church, and framing individual identity within an understanding of 'who we are' is key to keeping the African American religious tradition vital. However, as I have already indicated, a departure from the historical importance of community permeates the present millennial diaspora—and it is a problem that is growing worse in Black Protestant churches. Thus, the understanding of one's communal responsibility to Christ and community is essential to the development a new generation of faithful disciples. The same issue exists in the previous cohort, but our best hope of the future is begging the necessary formational changes with this new young adult cohort. Again, we must remember that the diasporic leanings of millennials, is a continuation of an erosion in formation and disciple making for at least two generations—we have done a wonderful job evangelizing in the Black Church, but our formation

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<sup>1</sup> Father Stephen Wang, "Lonliness" to Bridges and Tangents 12/29/09, accessed, 3/21/2016, <https://bridgesandtangents.wordpress.com/tag/john-mbiti/>.

<sup>2</sup> This is manifested in salvific acts that bring hope, deliverance, and justice (Luke 4:18-19).

of infused disciples has fallen short. Further, we will see again that a faithful branch, whom I call The Remnant, are integral to the life of the church and are not presently reflecting the diaspora discussed throughout this thesis. Yet, before a millennial majesty (the masses of exemplary disciples I envision being developed by our churches) can be deployed, we first have to equip the remnant for service, strengthen the witness of the marginal, and bring home those of the diaspora—empowering all for leadership of the Church. Key will be partnering with young adults to make a difference in our congregations and our worlds for Christ.

Knowing oneself as part of a whole moves beyond the inward work of identity and integration. The Ubuntu proverb—“we are therefore I am”—reminds us of what is incumbent upon the whole group, and also reminds us that the communal perspective is the missing link that will ensure the Church’s success in reaching African American millennials—especially those already inclined to think about community (i.e. those engaged in social-political movements). The lens of viewing one’s existence and purpose communally allows for the holistic embodiment of Christ’s mission. I refer to this perspective as infusion, when Christian disciples understand their mission as united with that of Christ and Church and is manifested by being *in the world* as agents of God’s redemptive plan with humanity.

I ended chapter one with a call for the Black Church to be relevant, relational, revelatory, and revolutionary if it is going to effectively engage African American millennials in its congregations.<sup>3</sup> In chapter two, I claimed that many younger adults have fallen away from the church and do not return because of the disconnections and disruptions in their faith journey. In the last chapter, I argued that integration (that is, integration of religious beliefs and practices, as well as one’s faith and work and family worlds, in order to form a cohesive identity) is necessary

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<sup>3</sup> Similarly Benjamin Stephens III and Ralph C. Watkins claim the way forward with the Hip Hop Generation is in being Relevant, Real, Relational and Transforming in *From Jay-Z to Jesus*, 87-88.

for the formation of the type of disciple necessary for the future of the Black Church. Finally, I delineated the characteristics and virtues that would be easily identifiable in the lives of young disciples. Now I take up the communal part of the ideal disciple's faith journey—reaching outside of the church community into the world (the mission field).

In this chapter, I will first describe infusion more broadly and then look at those millennials presently active in the life of African American congregations and their significance in securing the future of an enduring Black Church. I will argue a remnant remains who will be crucial to the long-term success with this generation of young adults. The way forward will be for church leadership to have a missional mindset, recognizing that the young adults in our pews<sup>4</sup> are in need of discipling (mentoring), coaching, and building. I suggest a multi-tiered mentoring approach that provides a dialogic relational environment necessary for the Church to become relevant to culture. If African American church leadership does not first create an environment in which even the marginally committed find the church relevant, the Black Church does not stand a chance of reaching those who are theologically and physically dispersed.

In the next chapter, I will end this project with a brief exploration of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and how the African American Church<sup>5</sup> might engage both churched and unchurched millennials in this cause. I will show the importance of cultural engagement, integration, and how this new generation is re-writing the margins—building upon the legacy of ancestors committed to liberation—of what it means to be faithful Christians. In answering the cry of a generation who feels unimportant and invisible to institutions, I will show how the Church can be given new life and relevance through proactively addressing the concerns of our

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<sup>4</sup> With the present diaspora that is taking place, there is an inside mission field (I have referred to these as Jerusalem and Judea in the latter part of chapter two) that should be our immediate priority with our long term strategies with millennials, which I will lift up again in a moment.

<sup>5</sup> In actuality, all churches can employ this paradigm, though I will focus on what the Black Church can do.

young people in ways that are both theologically and historically connected to the Historic Black Church. Yet before we continue, we must first look at how a missional focused millennials can revolutionize how these young adults approach and live out their faith.

### **Ecclesiological Understanding**

I argue that a proper ecclesiological understanding of what it means to be the Church is foundational, and that such an understanding must rest on practices—worship<sup>6</sup>, religious education and spiritual formation<sup>7</sup>—that shape the imagination and inchoate spirituality of young disciples. A faithful remnant must lead the way with a self-understanding infused with knowledge of their part in the great story of God’s relationship with humanity. Infusion, as I define it here, is the third leg of an individual’s orientation as a progenitor of the faith.

The religious landscape in America leaves many young adults “adrift in a sea of unqualified ethical relativism, unable to compose a worthy faith of their own.”<sup>8</sup> Infusion makes relevant one’s own life to the whole. We have debunked the danger of consumer-based faith and suggested that the righteous know themselves as citizens of God’s kingdom. It is critical to construct a vision of self for young adults based in citizenship that is “relationally cast, suggesting rights, protection, and participation.”<sup>9</sup> Those citizens whose thoughts are not *infused* with an ecclesiological understanding will be marginalized in their participation and will not value their role—as covenant partner—in creating the culture of the church. Bridging the gap between life as we live it and the eternal citizenship in heaven (Phil. 3:20) will concretize for

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<sup>6</sup> Conner shares my conviction of the centrality of worship in understanding one’s mission. See Conner, *Practicing Witness*, 61-62.

<sup>7</sup> Pauw, "Attending to the Gaps between Beliefs and Practices," 34.

<sup>8</sup> Parks, *Big Questions Worthy Dreams*, xi.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

millennials the need to live life integrated with one unified self, living and moving in “the world”—among *the culture*.”

### **INFUSION: OUR ROLE IN GOD’S GREAT STORY**

The marks of disciples discussed provide a tangible lens through which we can observe if integration has taken place in the lives of Christ’s disciples. Yet these discernable characteristics and actions will not be enduring in the lives of African American millennials if they are not grounded in theological constructs. The absence of such undergirding can cause activity to be reduced to vain repetition and cultural practices that can lose significance over time. Further, without periodic rehearsal, erosion of these Godward practices and habits will likely take place. One of the greatest ways to tie millennials’ faith to the wider mission of God (*missio Dei*) is the use of story and its narrative power to construct worldviews. Attending to the connection between the individual and the whole is the start of a revolutionized view of how one understands what it means to be a Christian—disciple of Christ.

Jesus’ practice of using story<sup>10</sup> as a pedagogical tool is helpful in appreciating the narrative<sup>11</sup> value of the postmodern tradition. Stetzer explains “stories describe the content of our lives, and as we begin to see our lives as just one segment of a bigger story, we have the mysterious sense that we are connected to something larger than we are.”<sup>12</sup> Edward L. Branch similarly admonishes his congregation to “find your something within the something God is doing and partner with God to make great things happen.”<sup>13</sup> Parks joins in the chorus of connecting the individual to the whole, noting, “a primary task of emerging adulthood is the

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<sup>10</sup> For example, Jesus’ use of parables, allegoric stories embedded with the intent to teach.

<sup>11</sup> See discussion of the *Narrative Self* in Grenz, “Christian Spirituality and the Quest for Identity.”

<sup>12</sup> Stetzer, Stanley, and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 100.

<sup>13</sup> Edward L. Branch, Senior Pastor of Third New Hope Baptist Church (Detroit, Michigan) to encourage his church to be involved in the ministry and mission of Christ.

formation of a worthy dream that coalesces a relationship between the self and the suffering and wonder of the world.”<sup>14</sup> Knowing one’s part in the larger story provides the revelatory understanding that disallows religious formation to be viewed as something to be graduated from instead of lived into during every phase of life. This knowledge makes millennial disciples keenly aware of God’s action in the world and of their call to become active participants in the work of the Lord’s ministry. Thus, the faithful understand themselves as active agents *in* the world. We might say they have begun the process of infusion—for without action said understanding remains philosophical.

### **Missional Theology and Infusion**

Missional theology, argues Benjamin Conner

is a kind of practical theology that explores in every aspect of theological curriculum and praxis of the church the implications of the *missionary nature of God* with the purpose of forming congregations to better articulate the gospel and to live faithfully their vocation to participate in the ongoing redemptive mission of God *in a particular context*.<sup>15</sup>

He further explains that missional theology stands on three pillars, which resonate with my arguments for infusion: one, mission originates with God; two, it embodies convictions that God calls the church to participate in His mission and of the connection between the gospel, the Church, and a particular culture; and three, this theology colors every aspect of congregational curriculum and life.<sup>16</sup> Though a newer discipline, missional theology is critical in helping keep congregations—and in my argument, the exemplary disciples that will lead the Black Church into her future—focused on ecclesiology and what their collective purpose is as the Body of

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<sup>14</sup> Parks, *Big Questions Worthy Dreams*, 237.

<sup>15</sup> Conner, *Practicing Witness*, 11. (emphasis mines)

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

Christ.<sup>17</sup> I also appreciate the expression of mission *in community*—or in a particular context. This thesis project has focused on one such context, African American millennials. I will argue that there is an inside mission field in those millennials who are either faithful or marginally engaged in church life—those who need to become I3 Disciples and; plus there are those who are outside of the church, truly in the mission field who first need to (re)hear<sup>18</sup> the story of Christ and be compelled through the Black Church’s loving *witness* to again participate in the *missio dei*. Ultimately, the C/church is commissioned—recall Matt. 28—to participate in the “task” for which we have been sent—to share the gospel and be witnesses.<sup>19</sup>

Missiology resonates with my own personal approach to ministry because it is based first in the redemptive work of Christ and then in our role in fulfilling—perpetuating—the Lord’s plan. Secondly, the discipline focuses on the “salvation activities of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit throughout the world geared toward bringing the kingdom of God into existence.”<sup>20</sup> Further, the collaborative nature of mission theology resonates with my own pedagogy that sees value in the concepts of biblical-theology, practical theology, Christian ethics, public theology, and other “nontheological” disciplines like “anthropology, sociology, economics, and political science.” I find this inter-disciplinary methodology appropriate because I call for the combining of life and faith, in a disciple’s life. Thus, socio-political and cultural particularities cannot but help impact faith. The sum total of all of our experiences will help shape how we interpret our mission, and how effectively the *infusion* of God’s call to *practice witness* will be in any individual disciple’s life.

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<sup>17</sup> Conner would argue the that motive, matter and manner of missional theology in some ways does the same *ibid.*, 25.

<sup>18</sup> The rehearing is particularly for those of the diaspora who have fallen away. Yet for those who have never been part of a worship community or identified as a follower of Christ, it will be a first time hearing.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Barth, *Doctrine of Reconciliation*, vol. IV/3.2, Church Dogmatics (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1962), 795.

<sup>20</sup> This definition belongs to Johannes Verkuyl found in *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 5, as quoted in Conner, *Practicing Witness*, 19. Verkuyl goes on to explain that missiology interrogates in every generation how the Church responds to the call.

## Why Infusion is Needed

Infusion is vital to the future of the church. The individualist, inward focused, often myopic understanding of what it means to be a Christian stands in opposition to the type of religious communities that are needed to ensure an enduring Black Church. A faith that is self-focused does not resemble that left to the Church by Jesus and the apostles. Exemplary disciples understand themselves to be part of God's redemptive plan with humanity; and because they do, they know they must be active participants in the ministry and mission of their local church. They are compelled to partner with other disciples because of their covenant with Christ—knowing their salvation is not for themselves alone, but that the world may be saved. Equipped with this knowledge, these exemplary believers know their own mission must extend beyond inward piety, *koinonia*, and community worship—thus they enjoin themselves with actions (even practices) that move into the culture, community, and world. This is infusion. If they were to remain inside the church, there would be no infusion, as it is the world that needs a witness<sup>21</sup> of Christ.

I chose the word *infusion*—causing something to be added or introduced into a person – to depict what must happen in the lives of the African American millennial disciples I am suggesting. Infusion begins with understanding and then culminates via communal practices both inside and outside of the church. Without *infusion*—both thought and action—mission forward actions may be better described as community service, or maybe mission activity.<sup>22</sup> But when a person has undergone infusion—having experienced the conjoining of ecclesiology with a lively

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<sup>21</sup> For Conner Christian practices are how the Church practices its witness in the world outside of the Church. Ibid., 6-7, 24-29.

<sup>22</sup> The nuance here is the attitude and understanding of what a person is doing as respects to their own understanding of what it means to be faithful to their own vocation and mission as a person of faith. I previously defined missions as 'domestic and foreign assistance to marginalized person or those without resources.' Individuals would participate in a church's mission activity without ever personally have undergone infusion.

sense of God's mission they are changed inside and their activity is elevated to the level of vocational and communal living that will not allow for diasporic tendencies. Thus, their activity becomes *missional*, which is more than simply practicing faith with others. Having undergone *infusion* in this way, the disciple's understanding of what it means to be Christian is transformed. Sensing that they have been found by the "missionary" God they now imagine themselves as "sent" by the same.<sup>23</sup>

Infusion is not embodied alone; it is witnessed and enacted in community. Envisioning the Church as baseball team will supersede the errant idea of the Church being a collection of individual believers. They provide an extensive list of practices that are done with other believers as part of a faithful execution of one's relationship with Christ. Some are fundamental imperatives in maintaining Christ's beloved community; others are done as a means of teaching the ways of faith; while some are for the furtherance of the divine plan for humanity.<sup>24</sup> For example, they list forgiveness, sharing of meals, discernment, repentance, and renewal as communal practices, those things that we must do with other Christians to embody our role in the Lord's Church.<sup>25</sup>

Infusion is distinct from integration. Infusion is how an individual is reconstituted by being *in* community, yet capable of moving beyond the particularities of social or group identity. Instead these people are impacted by Shweder's Ethics of Community and Divinity, which transforms how one envisions their own self and the world. Warring against this type of infusion are the highly individualistic tendencies of society that may contribute to creating "cultural narcissists who rarely make decisions on the basis of community flourishing."<sup>26</sup> Yet, if the

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<sup>23</sup> Conner, *Practicing Witness*.

<sup>24</sup> Dykstra and Bass, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," 19.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 60.

African American churches fulfill their legacy and righteously challenge the Ethics of Autonomy—which prioritizes the individual over the whole—we can be successful in releasing a (re)new(ed) type of Christian to the world. Infusion makes this feat possible. I caution against the erroneous idea that infusion is a box checked by attending formation classes—though catechism is vital in making the text relevant for life; or that it is achieved in young adult activation exercises—though community forming activities are needful; or that we can presume infusion has taken place because an individual has participated in mentoring—though mentoring is critically important. Infusion is an existential shifting of self-understanding and an actuation that transforms<sup>27</sup> in a fundamental way.

Infusion is an ecclesiological, focused enterprise born out of an understanding of the Church’s mission—instituted by Christ. The multifaceted mission of the Church, explained in the first chapter, is to be enacted jointly by the called out ones (*ecclesia*). However, our congregations—particularly leaders and clergy—have been derelict in their duty to connect persons to this greater work. The trend among millennials to want to connect with causes greater than themselves and to make a difference in their world—even their unyielding faith that change is possible<sup>28</sup>—creates the ideal conditions for churches to step up and invite millennials to embrace their part in God’s plan for humanity. Infusion touches the world with Christ’s love through the faithful acts of His disciples. Further, when persons have been ushered into the broad conversations of faith, mission, vocation, and purpose they know their gifts are to be joined with others to improve our world for Christ.<sup>29</sup> Theologically, they finally know that they must, as co-

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<sup>27</sup> This is a lifelong transforming activity, though there are moments or events that will enliven this truth and push a person to a higher level of participation in the Church’s mission.

<sup>28</sup> See Pew Research Center, *Millennials*.

<sup>29</sup> The Barna Group note that millennials who stay in church learn a) about how Christians can positively contribute to society, b) how to better understand their purpose in life via church, c) to view their gifts and passions as part of God’s calling, and d) served the poor with their church or went on a trip that help expand their thinking about

laborers with Christ, make disciples, and work as agents of reconciliation (1 Co. 3:9; Matt. 28:19-20; 2 Co. 5:18).

The distinction and interrelationship between integration and infusion remind us that “faith is a multifaceted phenomenon” and that it is best perceived from “several angles of vision.”<sup>30</sup> The three aspects of identity, integration, and infusion are all necessary for the formation of exemplary disciples to lead the Black Church both now and in the future. Identity (ego and group identity formation) is essential, integration (of identity, worlds, and beliefs and practices) is generative, and infusion reflects in some ways the culmination and the beginning of the process. Infusion inaugurates the final phase of a disciple’s formation—spiritual maturity<sup>31</sup>—but is also an ongoing transformative work. Thus, in working with African American millennials, we will have to reconstruct a vision of spiritual formation that focuses on the journey, not the destination. Further, the Church must help millennials reconstruct the margins of *the story* of Christ and culture, move to the center the issues and concerns that heavily impact their lives, and draw upon theological themes that link these factors to the whole of their existence. Finally, I argue that infusion will only take place when these millennials have been covenantally connected, have been mentored in their journey with Christ (discipled), and have encountered the text and related to Christ on a personal level—and when our churches have embodied E.P.I.C.<sup>2</sup> worship as described in this thesis. Then and only then can these exemplars be ready to embrace their call to be ambassadors of Christ in the world. This does not negate their ability to be witnesses and to be transformative agents in the world before infusion occurs, but that final culmination is perfected when a person has embodied theologically, vocationally, and existentially what it

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mission. In each of these areas those who participate in church reported anywhere from 20-37% higher than those who dropped out. See The Barna Group, *5 Reasons Millennials Stay Connected to Church*.

<sup>30</sup> Parks, *Big Questions Worthy Dreams*, 21.

<sup>31</sup> See discussion in chapter three on spiritual maturity (including the process of sanctification).

means to be Christ's. This infusion is the revelation I insist is needed for millennials' worship in African American churches.

### **THERE REMAINS A REMNANT**

I am persuaded that from Abraham to now there remains a remnant (Rom 11:4-6) that will be the catalyst to reach their peers and transform the world with the power of Christ. These faithful disciples stand as living testimonies of the Lord's desire to engage with humanity; far from being perfect, they earnestly live for Christ as cultural ambassadors in the world. Among African American millennials, they are the ones active in the life of a local church (e.g. committed traditionalists); and, though they need the type of identifiable cohesiveness, integration and infusion (13) I have been arguing for, they also will be the change leaders necessary for our ultimate goal of preserving the legacy of the Black Church.

Despite older generations' frustration with millennials—practically, theologically, or morally—L. Sweet convincingly argues that every generation is “equidistant from eternity” and that church leaders must find an “interface” (way of connecting) with a culture to fulfill the church's mission.<sup>32</sup> Every cohort faces the same challenges in engaging the young: one, making relevant the greatest story every told for the next generation, and two, teaching the young faithful to duplicate themselves by making new disciples that will carry the church into her future. Churches must assist devout millennials to reach their fullest potential, helping them break away from a benign faith—one that is powerless, aweless, or non-transformative—and become exemplary in their religions and spiritual lives. Black Church leaders should approach their interactions with millennials with humility, seeking to learn and not just to impart. In doing so, true communication between the generations occurs, and the legacy of the tradition is sustained.

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<sup>32</sup> Leonard Sweet, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIph3cDlycM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIph3cDlycM) (Accessed December 3, 2015).

Some of the remnant, though strident in their faith, may need training in how to interact with their peers whose faith is more tenuous—for example, those I have referenced as the marginally committed to faith (i.e. selective adherents). The church’s successful indoctrination of the remnant, in *some ways* creates a residual challenge: some are stuck in religious *identity foreclosure*<sup>33</sup>—resulting in their being unable to creatively engage their peers in conversations and questions of faith due to their failure to explore their own accepted beliefs. This challenge will be most pronounced in relating to those in the culture who are indifferent or disconnected to religion. Faithfulness alone will not ensure readiness of the remnant to be catalysts of change in our congregations (and the world); they too must be disciplined to reach I3 (more on this in a moment).

The remnant of millennial disciples have three roles to fulfill in the church: to be light bearers (Matt. 5:14)—exemplars inside and outside of the church; to be culture makers, influencing *the culture* for Christ (Matt. 5:13); and to become ambassadors of Christ (2 Co. 5:20) in the world to non-believing persons and communities. Borrowing from Paul’s insistence on believers being ambassadors, I insist the remnant of African American millennials must also be ambassadors *in* the church, representing the needs of *the culture* to a Church that is often unable to hear them or know how to engage them in community life. The remnant are cultural ambassadors *and* translators who will mentor these leaders in how to reach, develop, and walk with this generation during the tenuous journey of emerging adulthood. While the “interface” may change, the framework I am arguing for in this thesis will remain effective. In each cohort, the *how to* may be nuanced, yet the reading culture and identity cohesiveness will remain central.

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<sup>33</sup> See conversation in chapter three’s section on Identity and Spiritual Formation.

The remnant are central to ensuring that I3 takes place in the Black Church<sup>34</sup> becoming the nucleus group who, having experienced this renewal themselves, will become exemplars of the type of transformation needed in youth through adulthood. The millennial Christian that is already participating in community life (even if marginally) can have a profound impact on outreach efforts of local congregations. Specifically, as the peers of those in diaspora,<sup>35</sup> this remnant's self-understanding will impact how new disciples see the local church and their decision to become part of God's great citizenry. As noted, prior to outreach efforts to those outside of the Church, a shift in the relationship with those presently participating in Black Protestant congregations must occur. An exchange of ideas, concerns, and challenges, will enlighten church elders on how to interact with and reach today's younger adults and the generations that follow. The change I advocate is necessary for African American churches; it does not have to begin with millennials, though that is the argument of this thesis.

A person's ideological viewpoint is deeply influenced by their social relations—religious or otherwise. “Faith is interpersonally mediated and hence inherently social.”<sup>36</sup> I propose, therefore, that all relationships, whether formal mentoring or friendships with peers, are important in the formation of millennial identity and the infusion of personal and corporate mission. Wuthnow notes that while the bible remains a good source of insight and spirituality, conversations with friends,<sup>37</sup> reflections of experiences, and interaction with culture will also have a deep effect on identity integration. This may easily be observed if we consider the

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<sup>34</sup> The young adult (millennial) remnant can be the seed for the future of the African American Church. They are not the only cohort needing to experience this I3 I have argued, but if we begin with them, we can stave off the attrition that is damaging our congregations.

<sup>35</sup> Note that some of the marginal participants in Black churches (cp. selective adherents) will likely display a decent amount of the diasporic tendencies discussed in chapter two.

<sup>36</sup> See review of Tony Baucum's work on identity transforming organizations in Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 75.

<sup>37</sup> I previously noted the significance of friendships in the formulation of ideas and identities among younger adults. See Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 215.

influence of music and other media on the worldviews of younger adults. It is important to consider the entire cultural milieu of the millennials with whom one is working.<sup>38</sup> Context always matters. There will not be one panacea for all congregations suffering from the absence of this generation; instead, each will have to construct a culturally sensitive, contextually based plan of engagement with young adults. Relationship with the remnant—and those representing their cultural home—will assist in finding the proper interface to reach today’s younger adults.<sup>39</sup>

### **Dueling Centers of Identity**

As noted, the self-understanding of the millennial disciples (our exemplary disciples) will be distinguishable from other millennials because their identification as disciple is central to answer the existential questions “who am I.” My insistence that a Christian’s identity must be foremost *in Christ* (Col 3:3) echoes that of Dunn and Sundene. They argue, “in one sense a Christian emerging adult’s core identity is *in Christ*. In another sense, he or she has a unique identity and purpose specifically crafted for the purpose of bringing glory to Christ. Discovering that identity and clarifying that purpose involve learning what their strengths, weaknesses and role in the body of Christ are.”<sup>40</sup> They also share my insistence on the importance of each person discovering their gifts for the kingdom (1 Co. 12:4-7). Vital for the church’s future, are individuals who have a God-centered identity that manifests through each person’s individuality.

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<sup>38</sup> A similar claim is made in Parks, *Big Questions Worthy Dreams*, 224.

<sup>39</sup> Though media influence is evidenced in all cohorts (it was sex, drugs, and rock and roll for the Boomers), it no surprise that there is a preponderance of millennials who are now being identified based on their relationship to media. Take for example Tim Elmore who designates the lower portion of the millennial generation iYs. His arguments are sound/salient, and highlights how one researcher constructs an entire cohort, not around major societal shifts and shared experiences, but instead around how persons relate to technology. iY millennials are the most widely influenced generation by multiple mediums. Thus, the remnant must also serve as cultural interpreters in partnership of church leadership seeking to reach this youthful generation. They could also be viewed as generational translators, bridging the gap in culture; experts in understanding culture, not just judging it as difference. Instead finding value in it (Kinnaman, makes a similar claim in *You Lost Me*). To learn more about how technology is impacting society see Turkle, *Alone Together*.

<sup>40</sup> Dunn and Sundene, *Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adults*, 114-15.

Not self-sufficient, irreverent individuality but the God-given gift of individuality. Our uniqueness, expressed through our identity and special gifts are tied to the common good! This understanding of self is a central characteristic of the identity of exemplary discipleship and the remnant. While the archetypal disciple may seem elusive in actual community life, the remnant are ripe for engagement—waiting to be invited to the table and to be challenged to dream greatly with other believers in Christ. I envision developing the remnant into the exemplary disciples needed in African American churches.

The idea of core and unique identity deeply resonates with me. By acknowledging both, the discussion makes room for the possibility of tensive *centers*. For example, a Christian may feel uncomfortable having to choose one center (Christianity) over another (ethnicity or race). Nor does my insistence on a core Christian identity deny the complexities of racial identity among for African Americans.<sup>41</sup> For some, the assertion of *core* identity based on matters of faith may be problematic because it subordinates one source of identity to another. I do not wish to disaffirm essential parts of an individual's self-understanding. Thus, I am open to the idea of a multi-centered identity<sup>42</sup> where no one component of identity has to accommodate the other.

I will use myself as an example. I am an African American Christian Woman. But I am equally a Christian African American Woman. I am all and one simultaneously: I am Woman; I am Christian; and I am of African American descent. Depending on the individual, their own self-awareness can manifest in these and other multifaceted ways. Indeed, it is complicated. While my years in Neo-Pentecostal congregations of the Black Church had convinced me of the need to be Christian first, my time at seminary raised again issues of essential blackness and faith

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<sup>41</sup> For extensive conversations on racial identity see: Cross, *Shades of Black.*; Phinney, "Ethnic Identity in Adolescents and Adults."; and "Emerging Adults in America," 117-35.

<sup>42</sup> African Americans cannot escape that dimension of their identities in America even if they wish to. They may choose to be Christian or not but they have no choice over being "black." See Cross, *Shades of Black.*

from my undergraduate days. A seminary internship in a self-described “unapologetically Black and unashamedly Christian” United Church of Christ congregation spurred in me an insistence on the integration of my own self. Time, experience, and education caused me to wrestle with the realities of living in America and denied me the convenience of making race as secondary to faith. My Womanist teachers also encourage me to refuse to regard my gender as anything other than primary. Thus, a multi-lensed view is most appropriate for me, one where all three aspects of my identity coexist harmoniously. This quells the cacophony from competing centers and allows me to acknowledge that I am equally Christian, equally Black, and equally woman. I have one singular identity without preference or identity hierarchy.

The same type of identity integration I have experienced is necessary for the long-term health of the Black Church; it must be encouraged and cultivated in the lives of the remnant (and also those marginally connected to our worshipping communities). These committed, faithful, soulful ones are our best allies—the connectors facilitating regeneration—in repairing the breach between the church and so many of their generation who have grown weary in their engagement or have checked out altogether. They are exemplars of how life in faith can be with worlds that collide, intersect, interact, and overlap resulting in little contradiction of the self—though they will struggle with *becoming*, like any disciple. The ongoing process of infusion will cause their beliefs and practices to be more aligned as they grow in their understanding of their role in the world. They must be equal partners at the table, developing ministries and communities that will be welcoming and inclusive of those previously sitting at the margins. They will possess an authentic Christian particularity that does not necessarily exclude those questioning, exploring, or undecided in matters of faith.

## THE GATHERING FIELD

This thesis began with Jesus' commission of His disciples to "go and make disciples"—the impetus behind evangelistic efforts. If followed, this ensures the growth of the Church. Jesus came into the world "to seek and save the lost" (Lk. 19:20), yet as He prepared to ascend into heaven, He passed the responsibility of sharing the Gospel to the Church. Implicit in the command "to . . . make" is the distinction between converts—those who hear and accept Christ as Lord (cp. Rom. 10:8-10, Acts 16:30-31)—and disciples. This nuance is supported in the text; disciples had to be taught to follow in the way of Jesus—"teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). The paradigm of duplication—disciples making disciples—releases Christ's followers into the *culture* (the world) as agents of the Gospel. This imperative is not mitigated by the challenges of capturing the attention of millennials. Thus, the church must approach its efforts with this Hip Hop generation and other millennials with a *missional* mindset, beginning first with those in 'da house (the household of faith)—the remnant and the marginally faithful—and then the field. Those congregations with a *missional* focus take seriously their mission—as explicated in chapter one—and work intentionally to fulfill its calling.

### **In 'da House**

Earlier, I discussed the diasporic tendencies of many young adults and suggested that the Church employ an Acts 1:8b principle for its pattern of outreach among millennials—Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. Likewise, I insisted that congregations begin with the remnant; they are our Jerusalem, those who are *all in* and sold out for Jesus—they are strident in their efforts to be faithful and are prime to experience I3. Thus, whatever strategic or programmatic response a local congregation will make to the findings of this thesis must begin

with the remnant. Attempts to move immediately to outreach efforts will undoubtedly fail due to ineffective integration of young adults into the community life of many black congregations. This Jerusalem-first approach will be best because, first, the remnant consistently attend church despite our blunders to effectively connect with them and their peers; secondly, they have relationships with church leadership—important for bi-lateral mentoring (exchange of ideas) that is necessary for revitalization efforts; and finally, they have mastered, at least in part, co-existence in the world and in the church. Black congregations' actions with this cohort must be deliberate, collaborative, and immediate—even if simply creating space to be in conversation. Until the remnant can be heard in our churches, no great work with this current generation of young adults will be achieved.

Next, the African American Church must reach those in the region of Judea, that is, those of the faith who—though committed to congregational life to a lesser degree—experience dis-integration between their faith and life; those I have called the marginal participants. Though displaying more diasporic tendencies, these millennials clearly identify with Christianity, their local congregation, and possibly their denominations. Like the remnant, they too are critically important to the first phase of preparing to regain a majority share in the collective hearts of this generation of young adults. Those in this group may be hard to categorize and even identity apart from the multi-tiered mentoring relationships that allow space for dialogue. Thus, these marginal participants must be disciplined along with the most fervent, without any deliberate effort to distinguish them as from the remnant. Because they know the culture of the Black Church, they often resemble chameleons, adapting their responses, both inside and outside the church, to fit the situation. Like the remnant, the so-called marginal Black millennials are bi-cultural. Though still attending worship on a (somewhat) regular basis, this group may be less integrated in church

life and their religious community, considering it less a place of social belonging than it had been during the years of their youth. From my experience with those in my local context, this group will display all three types of diasporic tendencies discussed earlier.

Our churches must build up the faith of those in the house, boost their confidence spiritually, and bolster their presence in our congregations. It is necessary to be intentional in our religions education and discipling (mentoring) of young adults. Every aspect of their encounter with the community and the faithful will contribute to how they are formed in faith and how they envision their selves as part of the whole. But there are some challenges to releasing the I3 disciples into the world for Christ.

### *House Problems*

Unfortunately, by the time many younger Christians reach the age of eighteen, they become invisible within their congregations—often seen but not heard. The African American Church must make room *at the table*—where decisions are made and planning takes place for congregational life—for those young adults in ‘da house, and must relinquish some power to this newer generation as it re-imagines what it means to be a community of faith. Yet, in every generation, one of the greatest complaints of the younger about the established leadership of the church is their unwillingness to move aside and allow younger Christians to take part in church leadership. This requires leaders to listen to the voice of this younger generation in ways that some are unwilling to do—prejudging the youthful understanding of the world and faith as something other than a faithful assent toward God. Those who have dropped out have done so because they were often dismissed as idealistic or out of step with traditions and established norms of their faith communities. As noted, many leave, finding church no longer relevant to

their life beyond the sanctuary. Powe cautions, those of the Hip Hop Generation do not want to be dictated to but instead need to “discover for themselves what it means to be in relationship to the Holy.”<sup>43</sup> This will require honest dialog and discovery between the generations.

Here again is where traditioned innovation is helpful in community revitalization and continuance. Though many African American churches are thriving, we are missing our moment to right the ship before the exodus of young adults begins to adversely affect the whole. As argued earlier, a reliance on present strength without acknowledging places of vulnerability for the future leaves us susceptible to a dangerous heart problem. Much like a blood clot that eventually will shut down the entire circulatory system if not addressed, not tending to these problems will, in 10-20 years,<sup>44</sup> cause great harm for those communities that ignored the early signs of congregational heart disease.

Every generation deserves a seat at the table—youth, young adults, adults, and seniors—envisioning the present and future of the church, sharing in the responsibility of leading this beloved community into her future. The congregations in the best position for success have both cohort-specific ministry initiatives and intergenerational activities/ministries that meet the needs of the whole. Congregations that are unwilling to consider contemporary styles of worship expression—Hip Hop, dance, spoken word, mime, drama, multi-media, and various music forms—often lose their ability to hear the message of the Church, not because of their objection to what is being said, but because of how it is being expressed. The medium may change, but in every generation, the church must be able to be in conversation with the culture, translate what is heard for the church, and find ways to influence with the power of Christ—evangelizing those outside of a covenant with God.

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<sup>43</sup> Powe, *New Wine New Wineskins*, 49.

<sup>44</sup> The time is hard to quantify because it is contingent on too many variables according to the particular context of a local congregation or denomination. What is clear, erosion will continue without action to reverse the trend.

## In ‘da (Mission) Field

The second part of fulfilling the call *to go* is in reaching those outside of the church—people in ‘da field. The categories of those outside of the church are inexact, as there is much variability between types, but for discussion purposes I group them as 1) *lost sheep* and 2) non-Christians.<sup>45</sup>

*The Lost sheep:* In my Acts 1:8b plan, the *lost sheep* would be those in the region of Samaria (though proximate to Judea and Jerusalem, it is still distant, some 35 miles—certainly doable in biblical times without ship or beast). Likely to be found in this group are those millennials who were active in faith communities during their youth, but are now either a) more cultural Christians—attending church maybe 1-2 times a year<sup>46</sup>; b) those who are now ‘spiritual but not religious;’ or c) those without religious affiliation (nones). Regardless of classification, those of Samaria are disciples who have fallen away from religious life and the church—some may have cultivated their own unique blend of personal spirituality, but many are backsliders in their faith. It is entirely possible that a few of these former Christians may be agnostics or even atheistic, yet the data provided earlier noted such desertion to be a statistical anomaly—they are by almost exclusive majority those who have quit the Church but still love God.

The Lost Sheep – A Theology of Recovery: In Luke 15:1-7 Jesus addresses the Pharisees and Scribes, in response to the complaint that he interacts with sinners, he asks “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” This same attitude should be the church’s posture to those young people that have fallen away. They are our lost sheep and need to be brought home. We must not rest in the hope that they will return, but as good under-

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<sup>45</sup> See discussion in chapter two on religious participation and also: Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 166; Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 134. Those in the mission field would include, in Smith and Snell categories, the Spiritually Open, Religiously Indifferent, Religiously Disconnected, and Irreligious.

<sup>46</sup> Likely on holy high days—Easter, Christmas—or ones with social import—New Year’s Eve—or significance to their family—Mother’s and Father’s Day.

shepherds, we must go find them and help them find their way home—for example, we can go to the places they spend time, involve ourselves with issues that concern them, or create encounters outside of the four walls of the church (cafes, bookstores, etc.). Know this “I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

*Non-Christians:* The last leg in the Acts 1:8b text refers to those in the “ends of the earth”—which represents the true evangelistic field, where at that time, the Gospel message had not yet reached. Similarly, in my schematic, those in the uttermost parts (to borrow the language of the King James translation) of the earth today are the ones who have not been permeated by the Good News of Christ’s witness in the earth. Though they may have heard *the story*, they have never taken it unto themselves and made it a part of their life. In this broad category are those who have never been active in religious life—some religiously disconnected, religiously indifferent, spiritually open, or irreligious;<sup>47</sup> while others are atheists or agnostics—both of which categories are insignificant among African Americans.<sup>48</sup> This generation of unchurched young adults needs the Lord; our churches must reach out to them that they too may walk in God’s light. Disciples who have a heart for God will not only pray for these persons but also help build a community that can receive them. This does not happen without preparation—the African American churches must revolutionize how its congregations synthesize young adults into church life. We must find ways to disciple and empower millennials for leadership within the church and to serve as witnesses and ambassadors to those in ‘da field.

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<sup>47</sup> Smith and Snell categories I explored in chapter two.

<sup>48</sup> In 2007, less than one-half percent of African Americans reported being Atheist and one percent as Agnostic; see Pew Research Center, *Religious Portrait of African-Americans*, 3.

### *Field Problems*

One of the greatest problems in reaching African American millennials in ‘da field is the diversity of religious types and the reasons they are not connected with religious faith. This group (as I have defined it) includes not only dropouts but also those who have never engaged faith, the indifferent, and those who are spiritually open. Thus, diversity will stand as an obstacle to some congregations successfully evangelizing the unchurched or de-churched youth because they are unable to bridge the gaps in worldviews, morals, and ethical frameworks. Consider, for example, those who are second or third generation irreligious, with no legacy faith tradition of their own; it is likely that their ways of thinking about the world will challenge church leaders who cannot engage a non-religious worldview.<sup>49</sup> The church will need cultural experts, of which churched millennials are the greatest candidates, who comprehend disparate ideologies. Even the spiritually open or those who are indifferent toward faith may possess challenging philosophies to disciples uncomfortable with rigorous conversations that challenge a Christian worldview.

Another common problem in some Black churches/traditions is the insular nature and lack of involvement with communities, organizations, and activities outside of the local church. Because these congregations are not in conversation with the wider culture—from music to public opinions on any number of subjects—they are often out of touch or ill-prepared to answer the questions of millennials in the field. As we will see in a moment, the Church does not have to answer all of this cohort’s questions, but they must be able to help them construct outlooks on the world and have a theological response to their questions that does not sound like preaching. The best approach when evangelizing those in ‘da field is a dialogical one. An emphasis should be placed on conversation more so than sharing one’s faith in any formal way; what I am

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<sup>49</sup> A very small minority of African Americans have no family history of religious faith.

suggesting is not mere semantics but an ethos that undergirds our approach in reaching those who are far off.

I have noted that among religious emerging adults there is often a lack of particularity of the Christian faith in their religious outlook—citing Moralistic Theistic Deism, among others as the culprit. Yet, for many outside of the church, particularity is a detriment to their engaging and coming into the household of faith. One of the challenges for this generation of disciples is to find a way to embrace the reality of inclusivity or interfaith community and also dialogue without seeing it as a (reciprocal) erosion of the particularity of the church. Key to solving this puzzle is being in conversation with those inside and outside the church, those of faith and those without any religious belief or praxis. Whether in the field or the church, we must be in relationship with millennials if we hope to see a strong, growing church survive the upcoming decades with an active membership of those ages 18-35. The skills honed with this generation of disciples will be perpetuated in the next generation as they, too, participate in making disciples. Because they will be infused, they will be better exemplars, discussion partners, and representatives of Christ in the world.

### **DEVELOPING 13 DISCIPLES**

I stated at the onset of this thesis that mentoring relationships—ones that allow for questioning, exploration, and discovery—were critical to my *telos* of ensuring the perpetuity of the Black Church through the establishment of millennial disciples who have an integrated faith life that is discernable and duplicable. Within Christian communities, mentoring can occur in multiple ways. Discipling is an intentional form of mentoring, usually in small groups or one-to-one, that has a focus on spiritual growth and Christian support. This is a biblically prescribed regenerative

process, manifested in disciples who in turn disciple—in other words, manifested in those who are willing to journey with those younger in their faith.<sup>50</sup> “Emerging adults . . . need other adults as they search out both their own identity and God’s and seek to live openly, inside of both of those realities.”<sup>51</sup> The duplication that takes place is necessary for the furtherance of the kingdom of God. My call for mentoring relationships is critical for this generation, not only as an outreach tool, but also as a means of achieving the whole of the Church’s mission.<sup>52</sup> Discipleship “is communal, theological and practical,” dealing with lived faith.<sup>53</sup> “Fully mature spiritual adulthood cannot be reached without intentional relationships that invest Christ’s grace, truth and love into the young adult’s life.”<sup>54</sup>

### **Journeying with Millennials**

Jesus provides wonderful models of discipling in his interactions Peter, Andrew, and James; we can find similar close relationships that yielded spiritual growth and transferal of anointing in the stories of Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 2:1-15); Eli and Samuel (1 Sam. 3:1-11,17-18); and Naomi and Ruth (Ruth 1). Admittedly, walking with others on their faith journey can be disorientating—due to the sacrifice of time and risk of vulnerability. While the kind of one-on-one mentoring provided in these biblical examples, and even in Jesus’s relationship with John, is key, other forms of mentoring contribute to the spiritual formation of younger Christians—

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<sup>50</sup> In this particular case, younger in faith has nothing to do with chronological age, but spiritual age (i.e. new born, new convert, on to spiritual adulthood); yet for the purposes of our conversation the discipleship that often happens, and is needed, is between young adults and older adults walking together in relationship and together who will help build the Black Church that has been a cornerstone of the African American community.

<sup>51</sup> Dunn and Sundene, *Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adults*, 11.

<sup>52</sup> Dunn and Sundene champion the call of disciple making relationships as being of “mission critical urgency,” See *Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adults*, 15.

<sup>53</sup> Kathleen A. Cahalan and James R. Nieman, "Mapping the Field of Practical Theology," in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 69.

<sup>54</sup> Dunn and Sundene, *Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adults*, 16.

worship and community practices (those who are within the church and those that reach the world), and group mentoring (large or small group). This is the type of multi-tiered mentoring alluded to earlier, and reflects the type of village formational process common in African American communities. Other images used to describe the process are coaches, tour guides, and disciple-makers. Whatever the name, creating spaces for formation and discovery will empower this next generation to fulfill their destiny as leaders of the Black Church.

Dialogue and teaching are a vital component in mentoring young adults. Among this cohort, particularly with their postmodern sensibilities and penchant for individually constructed worldviews, it is paramount that we create educational spaces that allow for conversation and discovery. For generations, older Christians have pointed to younger cohorts, accusing them of a decline in religious beliefs. Globally, the faithful often fear an ultimate failure in the efficacy of the teaching ministry of the church to develop new generations of Christians that maintain ‘right thinking’ about God and faith—in other words, many are concerned that younger disciples are neither orthodox nor identifiable as descendants of their fore-mothers/fathers of faith. Even in this thesis, I have noted those who have lamented over this erosion among youth and young adults. For me, this dilution in biblical literacy is connective, but not causative in the pluralistic ideologies revealed in MTD and other worldviews incongruent with the faith of my grandparents.

Despite my own rumblings, we do well to remember, as Wuthnow notes, that “people can be orthodox and heterodox at the same time,” precisely because religious belief in the pew is never as “systematic or consistent” as theologians would hope.<sup>55</sup> In fact, as faithful as my ancestors may have been, when pushed, they may not have been able to sufficiently construct a systematic theology, nor was it necessary for them to flourish in their faith journey. Nonetheless,

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<sup>55</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 93. For more on conversation on the matter of Orthodoxy among young adults read Wuthnow’s entire 5<sup>th</sup> chapter. Also see McLaren, *A Generous or+Hodoxy*.

the pedagogical styles of that generation would prove unsuccessful in developing disciples that have more ‘right’ than ‘wrong’ thoughts about life, God, and faith. Key to remember is that today’s young adults “embrace less of a rules-orientated spirituality than older Christians.”<sup>56</sup> Rules bring about guilt and shame, while grace leads to repentance and hope—which is consistent with a therapeutic learning in religious life.

Millennials must be active participants in their own learning; moreover, they must be given the space to explore divergent ideas as they discover the own beliefs. It has been noted that among young adults a type of “cognitive bargaining”<sup>57</sup> exists where religious beliefs are negotiable. The inbred spirituality that Miller proposes does not guarantee a person will continue on into religious faith; instead one’s environment will significantly impact how our spiritual child is nurtured.<sup>58</sup> Being willing to be in conversation with emerging and young adults will help them construct meaning for their lives and worldviews that are based on Christianity.

If not implicit, this also means that questioning will be a large part of the conversation with those between the ages of 18 and 35. The very modern mantra of the 1980s, “the bible says it, that settles it, I believe it,” will not work with those raised in a pluralistic society in which access to many religious traditions is normal. Despite the general homogenous Christian affiliation among African Americans (See Figure 2.2), an unwillingness to wrestle with them in questioning ‘truth’, ethics, morality, or politicized topics will impede the process of them activating their own authority to choose for themselves. Further, questioning is an important part of eventual ownership of beliefs. Recall Marcia’s four quadrants, where exploration was one of the axes. Setran and Kiesling insist that emerging adults need to be free not only to question but also free to doubt; they also must be able to discuss competing ideals and their adequacy in light

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<sup>56</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 164.

<sup>57</sup> Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 93.

<sup>58</sup> Miller, *The Spiritual Child*.

of the Bible. Key here is the ability to engage in exploration. Thus, in order to solve the problems that emerging adults pose and to answer their questions, “leaders must [also] ask questions, helping these nascent adults begin using their own voices to think through significant issues of faith and worldview.”<sup>59</sup> Parks is advocating for engaging in big questions with people, noting that “commitment to truth requires a questioning curiosity and relentless and rigorous examination of one’s most elemental assumptions.”<sup>60</sup>

### **Bi-Lateral Mentoring**

I have mentioned earlier about the importance of church leaders finding ways to connect with millennials in order to understand their needs. One formal way of relating to this younger cohort is through Bi-Lateral Mentoring—a dialogical friendship-mentoring relationship between elders and young adults. In this relationship, the emphasis is on listening to millennials in order to understand their perspective, vision, hopes, concerns, or any other matters on life, faith, and the Church. It is in this relational-learning environment both sides experience growth, gain understanding, and are better equipped to serve a Disciples of Christ. Further, this bi-lateral mentoring is crucial for making room for millennials to lead and become more active in the life of the Black Church. Earl Creps calls these type of relationships “reverse mentoring.”<sup>61</sup> I opt for bi-lateral, or even co-mentoring, because I find real power in the gains that both participants (older and younger) gain from befriending those beyond their peer group.

Bi-lateral mentoring relationships also reveal how much each generation needs the other. Consider the relationship between Eli and Samuel found in 1 Samuel 3. This text gives a wonderful example of the co-dependency between the traditional mentor and mentee. In this

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<sup>59</sup> Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 65.

<sup>60</sup> Parks, *Big Questions Worthy Dreams*, 26.

<sup>61</sup> Creps, *Reverse Mentoring*.

story Eli could not longer see—he was physically blind, and Samuel also could not see, yet his blindness was spiritual. The reciprocal nature of this relationship shows value in what each party could bring to the life of the other. Eli still had much to offer as holder of the legacy, yet without a close relationship with Samuel, he could pass the mantel. Also know the close proximity to the High Priest was not open for the masses. Likewise, as leaders of the African American church, we will not be able to engage, in such an intimate level, each millennial in our congregation—though some group forms of bi-lateral mentoring can occur—instead we must pour into a special few who we mentor, coach, befriend, lead, and walk with in their fulfilling their call to be Christ’s disciples.

Lastly, when we are in engage millennials in honest conversation, giving them permission to critique, criticize, and challenge our methodologies, practices, and ways of being as the Church, enlightenment will occur. We will learn that some of our most earnest efforts to reach this cohort or ineffective. Yet by not only mentoring them, but giving them a seat at the table on our planning boards, ministry teams, and other strategic roles in our church will help us create a place where those in the field will favorable respond when they are invited in.<sup>62</sup> Again these relationships are crucial to the Black Church becoming who she needs to be in this next phase our the journey.

### **Institutional Mentoring**

Disciples are not only formed via interactions with individuals, but are shaped through their connections with their Church. This multi-tiered mentoring (people, institution, and practices) is

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<sup>62</sup> Find similar arguments in *ibid.*, 3-48.

essential to the development of faithful witnesses.<sup>63</sup> This is especially true among African Americans, where worshipping communities have been central not only for faith, but life. Though the civic and social-action component of church life is now diminished in many congregations, the role of worship—and by extension religious practices—remain prominent in the formation of disciples. I argue that infusion, which I have noted as necessary for achieving mission, cannot be realized without the cooperative influence of worship, scripture, and community on the life of the faithful. Likewise, Elliott Eisner’s model helps us to determine what is most important in a faith community by categorizing curricula—that which we use to teach, as with worship and educational programming—as explicit (that which is formally planned), implicit (informal learning opportunities), and null (those things missing from the activities of said institutions).<sup>64</sup> Some of the disconnect that today’s younger adults have with the African American church is revealed in the null curricula of our congregations—the lack of missional imagination and practices. Nonetheless, the life of these churches begins in worship and in community.

### *Worship & Word*

Sunday morning worship is the heartbeat of the Black Church. This gathering is the place of community formation where sacraments are taken, liturgy is heard, and the gospel is proclaimed with homiletical exquisiteness. Dunn praises Dr. King, a superb exemplar who provided “morally rich content, emotionally captivating cadence and an irresistibly compelling call to

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<sup>63</sup> Parks also speaks of “people, communities, places, and institutions that support emerging adults in their distinctive expression of potential and vulnerability,” see Parks, *Big Questions Worthy Dreams*, 230.

<sup>64</sup> See Mary Hinton, “Back to the Future: Re-Appropriating Religious Education—a Case Study Using the Black Church,” *Religious Education* 104, no. 1 (2009): 24-28 explanation of Eisner’s arguments in *The Educational Imagination: On the design and evaluation of school programs*.

action.”<sup>65</sup> The church must continue to provide these essential elements, while also maintaining a foundation in the word of God that makes the exhortations less polite social invitations and more life transforming demands of the faithful to take up one’s part in the great story of God.

Otis Moss III notes that when a church is trying to reach the post-soul (or Hip Hop) generation, worship must, among other things, include celebration, information, inspiration, improvisation, invitation, and the use of Hip Hop pillars.<sup>66</sup> Leonard Sweet insists that if we want to connect with our current culture in America, our worship services must also be EPIC: Experiential, Participating, Image Rich, Connective.<sup>67</sup> Alise D. Barrymore, discussing the Emergent Church Movement and the Black Church, prefers “creative” instead of Connective.<sup>68</sup> I find both appropriate and suggest that worship must be EPIC<sup>2</sup>. Community worship is central in the spiritual formation of the Christian disciple.

The nucleus of black preaching has been experiential ever since its nascent roots—born out of the struggles of the enslaved Negro and latter the cries of the freed black man. Likewise, the whole of African American worship is experiential; consider the black spiritual chants for liberation and freedom cloaked in metaphors like the cry to Pharaoh, ‘Let my people go.’ In African American tradition, worship is also very participatory,<sup>69</sup> particularly in its hymns, worship songs, vibrant choral arrangements, and the call and response of traditional black preaching. Image-rich and creative worship will indeed help connect with today’s T.G.I.F.<sup>70</sup> (Twitter, Google, iPhone, FaceBook) culture. Yet, EPIC alone will not ensure that infusion takes

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<sup>65</sup> Dunn and Sundene, *Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adults*, 124.

<sup>66</sup> Moss III, "Real Big," 126-28.

<sup>67</sup> See Tim Elmore, "Four Ideas to Lead This Epic Generation of Students," Accessed 2/1/2016, <http://growingleaders.com/blog/four-ideas-to-lead-this-epic-generation-of-students/>.

<sup>68</sup> Barrymore, "The Black Church and the Emerging Church."

<sup>69</sup> Wimberly speaks of the evocative nature of black worship in the fourth chapter of Wimberly, *Nurturing Faith and Hope*, 60-76.

<sup>70</sup> Leonard Sweet, "Epic Worship (Experiential, Participatory, Image Rich, Connective)," Accessed December 3, 2015, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIph3cDlycM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIph3cDlycM).

place. What is also needed in our worship services is a rich biblical content that helps believers wrestle with the theological, ethical, moral, and ideological struggles they face day to day. The presentation indeed must be moving (yet vary in style from week to week), layered (neither too deep nor too simple), and multi-sensory. Worship is the launching pad for the transformation that is necessary for discipleship—our response to the gift of God in our lives.

In the African American Church, scripture has been prominently positioned at the center of worship in the proclamation of the Gospel. The moving messages, bathed in hope, not only point people to an eschatological future but propel them toward change here and now. Scripture is held in high regard in the Black Church as the *Word of God*. In many congregations, so lofty is the word that walking is forbidden anytime scripture is being read. And yet despite congregational reverence, many millennials and their parents are not versed in scripture. The daily reading of scripture is seven percent among black millennials (compared to six among all young adults).<sup>71</sup> The simplification of sermonic messages with fewer scriptural references and more easy platitudes intended to get members through the week have left many biblically illiterate.<sup>72</sup> The therapeutic discourse lacks depth, attempting to solve problems in thirty minutes like a television sitcom.<sup>73</sup> “Scripture is one of the primary ways” to “internalize the narrative of God’s work in the world and begin to see” ourselves “as characters in the larger story he is weaving through all of history.”<sup>74</sup> This is the heart of infusion. Unfortunately, time and traditions seem to be eroding the place of scripture in our congregations and homes and if we are not careful we will strip scripture of its power to transform us. “The word, of course, possesses its

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<sup>71</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 116.

<sup>72</sup> Classes of Christian Education has an impact. But attendance has been poor in comparison to Sunday morning worship for generations.

<sup>73</sup> Similarly, sentiments of thirty minute sitcom solutions noted in Stetzer, Stanley, and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 95.; Ralph C. Wakins, *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2007), 118.

<sup>74</sup> Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 49.

own inherent power to inspire, convict, and train in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16).<sup>75</sup> But if we do not consult it, we will strip it of its power *in* our life.

L. Gregory Jones critiques Protestant liberals and the therapeutic impact on the church.

They become

susceptible to the invading cancer that is the therapeutic culture in which the church finds itself—one concerned only with finding ways to cope, “get through” life, be happy, get along amiably, live peacefully... Without an eschatological perspective, the church’s immune system to a therapeutic perspective which subversively creeps in from the outside, the church will unwittingly adopt such a message and begin to proclaim it as its own, supplanting the Gospel with worldly therapy, just as Rieff predicted.<sup>76</sup>

Jones condemns this as a “psychological captivity of the church.” These liberals “evacuated the gospel of eschatological content, deprived it of its ability to interrogate us, and transmuted it into (at most) banal truisms such as ‘God loves you.’”<sup>77</sup> This is a dangerous state in which the God of the universe is seen as concerned with only that which will make us feel better about ourselves and our lives. This same God can correct, rebuke, change, and restore us through the text. Yet a one-sided view of God and scripture, Jones explains, impedes the imagination of listeners, changing their understanding of what concerns God. Without a text that we allow to probe our hearts, individually and collectively, we are in danger of becoming a church that is unrecognizable by Christ. This danger is prominently seated in the Church I love so dearly.

This issue is not isolated to liberal traditions, but impacts many African American Protestant congregations. In our quests to be EPIC, we must not abandon our deep

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>76</sup> L Gregory Jones (The Psychological Captivity of the Church in the United States, 1995) as quoted in Lakies, "Candy Machine God," 19.

<sup>77</sup> L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 65.

connection to the God of scripture and the multifaceted ways the Lord deals with humanity. While we celebrate the heart of the gospel—reconciliation, redemption, forgiveness, and liberation—it is important not to lose sight of the accountable relationship God desires to be in with humanity. Millennials are looking for something other than what we are often giving out in our churches. We must answer Parks’ call to ask “big enough questions”<sup>78</sup> and thus invite emerging adults into enduring conversations about God, life, faith, community, conflict, justice, virtue, morals, and more. We need to tap into the Holy Spirit’s creative influence and ensure that scripture is not downgraded to a self-help book—or worse yet, a piece of antiquity sitting on our shelves. People need a place to wrestle with the difficult and unanswerable matters of life, explore issues of their own spiritual identity, and celebrate in community the weighty responsibility of being active agents in God’s divine plan for humanity (i.e. infusion).

In the Black Church, preaching is the primary pedagogical form that propels the faithful to action.<sup>79</sup> Thus, worship is the primary place of spiritual formation and education for the masses of African American Christians. With less than fifteen percent of most congregations being actively involved in some form of Christian Education,<sup>80</sup> undoubtedly, this low attendance contributes to their biblical illiteracy. Further, sermons that presume some prior knowledge of biblical stories is progressively becoming problematic among a membership that does not engage learning opportunities outside of worship. Therefore, worship must explore both the ethos and theologies necessary for the exemplary disciple to emerge.<sup>81</sup> Even so, worship alone will be

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<sup>78</sup> Parks, *Big Questions Worthy Dreams*.

<sup>79</sup> Hinton, "Back to the Future," 31.

<sup>80</sup> This is an informal guesstimate based on informal conversations with over 30 African American pastors of several Black denominations here in the U.S. However, it is well documented that attendance at Bible Studies and Sunday schools are usually less than twenty percent of the whole. Anything greater is more of an anomaly and should be studied for techniques that could help the average Black Church.

<sup>81</sup> See conversations in chapter three on the exemplary disciples characteristics, virtues, and knowledge sets.

insufficient in the development of well-rounded disciples. Instead, we can view Sunday morning in the Black Church as the portal into the community that embodies the gospel of Christ, the sacraments of the Church, and its public witness through its ministries and programming.

### *Community as Mentor*

The community, with all its moving parts, is the place of disciple-making. Every man and woman of the African American church is important in the process of spiritual formation. Philosophically speaking *s* goes one, goes the whole. Thus, any deficiencies among millennials are community issues. If there are deficiencies in how they understand, relate, and participate in the mission of Christ, these shortcomings must be embraced, combatted and worked on *in community*. True transformation will result from a combination of the young faithful person's participation in worship (adoration, praise, celebration and proclamation), education/formation programs, volunteerism/ministry, and social justice/action. The task of releasing a generation of culturally relevant, faithful disciples, having embodied a mission inspired infusion, is not just for clergy and leadership (though they must lead the charge); it will take the entire village to redirect the current diasporic problem in this cohort.

Emerging adults need teachers, mentors, coaches, and friends who will journey with them and who are willing to be in meaningful relationships in which these youth can question, explore, and discover matters of life and faith. Stetzer notes that the community is not only a religious need, but also part of the fabric of this secular subculture, one where younger adults are looking for a place of common identity. The emerging church movement has it right; people want a place to belong. This is of course about community, whose purpose is to “develop people into growing

followers of Jesus.”<sup>82</sup> Thus, while admittedly important, the emphasis on community cannot be simply mean belonging. Being part of a local church must also be about growing as Christ’s disciples. Building and sustaining a community that meets both of these demands is not without its challenges. “A church must walk the fine line between being programmatic and organic, between being institutional and relational, and between being rigid and flexible.”<sup>83</sup> For this reason, the church not only must expose millennials to the traditions of the church, but she must also introduce this next generation to an insatiable commitment to Christ, mentor them to ensure spiritual growth and ensure that they are existentially connected to the cause of the gospel.

### *Practices as Faith Forming*

We have said that practices are communal in as much as they are done with other believers over time and cannot be done without at least one or two other people. “Each Christian practice is large enough to permit us to draw together the shards and pieces of particular understandings, beliefs, events, behaviors, actions, inquiries, and skills into sets that are capacious and cohesive enough to show how they might guide one into a way of life.”<sup>84</sup> As such, practices are faith shaping in their ability teach millennials the way of the church. They are also instrumental as most (young) people will practice the ways of faith with others before actually making a confession for Christ. Thus, in forming 13 disciples, African American congregations must be sure to engage mission-focused practices over the course of any calendar year—being sure to cover all six categories of the Church’s mission. When we fail to do so, we find that Eisner’s postulations come true—our null curriculum will reveal what we value most.

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<sup>82</sup> Stetzer, Stanley, and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 78.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>84</sup> Dykstra and Bass, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," 18.

Take for example an African American community of faith that chooses to ignore the Flint Michigan Water Crisis—this deplorable atrocity is taking place at the time of my writing, and essentially involves a lack of clean drinking water for the citizens of Flint. Omissions such as these are problematic—systemic even. If the Black churches do not involve themselves with the matters of social justice and causes that are impacting those who are pushed to the margin of society, we do not partner with God on the side of the oppressed<sup>85</sup> thereby missing our moment to “participate in the ongoing redemptive mission of God in [our] particular context[s].”<sup>86</sup> If we make these missteps, we are out of step with the legacy of the Black Church that has co-labored in the field with God for the cultivation of justice and liberation. Finally, we must not forget the importance of doing ministry together to ensure that infusion takes place in the lives of millennial disciples and reaches the world with the love of God. Thus, engaging millennials in mission-focused practices is critical for the future of the African American Church’s witness.

### *Education and Formation*

In the past, African American worship communities counted upon youth Sunday School or Christian education programming to provide the biblical/theological foundation for Black Christians.<sup>87</sup> But for a few reasons this is a dangerous proposition for the future of the African American church. First, there is significant slippage in the religious education of youth,<sup>88</sup> and second, there is a corresponding increase in people who leave adolescence without developing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ (which is about twenty six percent of practicing Black

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<sup>85</sup> For arguments of Jesus preferential treatment and advocacy for oppressed people see James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, New Revised ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997).

<sup>86</sup> Conner, *Practicing Witness*, 39.

<sup>87</sup> We have already noted the problem in this practice, consider Benjamin Mays in the late 1960 who laments of the ineffectiveness of Sunday School to educate the masses—as even then they were not participating in ways sufficient to equip the church. Smith, "Forming Wisdom through Cultural Rootedness," 43,50.

<sup>88</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 120ff.

Protestants).<sup>89</sup> These new Christians, much like those already in church, come to worship but not bible study. In my local church alone, during the years 2013-2014, fifty percent of those who joined the church did so as new converts (candidates for baptism). More than a few were totally unchurched or had insufficient religious formation during childhood or adolescence to provide a foundation for their spiritual growth. To be effective, a congregation must accept that Sunday worship celebration—all aspects of it—is the greatest classroom or encounter to teach today's faithful.<sup>90</sup> Studies show that, among those who accepted Christ during youth, there is some predictability between young adult and teen spirituality.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, mid-week bible studies are insufficient in providing an adequate foundation for the majority of young adult Christians—not because of inadequacy of programming, though in some churches this may be the case, but due to lack of participation.

Religious education, distinct from Christian education, is more effective in developing 13 Millennial disciples. Hinton notes,

at its best Religious Education should provide a contextual location for people. It should explore and explain origins, not just religious but cultural and social origins. Authentic Religious Education shapes identity, not just individual but communal identity. [It is] also responsible for educating participants toward liberation: liberation to critique one's own tradition, and freedom to explore and respect the richest understanding of the other's tradition. Most importantly, Religious Education must liberate toward one's fullest expression of their humanity and toward a community working together to create a future.<sup>92</sup>

Religious Education therefore is more comprehensive, involving the whole of a person's interactions with the church, such that they are taught by every encounter. Classes, trips, services,

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>90</sup> See Robert L. Browning, *The Pastor as Religious Educator* (Birmingham, Ala: Religious Education Pr).

<sup>91</sup> Smith and Snell show the continuity of the faith beliefs and worldviews of adolescents and emerging adults, though clearly experiencing slippage, is still predictive of future religious engagements. Further, they warn against presuming mass reduction of religious practice happens in young adulthood. See *Souls in Transition*, 281-83.

<sup>92</sup> Hinton, "Back to the Future," 19.

conversations, service projects, rehearsals, and mission trips all take part in the harmonious education of these believers. They all serve as curricula essential to the formation of the faithful.

### *One on One (and Small Group) Mentoring*

A key component of community that has seemingly gotten lost in modern society, across all contexts, is mentoring.<sup>93</sup> This negative attrition impacts identity formation among emerging adults. Where community has failed, media and technology have stepped up to mentor this next generation in place of the Church. In the church, coaches, more appropriately named disciple-makers, are to

provide [an] up-close “feedback loop” that (1) helps emerging adults discover their unique design, talents, spiritual gifts and role in the kingdom; (2) reminds emerging adults of their uniqueness; and (3) encourages and challenges emerging adults to keep maturing in their uniqueness with full security in the love of the Father.<sup>94</sup>

All mentoring within the household of faith is (in part) about making, refining and developing disciples for the glory of Christ. The kind of rich dialogue and sharing that is necessary for the formation of the spiritual component of identity is often underdeveloped because the C/church has not educated and “provided opportunities to practice talking about...faith.”<sup>95</sup> The reluctance to engage faith in all aspects of the millennials’ life has already been well established. Like never before, teaching alone is insufficient for the formation of the soul. “Pastors, teachers, and mentors must teach with creativity, imagination, and narrative power.”<sup>96</sup>

This generation needs to connect lessons with deep experiences to put into practice the truths shared in church. This need is embedded in their DNA at a cellular level. Many are

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<sup>93</sup> Discussion of the erosion of natural mentoring in our society in Parks, *Big Questions Worthy Dreams*, 231-33.

<sup>94</sup> Dunn and Sundene, *Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adults*, 116.

<sup>95</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 133.

<sup>96</sup> Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 36.

unwilling to simply be ceremonial Christians, choosing instead to opt out.<sup>97</sup> Those who remain inwardly long for a faith that is living and engaged in the lives they live—and one that wrestles with the issues they face. In the absence of such engagement, multitudes settle for a marginalized expression of the faith of their fore fathers and mothers. People need to be led from cultural indoctrination to ways of faith, ways of life. There must be an ideological conversion that affects their worldview, even sitting at its center. When this occurs infusion is achieved.

### CONCLUSION

In chapter two, I note that many African American millennials are showing signs of waning commitment to Church. Although similar to previous generations, who too were marked by lower weekly worship attendance, this new cohort seems a bit more persistent, though official reporting can give a false sense of security. I also note from the onset, that Black Church leaders are voicing concern, across traditions, for the trends they are seeing among those in their congregations over the age of eighteen. Finally, in chapter one I argue that the reasons for reduced attendance in worship are variable and highly subjective to context and I note three types of diasporic leanings—people who have stopped coming to church on any regular basis or at all (physical); those who may still come, wanting to hold on to their commitment to Christ, but wrestle with The Church’s theology and ways of doing ministry (theological), and finally, those who have found that faith through The Church is no longer practical for their lives. Yet, I have laid out in this chapter a plan to bring home these prodigal sons and daughters—not in order to

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<sup>97</sup> Further study, particularly qualitative research, would be necessary to know the percentage behind why various African American millennials are falling away from the church. While the reasons are clear, we are not sure what percentage of those of the diaspora fall into what categories. Though now dated, Lincoln and Mamiya’s statistics from could give a benchmark against which to measure attrition and rates of change. See Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 327.

become again marginalized in our pews, but to partner with us to create anew what an authentic faith, worship, and Church can look. A church where they are allowed to lead change.

To win in our war against erosion, African American congregations must employ a two-part strategy. First, we start near and then go out (Acts 1:9). In this plan, congregations must realize that they have an automatic mission field *inside* their churches. Those young adults who either sporadically or half-heartedly participate are at least in ‘da house-hold of faith. Even if strained, the minds of these millennials are not reprobate toward faith expression via the Black Church. Thus, I argue, we must begin with those in the house—attending millennials. I identify a second group, who are possibly more devout, but don’t show ambivalence toward their church, but reflect a more cohesive faith identity—the remnant. These two types of church-ed young adults must be mentored together, grow together, and creates ministries (and programming) that will reach their unchurched peers for Christ. Once a cadre of I3 Disciples are ready to reach out into the world as ambassadors, the Black Church is poised to reach those in ‘da field (the world, the culture) who have dropped out, or those who never been part of a faith community.

The second strategy is to remember Jesus who speaks of the shepherd who leaves his ninety-nine sheep to find the one who is lost (Lk. 15:1-7). Thus, if the Black Church wants to seriously affect change -- that which will impact its very future -- it must make room in its budgets, staffing models, and strategic plans to develop ways to connect with this oft-forgotten group: emerging and younger adults, ages 18-35. From a place of strength, lagging behind our White Protestant peers, we can enact change before it is too late. We can redirect our ship away from the storm ahead. We don’t need Doppler radar, but can simply look at what has happened to the Mainlines over the last thirty years and decide we want different for our children’s children. As the shepherd in this text, we most go get the one. The change must start now with

these millennials, and reach into Generation X and down to whichever generation will come next.

If, instead, we wait for these prodigals to *return home* we may find ourselves bankrupt and

without reason to celebrate. The choice is ours.

## 5| LIVING MISSION IN THE FIELD

*How infusion creates opportunity for the Black Church to fulfill its Mission*

The church (the physical building where the C/church gathers for worship, education, and fellowship) is the training ground for ministry; but it is in the field, where *ministry*-mission—God’s redemptive plan with humanity (*mission dei*) witnessed through Christ and continued by the Church—takes place. As I have argued in chapter four, the Body of Christ must be outwardly focused, justice orientated, and missionally focused. We must form “congregations to better articulate the Gospel and to live faithfully their vocation to participate in the ongoing redemptive mission of God in a particular context.”<sup>1</sup> There are a number of ways to touch the world with Christ’s Love but *how* will depend on our local context, the needs in our locale, congregational skills, and over time should touch all six pillars of mission.

Infusion, as I have explained, is both destination and ongoing spiritual formation in that it is the culminating step of the 13 exemplary disciples I have proposed. A realization and activation of the communal responsibility for working with other disciples to transform the world with the love, justice, and salvation of God in Christ is at the heart of infusion—it culminates a process of spiritual development and religious education with its focus on identity formation. Infusion signals an arrival, but it can never be the final destination as [one/we] cannot stop having received the revelation of infusion. Like a car that has been built, infusion in a disciple’s life will need fuel to operate, maintenance to stay in top shape, and an engine to run.

Thus, a disciple never graduates, but instead is always striving for spiritual maturity. Christian ethics and morality will work with our ecclesiology to be the Church we were called to be in the earth. We must not only be active in justice, but never forget to walk in fruit of the

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<sup>1</sup> Conner, *Practicing Witness*, 39.

spirit or any other of the marks of a disciple—practices, disciplines and virtues discussed. Our job is to mentor (disciple) millennials—youth and young adults—in the practices of Christ’s church. We give them a theological foundation to ground their religious activity in the Word of God. We then release these ambassadors into the field as witnesses of God’s love.

To give my arguments some context in the *worlds* in which today’s African American millennials live, I have chosen to explore how engaging the #blacklivesmatter and other social movements can improve relationship between Black millennials and the African American Church.

### **MILLENNIAL MATTERS**

Shortly into this new millennium, I noted how disconnected younger African Americans were from the struggles and sacrifices of the Civil Rights Movement (CRM). It was not that young people did not appreciate the advantages of living in a post-civil rights world, but like so many others, they seemed to have taken for granted the *equalities*—and the possibilities—bought by the struggles of their grandparents and great-grandparents. A year after President Barak Obama took office, I questioned if there would ever again be any galvanizing moments<sup>2</sup> for African American communities and asked, almost rhetorically, if a National leader(ship) would emerge that represented the needs of Black people. I knew Black Americans were too diverse for such an emergence, yet I still wondered if there would be an event that would shake the Black community’s collective soul and awaken us to the need for political engagement and fights for social justice.

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<sup>2</sup> We also discussed our doubt that there would ever again be national leaders in the manner that we knew in the sixties: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker.

In 2005, I remember identifying that matters of sexual orientation would be *the*<sup>3</sup> defining issue for the C/church in the new millennium, presuming the wars being waged among Mainline Protestant denominations at the national level would soon be an undeniable place of contention in many Black congregations. Further, surveys by the Barna Group and the Pew Research Center were already noting more liberal strands of Christianity among younger Americans and the philosophical barriers to active participation in religious communities.<sup>4</sup> I also remember observing that racialized systems of oppression no longer operated overtly, as in generations before, but now covertly chipped away at the ‘equality’ the Civil Rights bill<sup>5</sup> had once guaranteed. Integration’s effect on Black communities and its youth had been far reaching—as evidenced in the rise of bi-racial and interfaith relationships; advancements (equality)<sup>6</sup> in education and employment; and the increase of a Black middle class. Yet something was brewing underneath the surface while people—younger and older—had grown comfortable, lulled by stories of economic, career, and political success of Blacks in America. Many were blind to the cries of those whose experience revealed that our collective dream may yet still be a nightmare<sup>7</sup>—and this included many African American churches who were also complicit, not noticing, or not acting on, some of the greatest societal ills plaguing our people.

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<sup>3</sup> At that time, I was not sure what else it would be our issue, but that apathy discerned among large pockets of millennials needed a reversal. The issue around orientation was clearly an issue for the whole, while many Black youth were exposed to liberal ideologies around acceptance at school despite more traditional religious responses in many Black Protestant churches.

<sup>4</sup> I have noted above findings found in Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*; Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*. Also see Pew Research Center on Religion & Public Life, *Religion among the Millennials*, 18-25; Pew Research Center, *Millennials*, 57-58; Pew Research Center, *Millennials in Adulthood*, 31-46; Pew Research Center, *Religious Portrait of African-Americans*, 11-18. For Black millennials distinct opinions on employment, health, and immigration policies; as well as LGBT issues see Jon C. Rogowski and Cathy J. Cohen, "Black Millennials in America: Documenting the Experiences, Voices and Political Future of Young Black Americans," (Chicago: Black Youth Project-University of Chicago, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> The Civil Rights Act of 1957, 1964 (and lets not forget the original bill of 1866).

<sup>6</sup> I would argue that African Americans settled with advancement, never truly believing that equality was obtained due to systemic blockages from full equality being realized.

<sup>7</sup> Integration had allowed may African Americans to live in the center of Dr. Kings Dream, yet countless others were still living with the realities of Malcolm’s contrasting Nightmare of a racist society the systemically and

## A WAKE UP CALL

It would be the killing of an unarmed teenager, Trayvon Martin, in 2012, that would become a cause for “soul searching”<sup>8</sup> and would signal the beginning of an awakening that captivated the attention not only of Black millennials, but African American communities as a whole. This awakening, which started with Martin’s murder and continued with the acquittal of his killer, would crescendo into a movement with the 2014 death of unarmed teenager Michael Brown, who was fatally shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. These wanton deaths outraged and deeply impacted many teens and younger adults, who possibly saw themselves in the lives of those gunned down and who were enraged by the injustice of *racist* systems that would allow such atrocities to occur. As young adults began voicing their concerns against the bigotry, injustice, social inequalities, and micro aggressions they experienced in communities and on campuses,<sup>9</sup> it started to appear as if Black Lives Matter could be the movement to galvanize our community in a fight for justice. Because no matter where a person lands on these very polarizing and politicized occurrences, it cannot be denied that they have spurred a National outcry and conversation about the alarming number of deaths of unarmed Blacks (predominately men and boys) in the United States, at the hands of law enforcement officers—deaths viewed by many African Americans as state-sanctioned murder.<sup>10</sup>

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oppressively held Black men and women back. For more on Martin and Malcom’s dichotomized view of America see James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Staff, "Trayvon Martin Shooting Fast Facts," CNN, Accessed 4/5/2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/05/us/trayvon-martin-shooting-fast-facts/>.

<sup>9</sup> Emma Green, "Black Activism, Unchurched," *The Atlantic*, March 22, 2016, accessed 04/01/16, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/03/black-activism-black-church/474822/>.

<sup>10</sup> Any number of articles, news reports, or essays on the number of deaths of unarmed Blacks in recent years. To learn more, considering beginning with Nicholas Quah, "Here’s a Timeline of Unarmed Black People Killed by Police over Past Year: From Arizona to New York, the Cases Have Added to National Outrage over Deadly Force Used by Police.," *BuzzFeed News*, 5/1/2015, accessed 4/5/2016, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/nicholasquah/heres-a-timeline-of-unarmed-black-men-killed-by-police-over#.wugnLk9B6Z>.

Place this time-bomb in the midst of a number of other unique challenges that color the world in which Black millennials live and one may begin to understand the palpable tension that exists between millennials, institutions and systems that refuse to value their worth—even their very lives. The Black Youth Project, a longitudinal study on race, politics and culture at the University of Chicago provides a good synopsis of ways these millennials uniquely experience<sup>11</sup> contemporary America, which includes higher unemployment, lower graduation rates, higher college debt, greater exposure the gun violence and staggering incarceration rates—that are seven times higher for black men 18 and 19 than they are for their white counterparts. Black women are more likely to experience discrimination in the workplace. Nearly a third of Black youth live in poverty, and over half know someone or have themselves been harassed or physically abused by the police.<sup>12</sup> These same factors affect not only millennials, but Black lives in the whole of American society—particularly the “whiplash environment of economic inequality<sup>13</sup> (unemployment, lower income for equal qualifications), educational inequalities,<sup>14</sup> mass incarcerations<sup>15</sup> (and the ensuing disenfranchisement of Black voters, destruction of families, the residual war on economic viability), police brutality, and abuse of power by law enforcement.

This is the world in which younger African Americans, particularly those who are economically disadvantaged, are coming of age. They are the most vulnerable to the societal ills plaguing our communities and are often the most marginalized—with little influence to change

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<sup>11</sup> The report benchmarked Black millennials against both White and Latino/a peers within same age brackets.

<sup>12</sup> The first survey was in 2005-2009 including 1,589 national respondents between the ages of 15 and 25. Their second national survey was between 2008-2009 in three waves with 4,300 respondents. For more on their findings and work see Rogowski and Cohen, "Black Millennials in America."

<sup>13</sup> Gates, "Black American and the Class Divide."

<sup>14</sup> R. L'Heureux Lewis-McCoy, *Inequality in the Promised Land: Race, Resources, and Suburban Schooling* (Stanford, C.A.: Stanford Univ. Press, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

the systems in which they are compelled to live. Economic disadvantages and systemic racism place more young African Americans potentially in a position to have encounters with law enforcement that can, or tend to, turn deadly—as Black Millennials are disproportionately victims of police violence, more than any other racial group in America.<sup>16</sup> Gates argues that today's college educated are reminiscent of Dubois' "Talent Tenth," providing intellectual leadership in expressing growing concern and outrage at the conditions of our country's race relations.<sup>17</sup> While he may be right, it should not be forgotten that it is not the college educated alone who are passionate about these issues and taking lead in this present movement. Yet, the localized movements—and particularly the media coverage—on college campuses make Gates observations worth noting. In order to capture the imagination of millennials, who largely want to envision the world *as it should be*, the C/church must involve itself in those matters that concern them most—including the dangers to which they feel most susceptible.

The Black Church has never only concerned itself with matters of faith—those churches who do become one-dimensional and fail to reach the masses, forgetting to address the life issues that impact the faithful. Church leadership (and by extension, church members) should never view society only from an evangelistic perspective and thus miss the opportunity to do what Christ did. Jesus walked with the people and touched their lives sharing the message of salvation that prioritized those at the margins (Matt. 25:31-40) and demanded they be provided liberty and justice (Luke 4: 18-19), not merely for eternal salvation (Rom.10:8-10) but established here in the world. Consider Jesus interactions with the woman at the well (Jn. 4:1-26), the heals man with leprosy (Mt. 8:1-4), the woman caught in adultery (Jn. 8:1-11), and Jesus feeding the crowd

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<sup>16</sup> John Swaine et al., "Young Black Men Killed by Us Police at Highest Rate in Year of 1,134 Deaths," *The Guardian*, 12/31/15, accessed 3/22/2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/31/the-counted-police-killings-2015-young-black-men>.

<sup>17</sup> Gates, "Black American and the Class Divide."

(Mt. 14 and 23). My insistence on the Black Church engaging the world (da' field) raises old debates of the church's mission and what it means to be the Lord's church.<sup>18</sup> However, it is incumbent upon African American Christians to be missionaries in the field, bridging the worlds of congregation and public space and engaging churched millennials in this mission, reaching out to their peers of the diaspora, is central to the relevancy of Christian communities for this and future generations.

### #MOVEMENTS

*"Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter,  
Black Lives Matter. #blacklivesmatter"*<sup>19</sup>

#Blacklivesmatter, an affirmation of the value of 'black lives' was first typed in a Facebook Post by Alicia Garza in 2013, speaking to the outrage and indignation at the unjust acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer. Yet it was the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner at the hands of police officers in 2014 that propelled this protest movement, and the use of the hashtag (#) *black lives matter* onto the national scene accompanied by marches and demonstrations. Today, Black Lives Matters (BLM) is an activist network of twenty-eight chapters in the U.S. and Canada that fight against violence and injustice toward Black people.<sup>20</sup> The growing awareness of the taking of Black lives, particularly millennials, by the police is the impetus

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<sup>18</sup> Raphael G. Warnock discusses the Gospel of liberation, how the gospel is understood in light of mission in the Black Church, Black theologians responses on mission, and how pastors and womanist see mission. His explanations are helpful to contextualize this debate, but go beyond the scope of this present work. For more see *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Wikipedia, "Alicia Garza," Accessed 4/7/2016, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alicia\\_Garza](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alicia_Garza).

<sup>20</sup> Each local body is fully autonomous, though guided by the organizations guiding principles, choosing what activities and manner of activism fits their local need. The BLM website records their guiding principles as diversity, globalism, black women, black villages, loving engagement, restorative justice, collective value, empathy, queer affirming, unapologetically Black, transgender affirming, black families, and intergenerational. See Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, "Www.Blacklivesmatter.Com," Black Lives Matter, Accessed 3/20/2016.

behind the collective exclamation #blacklivesmatter, whose website emphatically notes “this is a movement not a moment.”

The deaths of millennials Martin, Brown, Rice, Grey, Bland, Jones, and others reveal the vulnerability of teens and young adults to the type of killings that judicial systems seem to turn a blind eye to by failing to prosecute or indict.<sup>21</sup> Yet these millennials are not alone, for they are supported by earlier generations who also recognize we are again in the midst of a crisis and are calling for a new initiative, one reminiscent of Civil Rights Movement. However, yet again, many churches stand at a distance—some even criticizing the movement—put off by its radicalized nature, and we witness the old divide between impassioned youth and more established elders as to how to respond to these cries for justice. In the streets of Ferguson, Manhattan, Cleveland, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Baltimore have been protests, but in some cases the Church has not always been present—too many congregations remain hesitant to engage due to the uncertain direction of the movement. Nonetheless, many clergy and faithful disciples are leading the way, actively participating in this movement.

Alicia Garza notes, “Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.”<sup>22</sup> This movement has used social media as a communication portal to galvanize would-be participants. Feminista Jones argues that “Twitter has become one of the most important tools of modern sociopolitical activism,” as exemplified after Zimmerman was exonerated, to involve thousands in protest—even calling Twitter the “Underground Railroad” of

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<sup>21</sup> Quah, "Timeline Unarmed Black People Killed."

<sup>22</sup> Garza, Cullors, and Tometi, "Www.Blacklivesmatter.Com".

activism.<sup>23</sup> One criticism is the BLM is isolating other racial ethnic groups. One retort is #alllivesmatter (all lives matter). But this misses the emphatic focus on Black Lives who are faced with staggering societal inequities that millennials are demanding STILL need attention. These activists are unapologetic about focusing its efforts on Black lives, as they find the present crisis in the U.S. a greater concern than inclusivity. Further, BLM also distinguishes itself by focusing on “those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements” with a goal “to (re)build the Black liberation movement.”<sup>24</sup>

The Civil Rights Movement (CRM) was spurred by many events that revealed a crisis in our country’s race relations,<sup>25</sup> but it can be argued that Montgomery, Alabama was the launching pad of the movement—particularly the events in the aftermath of Rosa Park’s arrest, the ensuing bus boycotts, and the ground swell of protests that help propelled the movement onto the national scene. Similarly, Trayvon Martin’s murder instigated the creation of #blacklivesmatter, but it was in Ferguson, Missouri—where Mike Brown was gunned down<sup>26</sup> and lay dead in the streets for five hours that the national movement was launched. In some ways both cities, Montgomery and Ferguson, became memorials to the movement against the deprivation of human rights of Blacks and provided a wake-up to the nation of problems that needed addressing. In the fifty and sixties Blacks were fighting for equal rights and integration and today the fight resumes not only for rights, but for human dignity and worth. Decades after again being guaranteed ‘civil rights’ it is obvious that legislation alone does not change the heart and soul of a nation. Both Montgomery and Ferguson memorialize the critical need for change and signal a natural

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<sup>23</sup> Jones, "Is Twitter the Underground Railroad?."

<sup>24</sup> Garza, Cullors, and Tometi, "Www.Blacklivesmatter.Com".

<sup>25</sup> There are many events, but to note where the 1955 boycott is situated in the CRM’s time line is helpful. Brown vs. the Board of Education was in 1954 and Emit Till was murdered in 1955—the same year as Rosa Park’s arrest. It would be ten years later, in 1965 that Selma becomes another memorial of the movement and eventual passing of the Civil Rights Bill.

<sup>26</sup> You can see the distance from him and the cop, no way was he an aggressor, from this BLM spurned itself

opportunity for the Black Church to partner in the stand for justice—a prophetic call to continue in the legacy of Christ.<sup>27</sup>

Some use the Civil Rights Movement to critically judge the work of Black Lives Matter, which makes it difficult to impartially value this movement and its accomplishments. Although comparisons are inevitable, such assessments place impediments on people's choice to engage the cause. As many Americans memorialize Civil Rights 1.0 (CRM1), using it as a standard rubric for judging a successful stand for African American liberation, many tend to employ this standard of measurement in ways that devalue that tactics of the present BLM movement—plausibly/arguably named Civil Rights 2.0 (CRM2). These critiques of the BLM find resonance in many Black congregations. In this case, the similarities between CRM1 and CRM2 is haunting—as during the early years of CRM1 many in Black congregations criticized the efforts of Dr. King and other leaders, wrestling as faith communities on how to participate—reviving again the century old conflict between radicalized Christianity and more pious forms of faith.

### **How BLM Challenges Church Folk**

It is undeniable that some African American clergypersons, leaders, and even some congregations are challenged by Black Lives Matters. First, the leadership of BLM creates both ideological (i.e. theological) and practical barriers for some clergypersons and congregations. Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi are not only women leading this movement, but queer non-practicing Christian (Nones) who have preferred a decentralized style of organizational protest. “Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks,

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<sup>27</sup> For more conversation on the ways that BLM calls and challenges the church to action see Antonia Blumberg and Carol Kuruvilla, "How the Black Lives Matter Movement Changed the Church," *Huffington Post: HuffPost Religion* 2015, accessed 1/14/2016, [www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/how-the-blacklivesmatter-movement-changed-the-church\\_55c4f54ce4b0923c12bcc8c0](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/how-the-blacklivesmatter-movement-changed-the-church_55c4f54ce4b0923c12bcc8c0); Blair, "Could 'Black Lives Matter' Be Prophetic Message to the Church?."

disabled folks, black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum.”<sup>28</sup> While women were prominent in the CRM1, they were prevented from leading out in front—however this may be the patriarchal perception of history.<sup>29</sup> The Black Church’s struggles with homosexuality, transgendered, and other LGBT issues are well documented<sup>30</sup> and may for some keep people from embracing BLM, though I suspect that fear and uncertainty are more of a deterrent.

Secondly, because the church is not an igniter, nor creator of BLM, the leaders of chapters are not necessarily seeking the church out. As such, the Black Church sits in the peripheral—and BLM leaders are not overly concerned with bringing into the movement those Christians unwilling to walk with those who may not share their Christian commitments. Instead, these leaders are more focused on liberation, rescuing this movement from bias of the earlier era. Thirdly, the strong youth presence of BLM may be difficult for many churches. Congregations who struggle reaching unchurched (secularized) youth, will be challenged by this movement. This is why the millennials in da’ house—particularly the remnant and the more marginal in their faith—are so important to future of the church and the mission outreach efforts of the Black Church.

Fourth, the rhetoric of faith used by BLM may blur the lines of faith and community. The BLM website states “What we Believe” in describing their passions and purpose—traditional linguistics of faith. Many millennials are looking for a place of community and social belonging—these communities become such places. The leaders use belief—over core values or—for some followers will elevates involvement to a ‘religious’ type experience particularly those

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<sup>28</sup> Garza, Cullors, and Tometi, "Www.Blacklivesmatter.Com".

<sup>29</sup> One of the contentions of the founders of BLM is that women and other groups were marginalized within the struggle to stamp out injustice and racism that marginalized all African Americans.

<sup>30</sup> The Whosoever Church } Horace L. Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006).

pushed beyond the margins and all the way out of Black congregations. The Church too needs clearly stated beliefs that move beyond theological platitudes and address societal ills. We must be willing as Christ's bride to speak and stand up for the things that fit within Christ's mission.

Finally, the aggressive nature of some protests may be deterrents for faith communities who stand at odds with tactics found to be out of step with the Christian witness. Fear and uncertainty of what will happen at BLM events may preclude some ~~person's activity~~ from participating. Not knowing fully what boundaries a local chapter may set for themselves may keep more conservative individuals and communities' from engaging, though they too find the issues being addressed important. Not to mention the frustrations, with the church, by some millennials activists who failed to find affirmation inside the household of faith, Black Lives Matter provides a space where millennials can be heard, accepted, and activated to make a change in their world. Many feel empowered here while they feel disenfranchised in our congregation. In reference to CRM2, some feel, independent of the church, that "This is our movement. This is our time to lead."<sup>31</sup>

## **THE CHURCH AND BLACK LIVES MATTERS**

A Needed Collusion, A Necessary Encounter: The Church must be more engaged in organizations like Black Lives Matter because they represent the intersection of life and faith—which I have argued must be normative in the expression of what it means to be a faithful disciple. I have also noted that the Black Church, if it is going to be relevant for this and future generations must be in relationship with younger adults while helping them experience a revelatory understanding of their role in God's mission, and find ways to revolutionize how we (collectively) live into our call to be the Church. "Black millennials are no different in their

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<sup>31</sup> Green, "Black Activism, Unchurched."

yearning to be affirmed while also being deeply challenged. They . . . want guidance about their sense of purpose, relationships and lifestyle. They want to know how to balance their faith with the cultural influences that shape them as a person.”<sup>32</sup> Yet, some would argue that the Church’s inability to integrate millennials in Church life has a residual effect of pushing them out of the church.<sup>33</sup> It is undeniable that Church and Culture are often at odds, but with creativity we must help millennials live as I3 disciples and embody what it means to be Christ’s in new contexts. Likewise, we must help the church do the same beyond its’ borders. Many congregations can benefit from learning to move beyond its own normativity and fear.

The church must be relevant—yet it will take authentic encounters with people and culture to embody this goal. A church that wants to be impactful with this youth generation must be willing to deal with the issues that weigh heavy on their hearts and those that endanger their future ability to be equal contributors in society. The church cannot only be involved in those missionary type programs (feeding, clothing, shelter, education), where it has been historically strong, but instead it must also address social ills plaguing our communities through social justice/action, advocacy, etc. The church will fall short of its call in community if it is disconnected, focusing on prosperity while most of their members are impoverished. A faithful witness is found in the congregation that lifts up education, income inequality, etc.—issues that directly affect the people’s (millennial) conditions; the kinds of platforms that BLM<sup>34</sup> is giving voice. Jesus walked with people, meeting them in their everyday experience.

Determining how to respond to people’s needs will take conversation, planning, and imagining with millennials what a righteous response by the Church can be. Without the type of

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<sup>32</sup> Rahiel Tesfamariam, "Are Black Millennials Being Pused out of the Church?," *The Washington Post*, 8/27/13, accessed 2/3/16, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/local/wp/2013/08/27/are-black-millennials-being-pushed-out-of-the-church/>.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Again BLM is an example of an organization that addresses they type of issues. Other institutions

relationship I have been advocating throughout this thesis—discipling and mentoring persons in life and faith—the kind of understanding necessary to capture the heart and imagination of this generation will not take place. It is through relationship that we learn what is most important to those in our churches. Collaboration with other social organization and establishing alliances with those dealing with oppressive systems faced by those who come to our churches will be helpful. Both individual and strategic relationships will allow the church to be relevant by responding to national issues (i.e. police brutality) through a localized lens—whether in Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, or San Francisco—not just relevant but locally relevant in the community where the people are living.

Despite the aforementioned challenges, Christian millennials are desperate for a faith that touches and reaches the world—not only for themselves but for their peers who do not know Christ. Many have become active in fights for justice, but do not have mentors and companions from their faith communities helping them contextualize the experience in light of their vocational call to share in Christ’s mission. Joining with groups like BLM can provide revelatory benefits for the Church. A question to ask ourselves is where would Jesus put his time today? Participation in BLM can allow people to experience an Christological awakening that is tangible. While more conservative traditions may be challenged with a soteriology that goes beyond personal salvation, such activity is in keeping with the revelation that Jesus unfolds in the gospel. Jesus came to seek and save the lost. Revelation will occur for millennials in particular, and the church in general, if we are interacting with those, in the field, pushed to the margins of society.

For those who are disciples, BLM can (and does) provide a space to apply the teaching of sermons and Christian education—the theological constructs for the practice of activism and

protest, both born out of a theology of justice and liberation. The church-millennials' participation in BLM will be revelatory to those millennials who have given up on the church: one, as they work alongside peers who are unapologetically Christian yet fiercely committed to the same causes, and two, as they have the opportunity to see the Church in a new light through the active agency of individual disciples. Here, in da' field infusion takes place, one life connecting with another, doing the work of Christ in mission driven practices.

Finally, the church may be revolutionized in its understanding of finding new interfaces with millennials. In these protest movements, we see the power of social media—and the use of the hashtag #. Some segments of the Black church can benefit from making use of one of the mediums most utilized by millennials to communicate and interact with the world. As noted earlier, African American Millennials use twitter and social media more than their peers—consider in particular Black Twitter's influence on activist movements.<sup>35</sup> Thus, engaging BLM will help leaders realize how to activate millennials for service—adapting best practices for the Church.

The church can learn a number of things from the BLM movement. First, protest as being a faithful practice of the church. If in fact the church is to be advocates for Justice (Micah 6:8) then often revolutionized action will precede justice being secured. One millennial noted “a lot of people [involved in the activist community] tell me they don't identity as a Christian, but they feel something when they protest.”<sup>36</sup> The Church must touch hearts in worship and in practice. With such a strong desire to change lives, we must emerge from our holy hilltops to go out not only to make disciples but to bring God's kingdom in the earth.

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<sup>35</sup> Donovan X. Ramsey, "The Truth About Black Twitter: Complex, Influential, and Far More Meaningful Than the Sum of Its Social Justice-Driven Hastags," *The Atlantic*, 4/10/2015, accessed 4/11/16, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/04/the-truth-about-black-twitter/390120/>; Wikipedia, "Black Twitter," Accessed 4/10/2016, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_Twitter](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Twitter).

<sup>36</sup> Green, "Black Activism, Unchurched."

Secondly, the model of shared leadership among those leading BLM reflects the type of group partnering and synergy that comes from joining forces. The traditional independent Black Church model,<sup>37</sup> of one-singular pastor who wields the large majority of power and decisions in the church is antithetical to the group dynamic that resonates with most postmoderns. In many ways BLM is leaderless, empowering every member to make a significant contribution to the cause—effectiveness being measured by everyone doing their part. They crush the traditional ideas of hierarchy in the church. Ideas thus are free flowing allowing several leaders to emerge.

Third, the recent surge of protests across college campuses<sup>38</sup> and in cities plagued by police violence against those in their care debunk the myth that young people are fully disengaged. In fact, as I have argued, millennials desire to make difference and change their world for the better. They need only institutions that will make room for them to lead, partner with them on important life matters and provide a place—in the case of the church, where they can walk in 13 faithfulness to Christ.

Finally, the church can learn to listen and be more vulnerable—leading to self-discovery and becoming better. From the start, Black Lives Matter was ridiculed in how they protested, told of its inadequacies, or chastised for its differences from CRM1. In the end, they were able to carve out their own new way of being, by listening to the frustrations and ideas of those who pain were being ignored. By allowing every voice count, they were able to create a ground swell of support as they created infrastructure to support their cause. Indeed, some chapters will continue to experience growing pains, but no more differently than the Freedom Riders or Black Panthers were judged in the 50's and 60's.

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<sup>37</sup> Particularly the black Baptist, Pentecostal and other traditions who have a looser polity than say the AME, CME, and other Methodist Traditions—though in these communities the pastor does have a large influence on the direction and decisions of the church, even with more checks and balances in placed at the judicatory level.

<sup>38</sup> Ellin, "Meet the New Student Activists."

I have noted that the Black Lives Matter movement is largely secular, and is not reaching out for help from faith communities—though some churches are involved in non-primary roles. This leaves the question, how can the Church help and does BLM need a theology? The Black protest tradition, since the earliest slave congregations, used the narrative of the bible—often used as the white man’s weapon to enslave Blacks—to combat racism. King, and his contemporaries, used the bible as a tool of liberation in very subversive and radical ways.<sup>39</sup> However, King was for everyone’s rights not just African Americans. Thus remains, do we (the church) have a theology for those involved in the BLM movement? If so, what are the theological implications? If any?

### **A FINAL WORD**

The Black Church is blessed by its strength and rich history. Religious fervency, has been endemic in African American communities since we became a community. Our religious cultural heritage gives us an advantage over those communities where religious faith is no longer normative. At the onset of the project I said: as go the millennials, so goes the church. On this point I am adamant. We cannot afford to ignore what is going on with millennials with respect to their identity and religious formation. The current shifts and disintegration will adversely affect the church we love. If my peers and I—leaders of and in Black congregations—do not find a way to be in multi-dimensional relationships with this cohort, we will fail to pass on the Church to our descendants. Our traditions are too rich to allow that to happen.

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<sup>39</sup> For more information see Martin Luther King Jr., *The Radical King* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016).

Much of what I have argued theologically in this thesis can be applied to any Christian community—though I have continually focused the conversation on the particular nuances of African American millennials. Similarly, in the matter of infusion, a communal grounding of who we are and what we do as Christ’s disciples MUST permeate all demographic groups of the Black Church. By emphasizing religious education, with a prioritization of identity formation<sup>40</sup> over Christian education’s emphasis on learning information, we should observe a direct impact on the sustainability of the historic Black Church.

The identity of the African American millennial must not only be rooted in our African and African American ancestry and history, but also connected to our religious heritage as followers of Christ. We must also help them connect their identity, as disciples of Christ narrative stories of the text and their our own stories of the present and future—story linking. We are called to Go, MAKE, and TEACH disciples (Matt. 28:19-20) starting in Jerusalem (the most committed millennials), Judea (our marginal but yet faithful young adults), Samaria (those who have checked out), and to the outermost parts of the world (to those without a saving knowledge of Christ). Mentoring and intentional relational ministry will help us create spaces that are not only relevant, but provide context for ongoing self-revelation towards the call to partner with God to bring both justice—and sometimes revolution—to our world. Isn’t this what Jesus did in Jerusalem?

While formation through worship has historically been a strength of the African American Church, this practice by itself cannot suffice in a culture increasingly hostile towards Christian faith and values. Faith formation will require in addition: service (social

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<sup>40</sup> Hinton, *The Commercial Church: Black Churches and the New Religious Marketplace in America* 6, 121.

justice/action and missions), participation in church (i.e. volunteerism and working in ministry groups), and spiritual growth mechanisms that reach beyond the walls of the church and traditional educational programming. Further, these young adults will benefit from a formation process that includes a variety of educational and religious programming making use of technology and other culture-friendly methodologies. In doing so, certain normative traits will reveal themselves as indicative of a faithful following of the ministry and mission of Christ.

I have stated that infusion is a much as a destination as it is an ongoing training ground. We must not wait until someone has totally resolved their issues of identity, nor until they have a fully integrated life that is exemplary; instead we must engage youth, young adults, and the entire Church in activity that resembles God's witness in the world through Christ. This mission will transform how we are the Church. My initial sermon years ago was "More than Having Church." In my community if we said "we had church" it meant we had a high time of praise and worship in the Lord; we danced, shouted, and even had a good word (although that was not generally the focus of 'having church'). I argued then, as I do today, that we as individual Disciples of Christ must *BE the Church*. Today, my message is a bit more nuanced, but the heart is still the same. We have not received salvation only for ourselves, but that the world may be SAVED through Christ (Jn. 3:16-17). We perpetuate the ministry of Jesus, doing "greater works" not because we are doing more significant work, but because our collective work over many generations will reach more people (Jn. 14:12). Jesus moved in public ministry for three years, but our churches now live on until He returns. The challenge for Black congregations is to pass the baton by engaging millennials in the full life of the church, letting them lead and teach us as they

learn from the rich legacies of the Black Church. Without the pass-off, the Black Church as we have loved it will cease to exist.

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